

**The Unladylike Ladies of Roller Derby?:  
How Spectators, Players and Derby Wives Do and Redo  
Gender and Heteronormativity in All-Female Roller  
Derby**

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**January 2012**

## Abstract

All-female roller derby is a rapidly growing full-contact sport played on quad roller skates, with a highly popularized punk, feminine, sexual and tough aesthetic. Utilising theories on the institution of heterosexuality, I conducted a qualitative study on all-female roller derby which evaluated the way in which derby aligns with or challenges heteronormativity. In order to approach this question, I analysed, firstly, thirty-eight interviews with spectators, and twelve with players about their interactions with spectators. Secondly, I interviewed twenty-six players about the phenomenon of “derby wives,” a term used to describe particular female friendships in roller derby. My findings relate the complex relationship between players and spectators by focusing on: (i) spectators’ interpretations of the dress, pseudonyms, and identities of players, as well as the ways in which they were actively involved in doing gender through their discussions of all-female, coed, and all-male roller derby; (ii) players’ descriptions of their interactions with spectators, family members, romantic partners, friends and strangers, regarding roller derby. Additionally, I address the reformulation of the role “wife” to meet the needs of female players within the community, and “derby wives” as an example of Adrienne Rich’s (1980) “lesbian continuum.” “Derby girls” are described as “super heroes” and “rock stars.” Their pseudonyms are believed to help them “transform” once they take to the track. Roller derby is seen as providing a venue to showcase women’s strength and new conceptualizations of femininity and motherhood. However, my findings also indicate that with its many challenges to gender stereotypes, heterosexuality and gender dualism are pervasive and evident in the sport. Even though derby has done much to expand gender expectations, these expectations have only been expanded; they are not diminished or eradicated. Despite this, through all-female roller derby, women are seen as acting in new, transformative ways.

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## Acknowledgements

I am in the fortunate position of loving my dissertation topic as much now as I did when I started, but this is only because of the support I received from those around me. Firstly, my thanks to Professor Stevi Jackson for guiding me through my PhD, and inspiring me to attend the University of York. Secondly, I would like to thank my entire family for their love and support, but particularly my mother for her tireless proofreading. Thirdly, I would like to thank Jo Maltby, Amy Burge, Diz Manning, Tre Ronne, Matt Poland, Julie Petrie and James Christensen for their proofreading skills and insight. Additionally, I owe so much to Julia Carter and Richard McManus, without whom I would have been at a loss!

Of course, this thesis could not have happened without the generosity of my respondents and informants. I am indebted to the time and knowledge they gave me. I am also grateful to the photographers (Jason Ruffell, Scott Suenram, Russ Desaulniers, MelHokPhotography) who have loaned their pictures for this thesis. Thank you also to those in the derby community who have supported me and made me a better derby player: Emily “Ruby Deville” Mills, the Leeds Roller Dolls and the York Minxers. And lastly, thanks to my derby wife, Liz “Bruise ‘em Banshee” Thomas, for listening to me dissect the derby wife relationship a thousand times.



## **Author's Declaration**

A version of Chapter Five “Dude, She’s Knocking the Manhood Right Out of You” has been submitted to a journal for publication.

## Introduction

Roller derby began in the 1930s as a coed, or mixed gender, sport. Although men and women were on the same team, they competed at different times. It was played on a banked track (see Image 1) and, today, is widely considered to have been a sensational, fake version of the sport. Players elbowed, clothes-lined<sup>1</sup> and hit each other, and even threw themselves onto their opponents.<sup>2</sup> Rivalries were dramatised for the sake of entertainment. Apart from minor revivals, derby's popularity waned after the 1970s until it was rebranded in 2001 as an all-female and primarily flat-track sport. Although the roller derby community is hardly homogenous, derby has also been revitalised as a culture with women in fishnets and short skirts, and with pseudonyms or alter egos (like my own, Toxic Pink Stuff). Derby was, and possibly is, a site where gender is re-imagined, but still enforced.



Image 1: Modern day banked track roller derby, the Oklahoma Red Dirt Rebellion in 2009 (photo courtesy of Scott Suenram).

All-female roller derby began as the dream of “Devil Dan” Policarpo in Austin, Texas (Brick 2008; Ray 2007). Policarpo recruited women “with tattoos, Bettie Page haircuts and guts” (quoted in Brick 2008: np) to participate in a carnivalesque roller derby, complete with “clowns unfortunately stabbing each

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<sup>1</sup> “Clothes-lining” someone is when you stretch your arm out to the side so that your arm catches them in the neck.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of earlier versions of roller derby, see “Roller derby” (2009).

other, these bears on fire on these unicycles” (quoted in Ray 2007: np). However, Policarpo proved to be an unreliable leader who eventually left town. The women he had recruited, and more, continued to strive towards resurrecting roller derby, but without the additional antics of clowns or bears. What emerged in the aftermath were the first all-female banked track league, the Texas Roller Derby Lonestar Rollergirls (TXRD Lonestar Rollergirls), and a splinter league, the Texas Rollergirls, who began flat-track roller derby.

As roller derby continues to evolve, some have begun to play under their legal names, like Julia Rosenwinkel who skates for the Windy City Rollers. For her, this decision aligned with other, larger, changes in roller derby. When she first began in derby, she “excelled at fake fights, fashion legware was as critical (if not more!) as skate wheels and whether or not have a makeup artist before games was an issue my team actually voted on.” Then, in 2006, she played in a national tournament. Her relationship to derby transformed after that: “Skirts were passé and athletic leggings were the new staple, fake fights became vintage anecdote, boot camp was in and camp was out. Instead of a woman playing a game, I came to view myself as an athlete with a sport ready to be taken seriously” (Rosenwinkel 2009: 40-41). The sport, as well, has become more regulated, with many leagues now playing by rules established by the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), even if they are not members of WFTDA.

Whereas fights have been a part of roller derby history, and may still be for leagues that do not play under WFTDA’s rules (see psycho78sderby 2011), fights are barred under WFTDA and would lead to immediate expulsion. Under WFTDA rules, a bout lasts for sixty minutes and is made up of two thirty-minute periods. Periods consist of a series of jams which can last up to two minutes. Each team has one jammer (the player who scores points and is recognisable because of the star worn on her helmet cover), one pivot (who communicates strategy to her teammates and has a stripe on her helmet cover) and three blockers. A jam starts when the referee blows the whistle; this is the signal for the “pack” (all players except for the jammers) to begin moving around the track. The jammers are positioned thirty feet behind where the pivots begin. The jammers cannot start until the pack has already begun moving and the referee blows two short whistles, signalling their release. The two teams skate around a track, in the same direction,

at the same time. The blockers and pivot attempt to prevent the other team's jammer from breaking through, while also assisting their own jammer. Points are scored for each player of the opposing team, passed after a jammer's first lap through the pack. Players can use their shoulders, "booty,"<sup>3</sup> and hips to knock over other players or to slow them down. The first jammer to pass through the pack legally becomes the "lead jammer." Only the lead jammer can call off the jam, and they do so by touching their hips. They may choose to call off the jam for strategic reasons. For example, the lead jammer may choose to end the jam to prevent the opposing team from scoring. Those who follow WFTDA's rule-set also obey a strict code of conduct where elbowing, punching, hair pulling, etc, are not allowed.

### ***Watching, Playing and Researching Roller Derby***

In 2006, when I first watched a roller derby game, known as a "bout," I had only a vague idea of what it was. Although rather ignorant of the sport, I attended a sold-out exhibition game because someone said there was an "all-female roller derby." That was my introduction. I went because it was a women's sport and I felt some sort of allegiance to female skaters in a full-contact sport. I sat in the "suicide seating," aptly named because, with no guard between spectators and the track in flat-track roller derby, a hit could cause a player to come careening off the track and into a spectator. I did not know the rules or understand how teams scored points. As a spectator, I could only understand that skaters hit one another, the clothing was flamboyant and seemingly impractical, and there were absurd penalty punishments. I vaguely remember a player wearing a corset and a fight breaking out between two opponents; whether the fight was staged or not, I do not know. As a constantly evolving sport, it is quite evident how far derby has come since then, when I watched a fledgling league in their first exhibition bout. This league no longer has "human bowling"<sup>4</sup> as a penalty for players during half-time. The clothing has become less theatrical, but, in 2006, the stereotypical image of a tattooed woman in fishnets and a short skirt was certainly evident. This all

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<sup>3</sup> Hits with one's "booty" is called a "booty block."

<sup>4</sup> In this version of "human bowling", oversized, and possibly inflated, bowling pins were set up in the middle of the track. A player skated and then went into a "baseball slide" fall to knock them over.

combined to create a definite punk rock vibe. It was not just a sport; it was an alternative community that embraced a tough, but sexual, aesthetic. I loved it, but I felt uneasy enjoying derby as much as I did.

My uneasiness arose because of the clothing and my fear that it contributed to women's sport not being taken seriously, or it only being taken seriously if it looked like we were performing to appeal to heterosexual males. The fist fight also reminded me of a sexualised "chick fight," even though the only sexual thing about it was the clothing, and that I was not used to seeing women fight. Additionally, although I cannot remember any of the names used by players then, I grew concerned about some of the pseudonyms chosen by skaters. Most players skate under a pseudonym, and these names are registered with the Official Roster, maintained by Elaina B. and Soylen Mean (2011). Mabe argues that "derby names are a badge of honor"; according to her, most leagues will not allow a derby girl to have a derby name until after a significant amount of training. Derby names are widely varied, from the "threatening" to the "witty and cute" (Mabe 2007: 74) (e.g., "Anita Chainsaw," "Sunshine Girl," "Apocalipstick!," "BendURgender," "Magic 8-brawl," "Maim West," "Betty Oops," "Maiden Japan"), but can also include names that I find highly problematic. Some names which have been considered by others to be misogynist, objectifying, or poor representations of the sport have been publically challenged, perhaps most notably in Ginger Snap's (2011) article in *DerbyLife*. Her critique of names, like "Clitty Clitty Bang Bang," "Fist Fucker," "Chainsaw Guts Fuck," "Raging Cock," "Rose Hypnol," and a referee named "Ray Pugh," asks that the derby community question who derby's audience is, and, perhaps more importantly, who we want to attract to the sport. Ginger Snap's post led to a debate about whether or not women's empowerment in roller derby is undermined if misogynist names exist. By extension, many contested the meanings that had been attributed to these names, arguing that names may have private or different meanings than how they are interpreted.

As potentially controversial issues for my feminist politics<sup>5</sup> multiplied, I was also concerned that players of all-female roller derby are self-proclaimed "derby *girls*." Referring to a grown woman as a "girl" may serve to infantilise her,

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<sup>5</sup> I say "my feminist politics" because, of course, many may not find any of these issues to be contradictory to their feminism.

and, as questioned by Dawson, “by repeating patronizing words and images, aren't we -- and here I mean ‘us girls’ -- just maintaining the low status quo? [...] And even as we participate in brutal sports like roller derby, we dress in hot pants and fishnets. Could we be undermining ourselves as we make these great strides?” (Dawson 2009: np). However, the combination of calling a player a “derby girl” and the full-contact sport may elucidate some of the contradictions found within gender constructs, which are made clearer, or perhaps more confused, within roller derby. Perhaps my feminism was also going to be filled with contradictions.

For all these reasons, I was apprehensive when confessing my new admiration of the sport to my Women’s Studies mentor, Dr. Gwen Sorell, in 2007. There was a fear that such an admission would somehow call into question my status as a feminist. Contrary to my expectations, I listened to my mentor describe what she thought I appreciated in roller derby. It was the synthesis of the tough and the feminine. Strong, powerful women unabashedly wearing clothing that showcased their sexuality and physicality in unconventional circumstances. They were in control and they were taking up space. As someone who had previously studied eating disorders, this notion of wanting to make yourself large enough to occupy the greatest amount of space possible, and take other peoples’ physical space away from them, was novel.

With an increasing emphasis on athletics, derby clothing is no longer just fishnets and short skirts (though that is still the popular image), but also incorporates more traditional athletic attire. There are players who wear sexualised clothing on track; I was one of those skaters until May 2010. I joined the Leeds Roller Dolls in November 2008, shortly after moving to England. I chose to skate under the name “Toxic Pink Stuff” and did not even consider using my legal name.<sup>6</sup> At my first few practices, I wore hiking trousers. Then, influenced by what others were wearing, I bought a short skirt that I would not have otherwise worn since leaving high school. I played in Roll Britannia, the first European roller derby tournament, in that short skirt and a pair of fishnets.<sup>7</sup> While

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<sup>6</sup> My mother had a brief fear that my name would be interpreted as a reference to vaginal disease; my name is actually based on a rich traditional holiday dessert fondly known in my family as “Pink Stuff.” My name is a good example of how names may have private meanings and can easily be misinterpreted.

<sup>7</sup> From September through January 2012, I was on the training committee for a new roller derby league in York. During this time, I wore only standard athletic attire. However, I may wear more sexualised garb in the future.

skating with Leeds in bouts I wore either “Check Your Breasts” and a pink breast cancer awareness ribbon or “Banshee’s wife” on my knickers. “Banshee’s wife” refers to a neo-tradition within roller derby, which most commonly entails a skater “marrying” another skater. I had my “derby wedding” on Valentine’s Day in 2010 following a derby bout. Bruise ‘em Banshee and I stood before our head referee, disguised as Elvis, and pledged that I would always be her pivot and she would always be my lead jammer.

These experiences confirmed my desire, which began in 2006, to study the sport in two different ways. The names, dress and physicality in roller derby informed my primary research question: whether all-female roller derby upholds or challenges the institution of heterosexuality. I approached this initially by interviewing 38 spectators and twelve players about their interactions with spectators. There are several sub-questions that will be discussed when approaching all-female roller derby in this way: (i) Roller derby, as a full-contact sport played by women, is a rough sport that could challenge any lingering notions of women’s physical weakness, but do the feminised, sexualised clothing and the pseudonyms reinforce gender restrictions? (ii) Is all-female roller derby transgressive or is it accommodated by the institution of heterosexuality? (iii) Does the full-contact aspect of the sport actually change how women are viewed, as athletes, in relation to men? While these questions were addressed through interviews with, and about, spectators, an additional sub-question was addressed via a second round of field research where I interviewed twenty-six players about the phenomenon of “derby wives.” The derby wife question emerged as I became more immersed in derby, and referred to my “derby wife” as my wife in other circles. Non-derby friends began to wonder if derby wives trivialised lesbian marriages. To outsiders, these relationships may be seen as romantic or sexual, which led some to ask how both heterosexual and same-gender partners felt about derby wives. My fourth sub-question was inspired by these discussions: Does the practice, or concept, of “derby wives” challenge heteronormativity? All of the research was conducted in the United States, where roller derby began and is better known than in other countries.

This thesis is part of a process of coming to terms with heterosexuality in roller derby. Chapter One outlines the history of women in sport and in roller derby, with particular attention to the ways in which women are rewarded for

performing heterosexuality successfully. Chapter Two is a theoretical literature review covering some of the feminist debates on heterosexuality, including the “lesbian continuum” (Rich 1980), and applying these to women’s sport. I will also address the concept of “derby wives” and how it might relate to the lesbian continuum. The methodology used, and the two stages of field research, are detailed in Chapter Three. Following this are three analytical chapters based on my empirical research. Clothing, as an expression of femininity and sexuality and an often discussed feature of the roller derby resurgence, is analysed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five centres on the ways in which spectators “do gender” by reviewing their responses to coed and all-male roller derby, as well as the celebration of diverse body types in all-female roller derby. This analysis is useful in examining how respondents negotiate contradictory assumptions about gender, which underlines how gender is still viewed in binary terms. While all of the analysis deals with issues of heterosexuality in roller derby, the final analysis chapter, Chapter Six, is focused on the more explicit aspects of heteronormativity. As such, I evaluate the ways in which derby players are [hetero]normalised and how players manage the “stigma” of lesbianism. Additionally, I discuss the meaning of “derby wives” and its problematisation of heteronormativity.

Roller derby provides a new opportunity to examine gender and its relationship to heterosexuality. As a growing sport, this study took place at a time in derby’s transition. All-female roller derby now exists throughout the United States and, as evidenced by the first Roller Derby World Cup held 1-4 December 2011 in Toronto, in many parts of the world. National teams represented in Toronto were from Canada, France, Australia, Germany, Argentina, Ireland, New Zealand, the United States, Finland, Brasil, Sweden and Scotland. Several of the images included in this dissertation are from that competition.

I hope to provide an understanding of how roller derby challenges or upholds the institution of heterosexuality. The sport may be imagined in many, rather disparate, ways, including players as “hot chicks on skates.” Strangers have told me that they think the sport is played by “glamour dykes” or “big, burly women.” Additionally, someone once said: “When you say roller derby, I think of women in little to nothing skating around.” All-female roller derby is also imagined as a site of women’s empowerment, where women can, positively, transgress gender boundaries (see Storms 2008). This is in part due to its full-



contact nature, emphasis on female players, and display of unconventional femininity and sexuality through dress. As a revitalised full-contact sport, that re-emerged, unusually, as a predominantly *women's* sport, roller derby is a prime site from which to investigate gender. Before I can address this, however, it is important to understand the sporting context out of which roller derby has emerged and it is to this that I now turn.



Image 2: Team France versus Team Brasil at the Roller Derby World Cup (photo courtesy of Jason Ruffell).

## **Chapter One.**

# **Situating Derby Spectators: How History Influences Perceptions of Roller Derby**

Given that all-female roller derby exists within a long history of women in sport, it must be contextualized to establish a framework for thinking about the female participants and their spectators. The way women have been included in or excluded from sport in the past may influence the ways in which they are currently understood within roller derby. It will also help to illustrate why roller derby, as a full-contact sport primarily associated with women, is unusual. Although roller derby at times appears odd, with certain styles of dress and pseudonyms that have captured the attention of popular culture, the sport is linked to more general themes in sociological and historical studies of women's sport. This includes the challenge to sport as a male domain and the construction of gendered difference. Roller derby is, after all, a sport in which many men play by the rules established by women, and, despite its coed history, men as derby players are an anomaly, even with their increasing participation since the 2001 all-female roller derby revitalization.

Dress, pseudonyms, and women are all at the forefront of many cultural understandings of roller derby. Players have, deliberately or not, often provoked questions regarding the role of sexuality, non-virtuous femininity and gender in sport. These questions are entangled with a sporting history that has framed women as assumed heterosexuals or as demonized lesbians in arguments against women's inclusion. Broadly speaking, in order for a female athlete to be accepted she must act "in conformity with the patriarchal rules that ensure she is first and foremost recognised as a heterosexual feminine being" (Choi 2000: 8). If it is not possible to directly verify that she is heterosexual, other indications of heterosexuality can be used; for example, "femininity [...] is a code word for heterosexuality. [...] The real fear is that women athletes will look like dykes, or even worse, are dykes" (Griffin 1998: 68; see also Knight and Giuliano 2003). As a way to manage the stigmatizing effect of associations with lesbianism or masculinity, some athletes and promoters have relied on the triad of heterosexualisation, feminisation, and hyper-sexualisation to produce an appearance of acceptability so women may gain access, legitimacy (albeit

questionable), funding, or spectators. However, feminisation carries risks. To negotiate the complex gender requirements placed on female athletes, “she should be neither too feminine nor too masculine” (Kolnes 1995: 65): they must be seen as masculine enough to be capable of performing properly in sport, but not so masculine as to challenge their status as women. Roller derby participants, as they appear in media coverage, have managed to accommodate both masculinity and femininity. The question remains whether or not women’s participation in roller derby challenges “heteropolarity” (Wilton 1996: 127), which is often used to justify inequality in sport.

Issues of gendered acceptability and regulation have plagued women in sport. A historical understanding is crucial to considering the social influences that have assisted in creating all-female roller derby and spectators’ interpretations of the sport and is the focus of this chapter. Therefore, I will discuss sport as a widely acknowledged site of gender construction (e.g. Birrell and Theberge 1994; Kolnes 1995; Theberge 1993). I will also examine the assumptions grounded in heteropolar notions that have been used to justify: (i) defending sport as a sphere for men; (ii) the creation of different rules and separate sports for men and women; and (iii) gender-testing in highly competitive international sporting events. Historically, sport was a male domain (Birrell and Theberge 1994), and, although women have proven their athletic prowess, their physical abilities are still assumed to differ from those of men. I will therefore analyse the ways in which women’s participation in sport is gendered by a feminising and heterosexualising process in dress, physicality and overt sexualisation. Following this, I will address the ways in which coed, or mixed gender,<sup>8</sup> sport relates to gendered difference. Finally, I will discuss the exclusionary practice of gender

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term gender not just to mean masculinity and femininity, but also when referring to men and women. This usage marks these categories as social constructions which are not “natural, unproblematic, pre-social differences between men and women [...] sex differences themselves are by no means self-evident, [...] the ways in which we recognize and classify sex differences are themselves social” (Jackson 1999: 6-7). Pre-Enlightenment, it was believed that there was only one gender. Women and men had the same body, but women’s male organs were located internally and men’s were external (Lacqueur 1990). Therefore, it was reasoned, some circumstances, like excessive exercise, could turn women into men by dislodging the internal penis. While it may sound ludicrous, this idea is not far from the idea that exercise makes women look and act like men. The acknowledgement of the social construction of men and women is essential when discussing sport. Gender policies and testing rely on a social understanding of biology and, as evidenced in the cases of Caster Semenya and Santhi Soundarajan, are often discriminatory. The changing policies of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) are notable in showing that there is not a fixed understanding of what can be included under the definition of woman, and will be discussed in this chapter.

policies in sport, and WFTDA's implementation of a gender policy with the hope of promoting inclusion. The history outlined in the proceeding pages will be used to discuss the reality and stereotypes of all-female roller derby spectators.

### ***The Feminised and Heterosexualised in Women's Sport***

Since the beginnings of organised sport in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a common argument against women's inclusion has been the need to preserve women's reproductive potential and femininity. The Victorian ideal of womanhood "was antithetical to sport" (McCrone 1987: 99) because it required a passive, maternal femininity. However, as noted by Cahn, Black women were "excluded from dominant ideals of womanhood" (1993: 352). In 1851, Sojourner Truth highlighted the class and race differential in her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" Truth, a former slave, abolitionist, and a speaker on behalf of women's rights, eloquently discussed the hardships that she faced as an African American woman, and used her experiences to illustrate the disparity in the treatment of diverse women and assumptions of their frailty. The need to protect women was used to justify legal inequality, but was simultaneously ignored when discussing women of a lower economic standing or racial or ethnic minorities. Because this chapter focuses on historical, Western ideals of womanhood, it assumes women of a particular class and race location.

In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a shift in medical doctrine supported women's access to moderate physical activity, but this was not intended to liberate "the middle-class woman from traditional restriction on bodily movement, but rather as upgrading her ultimate maternal capacities" (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1987: 21). Limited exercise for white women of a certain class was authorized in the hopes of creating healthier children, not necessarily healthier women in their own right (McCrone 1987). The arguments regarding women's participation in sport revolved around heterosexual roles: whether it would make them better, or worse, reproducers and wives. Early arguments in favour of female athletes included reassurances that women would not abandon their heterosexuality and gender with involvement in sport. There were also concerns about the broader implications of women's athletic ventures, like women gaining

further legal and social rights; therefore, the female athlete was regarded as a threat.<sup>9</sup>

Women were excluded from the first modern Olympic Games under the International Olympic Committee in 1896.<sup>10</sup> Women's accomplishments were ignored by Olympic organisers, such as Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who valued the Olympics as a site for "the world's white, male upper-class youth" (Welch and Costa 1994: 124). Aside from racist and classist assumptions, the fear of gender transgression was evident in Baron Pierre de Coubertin's argument for women's exclusion. He was concerned that women would lose their femininity, while feminising sport. The genders were polarised, and elite men were viewed as the natural competitors. In addition to threatening the masculine preserve of sport, women were also viewed as unappealing to spectators; Coubertin believed that women's participation in the Olympics was "the most unaesthetic sight human eyes could contemplate" (quoted in Hargreaves 1994: 209). Some women<sup>11</sup> were allowed to participate in 1900, but only in sport that was classed and congruent with femininity, such as tennis, sailing, croquet, equestrian events, and golf.<sup>12</sup>

Even as women gained access to organised sport, accounts of women's natural weakness persisted and influenced decisions that regulated women's involvement. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some critics continued to fear that women's participation would cause them reproductive failure (Choi 2000) and dangerously elevated sex drives (Cahn 1994). In 1928, ill-founded reports that women

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<sup>9</sup> For example, at Cambridge in 1886 the "male undergraduates celebrated their school's refusal to grant women degrees by publicly hanging in effigy a female cyclist in bloomers" (Nelson 1994: 17). Involvement in sport mandated other social changes, as women's bicycling led to the Victorian dress reform movement. It could also provide financial support for women. In 1896, individuals in the fashion industry offered ten thousand dollars to Helga Estby and her eighteen-year old daughter Clara if they walked from Spokane, Washington to New York City, within seven months, earning their own way, and wore "the 'reform costume,' a bicycle skirt that sponsors wanted her to advertise once she got to Salt Lake City" (Hunt 2003: 12). This "creative promotion" was used to challenge groups, like "the Rescue League of Washington formed to fight against women riding 'the devil's agent' and wearing bicycle apparel. The organization launched a national crusade to ask clergymen and women to suppress the bicycle craze because of its vulgarity" (Hunt 2003: 85). Helga participated in this venture to earn money to save her family's farm, but was unable to collect the money when they arrived in New York City eighteen days after the contracted deadline.

<sup>10</sup> However, two women, Melpomene and Stamata Revithi, completed the same race as the men's marathon. Melpomene completed the event prior to the men's Olympic Marathon, in four and half hours, while Revithi ran the course in five and half hours the following day (Lennartz 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Those with access to the Olympic Games in 1900 were women who came from wealth, as women participating from the United States had to be able to afford their own travel to Paris (Welch and Costa 1994).

<sup>12</sup> There have been contradictory reports of the events in which the women actually competed. The sports listed here were taken from the International Olympic Committee's report (July 2009).

collapsed from an 800-meter run resulted in the cancellation of this women's event until 1960, a full thirty-two years later (Welch and Costa 1994).<sup>13</sup> The reported collapse of these athletes was interpreted through a gendered lens; the cancellation of the event was justified by the athletes' position as women and, thus, their presumed inherent frailty. Because these women were seen first and foremost as women, not athletes, they were denied the access that would enable them to progress and women's other athletic accomplishments were ignored. As one of Kessler and McKenna's participants said, "gender is an anchor, and once people decide what you are they interpret everything you do in light of that" (1985: 6).

As a number of studies have demonstrated, the more feminine and attractive, as socially and heterosexually defined, female athletes are the better the media coverage they receive as individual players (Kolnes 1995; Krane 2001; Pirinen 1997). This can have financial and marketing benefits, such as "endorsements, fan approval, and reduced heterosexist discrimination" (Krane 2001: 118). Athletes "employ various strategies to present an appearance consistent with hegemonic feminine ideals" (Krane 2001: 120), by stressing their heterosexual relationships, wearing make-up and not having short, cropped hair (Kauer and Krane 2006). These athletes, and promoters, are astutely aware that feminine presentation has positive implications. Women are not "cultural dupes" (Dellinger and Williams 1997: 153), but active agents who exist within institutions that exert pressures to conform to certain femininities (Black 2002; Craig 2006; Hockey et al. 2007), rooted in the institution of heterosexuality.

Women's participation has been constructed through gendered ideologies upheld by various institutions which require an adherence to femininity<sup>14</sup> in game play, physical performance and appearance. Rules are altered to accommodate a feminine presentation which creates the illusion that women can only play a feminised version of sport. For example, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Senda Berenson and Clara Gregory Baer each altered the rules of basketball to garner support for women's participation. Both shifted the focus from competition to "cooperation

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<sup>13</sup> In 1984, there was another benchmark for women's inclusion in the Olympics when the first women's marathon, 26.2 miles, was included. This event was won by Joan Benoit Samuelson, who had undergone knee surgery seventeen days prior to the Olympic Trials. Despite being denied equal participation for generations, women have, in a relatively short time, proven they can far exceed an 800-meter run without collapsing from physical exhaustion.

<sup>14</sup> The type of femininity mandated evolves over time.

and reasoning” (Paul 1993: 29). Baer’s changes, enacted in 1895, enforced a passive femininity by restricting women’s movements and silencing participants; women were not allowed to travel around the court, permitted “to speak aloud, to guard their opponents, to dribble, to shoot or pass with two hands, or to fall down” (Paul 1993: 29).<sup>15</sup> Women’s basketball is still played with an altered rule set.<sup>16</sup> The enactment of different rules for the same sport is especially questionable given that women have played, successfully, against men by the same rules. From 1936 to 1986, the All-American Red Heads provided an opportunity for some qualified women to travel the United States, playing against men, by men’s basketball rules. According to *The Washington Post* (1975), the All-American Red Heads had a record of 188 to 13 against men’s teams in the 1974 season. A notable challenge to sport as a male domain, despite their success, they still utilised gimmicks. Through tactics and appearance, they were highly gendered: “They would embarrass their male opponents by being flirtatious, unnerve them by teasing them about sex, and encourage the fans to give men a hard time” (Festle 1996: 33). Feminine wiles, perhaps bordering on the nonvirtuous, and heterosexuality helped frame the competition.

Female ballplayers in the All-American Girls Baseball League, begun in 1943, were taught beauty regimens and feminine etiquette at a charm school. This preserved their heterosexual positioning and attractiveness while they played a masculine sport. The players were restricted in clothing and hairstyle choices, as well as instructed to avoid signifiers of lesbianism. Officials were “firmly convinced that the contrast between feminine appearance and masculine skill accounted for the league’s success” (Cahn 1994: 153).<sup>17</sup> The careful and methodical preservation of femininity through manipulation of one’s general

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<sup>15</sup> The first women’s basketball game, on 4 April 1986, was played between Stanford and the University of California Berkeley. Only women were allowed to attend as spectators (Guttman 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Women’s basketball, generally, was not even played on a full-court until 1971. Whilst there has been progress since these feminised versions of women’s basketball were released, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball regulations still include differences based on gendered constructions. Amongst other rules, the balls weigh less for women, are smaller in circumference and bouncier, and the three-point line is an inch shorter for women (see Bilik and Williamson 2010). A particularly obvious example of gender regulation without any conceivable biological basis, since remedied, existed in the 2009 NCAA rule set: only women were allowed to wear beige headbands, but other colour options were available to both sexes (white or black) (see Bilik and Williamson 2009: 59).

<sup>17</sup> While this league was all-white, Ferrante notes studies that have shown African-American women’s participation in “their own leagues and teams and several even played on men’s teams in the Negro baseball leagues” (1994: 245).

outward appearance while playing a “masculine” sport is a powerful testament to the meanings associated with dress. Femininity is a marketable asset for women who can gain respectability through a presentation of acceptable femininity which is performed by embracing the dress that signifies it (Skeggs 1997; Tseëlon 1995).<sup>18</sup> Skeggs specifically focuses on femininity as a form of cultural capital adopted by women to counter how they are, “by class and race location, already categorized as non-respectable” (1997: 118). The same can be applied to female athletes in masculine sport, who by their very activities are unconventionally feminine. If, as Bartky (1990) argues, femininity has become less about personality traits and more about its displays on the body, then female athletes may perform femininity successfully.

The methods used to negotiate the constructed contradiction between feminine appearance and masculine skill are apparent in Roller Derby<sup>19</sup> marketing. Frank Deford<sup>20</sup> provides some “vintage or camp” (1971: 24) examples from Roller Derby yearbooks – promotional items sold to spectators at Derby events – which were explicit in their promotion of the female players’ heterosexuality: “Margie Laszlo stands as proof positive that femininity can survive in the rough-and-tumble skate world”; “The ink on her skating contract was barely dry when she got Larry's signature on a marriage license” (1971: 24). These statements serve to reaffirm heterosexuality and femininity, and act as assurances that participation in Roller Derby does not change the women into, as they have reportedly been called, “mannish freaks” (Deford 1971: 62). Instead, following a history of associating women’s athleticism positively or negatively with reproduction, readers are told that those within the sport are “very proud of how well the girls take pregnancy and deliver[y]” (Deford 1971: 133). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seems as though Deford, and those he interviewed, found it important to frame female Derby players as capable reproducers; he even announced that some women hid their pregnancy so that they could skate into the

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<sup>18</sup> This is not particular to the field of sport. In their study of women, make-up, and the workplace, Dellinger and Williams found that “respondents felt that women who do not wear makeup do not appear to be (1) healthy, (2) heterosexual, or (3) credible” (1997: 156).

<sup>19</sup> The early version of roller derby is capitalised because it is a copyrighted name.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Deford was a contributing writer to *Sports Illustrated*. His book is one of the very few about Roller Derby. This text is utilized throughout this thesis as a means to gain a historical understanding of the views on women in the sport.



sixth month. He reaffirms the women's capability to reproduce, while reiterating their passion for the sport.<sup>21</sup>

By extension, Ann Cavello defends the impact Derby has on a woman's physique: "in the summer, on the beach in a bikini, they all say, gee, you're a skater - you don't have those ugly leg muscles like a ballet dancer or anything. I've been in this twenty years, so it can't be bad for a woman" (quoted in Deford 1971: 57). She emphasizes a particular kind of muscular acceptability for women, which still aligns with physical attractiveness. Joanie, described by Deford as well-admired and beautiful, also defends women in Derby by saying "we really are very normal girls you know. You take any group of girls, secretaries, say, or something, and you would find the same range as we have" (quoted in Deford 1971: 62-63). Notably, she chooses to compare female Derby players with women in an overtly feminised career.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> His quote also ignores the dangers of a full-contact sport while pregnant, when one wants to continue the pregnancy. In the United States, an unaired public service announcement promoting breastfeeding featured pregnant roller derby players with the voice over: "You'd never take risks while you're pregnant. Why start when the baby's born?" (quoted in Wolf 2007: 597). While engaging in full-contact sport is a dangerous activity for a healthy pregnancy, some have questioned women's ability to make the choice to continue any athletic career once pregnant. The Women's Sports Foundation (n.d.) state that the pregnant athlete, and her physicians, should be the ones to decide whether or not to continue participation in competitive sports, and that it should be treated like any other medical issue. Fearing litigation if damage occurred to a pregnant player or the foetus, Netball Australia enacted a ban on pregnant women as participants. Subsequently, one player, Trudy Gardner, sued the organization, and, in 2003, the court determined that the policy was a form of sex discrimination under Australia's *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Hagan 2009). In the United States, in 2004, Cassandra Harding, member of the track team at the University of Memphis, discovered that she was pregnant – which allowed, because of her contract, for her scholarship to be revoked. Men did not have a similar contract, arguably in violation of Title IX. Lindsey Rovegno (2007), writing for ESPN, uses this as an example of a climate of hostility at many universities that led female athletes to choose abortions so as to keep their scholarships. ESPN's coverage of the treatment of pregnant athletes in universities, which can result in either a player hiding her pregnancy or terminating it, led the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education to release a "Dear Colleague Letter" detailing the rights of pregnant athletes (Brake 2008). Under *Title IX*, it argues, pregnant student athletes must be treated equivalently to other athletes who have a "temporary disability," which does allow for universities to request a doctor's note if required of other students with injuries or illness. The automatic dismissal of pregnant women, seen in the previous decision by Netball Australia and the 2011 policy of Slo-Pitch National (based in Canada and has rules for Men's, Women's, Coed, Masters and Seniors), "reflects deeply ingrained cultural concerns that sports participation will compromise women's reproductive health and the wellbeing of future children" (Brake 2008: 334). One must wonder if, in the United States, there are potential legal ramifications for women who choose to continue to pursue an athletic career while pregnant. In 2011, Ed Pilkington, writing for *The Guardian*, noted that "at least 38 of the 50 states across America have introduced foetal homicide laws that were intended to protect pregnant women and their unborn children from violent attacks by third parties – usually abusive male partners – but are increasingly being turned by renegade prosecutors against the women themselves" (np) if they experience a miscarriage or a stillbirth. For example, in Alabama, the chemical endangerment law has been used to prosecute a woman thought to have taken drugs while pregnant.

<sup>22</sup> This is an issue within media coverage of modern derby as well, and will be returned to shortly.

A new generation of Roller Derby strove to feminise their female players even more by defeminising the women of Derby past, as evidenced in a 1983 article by the Associated Press. It describes the Thunderbirds' "attempt to revitalize roller derby" by recruiting "a new breed of roller derby queens [...] The well-groomed T-Birds are so different from the bruisers of yesteryear that they go into the fray with the help of a cosmetician."<sup>23</sup> The author uses a quote by Darleen Langloise, a new skater with the league, to construct Roller Derby as a phase in a *heterosexual* woman's life: "I love guys," she added. "I just love dating. Eventually I want to settle down, wear aprons and cook chickens and all that. But now I'm – what does my mom always say? – sowing my wild oats'" (Associated Press 1983: 13A). At some point, she will fulfil the normative heterosexual wife role. Until then, one can be reassured that she still "love[s] guys."

Associations with heterosexuality or femininity can be utilized as a way to legitimize otherwise "deviant" women. Part of female athletes' reincorporation into the institution of heterosexuality is the way in which they are still situated within domestic, heterosexual frameworks. One journalist described a star female athlete as "someone who cooks, sews, and washes clothes just like most wives" (quoted by Nelson 1994: 208). This media focus on domestic care is rarer for male athletes, yet is historically evident in coverage of modern roller derby.<sup>24</sup> By utilizing these identities and roles, players are situated within the institution of heterosexuality, which organises how activities are interpreted: either as contributing to current notions of heterosexuality or as challenging its confines.

As part of Cotterill's Master's thesis, she asked derby players about their responses to their portrayal in the media. Cotterill categorised media coverage in three ways:

- (1) the participants in roller derby are rockers, young, punk, and tattooed, who enjoy partying and being rough on the track
- (2) roller derby participants are low-class, tough delinquents who use roller derby as a means of beating other people up without negative repercussions and
- (3) roller derby participants are average people who have jobs and families and enjoy a tough competitive sport. The

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<sup>23</sup> These cosmeticians are clearly seen in the centre of the track in the DVD *Roller Derby Mania* (Griffiths 1986).

<sup>24</sup> While no qualitative or quantitative analysis has been conducted on current media coverage of derby, the inclusion of lesbian players in mainstream media appears to be rarer than the presentation of players as heterosexuals or, at the very least, mothers or women with feminised jobs.

second type of image was the least commonly talked about, and most of the participants did not feel that roller derby had this type of image at all in the media (Cotterill 2010: 27-28).

Pointedly, none of these media stereotypes portray the players purely as athletes.

The representation of derby players “as domestic creatures” is noted by Kearney who dissects the depiction of the players’ personal lives in the television series *Rollergirls*.<sup>25</sup> She suggests that the focus on players as “teacher, nurse, and administrative assistant” (2011: 295) and within their household roles as the caretaker of family and heterosexual partner, continues a trend of feminising and heterosexualising female athletes (see also Messner 1994 for a more general discussion). Roller derby players are portrayed as having a split personality, one where they function as normal women by day, who overwhelmingly have a feminised career, and derby girl by night:

But members of the Tornado Alley Rollergirls [...] *don't seem too mean*, at least when they're away from the track. They [...] include teachers, hairstylists, restaurant managers, military wives and more. In their “*real lives*,” they're *just everyday women* in everyday jobs (emphasis added; Collinsworth 2006: np).

a third-grade teacher by day who *transforms* (emphasis added; Associated Press 2007: np).

Librarian *by day*, roller derby diva *by night*. [...] Hell on wheels, this little Glendale librarian (emphasis added; Erskine 2010: np).

*By day* Fackler, a married mother of two, is a math and science teacher so beloved by her students they voted her teacher of the year. *By night* she is Olivia Shootin' John of the Hotrod Honeys (emphasis added; Hodd and Owens 2011: np).

In the last quote, Fackler seemingly gives up her role as mother and teacher when night comes. Like the third-grade teacher, she transforms into something else, and, like Tornado Alley, derby is not a part of their “real life.” Derby girls are not “too mean”; they are “just everyday women.” Of course, there are variations to this theme. For example, journalist and derby player Lauren Bishop, aka Miss Print, narrates an *ESPN Sportscenter* piece on roller derby in 2008 that deviates slightly.

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<sup>25</sup> *Rollergirls* was an A&E reality television programme in the United States that lasted for one season in 2006.

While there is still a discussion of what the women do outside of roller derby, jobs are more varied and includes a space suit test engineer at NASA Thompson Space Center (*Entertainment Sports Programming Network* 2008). Notably, media coverage of roller derby appears to be changing. During the Roller Derby World Cup, 1-4 December 2011, there were reports on roller derby *as a sport*, rather than depicting the players as anything other than players, or focusing on tattoos, clothing, pseudonyms or other cultural aspects of derby (see, for examples, Casey 2011; Kuitenbrouwer 2011; Scott 2011).

One reason for the dominant discourse that locates female athletes in non-athletic roles could be that women are not given the same opportunities as men to be paid to play sport, and thus do “transform” by night into an athlete in a way that is not necessarily required of male athletes. This can be seen in some of the coverage of England’s women’s rugby team, with some players having to take unpaid leaves of absence, or work part-time, in order to compete in the Women’s Rugby World Cup. Therefore, mentioning women’s day jobs is not necessarily problematic, but can be done to illustrate the gendered difference in financial support (see, for example, Richards 2010). However, some roller derby articles imply an explicitly *gendered* transformation for *women*.

While professional male athletes may not have to work another job outside their sport, many do fulfil the role of parent. However, it is often female players who are described as parent, spouse and carer:

Two years ago, Jenny Mohammed, a 34-year-old full-time mother from the Bronx, was flipping through television channels while nursing her 6-month-old son, Kai, and landed on a reality show about derby (Schaefer 2007: G10).

Wives and mothers and students by day *transform* into “Deja Bruise” or “Velvet Landmine” at night as they take to the rink (emphasis added; Labbé 2008: np).

A journalist asked a member of Leeds Roller Dolls “what her boyfriend felt about her new hobby” (*Yorkshire Evening Post* 2008: np).

The intense commitment has paid off in legions of fans, including the Derby Widowers, husbands and boyfriends who thrill to and/or wince at every collision. “It’s definitely a concern, because I’m getting

married in September, and my future wife is out there,” said one Widower (Hodd and Owens 2011: np).

In the last example, there is a gender reversal as men are the supporters and women the focal point.<sup>26</sup> The players’ participation in roller derby prevents what could be considered the iconic, or archaic, image of the heteronormative, submissive, house-bound, house-wife or mother. Instead, she is framed as a different kind of mother and wife: “a mother of six children, but she is not the typical housewife” (Flores 2008: np). This description still enforces a normative expectation by noting the “typical housewife,” and derby players are still placed within the domestic sphere.

Media representations may expand the scope of acceptable femininity while still reaffirming gender divisions. This may include a broadened understanding of what mothers and wives can engage in while still being good mothers, but it does not break from feminised expectations. However, some representations are more complex than others:

You may have heard about the Windy City Rollers—how the members of the women’s flat-track roller-derby team are scarily tenacious and can clock a rival in seconds flat on the track without batting an eyelash. What you might *not* know is that this team is filled with moms—moms who are founders of nonprofits, teachers and hairstylists, and who basically define the word *badass*. WCR founder Elizabeth Gomez (skater name: Juanna Rumbel) and team members [...] share how they juggle playing with parenting—which sometimes means breast-feeding at halftime—and why they wouldn’t have it any other way (Batt 2010: np).

Here feminised careers are mentioned, but there is no recorded transformation that causes the women to be fundamentally different once they emerge on the track. Rather, these identities, player and mother, are all a part of the person. This cannot be easily read as a challenge to, or reincorporation of women into, the heteronormative. What is important is the way in which this type of media portrayal is interpreted; whether it influences outsiders’ understandings of the meaning of motherhood or limits who one thinks plays roller derby. In her study of female fans of women’s basketball, Bruce found two respondents who “desired more interviews with players who were mothers, believing it would help people

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<sup>26</sup> See Finley (2010) for further discussion about men as supporters in all-female roller derby.

realize women could play sport well and raise a family” (1998: 382). The association of female players with motherhood may normalise the skaters, but, depending on spectators’ interpretations, may serve a dual purpose in challenging what is normal for mothers. In particular, when the motherhood identity is not abandoned once a player enters the track, as clearly evidenced in Image Three (below), what emerges is a redefinition of motherhood. Here, Yo Mama is shown both as a derby girl and a mother and not as someone who must “transform” to skate. She can be both.<sup>27</sup>



Image 3: Yo Mama, of the Anarchy Angels Roller Derby Team in Canada, breastfeeds during a break (photo courtesy of Russ Desaulniers (2011).

Normalisation occurs in other ways as well, which may emphasize that the players are soft and “don’t seem too mean” (Collinsworth 2006: np). This may include female players actively distancing themselves from any political challenge to men’s dominance:

They assert that their involvement changes nothing, that they can compete “and still be feminine.” These athletes take great pains - and it can hurt - to send reassuring signals to those who would oppose their play: “Don’t worry, we’re not feminists. We’re not a threat to you, or to your ideas of how women should behave. We just want to play ball.” It has been a survival strategy (Nelson 1998: xi).

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<sup>27</sup> For another take on a photographic interpretation of mothers in roller derby, see Kate Wilhelm’s (2012) work.

Paul Croughton, writer for *The Sunday Times*, similarly distanced derby players from feminism in an article entitled “Women’s roller derby, like Pussycat Dolls meets NFL”: “while the only men present are the refs and Merv [the announcer], there are no shaven-headed militant feminists or seething misandrists.” This description is the precursor to a paragraph introducing “the Posh and Becks of roller derby” (2009: np) and follows a paragraph which also contains a mention of another heterosexual pairing in derby.<sup>28</sup> Although Finley (2010) cites skaters who distance themselves from feminism, roller derby and/or its players have, nonetheless, often been associated with feminism (Gold 2008). In some magazine and newspaper articles, this is a particular type of feminism, the “third wave” (Farstad as quoted in Wiens 2007; Fighty as quoted in Williams 2006; Joulwan 2007; *Newsweek* 2009): “maybe it’s feminism’s third wave, or the lure of the counter culture, but the full contact sport is enjoying a resurgence” (Internicola 2009: np). Often, there is no thorough explanation as to how it promotes or illustrates feminism. Instead, presumptive statements are offered: “It’s totally this third-wave feminist thing [...]. You skate around in miniskirts and fishnets slamming into people” (Farstad quoted in Wiens 2007: np). Here, the association appears to be in clothing and contact. Fighty also identifies roller derby with third-wave feminism, but differentiates derby players from “the feminists of the sixties, we’re not bra burners. [...] You can be athletic and you can be sexy. Most tennis stars are examples of absolute sex appeal and athleticism” (quoted in Williams 2006: np). This divide between the “waves” of feminism also serves to create, in some cases, a softer vision of feminism – in particular when the media presents third wave as just being about sexiness, rather than openness to sexual diversity.<sup>29</sup>

However, the co-option of derby imagery, or the dress as a sexualised performance for the audience, has been the basis for many feminist debates in the blogosphere. In 2006, both Twisty Faster of *I Blame the Patriarchy* and Vicky Vengeance of *Because sometimes feminists aren’t nice* introduced roller derby and feminism as a subject in their blogs. Unlike those who, in various newspaper articles and interviews, have claimed that roller derby and third-wave feminism

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<sup>28</sup> No lesbian participants are suggested. Mainstream media does sometimes mention the lesbian population within roller derby, and notable examples can be found when roller derby players skate in pride parades (see, for example, Hinton 2011: np).

<sup>29</sup> Of note, this is a discussion of how roller derby is portrayed in the media and is not meant as a discussion of how players portray roller derby. The authors may choose to represent only feminised careers or heterosexual participants.

are linked, both Faster's and Vengeance's critiques of roller derby challenge its assumed conflation with feminism. Faster was most explicit in her critique, calling roller derby "'proto-porn' – a non-penetrative, G-rated, but nevertheless two-dimensional, stereotypical, and bogus picture of female sexuality generated from an amorphous plasma of cultural misogyny" (2006: np). As of 2011, Faster's critique invoked debate and elicited two hundred and eighteen comments to her post. Vengeance's post only elicited seventy-eight responses, but both of these blogs help to further illustrate the complexity of defining feminism's relationship to derby.

### **Lesbian Invisibility and Existence**

The presentation of explicit heterosexuality and femininity may be an attempt to gain acceptance for women's sport, a response to female athletes' association with the sometimes derided lesbian identity. Female athletes are often associated with lesbianism when not overtly performing femininity or heterosexuality (Cahn 1993; Knight and Guiliano 2003; Lenskyj 1986; MacKinnon 1986; Nelson 1994); paradoxically, lesbian athletes are also made invisible in promotions and the media (Pirinen 1997).<sup>30</sup> Male athletes in masculine sport are not often plagued with stigmatising rumours of their sexuality, as muscularity has been coded as masculinity (Scott and Morgan 1996) and masculinity, for men, as heterosexuality.

Despite the "stigma" of lesbianism, sport does provide an avenue for lesbians to meet other lesbians (Cahn 1994). One interviewee, Sarah Sproul, in a short documentary about lesbians in Roller Derby called *High Heels on Wheels* (Cassyd and Sloan 2008), says that she did not believe that she would have met any other lesbians if not for joining Derby:

I was going with a girl, just doing what came naturally. And I didn't know gay from anything at the time. And she said, well you know, just because we're doing this doesn't mean we're lesbians. When she left, I went and looked up the word lesbian to see what she was talking

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<sup>30</sup> This is not to imply that female athletes, in general, are granted much media coverage. According to Messner and Cooky (2010), only 1.6% of televised sports coverage, within their sample, was dedicated to women in 2009, a decrease from 1999's 8.7%. The authors of the study note that the decrease could be caused by female athletes being taken more seriously now, so that news of, for example, naked female bungee jumpers are not covered as much.



about. So I was a little naïve. But that was before I joined the Roller Derby.

Ideally, derby is an accepting place for lesbians, but this is not always communicated in the media,<sup>31</sup> nor do the media always embrace them. The description provided by Deford, early on in his text, shows how women are derided as lesbians:

skaters are most particularly miscast, stereotyped as cro-magnons, ruffians, and scofflaws. The women, naturally, are most maligned, but only a few are Lesbians (and invariably a few of the men are homosexuals too) (1971: 11-12).

He assumes that being a lesbian is degrading and, while lesbianism is mentioned, he then negates the lesbian presence in Roller Derby by reinstituting lesbian invisibility throughout the remainder of the text. Deford does detail quite a few heterosexual relations that occur between members of the team, but is silent on any specific lesbian relations. He describes having to rearrange sleeping quarters to protect the chastity of the players when heterosexual romances appear to be occurring. There are no details regarding lesbians and gays in the text.

Whilst the Thunderbirds were marketing their feminine skaters in the 1980s, other women's sports were enduring "a number of highly publicized 'lesbian incidents' [...] [which] disturbed the still waters of silence and raised the issue of lesbians in sport more directly than ever before" (Griffin 1998: 44). In 1981, tennis player Billie Jean King was outed as a lesbian in a palimony suit filed by her former partner. She lost all endorsements, worth millions, within twenty-four hours. Unlike Billie Jean King in 1981, in 2005, Sheryl Swoopes, former Olympian and WNBA player, received a six-figure sponsorship deal with Olivia Cruises and Resorts, *because* she came out as a lesbian, as did other lesbian athletes Rosie Jones and Martina Navratilova (Robbins 2005). With the recognition of the marketing power of gays and lesbians, there have been vast improvements in the treatment of lesbian athletes. Fans are no longer always assumed to be homophobic, but rather, "the 1990s witnessed a proliferation of advertising designed to secure the 'pink dollar' in presuming and appealing to

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<sup>31</sup> In the Derby documentary *Jam* (Woollen 2006), two featured couples are gay men (with only one partner in each couple participating in Derby). There is no lesbian representation.

‘gays and lesbians’” (McDonald 2008: 87). However, those considered to be heterosexual or appropriately feminine still received more money in endorsements and sponsorships. *The New York Times* cites the differences in endorsements given to Amélie Mauresmo, “the world’s top-ranked women’s tennis player” in 2006, who is a lesbian, and the top paid female athlete in the world, tennis player Maria Sharapova.<sup>32</sup> One plausible explanation for this differential is provided by “Marc Ganis, the president of SportsCorp Ltd., a sports-industry consultant in Chicago. ‘Never underestimate the importance of physical beauty to an athlete’s endorsement opportunities’” (*The New York Times* 2006: np). Those within the industry who silence the lesbian existence presume

that a visible and/or vocal lesbian presence would repel fans from women’s sport. For example, the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), concerned about golf’s “image problem,” have made efforts to heterosexualize the sport’s image to appeal to fans and sponsors (Crossett, 1995). They assume, in this case, that the fans are heterosexual, or at least prefer a heterosexual image. The mainstream media work on much the same assumption. They assume that their audiences would rather not see or hear about lesbians in sport (Plymire and Forman 2000: 144).

The fear of stigmatisation continues because of perceived, or real, regulation within the sporting community, and not just the silencing of lesbianism in media and advertising; the female athletes Kolnes interviewed believed that judges might be easier on competitors who were feminine while “on the court” (1995: 68). Players perceived a biased judgment that would cause some to overlook successes or to penalise without warrant. Others were simply denied access to sport because of a perceived, or real, lesbian identity. Rene Portland, the women’s basketball coach for Penn State University, institutionalised homophobia in her programme for twenty-seven years, until 2007, by barring lesbians from the team. Her ban was well-known; in 1986, Bill Figel of the *Chicago Sun-Times* quoted her as saying: “I will not have it [lesbianism] in my program.” In Figel’s article, lesbians are portrayed as villains, sexual predators, or as cliquish women who isolate heterosexuals. Portland’s “extremism is to battle the stigma all women’s sports seemingly has been forced to face: ‘Guilt by association’” (Figel 1986: 119).

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<sup>32</sup> As of 2006, it was estimated that Sharapova earned \$19 million. The article also estimated that Mauresmo earned between one and two million in endorsements.

Portland aimed to protect heterosexuals from the stigmatising presence of lesbians. In 2005, Jennifer Harris was dismissed from the Penn State team; she believes this was because Portland thought she was a lesbian. As a result, Harris sued and Portland resigned following a settlement.<sup>33</sup>

Portland's attempt to disassociate basketball from lesbianism is not an isolated event within women's sport. Festle notes discriminatory recruiting practices, where players were sent "postcards with reasons to choose Baylor [University]. 'Coach is outspoken against lesbianism and won't accept it,' one read" (1996: xxvii). Other teams were associated with lesbianism, including the Texas Longhorns in the early 1990s. In response, the Longhorns coach, Jody Conratt, did not distance her team from lesbianism, but instead focused on the positive benefits that "*diversity*" (Festle 1996: xxvi) has for the team. Despite improved inclusivity, the maligning of lesbian players still occurs within both the domestic and international community of women's sport. Nikki Wedgewood's study of a schoolgirl Australian Rule football team found a coach who "consciously promoted a heterosexual team image" (2004: 144); according to the coach, the team members were presumed heterosexual because they combined femininity and competition. In 2011, news outlets were reporting on homophobia within the Nigeria women's soccer team in the run-up to the Women's World Cup. The team's coach, Eucharia Uche, used "religion in an attempt to rid her team of homosexual behavior, which she termed a 'dirty issue,' and 'spiritually, morally very wrong'" (Longman 2011: np).

Certain sports may even be coded as signifying a particular sexuality. The controversy surrounding a photograph of Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan playing softball at university is a quintessential example of this and spurred heated debate in the media during her nomination process. As Pat Buchanan tellingly said on MSNBC, not all female softball players are necessarily lesbian, "but that's been sort of a signal, like two men sunbathing together on a beach or something like that. The immediate implication is that they're gay. [...] And as soon as I saw that picture, first she's got a good batting stance there Joe, but secondly it seemed to me that that is the message conveyed" (2010: np). It is not just that Justice Kagan played softball, but that she played it well, which indicates to Buchanan

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<sup>33</sup> The discriminatory practices of Rene Portland are recorded in the documentary *Training Rules* (see Mosbacher and Yacker 2010).

that she might be a lesbian. While Buchanan's statement is "ridiculous" (as noted by a female newscaster seconds later), he did also address how the White House's "defence" of her heterosexuality angered many queer activists who viewed it as denying the legitimacy of a lesbian Supreme Court justice.

Bill O'Reilly, an American Fox News host, also discussed the photograph of Elena Kagan, and media response, in his segment "Dumbest Thing of the Week" (14 May 2010):

O'Reilly: There's a picture of Elena Kagan playing softball. This ran in *The Wall Street Journal*. Look at her, she's playing softball and all of a sudden the press goes, well, she's a lesbian – and I'm going 'wait a minute.' Alright I know a lot of women who play softball and I know they are not all lesbians. And why would you be a lesbian anyway if you're playing softball? It's not like the *roller derby* – ok? – It's *softball*.

Another male commentator: You've just maligned roller derby now.

O'Reilly: I mean roller derby is a tough, bang! You know, alright, you might make a case... *If* she's got the helmet and the skates, alright, [but] it's *softball*!

Sports are coded differently. Softball is perceived as being open to heterosexuals and, contradictorily to what was discussed earlier in this chapter, roller derby is aligned with lesbianism. Notably, these newscasters continue to stigmatise lesbianism by saying that derby has been "maligned" through this association.

### **Feminised Muscular Bodies**

Lesbianism may also be equated with different body types. Although a current trend in female beauty is for women to be both toned and thin, many women are still concerned about becoming too muscular and thus having the appearance of a man. Indeed, women are socialised to take up less space than men (Young 2005) and, competitively, "it *does* make a difference to the success of gymnasts, figure skaters, and divers that they look very thin" (Festle 1996: 271). While women's muscularity becomes more accepted, sport like "the masculine style of bodybuilding," raised concerns that:

Women were attempting to look or act like men, and therefore were unattractive, unnatural, freakish, or lesbian. [...] However, the

aesthetic criteria of women's bodybuilding change with standards of heterosexual attractiveness, as well as affecting these standards. Fitness trends also play a part, of course. A degree of thinness and muscularity which, twenty years ago, was incompatible with femininity or heterosexual appeal is now an accepted standard among most middle-class women (Lenskyj 1986: 137).

In bodybuilding competitions, female participants, especially in the figure/fitness category, as opposed to the physique competitions, are expected to maintain a feminine, sexualised, presentation.<sup>34</sup> To emphasize femininity within the competition, participants may dye their hair blonde, wear pink bikinis, high heels and g-strings while performing. There may be an established hierarchy amongst bodybuilding spectators which privileges the physique competition because of its greater focus on muscularity (Choi 2000). However, the figure/fitness competitions are used most in the advertisements to recruit new spectators because the competition's manipulation of femininity is more acceptable to outsiders (Lenskyj 1986).

The use of feminine displays does not mean that female bodybuilders have completely capitulated to the institution of heterosexuality. Instead, their use of muscular/masculine and feminine visuals "has offered a threat and a challenge to notions of both the feminine AND the masculine" (Mansfield and McGinn 1996: 65). However, that a female bodybuilder must assert her gender to be successful illustrates the restrictions still placed on them.

Lenskyj, cited above, wrote in 1986 about the changing rules of "femininity or heterosexual appeal." The trend in what is an acceptable level of fitness, or muscularity more specifically, for women is continuing to evolve. Within wider United States culture, First Lady Michelle Obama was the subject of a controversy in 2009 after appearing sleeveless at several events, as well as in her official White House photograph. ABC News published an article entitled "Obama's Choice to Bare Arms Causes Uproar," written by Imaeyen Ibanga (2009), and the *Los Angeles Times*' Jeannine Stein wrote a piece entitled "Michelle Obama's Toned Arms are Debated":

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<sup>34</sup> Even within the physique competitions, the most muscular female does not always win. Mansfield and McGinn (1996) and Choi (2000) both cite the documentary *Pumping Iron II*, which follows a body building competition where a less muscular, more feminine looking woman wins.

Her curvy biceps have become something of a lightning rod for remarks from both sexes in a larger discussion of how much female muscle constitutes too much. While some praise Obama as a role model in a world gone obese, others say she's gone too far in displaying the fruit of her workouts. Read one online forum comment: "There is nothing uglier than manly, muscular arms on a woman. Mrs. Obama should be hiding them instead of showing them off" (Stein 2009: np).

Reminiscent of Ann Cavello's statement that roller derby players have appropriate kinds of muscles for females, unlike dancers – or, surely, bodybuilders. These responses illustrate the stigmatisation of certain types of muscularity and women. Other types of muscularity are acceptable though, if seen to enhance one's heterosexual appeal.

Using aerobics as an example, Mutrie and Choi (2000) question whether women's engagement in physical activity is always empowering, if the intentions behind the activity are to beautify women for the sake of heterosexual attractiveness, and, if, as Choi (2000) notes, they become sexual objects through their participation. Although physical activity could be discussed in relation to physical health, some trends "redefine female athleticism as sexy or romantic, intended not for women's health, enjoyment, or empowerment, but for men's pleasure" (Nelson 1994: 17). If the aim of women's athleticism is to improve women's heterosexual attractiveness, then the threat of women as lesbians is also somewhat negated. While applauding the increasing rates of women's participation in sport:

optimism should be tempered by a consideration of the feminization of physical activity present in some types of fitness activities. Exercise and training programs that emphasize weight control, appearance, and sex appeal are contemporary incarnations of the myth of female frailty in women's athletics. By emphasizing the connections between physical activity and sexuality, they maintain the image of feminine athleticism that was the foundation of an ideology that restricted women's sport involvement earlier in the century (Theberge and Birrell 1994: 334-335).

Despite associations with sexuality, the roller derby community may provide a challenge to women's exercise as a device for weight control, or to the need for all to strive for a slimmer self.

The derby community is, overwhelmingly, dedicated to saying that women of all sizes and body types can play (Cohen 2008). This is also indicated by one of Finley's respondents: "You can be fat and skate, or totally out of shape; definitely an inclusiveness. There's a place for all types of girls" (quoted in Finley 2010: 378). Peluso's work emphasizes how "inherent in modern-day roller derby are seeds of resistance [... which] has the potential to pose challenges to many different cultural mandates" including exercise for weight loss or heterosexual beauty. Her examples illustrate a culture of body acceptance. She explains that roller derby is "a safe space to be transgressively embodied" (Peluso 2011: 42-43) because it challenges conventional notions of athlete and athleticism. However, Thomas' (2009) study of roller derby players in the United Kingdom indicates that some derby players may still think of fitness in terms of weight loss. In particular, she uses the experience of one skater, and Krane et al.'s (2004) work, to show

the difficulties of living within two cultures, the sports culture and the social culture [...] While she was empowered by the "different [body] ideal" that roller derby made available to her, she remained influenced by conventional cultural understandings of femininity as thin (Thomas 2009: 33).

Participation in roller derby does not isolate players from cultural ideals presented outside the sport. Indeed, the use of passive pinup imagery in some of derby's marketing materials, which relies on an unrealistic body type as noted by one of Thomas' respondents, may present ironic and contradictory notions of ideal athleticism within roller derby.

I question how bodily ideals are interpreted amongst derby spectators who may rethink fit bodies because of the range displayed in roller derby. Do media representations of fitness within roller derby, or derby advertisements, influence their perspectives? *The Washington Post's* fitness columnists Vicky Hallett and Lenny Bernstein write about derby in a way that is reflective of the acceptance illustrated in Peluso's (2011) study. Hallett and Bernstein list the ways one's body might change with roller derby: noting the possibility of weight loss, muscle gain, and saying "it's not necessarily an activity you'd pursue especially for weight loss" (2009: np). Unfortunately, some media outlets have marketed roller derby as a method for weight loss. On 18 May 2009, CNN's Sanjay Gupta covered roller

derby as a tool for fitness, but also included in the story the amount of weight one team member had lost, without equally covering how additional weight can be a benefit in the sport, or weight gained from increasing muscle mass. Instead of focusing on fitness, or balancing that with how a variety of sizes are important, emphasis on weight loss usurps some of the power of transformative bodies in derby. Within a discourse that focuses on weight loss, other benefits of women's participation are ignored, and certain body types become associated with fitness. In this media exchange, roller derby risks reincorporation into the mainstream where women are encouraged to practise a particular type of thin femininity.

### **Non-virtuous Femininity and Sexualisation**

As illustrated in discussion of changing ideals of feminine bodies, acceptable femininity is not static, but in a state of flux “lived by millions of women who are constantly changing and evolving” (Holland 2004: 35). There is “no such thing as *the* culture (or *the* knowledge), only that which is more or less dominant in any context” (Jenkins 2002: xv); thus, femininities are valued differently, based on their cultural location. Likewise, “cultural capital varies by social class, and in fact serves as a marker and a legitimator of social differences”(Wilson 2002: 6). Roller derby, which initially was located in subcultures like punk, uses a non-virtuous kind of femininity to gain cultural credibility.

The difference between roller derby and most other women's sports<sup>35</sup> is the general lack of distancing within the community from working-class femininity, and the incorporation of this femininity into the culture of sport. In particular, within the early stages of the roller derby resurgence, players adopted an explicitly performative, provocative, sexual femininity.<sup>36</sup> Cohen (2008) found that players uniforms/boutfits, team names, and individual names emphasized

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<sup>35</sup> By this, I mean other pure sports and not sports marketed for voyeuristic pleasure, such as women's mud wrestling. However, these classifications are difficult. For example, Holland differentiates polers, those who use a pole for exercise, and those who use the pole in stripping: “Pole may look the same in a lap-dancing club as it does in a class but, again, the reasons for it being performed differ: women attend pole classes for fun, for friendship, to get fit, for feelings of achievement and pleasure. Certainly it is the same, but it would be a mistake to assume that pole classes occur in the same context” (Holland 2010: 187). Just because a sport may have a particular reading in one context does not mean that there are not counter-cultural interpretations or reinterpretations of the activity.

<sup>36</sup> This is not meant to deny the nature of roller derby as a sport, but to point out that there were some performative aspects in regards to sexuality. For more examples, see *Hell on Wheels* (Ray 2007), which followed the beginnings of the eventually banked-track TXRD Lonestar Rollergirls.



sexuality. This results in the continued use of a sexualised femininity as cultural capital, even if they do not purposively manipulate their dress for the audience. As in the case of many roller derby players, when women do not distance themselves from working-class femininity, it “challenges the conventions of class and gender by flouting them, deliberately wearing outfits which risk association with the unrespectable or even the vulgar” (Storr 2002: 24). Since the feminine presentation adopted is non-virtuous, inappropriate, or a sexually powerful form of femininity, using femininity to balance power becomes more complicated. Derby girls are not, as Tseëlon describes Riviere’s concept of femininity as masquerade, “flash[ing] their femininity to signal that they are not really so threatening, and to reassure that their power is just a charade” (Tseëlon 1995: 37). Instead, derby players are evidentially physically threatening and some of the femininity portrayed serves to emphasize this.

Cohen, who conducted an ethnography of one roller derby league, claims that roller derby “is not a shift away from femininity, instead a different type of femininity is *stressed and expected* by both participants and spectators” (emphasis added; 2008: 24). It involves “a counter-cultural reproduction of femininity that is symbolic of distance from traditional social codes for high-class femininity and reinforces more of a suicide-girl, sexual femininity” (2008: 28).<sup>37</sup> The type of femininity described by Cohen is not normally what would be performed for the sake of increasing respectability, or used by female athletes to accrue cultural capital. Yet, since the revitalisation, the roller derby community has often been perceived as stereotypically alternative and punkish in its aesthetic, while still subversively<sup>38</sup> adopting feminine practices. Thus, femininity within the roller derby community can be used as cultural capital both internally (within the roller

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<sup>37</sup> Suicide girls refers to the SuicideGirls, which began as an online endeavour in 2001 and has since ventured into video, books, and magazines. SuicideGirls is, according to their website, “an alternative to the mainstream media’s obsession with the silicone enhanced Barbie dolls and the incredible shrinking starlets” (2012: np). The women who pose naked with the SuicideGirls are alternative, typically with tattoos and/or piercings. More information is provided on their website, in “Frequently asked questions,” which is retrievable here: <<http://suicidegirls.com/press/faq/>>. [Accessed 2 January 2012].

<sup>38</sup> “Subversively” is tentatively used, and meant only in regard to the disruption of passive femininity. It is debatable whether or not roller derby is subversive in regard to the way that this femininity is then sexualised and viewed by spectators. It is also not to assume that participants are consciously, or intentionally, being subversive; however, this may be the end result of their actions.

derby community to gain acceptance, as noted by Cohen) and externally (towards spectators, promoters, and the media to sell the sport).

Non-virtuous femininity does not communicate the same thing to everyone. Sexualised clothing may be misinterpreted. Some women are fearful of producing the wrong kind of femininity and thus signalling too much sexual availability, and, in particular, this concern occurs when one feels they may not be able to defend themselves from unwanted sexual attention (Tseïlon 1995). Roller derby is perhaps considered a safe venue to be the “wrong” kind of feminine because of the women’s visible exhibition of strength. Of course, no one is free from the potential of assault. In the case of roller derby, in the original Austin, Texas roller derby league, they had a “spank alley” as part of a penalty punishment for one of the derby players; audience members were invited to spank the player. One man overstepped the bounds of what the players deemed acceptable. In response, the man was removed from the audience and verbally reprimanded by the “penalty mistress.” The penalty mistress noted distinctions in sexual presentation and reception: “we walk a fine line between sexy and slutty. And crotch-grabbing is slutty” (see Ray 2007). This language is very similar to Skeggs’ statement of women learning the difference “between looking good and looking tarty, between looking feminine and looking sexy” (Skeggs 1997: 103).

One concern regarding the sexualisation of female athletes is the pacifying imagery of the sexually objectified women. A female athlete is often posed in magazines as glamorous and sexy specifically for a heterosexual male audience, and “by highlighting her sexuality, the media conceals her strength” (Nelson 1994: 216).<sup>39</sup> Women in sport are therefore framed within the institution of heterosexuality. As Kolnes argues, “rather than challenging dominant images of women and the female body, elite sport has turned into a medium in which the sexualization of the female body serves as a backlash against all women, both in and outside sport” (1995: 75). Women’s bodies are heterosexualised and their

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<sup>39</sup> For an overt example, one need only look to *Playboy*. In September 2004, *Playboy* dedicated an issue to “Women of the Olympics,” where eight female Olympians posed for the magazine. Listed here are high-profile examples of female athletes in *Playboy*: Katarina Witt (December 1998), Kiana Tom (May 2002), Chyna (November 2000 and January 2002), Amy Acuff (September 2004), Haley Cope (September 2004), Ineta Radeviča (September 2004), Zhanna Pintusevich-Block (September 2004), Fanni Juhasz (September 2004), Zhanna Block (September 2004), Mary Sauer (September 2004), Susan Tiedtke-Green (September 2004), Katie Vermeulen (September 2004), Amanda Beard (July 2007), Ashley Harkleroad (August 2008).

sexuality is used to sell the sport (Kolnes 1995; Choi 2000).<sup>40</sup> Kolnes's<sup>41</sup> found that there is a lack of consensus amongst female athletes as to their feelings towards their eroticisation. Some respondents did not find it to be "of an oppressive character" (1995: 68), while others believed that it corrupted the nature of the sport. Other female athletes believed the eroticisation of female athletes was a viable way for women's sport to exist.

In sharp contrast to roller derby, where there is no institutional body that mandates clothing choices amongst players, many other sports organisations do regulate what their players wear. Depending on the style of athletic clothing required, it can restrict access for women who live in certain countries or cultures and have to choose between participating in traditional clothing, or not competing (Moore 2004: np). However, the Muslim Women's Games, which, unfortunately, "hardly matches the prestige of the Olympics" (Moore 2004: np), have allowed for Muslim women to participate free from clothing restrictions as men are barred from attending. The 2011 controversy surrounding Fifa's decision to make the Iranian women's football team forfeit because of their choice in dress, which included a "full-body strip that includes a head scarf" (*Reuters* 2011: np), and, subsequently, eliminated their chances of attending the 2012 Olympics, is evidence of continuing struggles over universalised western standards.

In 2011, the Badminton World Federation announced that they were considering a requirement that all female players wear skirts:

Paisan Rangikitpho, the American deputy president of the BFW [...] denied changes were an attempt to use sex to promote the sport. "We just want them to look feminine and have a nice presentation so women will be more popular. [...] Interest is declining. Some women compete in oversize shorts and long pants and appear baggy, almost like men" (Meikle 2011: np).

This feminising process is done to ensure women are noticeably women. It relies on a western understanding of feminine acceptability, and would require that women who wear long trousers for religious or cultural reasons also wear a long skirt over it, significantly hindering movement. The Badminton World Federation

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<sup>40</sup> Ann Cavello believed that the audience went to the Derby for the women, and was well-known for referring to breasts as "tickets" – highlighting how the women's bodies sold tickets to the show (Deford 1971: 56).

<sup>41</sup> She interviewed seventeen different athletes from various sports.

is still reviewing this proposed policy. Also in 2011, the Amateur International Boxing Association (AIBA) announced that it would discuss requiring female boxers to wear skirts at their January 2012 meeting. The President of the organisation, Dr. Ching-Kuo Wu was interviewed after the policy was voluntarily tested at the Women's World Championships in 2010, and justified the proposal by saying "I have heard many times, people say, 'We can't tell the difference between the men and the women,' especially on TV, since they're in the same uniforms and are wearing headgear" (quoted in Rivest 2010: np). These policies reinforce gender division and are a continuation of fears that women's involvement in athletics will make them indistinguishable from men.

These proposed policies follow on the decision made by the Federation Internationale de Volleyball in 1999 which mandated that:

shorts "must be tight in waist and length. Inseam of maximum five centimeters or cut in an upward angle towards the top of the leg. Inseam for men's shorts must not exceed ten centimeters." Players who do not conform to these specifications can be fined \$3,000. Specifications for beach volleyball are as follows: "Men must wear shorts twenty centimeters above the knee and women must wear form-fitting bikini or one-piece swimsuit-style uniforms. Two-piece outfits must be no more than six centimeters wide along the hips and on-pieces must feature open back and upper chest" (Cantelon 2010: 15).

A new sponsorship promotion signed by two of Great Britain's female beach volleyball players, Zara Dampney and Shauna Mullin, continues the trend of catering to audiences' interests in the women's bodies. These athletes have rented the bottoms of their bikinis as advertising space for a Quick Response code, which, when photographed with a smart phone, will direct the photographers to the website for Betfair, a betting company. As evidenced by descriptions of the promotion, it relies on the assumption that the most photographed body part of these female athletes is their behinds (*The Telegraph* 2011) and only serves to encourage this.

In 2004, Sepp Blatter, president of Fifa, appeared impressed with volleyball's new uniform regulations and thought a uniform change would help advertise women's football:

"Let the women play in more feminine clothes like they do in volleyball," he said. "They could, for example have tighter shorts.

Female players are pretty, if you excuse me for saying so, and they already have some different rules to men – such as playing with a lighter ball. That decision was taken to create a more female aesthetic, so why not do it in fashion?” (quoted in Christenson and Kelso 2004: np).

Here, both the rules and modified dress give the appearance of gender difference. Lingerie sports, which have come into fashion in the United States, have capitalised on feminine and sexualised appearance in fashion. Not only has there been a Lingerie Football League since 2009, but a Lingerie Basketball League was introduced in 2011. True to the title, players wear lingerie, but, in the case of lingerie football, there is no denying that they engage in a hard-hitting sport. They are scantily clad, and are required to be so by their contracts which “stipulate that players must cope with the possibility of ‘accidental’ nudity” (Wachter 2010: np). A player could not decide that she wanted to wear standard American football clothing and still play as part of the Lingerie Football League. The players all adhere to a stereotypical standard of beauty; there is no redefining of the athletic body, no “fat and fit” here. The resonating theme of the article entitled “The New Skins Game: The Lingerie Football League is a Rarity in Sports – A Women’s Professional League That’s Actually Growing” by Wachter (2010) is that women have to sell sex to survive in the sporting world. Additionally, a player is quoted as saying that as long as she gets to play football, it does not matter what she wears. Requiring players to wear lingerie may take advantage of the limited opportunity they have to play American football professionally.

Marketers of female sport assume that these efforts will help promote the sport. And, in the case of the Lingerie Football League, it may be successful. However, recent changes to the uniform requirements in beach volleyball allowed Cantelon, using news reports, to study what this meant for spectators of the sport. He argues that the new audience members that the uniforms helped recruit “were not interested in the women as competitors but merely sexual objects” (2010: 18). Additionally, in interviews with focus groups, Mary Jo Kane found that “sex sells sex, not women’s sport.” She presented respondents with “photographs of female athletes ranging from on-court athletic competence to wholesome ‘girls next door’ to soft pornography” in order to determine which “images increased their interest” in women’s sport:

Women and older men [...] rated the image that portrayed athletic prowess as the one most likely to influence their interest in women's sports. [...] Even when younger males, a prime target audience, indicated that sexually provocative images were "hot," they also stated that such images did not fundamentally increase their interest in women's sports, particularly when it came to attending a sporting event (Kane 2011: np).

Instead individuals "want to buy the magazines but they didn't want to consume the sports" and portraying female athletes as sex objects "alienates the core of the fan base that's already there" (Kane quoted in Zirin 2008: np). Curiously, Kane does not say which sports or athletes were presented in these photographs. Additionally, the "on-court" photographs may not include images of female athletes who appear in a sexual manner while playing their sport. These depictions of sexualised athletes may not show the women as active, but standing still and passive. Although female athletes' actions can be co-opted with the "eroticization of the female athlete in *Playboy*," female athleticism, in general, challenges the male ownership of women's bodies by giving women themselves control: "it is our bodies as acting rather than as acted upon" (MacKinnon 1987: 121-122). However, even though "our bodies" are "acting" in sport, they are still being "acted upon" in others' interpretation of the bodies. Spectatorship must be considered in the sexualised construction of women in sport, and, in particular, must be analysed in sports where players may wear sexualised clothing but play a masculine sport, like in roller derby. This would provide a new understanding of more complex relationships between athleticism and women's sexuality.

There are several ways in which sexuality, and the interpretation of it by spectators, may function differently within roller derby. Firstly, and contrary to the lingerie sports, Oler argues that since, in all-female roller derby, "women are in control of their images [it] makes roller derby a very tough cultural phenomenon to assess" (quoted in Yogmas 2007: np). Yogmas also argues that "gawking dads aside, roller derby is *not* just about hot chicks skating around in circles and knocking each other over." Instead, derby is "complicated" (2007: np) because it resists femininity in the full-contact aspect of the sport, and seems to embrace it with the players' chosen clothing. Awareness that the women choose their own attire, and are not forced by an international organisation to wear skirts, may influence understandings of the sport. Secondly, and distinct from the

sexualised images of female athletes in magazines, the players who dress in a sexualised manner are actively playing a sport; therefore, they are not passively sexual. Debatably, the spectators' gaze may be used to re-imagine strength and femininity. Players control their attire during games and can influence what the spectators gaze at. However, control ends there. The interpretation lies in the eyes of the spectators and in the end, they control the interpretation of the image they are viewing. Despite the ability to dress one's body (and thus control the presentation for spectators), bodies can always be "read in ways that defy our intentions" (Craig 2006: 270). And even without donning highly sexualised attire, a female athlete's clothing can still be sexualised by others (Hargreaves 1994). Thirdly, media portrayal does not necessarily codify the players' intent. This is not necessarily the end of the negotiation between player and outsiders, as players may have their own understanding of the meaning of outsiders' interpretations.

In the end, representations of derby do act upon the participants. As Adria Battaglia (2008) points out, Dave Attel's *Playboy* write-up regarding roller derby, as well as *Penthouse*'s description of the A&E documentary *Rollergirls*, in obviously sexualised tones, reframes roller derby to fit with an idea of the sexual availability of female roller derby players and contextualises derby within the institution of heterosexuality. Even within the sport, albeit an earlier version, misogynist beliefs were presented when an announcer for *RollerJam*, Lee Reherman, said the following on 18 January 2000 (when the episode originally aired in the United States): "Well, absolutely, in Las Vegas, it seemed like either she [Lindsey Francis] was playing a great game or getting her clothes ripped off. I can't decide which I prefer" (see Roller Jam nd).

On the television show *Wild World of Spike* aired on Spike TV, a network designed for heterosexual males, two athletes and one comedian attempted roller derby on 3 May 2007 (Byrnes 2007). When they previewed a roller derby bout, they said: "roller derby rocks man. Chicks fighting in daisy duke shorts." Despite obvious indications that the hosts were not physically able to perform well at roller derby, and recognition that it is a hard-hitting contact sport, the women were repeatedly trivialised and sexualised. Aside from various shots of the derby girls' behinds, Kit Cope mentioned at one point, when a fellow host had passed behind a player, "I think Ellis just penetrated that girl and then tossed her to the side." Tellingly, this one sentence marks the woman as an inactive object, when she is in

fact playing a physically demanding sport and certainly performs better than Ellis. The sexualisation of her, specifically in this way, denies her athleticism. While on a banked track, Ellis is shoved over the railing, but says “you win, we’re done, show me your boobs.” At the end of the episode you hear a derby girl say “everybody lift your skirt up” as the show goes to the credits. The performance is a tease of heterosexual availability. The women are obviously the victors physically, but are re-appropriated, ironically or not, as objects for the men’s viewing pleasure.

Jackson and Scott (2001) differentiate between the sexual and sexualised body: the sexualised body is more often passive, where the sexual body at least has the potential for active engagement and embodiment. Hargreaves also makes this differentiation in athletics:

The issue that is seldom addressed is that women are just as interested in sexuality as men – the important question is whether they are treated as active subjects or as objects (Williams 1990). It is clear that female athletes are making positive choices and creating images which are radically different from previously stereotyped ones of women in sports. Not only are sportswomen making new displays of physical power, but also new displays of sexual power (1994: 167).

Women do have sexual interests, and should be able to explore their sexuality. However, they do so within the constraints of a society where they may not be viewed from the position of subject, but object. Also, just because women are athletic and explore a sexuality, it does not mean that they are creating “new displays of sexual power” (Hargreaves 1994: 167). Female athletes have bared all for *Playboy*, posed in semi-pornographic photographs, but athleticism does not grant them the ability to question current interpretations simply because they are using their *athletic* bodies in an erotic or sexualised way. For example, Oppliger argues that women’s consent to exploitation does not grant them power:

There appears to be a misperception that women gain power through the expression of their bodies. In essence, it is no different than voluntary exploitation. These messages define femininity in terms of what it can do for men's pleasure. This is not about women controlling their sexuality, but what they must do to get a man's attention. [...] There is a prevalent yet misguided thought that showing off one's sexuality is empowering. That the women are voluntarily contributing to their own exploitation makes the situation even worse (Oppliger 2004: 152).



Embodiment can also slip into objectification because of the power of gazing and interpreting held by others. *Bizarre Magazine*'s (2008) editorial layout of "fantasy roller derby" shows two models named Sarah-Jayne and Nina Kate fist fight while wearing skates and a helmet. There are no cumbersome knee, elbow, wrist guards and gum shields on these women. One woman's breasts are bared. This imagery is clearly for the spectator, and projects roller derby as dramatically different from its reality.<sup>42</sup>

When a female athlete portrays vampish behaviour to attract an audience or acts femininely "to overcompensate for their masculine behavior on the field" (Knight and Giuliano 2003: 273), she may be engaging in the "feminine apologetic" (Felshin 1974: 203). The "feminine apologetic" is a way for female athletes to mitigate their masculine actions by adopting traditionally feminine practices by emphasizing "sexual normality and attractiveness as well as so-called 'lady-like' behavior; and [she] *wants* to be feminine, which means that social roles are valued more than sport roles, and life goals include marriage and motherhood rather than being a champion athlete" (Felshin 1974: 204). In Felshin's original argument, the apologetic is enacted by the athlete; it is her apologising for her behaviour. However, the feminine apologetic also occurs in the media, where the media appears to apologise for the athlete: "the media can implicitly or covertly 'assure' their audience that female athletes are heterosexual" (Knight and Giuliano 2003: 273).

While these feminising incidents do occur in the media, with or without the athlete's consent, the femininity that is purportedly displayed in roller derby is found in the dress worn while on the track. It is not something that occurs at a distance from their masculine behaviour, but simultaneously with it. Within the roller derby community itself, non-virtuous femininity may represent more of a feminine unapologetic, as Broad (2001) argues is the case with female rugby players. Broad's argument of a feminine unapologetic relies on the ways in which her respondents instead "destabilize[d] the very categories of gender and sexuality by adhering to their own standards of appearance and, at times, parodic repetition of the traditional ones" (Broad 2001: 190). Femininity was defined in their own terms, but was also played with, as evidenced in Broad's description of "the

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<sup>42</sup> However, the same issue "included interviews and pictures with the London Rollergirls" (Thomas 2009: 51) and therefore the magazine representation was not completely fictionalised.

annual alumni rugby game played in evening gowns, prom dresses, and the occasional wedding dress ” (Broad 2001: 190). This, as well as players’ explicit advertising of their rugby participation, by wearing rugby t-shirts or having bumper stickers, strangely mirrors what occurs within roller derby. While changes within the roller derby community have occurred as its participants strive for acceptance and recognition as a sport, where women played a full-contact sport in bruises and fishnets, players are in as much of a drag as the rugby players described: “By being strong, athletic women (doing female masculinity) and ‘doing drag’ these players were enacting a gendered transgression of gender” (Broad 2001: 190). And even if roller derby players are not in “drag,” they are still presenting a different kind of femininity from what I would associate with the apologetic. It is potentially a femininity that emphasizes the toughness of the players. Again, I would differentiate it from the Lingerie Football League, where the clothing, even when worn during a full-contact sport, could align with the feminine apologetic. In roller derby, the clothing is arguably more of a choice for players and not dictated by an overarching organisation. Whereas lingerie football is seen as using lingerie to entice men, roller derby players may wear whatever *they* desire.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, derby players are not necessarily engaged in the feminine apologetic. But there is evidence of a normalisation process which occurs in the media, as demonstrated by the heterosexualisation of players and the emphasis on their social, domestic roles. Players may perpetuate this. However, skaters are not apologising for their gender in sport, but, when a sexualised femininity is enacted through the clothing, they are claiming femininity in an exaggerated, non-virtuous way.

### **Chick Fight!**

Within roller derby, and other all-female full contact sports, an additional way to sexualise the sport is by emphasizing its display of “chick fights.” Criticism regarding men’s violence in sport evaluates the association between violence, romanticism, patriotism and the concern that this violence will spread from the

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<sup>43</sup> However, each league may have their own individual policy, and, as noted by Cohen (2008), players may feel pressure from within the community to dress in particular ways. Additionally, like in other women’s sports, players may be rewarded for feminised or sexualised dress commercially. The concept of choice is contentious, and will be addressed further in Chapter Four.

sporting context into real life (Nelson 1994; Oppliger 2004). But full-contact sports are viewed differently dependent on the gender of players: “Physical grappling between men is seen as a celebration of masculinity and male bonding, but between women, the act is considered unacceptable and unnatural, with sexual innuendos” (Lenskyj 1986: 115). These sexual innuendos are amplified when the sport is designed to cater to perceived heterosexual men’s desire. When coed roller derby returned to television as *RollerJam* in the 1990s, the following was stated on *The Daily Show* by Jon Stewart (1999):

Roller derby is back, and it's better than... well before. *RollerJam*, a good example of what can happen when overweight Hooters<sup>44</sup> girls learn how to skate, made its debut on TNN, helping to feed the hostile aggression of frat boys who have grown bored with the tedium of date rape.

Jon Stewart perceives the female participants as lowbrow, working-class, and disempowered sexual objects. Notably, *RollerJam* was coed, but the focus was solely on the women participating. The reason for watching *RollerJam* and the critical view of the players was placed squarely on the women, and heterosexual men’s reaction to the women playing derby. This description differs significantly from how roller derby is often discussed in the media since its revitalisation, where the sport is considered a tool for women’s empowerment.

While roller derby is often associated, albeit contentiously, with violence, the concern is not that women will go home to become domestic abusers, but rather the way their full-contact sport is potentially read by outsiders as a sexual “chick fight.” Oler (2008), in *Bitch* magazine, has expressed concerns about the physical hits between women in derby and its eroticisation by the [heterosexual] male audience. The “violence” that occurs within roller derby in particular has not been analysed extensively. Under WFTDA rules fights are not allowed, but players follow a strict code of contact. However, prior to WFTDA rules and many leagues’ condemnation of fights, real or for performance’s sake, there were fights in roller derby. Although there is no record of how often this occurred, there is an episode of Dave Attell’s television series *Insomnia* which records one incident

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<sup>44</sup> “Hooters” is a United States based restaurant chain, known for the “Hooters Girl.” The Hooters Girl is a waitress with a very specific uniform: a tight white sleeveless shirt with the Hooters logo, and orange hot pants.

within Austin roller derby. When a fight begins between two players, Dave Attell shouts “Chick fight! Take that bitch out!” (Ray 2007). In this way, men’s and women’s sports are constructed differently. Women are sexualised in their aggression, whereas men are not.

### ***Coed Sport***

Although women play rugby and other contact oriented sports, these are part of a history of men’s sport, where men dominate as participants. However, more women have been emerging into sport historically associated with men. The first women’s rugby World Cup was in 1991. Women have been participating in American tackle football in increasing numbers. By early 2009, the Independent Women’s Football League and the National Women’s Football Association (now defunct) had “recruited more than 3,000 players for 80 teams in 67 cities” (Miller 2009: np). In 2011, the Women’s Football Alliance boasted sixty-two member teams (Women's Football Alliance nd). In the UK, Jen Hilton joined the Coventry Jets in 2011, under the British American Football Association; “however, the European Federation of American Football (EFAF) has prohibited her from playing in any European cup games” (BBC News 2011a: np).

The resistance to women’s inclusion in certain sports is based on historical amnesia that ignores women’s successes (Kane 1995) in unsanctioned game play or against men, as well as gender stereotypes. As late as the 1980s, opponents still “justif[ied] women’s exclusion from the triple jump, the pole vault, boxing and weight-lifting, on the grounds that women’s reproductive systems are vulnerable to injury in these sports,”<sup>45</sup> without any “medical reasons intrinsic to women that should prevent them, *any more than men*, from participation” (Hargreaves 2007: 12). In 1999, Margaret MacGregor’s victory in a coed boxing match against Loi Chow “did nothing to legitimize female professional boxing or mixed-gender boxing matches” (Fields 2005: 129).

Sports that are categorised as being either for women or for men are premised on the notion that there are only two genders, and that these genders

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<sup>45</sup> Women’s triple jump was included in the Olympics in 1996 and pole vaulting and weight-lifting were added in 2000. Women’s boxing will make its official Olympic debut in 2012, following a history of exclusion and even outright bans in certain countries, despite its inclusion in the 1904 Olympics as an exhibition sport.

have certain identifiable and radically different traits. Ferris reports on a study which suggests that while there may be significant physical “differences between the average” man and woman, “comparisons between highly-trained female and male athletes revealed more similarities than differences” (1992: 684). In fact, Ferris expands on this by arguing that differences in athletic performance between men and women in the same sports have shown a continued equalisation.

In acknowledging the variation within genders, not just between them, Kane (1995) argues that sport should be considered a continuum. Viewing sport as a continuum would problematise statements like this one, made by one of Messner’s respondents: “A woman can do the same job as I can do - maybe even be my boss. But I’ll be *damned* if she can go out on the field and take a hit from Ronnie Lott” (1990: 213).<sup>46</sup> One implication of this type of ideology is, as Kane (1995) states, to perpetuate gender binaries, where physical difference is assumed; even though, as Messner points out, a vast majority of men could not take a hit, without injury, from Ronnie Lott. The second implication is contained in Kane’s critique that women’s successes in these masculine sports are denied. And thirdly, it creates an expectation that all men can excel in athletics. This justification for women’s exclusion is based on the premises that real men can always excel, and real women cannot. These distinctions are important, because sport maintains the idea of male supremacy (Messner 1994). If women and men competed together successfully, without capitulating to those who assume women need special treatment, it would challenge the presumptive gender binaries which have supported exclusionary practices in sport.

Polarisation of the genders is necessary for the continued maintenance of heteronormativity, and the emphasis of men’s physical superiority (or difference), as well as the construction of sport as a masculine domain, is one of many institutionalisations of “heteropolarity”; “it must be possible to distinguish men from women in order to institute and reproduce a power differential that is (precisely) predicated upon that difference” (Wilton 1996: 127). Most western sports are segregated by gender, with women’s sports tailored to allow for feminised play, premised on the notion of a gender dichotomy (Cahn 1994). This differentiation is characteristic of the construction of sport as a “binary” (Kane

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<sup>46</sup> Ronnie Lott is a former American football player.

1995). When women participate, the sport often becomes marked, and the rules are altered to “suit” women. The creation of a separate league or association for women also makes it easier to keep women from trying to participate in the other league, marked, invisibly, as for men (e.g., National Basketball League, National Football League, etc). In 1974, after numerous lawsuits and congressional legislation, Little League Baseball was forced to integrate the genders; although, in the same year, they established “a softball program, effectively attracting girls to fast-pitch play and away from Little League baseball” (McDonagh and Pappano 2008: 210).

In coed sport, where men and women compete together, there are other methods of signifying difference. While the All-American Red Heads were directly pitted against men, by men’s rules, other types of coed sports may limit contact between the genders. Players of korfbal, for example, a coed sport invented in 1901, are prohibited from guarding someone of a different gender. In mixed doubles in tennis, players always serve to the player of the same gender. Although coed sport could be a site where gender identification is irrelevant, regulations such as these continue to maintain a system founded on the belief of fundamental difference and forces particular gender identification. Similarly, Roller Derby, as a coed sport in the 1930s and until the recent revitalisation, may have allowed women and men to play on the same team, by the same rules, but still practised gender segregation on the track. This division was not enough for “the purists” of derby in the late 1960s, who wanted a more obvious demarcation between the genders and

would rather the girls skate in a preliminary game, with their score unrelated to the men’s. Or, even better, get rid of the women altogether. Buddy Atkinson, Sr., head of the Derby training school, is married to a skater and has a daughter-in-law for one, too. “The best thing would be to take all the girl skaters, put ‘em in a little sack and drop ‘em in a river,” Buddy Senior declares. Certainly, there is no doubt that it is the women who give the game its tawdry, sideshow image. But there is also no doubt that it is the girls who bring people into the arenas – even if the fans stay to enjoy the faster, harder men’s play more (Deford 1971: 48-49).

Grounded in notions of gender difference and feminine acceptability, Buddy Atkinson, Sr. severely discredited female athleticism, and Deford elaborated on

his statement by claiming, without qualification, that the men's play is "faster, harder."

Gender differentiation within coed sport continues today. A coed soccer league, studied by Henry and Comeaux (1999), awarded more points for women's goals than men's and capped the number of male players on the pitch. Slo-Pitch National, an organisation that oversees member teams and leagues for slo-pitch softball in Canada, has a rule that if a pitcher walks a player, the male gets two bases whereas the female gets one.<sup>47</sup> In other cases, the contact aspect may be diminished once women begin to play with men, as in lacrosse. These types of rules rely on a "paradox created by providing equality of opportunity that is predicated on binary assumptions of difference" (Wachs 2002: 302).

Coed opportunities may not be common, but they do exist and there have been several high-profile mixed gender games in tennis. In 1973, Billie Jean King, a female tennis champion and former Wimbledon winner, aged 29, played the male Bobby Riggs, aged 55, also a former Wimbledon winner. The match was termed the "Battle of the Sexes," which Billie Jean King won.<sup>48</sup> The "Battle of the Champions," another coed tennis match, occurred in 1992 during a "celebrity tennis tournament." This time Martina Navratilova and Jimmy Connors were the competitors, and Connors was the victor. This competition provided an opportunity for Halbert and Latimer (1994) to study the language used by announcers to describe male and female athletes, in the same sport and with similar circumstances. Their findings illustrate the gendering of the players, and the gendered assumptions, that the announcers brought to the match. For example, they note that "both players agreed to a rule modification whereby Navratilova gained 18 inches of each doubles alley, and Connors was limited to one serve" (1994: 301). This was then mentioned by commentators thirty-nine times, which Halbert and Latimer argue "is ironic given that the purpose of a handicap is that neither player has an advantage; the goal is not to handicap one player to the advantage of the other" (1994: 305). While a handicap can be used to create a fair playing field, it was possibly because of the gendered context of this match that the handicap was interpreted to be because of Navratilova's gender. In the Bobby

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<sup>47</sup> In other words, the pitcher is punished more for walking a male player, as they advance one base more than women.

<sup>48</sup> Billie Jean King advocated equal prize money for men and women, which Wimbledon only recently, in 2007, began to award to the male and female champions of the tournament.

Riggs and Billie Jean King competition, there was no handicap for either side, although it could be argued that the “disadvantage” caused by both age (Riggs) and gender (King) created an even playing field. However, it would be fairer to have a serious analysis of the skill of both players, rather than relying on gender or age to explain an advantage or disadvantage. Another gendered assumption, which unfairly assumes that the competition is again hindered because of the woman’s gender, was expressed by one commentator who assumed that Connors was trying to be “gentlemanly” (1994: 306) and not play as fiercely as he would, had Navratilova been a man.

Title IX legislation,<sup>49</sup> which has been utilised to provide women with equal opportunities in schools that receive federal funds, has been qualified as not pertaining to contact sports,<sup>50</sup> and, in turn, has required court challenges in some cases in order for women to compete with men (Fields 2005; McDonagh and Pappano 2008). While it is rarer, there have been court challenges so that men can play sport with women (Love and Kelly 2011), particularly in the case of field hockey (Fields 2005). Love and Kelly note a series of cases where boys attempted to play on sports teams with girls, but their claims were dismissed because of gender assumptions, including that men would have an inherent physical advantage, or because “overall opportunities for boys had not been limited in comparison to those of girls” (2011: 239). Like girls’ field hockey in the United States, roller derby is in the unusual position of being a full-contact sport dominated by females. Although there have been no judicial challenges related to roller derby, if it continues to be categorised as a woman’s sport and is incorporated into the school curriculum, this may become an issue.

All-male and coed roller derby has become side-lined by all-female roller derby. The Texas Rollergirls, as a featured league on WFTDA’s website in February 2010, want to “take the W off the front [of WFTDA]. Our female leagues make up the premier flat track derby association. If men wanted their own association they should have to qualify it for men, since modern derby is assumed to be female” (quoted in WFTDA: 2010a: np). In WFTDA’s first large-scale study, they found individuals to be less interested in men’s than women’s roller

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<sup>49</sup> The Sex Discrimination Act in Great Britain, which occurred in 1975, and Title IX passage in the United States in 1972, were both geared to increasing women’s access to sport.

<sup>50</sup> 34 C.F.R. § 106.41 (b) (1991).



derby: only 38% of skaters, and 21% of fans “support men’s roller derby at least on an equal level as women’s derby” (2010b: 3); unfortunately, the disclosed results provide no further illustration of why women’s derby is preferred. Only recently has WFTDA become supportive of the Men’s Derby Coalition (MDC),<sup>51</sup> who, incidentally, do also qualify their Coalition with a gendered descriptive. The press release composed by the MDC, which reports on their meeting at WFTDA’s National Tournament in November 2010, says:

Gonzales [aka Blood Mary, Executive Director of WFTDA] acknowledged that initially there was little support for men's derby within the WFTDA. But during the last 3 years, that attitude has changed. The Men's Derby Coalition has grown and demonstrated its commitment to the the [sic] sport, to the community and its respect for the skaters who developed flat track roller derby (2010: np).

There has been controversy regarding the way in which men’s roller derby is referred. This is acknowledged by Bourne, writing for the roller derby magazine *Five on Five*, who uses the word but says: “Merby. Even the word is controversial – Rose City voted to have banned the term within their league.” This article provoked a response in the following issue of the magazine, but not on some of the erroneous justifications used by Bourne to deride coed derby, like the statement that one woman “had three ribs broken playing co-ed Queen of the Track” (2011: 40-41) without mentioning the similar injuries that do occur in all-female Queen of the Track.<sup>52</sup> The problem, instead, was the use of the term “merby,” which Harkavy finds “derisive (along with ‘dangler derby,’ ‘broller derby,’ etc., ad nauseum)” and as highlighting “the differences, when the rules of the game being played are exactly the same” (2011: 46-47). In what I would argue is unlike any other full-contact sport that men can participate in, Harkavy says that some male derby players have received hate mail because of their participation in a predominantly female sport. Still, there remained uncontested the unfounded idea that women would be disproportionately harmed playing against men in roller derby compared to all-female competitions, yet there simply is no evidence to support this claim.

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<sup>51</sup> The MDC is now known as the Men’s Roller Derby Association (MRDA).

<sup>52</sup> Queen of the Track is a game played in training sessions. The objective is to be the last one standing, or remaining on the track. Players may knock over others, or push them out of bounds to get them disqualified. Notably, the coed version mentioned in the article was still referred to as *Queen of the Track*.

As of this writing, there have been four coed bouts between Team Awesome, an all-female all-star team, and Team SeXY, an all-male all-star team. The first bout occurred during 2009's Rollercon, the roller derby convention in Las Vegas. This bout was a twenty-minute exhibition Challenge Bout and took place on the Fremont, the former main strip of Las Vegas. The Challenge Bout was won by Team SeXY 43-37. The second bout was a full-length, banked track game in San Diego in December 2009, won by Team Awesome, 132-102. The third and fourth were full-length, flat track bouts during RollerCon 2010 and 2011. Team Awesome won the third, 132-113, and Team SeXY the fourth, 148-86. The bouts are examples of men and women's direct competition in a full-contact sport. Trish the Dish, who plays for Team Awesome, says of the relationship between the male and female players:

The guys say they have a no douche bag rule, which I think is a good idea. But when you're playing a game like this, where you know what you're getting into, I think that you should show it all. If you can hit us harder, show us, because then we'll train harder, but if you hold back then maybe I'll never be able to knock down a 300 pound dude (quoted in Gochmanosky 2009: np).

Trish's assertion is emblematic of women's position in sport: in the absence of opportunities and competition, women are denied the same advantages to progress as men have. However, the idea that competing against women could improve men's skill is often ignored. It is simply assumed that men have a competitive advantage.

In 2011, the International Association of Athletics Federations ruled that women cannot set records when competing in coed marathons because running with men gives them an unfair advantage (BBC News 2011b: np). This is predicated on the idea that women will achieve more with male runners than they would on their own. There is no reciprocal ruling for men. In Henry and Comeaux's study of coed soccer, female respondents asserted that they could learn from the male players, but no male respondents "evoked the possibility of learning from women" (1999: 284). Instead, men's role in the sport, even though it was coed, was privileged. In sports dominated by women, like roller derby in its current incarnation, where women have the access to premier training, it would be a disservice to men, as well, if women coddled them during competition. Given

that the female all-stars outscored the male all-stars in half the bouts, it is worth considering what men can learn from women in the field of full-contact sport and to consider Kane's (1995) approach of a sport continuum and focus on what athletes can learn from one another, irrespective of gender.

Despite Title IX's inapplicability to contact sport, some organisations and individuals have made an effort to construct opportunities for men and women to compete together. Coed roller derby provides one such example. In addition, at least two roller derby leagues in the United States have paired with Quad Rugby, also known as Murderball or wheelchair rugby.<sup>53</sup> Quad rugby is a coed contact sport<sup>54</sup> played by individuals who "must have some dysfunction in all four limbs" (United States Quad Rugby Association 2011: np). Players are classed based on level of disability and those on the court cannot exceed a total function classification of eight points. As explained by Goodwin et. al, quad rugby was developed with the intention of inclusivity:

The classification system was designed to maximize the range of players with quadriplegia who could play while also keeping team performance equitable, as also occur [sic] in wheelchair basketball. This was in contrast to some individual disability sports that can create situations of exclusion based solely on the classification system such that individual gains in skill and training are lost to basic differences in level of impairment (2009: 111).

However, quad rugby's point system is not "based solely" on this, but also on the player's gender: "all female athletes are reduced an additional 0.5" points (United States Quad Rugby Association 2011: np).

A newer sport, whose governing body has been emphatic on the issue of gender equality, is quidditch. Created by J. K. Rowling for the *Harry Potter* series, quidditch has been adapted to function in the non-fictional world "by Middlebury College students in 2005. Quidditch is now played at over 300 universities and high schools in the United States and 12 other countries"

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<sup>53</sup> The Minnesota RollerGirls hosted a quad rugby game prior to their bout on 11 April 2009, with the Minnesota North Stars Quad Rugby. A demonstration, with Seattle Slam, also occurred during a half time show of Seattles' Jet City Rollergirls bout on 20 September 2008. The pairing of these two sports is sensible. They both aim to make full-contact sport accessible to a group of people who have typically been excluded and utilize the same rules for contact between men and women as they do in single gender competition.

<sup>54</sup> Albeit, according to Kerri Morgan, captain of the St. Louis Rugby Rams and Paralympian, as of 2006, approximately only twelve women played competitively out of around 500 players in the United States (McCarthy 2006).

(International Quidditch Association nd-a: np). The International Quidditch Association (IQA) created a Title 9¾, which is a twist on the United States' own Title IX and Platform 9¾ in the *Harry Potter* series, but aligns with Kane's depiction of sport as a continuum:

We believe that if men and women learn to compete equally, then they will learn to respect and value each other's abilities regardless of gender. It is well researched that sports participation improves the lives of women and levels the "playing field" not only in sports but in every aspect of society; with Quidditch we would like to take those benefits a step further by promoting a sport that is truly co-ed, rather than evenly segregated (as it currently exists under Title IX) (IQA nd-b: np).

While the courts and legislative bodies may be hesitant to support "truly co-ed" contact sport, grassroots organisations have recognised that men and women can participate equally. Instead of arguing that men would be unfairly advantaged and harm women, IQA rules, without mentioning gender, regulate force of contact. For example, one offence is "playing using excessive force" (Benepe 2010: 48). The IQA moved from requiring at least a five to two gender ratio to a four to three gender ratio in response to potential gender stereotyping of positions and to continue to strive for more equal representation in sport. As indicated by the IQA's strategies, coed sport does not automatically eliminate all gender hierarchies or generate equal access for all. In an additional example, skydiving is a coed sport, but dominated by men and "considered a male domain" (Laurendeau and Sharara 2008: 25).

Quidditch differs from modern roller derby in that it is defined by coed participation. Whilst roller derby previously had both men and women participating, it never placed them in direct contact with each other (except in physical confrontations that were not an inherent part of the sport). Although coed bouts do occur, derby is unique as a presumed all-female, *full-contact* sport where men play by women's rules. As an all-female sport, derby does rely on definitions of gender, which are explored historically in the next chapter, after looking at the gender policy formulated by WFTDA.

## *Gender Policy*

In international competitions like the Olympics, if a woman exceeds gender expectations, she risks questions about her biological sex (Ferris 1992); “the doing of gender will always include some risk of gender assessment and accountability for one’s performance as normative for incumbents of gender categories” (Stokoe 2006: 477). Women are confined to performing within the range expected of their gender, and/or must appear overtly feminine/female, to prevent investigation as to their legitimate status as a woman. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States were each suspicious of the other’s Olympic female athletes. This coincided with a time of increased opportunities for women’s intense physical training; therefore, women were performing at a level that “traditionalists affirmed no normal woman could equal” (Ferris 1992: 685). In the 1960s, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) addressed concerns regarding “abnormal” women by introducing universal sex testing for women. From 1966-1968, sex testing was conducted by a visual examination, and did not include genetic testing. External appearance varies, and Lenskyj (1986) and Choi (2000) argue that some judges confused a female appearance with sexual attractiveness.<sup>55</sup> While gender verification policies were “aimed at ensuring fair competition amongst female athletes” (IAAF Medical and Anti-Doping Commission 2006: np), no similar systematic protection existed, or currently exists, for men. The policy of gender verification for women assumes that men are inherently superior to them in sport, even though in cases where women are given opportunities to compete with men, men are not the guaranteed victors. The only male who has ever admitted to masquerading as a woman for an Olympic competition was a Hitler youth, Hermann Ratjen, who claimed he was forced by the Nazis to enter the women’s high jump at the 1936 Olympics. His male gender did not catapult him to victory, but instead he was placed fourth.

In 1968, the IOC began administering the Barr Body Test, which used a mouth swab to test for Barr bodies; however, this method was unreliable and “approximately 1/500-600 athletes tested are declared ineligible not because they were male but because their tests showed the presence of chromosomal or genetic

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<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, Lenskyj also notes that “following the 1968 Olympics, the chief sex tester, Ludwig Prokop, told reporters that his examination of 911 female athletes had convinced him that sports made them ugly, with hard, stringy bodies and, in some cases, hair on their chests” (1986: 89).

anomalies” (Kirby and Huebner 2002: 37). In some cases, a gynaecological exam was also conducted to clarify the results. There are many problems with these tests. In particular, the Barr Body test may unfairly punish those with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) (individuals with XY chromosomes who have the external markers of a female and receive no benefits from testosterone). However, the IAAF does now list AIS as one of its “conditions that should be allowed” (IAAF Medical and Anti-Doping Commission 2006: np).

Participants of the 1976 U.S. Tennis Open were required to take a Barr body test in reaction to Renée Richards’, a post-operative female transsexual, desire to play in the women’s singles competition (Birrell and Cole 1990). So that she could continue competing post transitioning, Richards sued the United States Tennis Association. Her participation was worrying to some who believed that Richards would inspire “enterprising men” to attempt to “pass as women” (Birrell and Cole 1990: 18) so they could gain a competitive advantage. Although no “enterprising men” emerged, controversy persists. Some female athletes have not accepted the legitimacy of male to female transsexuals competing in women’s events, even if they meet established conditions to participate. This fear of men intruding into women’s sport is reported in amateur realms as well. Both Choi (2000) and Cahn (1994) cite a case as late as 1990 in Texas where two fathers of a competing girls’ soccer team challenged a few of the opposing soccer team players as being too good for girls – and requested a visual exam be conducted to see if they were boys.

The IOC ceased *universal* gender testing in 2000; however, within the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), “if there is any ‘suspicion’ or if there is a ‘challenge’ then the athlete concerned can be asked to attend a medical evaluation” of their gender (IAAF Medical and Anti-Doping Commission 2006: np). In 2003, the IOC adopted the Stockholm Consensus, allowing for transsexuals to participate in the Olympics if they meet certain qualifications; participation is allowed if full transitioning occurs prior to puberty or, after puberty, if they have undergone surgery, received hormonal treatments “appropriate for the assigned sex ... for a sufficient length of time,” and are legally recognised as the sex they wish to compete as (International Olympic Committee nd: np).

Michelle Dumaresq, a Canadian mountain biking champion who is transsexual, had her gender challenged by fellow mountain biker Danika Shroeter. Shroeter was placed second to Dumaresq in 2003, and in “symbolic protest” (Travers 2006: 433) wore a shirt at the awards ceremony which read “100% Pure Woman Champion 2006.” The argument of the “pure woman” reflects Garfinkel’s (1967) points in the study of Agnes; it is often assumed, without qualification, that gender is fixed and stable, and there is intrinsic, and socially understood, meaning associated with the gender with which one has been identified. There have been several other recent, highly publicised cases of gender challenges; perhaps most notably is the IAAF’s eleven month investigation of Caster Semenya’s gender, before reaching a decision that she could continue competing in international competitions. Her gender test consisted of “a physical medical evaluation, and includes reports from a gynaecologist, endocrinologist, psychologist, an internal medicine specialist and an expert on gender” (Smith 2009: np). The week prior to Caster Semenya winning the 800 meter final at the 2009 World Championships in Berlin she was said to have “aroused suspicions when she posted the fastest 800m time in the world” (Kessel 2009: np) that year. Aside from her athletic skill, numerous descriptions of her highlighted her lack of feminine appearance: she “possesses an unusually developed muscular frame and a deep voice and has clocked times which belie her youth” (Kessel 2009: np), and, as one can assume from the description, her skill and appearance also belie her gender. Infamously, Italian runner Elisa Cusma, who placed sixth at the Championship, said of Semenya: “these kind of people should not run with us. For me, she’s not a woman. She’s a man.” Cusma’s phrasing is important; irrespective of others’ perspectives, Semenya’s own feelings or any gender testing, *to her* Semenya is a man. She has ascribed a gender to Semenya that is fixed, and rooted in her own construction of what makes a man and a woman. While the world awaited the results of the IAAF investigation, Caster Semenya posed for the cover of a South African magazine, *YOU*. In her cover photograph, she wears a dress, jewelry and make-up. The text of the article highlights her femininity, both using quotes from friends of Caster and Caster herself to detail how feminine she really is.

Another runner, Santhi Soundarajan, whose silver medal in the 800-metres in the 2006 Asian Games was revoked because of gender test results, has been quoted in support of Semenya, saying: “A gender test cannot take away from you

who you are” (Bhowmick and Thottam 2009: np). Soundarajan and Cusma thus illuminate the contentiousness of gender, as does Diane Cummins who states:

I mean, we’ve had this before. Maria Mutola has been an athlete up there for a long time who on the circuit had a high testosterone, but she was still within the levels of what was acceptable to compete as a female. I think the problem is just where do you draw the line? Where do you draw the line as far as what is required to be a female athlete? (quoted in Clarey 2010: np).

Since the case surrounding Caster, the IAAF has introduced a new policy on hyperandrogenism amongst women, which includes the following statements:

- Competition in athletics will continue to be divided into men’s and women’s competition recognising that there is a difference in sporting performance between elite men and women, that is predominantly due to higher levels of androgenic hormones in men;

- A female with hyperandrogenism who is recognised as a female in law shall be eligible to compete in women’s competition in athletics provided that she has androgen levels below the male range (measured by reference to testosterone levels in serum) or, if she has androgen levels within the male range she also has an androgen resistance which means that she derives no competitive advantage from such levels (International Association of Athletics Federation 2011: np).

Athletes are not understood as individuals, but, by gender, are bound to a social construction of biological acceptability. There is an assumption that amongst one’s own gender there is no physical advantage; however, as Nelson argues, there are numerous differences within one’s own gender. She cites Flo Hyman, “the world’s best female volleyball player” who had Marfan’s Syndrome, and thus may have had an advantage over other women because of her height, as well as “Gheorghe Musorean, the 7’7” Washington Bullets center, [who] owes his extraordinary height to the excess growth hormone his body produces. Should he be banned from playing basketball against men?” (Nelson 1994: 78-79). More recently, Michael Phelps made headlines for winning eight gold medals in the 2008 Olympics, while journalists suggested he had physical advantages that propelled him to victory. Barry Petersen, with *CBS News*, claimed Phelps had “a body custom made for swimming” (2009: np) because of flexible ankles, an extended torso, short legs, and large hands. If these physical attributes do offer an



advantage, no one would argue that he should be ineligible for competition, or that because he has an advantage, all men have an advantage.

That it is thought that bodies need to be regulated to provide fair participation for women, even when trying to be inclusive of transgender and intersex peoples, is evident in the new gender policy introduced by WFTDA in April 2011. This gender policy was released in order to institutionalise equality for transgender participants who identify as female:

The purpose of this policy is to designate a set of criteria that applies to chartered team skaters in sanctioned interleague games so that athletes are able to compete on a level playing field in a safe, competitive, and friendly environment, free of discrimination. Fundamental fairness requires Women's Flat Track Derby Association ("WFTDA") to provide intersex and transgender athletes with equal opportunities to participate in athletics while still maintaining integrity as a women's sport. This policy creates a framework in which this participation may occur in a safe and healthy manner that is fair to all competitors. This policy does not consider whether an athlete has undergone sex reassignment surgery, as such surgery is not considered medically necessary or linked to competitive equity (2011d: np).

The WFTDA policy relies on information provided by a "healthcare provider" who will confirm "that the athlete's sex hormones are within the medically acceptable range for a female" (2011d: np) as determined by them. This policy only applies to interleague play between member WFTDA leagues, and does not, as Michi-chan (2011), an advocate for transgender equality within roller derby, notes, require that leagues allow the participation of transgender players at a local level. Instead, it presumably functions as a way to resolve issues of interleague play which could occur if one league allowed transgender players to participate, and another did not. It does not affect policies regarding intraleague bouts, where "Leagues are welcome to model their own policies in parallel with the WFTDA gender policy, or develop their own standards for defining 'female' with regard to their membership" (WFTDA 2011b: np). There are other concerns with WFTDA's gender policy, as detailed in a letter to "Fellow WFTDA Leagues" by the Philly Roller Girls (nd). The Philly league argues that as the policy does not mandate that all players present documentation of their hormone levels, it unfairly targets transgender and intersex athletes, while ignoring that "many women have congenital or acquired disorders that lead to hormone levels outside of what a

physician might define as ‘normal ranges’” (nd: 1). They also question the reasoning behind requiring skaters to live as a woman, when it “creates a double standard countering the embrace of nonconformity that is one of the very special elements of flat track derby” (nd: 1). Not all skaters will be forced to show how they have “lived as a female.”

WFTDA do not elaborate on how living as a woman would be defined, other than that it would be defined by the medical practitioner and would undoubtedly fall under the “medical approaches to gender” (Butler 2004: 88) problematised by Judith Butler as it presumes an inherent meaning to the category of woman.<sup>56</sup> It is interesting that the all-female roller derby resurgence would still hold players to a medicalised diagnosis of the appropriate gender. The very nature of women’s participation in a full-contact sport such as a roller derby would have historically raised questions of the players’ gender identification. To rely on whether or not one has “lived as a female” requires an investment into the construction of gender.

Is there a plausible alternative to “all-female” roller derby that still allows for the benefits claimed by a community of women, while also embracing various genders that do not fit neatly into gender categories and without relying on binary constructions? As there are certainly benefits to an all-female league, including women’s empowerment, this is not intended to function as a criticism of all gender policies, but rather to raise questions about the policy’s implications and underlying assumptions, many of which are illustrated in discussions of coed sport.

### ***Derby Spectators***

While there are issues with gender policies that enforce the idea that women can only compete against women, derby fills a niche which allows spectators to witness a full-contact sport, shaped by women’s participation instead of men’s, which still plays with notions of sexuality, fitness and gendered constructs. The nature of roller derby may attract spectators who are not normally fans of women’s sport, or sport in general. This creates new opportunities to understanding spectators’ interpretations of gender, women and sport. It is unlike

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<sup>56</sup> Although there are problems with the gender policy, I do applaud the efforts that are being made towards inclusion within roller derby.

any other sport that exists today and may, therefore, have an audience unlike others studied.

Historically, men have comprised the main demographic amongst sport spectators (Wann and Waddill 2010). Throughout the early history of sport, special conditions have been placed on women's spectatorship. For example, married women were barred from attending the Olympics, but evidence suggests that parthenoi were allowed (Dillon 2000: 457). In the United States, in the late 1800s, at least one racecourse created a women's only viewing section, intended to protect middle-class women from the "gamblers, pickpockets, cutthroats, prostitutes, and their helpless victims" (Guttman 1986: 99) thought also to be in attendance. Women's attendance at the National Association of Base Ball Players was also regulated, and it was "believed that women's gentling presence contributed to improved crowd behavior" (Voigt 1978: 392). The idea that women are the peacemakers in sport still exists. In Turkey, Fenerbahçe, a football club, played two games to an audience of women and children; men and boys over twelve were banned from the games in response to "crowd trouble." After reports of its success, "the club has decided to set up the women-only area for a trial spell" (Letsch 2011: np). The women's only attendance was allowed on the assumption that women do not participate in football hooliganism.

Stacey Pope (2010) notes the dearth of research on female fandom in areas where women's athletic participation and men's spectatorship are analysed. A similar trend is emerging in studies on roller derby; the primary focus has been on skaters, but not spectators' interpretations of their actions. Investigations into roller derby have primarily relied on ethnographic or interview-based research with the players themselves (Storms 2008), and with a focus on sexuality, femininity or clothing (Breeze 2010; Carlson 2010; Cohen 2008; Peluso 2011), injury and embodiment (Peluso 2011; Thomas 2009), feminism (Kearney 2011; Krausch 2008), or A&E's *Rollergirls* (Kearney 2011). Finley (2010) does interview both skaters and fans as part of her research on intragender relations, but her analysis relies heavily on the skaters' perspectives. Even Battaglia's (2008) study of spectators is limited in that it represents spectators who are already in the media, through news articles or blogs.

Before looking at my study on roller derby, it is important to know the history of derby spectators and the game that they have watched. There is some

information as to the demographics of earlier Roller Derby players and spectators; they are commonly associated with working-class populations (Deford 1971; Lipsitz 1994; McKay 1986; Sewart 1987) and a particular kind of working-class culture: it is “part of American trash culture” (a fan quoted in Woollen 2006). Still, Roller Derby was incredibly well-attended early in its creation. At a bout on 4 March 1939, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported an attendance of 8,000 spectators (1939). Despite its popularity through the 1940s, Derby struggled in the 1950s, arguably due to television controversies. Initially this was because of the public’s oversaturation with the sport, and, subsequently, the loss of all television contracts (Deford 1971). With waning interest in the United States, Roller Derby began a European Tour in 1953, which included bouts in London.

According to Frank Deford, Leo Seltzer, around 1954, tried to eradicate the dramatic fights and pre-scripted antics so that Derby could “restructure itself as a serious sport” (1971: 73). In 1958, Leo’s son, Jerry, inherited the Roller Derby. Some of the pre-scripted antics returned:

[but to] only a small portion of the play, and really seldom intrudes on the bona fide action itself, but, of course, as long as it exists at all, it manages to discredit the Derby’s generally honest posture. So long as the straight dramatic and comic bits remain, however insignificant they are to the full game, the Derby will operate under a cloud. The box office is otherwise pressured (Deford 1971: 119).

Staged performances were for the benefit of spectators, and research does indicate that, for spectators of sport, “*enjoyment* was substantially more intense in the condition that featured animosity than in the other conditions,” and when “spectators thought the players were feuding” the game was “more interesting” and exciting (Bryant et al. 1982: 117). Derby utilised this type of ideology and was revitalised under Jerry Seltzer’s leadership; new Derby leagues increased the performance aspect, and showboating, during the 1960s (Mabe 2007). Seltzer’s Roller Derby was reintroduced to television as a tool to attract audiences to the live bouts (Deford 1971), and in March of 1971, an audience of 19,507 was recorded at the Madison Square Garden (*The New York Times* 1971). This was surpassed in October of 1972, when 50,118 spectators were reported at White Sox Park (*Chicago Daily Defender* 1972). Despite these figures, Roller Derby’s

success faded in the 1970s, with many blaming the gas crisis because it prevented teams from travelling for bouts (Mabe 2007).

However, professional Roller Derby continued to exist, most notably in California. Attempted televised revivals occurred, including *RollerGames* and *RollerJam*. Both were based on the concept of Roller Derby, but were altered to either emphasize theatrics and/or to modernise derby. For example, *RollerGames* was televised for one season and “featured a figure-8 shaped banked track and stunts like alligator pits” (WFTDA 2011c: 5) and *RollerJam* was played on inline skates.<sup>57</sup> The latter was televised from 1999 to 2001 in the United States and had a greater emphasis on “catfights” than the sport, which prevented any true derby resurgence (Mabe 2007: 57) and acceptance from mainstream spectators. The United Kingdom had an attempt at their own, home-grown, roller derby from 1999-2001 with *RollerBlaze*, which was a modified form of *RollerJam* and the American Roller Derby League. Both teams of *RollerBlaze* advertised for women on their respective team pages: the Sun Devils argued that the equal participation of men and women in roller derby “is an important part of the game” (Blaze U.K. Skating nd-b: np); the Southern Blue Angels add that “female players are usually the stars” (Blaze U.K. Skating nd-a: np). Indeed, the newest resurgence is focused on women’s participation.

The United Leagues Coalition, now known as WFTDA, was created in 2004 to facilitate inter-league bouts of all-female flat track roller derby. Initially formed for leagues located within the United States, WFTDA accepted Montreal Roller Derby in 2009 and in 2010 the London Rollergirls joined as full members. All-female roller derby is still a relatively new sport in the United Kingdom, beginning in London in April 2006 (London Rollergirls 2010). In April 2011, the London Rollergirls hosted the first WFTDA tournament outside North America. Roller derby’s growth has continued since its resurgence, but spectator attendance at the modern all-female roller derby has not met the records set in the past. Rat City Rollergirls, in Seattle, boasted ticket sales of 6,885 for a bout in June 2010, which set the modern attendance record (Reynolds 2010). In a mixed sport doubleheader, the Minnesota RollerGirls were paired with the Minnesota Swarm lacrosse league with 8,911 tickets bought (Killer 2011). Although these numbers

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<sup>57</sup> Also known as Rollerblade©.

indicate that some leagues have gained significant popularity, there have been several disputed challenges to derby's legitimacy as a sport that may have prevented it from receiving wider, and quicker, mainstream success. For example, modern roller derby has been somewhat marred by the legacy of scripted bouts.

Roller derby has evolved since its inception. Current demographic data for WFTDA may also show the changing nature of roller derby spectator demographics. WFTDA's survey results illustrate that a range of incomes are represented amongst players and spectators alike, as evidenced in Table 1 (Appendix A). In addition to income diversity, players hold a variety of jobs, and the "most popular careers among current active skaters include education (10%), health care (practitioners and technical) (7%), and office and administration support (6%)" (Women's Flat Track Derby Association 2011a: 3). As WFTDA member leagues are non-professional, most derby players around the world have to pay to participate, which requires a particular economic standing.

WFTDA demographics illustrate that, at least in 2011, "most WFTDA fans are female (66% to 34% male; 2010 results: 59% to 41% male). Fans 24 years old and younger are more likely to be female (88% versus 11% male). As the ages of fans increase, the gender split decreases; for all fans at 35 years old and over, the female/male split narrows to 57%/42%" (Women's Flat Track Derby Association 2011a: 1). This gender differential has increased since the release of the 2010 demographics, by seven, five and seven percent respectively (Women's Flat Track Derby Association 2010b).

Despite the percentage of women spectators, economic and professional diversity, stereotypes remain as to who watches roller derby, and why they watch it. Mike Seate, writer for the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, originally wrote a scathing critique of derby arguing that it "was just plain dumb entertainment for people too dumb to even know they were being insulted" (Seate 2007a: np). At least two letters to the editor were written in response, and, according to Seate, it elicited hundreds of emails and calls. He argues that he was not saying that fans of derby are "lowbrow" but that "the *concept of and audience for roller derby*" is. He equates roller derby with things like "Nude Cole-Slaw Wrasslin" arguing that when he went to the roller derby bout in California, "the audience was mostly male and smiled at all the exposed female flesh" (Seate 2007b: np). Spectators in roller derby do not necessarily meet this stereotype, but the history of women's

sport and the themes that arise in roller derby – sexuality, femininity, full-body contact – influence the way roller derby is expected to be received, as well as who one thinks will be watching.

### ***Conclusion***

All-female roller derby functions within a society where many feel that female athletes must be heterosexualised and feminised in order to garner support for women's sports. Additionally, sport has been constructed using the myth of binary genders and, therefore, gender policies and segregated sports are viewed as necessary to ensure that fair and equal participation occurs. Roller derby provides an opportunity to challenge the notion that women are incapable of successfully competing directly against men in a full-contact sport. However, whether or not roller derby is interpreted differently from (i) overly sexualised sport like the Lingerie Football League; (ii) feminised sport that presumes women's inadequacy in masculine sport; (iii) sport that emphasizes thinness over fitness; or (iv) functions outside of the discourse that heterosexualises athletes and/or demeans them as lesbians, remains to be seen. Before examining how my study may provide some answers, I will address, in the following chapter, the theoretical issues that underpin critiques of the institution of heterosexuality and how they apply to the sport.

## **Chapter Two.**

### **Capitulating to the Institution of Heterosexuality?**

In this chapter, I will argue that my study of roller derby provides an opportunity to make “an effective critique of heterosexuality,” which, Jackson says, “must contain two key elements”:

The first of these is a critique of heteronormativity, of the normative status of heterosexuality which renders any alternative sexualities “other” and marginal. The second is a critique of what some have called “hetero-patriarchy” or “hetero-oppression” [...] in other words heterosexuality as systematically male dominated. It follows that a critical stance on heterosexuality should pay attention to its interlinkage with gender, as both division and hierarchy (Jackson 1999: 163).

In order to use roller derby as a platform for a critique of heterosexuality, I will examine various concepts that will be useful in answering my research question: whether all-female roller derby upholds or challenges the institution of heterosexuality. An overview of the core feminist debates on heterosexuality and the lesbian continuum will be followed by a discussion of what this means for sport and how it can be applied to roller derby. Importantly, I will use this chapter to situate my study of roller derby within the institution of heterosexuality and argue that current studies that theorise roller derby, while important, do not address the ways in which roller derby is actually interpreted by the nonacademic audience.

#### ***Debates in Heterosexuality: Heterosexual Women as “Collaborators” or Feminists?***

Heterosexuality “is understood in its common-sense meaning as the erotic desire of men for women and of women for men” (Wilton 1996: 131). However, constructions of heterosexuality are not static and have evolved since the term was coined in 1892. The term was invented to describe the sexual perversion, or deviance, of non-procreative sex in different-gender couplings (Katz 1995). In 1893, Krafft-Ebing used “heterosexuality” to describe a non-procreative sexual interest in someone of a different gender. He situated the genders as “opposite” (Katz 1995: 30), not just in genital difference, but in other characteristics as well:



women were defined as passive, men active. Katz argues that heterosexuality “gradually” became normalised and escaped its association with deviance. This normalisation relied on the persistence of assumed gender difference, and existed alongside fears that women’s new political rights would cause them to “change physically and psychically and pass along pathologies to their children” (Katz 1995: 86-87). Heterosexuality both emphasized gender difference and sexual attraction.

There has been no consensus within the feminist community as to what heterosexuality means. Some in the feminist movement have focused on critiquing heterosexual sex and penetration, but others describe heterosexuality as encompassing more than just sexuality or the sex act. Instead, heterosexuality is seen as enacted through various institutions and the forced invisibility of alternative sexualities. Adrienne Rich argued that “heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (1980: 50). While certain societal institutions enforce heterosexuality, individuals themselves may not consciously recognise the heterosexual script that underpins their daily lives or consciously think about or question heterosexuality as an identity or heterosexual privilege. My use of the term heterosexuality refers to the way in which it moves beyond the sexual, infiltrating other aspects of individuals’ lives (Jackson 1996; Wilton 1996), but the varying interpretations of heterosexuality, and what they mean for women who are heterosexual and for lesbian feminists, are still contested.

The meaning of heterosexuality to feminism has been contentious from the 1960s through the heated sex wars in the United States between “Lesbian”<sup>58</sup> and heterosexual feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. Early in the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW), some NOW organisers desperately tried to distance themselves from any association with lesbianism. In 1969, Betty Friedan, one of the NOW founders, argued that lesbians were the “lavender menace” (as quoted in Gilmore and Kaminski 2007). The strategy of excluding lesbians from a women’s organisation assumes heterosexuality as the norm amongst women. Many heterosexual members excluded lesbians out of fear that NOW would become overrun with lesbians. It was argued that this would give too

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<sup>58</sup> The capitalization of “Lesbian” is used by Bunch (1972) to mark a woman-identified lesbian.

much attention to lesbian concerns at the expense of heterosexual women and delegitimize heterosexual feminists' protests (Gilmore and Kaminski 2007).

The debate that ensued caused some to wonder if heterosexual and lesbian feminists could work together effectively. Some argued that heterosexual women would always privilege men and be subordinated to them. Therefore, it was politically impossible to be both a feminist and a heterosexual. Feminist criticisms of heterosexuality came from around the western world: the Radicalesbians (1970) and Charlotte Bunch with the Furies (1972), both in the United States; the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group in the United Kingdom (1981); and Monique Wittig in France in 1981 (1992).

Some saw lesbians as escaping the privileging of men and the heterosexual system. As Monique Wittig argued, "lesbians are not women." "Women" are defined through their relationships with men in a way that lesbians are not: it "has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems" (Wittig 1992: 32). However, others have argued that lesbians are still perceived, and defined, in relation to men by the rest of society (Bunch 1972; Dhavernas 1996). Lesbians may not place men before the movement, but they are still forced to exist within the institution of heterosexuality: "to the society she is still a woman, or worse, a visible Lesbian. On the street, at the job, in the schools, she is treated as an inferior and is at the mercy of men's power and whims" (Bunch 1972: np). Notably, this illustrates the power of heterosexuality beyond what occurs in the bedroom. Heterosexuality structures gender relationships, regardless of one's sexuality, through its influence in various institutions and shaping of social interactions, public and private.

Charlotte Bunch, writing for the Furies, is clear that she is not arguing against heterosexual women, but critiques heterosexuality in that "the very essence, [sic] definition, and nature of heterosexuality is men first." Heterosexuality, therefore, contributes to the maintenance of heterosexual privilege and is inevitably detrimental to feminism. However, this rift between women could be solved if all feminists identified as Lesbians:

The Lesbian, woman-identified woman, commits herself to women not only as an alternative to oppressive male/female relationships but primarily because she loves women. Whether consciously or not, by her actions, the Lesbian has recognized that giving support and love to

men over women perpetuates the system that oppresses her. If women do not make a commitment to each other, which includes sexual love, we deny ourselves the love and value traditionally given to men. We accept our second class status. When women do give primary energies to other women, then it is possible to concentrate fully on building a movement for our liberation (Bunch 1972: np).

While she argues that heterosexuality results in heterosexual women eventually placing men before other women and the movement, she also distinguished between apolitical lesbians and “woman-identified” Lesbians. Apolitical lesbians do not necessarily put women first or fight on behalf of the women’s movement. Here, there is an emphasis on commitment to, and solidarity with, women, which becomes an option for heterosexual women if they renounce romantic and sexual relations with men.

The Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group argued that “all feminists can and should be political lesbians [...] a political lesbian is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women” (1981: 5). They sparked controversy in the British feminist newsletter *WIRES* by claiming that “heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy” (1981: 7). They vocally condemned heterosexual women and focused primarily on sex between heterosexuals, not heterosexuality as a larger social construct. They argued that heterosexual penetration was a demeaning and oppressive act, where “the oppressor actually invade[s] and colonise[s] the interior of the body of the oppressed” (1981); however, any sexual act between men and women was also criticised, even if there was no penetration, as contributing to men’s domination over women. Sheila Jeffreys, who belonged to the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, has continued to criticise vaginal penetration, any relations (including lesbian relations) that resemble heterosexuality in their incorporation of an unequal power dynamic, and also beauty practices in the West (Jeffreys 2005). Jeffreys castigates heterosexuality as “a desire that is organised around eroticised dominance and submission” (1996: 76). Therefore, a feminist cannot be a heterosexual because of the way hegemonic heterosexuality is enacted.

The “lesbian continuum” was introduced by Adrienne Rich (1980) in part as a response to the lesbian exclusion within major feminist organisations and the heated feminist debate as to whether or not one could be heterosexual *and* a feminist. Rich argued that heterosexual women could exist on the lesbian

continuum when involved in a “women-identified experience,” which did not necessarily include erotic attraction amongst women, but the “many more forms of primary intensity between and among women” (1980: 648). Again, the focus here is on solidarity amongst women, as the lesbian continuum allowed for any woman to identify with the continuum as long as they have experienced some sort of meaningful relationship with women. However, Rich’s proposed lesbian continuum did not solve the rift that had formed between some lesbian and heterosexual feminists. Many heterosexual feminists took Rich’s article as an acknowledgement of the possibility of being a heterosexual and a feminist as long as one recognised that heterosexuality was not the only normal sexuality; therefore, the only requirement would be recognising a lesbian existence. Rich originally argued that all women could, throughout their lives, be “moving in and out of this continuum” (1980: 651), but there was no discussion as to what constitutes moving out of the continuum. I would argue that we cannot exist on the continuum when we do not stand in solidarity with women, and instead establish discriminatory hierarchies within our communities of women. Women’s primary relationships with women do not necessitate their existence on the lesbian continuum if they only show solidarity with particular women and do not work against the demonization of lesbians.

As VanEvery (1996) insists, too many heterosexual feminists have relied on identification with the lesbian continuum without problematising the privileges and coerciveness of heterosexuality. Problematically, as Rich later pointed out, this term “can be, is, used by women who have not yet begun to examine the privileges and solipsisms of heterosexuality, as a safe way to describe their felt connections with women, without having to share in the risks and threats of lesbian existence” (2003: 41).<sup>59</sup> In order to exist on the lesbian continuum, one must resist the hierarchies and privileges supported by the institution of heterosexuality.

Along with debates about who can exist on the lesbian continuum, the very term is contentious, as it may ignore difference where it exists or soften the powerful identity of lesbianism for some. Ferguson (1981) and Zita (1981) both

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<sup>59</sup> This statement was included in the 2003 edition of Rich’s work, where she included an Afterword containing letters between her, Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson. This Afterword provides some clarification what she argues is the appropriate usage of the term “lesbian continuum.”

raise definitional issues in Rich's article, and do not want to "excise the erotic dimension from the concept *lesbian*" (Zita 1981: 174). Despite the inadequate vocabulary that exists to express women's solidarity, it is no reason to necessarily remove the power of a conscious lesbian identity from women who do have a sexual attraction for other women. An additional concern with the "lesbian continuum" is raised by Ferguson (1981), who argues that we must look to multiple systems of oppression and not just the coercive nature of institutionalised heterosexuality. This may entail a need for men and women to work together. Utilising the term lesbian continuum may highlight issues of homophobia and the normalisation of heterosexuality, but it does not draw attention to other discriminations that occur.

While Rich may have tried to use the idea of the lesbian continuum to respond to the criticism that heterosexuality forces women to divert their energies away from the movement, and prioritise men over their female comrades, it did not resolve the issue that heterosexual relationships, arguably, subordinate women. For example, this subordination has historically been codified in the role of wife in heterosexual couplings, with legal consequences that were not always beneficial to women. Wife is a social and legal construction which has had varying connotations throughout history and for different cultures. In the United States and the United Kingdom, the meaning of wife derived from an earlier common law interpretation of *feme covert*, which Sir William Blackstone in 1765 illustrated by saying "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage" (quoted in Kay and West 2006: 224). It was a role necessary for women's economic standing, but today western ideals of marriage are of a more equal relationship, even if this is not actually achieved.

The debates on heterosexuality re-emerged with Wilkinson and Kitzinger's 1993 special edition of *Feminism & Psychology*. They called for heterosexual feminists to answer the following questions:

What is heterosexuality and why is it so common? Why is it hard for heterosexuals to change their "sexual orientation"? What is the nature of heterosexual sex? How does heterosexual activity affect the whole of a woman's life, her sense of herself, her relationships with other women, and her political engagements?

An additional question was posed: “How does your heterosexuality contribute to your feminist politics (and/or your feminist psychology)?” (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1993: 1-5). Jackson argues that heterosexuality, as the norm, cannot be a “political identity – precisely because it represents conformity with the institutionalized norm” (Jackson 1999: 165) and that Kitzinger and Wilkinson misrepresented many of the responses they received, moulding them into a uniform, monolithic heterosexuality.

Unfortunately, many critics of heterosexuality ignore the multiplicity of heterosexualities (for a discussion of this, see Hockey et al. 2007; Hollway 1996; Jackson 1999; Richardson 1996; Wilton 1996). It cannot be assumed that all heterosexual relationships function in the same way nor can one ignore the possibility of heterosexual feminists forging egalitarian relationships. Heterosexual women can have agency within heterosexuality, and can participate in challenging, as well as conforming to, dominant modes of heterosexuality (Hockey, et al. 2007). Additionally, arguing against any form of heterosexual identification amongst women does not address the ways in which women can use heterosexuality to subvert the hegemonic heterosexual script. Women can resist heteropatriarchy by fighting for “our freedom not only apart from them [men] but in front of them, forcing them more and more to recognize that women are people and not objects” (Dhavernas 1996: 152).

Heterosexuality studies have not often looked beyond heterosexuality as interpreted through the lens of western whiteness (Stokes 2005). However, some studies have included a discussion of how class, sex, and generational differences influence lived experiences of heterosexuality (Hockey et al. 2002; Hockey et al. 2004; Hockey et al. 2007; Robinson et al. 2007). Heterosexuality is pervasive, and simultaneously invisible. But heterosexuality is also diverse, and it is, therefore, more accurate to discuss various “heterosexualities” (Hockey et al. 2007: 162). Heterosexuality can be lived in multiple ways depending on one’s social position and changes throughout one’s lifetime. Heterosexuality, then, appears to be a moving target. It “operates as the implicit organizing principle of much of everyday life” (Hockey et al. 2007: 128), but is a “*residual* category. That is to say, we can begin to make sense of what it is all about by examining what it is not. This therefore raises the concept of failed heterosexual lives, of transgressions, of omissions, of contradictions” (Hockey et al. 2007: 87). These

failures, transgressions, omissions and contradictions can be discovered by examining the way in which the institution of heterosexuality thrives in sport, where female players undergo censorship for transgressions, or are celebrated for performing gender in a particular way.

### ***Successful and Failed Heterosexuality in Women's Sport and Derby***

Preferred gender performance appears to be that which leaves binary gender division unquestioned. Even women's successes are often interpreted in a manner that does not question men's supremacy in sport. The construction of gender difference is integral to heterosexuality, easily evidenced in upholding the binary organisation of sport which reinforces heteropolarity. Heteropolarity, as central to the institution of heterosexuality, informs gender division and construction within the field of sport. Justifications for gender segregated sport rely on the assumption that every athlete should fit within the "right" gender or be excluded. Not only does gender segregation presume that there are two biologically distinct and determinable genders, but its justification often, at least partially, relies on paternalistic attitudes that define women as the weaker gender, especially in sports defined as masculine. The assumption that women are, and should be, passively feminine has historically limited access to sport for women and thus further entrenches heteropolarity as women are denied opportunities to succeed on a par with male athletes.

Beyond the structure of sport, Kolnes outlines how a number of individuals within the culture of sport are culpable for aligning women's athletics with the institution of heterosexuality:

the media, sponsors, the audience, and fashion industry – the women themselves and how they experience and make sense of sport, are important actors on the scene [...] Heterosexual attractiveness structures the way the female athlete understands herself and how she is perceived. [...] In order to survive as an elite athlete the woman's strategy is to conform to the patriarchal and new standards of femininity. In that sense the fundamental relations between men, women and sport remains unchanged (Kolnes 1995: 73).

That this remains unchanged by the proliferation of women's sport illustrates that "women's sport has been accommodated, but at the same time resisted, through

hegemonic femininity where the female athlete's body is (hetero) sexualised; where, although she is strong and independent she is subordinated and made to fit with cultural norms” (Choi 2000: 79). Part of the reformulation of women’s sport into the institution of heterosexuality includes the emphasis on female athletes within their domestic roles (see Nelson 1994: 208) and the construction of sport in binary terms, which enables the public to argue that women’s sport is a lesser version of men’s (see Kane 1995). Kane’s later work, with Lisa Disch, locates the sport binary as part of the “heterosexual matrix” in its enforcement of the idea of gender appropriate sports, ignorance of women’s successes in masculine sport and successes over men, and the “regendering” of female athletes by claiming they competed “just like a man” (Disch and Kane 1996: 295-296).



Image 4: Jammer wears an “I hit like a girl” t-shirt at a coed scrimmage in Sheffield, UK (photo courtesy of Jason Ruffell).

Although women have proven their athletic prowess, their physical abilities are still assumed to differ from those of men. However, both Bruce (1998) and Nelson (2010) report that fans of women’s sport may re-evaluate the masculine qualities that are prized within sport and argue women’s different abilities, such as better teamwork, should be more highly regarded. Paraphernalia thus emerge in these sports which emphasize “women’s” skill: a t-shirt in basketball that states “A Woman’s Place is in the Paint” (Nelson 2010: 98) and, within derby, “She skates like a girl. ... It’s a compliment” advertisements (Finley



2010: 380) and “I hit like a girl” or “Hit like a girl!” derby t-shirts worn by both men and women (see Image Four). Although women’s physicality here is applauded, these statements are still founded on gendered difference.

The gendered performance in roller derby is evidenced in the physicality and behaviour of derby players, their clothing choices and gender identification. But is the gendered difference within roller derby different from that which is traditionally supported by the institution of heterosexuality? On the surface, an argument could be made either way. The full-contact aspect of derby aligns the sport with more masculine behaviours, but the popular image of derby girls emphasizes a type of feminine self-presentation. Within cultural practices, the contradictions continue. Players may be interpreted as presenting heterosexual availability and they, or the media, may focus on their identities in their domestic life as mothers or wives. Some chosen pseudonyms illustrate sexual availability, cuteness or sexiness, violence, or violence against women more specifically. Others may emphasize queerness or an attraction to women and female sexuality with their names. Additionally, a queer community has emerged within roller derby in the form of the Vagine Regime. Gendered performances within roller derby are not uniform, which exacerbates the problems of analysing derby as a whole. However, some studies have been conducted that try to make sense of players’ enactment of gender in the sport.

Roller derby players, while often seen as feminine because of their dress, are not associated with a passive femininity. Three current scholars of roller derby each utilise different conceptualisations of players’ performances of gender. These will be briefly mentioned here before articulating their meanings and explaining their implications for my study. Finley prefers “hegemonic femininity” to “emphasized femininity,” which she discusses in relation to “‘pariah’ femininities,” as well as “intra-“ and “intergender maneuvering” (2010: 361-363). Carlson develops the “female signifiant” in order to elucidate “the contradictions inherent in emphasized femininity,” without distancing derby players completely from emphasized femininity (2010: 430-432). And Breeze (2010) tries to untangle the concepts of “hegemonic masculinity,” “emphasised femininity,” and “alternative femininity” in her analysis of the complex gender performances in roller derby.

All three utilise Connell's concepts of "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphasized femininity" as a starting point. "Hegemonic masculinity" was introduced to describe "normative" masculinity, "the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). Another concept, "emphasized femininity," was created to illustrate the relational aspect of gender and, in particular, "compliance to patriarchy" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 848). Although Connell originally introduced "hegemonic femininity" as hegemonic masculinity's counterpart, this was soon changed to "emphasized femininity" because, Connell argued, femininity was valued differently from masculinity. However, Finley (2010) argues that there is merit in the term "hegemonic femininity" and, using Schippers' (2007) work, shows the varieties and hierarchies of femininities, with this particular femininity supporting hetero-patriarchy.

The conceptual issues of determining what kind of femininity, if any, the female skaters are performing are discussed by Breeze (2010), who argues that current constructs leave room for slippage and essentialism in that *anything* done by women could be considered feminine, either as alternative or emphasized femininities. Additionally, using theoretical understandings of doing gender, the interpretations of activities within roller derby are often of a contradictory nature:

[...] following precedents set in the somewhat Janus-faced literature leads to a characterisation of roller derby skaters as simultaneously refuting *and* rearticulating essentialist readings of sexed bodies, transgressing *and* reinscribing dominant notions of compliant hetero-sexualised, "emphasised", femininity, as apologising for their athleticism, as performing alternative femininities, and all the while as shoring up the ideologies and institutions of male privilege and hegemonic masculinity through their doing of "hegemonic masculinity" *and* "emphasised femininity". These theoretical gymnastics create a kind of "damned if you do, damned if you don't" position for sportswomen whereby acting 'masculine' in sport can be interpreted as collusion with 'hegemonic masculinity' and the same can argued about acting "feminine" in sport. Further complication arises since the very same actions can be classified as both subversive and compliant (Breeze 2010: 130).

However, the difficulty of teasing out the potentially subversive nature of roller derby, and the ways in which it may continue to uphold “dominant notions of compliant hetero-sexualised, ‘emphasised’, femininity,” may be better resolved by a more rigorous use of concepts, as suggested by Breeze:

One can imagine a more varied conceptual tool box, more carefully and thoroughly applied, would enable “femininity” and “masculinity” in all their divergent, emergent, contradictory and continuously re-constituted natures to be analysed in such a way as to unravel the difference between the (undoubtedly co-occurring) de-stabilisation and re-stabilisation of what is understood as the ‘gender order’ (Breeze 2010: 130).

Part of the difficulty in understanding the difference between “de-stabilisation and re-stabilisation” is not just the issue of terminology within academia, but the often contradictory way in which gender in roller derby is presented in the media and, possibly, within spectators’ understandings of it. One person may see “hot chicks,” objectified for monetary gain, and another may see sexually empowered women. Academic terminology alone will not allow us to understand how femininity is interpreted. Gender and femininity are not static notions, but change depending on their settings, culture, era, because of who is performing them and who is interpreting them.

For an example of how gender is understood differently depending on the context, Finley uses Schippers’ (2002) strategy of

“gender maneuvering” [...] a collective effort to negotiate actively the meaning and rules of gender to redefine the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity in the normative structure of a specific context. These strategies change familiar meanings of gender, violate rules of interaction, and shift positions so that the links between gender relations are damaged and transformed within that context (2010: 362).

Within this approach, she notes that what occurs in roller derby could be, in other contexts, examples of “pariah femininities,” which “are stigmatized and less threatening to hegemonic gender relations,” but, within roller derby, are transformed “into an ‘alternative’ femininity that is not seen as contaminating but rather is honored in that setting” (2010: 365). Although Finley’s ethnographic study included informal and formal interviews with spectators, she relies on

interviews with players to further her understanding of femininity in the sport. It is assumed that spectators would interpret the players' positioning in the same way as the players do:

In this setting, the creation of the feminine is also complicated by blurred distinctions between types of femininities and scrambled boundaries between the power dynamics of "masculine" athlete and the "feminine" supporter. All this is done with irony and parody to assist in the redefinition of the situation for the participants and observers (Finley 2010: 372).

However, there is no indication of spectators' interpretations or whether they are redefining gender.

Both Breeze and Finley argue that what occurs within roller derby is not what has been marked in other "feminised" sports as the "feminine apologetic." While the derby girl "image is intentionally feminized [...] gender maneuvering strategies prevent the neat reconstruction of gender relations that usually accompanies women's participation in sports"; however, "this new femininity is heterosexually normative" (Finley 2010: 372; 379). According to Breeze, if one were to attribute the feminine apologetic to the "skaters' flirtatious or sexualised outfits," not only would it ignore the "implications of sportswomen's coincident doing of both 'femininity' (sexy outfits) and 'masculinity' (aggressive sport)," but "this line of argument" also:

assumes a heterosexual male audience, does not critically analyse how particular meanings are ascribed to the images that some roller derby skaters choose to present, and [...] fails to critically consider the conceptual validity of hegemonic masculinity and its helpmate, emphasised femininity (Breeze 2010: 128).

I disagree with the reasons Breeze gives for why derby players are not participating in a feminine apologetic. The feminine apologetic is not contingent upon a heterosexual male audience. Heterosexual women, or anyone, may also require a particular gender performance in order to accept women in a full-contact sport. Analysis of audience members' interpretations of the pairing of skirts and athleticism is necessary to determine the meanings that are given to the performance in roller derby. I agree that the gender meshing of femininity with

masculinity in roller derby does not necessarily mean that the feminine apologetic is being used, but this may be the case.

Rather than distancing derby from emphasized femininity, Carlson argues that “skaters engage in practices that do not necessarily abolish norms surrounding gender and athleticism so much as expose their contingency.” She terms this the “female signifiant” in order to elucidate “the contradictions inherent in emphasized femininity” ” (2010: 430-432). Therefore, they can display femininity while still portraying active, athletic qualities. Carlson notes that the question is not whether “derby skaters are agentially engaged in gender play” but that it is

whether this satirical portrayal of the feminine actually constitutes resistance. A quick survey of the clichéd headlines of news commentary on derby suggests no; at least in terms of its media coverage, roller derby is often rendered subversive to the extent that it is integrated into a multiplicitous femininity. [...] Thus, while derby offers substantial room for manoeuvre in the form of agency, it is not clear that crossing the boundaries of feminine norms into masculine-marked territory (as derby skaters clearly do) constitutes any resistance of femininity per se. Rather than lauded for their ability to dedicate their lives to athleticism (a singular pursuit which I would argue would be much more subversive of femininity), skaters are applauded for being able to pull-off “subversion” while still maintaining jobs and families. Thus, femininity may not be undermined but rather confirmed by boundary-crossings that are often noted – according to Butler – as potentially indicative of gender subversion (Carlson 2011: 86-86).

Although this “gender play” may not be explicitly identified by players as resistance, they may be conscious of the way in which roller derby provides opportunities, often denied to women, to participate in masculine sport. Finley’s research indicates that players are aware that they are presenting a different kind of femininity than that normally accepted. However, any radical reconceptualisation of gender within roller derby could be negated by the mainstream’s reincorporation of roller derby into the gender order or spectators (mis)understandings of players performances.

Either way, Finley argues that derby is not deconstructing gender and may not change gender relations beyond derby:

It is still a gender-segregated endeavor that calls on definitions of gender albeit in scrambled and paradoxical ways that can threaten the inequality of gender relations. More needs to be done on whether

these maneuvers crack those “bowls” of difference in ways that make them less available for reinforcing ideologies of natural differences in wider settings. Whether alternative femininities have long-term or far-reaching consequences is an empirical question. Women can now kick ass, but it might not bring the society any closer to societal support of child care or equal pay, or sports that do not glorify bruises (2010: 383-384).

West and Zimmerman’s (1987) argument of “doing gender” is a useful tool of analysis when examining gender in a changing social world, and therefore can be applied to gender within roller derby. West and Zimmerman (2009) argue that “doing gender” is done through social interaction and although the social structures, and people’s relationships to those structures, do not remain the same, gender is never actually “undone,” as argued by Risman (2009) and Deutsch (2007), but “redone.” When examining roller derby, it does appear that gender is “redone.” Derby may change the way in which women’s gender is perceived, but does not necessarily critique gender difference or new forms of “gender accountability” (West and Zimmerman 2009: 118).

To gauge the transgressive potential of roller derby, it is important to discover spectators’ interpretations. Does watching roller derby alter the way they view gender constructions? To what extent do they, like the media as described by Carlson (2011), view gender options as broadened for players within the sport, without translating this expansion of gender acceptability to women outside of derby? Does it change, disrupt or work within the possibilities currently offered by hetero-patriarchy and heteronormativity? Do spectators see all-female roller derby as the beginning of what women can achieve? It is important to note that spectators may not be privy to every aspect of the sport. Clearly, they can witness what occurs in bouts, media representations and promotional materials, but they may not be aware of the way other spectators interact with players or some of the subcultural phenomena that exist within derby. Additionally, they may be ignorant to the relationships forged between players.

### ***Female Friendship: Derby Wives and the Lesbian Continuum***

Mariah Burton Nelson believes that “all-female sports participation places women somewhere along what Adrienne Rich calls the lesbian continuum”; however, this is later stated somewhat more tentatively when she argues that

even heterosexual athletes, especially team sport athletes, could be classified as falling somewhere on this continuum, which is based on love and commitment to women rather than sex. In a society in which “lesbian” is a pejorative used against women who become strong and assertive, the athletic act of enjoying one's female body as it moves with and against other female bodies becomes a feminist act (1994: 39).

Despite this, Nelson acknowledges that there are female athletes who play into the institution of heterosexuality for the benefits it bestows. Therefore, they would not meet Rich's later criteria for inclusion on the lesbian continuum. Female athletes may still distance themselves from the label lesbian, and use perceived, if not real, heterosexuality to claim an advantage in the media, sponsorship or ticket sales. Participation in sports thus does not mean that one is consciously challenging the invisibility and privileges of heterosexuality, nor do sportswomen stand in solidarity with other women. There is no doubt that some women downplay their commitment to other women in an attempt to emphasize their own heterosexuality.

Roller derby may be different, though, as Breeze argues that one way that roller derby challenges heteronormativity is in its presentation of “a queer positive public image as well as visibly recognizing and celebrating marginalized sexualities and same sex relationships” (2010: 127). She cites the Vagine Regime, a networking group for the queer derby community, as evidence of this recognition and celebration. I am more hesitant. There is anecdotal evidence of roller derby's inclusive nature and the leading bodies within derby appear to have an anti-homophobia agenda, but more empirical research must be conducted in order to make this claim. Switchblade Siouxsie, writing for an online derby magazine, addresses the assumption “by outsiders that lesbians comprise an overwhelming percentage of roller derby players,” but concludes that “that tends not to be the case, and many times our queer identified sisters are left looking for a community that better understands them” (2008: np). Because of the potential isolation of queer women within derby, Injure Rogers created the Vagine Regime to provide opportunities for the queer identified (and their supporters) to network, bout together, and host parties, like the “Pants Off Dance Off” at RollerCon. But the existence of a queer community within roller derby does not mean that everyone would want to be associated with queerness, even if they do not

disassociate themselves from it. Finley quotes one of her respondents as saying “We made it [derby] campy and we make it cute. Takes the lesbian spin off.” An area not investigated in Finley’s article is the assumption by her respondent that lesbians would be neither camp nor cute. Finley goes on to say that “skaters make little effort to distance themselves from lesbianism, however, since that would align them with sexual conventionality, something their subculture intentionally mocks” (2010: 379). Being a female athlete, and being one in roller derby, does not necessarily challenge the institution of heterosexuality, but it may provide one with greater opportunity to do so since it can promote varying notions of femininity and biological difference/superiority. It may also promote meaningful relationships among women, especially when playing an all-female sport, as noted by Nelson. Indeed, roller derby, in particular, has, in some way, institutionalised close female relationships with the phenomenon of derby wives.



Image 5: My derby wife and I, wearing “Toxic Rox” and “Banshee's Wife” respectively (photo courtesy of MelHokPhotography).

“Derby wives” are a culturally specific phenomenon which originated in 2003, while Jennifer Barbee (Kasey Bomber) was on a road trip to watch Arizona Roller Derby’s (AZRD) first bout. As she describes it, there was a moment when her soon-to-be derby wife:



just looks at me and goes, “I love you, man.” And I said, “I love YOU, man.” And pretty shortly after, I said “You should be, like, my derby wife.” She said, “[my husband]<sup>[60]</sup> is gonna think that's hilarious.” (He did).<sup>[61]</sup> And that was that. But the thing about the whole thing was this feeling like there was this big invisible arrow pointing between us - we trusted each other immediately, we felt like we would be the ones to protect each other from whatever emotional or physical distress derby and life outside might have to offer, and we were going through all of it at the same time. We weren't best friends (we're pretty close to it now), but we were each other's champions, and remain so now. It goes well past derby. There's a certain comfort knowing that someone in this derby family is choosing to embrace you, and be there for you unconditionally, and that, at the heart is what you want in a derby wife - a social and emotional anchor in the melee of this sport and community (Bomber 2011: np).

Derby wives have become, in a relatively short time, a neo-tradition in all-female roller derby culture, providing some with either the impetus to join roller derby and/or the ability to thrive in the sport. Derby wives are chosen by skaters themselves, as described by Kasey Bomber. It is not a compulsory practice, but a relationship that players may choose to form. There is no script as to how this occurs. It can include a “proposal,” where one asks another, or several, to be her derby wife or wives. Following the proposal, a wedding does not have to occur in order for them to refer to one another as wife. Weddings do occur though, and have been arranged by leagues as after-parties to bouts, but the most famous derby weddings within the community are those held annually at RollerCon, with skaters marrying skaters in Las Vegas as early as 2005 (for the derby wife vows said at Rollercon, see “Dearly Beloved, Ladies and Broads...” nd).

Derby wives have become so popularised that “Wheels Up,” an episode of the television series *CSI Miami*, included an impassioned description of derby wives during an investigation of a derby girl’s murder:

Deb: I wouldn't hurt Connie; she was my derby wife.

Walter [a police officer]: Derby, huh?

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<sup>60</sup> Quotation changed to protect the anonymity of those who have not agreed to participate in this study.

<sup>61</sup> In a separate online interview with *Derby Girls*, Evil E, Kasey Bomber’s derby wife, says “I never even thought people were going to understand why we were calling each other wife. *I got some weird looks when it started, especially from my husband.* So to see it completely embraced is just shocking. Look at us – we’re the faces that launched a thousand + derby weddings!” [emphasis added] (Derby Girls Blog: np).

Deb: Partner in crime. On and off the track. She had my back and I had hers. I was supposed to have hers.

Walter: So, you guys were a couple?

Deb: *Not like you mean it.* We weren't sleeping together. Connie and I had a bond. She was a riot girl like me. We just got each other (emphasis in original; Hill 2011).

That derby wives can be confused with lesbianism may indicate how easily female friendships are taken for lesbianism. That the word wife is used may confuse matters further. Some same-gender couples refuse to use the term “wife” “because it seems imitative of a heterosexual model they reject” (Land and Kitzinger 2007: 174). However, a gender division that re-enacts a husband/wife duality is not necessarily evident in derby, and is thus not reflective of a heterosexual model in this instance. Although both players taking on the role of wife in roller derby may still be gendered, the role of wife does not presuppose a gender dichotomy within the relationship. Each partner would provide support, commitment, and care for the other, without a power differential between the two. Therefore, this enactment of wifeness within roller derby may call into question the previous criticisms of the wife role as intrinsically subordinate.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2006) defines wife as “a married woman in relation to her husband,” which necessitates the question asked by Marilyn Yalom: “Can the term ‘wife’ have meaning in a union where there is no sexual difference between the partners?” (2001: xix) and both take on the role? In Eskridge’s review of same-sex marriage throughout history, he finds both husband and wife roles as “constructed categories that need not correspond to biological categories” (1993: 1495). However, as Polikoff (1993) notes, the examples of “same-sex” partnerships that Eskridge provides are predominantly arranged as opposite gender relationships, in that one would assume a more masculine (husband) type role and the other a more feminine (wife) role. There would have to be a substantial shift from the meaning of wife, when “wife” is understood as the subject of previous feminist critiques, for two wives to coexist, complementarily, in a two-person relationship. Coontz argues that heterosexuals have already shifted the meanings of husband and wife and have allowed for “husbands and wives to construct their marriages around reciprocal duties and

negotiated roles” (2005: np); however, this argument is contentious as there is still evidence that husbands and wives are not equal, in law or practice.

Yip’s research indicates that even supporters of same-gender marriage have “acknowledged that the heterosexual norm remains the time-tested blueprint for ideal relationship arrangement [...] Therefore, it is no surprise that the efforts to legalize same-sex relationships are framed by a heterosexual vocabulary and paradigm” (2004: 176). Similarly, the use of “wife” amongst derby participants reflects the common term used to communicate commitment to another person, but the discussion of wives in the context of the derby community is different in that derby marriage is not implicated in the historical *institutional* subjugation of women. They are wives without a legal contract, but who use the imagery of wifehood to highlight their commitment to one another. In adapting the term wife, instead of partner, players may mimic the role found in heterosexual marriage, but the contextualisation of the relationship within an all-female full-contact sport creates an incongruent relationship between “derby wives” and same-gender marriage, as the criticisms of marriage as a replication of “a heterosexual model” do not apply.

## ***Conclusion***

Sport is one part of the “everyday sexual and social practices” (Jackson 1999: 179) that perpetuate heterosexuality. How successfully then does roller derby operate outside of mainstream sporting dynamics, where gender division and hierarchy are often reified by the sport’s structure? Similarly, Breeze asks “what would characterize a sporting context that *didn’t* sustain hegemonic masculinity” and questions

whether conducting research on femininity and masculinity, and continuing to refer to binary conceptions of gender, contributes to reified understandings of sex and gender. Does viewing sport through the slightly clouded lens of gender nourish the idea of men and women as essentially different? (2010: 130-131).

While these theoretical queries regarding how researchers should approach femininity and masculinity must be explored, I wonder what we can learn from spectators’ understandings of the sport. Do they currently see binary constructions of gender reflected in roller derby, or have they attributed new meanings to

gender? Exploring spectators' views of gender and derby may help us to theorise the gendered happenings within roller derby. This is the original focus of my dissertation, but derby wives also raise many questions that are worth investigating. A study of derby wives could help frame the possible undoings of heteronormativity within the sport. By analysing both heteronormativity, the ridiculing of various sexualities, as well as gender division and the privileging of men in sport, my study of roller derby will contribute to "critique[s] of heterosexuality" as specified by Jackson (1999).

I have two final thoughts, given the history of heterosexuality in the feminist movement and sport, and regarding the concepts "lesbian continuum" and "derby wife." Can I be a heterosexual feminist and a derby wife on the lesbian continuum? And have I contributed to the grip that the institution of heterosexuality has on women's sport by skating in fishnets and skirts, with writing on my knickers?

## **Chapter Three.**

### **Researching Heterosexuality in All-Female Roller Derby**

The growth of all-female roller derby has created a new area of research in sport sociology. While related to a larger study of women's sport, it diverges from most accounts because of its combination of sub-cultural appeal, clothing, pseudonyms, full-contact nature, and in that it is primarily women who participate. Qualitative research was useful for "discovery rather than verification" (Ambert et al. 1995: 880) of spectators' interpretations. Qualitative analysis was necessary to ascertain the language chosen by spectators in their description of derby and whether this would have gendered implications. Semi-structured interviews were chosen so respondents could manage their own accounts, and provide a more thorough depiction of roller derby spectator culture.

In order to answer my primary research question of whether all-female roller derby upholds or challenges the institution of heterosexuality, I began by investigating spectators' understandings of the sport. I then, as I became more aware of derby wives, included interviews about the phenomenon in my study. Therefore, this research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, I interviewed thirty-eight spectators of all-female roller derby and twelve female players, about their experiences with spectators, in the United States over the course of five weeks in the Summer of 2009. The second phase of research was conducted on "derby wives" via email with twenty-six female players in the United States from May to August 2010 and was developed through my own participation in "derby marriages." By studying this practice, I hoped to gain a greater understanding of gender construction within the subculture and the queering of the heteronormalised role "wife." During the second stage of data collection, open-ended questionnaires were distributed to allow for respondents to describe, in their own words, the meaning of derby wives. As no work had previously been conducted on the relationship, a fixed choice questionnaire would have limited respondents to options that may not accurately represent their views.

I chose to collect data through interviews with spectators because I was keen to hear experiences that were not filtered by the media or conjecture as to why they watch derby. Whilst studies have been conducted on media coverage of women's sport, Bruce argues that "audiences must become an integral part of

research” (1998: 390) in order to understand how they resist the dominant representations in media, as well as their interpretation of women’s sport. Arguably, the derby audience functions within a subcultural context and will ascribe meaning to derby not necessarily accounted for in mainstream media. By contacting fans for in-depth interviews, or talking to spectators at bouts, one can create a broader picture of how roller derby is interpreted within, or outside of, heterosexuality.

Battaglia’s study utilised “interviews with fans in newspapers [...] fan websites, blog postings and published fan mail” to “assess the popular culture phenomenon of the roller girls as a text perpetually produced by a culture industry, and simultaneously reworked (though not always positively) by a diverse population of fans” (2008: 4; 21). She contextualises fans’ interpretations with dominant readings of roller derby (like those represented in *A&E Rollergirls*, *Penthouse*, or a deodorant ad). While useful, this study only illustrates a certain segment of the spectator population, and, in particular, many are chosen as representations of derby culture by the media or the fans of a league who established their own unofficial Fan Club for the Naptown Roller Girls. Further investigation is needed to understand what is not being represented within the media, such as preferences for all-female derby or changing attitudes towards female players.

This chapter will address the process of recruitment and interviewing for both phases of data collection. There will also be a discussion of the data analysis and issues that arose in interpreting the interviews. The two phases of research will be discussed separately, as there were significant differences in the interview and analysis processes. However, the demographics of all respondents will be analysed together, with an emphasis on the questions that emerged from using an open-ended demographic form.

### *Understanding Spectators*

During July and August 2009, I visited the Atlanta Rollergirls, Rollercon<sup>62</sup> in Las Vegas, the Bay Area Derby Girls (B.A.D.) in San Francisco, the Boston Derby

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<sup>62</sup> Rollercon is an annual roller derby convention. There are on- and off-skates workshops for players, referees, and coaches. There were also numerous scrimmages open to the public on Fremont, the former Las Vegas strip.

Dames, and the Charm City Roller Girls in Baltimore.<sup>63</sup> These were chosen because of bout availability (both in terms of the dates held, and, with the exception of B.A.D., number of bouts on the day) and their geographical location. B.A.D. specifically was of interest since they had an online, and thus readily available, gender policy,<sup>64</sup> and were scheduled to have a mud-wrestling fundraiser on 17 July 2009. Whilst unable to attend the fundraiser, I was curious whether this would be a topic of discussion at the bout or if it was a draw for new spectators. I also recruited respondents via contacts in Washington DC and Oklahoma, though I was unable to attend bouts in these areas during field research.

Two different versions of the Call for Participants were circulated. One was written with the purpose of recruiting spectators, as I had not yet decided to interview players; the second solicited both spectators and players (see Appendix B). Although I am primarily interested in spectators' responses to derby, and not how others believe spectators interpret the sport, I decided to interview players about their interactions with spectators after hearing of a fellow team member's experience. A male spectator found her on the online social networking site Facebook, where he located her using her legal, not derby, name. He "friended" her after her first bout, and she, excited to have her first fan, accepted.<sup>65</sup> After he initiated a conversation using the online chat option, he expressed his appreciation of the "skimpy shorts" that she wore during the bout and suggested that next time she "lose the knickers." He negated her athleticism by suggesting that she was there to please him, the sexual voyeur. This incident motivated me to circulate another Call for Participants so I could interview players about how they are approached by members of the audience and derby outsiders.

The inclusion of roller derby players was an attempt to capture some of the events that spectators may not include in their accounts. Social desirability bias may influence spectators to construct their answers "so that they sound nicer [...] and more desirable to the researcher" (Williams and Heikes 1993: 285). Therefore, a spectator may not be honest if they have participated in problematic behaviour towards a player. Additionally Williams and Heikes (1993) found that male

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<sup>63</sup> For information regarding the geographical location of interviews, please see Table 2 in Appendix A.

<sup>64</sup> This gender policy is no longer available.

<sup>65</sup> When she agreed to "friend" him, depending on her privacy settings, he was able to see photos, discussions she was having with other friends, and communicate with her if they were both online at the same time via an online chat option.

respondents were less likely to express overtly sexist views to female interviewers. It would be difficult to imagine a spectator telling me, as a female researcher and roller derby player, that they, without consent, grab the behinds of players after bouts. However, social desirability bias does not always seem to affect what is shared, as seen by Arendell's (1997) experience in interviewing divorced men. Despite her gender, she was exposed to quite disparaging remarks about women.

Players also share stories that are "socially situated" (Jackson 1998: 49) and may not want to relay problematic interactions with spectators for fear it would represent the sport negatively. As blogger and derby player trACDC wrote:

I'm about to do something taboo. Not like having sex with your twin taboo, but taboo nonetheless. I am about to admit, right here on the interwebs, that roller derby isn't all camaraderie and fishnets. This may seem obvious, but we derbies are pretty protective of our sport and our teams and talking shit about either is just not what we do. Except when it is (2011: np).

Players may wish to present the best possible version of the sport; therefore, social desirability bias may influence the interviews with players as well.

The interview schedule<sup>66</sup> for spectators was designed to discover why spectators attended bouts, and capture their general feelings towards the sport, including the full-contact aspect, clothing, pseudonyms (in the schedule termed "alter egos" as that was the language understood best by respondents), and interactions with derby players. I was also interested in whether or not they reported changes in their attitude towards roller derby over time. The interview schedule for players was designed to investigate their interactions with spectators, as well as other potential derby outsiders (friends, family, partners, and strangers).

## **Recruitment**

Leagues were emailed a Call for Participants and a request to conduct interviews at the bouts. Some leagues, including the DC Rollergirls, forwarded the Call for Participants to their online mailing list, and, where available, I posted the request on Facebook fan pages and groups for the leagues. I had difficulty reaching anyone in one of the chosen leagues to obtain permission to conduct research at

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<sup>66</sup> All interview schedules are included in Appendix C.



their bout, but played against a former member at Roll Britannia<sup>67</sup> who kindly assisted me in contacting them. In her emails to league members, she emphasized my status as a derby player by explaining how we met and ended her email with “so please, help a[n] international roller derby sista out.” I immediately received a response saying that I had been put on the guest list for the bout. My position as a player appeared to make respondents more comfortable; one player, unaware that I played derby before we began an email exchange, replied after I signed an email with my derby name: “Toxic Pink Stuff, I didn't know you were a derby girl! Good, we can be less formal, then.”

I also wanted to interview spectators who were not completely immersed in the derby culture. In order to record the experiences of those spectators who would not have been privy to the Call for Participants, I conducted impromptu interviews with individuals I met at the bouts I attended. Initially, I hoped to approach individuals at bouts, but interview them at a later date. This would have helped avoid the problems of interviewing at bouts, like time restrictions and noise. However, in both Atlanta and Las Vegas many of those I approached were tourists which precluded arranging a meeting for another date. This was not surprising in Las Vegas, a tourist destination, but was unexpected in Atlanta. As a result, interviews were conducted at bouts, and I pre-arranged more interviews using derby contacts to counter-balance these shorter ones.

Despite limitations, the data gained through these shorter interviews at bouts was invaluable. In particular, the bouts in Las Vegas were unique in that they were free demonstrations on the Fremont, the former main strip in Las Vegas. Therefore, it provided an opportunity to interview individuals who happened upon a bout and, thus, I was able to capture the attitudes of those who were interested enough to stop and watch a bout without necessarily having previously formulated opinions. There was the added benefit of unexpectedly watching a coed bout with two respondents, prior to my realising how responses to coed derby would aid in understanding spectators’ construction of gender.

Another challenge to recruitment, which required a modified plan for interviews, was that I sought to interview individuals and not groups. I was concerned with the practicality of finding a location to hold focus groups,

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<sup>67</sup> Roll Britannia was the first European tournament, which occurred in 2009.

especially when travelling across the United States, and having the proper equipment to record them in already crowded and noisy areas if the interviews were conducted at bouts. However, in some cases, it was not feasible to interview individuals on their own; many I approached were in the company of at least one other person, and several of these were not interested in being separated from each other for the duration of the interview. In these instances, respondents were interviewed together.

Interviewees were selected using a convenience sample. Attempts were made to accommodate every response to the Call for Participants; however, in Washington, D.C., some potential respondents were turned down because of time limitations and the overwhelming response I received from individuals in the area.<sup>68</sup> Respondents interviewed at bouts were selected pragmatically. I approached individuals who arrived early so that I could conduct interviews before bouts and maximise the number of responses acquired. Two individuals, who were interviewed together, were players attending another league's bout, and were interviewed as players instead of spectators. This is different from Bruce's study, whose "female viewers of televised women's basketball" (1998: 378) included basketball players. Although playing the sport would have informed the way in which they watched a bout, the women identified primarily as players.

### **Interview Process**

Most interviews with spectators (63.1%) were prearranged through a snowball method that involved the leagues, other respondents or my own contacts. Seven of these prearranged spectator respondents were interviewed during or immediately after a bout to suit their schedules. In general, interviews which occurred at bouts were not as in-depth as prearranged interviews that occurred elsewhere. Bout interviews had to be conducted within a short timeframe (between fifteen and thirty minutes).<sup>69</sup> Most prearranged interviews lasted around forty-five minutes, with some lasting over an hour, and the longest lasting approximately two hours. Prearranged interviews occurred in a variety of places. Most often I met respondents at coffee shops, bars, restaurants or in their homes.

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<sup>68</sup> Sixteen respondents were pre-scheduled for interviews in the Washington, DC and Baltimore area. All of these meetings occurred within eight days.

<sup>69</sup> Characteristics of the interviews for both spectators and players may be found in Tables 3 and 4 respectively (see Appendix A).

The more unusual locations included a tattoo parlour, an airport, and a car with four previously known individuals (Daphne, Hallie, Corinna and Julia) during the drive from Baltimore to Washington, DC after a bout.

There were several unexpected difficulties with the interviews, aside from time, noise, and number. I had not anticipated my nervousness at approaching random individuals at bouts and asking for their participation in my research. Although I had conducted pilot interviews in the United Kingdom, these had been prearranged. My nerves are evident in the transcript of the first interview I conducted at a bout, where I met the respondents with no prior contact and immediately interviewed them. There were several statements that I did not capitalise on, such as “I was thinking of horrible questions I was half expecting [you to ask]. You know, why do you participate in the objectification of women and violence, they’re marketing on their rear ends. I don’t know” (Patrick). In hindsight, the consent form should have included a section for respondents to provide their contact information if they would like information on the findings, and/or if they agreed to being contacted if questions arose about their responses.<sup>70</sup>

Two interviews I conducted were not included in the final count or analysis and represent other issues with the impromptu interviews. One interview lasted barely a minute before I decided that the respondent may not be of a mental capacity to have granted informed consent. The other interview was conducted over a short amount of time and was more about the respondent’s own work on roller derby than on the interview content. Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain contact information from him before the bout resumed, and think it would be a disservice to him to represent his ideas without giving him full credit, including using his real name.

I divulged that I play roller derby in both the Call for Participants and emails to the leagues, and introduced myself as a derby player when requesting interviews from potential respondents at bouts. I was hesitant about disclosing that I played derby because I wanted respondents to feel free to criticise the sport. However, I thought my status as a player could help me secure more interviews.

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<sup>70</sup> Another unexpected difficulty occurred when, at the end of my field research, I developed the flu with three prescheduled interviews remaining and one day left in the United States. These volunteers were notified of my illness, but all remained willing to participate. I managed to keep my composure until the last interview with a spectator, but, unfortunately, I was unable to do a proper job. This interview was still used, but not to the extent that it could have been if I had asked the appropriate follow-up questions.

In addition to knowing that I play derby, many respondents asked what degree I was studying. In replying Women's Studies, I am sure many, if not all, deduced my feminist leanings. If I were solely labelled as a feminist, and not a derby player, they may have been more open with derby criticisms, or considered that I would have anti-derby leanings, as suggested by Patrick who thought I would ask about the objectification of female players. Instead, my Women's Studies background only seemed of importance when speaking with two male respondents who had something of a Women's Studies background themselves. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, these men were able to better manage their accounts of sexuality in roller derby. In some cases, the discussions even became highly academic in their rationality,<sup>71</sup> which may hint at the influence of social desirability bias, and/or illustrate an intellectual engagement with the complexities of roller derby. Respondents who were attracted to the sexual display in roller derby may have modified their answers because I was a feminist derby player.

There were instances where my gender played an evident role in interactions with respondents. Whether intentional or not, there were a few moments where I did feel the target of a sexualised comment. One particular respondent made two statements that caused me to flounder for a response. The interview was lively, and I was laughing along with the respondent from the very beginning. Admittedly, I have an unusual laugh that involves a squeak and a snort, to which his response was: "you got to do that in bed for me. That would just freak a guy out." He also informed me that my eyebrow piercing was sexy. Both comments served to sexualise me. The former, in particular, heterosexualised me and seemed to strip me of any authority that I wanted to maintain. Another respondent told me a few days after the interview that his friends had enquired as to whether or not he had asked me out. I had not prepared for this within the context of a respondent/interviewer relationship, and did not know how to respond as I did not want to offend him. These were rare occurrences and not representative of my interviews with men.

Half of the spectators I interviewed were men, and, of those, there were a few heterosexual male respondents who did comment on enjoying the sport partially because of the attractive women. These comments were not limited to

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<sup>71</sup> At least one of these respondents had taken a gender studies course at university and was very reflective in his statements on the sexuality displayed in roller derby.

men, as women also commented on the sexiness of players. However, when men made these comments, I would sometimes feel uncomfortable, but not because anything was directed at me. Instead, it was because I identified as a derby player and was considering how their comment applied to me. For example, one respondent says, amidst many other reasons for liking derby, that “there’s something about women with really tight behinds on roller skates going around and around in circle while I’m sitting on the floor watching it go by at eye level.” Since I played roller derby at the time, my initial thought was wondering how many of those who have watched my bouts have considered my *derrière*. I personalised some of the statements because of my status as a player, whereas respondents did not.

I hoped that spectators would feel comfortable talking openly and attempted to keep my interviews informal and conversational.<sup>72</sup> However, I felt, at the end of my research, that I should have better prepared myself to interview unknown heterosexual men and considered more how to minimise the impact of social desirability bias. The interviews with men challenged my own bias and the gendered assumptions about my anticipated results. I began my field research with the assumption that some heterosexual men would say outright that they attend roller derby bouts for the “hot chicks.” Not only does this underestimate roller derby audiences, but it also underestimates the sport. No doubt there are some who, at least initially, attend roller derby for the athletes’ physical appearance, but that would not represent all heterosexual male spectators. Those who do attend for these reasons are possibly underrepresented in my sample because respondents who volunteered were embedded in roller derby culture. Additionally, there was a subgroup of spectators that I could not ethically interview because they were visibly intoxicated, particularly in Las Vegas.<sup>73</sup> For example, there were four male spectators sitting near me during one of the exhibition bouts in Las Vegas who I could not approach to interview because of their level of intoxication. They held giant margaritas, equipped with a shoulder strap for easy carrying. One of them

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<sup>72</sup> One respondent wrote to me after the interview saying “You really have a talent to get people going in natural conversation.”

<sup>73</sup> At the completion of one interview with a woman in Las Vegas, she apologized for being drunk and smelling of alcohol. I was unable to detect any sign that she was intoxicated, and decided to include her data in my research because our conversation led me to believe that she understood the informed consent. It is tricky, for me, to determine when a respondent has drunk too much and thus should not be included in the research.

appeared to have a difficult time sitting upright, and periodically lay down alongside the track with his margarita leaning precariously in between his legs. Because of their proximity, I was able to overhear some of the conversation. One remarked, when some male derby players entered the track, “I don’t want to see dudes.” The same individual asked a derby player in the audience if one of the men playing, who was wearing short pink shorts, was gay. She replied “not at all. He gets a lot of action.” Because I chose to attend bouts, I was able to observe spectators that I could not always interview and witnessed this ad-hoc conversation between a player and, presumably, first-time spectator.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed in full, including “um,” “you know,” “like,” etc.<sup>74</sup> All data were analysed using a qualitative thematic analysis. Because of the amount of data provided by spectators and players in the first round of data collection, there were several different processes used to create codes for these themes. The interviews were initially coded by hand, and data from the themes identified were organised and ordered into a chart via the “framework approach” (Bryman 2008: 555). This provided a visual for the number of respondents who discussed each topic. Main themes were identified and then incorporated into a concept map to discover their interconnectedness. These concept maps were used to rethink and simplify the coding, and the data was recoded with this knowledge in Atlas.ti. Since I wanted to discover the meanings of the sport for spectators, it was important not to have a predetermined set of codes and to allow for unexpected themes to emerge. In particular, I had not anticipated the importance of the construction of gendered bodies, which I discuss in Chapter Five, even though this does align with other discussions of the gendering of bodies through sport.

I was most knowledgeable about the leagues discussed in prearranged or at-bout interviews. With at-bout interviews, I had witnessed the same event as respondents. While these bouts were surely viewed differently by everyone in attendance, there was a common understanding of what had occurred. For example, I knew what the announcers had said, what players wore, who won at

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<sup>74</sup> In the analysis chapters, these have been removed when it detracts from their accounts.

the coed exhibition bout, the style of play at bouts, or whether the score was particularly close. Interviews that did not correspond with a bout, on the other hand, left me without the ability to compare our interpretations. Indeed, often the only information researchers have to work with is that which they are provided with by respondents. However, with the availability of information on the internet, researchers have to choose whether or not to utilise other sources to augment the data collected from volunteers. I had not considered the ramifications of seeking external information when I searched online for a league of which two respondents were members.<sup>75</sup> In the interview in question, the respondents described participation in roller derby as empowering and, separately, revealed that their league stages fist fights for the purpose of maintaining their current audience base. While in my opinion fist fights, real or fake, are problematic, knowledge of their league practices did not take away from the emotion I felt during the interview. At the time, this was one of my favourite interviews *because* of how it made me feel about derby. As they spoke about being role models to girls in the community, they were teary-eyed and so was I.

Days after the interview, I watched a video posted on their website<sup>76</sup> which consisted of a series of video segments from a bout. In the video, there is a woman humping the backside of another woman as she is face down on the floor. The one on top appears to be holding the woman's head to the floor as this takes place. My interpretation of this scenario is that it is simulated sexual assault, but others may interpret it differently. I struggled to maintain a consistent interpretation of the interview once I saw this, and readers should be aware of the biases and conflict I dealt with during the analysis process. While I may disagree with the video, I am in no position, and would be abusing my power as researcher, to define what is and is not empowering for these respondents; to do so would misrepresent their experiences. The respondents presented to me their reflexively constructed accounts of their experiences (Jackson 1998), and determined what they thought was important to share. It is my responsibility, as a researcher, to represent their perceptions of roller derby accurately, not my bias against what was not shared in an interview.

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<sup>75</sup> This interview had not been prearranged, so I had no knowledge of their league beforehand.

<sup>76</sup> When I first visited their website, this video was on their front page. It has now been moved to another area on their website, but still easily accessible. The URL is not provided to guard the confidentiality of the respondents is discussed.

## *Understanding Derby Wives*

Roller derby culture presented an interesting phenomenon in the practice of derby wives, which can be seen as queering the wife role. It was only because of my insider status that questions began emerging about derby wives, whereas before it seemed a minor part of the culture. Potentially, this is because of my location in the United Kingdom, where roller derby is newer, and in my particular league, where it seemed very few, if any, had publically known derby wives before February 2009.

As I became more immersed in derby culture, several questions emerged about derby wives. I wondered why the word “wife,” with its historically gendered connotations, is chosen to describe this relationship and how this culturally specific concept was explained to, and understood by, others. As an overt recognition of women’s commitment to one another, does it have implications for how outsiders perceive players’ relationships and sexuality? My friends wondered how heterosexual participants explain their derby wifeness to their romantic partners and another raised a concern that weddings between derby wives could potentially trivialise and mock lesbian weddings. I wondered if this could be thought of in terms of Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum.” The terminology and practice were addressed by conducting email interviews with players in the United States from May to August 2010.

### **Recruitment**

Out of necessity, I altered the research methods used to conduct these interviews. I developed a voice disorder after the original interviews were collected and my voice was too unreliable for any oral interviews. Therefore, I conducted email interviews from May to August 2010. Forty-three players responded to the Call for Participants (see Appendix B), which was advertised through the mediums of Facebook, Vagine Regime’s contacts, the yahoo\_rollergirls group, and a snowball technique. Players who had participated previously in the project, for whom I had contact information, were informed of the derby wife research and sent a Call for Participants. None chose to participate in the new interviews, but a few did forward the information to their leagues.



As a convenience sample, all volunteers were accepted for participation bar one player who did not meet the requirement that players reside in the United States. All respondents received a consent form, the questionnaire, and an optional demographic form. Twenty-six of those who initiated contact completed the questionnaire which addressed: their understandings of the connotations of derby wife; if they found it an appropriate representation of friendship; what was different, if anything, about this friendship from others; the practice of derby wives as following a normalised marriage pattern (proposal, wedding, divorce); how their friends, relatives, and significant others responded to the concept.

In general, interviews conducted using the Internet may access a wider range of the population (Beck 2005; Mann and Stewart 2000). This geographic reach was notable in the derby wife research, with respondents from various towns in the following states: Alabama (1), California (2), Illinois (2), Maryland (1), Michigan (1), Minnesota (1), Missouri (1), New Hampshire (2), New Jersey (3), New York (1), South Carolina (1), Texas (3), Vermont (2), and Wisconsin (1). Greater geographic diversity was not achieved when conducting in-person interviews because of cost and time constraints.

### **Interview Process**

Although computer-mediated communication had to be used for this data collection because of my voice disorder, there were several ways it could be conducted. Because I wanted in-depth interviews, online surveys like SurveyMonkey would have been too limited. Individual online chats could have been used, but would have created difficulties with time-zone differences, as I reside in the United Kingdom and respondents were in the United States. A benefit of conducting these by email was that volunteers could respond in their own time. Although online interviews allow for “rapid response times” (Beck 2005: 412), they were still time-consuming. Of those who completed the questionnaire, email communication consisted of, on average, 3.4 emails from respondents, but ranged from one to eight. Follow-up communication was necessary to ask volunteers to elaborate on certain statements that implied a shared cultural understanding.

Email interviews are not ideal, and resulted in several complications; most notably was the difficulty in obtaining answers to follow-up questions, resulting in five incomplete interviews. Because of this difficulty, the initial questionnaire was modified to include what had become a common follow-up question: “what do you like about the term (for example, why use it instead of ‘derby best friend’ or ‘derby sister’)?”<sup>77</sup> Another common issue was emails getting spammed because of the attachments. I tried to remedy this by sending reminder emails to make sure they had received the questionnaire, but feared being too obtrusive if the respondent had lost interest in participating in the project.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Since all derby wife interviews were conducted via email, and respondents had time to consider their responses, quotes from these interviews will not be edited, as it helps to establish the personality of the respondent and the respondent may have used certain devices to emphasize their point. The only exceptions are two respondents (Ani and Kathryn) who answered the initial questionnaire capitalising every letter, but did not in later responses; their responses have been altered so that it would not appear as though they were emphasizing every point. The interviews were shorter and less complex than the in-person ones, as they focused on one issue. Thus coding was conducted by hand, followed by a re-coding of the data in Atlas.ti, instead of also utilising Framework analysis.

Unlike the initial research, my analysis of the derby wife data was largely deductive, since I was interested in whether the phenomenon could function as a modernised version, or application, of Rich’s lesbian continuum. Analysing the data in this way carries risk. My main concern was that respondents might not appreciate having their experiences understood as part of the “lesbian continuum.” This idea was highly contentious amongst feminists at the time Rich introduced it, and there is no reason why it would not be equally so amongst respondents in 2009-2010. A thematic analysis would have produced similar results and could have stood on its own; however, as a researcher it is also important to consider the theoretical underpinnings that make sense of the experiences discussed.

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<sup>77</sup> See Appendix C for the full list of questions.

Although my interpretation of the phenomenon may differ from respondents, this does not take away from the representation of their lived experiences:

It is facile to assume that the analysis of experience necessarily means the exploitation of experience to the detriment of the participant, or that the researcher's re-interpretation of that experience will change its fundamental meaning to the participant. The participant will always own the construction of meaning she has ascribed to experience, regardless of the interpretation placed upon this by the researcher within the publication of his or her work. Secondly, the researcher is the one who has been motivated to explore the theoretical ideas before conducting research, and to try to construct knowledge from experience: it is a practical necessity that some individuals should do so, if we are ever to have any knowledge at all (Millen 1997: para 3.4).

It is possible that a misinterpretation of the lesbian continuum could cause alarm amongst those who see it as creating an explicit association between derby wives and lesbianism. A closer investigation of Rich's intent should alleviate some concerns, but I do not expect all respondents to have the same interpretation as I do. In particular, I wonder what Daria's response to my interpretation would, and will, be. Within her former league there had been a homophobic response to derby wives; she purposively detailed her experience to me in the hopes of challenging the association of derby wives with lesbianism, as well as an open criticism of homophobia:

I consulted my friend [...] and when your email came through she forwarded it to me and we feel like this should be addressed. To educate and eliminate any confusion about the truth of the "derby wife" and what it means and stands for. If I could in anyway share my story or what it is I have seen or been faced with regarding a stereotype or poor image. As you are probably aware, it has nothing to do with Homosexuality and everything to do with friendship and loyalty and respect as a player and leader.

I need to be aware of how interpretations of the data provided may differ between me and those who volunteered their knowledge. But my fears that I may offend respondents by contextualising their experiences within a broader theoretical

perspective should not prevent me from investigating a theory that appears pertinent.

### ***Demographics***

A representative sample would have been impossible as there was no available information as to nationwide demographics of derby audiences. I did want to collect demographic information from respondents so that I could have basic information. Since then, WFTDA has published large-scale demographic studies, released in March 2010 and January 2011, which are possibly more representative than my own. Their studies have enabled me to compare my demographics to theirs. According to WFTDA, most fans are female (2010; 2011) and “the average fan is just over 36 years old” (2010: 1). Of the thirty-eight spectators I interviewed,<sup>78</sup> nineteen identified as men. I have a much higher proportion of men in my sample because I set out to interview men and women equally. Most (52.9%) spectators were in their 20s, but ages ranged from 16 to 59 with a median age of 28.5. According to WFTDA, “the majority (60%) of female skaters are between the ages of 25 and 34” (2011: 2) and “seventy-six percent of adult female skaters identify as straight” (2011: 2). Most players in the first phase are in their 20s, though those interviewed ranged in age from 24 to 51. The median age was 29. Of the derby wife respondents, ages ranged from 24 to 44. The median age was 29.5. WFTDA does not provide any information of the racial or ethnic diversity amongst skaters or audience members. Most of my respondents in the first phase identified as Caucasian or white: 68.4% of spectators and 83.3% of players. In the second phase, the majority of players were white or Caucasian. Additionally, one identified as a “cracker,” one as “mostly white,” another as Mexican/American, and one as having “Mexican and Eastern European background.”

All demographic questions, except the financial questions, were open-ended (see Appendix D) so as not to impose limits on responses or, by default, assign an undesired identity to the respondents. The issue of choosing what identities to capture as choices on a fixed choice demographic form is discussed by Sprague: “Every measurement approach creates a pattern of selective visibility:

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<sup>78</sup> For details, see Tables five through eight in Appendix A.

it taps some aspects of a phenomenon and hides others. Measures are always constructed within specific historical and political contexts that shape what is measured and how” (2005: 84). Limits were still imposed by the demographic form in that respondents were given set questions, like age, race, and sex.<sup>79</sup> These were certain identifications that I wanted to guarantee I knew so I could respond to potential questions about the respondents. In retrospect, I could have included a section that allowed participants to say how they identified themselves, in addition to asking them the standard demographic questions to which I wanted answers.

The problems of closed-survey demographics were discussed by one respondent who refrained from responding to the question of race and sex. Ironically, it was for the same reasons that I chose the open-ended form. Even with an open-ended form, there were issues with how to categorise oneself:

Alva: I don't usually answer these ones but I know you're not going to do it for syst- for other purposes. Well, I can't even say that actually.  
[laugh]

Q: Other purposes? What do you mean?

Alva : I guess just like, I don't like telling [pause] my my um my husband is half black and half Palestinian and so he's in the mixed category and I think that's bull shit, and I also, myself, am multiple European, um

Q: That's why I left it blank, so people could do their own-

Alva: I don't like it. I have to list like seven things here for you. There's just, I'm like, I guess like, I was just reading um about sex versus gender and that woman who just won that race and how they're doing all that testing to make sure she's a female and whatever. And it goes back to that category factor. Like there are so many um XXYs or people born that do not have one or the other.

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<sup>79</sup> Sex is used on the demographic form instead of gender because it was created prior to my theoretical understanding of “sex” as a social construct. I have since used gender for this description.

Similarly, Sprague details how “standardized measures of traits are premised on the assumptions that traits are stable and can be measured out of context” (2005: 87).

As a result of choosing the open-ended form, the descriptive statistics are not neatly divided into few categories, but represent a variety of identifications made by respondents: as “in the empirical world, phenomena are much more likely to exist on a continuum” (Sprague 2005: 88). Therefore, I cannot easily compare the spectators’ sexuality to WFTDA’s findings. WFTDA found that “four out of five fans identify as straight” (2010: 1; 2011: 1) or eighty percent. Although sixty-eight percent of the spectators I interviewed identified as straight or heterosexual, others identified in such varied ways that it is difficult to compare. The same cannot be said for the first group of players that I interviewed, where only one player in my sample did not identify as heterosexual or straight. The exception identified as “confused.” Of the twenty-six derby wife volunteers, three identify as bisexual, two as queer, one as a “queer identified lesbian ☺,” one as “at this point, questionable,” one as married, and eighteen as either heterosexual or straight.<sup>80</sup> Unlike the in-person interviews with derby players, the players involved in the second phase may under-represent heterosexual respondents with 53.8% identifying as heterosexual or straight, compared to the 76% percent heterosexual derby player community found in both WFTDA’s 2010 and 2011 survey. This difference in the demographics could be explained by Vagine Regime’s assistance in recruitment for the derby wife research.

The answers provide an account of sexual diversity and fluidity.<sup>81</sup> Responses to the question of sexuality brought into light my own, underestimated, heteronormative assumptions of restricted identity options. One female respondent, Kate, asked me what the form meant by asking for her sexual orientation. I explained by listing various sexual identities, including heterosexual. She responded verbally by saying “I’m normal.” The respondent had previously

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<sup>80</sup> In the second phase, two respondents chose not to complete demographic forms, and, although much information can be gleaned from the interviews themselves and skater profiles online, these two will be represented as missing data. One does identify as “gay,” which is important to note considering the context of the interview during the analysis. Despite this knowledge, I have included her as “missing data” in the demographic summaries.

<sup>81</sup> For information regarding gender and sexuality, please refer to Tables 6 and 7, for spectators and players respectively, in Appendix A, and for derby wife respondents in Table 9. For a detailed description of spectators, please refer to Table 8. Player descriptions are not provided, as these are discussed in the text where confidentiality can be better secured.

informed me that she was married, and her husband was nearby (but out of earshot) while the interview was conducted. I initially interpreted her response as heteronormative, and assumed a stigmatising of other identity options. Consequently, I did not ask any questions for clarification. It may be, however, that my assumption that her claim of normalcy meant heterosexuality was heteronormative. As a researcher, I must take responsibility and account for my heterosexual biases in interviews (Braun 2000). This is particularly important in my research as I seek to evaluate the institution of heterosexuality. The appearance of a heterosexual relationship does not mean that one is heterosexual, and calling oneself “normal” could be an attempt to naturalise, not malign, other sexualities. As one male respondent suggests, when he writes that he is “usually taken to be straight,” certain actions indicate an outward appearance of heterosexuality, but these assumptions may very well be inaccurate. Even if one’s sexuality follows a socially constructed and stipulated pattern, there can still be flexibility in sexual identities. Respondents who identified as “mostly heterosexual,” “homoflexible,” “confused” and “queer” have placed themselves into seemingly more fluid identity categories than “heterosexual,” “gay” or “lesbian” would allow.

My initial response to the player who identified as “confused” was also indicative of my heteronormative assumptions: the response “confused” implied, to me, that she was not heterosexual. Confusion could arise because she is deviating from the “norm,” and therefore questioning her sexuality, as heteronormativity typically protects heterosexuals from such questioning. But this may not always be the case. Without the requisite follow-up questions, it is impossible to know what she meant by “confused,” except that she is questioning how she would name her sexuality. It is noteworthy that the difficulty in interpreting responses to the sexuality section of the demographic form underscores how language itself is heteronormative. In general, the open-ended demographic forms could have been very useful in evaluating current views of sexuality - if they were reviewed and discussed. This is noted by DeBlaere et al. (2010) in their discussion of the need for methodological changes to the study of sexuality, and the needed awareness for cross-cultural differences in identification:

Use of open-ended questions could reduce inappropriate application of culture-specific terminology across groups as well. Moreover, analysis of open-ended responses could inform development of a taxonomy of specific terms and superordinate categories that may encompass a broader range of sexual identities across groups (2010: 335).

This was outside the scope of my research, however, and given the time constraints placed on my interviews, was unfeasible.

### ***Conclusion***

The study was designed to investigate heterosexuality in all-female roller derby. In order to accomplish this, I approached the research question in two ways. The first was to examine the meanings spectators attribute to roller derby. The second delved into the phenomenon of derby wives. In regards to my first stage of field research, it was important to try to capture the many ways in which roller derby may be viewed. While it is impossible to represent every way derby is understood by spectators, I attempted to represent as much as I could by interviewing long-time fans, first-time spectators and players, about spectators. This was accomplished by diversifying my recruitment methods for the in-person interviews. During the second stage of field research, I used computer-mediated interviews which also allowed for a greater diversity, in terms of geographic location, amongst my respondents.

I chose to disclose my status as a derby girl to my respondents, which was important for access to interviews, but may have influenced their responses. It was important for me to consider the way in which I was socially situated, both in the way respondents may have shaped their answers to correspond with me and in the way I reacted to the interviews and data. This ranged from the nervousness in my first interview, which caused me to realise the need to improve my interviewing skills, to the analysis conducted on the league that practised fist fights. During the process, I also became more aware of how statements about derby girls made me feel. It was important to be aware of this while conducting the analysis. I reflected on my positionality, and also used the methodological tools I had for the analysis to distance myself where appropriate. There were many benefits to my insider status, the most important being the inclusion of derby wives in the study, which



allowed for a glimpse into the culture of roller derby beyond what spectators necessarily see on the track.

This study also had me question my own heteronormative assumptions, as well as the politics of demographic data collection. Although I attempted to allow for self-identification, my framing of the demographic form still enforced some limitations. In the future, Alva's concerns may have been remedied by asking respondents to describe themselves, without any pre-established parameters. However, this has its own disadvantages in that heterosexuality, and other privileged identities, may remain invisible.

While the demographic data was intriguing, and warrants further study, my focus was on heterosexuality within all-female roller. Although opinions on roller derby and its players and spectators are still evolving, there is still the assumption that heterosexual males enjoy roller derby for the women in short skirts and/or that it is entwined with third wave feminism. This is often communicated by the media, and I found it important to hear directly from participants themselves. Although I was involved in filtering the information provided by spectators for this thesis, I aimed to provide a representative account of those I interviewed when conducting the data analysis. In the following chapters, I will discuss my findings. Since one of the most debated issues in public about roller derby is the sexualisation of the players because of the clothing worn, my analysis will begin with the sexualisation of roller derby and the "feminine" presentation of players through their use of dress.

## **Chapter Four.**

### **Sex, Femininity, and Athleticism: The Meaning of Dress**

Despite diversity in outfits across local, national and international roller derby leagues, there is still a general expectation of players' appearance, predominantly associated with a punk rock stylisation where the players sport tattoos, fishnets, short skirts and knee high socks. Although this style of dress is not intrinsic to roller derby *as a sport*, this common perception is central to much of the imagery and representation of derby. Whether empowering or objectifying, this is undoubtedly a sexualised image. However, as argued in Chapter One, the sexualisation in roller derby appears to be different from that in other sports that emphasize the female athletes' sexual availability, as well as from marketing campaigns that rely on a sexually passive athlete to sell the sport or product. What meaning roller derby *spectators* give the sexuality displayed in roller derby has yet to be investigated. In this chapter, I argue that sex does indeed help to sell the sport, but it is a different kind of sex from that seemingly assumed by Kane when she argues that "sex sells sex, not women's sport" (2011: np). The sexuality in roller derby is not appropriately feminised and passive. While there are instances of heterosexual objectification, which is assumed to be a reaction to the attire worn by female players, the popular image of the outfits plays a role in elucidating the sexual, or feminine, *empowerment* of the skaters.

My research suggests that the playful outfits in derby, combined with the full-contact nature of the sport, spurs initial interest, as well as influences spectators' and players' understandings of gender, sexuality and culturally appropriate presentations of non-virtuous femininity. Respondents, either explicitly or implicitly, argued for a "correct" reading of derby attire, which allowed them to negotiate their own notions of acceptability and respectability for women generally and in derby specifically. Dress is a symbolic tool of communication with meaning that is culturally and historically located (Barnard 2002). Dress, as a signifier, is used to class and mark women as gendered, with implications as to whether they are seen as either respectably feminine or non-virtuous. The multitude of meanings given to dress in roller derby by audience members provokes the following questions, which are drawn from the literature review: Is the wearing of stereotypical roller derby attire representative of "new

displays of sexual power” (Hargreaves 1994: 167) by women athletes? Does the wearing of roller derby boutfits, as stereotypically defined, defy the gender norms which uphold the institution of heterosexuality, and does it objectify women in the sport? These questions will be addressed through the analysis in this chapter. I will discuss the ways in which even the more flamboyant dress in roller derby is justified and celebrated, when worn by women. Additionally, I will examine how the boutfits are interpreted as communicating a particular type of femininity and sexuality, which includes players’ depictions of unwanted sexual attention and spectators’ view that the sexual, feminine clothing is redefined in derby. Finally, I will analyse descriptions of violence, as it relates to dress in derby.

Prior to this analysis, however, it is important to recount the boutfits I saw during my field research. The assumption that all players wear skirts and fishnets may reflect some of the attire in the roller derby community, but is not representative of all players. I noted variations in dress across leagues and within teams themselves.<sup>82</sup> The Bay Area Derby Girls All-Star team is an example of some of the more uniform sportswear that I saw, with all players wearing shiny gold tights and all-black attire with gold writing. Other players, in various locations, sported volleyball type shorts, athletic trousers, knickers (with or without noticeable hosiery), and hot pants (some shiny or glittery), among other types of clothing. There may be regional differences in the type of attire to which spectators are exposed; for example, a spectator in Boston appreciated a tutu worn by a player, whereas a spectator in Oklahoma said that tutus would be unreasonable and had not seen players wear them. At RollerCon, the annual national roller derby convention, I saw the most divergent clothing<sup>83</sup> and in one case it was unmistakably symbolic. During the Strictly Dickly (read: heterosexual) versus Vagine Regime (read: queer) “Challenge” bout, which took place on the Fremont, the former main strip of Las Vegas, one player removed her Strictly Dickly shirt to reveal a Vagine Regime shirt, symbolically, and literally, switching sides. This level of tongue-in-cheek play was unusual, as it interferes with the

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<sup>82</sup> In 2008, I even witnessed a bout during which one player wore jeans.

<sup>83</sup> This may be because most skaters were not playing in bouts with their normal leagues or teams, and therefore did not have to adhere to a dress code. However, playing with one’s team does not mean the boutfits are uniform, as seen in Atlanta where there were specific colour schemes, but the boutfits were individualised.

game, but is illustrative of the variety of ways clothing acts as a symbol and is tied in with some of the humorous, or political, aspects of the roller derby community.



Image 6: Strictly Dickly (on left) versus Vagine Regime (on right) at Rollercon in 2009 (photo courtesy of Scott Suenram).

As revealed in discussions with respondents, dress is part of the spectacle of roller derby; the individualisation, uniqueness of the personalities, and creativity of the players are all indicative of the humour found in the sport. The spectacle is not necessarily sexualised, but can be used to entertain spectators until they understand roller derby's rules. These nonsexual interpretations of dress in roller derby should not be discounted, but the focus of this chapter is on the sexuality, and the melding of "toughness" with femininity, represented by derby dress, as indicated by spectators' responses to the clothing. The outfits that feature prominently in the interviews were the more stylized attire. The way the players' outfits were portrayed often isolated the more controversial articles of clothing, minimising, ignoring, or rendering invisible, the padding worn, as well as the attire more traditionally associated with athletics.

The sexuality presented in roller derby can be interpreted in a number of ways, both positive and negative, and include assertions of women's power and that players perceive some spectators as believing they have a licence to touch the skaters. Before discussing the hostile responses to the dress and women in derby, I

will first present the ways the dress was viewed as transformative, redefining or reclaiming femininity, and empowering.

### ***Respectability within Derby Culture: The Meaning of Dress and Femininity***

Briefly, I will outline the few discussions that occurred in which respondents emphasized the functionality of players' clothing, without acknowledging a sexualisation of the attire. Only one player (Eva) mentioned function in its simplest form in describing how an article of clothing affected her; she preferred to wear American football trousers partially because of their reliability: "I love that they stay on [laugh] and you don't find yourself standing on the jammer line wondering if the elastic waistband is still working out for you [laugh]." She also discussed the confusion of purchasing pads for an unfamiliar sport, which resulted in her attending her first practice with inadequate protection. Her pointed discussion on the functionality of dress was unusual amongst my respondents. Two other players mentioned safety equipment, but it was neither within a similar context nor to a great extent.<sup>84</sup> Mike was the only spectator to only mention padding, without alluding to any of the other articles of clothing typically discussed by respondents. Uniquely, he had not formulated any thoughts on the outfits in derby. Following a long pause when I asked about what players wore, he replied: "I don't know. I've never thought about it. It doesn't seem like they wear much padding." Others had more developed opinions, whether they said that the clothing was fun or had analysed the relationship of dress to the sport.

Although few respondents had a single focus on the functional aspects of garment choice, most spectators who functionalized attire acknowledged the sexualisation of the clothing; and sometimes functionalization was used to deflect associations with sexiness. For example, Shawn said the players "tend to wear rather tight outfits, but there's actual functionality to that." The language used suggests a defence of the dress and an assumption that function may not be recognised by others. Despite this, he did not intimate other purposes of the dress, like the display of sexuality or gender. He argued that hosiery was functional and

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<sup>84</sup> Claire and Deborah are the only other players to mention pads at all. Deborah discusses her knee pad in the context of a knee injury. Claire said "it's not easy getting out there and putting on pads and yeah you look pretty at the beginning, but it's not easy getting out there on pads and taking a hit and skating and keeping up with the pack."

worn to protect the players' skin. Other options, like trousers, which might provide better protection, were not evaluated. Instead, the more feminised or sexualised clothing choices were justified. Alva also defended the dress by highlighting the functional reasons why the players would choose a short skirt or shorts:

They can't really afford to have long sleeves, long pants. You know, it's hot. They're sweating; they're working out. You know, you don't want to wear [that] when you're in an indoor gym of some sort. So it's not as if they can wear "modest" clothing (Alva).

Alva not only emphasized the necessity of the potentially sexualised clothing, but, perhaps because of the league she watches, was seemingly ignorant of those who do choose to wear long athletic trousers when playing.

However, Chloe, a spectator, contrasted the amount and style of clothing with the abundance of padding worn by players who "don't look like they're very covered, but I know that they're covered more than most people realise. You have to protect your skin." Players may not appear to be wearing much, but with the visible protective gear, players are often more covered than in other athletic events. Members of one focus group (Julia, Corinna and Hallie) spent time debating why attire in roller derby was discussed differently from clothing in other women's sports. Hallie mentioned that derby girls wear "as much, if not more" than volleyball players, but that some criticise derby girls as scantily clad. Even Olympic level female gymnasts, and track and field athletes, may wear more revealing clothing than some derby players and a few respondents offered several possibilities for this differential treatment,<sup>85</sup> such as derby not being taken as seriously as other sports, viewed as less competitive and more humorous.<sup>86</sup> And, as Julia suggested, it is not necessarily the amount of clothing worn, but the type

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<sup>85</sup> Although discussed as differential treatment by the respondents, specifically Hallie, who says "we don't even question it" in other sports, this is not necessarily the case. For example, I detailed the controversial uniform decisions and proposals in volleyball, badminton and boxing in Chapter One. The proposed ruling that would have female badminton players wearing skirts sparked so much controversy that implementation was delayed (Longman 2011).

<sup>86</sup> Both Hallie and Daphne like the "light hearted" (Daphne) nature of derby, where players are focused and competitive, but "even when they were losing, it looked like they were still having fun" (Hallie). They acknowledged, however, that that could be a reason why others belittle roller derby.

of clothing, e.g. fishnets, that garners the attention of others. It is the fetishisation of certain articles of dress (skirts, fishnets) that may cause viewers to think they see less than is really there. Here the clothing is normalised; it is interpreted as necessary for the sport. Potentially, it is others who interpret the type of clothing worn as sexy.

Perhaps because of the protective attire,<sup>87</sup> or because of the type of sport that roller derby is, the boutfits in roller derby are interpreted differently from the sexualised uniforms worn in other women's sports. Carlson argues that unlike "traditionally feminine sports [...] skaters *remake femininity* by consciously integrating threatening aggression into feminine dress" (emphasis added; Carlson 2010: 434). The femininity displayed is interpreted differently within roller derby, as is the sexuality. Rather than being interpreted as overt sexual objectification, roller derby is sometimes distanced from other sports, and this differentiation emphasizes how spectators view boutfits as respectable within derby. For example, Chloe appears to deride beach volleyball because of the clothing, but distances roller derby from the same criticism by emphasizing the physicality required in derby and the creativity of players:

It's just fun to see women engaging in an activity where they don't have to be pretty. [...] Oh God, beach volleyball, they wear the skimpiest bikinis [...] [derby players] get out there and they're grunting and jabbing and really working hard and you can see it and it comes through in the emotion and the facial expressions. [...] That and there's the colourful costumes. And the individuality. Every- they're all in uniforms but they don't look the same. Every single girl looks different and so- so much personality comes through just the way they wear their team t-shirts. It's just amazing.

The contextualisation within a full-contact sport overrides associations with other sports where Chloe sees the women as just wearing "the skimpiest bikinis." Chloe acknowledges that some women in derby "wear skimpy cutesy clothes and

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<sup>87</sup> All skaters, according to WFTDA rules, are required to wear a gum shield (also known as a mouth guard), a helmet, knee and elbow pads, and wrist guards. Skaters may also choose to wear hip or derrière protection (padded shorts, etc) and a breast guard (also known as a turtle shell bra, which is worn by female boxers).

fishnets. [But] they're covering themselves with armour and padding so, again, it, it's a kind of more symbolic there too. It's, they're they're tough and they're feminine at the same time." She does not see the clothing as fetishised, but feminised. The contrast between the padding (tough, functional) and the outfits (feminine) influences Chloe's interpretation. Herbert also remarks that the clothing in derby would be viewed as "unlady like" [sic], and, "although derby outfits are down right modest compared to beach volleyball. Maybe it's the fishnets maybe it's the individualities to the uniforms," but for whatever reason, a friend "exclaimed" at a photograph of a derby girl: "she's not wearing any pants" (in email communication).

Although Carlson has argued that "skaters *remake femininity*" (2010: 434), Finley has described the "new femininity" as "heterosexually normative" (2010: 379). The femininity may be "new," but it also still functions to normalise and heterosexualise skaters. The femininity and sexualisation of the players culminate in their reception as not "wicked butch" but "normal people" (Sophia). However, while it appears "normative," some spectators distanced it from any assumption that players are promoting their heterosexual attractiveness to garner the interest of male spectators.

Although the extent to which the femininity is remade within roller derby is debatable, it is clear that the new femininity is not a passive femininity. As Ronald says, players wear what "makes them feel pretty," but the clothing also "seem[s] to make them look tough." Not only does the pairing of feminine dress with a vigorous full-contact sport blur the lines between femininity and masculinity, but the attire itself, as associated with a rugged femininity, blurs those lines as well. Interestingly, this feminine, tough dress is still seen as contradicting the masculine activity of the sport by spectators Virgil and Herbert, and not as a femininity that includes toughness. Instead masculinity and femininity are still juxtaposed as binaries, and by their contrast emphasize their mutual existence. Virgil describes the sport as an example of larger questions on gender, and discusses the sport as masculine, the dress as feminine, and wonders if the actions trump the feminine appearance:

[The dress] reminds me of their femininity and the juxtaposition between the notion of a feminine woman and a masculine kind of



activity. Um, that I think they're trying to bring into question. As to what my expectation is, is this a masculine activity? Is it a feminine [activity]? Is it a feminine person engaging in that as a masculine person in a feminine activity? How in the world is this happening?

Herbert explains how “there’s a very graceful thing to a girl being on skates, and you know, ice skating or roller skates, whatever. Just the sweetness of it. But at the same time, they can be brutal and like smack each other.” Without using the terms masculinity and femininity, Herbert describes this sweetness, in the “gracefulness” of skating and the “colourfully dressed women,” and brutality as coexisting, but still as “opposites.”

Half of the derby players interviewed described at least one contradiction between derby and femininity in either others’ perception or their own: some (Blanche and Margaret, Claire, Deborah) described how the actions in derby are, or are seen as, counter to traditional femininity and associated with “trashy” women (Selma, Betty) or “white trash” more specifically (Andrea).<sup>88</sup> Those who see derby as “trashy” would presumably not see the feminine attributes, displayed in outfits, as having any redeemable value. Instead, the femininity itself may be a “trashy” form of femininity, associated with the white working-class, and may be used to delegitimize the person’s whiteness.<sup>89</sup> To adopt femininity beneficially, one must appropriate the right kind of femininity for the community, as appropriate femininity varies depending on culture, race, ethnicity, and other social locations. As is the case with roller derby players, when women do not distance themselves from working-class femininity it “challenges the conventions of class and gender by flouting them, deliberately wearing outfits which risk association with the unrespectable or even the vulgar” (Storr 2002: 24). Therefore, female roller derby players who adopt a non-virtuous femininity work within the confines of femininity, but twisted through sport and risqué clothing to produce a different kind of femininity. If Skeggs’ work on femininity as a marketable asset is applied to the use of nonvirtuous femininity within roller derby, then it becomes more evident how different femininities function within different cultures.

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<sup>88</sup> Both Andrea and Selma described friends and family as becoming enlightened via watching modern roller derby, and the stigma was lessened or vanished completely.

<sup>89</sup> Whiteness, while in many ways privileged, can be broken into categories like “pure and dirty white” (Skeggs 2005: 972).

Subversive femininity may attain the benefits of its use as cultural capital, while unsettling the more orthodox appropriate femininity. Descriptions of roller derby players often include a mention of fishnets or punk culture, both described by Jeffreys as nothing new or revolutionary, but an appropriation of “the symbols of prostitution and harmful and constraining beauty practices” (2000: 417). However, appropriation of these symbols does not mean that the symbols are harmful, but rather how they are perceived and interpreted may be. The meanings attributed to dress change by culture and generation, amongst other things, and the reasons women wear the attire are also in a state of flux. The same dress that Jeffreys describes could be used in an ironic mimicry, as females in the punk subculture may take what is seen as sexy, but through its subversion they are “making it ugly” (Leblanc 1999: 2). Several respondents discussed how the meaning of dress was reconceptualised in modern roller derby. Importantly, the clothing was not perceived as being used to increase heterosexual attractiveness and, therefore, spectators’ understandings of particular articles of clothing also changed. Virgil argues that the dress in derby “provides a different” meaning than what he would formerly have associated with it. He equates the dress to that of Hooters’ waitresses, but the intent and related activities are different. In derby, the person in the dress is “engaged in something very hard hitting and very visceral.” The outfits are not worn for the purposes of selling derby with sexuality or “disingenuous flirting,” but instead is “action oriented,” functional in the sport, or because of their own comfort with their body (Virgil). Derby girls, as “action oriented,” are distinguished in their sexual presentation from the passive sexualised images of female athletes in magazines like *Playboy*. Additionally, if sexuality does sell the sport, that is not the intent of the dress. It is often considered a by-product of wearing clothing that is appropriately redefined by its contextualisation in modern roller derby.

All-female roller derby was considered by Ronald to be less about objectifying women’s bodies than the 1970s roller derby. In the 1970s, “they flaunted girls, girls in tight pants. ‘Oh, look at her, look at the hot chicks go around there’” (Ronald). Players are now in control of their image, and may wear certain outfits because of the punk aesthetic, the function, and also to “feel pretty.” Ronald’s analysis framed the players as acting for themselves, and not for others.

### **Skaters' Intent: "The difference between a burlesque show and a strip club"**

Intent was further discussed by both Richard and Chloe whose responses were informed by feminism. While both used similar rationalisations, the variations in their argument illuminate different feminist perspectives. Chloe scoffed at the idea that roller derby is burlesque on skates, and Richard aligned roller derby with burlesque in order to distance it from the idea that players are strippers on skates:

I never feel like they're playing up the uh burlesque or like um I guess like the campy sexualness of it, and if they go that way with it that's fine, and some of them do and that's great. [...] But at no point does it seem thrust upon or expected or like necessary. [...] It's kind of like the difference between like a burlesque show and like a strip club.

And so like I've been to burlesque shows where it's like a very inviting audience, and it's like a form of empowerment, like "I want to do this because I want to celebrate my sexuality or my gender" and stuff like that. And men can do that too, anyone can do that. But like a strip club, you know why you're going there. Like we're going to see naked women. At no point in the burlesque show does she have to get naked. Like it's not an expectation, we're not tossing dollar bills, we're not doing anything. Like strip clubs you're paying for one thing and one thing only. That's the best uh difference I can make there.

Both Richard and Chloe argue that the point of the attire is not to arouse sexual interest. Using the prioritisation of sport over spectacle, Chloe contends that feminism and roller derby are congruent, and that derby is not the new burlesque:

These girls, they may be gorgeous, they may be wearing short skirts, but they're not, they're involved in a sport – again – that I found has rules and guidelines, and scoring, and they're not- when they're trying to score points they're not thinking, "Gosh, I think, I think I got those guys over in that section really turned on." They're not thinking about how good they look. They're not thinking about getting a response- a sexual response from the audience. Whereas, what I know of

burlesque, what I get from burlesque is that's the whole point. Where roller derby is a sport. And these girls, that's their main concern.

However, by not wearing what some would expect for athletics, a few respondents, upon first attending a bout, were concerned that derby was not really a sport, but overshadowed by sexual display. Richard's initial reaction to roller derby was "'Oh God, what sort of soft core cheesecake show have I gotten myself into?' [...] Fishnets, and, you know, thigh highs and all, [...] I'm like, 'Oh God, is this just going to be women going in a circle and looking hot?'" Jenn was equally stunned upon entering the venue, but, despite their initial scepticism, both respondents found the outfits to be secondary to the sport. Richard's response was similar: "[it] turned out to, thankfully, be a sport and that's like the sexuality is completely a backseat to the rest of the action."

Richard was suspicious because the outfits connoted a meaning contradictory to a "real sport." The signification of fishnets was elaborated on in the focus group which included Penelope, James, and later, their daughter, Rose. Surprisingly, given the history of fishnets and the presumed socially unacceptable sexual woman,<sup>90</sup> Penelope associated fishnets, normally, as an attempt to dress in a way that was "considered 'socially appropriate'" for the purposes of attracting, even marrying, a heterosexual male. The objective of the dress was important to Penelope, who saw roller derby players as subversive in their use of fishnets and "appropriating the cultural stereotype" with an ironically humorous twist on a symbol of women's sexual objectification. Instead of reproducing a misogynist image of women, the players construct an image that "they control" within an athletic, and therefore assertive, context. Simply placing the fishnets in a nontraditional setting altered their meaning for these spectators. For example, James saw the pairing of padding with fishnets as significant: "When you combine fishnet stockings and chrome plated pointy motorcycle helmets, you, it's different." Peluso notes that the clothing is "reminiscent of a third wave feminist aesthetic [...] and] paired with 'masculinized' elements of fashion (e.g., shaved heads) and sporting gear (e.g., mouth guards and protective padding)," and argues

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<sup>90</sup> Although there have been periods when fishnets were fashionable, acceptable, and even mainstream, fishnets do have a history of signifying prostitution or punk.

that the meaning of the sexualised clothing changes when also donning masculine signifiers (2011: 43).<sup>91</sup>

But even if women attempt to appropriate fishnets in an empowering manner, fishnets are still “sexualised,” as the spectator Julia said. Julia drew parallels between derby players wearing fishnets and attempts to reclaim the word “bitch.” The participation in the process may be empowering and important to those involved, but the historical location of the word, or in this case dress, cannot be ignored:

Regardless of if a woman is wearing fishnet stockings because “Oh, they make me feel like a badass,” like the way, just the paradigm of women wearing them in society is such that, regardless, I mean- it’s like using the word bitch, right? Like women are taking back the word bitch but ultimately it still is used as a derogatory word about women and, but at least in this circumstance it’s not an outfit that’s chosen for them. Like they get to choose the outfit that they want to. And I think whether or not they’re successful, there is the intention of “I’m wearing this outfit because it makes me feel powerful, or it makes me feel you know, insert positive adjective here.” And their goal isn’t to attract a man. It is to, or whether they want to feel sexy or not, like the ultimate goal isn’t to get some guy.

If roller derby players cannot reclaim certain articles of clothing, they at least change their symbolism within derby.

Carlson, who examines the “female signifiant” in all-female roller derby also explains how clothing typically “associated with emphasized femininity,” like short skirts, “is subverted in roller derby as it is worn by women of all sizes engaged in full contact athletics” (2010: 435; see also Peluso 2011: 43). In other contexts, the outfits would be considered “sexualized clothing. [But] Fishnets are

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<sup>91</sup> Additionally, Jacob notes that by wearing “padding and helmets” with “the uniform and an aspect almost of cabaret [...] where you’ll have tassels or like torn up stockings [...] a name on the back and then a number, and I love the throwing out like the numbers [...] like it’s words or huge number or small number or quarter of a number, negative number [...] they take aspects of traditional sports and the gear, [...] identifying signifiers, and then [...] twisted it. You’ve made it like an aspect of pageantry.” It, therefore, becomes a sport that “takes itself seriously” while not taking “itself too seriously.” Therefore, not only does the meaning of sexualised attire change, but so does the meaning of sport attire.

ripped, uniforms are printed with skaters' menacing names, lifted skirts reveal panties printed with words like 'Fuck your mom!'" (2010: 435) and all is worn with protective attire. These types of transformations of sexualised clothing are described by my respondents as lending credence to derby's affiliation with punk, but can also be noted as complicating "emphasized femininity," as discussed by Carlson. Additionally, the players were perceived by my respondents as dressing for themselves and not a [heterosexual] male audience. Breeze also notes, from her "experience, many skaters reject the idea that they dress in a feminine or sexy manner when they play [...] Instead, they assert the functionality of their outfits and especially reject the idea that they dress in any particular way for a, real or imagined, male audience" (2010: 126). The outfits can be feminine or sexy without being for the audience, and while there is a move to more traditional sportswear in derby, I wonder if Breeze's assertion, that "many" deny femininity or sexuality in outfits, is too strong. Either way, this emphasizes that the dress is for the players, and the matter of intent is important in understanding conscious adaptations of clothing, previously interpreted as feminine or sexy, amongst players and its uses within the sport.

Even if *players* do not define their clothing as sexy or feminine, spectators may. In Andrea's case, fans liked her "because I skated in my panties." She does not condemn spectators for their attraction to her because of her attire alone; she is rather indifferent to the reasons spectators like her. She chooses to wear her outfit and is entertained by her own knicker decorations, which have included a marijuana leaf patch, a gun, and labelling herself a M.I.L.F. (Mother I'd Like to Fuck). Having M.I.L.F. on one's exposed knickers while playing a sport may not be "acceptable" femininity, but it does highlight her as a mother (generally read as heterosexual, even if not an accurate interpretation) and markets her as sexually available (or whoever the "I" is in M.I.L.F. hopes that she is sexually available).<sup>92</sup> Femininity and heterosexual attractiveness are still marketable assets within this redefined, non-virtuous, femininity. Even with a different knicker decoration than M.I.L.F., skating in her knickers still marks her as a woman.

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<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, as hers is the outfit I choose to discuss, Andrea said that there are "women's rights advocates who often get on us because of what we wear when we're playing derby."

## **Projecting and Negotiating Femininity**

Even though spectators predominantly saw femininity and sexuality within roller derby as different from that demonstrated in other women's sports, there was still some discussion of a normative projection of femininity, not in physical demonstrations, but in dress. For example, Heather speculated that players may wear skirts because of a desire to "project a more feminine image." Heather did not favour the sport because of the femininity; however, Julia, also a spectator, suggested that affirmation of femininity in sport was important to her because it showed that women who participate in sport do not have to be masculine: "One of the things I like about roller derby is like, [the] femininity, in maybe not a stereotypically sense, but it's celebrated. [...] The women are wearing dresses, and they're wearing make-up." Although there are variations of dress, it was the feminine outfits that were discussed more frequently by spectators. And, with the possible exception of Eva, all of the players interviewed described attire clearly marked as feminine, or as having an association with women. While it may be that this presentation shows that all types of women, including those who dress in a feminine manner, can participate in sport, at no point did spectators discuss how great it was to see "masculine women" on skates. These women were invisible in my data, but there was a discussion about the lack of masculinity amongst players. It appears that those I interviewed were more interested in the feminine, and/or sexual, attire and showing that feminine-appearing women can be athletes.

Two players, Deborah and Betty, were both aware of, and detailed, their strategic manipulation of their self-presentation to ensure that their bodies communicate that they are feminine women. These respondents used their hair as a symbol of femininity; though the players wear helmets, the visibility of their hair was important to them. Deborah said that "it's one of those things about playing up the femininity, getting in touch with your feminine side. Because I have my long hair down and people see that I have long hair, I guess, like a girl." Hair is not just a marker of femininity, but a way visually to assure the audience that she is, indeed, a woman.

Betty viewed derby as a site where she could combine femininity and masculinity. When she played derby, she "really preferred to wear a skirt over

anything else. And I've got long hair, I always wear my hair in braids, and so just sort of, I mean, there's kind of something about roller derby that I think most of the women, I don't know if you could ever really mistake anybody for a guy." She continues by saying that "you're doing something sort of rough, but really feminine, at the same time. Because you're surrounded by women, it's a women's sport, so how could you not feel feminine when you do it?" She conflates femininity with being a woman, not just for her, but for all derby players. Interestingly, she addresses femininity overtly, but, like all other players interviewed, did not use the word "masculine" or "masculinity." Instead, she either did not see playing the sport and feeling feminine as a clash between masculinity and femininity, or she relied on code words for masculinity to explain the differences between the two. However, both of my assumptions rely on binary gender divisions. While "strong" and "tough" are often considered to be masculine qualities, there is no reason as to why this has to be the case in spectators' understandings of roller derby. Perhaps spectators are not thinking in binary terms, but are instead incorporating what was once considered masculine into a version of femininity celebrated within roller derby.

Deborah's language brings together attributes that were once antithetical to emphasized femininity, like toughness and strength, into the femininity she presents on track. Players "can be strong and tough but feminine at the same time; like you don't have to compromise either" (Deborah). Similarly, Betty constructed the sport as a rough but feminine. Julia emphasized that it was the "lack of masculinity" in roller derby that was important to her, and, again, attributes that would have traditionally been contrasted with femininity are found to coexist unproblematically: "I don't think that there was necessarily anything masculine about any of the women there tonight even though some of them were very big and very strong and very powerful." If big, strong and powerful are no longer categorised as masculine traits, then something new is emerging in the way the genders, once binary opposites that privileged masculinity, are constructed, performed and perceived. Or the physical appearance of the women, in feminine attire, may outweigh their behaviours.

Claire was most specific in describing the opportunity to dress as feminine, act as "tomboy," and somehow strike a balance: "Roller derby kind of allows you to be feminine and then be [a] girl and still kind of be taken seriously as an



athlete, as a leader, or however you want to look at it. So, it just, it was like oh, and since I'm tomboyish, it was just like 'Huh, so I could kick ass, and I could wear a skirt and [inaudible] lipstick.'" Claire references a societal construction that juxtaposes athlete and girl. Like being too masculine, being too feminine has its risks for an athlete, and may be used to justify objectifying sexualisation of the players. If one is too feminine, one's credibility as an athlete (read: masculine) is diminished. Dakota Prosch, a player for the Windy City Rollers of Chicago, was quoted by Paul Wachter (2009), of *The New York Times*, as saying "Roller derby's become less of a kitschy, girly thing and become a serious sport." Whether intended or not, this statement also utilises the term 'girly' as a descriptive criticism of the way in which all-female roller derby has previously portrayed itself. This "intragender maneuvering" is discussed by Finley, who argues that, among the skaters, "their alternative construction of femininity devalues particular elements of hegemonic femininity that are used to uphold male dominance" (Finley 2010: 379-380). This argument is particularly applicable when derby players protest apologetic femininity by refusing to say that they are sorry, or when they ridicule passive femininity. However, Prosch creates a gulf between being athletic and "girly" (or feminine). This implies that a sport that reinterprets physical activity and feminine flamboyance in dress may be denied classification as a real sport, with spectators viewing it as too much of a contradiction. This was not the case with any of the spectators that I interviewed,<sup>93</sup> even when sexualisation of the players occurred; although, any supposition that the dress was too feminine may have been countered by its association with toughness.

These new associations with the clothing may only work because of the type of community that is interpreting them. As outsiders to the culture are introduced to roller derby through mainstream media, new expectations of dress, understandings of beauty, and acceptability may arise. Deborah worried that the movie *Whip It!* would bring in an audience with highly gendered, appearance-based expectations:

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<sup>93</sup> Only one respondent described the *potential* for female roller derby outfits to move beyond reasonability for sport, and become too humorously feminine. Ronald said players wearing "pink tutus" would be too humorous, and his current associations of derby attire with "punk rock" and toughness would be lost.

[I'm] afraid that that they'll come and expect to see lots of hot roller girls that are going to look like Drew Barrymore and Ellen Page and all these like gorgeous movie stars and we're just normal people. So we're not going to quite meet their expectations. And unfortunately, as a woman, like that's something that we have to worry about, you know, that they're going to think that we're not attractive enough.

Deborah does not say roller derby participants should alter their appearance to accommodate these spectators. Instead, she believes that potential spectators may be drawn to the Hollywood version of roller derby initially, but also, as she said later, they will then enjoy the sport played by “normal people” and become repeat audience members.

Conversely, the derby community has debated whether individualised “sexual” or theatrical dress delegitimizes the sport, particularly when competing at a national level; however, derby's stylized dress has value for those players and spectators who enjoy the “spectacle” as part of the sport. Andrea explained that she chooses her outfit based on implied notions of acceptability, which changes depending on her location:

When I play WFTDA on a national level I don't skate in the panties, I don't wear what I would normally skate in. Our uniforms are much more sport like, you know a lot of teams wear volleyball jerseys. [...] Yeah at that level definitely there's a change in the outfits. Girls wear less makeup than before, but when she skates for her home team she skates with a lot of blood on her face, but she doesn't [...] at a national tournament. [...] I could still skate in my panties at the national level, but I, as someone who really cares about the sport and where it's going, I don't want to do anything to harm it and I want to make sure that it continues to grow so [...] at that [national] level, everybody emphasizes more of the sport [...] but at home, [...] I enjoy the spectacle part of it; I enjoy playing to the crowd, that's fun to me, playing to the crowd.

Players are aware of the meanings attributed to dress, and may take into account their own spectators', as well as others', interests when choosing their clothing before a bout. Therefore, Andrea's discussion of her outfits indicates that what I viewed during my field research may not be representative of what players would always wear. Deborah also saw a shift in clothing becoming more uniform at the national level, and, according to Claire and Calvin, some local circuits also have outfits that are aligning closer to conventional, or more masculine, sportswear. Additionally, Herbert said there are fewer "personal touches" to the outfits; there is still variation, but it is becoming more uniform. If players alter their outfits depending on location, are they feeling pressured to dress one way or another? Andrea suggested that to count as a serious sport, one must adopt masculine uniforms, or at least clothing not overtly feminine, sexualised, or associated with a "spectacle."



Image 7: Jack Attack jams for Team England, wearing theatrical-style make-up at the World Cup (photo courtesy of Jason Ruffell).

Although some reject feminine outfits for more mainstreamed, masculine sportswear, the femininity that is displayed is often reconfigured to present a revamped, punkish, tough femininity that allows for spectators and players to, at times, rationalise dress in derby as acceptable for this subculture. Even within non-traditional activities, like derby, participants clearly define certain behaviour as appropriate or inappropriate within their own community. Some behaviour is

still privileged, even if it is within a different hierarchal schema from that of mainstream society. Both Carlson (2010) and Finley (2010) note the degradation of certain types of femininity within the roller derby community. In what was described by Andrea, this extends to a de-gendering of the attire when playing in national competitions that contribute to the perception of the sport as legitimate.

An individual player's location within larger society, outside roller derby, may also influence what they deem to be appropriate. She may take advantage of roller derby as an opportunity to be free from workplace constraints. Two roller derby players, coincidentally (or perhaps notably) teachers, navigated respectability in their dress. Caitlyn vaguely distinguished between appropriate and inappropriate attire:

Caitlyn: I wore fishnets and a skirt and you know had writing on my butt but, on my actual underwear, um, but no, like I won't.... I won't be wearing anything like really like naughty. It would be, it'll be fun but not not-

Q: What's naughty?

Caitlyn: Well, like some of the girls are just wearing like really panties and so butt cheek shows and, which is fine if they want their butt cheek to show, but I don't want my butt cheek to show.

This distinction between "fun" or sexy and "naughty" means disavowing certain styles to prevent association with the non-virtuous. Madeline's discussion of how players do not dress "sleazy," but "respectably" is another example of attempts to differentiate among types of sexiness. Madeline believed that this differentiation is what keeps roller derby from being something where [heterosexual] "guys like [are] wanting to get out there on the track with them."

External pressures influenced Caitlyn's derby dress; she aimed to maintain respectability to avoid any threats to her job as a high school teacher and feared the reaction of the administration if someone declared that she is "hanging out with strippers that are on skates." Dorothy, another teacher, did not fear punishment, but alluded to different presentations of self in varying contexts:

“I’m a teacher and you’re supposed to have this kind of um, you know, respect and this could kind of being this alter ego and you know wear sexy things that I’ve never worn before, and it’s just really a lot of fun.” For these players, as well as Eva, Betty, Deborah and, to a certain extent, Claire and Blanche, derby provides an opportunity to dress in a way distinct from their normal appearance. A few spectators also saw derby as an opportunity to dress up, both for the players and the spectators themselves. One spectator, Olive, regarded derby as a safe space to express oneself through dress: “it’s kind of like ‘Oh, I’ve always wanted to dress like this but it’s not really socially acceptable to walk down the street like this. But as a roller girl, I can do whatever I want.’” The identity and community of roller girls provided protection and the bout provides a venue. Both Vivien and Calvin value derby as an accepting community in otherwise oppressive cultures, countering homophobia and norms of the “Bible Belt” respectively, where players and spectators may dress as they choose.

Individual choice and agency in derby are contested by Jodi Cohen (2008) who, in her ethnographic study, argues that there were pressures to dress provocatively within the league she joined. This was not reflected in my research, but cannot be discounted as a possibility. What was apparent were the ways in which many in the roller derby community had been pressured into adapting more mainstream sports attire in an attempt to gain credit as a “real sport.” To further confuse matters of choice, players may subconsciously, or even consciously, choose sexual dress to sell the sport, as derby is located in a culture that rewards sex in advertising. This may also influence fundraising choices. Caitlyn discussed her discomfort with her league’s proposed fundraiser of applesauce wrestling because the activity connotes the image of scantily clad women. She would, unhappily, compromise her dress to match presumed expectations for fear that if people attended the fundraiser and saw “fully clothed girls, they might walk right back out the door.” She would, despite her unease, consider acquiescing to spectator’s perceived demands. No players discussed this relative to how they chose to dress in derby, but there is no way of knowing to what extent subtle, or overt, cultural conditioning impacts on individual choices, even though many respondents believe that players are rewarded when they dress, or act, in particular ways.

Even if the players are adopting dress that fits within the parameter of emphasized femininity, or marks them as women, new meanings may still be attributed to femininity because the clothes are worn by athletes in a full-contact sport and include a celebration that sexiness exists in women of all sizes. Although Jeffreys (2000) condemns the use of any beauty practices, in some cases appeals to beauty can be revolutionary, as in the liberating and political slogan “black is beautiful” (Craig 2006). For dress to be revolutionary, does it have to be deliberately political or about personal choice? Even if one recognises the benefits of the dress in promotion of the sport, there may also be individual reasons why certain outfits are chosen by derby players and why they can find them empowering.

My findings suggest that the femininity on display in all-female roller derby may adopt some hegemonic aspects, but because of the combination with toughness, it is perceived differently by spectators. The combination does not necessarily interfere with the recognition of roller derby as a sport. The association of dress with a punk rock subculture reconstructs femininity, giving women some flexibility in their presentation of gender.

Others, like spectators Olive and Penelope and player Dorothy, appreciated that athletic women are recognised as sexy, without pandering to western ideals of heteropolarity:

I think the mainstream might expect the roller derby as being a series of meaningless cat fights with skinny-supermodel-like women (the conventional definition of female sexy-ness), solely being performed to entice the straight male audience. [...] They are sexy, not because they are these fragile Barbie dolls fighting daintily with each other, but because they are comfortable in their own skin no matter their body type, and they are perfectly capable and athletic, assertive women competing in a skillful game (Olive, in email communication).

Penelope described the evolving meaning of the previously masculine term “jock” for women; in roller derby there is “this whole definition where you can be this athlete and yet be very sexual and aggressive athlete.” This presentation of the acceptable athlete, however, seems to be contingent on their reception as sexy.

Although Penelope saw this as a positive expansion to include more women, it is possible that it also creates new restrictions for women's performance, or maintains the same ties to heteronormativity; the women's activity is linked, in these examples, to new understandings of sexiness as a demonstration of their empowerment, instead of focusing solely on athleticism as empowering in itself.<sup>94</sup> Derby is seen as allowing a re-evaluation of the concepts of femininity and beauty, incorporating strong women into these ideals.

This incorporation may prove a challenge, as Marilyn explains the importance of providing appropriate information for the media: "explaining it in a sports way, not just talking about the fishnets and the shorty shorts and all that. Breaking it down in actual sporting terms so that we sound like real athletes, which we are." Sexualised clothing may not be seen as a characteristic of "real athletes," but female athletes are often expected to perform femininity (Kolnes 1995). However, femininity, either virtuous or non-virtuous, is counter to ideals of athleticism which values masculinity. It is the meanings attributed to the category of "derby girl" that may detract from their athleticism, as indicated by Deborah who embraced the femininity and the flare of the outfits, but wanted them distanced from objectification: "it's only right that people should think of us athletes first, and not like derby girl." Here, "derby girl" may describe the individual's membership to the subculture, but not their value as athletes.

This separation, where derby players are assumed to occupy a space distinct from athletes, is beneficial in including individuals who would not typically identify with the concept, or category, of athlete:

There are people like me who used to play sports [...] but there are also so many people who didn't like playing sports. [...] Yet they found this game. [...] And they decide that they like roller derby. They are so enthusiastic; they are coming in three and four times a week and doing wind sprints. [...] Whatever it is about roller derby that soccer and basketball and tee ball and whatever other games [do not have ...] without the names and probably the clothes and maybe the after parties per se, but the whole spirit of international and national roller derby. [...] We would start to miss those women who

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<sup>94</sup> Penelope did discuss the importance of women's athletics in and of itself as well.

weren't trying to be athletes, but just wanted to be roller girls, and became athletes in the process (Eva).

The label "roller girl" has a greater, and different, meaning for these players than the label "athlete" and, at least initially, it was the identity of a roller girl that sparked their interest.

Some spectators did not distinguish the derby girl from an athlete; even if they did discuss some unusual aspects of the derby girl in comparison to traditional athletes, they emphasized the athletic nature. Ronald acknowledged the clothing can be sexualised, but said: "I see pure athletes. I see girls who can skate their ass off, who are tougher than nails. I see, I guess I see pure talent." Mike, as well, stressed that the "players are athletes; there's no question about that." The subcultural aspects of derby, such as the clothing, did not detract from the athletic nature of the sport. It is, no doubt, a sport with a twist, "a, female sport that is kind of tongue and cheek [sic], kind of funny, like the names and the, you know, what people wear and all that stuff, but that's [with] serious athletes" (Vivien). Aaron used an aspect of the derby subculture to bind derby to traditional athletics. For him, the pseudonyms make the players seem like "a football player, like a big time athlete." This twist, though, might cause some spectators to question their seriousness: "I get a sense that they're serious athletes, but they don't take themselves so seriously that they that they're like mean competitive" (Heather). That one must be "mean competitive" to prove their seriousness as an athlete reflects the masculine standard in sport.

### **Queering Derby: How Men Dress for Sport**

However, spectator discussions of male players' outfits in roller derby were more complicated, and, in some cases, restrictive. The risks associated with being seen as too feminine are amplified if the athlete is male. Although the dress for women was still associated with punk, when worn by men, it was no longer interpreted as displaying toughness. Notably, only one of the spectators who discussed dress in men's derby had ever actually seen men play; although others had seen men as referees or coaches. Still, a few approached the idea of men in roller derby as humorous because of the idea that they would don the same attire as in all-female roller derby. Olive and Kate both described the dress as "silly" for



men and said it would take away from the seriousness of the sport. Neither was particularly interested in attending a male bout. Olive appreciated men's derby as a "novelty" but specified that she was uninterested in a "serious male bout," and Kate described men's derby negatively, if feminine dress were worn, as "more silly than serious." I met Kate on the Freemont during a roller derby challenge bout, where one of the male referees was wearing sparkly hot pants, which she found amusing as side-line entertainment, but ridiculous if imagined as the main event. Her lack of interest in men's roller derby was rooted in the meanings she attributed to the dress when worn by men; however, hot pants on women were not an issue. She viewed the outfits as "entertaining" but secondary to the sport. Unlike masculine attributes in women's sports, femininity in men's sports was indicative of less skill and value as a "real sport." The perceived gender conflict in men choosing to wear attire associated with women is illustrated by Clyde, who described a particular referee: "He's the ref; he comes out in a skirt [laugh]. He's like reffing in a skirt and he's a man, you know. I don't know what's up with that. But he's really nice." It did not alter Clyde's feelings towards roller derby, but it was obviously an anomaly for him. His laughter, the reassertion of the referee's maleness, and the quizzical reaction all emphasize the rarity, and queerness, of this association for him.

What the men choose to wear did not influence whether Charlotte and Patrick would attend an all-male derby, but they approached the concept of men's derby with humour:

Charlotte: Do they wear the short skirts? [laugh]

Q: Would that make a difference?

Charlotte: No, it wouldn't.

Patrick: If they were in pigtails and push-up bras, I would absolutely go.

Charlotte: No, I just wanted to know if they had the same advertisements on their bottom,<sup>[95]</sup> [both laugh] ‘cause that would be kind of hard to do for boys.

The dress they describe is acceptable for women, approached without humour in the interview when describing women and even applauded by Charlotte as a symbol of the confidence that she wishes to attain, but the notion of men in the dress is viewed as ridiculous because skirts, push-up bras, and advertisements on one’s derriere are all sexualised and gendered images.

Although respondents were not critical of the women’s dress, their opinion shifted when the same garments were imagined on men. As Tseëlon explains, a man dressing femininely “is funny, because of the loss of status displayed” (1995: 90). Finley, in her ethnographic study of women’s roller derby, described the crowd reaction to men “acting as supportive ‘cheerleaders,’ sometimes with an obvious intention to mock the gender relations of traditional sports” (2010: 375), for example, by dressing in skirts. Finley argues that it is “difficult to interpret whether some of the humor of the masculine performance by men challenged or reinforced gender relations” (2010: 375). At least in the cases described, spectators’ responses seemed to reinforce gender divisions. Similarly, men’s growing participation in netball, a “women’s” sport since its existence began as a modified version of men’s basketball and associated with a skirt as a uniform, has been ridiculed by imagery which mocks feminine clothing on men and thus “could be read as a parody of all men who choose to participate in ‘feminine’ activities such as netball” (Tagg 2008: 415). Amongst other examples, Tagg cites the practice in New Zealand of men dressing in drag to “perform a spoof ballet at capping shows and ruby matches” as directly associating “men’s interest in stereotypically female activities and men’s desire to dress in women’s clothing” (415). Perhaps an equivalent practice exists in the United States with “Powderpuff Football,” where women play, typically, flag or touch American football, and men dress as “female” cheerleaders.

Despite the convention that men in women’s clothing is a means to trivialise their participation in women’s sport, and the sport itself, a prerequisite

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<sup>95</sup> The league they watch used to sell advertisements on the knickers they wore during bouts.

for James and Penelope to attend a men's roller derby bout is that the men would continue performing in line with the women's "sense of sexuality." Sexuality was a key theme in this particular focus group, which saw dress and pseudonyms as a way of communicating empowering sexuality that queered traditional notions of the "weak woman." This same queering would be essential if they were to support men's derby:

James: I don't know [if I would attend a men's derby]. It depends on what it would be like. I don't know. Would it- are men's leagues, like, do they present as gay? I'm curious. I mean if it was, if it just became like you know a bunch of like standard male speed skaters doing roller derby it would probably be a little boring.

Q: But if they presented as gay?

James: If it was done sort of - they had the same sort of culture.

Penelope: If they had a sense of sexuality just a little.

James: [The] same cultural stuff going on [as the women], it would just be as fun. Yeah.

The respondents assumed a gendered norm in their mention of gayness, and wanted men's derby to continue the same political theme they saw in women's derby, where gender norms, from their perspective, become problematised – partly through their use of dress. Similarly, Hallie would only watch if the men in derby were gay because then "they would bring their own charm of femininity to it." Dress is such an integral part of roller derby, for these spectators, that it is difficult to imagine the sport without the same "cultural play" (James); even though the dress is not part of the sport, as such, it is an important part of the attraction for many spectators. The dress, particularly for Penelope and James, made the sport a political commentary as well. It was difficult to imagine spectators asking why men in beach volleyball do not wear two-piece bikinis, but playful outfits in roller derby are seen as so integral to the sport that some respondents seemed to find it difficult to imagine roller derby without the sense of

feminine camp in dress. In some ways, spectators' responses to men as derby players illustrates that the outfits are only transformative for women; therefore, some respondents used dress to reify gender division.

### ***“Watching Women in Hot Pants Hit Each Other”***

The dress in derby is further complicated because of derby's stereotype as a violent sport. While not directly asked, several respondents broached the subject of violence and dress on their own, by explaining how they sell, or why they are interested in, roller derby. Dress was not explicitly related to violence; however, Tammy Oler, writer for *Bitch* magazine, has expressed concerns about the physical hits between women in derby when players wear “bad-gal costumes” (2008: np), and its subsequent eroticisation by the [heterosexual] male audience. The full-contact nature of roller derby in particular has not been analysed extensively, nor has the cultural phenomenon of the “chick fight” and “cat fight.”

The meaning of the dress, in relation to “fights” in roller derby, shifts as spectators describe not just the violence or the outfits, but how the combination of the two influence their enjoyment of roller derby. Roller derby is not inherently a violent sport, but a full-contact sport that follows rules of appropriate contact. For example, fist fights are not allowed in WFTDA sanctioned bouts; although fights still occur in some non-WFTDA leagues. However, Blanche and Margaret's league stages fist fights “*because our crowd loves it*” (emphasis added; Blanche). While Margaret says that this is because wrestling is popular amongst their community members, Blanche stereotypes their audience: “we have mostly Hispanic people that are there, which is a male dominated culture. And they love it. If we don't have a fight they're like ‘what's going on?’” Neither of these players suggests that *they* actually enjoyed fighting; they performed for the audience. While performance is part of any spectator sport, it, nevertheless, does not typically impede the actual play in competitive sport, whereas fighting does. Even if fights are part of the performance, they are both contentious and gendered. Patrick assumed that my feminist identification meant that I would be asking respondents “horrible questions.” For example, “why do you participate in the objectification of women and violence; they're marketing on their rear ends?”

Even when contact is controlled, spectators often equate it with violence, so when discussing leagues that are known not to participate in fist fights, a few spectators described roller derby as “violent,” and did connect the violence to the dress. Caitlyn, and spectators Daphne and Mia, assumed that it is the combination of violence and sexualised dress that is a draw for [heterosexual] men. Mia said “I think most people initially think, ‘Oh great, girls beating each other up on roller skates.’ And most people I think initially would say: ‘Cool; that sounds like fun.’ Especially guys”; she associates men’s reaction to roller derby with their reaction to “mud wrestling. They think that’s hot. Girls fighting is a hot *thing*” (emphasis added). The attraction is difficult to describe, but such an assumed social construct that it is simply acknowledged as a “thing”: “but for say straight men, maybe it’s like ‘Ohhh, girls, yeah.’ You know, I mean that already is like *a thing*. And then them being all aggressive and stuff like it’s ‘Ohh, that’s even cooler’” (emphasis added; Olive). It was not just a draw for [heterosexual] men, however, as Caitlyn’s introduction to roller derby was when she saw posters that “had girls on these quad skates, looking like they were beating each other up.” The image of women “beating each other up” on skates was a draw for Caitlyn before she played derby, but she still associates the dress and fighting with [heterosexual] men’s interest in roller derby: “there’s a poster with two chicks fighting. [laugh] I could see how that would be a little intriguing for guys, see some various scantily dressed ladies beating up on each other.” Alva did not explicitly describe violence in connection with the dress, but she did assume that “there’s a lot of guys that come because of girls in skimpy clothing slamming into each other. So it’s not, I feel like it’s not respected for the endurance and the talent that some of these women have.” It is scantily clad women in a full-contact sport that is presumed to encourage the [heterosexual] men to attend. If one component or another was missing, the reaction may not be the same.

Aaron claims that his interest in roller derby is “not necessarily a sexual thing” when pressed, but his original statement suggests eroticism is a component: “I guess I might be a bit of a guy here. But you know, girls in tight shorts hitting each other sounds kind of like an aspect that I would like.” He assumes that all men (“a bit of a guy”) would be interested in viewing “girls in tight shorts” while engaged in acts of aggression and then distances himself from this statement when he could not explain why this would be of interest. After Sophia describes the

importance of an all-female sport for her, her partner, Tanner, is asked by me: “Is there something about an all-women’s sport that has an impact on you as a spectator?” Tanner replies “other than enjoying watching women in hot pants hit each other?” and volunteers it as his selling point to potential male spectators. His female companion (Sophia) advertises derby in a similar way “Like girls on roller skates and fishnets hitting each other, that’s, it’s roller derby. [...] But usually, the ‘in fishnets hitting each other’ thing, people like violence.” This is not just advertising violence, but advertising a sexualised and gendered violence.

Others found that roller derby was not as violent or lawless as they expected. Ellie, Julia, and Carey were disappointed in the lack of violence in derby. Still, Jenn found it to be “violent enough” and Drew, Brent, and Virgil, used language portraying derby as a violent sport. Some others who did not say explicitly that derby is violent still used violent imagery, like Olive who described derby as “girls and they like to beat each other up.” Hip and shoulder checks are not exactly beating someone up, and Deborah, as a player, tried to distance herself from the association of roller derby with violence, perpetuated by people who do not understand roller derby. Even Blanche and Margaret, whose league stages fights, did not appreciate derby, or themselves, being associated with violence.

It is unusual to see women with black eyes and visible physical injuries, except in the context of domestic violence. The *East Bay Express*, a weekly in the San Francisco Bay Area, even published an online article by Rachel Swan on roller derby with the subtitle “In Bay Area roller derby, ‘domestic violence’ gets a third-wave feminist spin” (2008: np). “Injured women” were positioned as victims, and often passive recipients of the injury. Injuries in roller derby were caused by their participation in the sport; they were actively engaged in a way that runs the risk of injury. Injuries are a sign of their activities, a battle scar that represents their hard work. Battle scars are common for men in sport, and in roller derby it is no different. Derby bruises are a badge of honour, as seen in Facebook groups dedicated to bruise photographs, advertisements and merchandise that include women with black eyes or bruised behinds, and my own teammates’ naming their larger bruises, sometimes after the player who gave it to them.

Strangely, few broached the complications in honouring images of bruised and battered women, considering the oddity of proudly displaying images of women with bruises. Only one derby player problematised the focus on injuries in

derby within a larger context (Eva), while another (Blanche) posed the question of what it means for empowerment. Chloe, a spectator, differentiated the injuries in derby from domestic violence by distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate forms of contact:

I can't remember who told me the quote first, but I kind of got a kick out of it even though, you know, violence against women is again very common in our society, but the line was "Roller derby isn't about knocking the girls in fishnets down, it's about knowing when to knock the girls in fishnets down" and that stuck with me because, I thought, that's just kind of funny. [laugh] Like it's okay, in this connotation, in this instance, you're supposed to [laugh] but she might also knock you down. [laugh] Yeah. It's all fair.

Again, note the association between physical contact and clothing; it is not just about hitting players, but players in fishnets. She also saw derby girls as capable of injuring others, as well as being injured; therefore, women in derby were not victimised. Carlson studied three teams within the Nowhere Roller Derby league<sup>96</sup> and described their team photographs as follows:

many skaters hold weapons, show off actual bruises and/or wear make-up simulating bloody noses, missing teeth, and other injuries [...] While women marred with bruises and blood are usually represented as victims rather than aggressors, these skaters clearly signify themselves as active participants in their injuries insofar as they brandish weapons [...] Thus, emphasized femininity becomes scrambled as skaters juxtapose antithetical attributes, namely, emphasized femininity (indicated by short skirts, bras, and panties) and aggression (i.e., weaponry and injuries (Carlson 2010: 433).

These images present injured skaters in different ways, and like Chloe argues, show that derby girls are active participants in getting their injuries and that it is not inflicted upon them by an abuser.

Blanche approached the role of hitting women in derby similarly. She believes derby is empowering and upon questioning what empowerment means she asks: "Is empowerment hitting someone else? Is that empowerment? [...]"

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<sup>96</sup> This is the pseudonym given to the league by Carlson.

that's what I don't want, because people are like, 'What, you feel empowered because you get to beat people up?'" In Blanche's league, they stage fights, but she contextually defends these actions in roller derby as appropriate, since the players are in "control" of themselves. While Blanche acknowledges the potential conflict between hitting others and empowerment, there is no discussion of what it may mean that they are hitting other women in a society that still fights to eradicate violence against women.

Players in Eva's league emphasized the importance of moving away from representations of roller derby players as injured women and analysed why certain images could sexualise violence. Part of combating this was distancing derby from the idea that injuries are unique to the sport. They emphasized that injuries can occur in any physical activity, and were aware of the dangers of focusing too much on injuries in an all-female, gendered, sport:

We do play a game that is physical, and we do promote both the physicalness [sic] and the sexuality that comes with physical nature and that kind of thing, but we toe a line between um, girls who are aggressive and assertive and physical being sexy, and girls who are beat up being sexy, and the image of battered women as sexy is not our intent, but we do walk a little bit close to it. Like we have posters of girls with black eyes and bruises on their butts and it, it is what it is. And truthfully, we like it, I mean, it is something we're proud of. When you take home a really big shiner and like this, I'm playing this game, but we don't want to sexualise the idea of battered women and while it's not a direct connection, it is an indirect connection that we need to be aware of, like the injury and the bruise, and that's not all of our image, that's not the only thing that we want to project and the idea that it's a real sport if you break your leg, playing it is really not a healthy one, or really some, I mean truly that's not what we're trying to do, at all (Eva).

Eva's league has thoughtfully examined how images of women with injuries in roller derby may be perceived. They are concerned with the glamorisation and sexualisation of women's injured bodies, which can be seen in some media



portrayals. For example, in advertising the roller derby movie *Whip It!*, Drew Barrymore poses holding a bag of ice held to her face, while hues of purple and pink eye shadow give the illusion of a black eye. The caption for the picture in *The Daily Mail* is “Battered and bruised: Roller derby is a messy game, but someone’s got to do it” (*The Daily Mail* 2009: np). Drew Barrymore’s make-up is otherwise intact; she looks sad, not proud, and still sexy. The image is an artistic depiction of a “battered and bruised” woman wearing her injuries. The message is not that we take precautions in attempts to avoid these types of injuries, but that these injuries are embraced as something that will inevitably occur and “someone’s got to do it.” Drew Barrymore is inactive and injured in the image, passively accepting that injuries in derby just happen. There are other images in *The Daily Mail* spread, which are contextualised and include her in skates. However, this image, removed, does not “scramble” emphasized femininity. Instead, a black eye just appears sexy.

Clearly, Eva is correct to distinguish between promoting a sexuality that supports the athlete as subject versus one that places them as object. Roller derby players may be sexualised, either on their own terms or because the spectators have interpreted them as sexual, but while playing they are at least active and powerful.<sup>97</sup> However, power could be negated when we are visualised as “battered and bruised” or beaten. Eva acknowledged that there is something powerful in women who play a full-contact sport, but recognised the position of women, as a whole, in society and was wary of images being reinterpreted to fit the mould of passive femininity.

While women’s aggression tends to contradict appropriate femininity, there are examples of aggressive behaviour amongst the non-virtuous women, who are viewed as heterosexual objects, as evidenced in descriptions of “hot chicks” on skates or “chick fights.” However, derby players are seen differently by many spectators. Olive, in particular, differentiates derby girls from

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<sup>97</sup> Roller derby calendars and promotional photos by various leagues are more complicated. There are those which contain images of the women, perhaps posed sexually, but wearing skates and thus implying their athleticism. However, if the images do not include women on skates, or have the players passively lounging without other gear, they, at worst, may also contribute to the objectification and pacification of the female athlete. At best, these calendars still read differently than ones where the players are in full gear (pads, helmet, gum shields – not normally associated with sex appeal) and active. The various perceptions of derby based on these images could be a study on its own.

heterosexual objects of desire: “[It is not a] very mainstream, socially acceptable thing for females to be so aggressive for each other physically, and it’s like, whatever is stereotypical of females getting physical with each other is like cat fights. [...] When I think cat fights, I think of girls fighting over something really petty like a boy.” It is a fight with a “goal” that helps to present women’s aggression in a different way. Instead of heterosexual competition, the female players are engaged in a physical competition for themselves.

### ***Boutfits and Sex Help Sell the Sport: But to Whom is it Being Sold?***

As evidenced in the last section, some spectators that I interviewed attended because of advertisements that illustrated “sexy” women being physical. Their interpretation may have been different from the more stereotypically objectifying reaction to “hot chicks on skates,” but many also believed that a more normative selling of derby as scantily clad women would help to sell the sport. Although the skaters are not seen as dressing to sell the sport, or as objects defined by heterosexual desire, many spectators and players took advantage of the sexuality displayed to advertise roller derby. The dress was, by some, simultaneously described as practical and necessary, but also, somewhat ambivalently, as serving a dual purpose of galvanising interest in the sport:

And I think that, if they’re comfortable with it then, you know, that that’s what they want to do then I have no- I don’t think that a woman asks for unwanted attention just by clothing she wears. I think that that is imposed on her by our society. [...] If that brings more revenue in for these games, so be it. That’s money for the women that only encourages the sport (Alva).

The complicated nature of the sport is seen as restricting other possible selling points, which may cause some to resign themselves to the idea that sexualisation in the sport is necessary for the sport’s popularity:

I think it’s just the nature of people. You know, you can’t go up to somebody and be like “Listen, there’s this new women’s sport and basically they’re skating really really fast in a circle rink with each

other, then they hit each other.” Like, that’s not going to sell anything, you know, and so you tell people, like, “There’s a sport where people are skating fast, hitting hard, wearing short skirts, being cheeky, being fun. Like, it’s awesome, it’s all-.” That’s going to sell tickets better than like, “Yeah, people skate in a circle really fast” (Selma, a player).

This was certainly supported by others who stated that they used sex to advertise derby to potential spectators, and by those who spoke generally of the impact sexuality, displayed through dress, had on spectators’ enjoyment of the sport.

While selling the sport with sex may be viewed as a successful strategy, it is not necessarily thought of as ideal. Ellie described her complicity in a culture that sells women’s sport through sex because she desires the sport to succeed, and her hope that it can gain popularity without sexualisation. Ellie wanted derby to be seen as an:

accepted, legitimate sport [so] that there doesn’t still need to be that side of sexualising it, and I still feel like there is an aspect, which I even do, which I even said is “If you don’t want to come out because you think it’s [not] an interesting sport, come out because it’s girls showing off their butt rather than skating around.” Um, but even though I do occasionally exploit that to get more fans, it’s something that I wish could be different, you know? I wish that. I don’t think that if you had them in shorts that went to the knees and t-shirts that you’d have quite the audience that [they do], and that makes me sad, but, it is what it is.

Clearly evident is that risqué outfits are attributed with power to sell the sport. Some thought that this sexualisation was *necessary* for selling the sport, but, when focusing on this sexualisation, to whom was the sport being sold?

There was speculation that heterosexual men attended because of the sexual attractiveness of players. Notably, however, their heterosexuality was often assumed amongst respondents and not specified. Some anticipated that members of the audience were predatory and/or voyeuristic [heterosexual] males who

ascribed more lascivious meanings to the players' dress<sup>98</sup>; however, this spectator is not necessarily viewed as threatening. For example, Selma said that the "males [in the audience] are sports fans, a lot of them, and then they find out there's a sport for hot chicks in short skirts – 'I am there.' And they get really excited about it." She argued that women, on the other hand, appreciate the sport because of their "respect" for the players, and Selma's own feelings that it's "fun" to wear "crazy" outfits. Olive made a similar distinction: women attend for the empowerment; "straight men" for the female players. Likewise, others specified [heterosexual] men's attendance because of the sexuality displayed (Dorothy, Caitlyn, Mia) or universalised their experiences, as a male, to other men; e.g. Aaron who "might be a bit of guy here" because of why he enjoys derby or Gordon who explained his enjoyment by saying "men like watching females, so, you know." Both Aaron and Gordon assume men's, unnamed, heterosexuality<sup>99</sup> would be a reason for attending an all-female bout.

While there are men who favour roller derby because of the attractiveness of the female participants, some respondents generalised male spectators, but were, upon questioning, unable to provide specific examples of incidents that led them to believe men were, or any man was, there as a sexual voyeur. For example, Dorothy, a player, believed that association with older versions of roller derby<sup>100</sup> drew [heterosexual] men to the sport: "I think lots of men come and it turns them on. They think the girls are sexy in their outfits." But the statement that "lots of men come" implies that a great number of men attend for the same sexualised reason, without having the evidence to make this extrapolation. When asked for examples, she responds with "I think I've heard men say stuff." Margaret, a player, also perceived that some spectators only attended roller derby because of a sexualised interpretation of the dress: "I really don't like the dirty old men that just come because they think they're seeing like naked girls on skates." However,

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<sup>98</sup> Women did discuss an appreciation for the clothing, but not typically in a sexual fashion. The reasons discussed as to why women appreciate the attire are detailed later in this chapter, and bolstered by the discussions of identification in the Chapter Five.

<sup>99</sup> I do not mean to reinforce heteronormativity by assuming that the respondents are referring to heterosexuals. I do want to bring out the silences of heterosexuality, which I believe is evident in some of the quotes that assume men would like derby because sex sells.

<sup>100</sup> Derby (including offshoots such as *RollerJam* in the 1970s through the 1990s) was often viewed as problematic in the objectification of female players, as seen in the earlier example of an announcer saying Lindsey Francis "was playing a great game or getting her clothes ripped off. I can't decide which I prefer" (see *Roller Jam* nd) in Chapter One.

both she and Blanche pointed to specific incidents, and indicated that they are referring only to “the dirty old men” in their stories, not all or most men.

There were few exceptions to the invisible, but assumed, heterosexuality of men. Olive specifies that “straight” men may enjoy derby because ““Ohhh, girls yeah”” but does not mention lesbian women. Perhaps this invisibility indicates that she assumes lesbians would enjoy roller derby for different reasons than heterosexual men. Brent, however, does specify both “heterosexual men” and “homosexual women” as having an interest in derby, potentially because of the dress. Brent said his general selling point would include that roller derby is played by “attractive women”; when asked to elaborate, he explained that his sales would be tailored based on the gender and sexuality of the potential spectator. For women: “I don’t know that I would necessarily use the attractive women selling point along sex lines if I was talking to a female potential roller derby spectator. However, depending on, you know, their sexual orientation, that might be a good selling point.” Brent did not problematise his use of attractive women in marketing, and instead justified it by saying that there are “women football fans who say that they have absolutely no idea what’s going on, on the field, but they love the tight pants.” Objectification may not be exclusive to roller derby or women, but should be considered in all sports if the body is seen as a tool for sport and entertainment, separate from the person.

Some heterosexual, and one “mostly heterosexual,” male respondents did discuss sex appeal as a benefit of roller derby, such as Clyde, who said: “well, there’s girls, you know, they wear little skimpy outfits when they skate, so that always helps too. [laugh] I think my son and I are both kind of like that equally.” Additionally, Richard said: “Like, I’m attracted to women [laugh]. So I’m going to be a little biased when seeing women do anything.” None of these respondents, in these statements, assumed that it would be the same for all males, but were expressing their own personal desires. Pointedly, the attractiveness of players was *just* a benefit for their spectatorship. While many of the spectators I interviewed were knowledgeable about the sport, Galen and Richard were especially attuned to the rules and tactics; clearly, they were invested in the sport as well.

For some (Drew, Tanner and Aaron in particular), heterosexual attraction was mentioned as a draw to the sport, and not just as a benefit. Finding someone sexually attractive was not necessarily problematic, but the history of objectifying

women's bodies in sport must be acknowledged. Some respondents rationalised using sex as a selling point because once spectators attend derby they may re-evaluate the reason for their interest and support it *as a sport*. As one spectator, Daphne, elaborated:

With some of my guy friends it's like "Hey, they're scantily clad." And maybe they have an idea in their mind about going to roller derby, like "Ooh, women beating each other up like pillow fights or whatever." But then they actually go and they're like, "Oh, there's a lot a more to it." So, I think I sell it as a way, like, "You're actually going to be surprised by the athleticism."

Although there is an expectation that some roller derby attendees anticipate voyeuristic pleasure, some respondents are optimistic about roller derby as proof of athleticism, and certain that spectators will re-evaluate the women as athletes first and foremost. Her belief is not unfounded. Drew's description represents the transition, within a single day, from voyeurism to valuing the sport and athletes. He provides the most overt admission of objectification, but also illustrates how his outlook on the sport changed as he watched derby for the first time:

It's kind of like Nascar, you know? People go there and watch and look for a wreck. I just sit here and hope a boob pops out, you know. [...] So [laugh] I mean, I'll sit for hours, just watching and waiting, and not yet, but still people are getting like crashed in the crowd, that's pretty cool to watch too. [...] You forget about the hopeful boob to pop out, and you end up watching the sport for real.

Players provided accounts of spectators whose interests in derby were similarly transformed. Many players did not think sex was the reason spectators came to derby, but framed sexualisation as a reason, amongst many, that some spectators (namely [heterosexual] males) like derby. Some players were ambivalent, accepting that the close association with sexuality may be necessary to get an audience, but also confident in derby's value as a sport. As Selma said, the [heterosexual] men "get sucked in by the girls in the shorts skirts, and then they stay for the athleticism." Despite the potential for a voyeuristic spectator to

change their mind, Herbert was protective of the sport and would not invite anyone to a bout who was going for “the thrill of seeing a girl in a short skirt.”<sup>101</sup>

There was some, albeit limited, discussion of lesbian women’s potential enjoyment of the players’ dress: Jenn, a lesbian, said “seeing hot women being athletic is fun” and both Ellie and Brent<sup>102</sup> acknowledged that lesbians may be interested in watching women perform in sexualised attire. Richard made a similar statement as Brent, saying that others enjoy the “other half of the population” in tight clothing. Unlike Brent, however, Richard did not specify sexuality, or even a gender of those who enjoy “men in spandex.” Instead, gender binaries and attraction to the “other” gender is assumed. Additionally, he argued for the functionality of the clothing, whilst recognising that others may sexualise the clothing:

Our society at large values attractive women and like, but that’s not the fault of the women. Like any sports or athletic clothing is attractive. Like gymnasts have to wear singlets. They, you can’t do it in baggy clothes. It’s like this protestant like [Bible] Belt Buckle [sic] sorta- it’s not going to work. Like gymnastics has to be done in spandex. But I would say probably on the flip side, men in spandex are probably attractive to the other half of the population who enjoys that sort of thing. And so people get hung up on a lot of those things, like, is it sexy to be sexy or is it sexy because it just happens to be sexy? (Richard).

He questions how clothing is determined to be sexual. Are the players wearing it in order to present a sexualised image, or is it interpreted as sexual because

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<sup>101</sup> He says that he’s “sat around people” that have gone for sexualised reasons, although no specific incidents are described. Interestingly, Herbert does not associate those who may go for the “thrill of seeing a girl in a short skirt” with a particular gender or sexuality, though he does note that he would not “take a friend’s bachelor party there.”

<sup>102</sup> Calvin could also be included in this count, but was not as explicit as Ellie and Brent. In discussions about whether or not he would use girls in short skirts as a selling point, he said: “Most of my friends are attached, so that’s not really a good sale to get both of them there, now if it was the guy, maybe. Sometimes if it’s just the girl maybe. But you know. It’s all a matter of who you’re talking to, just going to have to tailor it to the person.” He framed the clothing mostly as a showcase for individuality in a conservative area of the country, so the “if it’s just the girl maybe” is not clear as to if that would be because of sexuality, or for fun more generally. However, it is implied, based on the statement of friends’ attachments, that this could be tied to the attractiveness of players. The lack of naming sexuality in this account prevents a more conclusive interpretation.

women are wearing it? In sport, function often dictates the clothing choices of women, but social understandings may frame the way in which the dress is interpreted as sexual. Despite what is worn, any attire may still be sexualised by the audience.

The marketing power of sexuality is unquestioned by respondents. Selma described the predicament of players who do not like the focus on sex, but recognise its contribution to promotions: “Our PR juggernauts [are ...] giving it a little bit more camp and sexiness than we would like, but that sells tickets so we can’t really bitch about it.” While using sexuality to sell tickets may be successful, it is worrisome if a woman’s body is constructed as a principal reason to watch derby, whilst heterosexualising the male spectators. In her description of the adverts for A&E’s *Rollergirls*, a reality television show in the United States which lasted one season, Kearney notes that

most images used in *Rollergirls* promotional campaign are devoid of athleticism also. In the advertisements, the players appear with skates; however, none is shot in action. Although the website contains more skater images, only one depicts athletic competition. Moreover, not one pair of skates is shown.

Additionally, skaters are often portrayed alone, without a team, “which undermines the collectivism of women’s sport teams” (Kearney 2011: 290) and emphasizes the athletes’ femininity. What neither Kearney, nor my respondents, discuss is the way in which some roller derby art or bout advertisements, made within the community, may depict the very same things. Another area never addressed critically by the spectators I interviewed was derby fundraisers, even though some could be controversial. Selma, for example, explained that her league had a “spanking booth. [...] You get spanked by a roller girl, [...] paddles, and like a riding crop, and a cat of nine, and you know whips. [...] It’s all really cheeky and fun, of course.” Of course, this is not representative of all fundraisers. The sexualisation of women in sport is often viewed in conflicting ways amongst female athletes, some of whom believe the eroticisation of female athletes is a viable way for women’s sport to exist (Kolnes 1995). Female athletes must fight “to keep their sports alive,” either with “fundraising or revealing costumes, and there comes a moment a short skirt becomes a necessity rather than a choice” (Hennessey 2007: 61). Tim Patten argued that “the whole reason that people first



started coming to roller derby is because of the women. It's always exploited women's sexuality from 1936 to today – It's women skating in underwear, for god sakes" (as quoted in Williams 2006: np). This was reflected in some of my own respondents' scepticism about the success of selling women's roller derby as a pure sport. However, even if players continue to dress provocatively, there may be less skin exposed than in many other women's sports because of the required protective padding.

### ***Unwanted Attention: Perverted Gaze and Handsy Spectators***

Despite players' descriptions of interactions with spectators as overwhelmingly positive, over half of the players described unwanted sexual attention from spectators, strangers, acquaintances, or even loved ones, in response to their roller derby participation. Similarly, several spectators also described perceived unwanted attention directed at the skaters. Provocative clothing was thought to be used as an excuse by perpetrators of harassment.<sup>103</sup> Whereas before the clothing was seen as transformative, in this section I describe the ways in which the sexuality portrayed, or perceived, in roller derby is interpreted in a manner that objectifies players.

The first example I will address concerns audience members' discomfort with language used by a member of roller derby's in-crowd. Some spectators problematised the comments made by announcers at bouts, which focused on the players' clothing. Hallie, Corinna and Julia were, overall, content with the male announcers at the bout we attended, but described some comments as "sick" (Corinna). The announcer had expressed a desire to be, or get into, a player's pants, and was making "gay jokes" (Hallie). I attended the same bout as the respondents, and the announcers apologised some minutes after the remark about the player's trousers, saying that it had been misinterpreted, after, I believe, they received a complaint:

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<sup>103</sup> This is, of course, not unusual to roller derby. Variations of Vancouver's "SlutWalk" were held around the world in 2011 as a response to "victim blaming," part of which may include people thinking that women "ask" for sexual harassment or assault because of what they wear. As Richard argues, the women cannot be blamed for spectators' responses: "do they gotta like ug mo it up to like come out and play a sport?" Note that "ug mo it up" means to make oneself ugly.

The guy that wanted to be that lady's pants. What was that all about? And then he tried to backtrack why it was okay for him to want to be in her pants. It wasn't actually about grabbing her ass, it was about wanting to be orange. And I was just like no one is actually [going to] believe you (Julia).

This experience did not impact on the respondents' feelings towards derby itself, but was attributed to the announcer's drunkenness and excused because of the symbiotic relationship among spectators, announcers, and players. According to Hallie and Julia, the announcers were necessary to understand the complicated game of roller derby and the comments could be tolerated because at any sporting event there would be issues with "foul language" (Hallie), even if just from spectators. Corinna acknowledged that there is always inappropriate language at sporting events, particularly from drunken fans; however, she distinguished between a fan's language and the announcers', because they are "the representative of the sport. [...] Not people around you. [...] Obviously that guy is drunk and [you] don't pay attention to that guy, versus that guy who's on a microphone telling six thousand people what to say about the game." Outside of roller derby, there are numerous examples of commentators ridiculing female athletes' achievements. In the United Kingdom on 22 January 2011, Andy Gray and Richard Keys made comments about assistant female referees, claiming that women did not understand the offside rule in football. In the midst of the outcry over these remarks, it was revealed that Andy Gray had, a month prior, asked fellow television presenter Charlotte Jackson to tuck a microphone wire down his trousers. Andy Gray and Richard Keys were both fired by Sky.

Even in all-female sporting communities, announcers can verbally undermine the successes of women's sport. Don Imus made headlines in the United States when on 4 April 2007 he referred to the female Rutgers basketball team as "nappy-headed hos." Female athletes were also relegated to object in these two examples cited by Mariah Burton Nelson:

Of female athletes, one WTEM [sport's radio station in Washington, DC] host said: 'I want to go to the ice skating world championships. I want to sit in the lowest possible seat, front row, so I can look up the

skirts.’ Another said that women’s basketball would sell more tickets if the players wore fishnet stockings and lingerie (1994: 205).

These examples highlight the way announcers can frame women’s roles in sport, including subordinating them to the position of object.

Another respondent, Clyde, had concerns with how the announcers use pseudonyms, written on the back of players’ t-shirts, as a way to interject slightly “misogynistic” comments into their reporting of the bout. He notes that “some of the names are kind of vulgar” in themselves, and it is “interplay between the vulgar names and the announcers” that creates a potentially problematic setting: “they always seem to have male announcers who are acting kind of like shock jocks, you know. And that makes it fun and the crowd gets into it, [...] but every once and awhile I get kind of a little twinge, like, ‘Oh.’ It’s kind of, you know, from a Women’s Studies perspective you probably already honed [sic] in on that a little bit.” Ultimately, though, Clyde believed that the announcers in roller derby “respect” the players, that “the girls are in on the joke” and perhaps even that the players are potentially culpable: “With the silly names, you know, you got to expect them trying to squeeze some entertainment out of that.” Whatever the relationship between the players and the announcers, as a spectator, he feels a “little twinge of feminist guilt” when these incidents occur.

Aside from the use of pseudonyms by announcers, pseudonyms were seen as protection against stalkers, necessary, “especially, in an *all-girl* sport kind of thing, rowdy and rough like this” (emphasis added; Shawn). Shawn distinguishes roller derby from other sports in the venues’ limited security and the lack of a barrier between the track and the audience, which is framed by the gendered relationship between players and spectators: “You can actually wear a girl home on accident. Someone lands on you; you’ll have a souvenir from it. [...] It is nice to have another name to go by so people don’t, can’t look you up in the phonebook or track you down with an address.”<sup>104</sup> Players Blanche and Margaret

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<sup>104</sup> Suicide seating was one of the attractions to roller derby for many of those I interviewed. It is a prime place from which to watch a bout, and serves to get the crowd involved, literally, in the action. Galen even carries “a sign that says ‘Aim Here.’” I was often told that the suicide seating was part of the fun atmosphere at roller derby and that it provided a unique experience, distinct from other sports. This also provides another opportunity for some gendered humour on the part of announcers, who are said to say: “Just because someone lands on your lap does not mean you get to take the girl home” (Ronald); “if a roller derby [girl] falls into your lap, try to get a number” (Jacob).

also argue that pseudonyms help provide protection from stalkers. They discuss one particularly zealous fan that invites players to his home, asks them where they live and out for dates. As a fan, “this guy knows where you’re going to be on the third Friday of next month” (Blanche) and “we can’t get away from you, can’t say no, because he’s at the next game” (Margaret). When he attends bouts, they stay “aware” (Blanche) of his presence during the event. If a spectator’s adulation becomes harassment, and they attend every bout, then there is seemingly no escape; however, one can use a pseudonym to provide anonymity. Selma has considered creating a Facebook or MySpace page for her “derby persona” because of spectators’ desires to be her online friend.<sup>105</sup> She is apprehensive about the online attention of male strangers in particular: “It just kind of reminds me of online stalking, you know? And I know that’s a big stretch, a huge stretch to make, but it’s kind of like that’s how it starts.” The pseudonym may help deter individuals from finding skaters online or at their homes, but it does not protect them from actions taken at bouts when spectators invade their personal space.

Because of the close proximity of spectators to players, some physical altercations do occur. Ronald provides an example from his friend’s experience as a bouncer for a roller derby league. The bouncer called the police when a spectator groped a player’s breasts as she fell into the crowd. None of the spectators to whom I spoke mentioned that they had personally seen anything inappropriate<sup>106</sup> and were only able to offer hearsay as examples, nor did the spectators exhibit any signs that they participated in such inappropriate behaviour themselves. Ronald hinted at this drawback in my interview sampling: “maybe [if] you interviewed one of those guys you’d be talking a whole different- [they’d] be like ‘Oh, hot chick, hot chick, hot chick.’ That’s all they think. I don’t.” Spectators utilised hearsay of harassment, spoke more generally about issues, or did not perceive there to be any objectification of players in all-female roller

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<sup>105</sup> Pseudonyms only protect players to a certain extent. While it’s unknown how Selma’s fans find her on Facebook, my teammate who sparked my interest in interviewing spectators was presumably found through pictures tagged of her on Facebook from the bout. These pictures, depending on the privacy settings of those involved (the person “tagged” and the poster of the photographs), may be viewed across Facebook. Even if the player skates under a pseudonym, detective work on Facebook could lead spectators to the player’s real name, unless the player is only tagged in pictures with her derby pseudonym.

<sup>106</sup> I interviewed one spectator who acted as bouncer for at least one bout. He, primarily, kept children from the players’ practice area before bouts. He did not describe any harassment of players.

derby. For example, Richard argued that because the performance was not conducted for spectators, but for the players, there was no “male gaze” and players were not exploited. Instead, spectators, men included, were “invited” to watch an empowering activity.

While this may be the ideal, the performance can be misinterpreted, or reinterpreted, to still comply with the “male gaze.” Players produced personal examples of spectators’ poor behaviour. Claire was furious with a photographer who took “crotch” shots of the players stretching, and emphasized that “there were no faces in the picture.” This theme of objectification was central to Claire’s interview, where she described the disrespect shown to players by spectators who act “as patrons of strip clubs”:

They don’t understand the rule of “Don’t touch the lady.” There have been times, girls have fallen into people’s laps, and people haven’t let go, or people have gotten an extra handful and it just- they objectify us. And they forget that even if we do look slutty and we do have M.I.L.F. on our panties, we’re still athletes.

This impacted on Claire’s game play. When a hit sends a player into the crowd:

your momentum’s knocked out of you; you’re knocked into somebody’s lap and then you’re concerned when you’re knocked into somebody’s lap if they’re going to grab a handful of ass or handful of your chest. And, it just, there are some people who are just “Oh, it’s chicks in skirts on skates.” I mean, we’re just strippers with clothes on to them. You know, and and they think that for ten dollars it’s a grab all. No pun intended. And that’s how they treat us.

Although she managed this the few times it occurred by letting her skate “slip” and putting her “toe stop in the nuts” of whoever was holding on to her, these negative interactions were one of the reasons she quit roller derby. Claire could not control the audience but could only react to it.

Blanche and Margaret, players who were interviewed together, also discussed handsy spectators who they believed thought their derby attire gave them permission to touch: “I may be wearing a short skirt, and my ass is hanging

out of the back of it, but that does not mean that you can touch my ass” (Margaret). Like Claire, Blanche was vigilantly on guard against males who took advantage of the players at after parties, or who cross the line at bouts. Sometimes the harassment, however, occurs away from the track and fellow members of the league. Players Marilyn and Imogen, also interviewed together, provided several examples of sexualised reactions to their dress in roller derby outside of the rink. Imogen explains:

I was handing out flyers last night [...] and the flyers had my picture on them, and guys were like “Oh I’m going to take this home and put it in my bathroom.” Like uhhh. That’s gross! So that’s a little creepy. Like, people that think it’s just about sex, really piss me off. ‘Cause it’s more than sex. It’s better.

She interprets this as her image being manipulated, removed from the position of active athlete, and relegated to the sphere of the bathroom, as a sexualised object.

It is not always strangers who react in ways that hinder feelings of empowerment. Marilyn’s husband was supportive of her derby activities in every way; however, he simultaneously used derby images in a manner which made her uncomfortable:

Sometimes after a bout though, he’s all handsy and wants to like get some action afterwards. [...] I feel like he wants to mount me. [...] Like an animal, you know. Like “I now mount you because I’m the man.” [...] I just mean that um, I feel, okay, so, roller derby is really empowering for women. And I think that when like it’s a feeling that no man could ever feel. I mean there’s men’s roller derby leagues out there but the connection and the intensity of being a player and being out there, like it- you can’t, they can’t really, it’s like giving birth, they could never really know that, and so after a big game like that, when you’re all pumped up and amped up, I don’t want like my boobies grabbed, and I don’t, you know, I don’t want. [...] I don’t want to be mounted. I don’t want to be dominated. And I feel like sometimes, he feels like he wants to dominate me after that. I don’t know if it’s like a

subconscious primal feeling or maybe he's just really horned up by the nice ass shots.

Marilyn alludes to an ownership of her body and derby experiences that she feels becomes trespassed upon by her husband. She engages in roller derby for herself, not to arouse anyone. Imogen was also clear in explaining how she dressed and acted in derby for herself, much to the bewilderment of her, now ex, boyfriend. He was "jealous because I dressed up for derby and not for him." She elaborates:

He liked it until he realised that it wasn't really so much for him. It was for me, to go out and skate in. And then it became an issue of him saying, "Oh, you're going to go dress up and lick pussy tonight?" Because obviously we're just a bunch of dykes. Instead of going to roller derby, we just hang out and like lick box.

Her former partner denied the athleticism associated with roller derby, focusing instead on labelling the women as lesbians, active in sexual activity alone. According to Imogen, this was in direct response to her clothing choices.

The sexualisation of derby outfits is not always negative. Players may be sexualised, either on their own terms or because spectators have interpreted them as sexual, but while playing they are at least also active and powerful. This is illustrated by Eva who mentioned one way of viewing derby as "girls who are aggressive and assertive and physical being sexy."

## ***Conclusion***

Clothing can be a form of communication, but as the meanings are located historically, within a time and place, in relation to other symbols, and are in constant negotiation between the viewer and the wearer, one article of clothing can have multiple meanings (Barnard 1996). Importantly, this research has allowed for meanings given to the dress in derby to be discussed by both viewers and wearers, and highlights some of the different meanings attributed by each. Researchers may over-intellectualise the attire chosen by certain subcultures, and apply meaning not recognised by the subculture's participants (Muggleton 2000);

therefore, it is important to take into account the ways in which those within the culture interpret the outfits within derby.

Clothing that once symbolised resistance can be co-opted, or “rendered harmless” (Barnard 1996: 138), when broadly incorporated into mainstream culture. Additionally, clothing that once represented women’s subordination may be reclaimed when worn by powerful women playing a full-contact sport. Derby may be a venue to use the spectators’ gaze to re-imagine strength and femininity. While derby players have an image that they themselves put together, once their image is released to the viewing public, it can be reinterpreted and undermined by objectification.

More questions would arise if players were thought to dress for the audience. If sexuality is done as a performance for another, does it necessarily mean that what is being done is sexual objectification? Although physical activity could be discussed in relation to physical health, Nelson argues that there has been a move away from discussions of women and health “to redefine female athleticism as sexy or romantic, intended not for women’s health, enjoyment, or empowerment, but for men’s pleasure” (1994: 17). And, even without intent, does sexiness inherently negate authenticity of athleticism? The presence of femininity in roller derby may allow for some to reinterpret the sport to fit within the confines of the institution of heterosexuality. Roller derby, however, is not for a purely heterosexual audience. The women may dress for themselves, and female audience members may be empowered by their appearance and behaviour. While there may be alternative, even sexual, femininities presented by players, no one interviewed advertised roller derby as inclusive of “masculine women on skates.” Importantly, the more flamboyant, or sexualised, clothing was what was primarily discussed by respondents, despite their being a range of dress within derby.

Even if all players did wear sexualised outfits, the potential for objectification was not necessarily a reason to change how one dresses within the sport. One player, Joni Missile, quoted in an article for *Blood & Thunder* magazine, said: “at first, I felt as though the male response was a definite problem,” but she’s “reconciled this to myself by considering it an unwanted consequence of women claiming their sexuality” (Hennessey 2007: 60). And, as Richard said in his interview, “People get hung up on a lot of those things. Like, is it sexy to be sexy or is it sexy because it just happens to be sexy?” There may be



no escape from sexual objectification in women's sport, but we can hope that if sexualisation occurs, it is done without obscuring the physically demanding aspects of the sport and without trespassing on the players. Marilyn's experience with her husband is representative of the disjunction between being sexualised and the empowerment she derives from playing derby: there was a discrepancy between what Marilyn believed her husband felt when he watches a roller derby and what she herself felt when she was on the track. Spectators' interpretations of derby clothing, and players' accounts of their treatment by others because of their outfits, are indicative of the ways women have both transformed sport and clothing, yet are still positioned within gender constraints.

In this chapter, I have argued that the sexualised dress, real or imagined, does help to sell the sport. However, the feminised and sexualised attire is reinterpreted to describe a new form of femininity and a sexual empowerment amongst players. But the interpretations of the dress do not exist completely isolated from the institution of heterosexuality. Instead, it may affirm derby as a "women's sport" and therefore not appropriate for men, and only acceptable for women who can still be identified on the track as "women," through a feminine or sexual expression. Additionally, the sexualisation of violence may be codified in expressions that link the dress to the full-contact aspect of the sport. These issues may also be used by some spectators, according to players, to justify inexcusable behaviours, like touching players without consent. The dress, then, is not always interpreted in new ways, but is instead read differently by many. But even those who reinterpret the outfits as empowering may also recognise how they are interpreted outside of the derby community, and use this to their advantage in selling the sport.

Most spectators did not ignore the sexiness of derby, but incorporated it into the strength and power displayed by the women involved. This is illustrated as well in the *ESPN* video segment, "Roller Derby Revival," when Honey Homicide states: "I think the thing that cinches it for me is that you get to see women being beautiful and sexy, but you never forget that they could probably kick your ass" (*Entertainment Sports Programming Network* 2008). This balance was what transformed femininity for many of the spectators I interviewed, and allows for the possibility of those who sexualise derby to, after witnessing it, respect derby as a sport. However, as will be addressed in the following chapter,

while roller derby may cause some to re-evaluate the meaning attributed to sexualised and feminised dress, and expand their notions of gender, gender binaries are still enforced by many.

## **Chapter Five.**

# **“Dude, She’s Knocking the Manhood Right Out of You”: How Spectators’ Understandings of Roller Derby Construct Gendered Difference**

This chapter analyses how respondents’ depictions of male and female athletes in modern roller derby construct a basic assumption of “heteropolarity” (Wilton 1996: 127): that there are certain, and distinguishable, physical and behavioural characteristics which typify each gender. Deviations within gender are allowed, but it is assumed that all women function within a particular range of physical and behavioural possibilities, separate from men’s capabilities. The heteropolar ideal is reflected in spectators’ discussions of sport history, players’ bodies and personalities, as well as some respondents’ gender identification with players. In utilizing heteropolar norms, spectators also engage in actively constructing gender by establishing, in their accounts, physical and behavioural expectations. Spectators employ these binary categories to frame their discussion of sport. I argue that even if all-female roller derby expands the scope of what is expected of a woman, gender binaries are still reaffirmed in its designation as a female sport and in spectators’ reliance on heteropolarity to explain the importance of all-female derby and the differences within all-male, all-female, and coed derby. Unusually, this research utilizes interviews with spectators to investigate not only all-female roller derby, but coed and all-male derby as well.

Due to derby’s structure and the fact that prominent coed bouts have occurred, it is a prime setting in which to adopt Kane’s (1995) contention of a sport continuum. Kane notes that despite efforts to illustrate sport as “a socially constructed, mutually exclusive binary” which creates “sexual difference,” sport sociologists have often ignored that “there exists today a sport *continuum* in which many women routinely outperform many men [...] The acknowledgement of such a continuum could provide a direct assault on traditional beliefs about sport – and gender itself – as an inherent, oppositional binary that is grounded in biological difference” (1995: 193). I argue that derby, in particular a coed version where men and women compete against one another on mixed teams, could be a useful tool in depicting a sport continuum because it challenges a dichotomous gender system, the delineation between men and women’s sport, and the “dualistic

thinking: [of] the ‘muscle-gap’ literature” (1995: 194). Additionally, attention must be paid to women who “excel in those sports traditionally associated with men” (197). Although roller derby is not traditionally seen as a male sport, its full-contact nature would align it with more mainstream, masculine sport. Derby also aligns with Theberge’s argument that “a focus on women in team-orientated confrontational sports is a particularly powerful challenge to the construction of sport as an oppositional binary that ‘naturally’ reproduces gender divisions” (1998: 184).

Despite the possibilities that coed derby could illustrate a sport continuum, in this chapter I analyse how spectators are involved in the process of “doing gender” by “creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 137). Spectators could resist this by problematising gender difference; however, they may rely on current constructions of gender in other areas of sport to interpret women’s and men’s performances in bouts.



Image 8: Violet Attack during a 2011 coed bout in Sheffield, UK (photo courtesy of Jason Ruffell).

### ***Constructing Difference: “The Gayest Guy in Gym Class Still Can Play Basketball Better than All the Girls”***

The spectators that I interviewed viewed the bouts they attended from within a gendered world, where women’s participation in full-contact sport is still understood as unconventional, and through a gendered lens, where spectators’

own perceptions of difference between the genders influenced their descriptions of the players. Spectators' responses reflected, and sometimes problematised, heteronormative ideology, which is predicated on the construction of both radical difference and complementarity between the genders. Several important themes emerged from asking spectators if they would ever attend a coed or men's derby. Even some of those who had not seen men play held strong opinions about their involvement in coed or all-male derby. The majority of those interviewed had concerns or expectations rooted in assumptions of difference and sport as a binary<sup>107</sup>: they (i) distinguished men and women by arguing that there were greater differences between genders than within one gender and (ii) assumed that attributes commonly associated with men and masculinity (strength, height, muscularity, aggression) would disproportionately favour men in athletic competition. They not only viewed men as physically larger, but also as less cooperative than women. While not all respondents viewed coed derby as problematic, several respondents' answers reflected paternalistic attitudes similar to those displayed in various other sporting environments. Arguments, such as "male physical superiority" (Fields 2005: 2) were used to prevent women from participating with men in full-contact sport. When I discussed all-male roller derby with Jacob, he wondered "if the audience perception of the all-male roller derby and all-female roller derby would be different in any sense." My research indicates that even without witnessing an all-male bout, spectators' interpretations of roller derby are significantly impacted by the gender of players.

The lack of visible coed leagues, in media coverage and numbers, prevented many of the spectators I interviewed from ever witnessing coed derby, except in the older versions of televised play. Five spectators had seen the older coed version of roller derby (where men and women played on the same team, but not at the same time),<sup>108</sup> another six had seen coed derby<sup>109</sup> (where men and women play on the track at the same time) since the revitalization, and three had seen men's derby since the revitalization.<sup>110</sup> Of all spectators, eighteen would attend a men's game; ten would not; six were either unsure, placing larger

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<sup>107</sup> "Sport as a binary" refers to Kane's argument about how sport is often presented to ensure division between the genders.

<sup>108</sup> Gordon, Richard, Mike and Shawn all spoke of watching the older coed versions on television. Albert watched the older games live.

<sup>109</sup> Herbert, Jacob, Richard, Calvin, Drew, Daphne.

<sup>110</sup> Shawn, Clyde and Olive.

conditions on their attendance (for example, James and Penelope would only attend if there was the same level of “cultural play” of sexuality and gender performance) or were uninterested.<sup>111</sup> Sixteen respondents said they would attend a coed roller derby, where men and women played at the same time, and five would not.<sup>112</sup>

Even two respondents (Drew and Calvin), who independently witnessed the same coed exhibition game between Team SeXY (an all-male team) and Team Awesome (an all-female team) at Rollercon 2009<sup>113</sup> (won by Team SeXY 43 to 37) offered distinctly contrasting versions of what occurred. Calvin, interviewed several days after the bout, “prefer[s] all men’s or all women’s because the coed bout that I saw, it seemed like a lot of the men were significantly larger than a lot of the girls. [...] So it was kind of mismatched. Granted size isn’t everything, I’m not saying the men won. I honestly don’t remember who won. But it just seemed an uneven match.”<sup>114</sup> Calvin’s interpretation of the bout is reflective of conventional gender premises. Curiously, while Calvin describes the bout as “mismatched” to men’s advantage, he cannot remember who won. He uses size descriptors to establish physical and athletic disparity, but acknowledges that this may not translate into physical superiority even though his perception of size influences his interpretation.

In contrast, Drew was interviewed immediately after the bout, and described the bout as follows:

She knocked a guy down and made a little crying face at him and I was like “Awesome, yes!” And then there was like this one girl [...] she just like knocked this one guy over like three times [...] I was laughing so hard. She’d knock him into the crowd. But she didn’t even have to hit him again, like she came around laughing and she just went towards him and hit him [...] Hit the same guy. I felt bad for him,

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<sup>111</sup> One respondent, Vivien, was not asked about men’s or coed derby because of time constraints, but spoke instead about her appreciation of derby because of the community, the freedom of expression (including tutus), and the more cooperative nature of the sport.

<sup>112</sup> Discussions of men’s derby often overshadowed discussions of coed roller derby, so much so that six respondents who responded to the men’s question did not respond to the coed question.

<sup>113</sup> The first two jams of this bout can be found on youtube (see *atsuikuso* 2009).

<sup>114</sup> The juxtaposition of the terms “men” and “girls” in Calvin’s account, but not unique to him, also implies difference in size and ability; however, this may be a cultural representation of derby, as community members term themselves “derby girls,” and therefore not indicative of Calvin’s own perceptions.

'cause he was like probably a hundred and ten pounds. It was really bad. She probably benches more than he does. She was just killing him. And I enjoyed it. [...] It's just, like, dude she's knocking the manhood right out of you. I mean, that's funny to see.

Drew's account, although utilizing a hegemonic gendered framework, was atypical amongst spectators as he discussed individual skills instead of stereotypes to define women and men's athletic capabilities. Drew challenges stereotypical constructions of physical difference, portraying a female player as possessing the size advantage. This disruption of heteropolarity was undermined as he quickly employed gender norms to describe the humour in the situation with his emphatic description of the male player as an anomaly amongst men, whose inferior performance, when compared to the female player, was emasculating.

Female spectators also voiced gendered expectations about athletic performance. Heather, without witnessing an all-male or coed bout, used her pre-constructed knowledge of gender difference to frame her response to the idea of attending a coed one:

Heather: Not coed, I don't think. I mean, God, I hope not.

Q: Why do you hope not?

Heather: Um, well, unless the men were being pretty cautious, you know, just like they have - having more body weight, it could be dangerous if somebody had much less body weight than you. I don't know, I could be wrong about that, but, I don't know. I don't think I'd probably attend a men's, no.

Her initially definitive response of "God, I hope not," later qualified, relied on her general expectations of men's behaviour and body size to deduce men's impact on game play, without ever having seen men play roller derby. Similar fears were repeated by four other spectators (Calvin, Richard, Julia, Corinna) who described coed derby's imagined size differentials, with men benefitting, as a primary concern. One spectator, Richard, discussed the size of men in extremes: "With a coed team, it's like, I still don't really know the fairness of that. Like, because like

some of these dudes are dude sized [...] like 6'5", like 6'8", you know, 250 pounds [...] it's not a question of athleticism, but like in a weight lifting contest you don't make a hundred pounder weight lift against three hundred pounders." Even though individuals may be filtered into certain sports based on their body type, there is no evidence that the men who play roller derby are of such an extreme height or would have a weight disproportional to female skaters. Even if there was such a differential, there is no evidence that in this particular sport it would lead to one having an advantage or disadvantage. Richard acknowledged one female skater, described as the exception for her height (her name is actually Six5onSkates, but he refers to her throughout the interview as Six9onSkates), who "could certainly go toe to toe with" men. He did not say that Six5onSkates' participation is unfair to other, shorter, women. His focus on height and weight differences extended to his interpretation of my own experience when I disclosed that I had played in coed scrimmages. Richard used my admission of a failed jam against a male skater as an example of men's physical superiority: "it's not athletic at that point [...] because of a genetic disposition," and not, assumedly, because of my inexperience (I had skated for less than a year at that point). When asked about the possible role of my inexperience, he answered in such a way as to illustrate the operation of a two-gender system, where it is assumed that individuals of one gender share more common ground than not, and the genders are polarized:

experience aside, women can compete against women with equal ability, as men can compete against men with equal ability, regardless of size or skill, like, those things certainly factor into it, but like a bigger guy can still suck just as much as a little guy. There's still room for that. But when you start doing like uh, inter gender sports [...] you run into problems just based on sheer size.

Richard's argument recognizes a continuum of abilities within one gender, but does not allow for a continuum existing across genders. He does not take the more contentious position of denying women's skill, but uses mainstream ideology of biological difference between men and women to justify gender segregation. He argues that size differentials do not override skill within a gender, but do between genders. However, if size is problematic between the genders, there is no reason



why this reasoning should not be applied to size differences within one. The illogicality of Richard's discussion is logical, for him, because of the pervasive meaning attributed to gender, with gender similarity trumping other bodily characteristics. Women's successes are ignored; instead of embracing and celebrating the women who can compete successfully against men, all women are reincorporated into the flawed muscle-gap argument as described by Kane: "even marginal males are seen as capable of outperforming the best females because the binary presupposes that there can be no overlap, no hint of a continuum" (Kane 1995: 202). This is further illustrated by Corinna who links biological physical "advantage" to skill, because all men "still have some kind of physical advantage, at some point. But like the gayest guy in gym class still can play basketball better than all the girls. It's still that way." Since she utilizes gradients of gayness, she may be implying the most feminine or least masculine (perhaps smallest) male will always perform better than women. Universally, and without discussing the variety of women's bodies and skill, she privileges all men's athletic skill over all women's, and relies on implied meanings of sexuality and men's bodies to communicate gender.<sup>115</sup>

Others spoke more specifically about gendered skill or movement, describing men and women as having distinct skill sets. Gendered skill was communicated by several who assumed women were more graceful, and had more finesse, whereas men were described as "bulky and large" (Mia) and "lumbering and banging each other around" (Shawn).<sup>116</sup> This is then attributed to natural gendered difference: men are encumbered by their size from a performance perspective; women's bodies and movements are feminised, but, instead of being derided, are preferred. Brent compares it to "Ginger Rogers [who] did everything that Fred Astair did but she did it backwards and in high heels. These uh, athletes were doing you know everything that traditional athletes would do in a contact sport, except that they were doing it on roller skates at thirty miles an hour."

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<sup>115</sup> Corinna's statement was in response to Hallie's interest in seeing her gay male friends play roller derby: "It would be hilarious ... I think they would bring their own charm of femininity to it." Corinna may have been arguing against the stereotype of the feminine gay man, but still relies on gender stereotyping and binaries to make her point.

<sup>116</sup> There were some masculine descriptions of female players' activities in the course of the interviews, including "smashing each other" (Aaron), and various references to "beating" one another (Caitlyn, Shawn, Julia, Daphne, Tanner). However, these are not discussed when comparing all-male and all-female derby.

Derby is constructed as “suited to the different strengths women have [...] it’s about strength, but it’s also about agility, and balance, you know, versus brute [force] [...] it’s more about the team work [...] everyone’s working together” (Ellie). Contact is rewarded, but so are other attributes associated with femininity, like community. These findings are similar to other studies of fandom in women’s sport (Bruce 1998; Nelson 2010). Both Nelson and Bruce’s studies noted fans who valued women’s sport more than men’s, and “revalued skills that they saw as integral to the women’s game and lacking in the men’s game such as teamwork and the willingness to sacrifice individual glory for the team good” (Bruce 1998: 388). In general, women are heralded as being better suited for derby than men; this is also noted amongst derby skaters in the UK by Breeze (2010).



Image 9: A hip check during a men's roller derby in November 2009, UK (photo courtesy of Jason Ruffell).

Even the full-contact aspect of derby is gendered by Daphne who privileges women’s bodies in the sport: “women use their hips to block each other, and [the] hip is always very like feminine part of the body, and I just, I can’t image men, like trying to hip check a girl. I don’t know, it’d be weird just watching it.” Daphne is most specific in gendering the use of one’s body by attaching particular meaning to body parts: women’s use of their hips is considered feminine and men’s use of the same body part “weird” (see Image 9). The feminine aspect of the blocking solidifies Daphne’s belief that roller derby should be a women’s sport.

Strategies were also discussed as different for men and women, even though the sport is played by the same rules: “When I did see the guys at the exhibition, it was more of a pushing instead of real actual skating and cutting and so forth. [...] I could be completely wrong. But, by the styles I’ve seen, I mean, yeah, I prefer girls over that” (Shawn). Interestingly, we had just watched a female bout where a league utilized a strategy to which Shawn was averse because it involved a lack of skating. However, here he reverts to generalizations based on gender instead of discussing preferred derby tactics more specifically. Other links to gender were made by some who thought women’s derby would be more cooperative, and had a “gentle roughness” (Samantha) with “obvious camaraderie,” even among those in different leagues and teams (Sophia). Jenn says that women’s sports generally are more intellectually based, “more strategy and more finesse rather than [the] brute force” seen in men’s contact sports. When Heather describes derby as “cooperative[ly] competitive” because “they block them just enough to prevent them from coming through, and not so much that it’s going to knock them out,”<sup>117</sup> she distinguishes the sport from ruthless competition, which she associates more with men’s sport. While Heather’s description is not necessarily gendered, it does place women’s role in roller derby as parallel with traditional gender norms.

The belief that men have a propensity for aggression was used to argue that their participation would change the physicality of the sport. Ellie feared escalating aggression in derby if men were involved: “not that there can’t be plenty of aggression in female roller derby, but it feels like coed or especially all male [...] I could see how an all-male roller derby could very quickly devolve into like hockey level [laugh] um, of violence.” Part of Sophia’s interest in men’s derby was “just to see if, like if they hit harder or if they’re like way more aggressive or anything like that, if more bones are broken. Yep. Men are more prone to that kind of thing.” While men may appear to be more aggressive in sport, another respondent, Alva, suggested that women are constrained from

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<sup>117</sup> The interview occurred at half-time. In the second half, one of the visiting team’s players received an injury when she was knocked off the track and went head first into a wall. She was carried out on a stretcher. She was not injured on purpose, but is noted to illustrate how there are hard hits in all-female roller derby as well, and the interview may have been different had this occurred in the first half. Others, though, also argued this cooperation was distinct from several other sports. For example, Vivien’s “daughter plays hockey and there’s just this uh nastiness between a lot of the players, and here it’s really physical but it’s not like going to a hockey game.”

participating in the same types of opportunities where they may present themselves as aggressors<sup>118</sup>; derby's rules, unusually, allow for men and women to engage in the same code of conduct.

While women may excel in the sport against other women, several respondents expressed their belief in men's propensity for aggression, which in turn would impact the physicality of the sport. The desire to protect women, and the belief that gender-segregated sport allows both genders to thrive, was also evident. Two respondents addressed the unacceptability of violent physical contact between men and women; the strong social taboo against men hitting women may influence spectators' feelings towards coed derby and their perception of how it would be performed. Patrick wondered if men would be less apt to "elbow check" women (notably, elbow checking is not legal under WFTDA regulations). Ronald's own discomfort with coed derby, though he would attend one, stemmed from how: "it's hard for me to watch a guy hit a girl. Even if that girl could kick his ass. I know it's going to sound totally sexist and an asshole and I don't mean to be. I just can't stand a guy hits a girl. And no, it's not a childhood [issue]; no, I didn't have any issues with my dad. It's just something I can't, I can't deal with it." Women's physical success was recognized, but other societal expectations prevented Ronald's complete acceptance of a coed contact sport.

Other social concerns influenced some who were wary that the traditional patriarchal framework would still function within derby and instigate inequality on the track. Both Alva and Clyde specifically discussed the possibility of heterosexual sexualisation and victimisation in coed derby. Clyde feared his "wife would think I was creepy pervert if I was banging up against Derby Girls in scrimmages on a regular basis. And that would be a legitimate opinion."<sup>119</sup> Alva was "nervous" about coed derby because of the nonverbal communication, as players touch one another: "my immediate response to that would just be uncomfortable, unwanted attention - unwanted sexual attention, especially knowing what the girls wear. But, I'm a social worker; I'm an advocate for women's rights." Not only did Alva's response presume male heterosexuality (in

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<sup>118</sup> While many women's sports do limit the amount of body contact, in comparison to men's sports, this should not deny that contact does occur. Theberge's (1997) participants in her study of young women in ice hockey explain that while officially it is a no-contact sport, there is still physical contact amongst the players.

<sup>119</sup> This was communicated in response to a follow-up question in a personal email with the respondent after the interview had occurred.

a threatening sense), but both responses illustrate the particular sexualisation of female roller derby players, and their clothing, by others.

The same gender regulations do not exist for women's contact with men. There is no concern for men in coed roller derby. No similar discussion about them being at an increased risk of sexual harassment, injury, or that they might be pitted against women who are too strong or violent for them. Men are still expected to behave like "a guy" if women hit them: "I have a stupid guy mentality. 'Oh, you're a guy. Shake it off, you'll be alright'" (Ronald). Being "a guy," for Ronald, dictates how one should respond to such physical engagement, and although he suggests that there are women who could physically dominate men, he still anticipates that men would behave as expected by gender norms and be able to "shake it off." This attitude is also demonstrated in Messner's (1990) respondents' discussions of violence in sport: men are expected to play despite injuries, and successful female competitors are rendered invisible. Women in derby are not passive, nor are they expected to be, and men's participation, as congruent with masculinity in competition and physical contact, does not necessarily challenge spectators' socially constructed gender boundaries for men. However, gendered notions of acceptability for women may cause derby outsiders to think that derby is more violent than other sports:

It's no more violent than many other sports [...]. And so, when I told my mother that I went to a roller derby match, and she just freaked out, like, "Oh my God. That's women beating up on each other." But you've made me watch the Super Bowl for the last twenty years of my life. Like, seriously? We're having this discussion? So maybe it's just the gender stereotypes or, whatever, that women aren't supposed to do that (Hallie).

This discussion of violence is reliant on gendered assumptions; women are not supposed to fight. And, if they do, it takes on a different meaning than when men do. When men fight in sport, it is part of the competition and therefore acceptable.

Other participants (Clyde, Jacob, Drew, and Shawn), all men, resisted the idea that men's derby would be any more violent than women's. In fact, after some hesitation, Drew made his attendance at a men's derby bout conditional on

“if it was violent enough.” Perhaps this shows a different standard by which he would judge men’s sport, or men’s involvement is not seen as predicting the level of violence. Jacob begins to reference gender norms in relation to derby players, but because of his attendance at women’s bouts is able to challenge his own preconceptions: “I think essentially I would say that, ‘Oh, they [men] would be harder hitting or more aggressive.’ [...] But then I think back on the women’s matches and I’m like, ‘Oh, that couldn’t be true.’”<sup>120</sup> Jacob initially formulated meaning based on the category “men,” without evidence of their participation, by utilizing gendered constructions of what it means to be male, but went on to re-evaluate these understandings by reflecting on his own experience watching all-female roller derby. Albert, a veteran roller derby fan from its former days as a coed sport, similarly initially explained subtle differences in men and women’s techniques, but then resolved that these differences were, in fact, minimal:

Women have a different, almost finesse about the game. And a different type of strategy. With the men it was a lot more rough and physical. And when they first start with all women championship, I’m going, well I don’t know, let me [you] know, look at it twice, but I’m glad I came. I’m very glad. Wow, that was great. And it’s not, it’s not a real major difference as I thought it would be.

Attending women’s bouts has helped some spectators reinterpret their understanding of, and the magnitude of, gender difference; however, it does not have this effect on all.

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<sup>120</sup> Jacob had watched a coed team play “an all-girls team” and did not see a difference between that and the all-female bouts he had watched. It is interesting, therefore, that he still had to think about the difference for an all-male team, and was still initially influenced by gender stereotypes.



Image 10: Team Stars versus Team Stripes at the World Cup  
(photo courtesy of Jason Ruffell).

### ***Gendered Sameness: How Size Doesn't Matter, as Long as Only Women are Playing***

Another example of gender construction and binary thinking was evident in the contradictions of celebrating the variety of body types of women in derby, when the same logic was not used to argue that the diversity of body types amongst men and women would also have advantages. Although a binary understanding of gender enabled some respondents to assume that there are inherent characteristics of maleness that would lead men to out-perform women, the diversity of women's sizes in derby was celebrated by many respondents. Therefore, roller derby participants can potentially distance themselves from criticism that befalls some women's athletic ventures. Hallie, for example, viewed other sports as restricting participation: "like, gymnastics are all anorexic girls." Roller derby has been argued as potentially more inclusive than other sports because of the community's open interpretation of what counts as an athletic body (for a discussion of this from UK roller derby players' perspectives, see Thomas 2009).

However, perceived external societal pressure may still influence potential participants. Ellie said: "I'm a bigger girl myself and one of the reasons why I haven't gone out for derby is I feel like I need to get at a place where I can I feel like physically it's not this huge like burden of like people see my trying to roll around and they're like 'Oh my God, you know, roll out.'" She later clarified that

she had “been holding off just because, you know, I was never this big, but, you know, I was never athletic and I’ve never skated, went to the gym. You know so I just I kept feeling like okay I need to get to a point where even if I’m not like small I’m at least like healthy and fit.” Although she did not think she needed to be “small” to play derby, she did seem partially insecure about how others would see her; instead of using derby as a tool for fitness, she wanted to change her body prior to joining. Claire, a former player, expressed her concerns with others’ perceptions of her weight: “The hit didn’t frighten me, what frightened me was me falling behind and looking fat and slow.” She was not worried about appearing unathletic; her concern was centred on her weight and speed. Roller derby has a role for women of all sizes and shapes, but social constructions of fitness and athleticism still influenced how Claire regards her body.

One player, Dorothy, narrated an experience that showcases both the community’s internal inclusivity and external pressure to fit the mould, physically, of an athlete. Dorothy articulates her appreciation of a “loving” derby community, inclusive of women of “all the different sizes and shapes [...] you didn’t have to be this perfect model and um all different things are sexy.” Despite the players’ broad view of sexiness and inclusion, she assumes that spectators’ comments on players’ “bigger” sizes are derogatory, as seen in the following excerpt:

I don’t ever like to hear people say bad things about people, if someone [said] “Oh, she’s too fat.” [...] A couple [of] gals on our team are a little bigger and um, when we were skating against [another league] and they were so much better you know and more experienced and that guy just kept saying, “Oh it’s cause they’re so big.” And you know I didn’t say nothing to him, I just thought “Fine. I’m not going to argue with you.” You know. I just said they’re way better. You know, and then that is the one thing that [reporter] guy wrote in the paper that we were “faster, better, and bigger,” he said. And not all our girls are real big but you know, a few, the one that was, well [...] is a really good blocker too [...] she’s just she’s really big, and so then [...] she did not let a single person by, you know.



She did not actually recall anyone saying that the women were “too fat,” instead she recollected one conversation and a newspaper article that described the women as “big.” Notably, like Andrea, Dorothy distinguishes between size and skill in derby. Her response to the spectator/journalist, in which she emphasizes experience instead of focusing on possible advantages of weight, is an attempt to refute the spectator/journalist’s assumption that size dictates ability. However, she returns to the possible advantage of weight herself. She begins by indicating the woman’s skill as a blocker, and then reflects on the woman’s size before explaining that she would not let anyone by her. Dorothy wishes to focus on skill when speaking with the spectator/journalist, presumably because of her interpretation of his statements as derogatory, but then seems to acknowledge some benefit to size in particular derby positions. The discussion appears somewhat contradictory, but is rooted in Dorothy’s, and the derby community’s, support of body positivity while Dorothy perhaps sees outsiders’ use of the same language (“bigger” or “big”) as a departure from acceptance.

There were other spectators who linked size and appearance, at least initially, to ability in all-female roller derby. Galen said that if one player were “just a little bit bigger she could have played everything [...] [but] she didn’t have the mass to knock anybody else over.” Notably, it was not her inability to use what mass she had to knock someone over, but her size that Galen saw as limiting her skill. The smallness of some players came as a surprise to Brent, who had expected the players to be larger than they were and, by his own admission, incorrectly expected the physicality of the sport to be diminished by their smaller frame. Ascribing physical attractiveness to size, Brent explained that as the women were smaller than expected, “It was nicer than I anticipated. There were a lot of very attractive women.” Several spectators initially had certain expectations of what derby players would look like. Charlotte and Patrick, a married couple, were unique in that they expected the players to be “skinnier little waif-like people getting the crap beat out of them badly, as opposed to people who are big, muscular, in shape, hitting each other.” Others’ expectations were discussed through generalisations of the size of the players. For example, Clyde described the players as “a lot of big curvy strong girls in tight clothes.” Even though I informed participants that I play roller derby, Virgil made a generalisation that ran

counter to my own physical appearance.<sup>121</sup> He said that he enjoyed roller derby, amongst other full-contact sports, because “you can see immediately a very physical aspect to large people getting involved in very very physical conflict.” He further defined large people in derby as “Like people of several, you know, 250 pounds.”

Few discussed size as a limitation in all-female roller derby, even though this was an issue in discussions of coed derby; however, several presumed that various body types would be more or less effective as blockers or jammers. Andrea described the expectation within the league that she would be a good jammer because of her size, but over time “we’ve learned that body size has nothing to do with what your good [at] – what you’re going to be. At the very beginning, people thought that you had to be big to be a blocker, and that’s absolutely not the case.” Again, this may not be the case within all-female roller derby, but spectators’ reactions to size differences within coed derby were markedly different. Spectators expected size to have a relationship to the skill, or power, of a blocker; thus, women playing against larger men would create an unfair sporting environment. As players have experienced playing derby, possibly with men and certainly with women of various sizes, they may have a different perspective from the spectators who presume difference.

The diversity of sizes was celebrated by respondents in that it allows a venue for players of all body types to display their athleticism. Hallie, in particular, said her favourite player was “probably, by far, the largest woman out there, but also was just a really skilled blocker. So, and I think that was part of the appeal for me, that she was not somebody who you would normally think of as an athlete [...] since she was so large compared to the other women.” The allusion to disparity between “athlete” and “largest woman” is challenged when Hallie watched her favourite player; thus, spectators construct a new meaning of “athlete” and expand notions of athletic acceptability for women. Julia, who was interviewed with Hallie, referred to Hallie’s example when explaining why she would consider joining a derby league: “it’s all different types of women who are

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<sup>121</sup> I am a slender five foot, four inches, and my status as a derby player has been questioned by derby outsiders because of my size, as I am frequently described as “too small” for derby. On one occasion, while discussing derby with fellow passengers on a train from Baltimore to Washington, DC, in July 2010, an older man repeatedly asked how much I weighed. I interpreted his persistence to discover my weight as disbelief that someone my size could play derby.

celebrated and um you know, it's not any one particular type of athletes [sic], you know, there [is] certainly room for different levels of skill." The recognition of a variety of skill levels suggests a continuum amongst women's abilities.

Ellie explained the importance of seeing a "bigger girl" while reconciling her concerns about weight if she were to play derby herself. She related to one of her favourite players, Triple D-Licious, because of her body:

So part of it is I'm extremely impressed by how fit she is. You know she's a lot fitter than you would necessarily think when you first look at her. [...] I think a lot of people have areas that they're not necessarily happy with or proud of. And that they necessarily try to downplay, and yet, [...] I kind of feel like she's taken something where, if it was me, I'd be maybe trying to cover up or I'd try to downplay it. She's just like you know picks it and just flaunts it. And like this is who I am, and yeah this is what you're going to notice about me like, when you see me, [...] so I might as well, you know, make a character out of it.

In fact, four spectators individually mention Triple D-Licious, her size and/or breasts; unlike Ellie, Alva disliked the player's focus on her own breasts as this would "encourage people to objectify women." Where Alva interprets the name as over-sexualisation, Ellie describes it as an empowering statement about body positivity, a reclamation of stigmatised physical traits, and an expansion of the concept of athlete to include women. Ellie identifies with the player because of size, just as other women were able to identify with players because of their gender.

### ***Are All the Referees and Coaches Men?***

Some were concerned that even in this celebrated all-female sport, men still set the standard by which others are measured. Ellie argued that "we're just as much athletes as guys" because women must prove their worth in relation to men whereas men's athletic superiority has already been proven. At one bout I

attended, the male presence as line-up managers and/or coaches was obvious.<sup>122</sup> This visual, that Julia saw as presenting men as leaders in an all-female sporting community, illustrated to her that “regardless of all of the advances that we’ve made there still has to be this ghost of testosterone for anybody to take it seriously. And I’m sure like even the women right on the team, in certain times, are probably like ‘Oh well of course he knows, he’s a guy, and guys are better athletes.’”

Hallie, who was interviewed with Daphne, Corinna and Julia, questioned why men had the role of coach in roller derby “because they never have played this sport. So why don’t they have women be the coaches? Because women are the players.” Julia also queried the invisibility of “women in a leadership position,” such as coach. Although WFTDA is run by the skaters and shows women’s leadership in derby, these spectators enquired about the lack of women’s leadership on the bench during bouts. Men are often encouraged in the role of referee or non-skating official, as a way for partners of players to participate (see Finley 2010) or because there is no accessible men’s league. This is different from Theberge’s experience of women’s ice hockey, where “an effort is made to have female referees for games. This is done to increase the involvement of women, to provide role models, and, most important for the practice of the sport, to insure that games are called by officials who are familiar with the women’s game” (1997: 76) as there are different rules for men. Neither Hallie nor Julia took issue with men as referees; in fact, Julia thought it is “kind of cool. Like oh look, there’s guys that are interested enough and supportive enough about women’s roller derby that they would be a ref. Which is something to maybe think about, cause why was I sort of you know upset- not upset, but why am I supportive of like that.” Finley, in her ethnographic study of WFTDA, noted that the role some men occupy in roller derby, like cheerleading, was indicative of a “new masculinity [which] is emerging to support the derby femininity” (2010: 375). While this should be valued, Mia explained that “I like the idea of there [being], I think, one girl ref [at the bout we watched]. I think that’s pretty cool because you typically don’t see female refs in any other sport. [...] It’s not really important, but it’s out of the ordinary so [...] you take note of it.” Whilst not an important concern when

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<sup>122</sup> The amount of male versus female referees, as well as line-up managers or coaches, was different at each bout.

discussing referees, players' gender was often important to the spectators of all-female roller derby.

### ***Gendered Identification with Players: "When I Grow Up I Want to be a Roller Girl"***

Part of the resistance to coed or men's derby was rooted in the fear that, either because of physical differences or the tradition of male dominated sports, female players would become excluded if more men participated. Richard believed that if derby became coed, female players would get "pushed out to a point. Like simply because the expectation is to watch men play sports, and like the women is sort of like a fan fare, [...] like only the pretty women [would] get to play or something like that." Julia had the opposite concern, though also relying on gender polarity and social constructions of appropriateness. She was concerned that smaller, more feminine women would be limited from participation, because: "biologically, men are bigger than women a lot of times. And so in order for women to play on the same, like an equal playing field with men [...] I just think they would end up with more stereotypically masculine women which would sort of defeat the whole purpose of having a women's sport." Julia not only worried that derby would become the exclusive domain of masculine women and men, but feminised the current players and argued that a loss of the feminine aspect would remove the significance of it as a women's sport. Her argument relied on the gender binary to justify men's exclusion.

Some expressed wariness that derby could also become part of the male sporting domain if men's participation became more popularised, leading them to wonder if men's derby "would be seen as more legitimate, just because that's how society usually treats guys in sport" (Chloe). Herbert, Richard, Daphne, and Penelope all also worried that men would begin to dominate the sport, potentially causing the community to lose its association with "girl power" (Herbert). This is an understandable concern as men's sport is often valued more than women's. This may have influenced the eleven spectators who emphasized that there was nothing exceptional about men playing derby, whilst others detailed the distinct importance of women as the main derby participants: "I'd probably find it a little boring because it's like 'Oh, typical males hitting each other.' I could just go to a hockey game if I want" (Chloe).

Because all-female roller derby provides new opportunities for women to participate, it has a broader meaning for women outside sport; it is linked with empowerment, female role models and redefining the meaning of “woman.” Therefore, some respondents were protective of it as a women’s sport. Men’s derby did not provide spectators with the same responses. Marilyn disputed the idea that men could even have a similar connection to derby as the women who play and implied a feeling of intrusion if more men were to play derby:

Well, there’s so many opportunities for men to play a sport, and roller derby as we know it today, has become something that only women can really play. Like we have refs and we have coaches, and those are often men in our lives, but [...] I just don’t think a man can really know derby, and I like that. I like that it’s mine, and you don’t know. Like, you can come up to me and try to talk to me, like you know what you’re talking about, but you don’t. And it’s mine. And I own it. So, go play some football or whatever.

Protective attitudes towards the women’s sport were also discussed in Finley’s interviews with skaters; she noted that in roller derby women are the primary participants, which means that “This sport was not positioned as a lesser version of men’s where masculine superiority could be constructed” (Finley 2010: 380). Women’s legitimacy within the sport could not be challenged by men’s participation in a sport already regarded as belonging to men. Part of the draw to women’s roller derby is that there have been so few opportunities for women in the past to participate in a full-contact sport. Daphne views men’s derby as encroaching on women’s space. She describes male players as “kind of like a mascot sort of thing. [...] you think of roller derby as a female only sport, and the fact that they had a coed thing, even just as an exhibition, [...] for whatever reason, [I was] offended by it.” Others also queried men’s role in the sport, with Kate, Olive, Charlotte and Patrick finding it difficult to take men’s participation seriously, largely because of the dress associated with derby. Criticism of men’s participation in replicating women’s activities within roller derby, like expectations that they would be “dressed in silly outfits” (Olive) like the women, revealed the expectations for men and women’s distinct behaviours.

There is value in separate gender sports, which makes criticising this polarity difficult. There were spectators who, although willing to see men play, enjoyed derby because it was predominately played by women. Men's participation could incorporate derby into the mainstream, with the risk that derby becomes dominated by men. The revitalisation of roller derby has given women "their own sport and they weren't like [...] women's basketball, [...] women's hockey, [...] that's more of an extension of like a male dominated sport" (Olive). That the rules developed by WFTDA were used for both men and women was important: "It's not like a girl's version of a boy's sport. [...] If you watch women's football there's like different rules and so it's a little lamer, but here it's like a women's sport, and men can play it too in some leagues and it's the same rules" (Sophia). However, men's limited involvement, as players, also means that there is a lack of available opportunities for women to show the ways in which they can succeed against men.

While this sport is not framed in relation to men's sport, it is contrasted to other female sports. Roller derby is not a "traditional girly sport" (Chloe) because "it's tough. It's not like a wuss for women kind of organization" (Betty). More conventionally feminine sport is derided in the criticism of "girly" and "wuss" sport, but is also a criticism of the limits placed on women's physical engagement more generally. Distinguishing between types of femininity by derby players was described by Finley as an example of "intragender competitions" (2010: 379) and possible "intragender maneuvering" (380):

When a "derby girl" uses the label "girl" pejoratively (as in "she cried like a girl"), it becomes dissociated with gender identities and scrambles gender. The contrast of the other—the girlie girl—becomes a strategy of intragender maneuvering. They are negotiating hierarchies between femininities in a way that disrupts the gender order (380-381).

The gender order that disavows girly or feminine behaviour remains in place. But femininity was still celebrated by both Betty and Chloe, though more in appearance than physical action. Betty embraced derby for its "rough" contact while players can appear aesthetically "girly." That women must participate in masculine sport, with "rough" contact, in order to be regarded as serious, and for femininity to be acceptable within this subculture, should be considered.

Regardless of the devaluing of some types of femininity, roller derby has broadened notions of what it means to behave as a woman. Shawn explained that “men are kind of expected to play in aggressive sports. For women, they are stand[ing] out, being different than most.” He distinguishes between female skaters and those who do not play, which does not necessarily critique heteropolarity as much as establish these women as exceptional for their gender. Attribution of aggressive behaviour to remarkable women both challenges the limits placed on women as passive, and risks framing the players as so unusual that it reinforces traditional notions of womanhood. However, others tended to argue that these women were not so unusual, but that derby provided women with a venue in which they could break from the stereotype of the weak woman. Once others see that women can fully participate in a range of physical activities, it will provide an avenue to continue critiquing gender assumptions.

Galen introduced the sport to one friend by saying “You want to see girl power? Come ‘ere, let me show you something.” It was not just the physicality of the sport that had Galen associate it with “girl power,” but what this meant for them as women: “they’re confident. They’re self-assured. They’re resilient. They are [...] powerful women.” Herbert, as well, celebrated the derby girl, arguing that they are not, thankfully, “proper ladies,” who are “demure and certainly not aggressive. [...] I don’t know what a ‘proper lady’ is or if there even is such a thing exists. What I do know is this so called ‘proper lady’ is definitely sub par to a derby girl. I think the stereotypes of the ‘proper lady’ have qualities of weakness and submissiveness and that is definitely not a derby girl” (in email communication). Alva noted that the women are “hardcore ladies” who challenge gender stereotypes. They are still “ladies,” still women, but provide an example of how women do not have to fit into a feminine mould.

Transforming gender expectations extends beyond the sport itself. For Chloe and Deborah, it represented what women are capable of: that they can take up space, literally as well as figuratively, and have strong voices in wider society. Chloe, who became a player after I interviewed her, saw actions taken by female players in the game as symbolic of their attitude in day-to-day life, and representing who she aspired to be:



It's all a romanticized idea. They can just push past obstacles and you know, knock down anyone that gets in their way, and they've got it all together [...] in my mind, I want it to be that way. Because I want me to be that way. [...] It's a symbolic thing, they can do stuff that I don't feel comfortable doing. [...] I'd like to have, [pause] have the ability to do that and not think am I stepping on anyone's toes? Am I being too pushy? What are people going to think of me? ... They don't have to worry about that. [...] Damn, they're like rockstars. [...] They have it all together.

Samantha also saw what she wanted for herself embodied in a derby player. Her interest in derby began because of the image projected by a derby girl on a poster: "I think it was the fact that she looked so confident. I just, I wanted that." Several spectators discuss roller derby, or the players themselves, as inspirational; over half of the players interviewed (Blanche, Claire, Deborah, Margaret, Andrea, Marilyn, Imogen, and, to a certain extent, Dorothy) discuss how roller derby can function as an inspirational activity for girls and women. Andrea, for example, described it as influencing her decision to leave an abusive relationship; she saw the players as "a bunch of really strong women who were not letting people hurt them."

Derby girls are not just viewed as role models for adults, but children too. Brent and Ronald both thought that their daughters were more interested in derby than men or boys, because the girls could identify with the players. For Brent's daughter, it is a "role model kind of thing. Just how femininity is projected in a powerful way." Blanche and Margaret, who were interviewed together, provided another narrative of players' influence in girls' lives. A girl, who was turning five, attended the bouts and said "when I grow up I want to be a roller girl" (Margaret). On her birthday, Margaret's league transformed their young fan into a roller derby girl in appearance. Blanche summarised the experience:

See for me, the, what was significant about it, is that I think that our lives are um marked by milestones, the things that have happened to us, I think that they shape us, and I think that she will never forget that day. I think that she will always remember that. [...] But I just think

that for me it was like, when people do good things [...] you remember that. And I think it shapes you into what you will be when you become an adult.

The association with derby players and empowerment may lead some to see derby players as embodying what they want for their children; Claire was often told, by those who recognise her from media coverage, “I want my daughter to be just like you.”

There were a few mentions of young boys asking for the autographs of the female players; however, no equivalent statements were made of male spectators wanting to be like the players, or wanting their sons to be like them either. Women’s identification with players could be because “sport fans tend to resemble their exemplars and that some dimensions of the resemblance likely form the basis of hero selection” (Wann et al. 2001: 77). Men’s derby, then, may have a different audience base, which was suggested by Jacob. I wonder if women would still identify strongly with the players in all-male derby, if there would be a shift in the focus of their appreciation of the sport, or no interest. My findings, although not located within a large enough study to be significant, suggest that there may be a gender difference in identification with the players which is contingent upon the gender of the players and spectators. Female spectators’ were also found to “feel more positive” when viewing female athletes in Angelini’s study, and this could be due to “these athletes [...] exceeding societal expectations” ; however, Angelini also found that female spectators “appear to be rejecting female athletes who are attempting to be successful in realms that would cause them to be perceived as masculine or unlike the typical woman” (2008: 134) but receptive to men who participated in these cross-gender sports. Amongst my own respondents, there were discussions of men becoming too feminised within the sport by adopting women’s mode of dress. The gendering of the clothing within roller derby and the predominance of women within the sport may help maintain a balance of femininity within what could otherwise be considered a masculine sport.

For some, it was important that the players were women, so that they could identify with them *as women*. While Penelope’s description was not specific to derby, it highlights the significance of seeing individuals one can identify with, especially when equal representation, historically, has been rare:

I was born in '55 and so when I was a kid there just wasn't girl sports in the same way. [...] It never occurred to me that there ought to be baseball for girls, or that there ought to be girls' teams. I could never conceive that. And it never occurred to me that girls could play on boys' teams. [...] I was just like shit out of luck. [...] I didn't even have a conception that I should be able to do these things, even though I really wanted to do them and I just thought boys had it so much better. And so because of that, I mean I think I've always grown up with the sense that well females don't, I can't do what the men can do, and so that's that's a lot of reason why I watch women's sports was because there were other women, again, that means I can do it.

The lack of women's representation distanced her from sports, symbolically cementing the difference between her and men.

Penelope also enjoyed women's sport in part because of her ability to relate to the women and their representation of what her gender can achieve. Madeleine, the sister of Marilyn (a player whom I also interviewed), grew emotional in describing how derby allowed her to see what her sister was capable of, by expanding her roles, and impacted Madeleine's own sense of self. Her sister encouraged her to "just be something that you thought you couldn't be." She had the desire to participate, in part because there are women who have shown that success as an athlete/derby player is possible. Daphne implied this as well, while attributing importance to women players and to the pseudonyms: "part of the appeal of derby is that you can kind of visualise yourself out there, like 'Huh, I could do that.'"

Mirroring these explanations, Herbert was less interested in men's derby because it would show him that his own participation as a player was possible: "Maybe it's like a testosterone thing where like seeing a bunch of guys out there like, I could do that. [...] Maybe it is that like exclusion of me, [...] like, if it was like a coed thing I'd be like well, why? I could get out there and do that. And my derby dreams would be shattered as I'm like, don't know how to skate." It is difficult to imagine women saying that watching men's sports gives them the distance needed to appreciate it, but such was the case for Herbert.

Although Drew seemed to identify with the male players, saying he “was cheering for the guys [in the coed bout] because apparently I have a penis,” he illustrated the diversity within gender by discussing his dissociation from players because of his race. Despite the, albeit limited, presence of African American players at the expo-bouts he attended, he responded to my question of whether or not he would play roller derby by stating “Okay, yeah, this is audio- I’m African American. Um, yeah. Probably not.” Andrea, a Black skater, had friends who were sceptical of her derby participation for a similar reason. They believed that fellow skaters were “a bunch of tattooed white girls who aren’t going to like you anyway.” Racial differences, in a sport associated with whiteness prevented the same kind of identification expressed by other white female spectators.<sup>123</sup> In addition to the limited diversity amongst skaters in certain leagues, which Claire detailed by saying: “there’s only four of us [racial minorities] in a league of 70 [...] where there are tons of Asian people, and there are tons of Indian people, and there are tons of Black people. [...] It was pretty sad when you think about the percentage,” racial diversity in the audience, or lack thereof, was also mentioned by some. Vivien, part of a multiracial family, felt very welcome in roller derby, and commented on the audience demographics: “it’s a very slim audience tonight, but generally speaking it’s really packed in here. It tends to be pretty diverse, lots of gay people, lots of straight people, lots of people of color, but I think less so tonight, but more so other times we’ve been here.” Others mentioned “diversity” in general, but did not specifically evaluate issues of race and ethnicity in derby. Albert described a different kind of diversity in the modern derby movement than in the older, coed version of derby:

As an old guy [laugh] I find the crowd very, almost intriguing. It’s not as, it’s a very diverse crowd, but not as diverse in the old day. I mean, the old day you could go to Kezar or big stadium it was only half full, you would see Black, white, Hispanic. Here it’s almost dominantly a white crowd, similar look, similar energy. And I can see for the sport right now, it’s attracting, [...] and maybe as it grows [...] it[‘ll] spread out, but right now - I mean I’m not worried about it [...] but I can see the difference. [...] The whole culture around this venue is totally

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<sup>123</sup> Samantha, a Black spectator, did not discuss this as an issue.

different, and I don't know if it's because, it's again a women's league attracting certain looks, certain style, certain feels, or if it's the fact that it's still a small, growing [community].

This whiteness was what caused Andrea's friends to believe she would not be accepted as a player, but Andrea's experience with her teammates was positive: "Who would have thought that these tattooed white girls would be so accepting and caring of- so I was not expecting to get that out of it at all," While Andrea had good experiences with her teammates, she also addressed the lack of racial diversity amongst audience members: "You don't see very many people other than white people and a lot of the white people that you see have tattoos, and are kind of punk rock and alternative lifestyles are totally a non-issue at derby. You see a lot of lesbian couples and [inaudible] communities of colour those kinds of activities, or ways of life, are less acceptable, unfortunately." But not all of her experiences have shown an accepting community. Skating at an away game where she saw only one Black spectator in attendance, she was told by an audience member to "go back to where I came from." She continued to have issues with the spectator throughout the night, resulting in an almost physical altercation, and "when the bout was actually over, we were escorted out, literally." While some spectators identify with players because of gender, there were allusions to issues of exclusion because of the lack of racial diversity. Not all women will find themselves represented on track, and some players, like Andrea, may be placed in the position of the denigrated other by some spectators.

### ***Conclusion***

Female players fulfil a role which challenges gender assumptions and previous restrictions that have limited women's access to sport. That women are the primary players of roller derby enabled a few respondents to relate better to the sport and provided them with the impetus to re-evaluate their own concept of self and what it means to be a woman. However, respondents' speculation about coed derby and men's derby helped to reinforce gender duality itself and underpins difference, despite discussions of expanding notions of acceptable behaviour and body types for women.

The all-female roller derby resurgence has provided opportunity for women's inclusion in full-contact sport. They are the norm, even though the WFTDA is qualified as "women's." This positioning has relegated men to the role of "mascot," as described by Daphne. Unlike other sports where women are viewed as such, it is men's derby that is viewed as "just for fun" (Olive). The way roller derby has been perceived by spectators problematizes the role women have previously occupied in sport.

There were also those who worried, not that there are inherent gender differences, but that the gendered expectations that construct men as stronger athletes than women would make men's derby more valued than women's. In this way, it was thought that the larger societal investment in the duality of gender would overshadow women's success in this sport. While certain aspects of heteropolarity were challenged within the roller derby community, this does not mean that the mainstream will adopt the sport as is. Instead, it is possible that derby would be co-opted, as outlined by those who considered men's entrance into the sport as potentially limiting the kinds of women who could participate. As the sport becomes more mainstreamed, the current community's attitude towards body acceptance may similarly be tested or it may provide an opportunity to challenge the mainstream's ideas of health and beauty.

Roller derby may not always be a site of inclusion, but roller derby has the potential to meet Birrell and Theberge's definition of feminist resistance in sport, albeit without all players identifying as feminist. The following counter hegemonic practices must occur for a feminist resistance to be enacted, according to Birrell and Theberge:

an emphasis on the process of play that rejects sport as a rational practice; an inclusiveness that insists on providing opportunities for women of all sizes, ages, classes, and races, and a safe space for those who have not had an opportunity to develop their skills; collective coaching practices that deconstruct the hierarchical relationship between player and coach; and a refusal to see the opponent as other (1994: 371).<sup>124</sup>

Derby is noted for including women of all sizes, ages, and classes, as well as amateurs and experienced skaters. The community is run "by the skaters, for the

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<sup>124</sup> This is citing Susan Birrell and Diana Richter's (1987) discussion of a particular softball team.

skaters,” even though some spectators did reflect on potential issues of having male referees and coaches. The most obvious breach from these counter-hegemonic practices, according to only five respondents, was the limited racial integration of the community.<sup>125</sup>

Inclusion in other aspects, like size, was contingent upon concrete definitions of the category woman. While recognising difference within the category, respondents engaged in the process of constructing gendered difference, discounting similarities between the genders. The segregation assumes that gender is easily determinable and divisible. Women’s segregation from men was justified by constructing men’s superior physical prowess. Valuing the contribution that women have to sport implies that they still have a different set of capabilities from men. The question then is why one segregates the genders in sport, and assumes that certain sports exist for one gender more than another. The latter, gendering sport, does not provide equal opportunities for men and women. Men in derby, as demonstrated in the trailer for an upcoming documentary on the topic, directed by Kat Vecchio (nd), have been ridiculed for playing a sport associated with women, either because it is inappropriate for their gender or because it detracts from the gains women have made by having a sport of their own. The former is a more complicated issue. As noted by respondents, roller derby as a female space has allowed for a celebration of women’s strength without being connected to a subordinated version of men’s sport. There are risks that coed sports may limit the women who can participate because of societal preconceptions. Like Kane, I do not believe that all sport should be coed, but “we must continue to challenge the popularly held assumption, repeated in a mantralike fashion, that women cannot compete with and against men because they need to be protected” (1995: 213). Women have performed on par with, or better than men, and coed derby, as it currently stands, can be used to illustrate sport as a continuum.

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<sup>125</sup> Different geographic locations may have different demographics, and, without further study, this cannot be presumed to reflect all of roller derby. However, it should be considered.

## **Chapter Six.**

### **Playing with, and/or Restrained by, Gender and Sexuality: Derby Girls On and Off the Track**

There are numerous practices within roller derby which can transgress heteronormativity and heteropolarity; however, further evaluation is needed to demonstrate whether or not these practices are forms of resistance or negotiated to fit into repositioned, albeit still confining, gender categories. As detailed in the two previous chapters, there are instances in which some spectators maintain and propagate heteropolar ideas. The femininity portrayed in dress, or even style of contact, may align players with spectators' heterosexualised expectations, and proof of women's physical prowess may not cause all spectators to re-evaluate women's capabilities in comparison to men's. In this analysis, I question derby's challenge to heteronormativity and its contribution to altering gender expectations, while considering how heteronormativity can actually be useful in deconstructing barriers to athletic participation for heterosexual women. By drawing on both the original data and the derby wife interviews, I assess the emergence of similar themes relating to heteronormativity and the management of "stigmatised" identities, in particular lesbianism. Among all the issues discussed, derby wives – the term coined to represent particular female friendships in derby – are perhaps the most notable example of the way in which derby culture may problematise heteronormativity.

Institutionalised heterosexuality has consequences for all women. Indeed, "many of the identities available to women derive from their location within heterosexual relations – as wife, girlfriend, daughter or mother" (Jackson 1996: 31). Spectators may invoke these roles, namely wife and mother, as a way to normalise female derby players, whilst simultaneously celebrating what some see as a deconstruction of gender constraints. Additionally, the phenomenon of derby wives uses a role usually associated with the heterosexual institution of marriage. Therefore, it provides an opportunity to evaluate the heteronormative assumptions tied to the role of wife, and its reformulation to meet the needs of female athletes. In order to understand these issues, this chapter will examine the meaning of descriptors like wife, mother, heterosexual, and lesbian in the accounts of spectators and players. It will begin with an analysis of how spectators made sense



of derby players' personae as a way to negotiate expected behaviours for women, before discussing the roles of mother, wife, and derby wife, followed by spectators' and players' thoughts on lesbianism, both real and perceived, in the sport.

### ***The Role of the Persona in Gender Restrictions***

As players' personae<sup>126</sup> often run counter to hegemonic expectations of heterosexual women's identities, it is possible that one way to accept the behaviour of female players is by differentiating them from their day-to-day selves. This negotiation serves both to normalise the players, making them accessible and non-threatening, and to challenge restrictive gender norms. Spectators and players raised issues as to whether the players led separate lives on and off the track, which is connected to the pseudonyms<sup>127</sup> in particular and personae more broadly, which will be explored in this chapter.

Shared understandings of social expectations for women create a framework from which spectators construct their understandings of women's participation in roller derby. According to some, women's athleticism in roller derby challenges conventional norms of gender and the stereotype of the weak woman. As Herbert said: "One of the things I like about it is, girl power sort of thing [...] maybe I'm just thinking too old fashionably of like roller derby is not what a proper lady would do." Although gender conventions were altered, they were also still in place as evidenced by the distinction between the "proper lady" and derby girls. Similarly, Selma's mother had an "old fashioned sense of what it means to be a lady and a woman" which, according to Selma, included:

You don't go out and you don't wear crazy make-up and crazy clothes, and skate and fall down with your butt in the air, and hit people and yell and scream, get angry, get sweaty. [...] But she came to a couple bouts a couple of years ago, she actually realised, like,

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<sup>126</sup> By personae, I mean the personality that spectators interpret through pseudonyms, clothing, and attitude on track. I do not mean to indicate that players actually have a different persona when on the track, but rather am evaluating the way some spectators view it.

<sup>127</sup> I am wary of over-analysing the pseudonyms. It is important to note that my analysis is pertaining only to the way that spectators perceive them, and not necessarily how the players themselves would, or would not, like for them to be interpreted. Also, a spectator may enjoy the pseudonyms for the fun and spectacle they provide, and not need them to represent a players' "alter ego."

“This is a lot different than what I’d remember in the 60s.” [...] She was really impressed with everybody’s athleticism, and you know the sportsmanship and that kind of stuff. So her feelings kind of changed.

While not explicit, this suggests that Selma’s mother expanded her idea of what was acceptable or appropriate behaviour for women, at least in the realm of roller derby. Selma notes that she’s “never been a lady” in the sense that her mother defines one.

Olive linked derby players’ gender transgressions with empowerment: “women empowering themselves and [...] not being like the, you know, people would expect them to be.” Women’s physical experience in roller derby illustrates their transcendence of passive femininity, which extends beyond derby in showcasing women’s capabilities:

[Derby] has really changed the way that people think about women. And I really see it as a big empowering tool. And I think it could revolutionise the way women are viewed in society. [...] When I was a little girl [...] I thought that being a woman meant having to be frilly like liking nice things and not wanting to um, upset people too much. But this, this sport allows me to do that. You, I mean, you’re supposed to get in people’s way. You’re supposed to like hit people (Deborah).

Unlike many other sports currently available to women, the contact aspect of derby provides young women with an alternate view of acceptable behaviour.

The transformation that derby provides women is not located solely within roller derby, but is argued by a few, such as Betty, as “symbolic” for women who are gaining “a sense of pride, and femininity and womanhood”: “the resurgence of roller derby speaks to the strength of the larger movement of women in society and that women are really strong.” However, if spectators expect women to need the pseudonym, or alter ego, in order to perform, and if spectators need the derby persona to give them permission to cheer for women in a full-contact sport, then one must consider the role roller derby plays in illustrating the restricted expectations placed on women. The necessity of derby personae, for some

spectators, may illustrate the strict gender confines applied to “normal” women, but not the “superheros” they see on track.

The personae serve a variety of functions and, instead of being used to bisect women’s lives, can be a political statement with transgressive meanings. It is difficult to discuss any of the derby girls’ pseudonyms while guarding their anonymity, but one in particular detailed her concerns with the “censuring” of her derby name by others, a practice which she described as “patriarchal. It is based in a system where sex is taboo yet violence is embraced. Where women’s empowerment terms [...] are kept down.” Even if censored by the media, spectators can view and interpret the pseudonyms of players, but spectators’ interpretations are not always consistent. Alva and Ellie’s conflicting understandings of the name Triple D-Licious also illustrates how one name can be read as either sustaining or querying heteropatriachal ideas.<sup>128</sup>

In the following exchange, James makes a connection between the names, female sexuality, and lesbianism that his partner, Penelope, questions:

James: and, at the same time, tons of kind of obvious lesbian references in the names, and you know just sort of playing with female sexuality-

Penelope: See I did not pick up, I did not see obvious lesbian references. I saw obvious-

James: Battery Powered, and, well, you know.

Penelope: Battery Powered.

James: That’s not necessary lesbian.

Penelope: [laugh]

James: But the sexual stuff was

Penelope: The sexual, yeah.

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<sup>128</sup> For further discussion, see Chapter Five.

James: But I thought there was plenty of obvious lesbian charactering and then you know people running around in you know torn fishnet stockings [laugh] as part of their uniform, and also the really old, really old school motorcycle helmets [laugh] [...] that was part of it, was also just the clothing reminiscent of certain, parts of the lesbian culture.

James sees the clothing, names, sexuality and, in particular, sex toys as signifiers of lesbianism, but James and Penelope's differing interpretation of these symbols illustrates their social construction.

The names discussed are situated within gendered and sexual connotations. It is the usurpation of femininity, the challenge to tradition, which can be reflected in a name that Olive appreciates. She divides derby names into historical or gendered categories:

Well, when most players name themselves, they usually use word plays that include their gender, either using famous females in history, like "Agony Christie" (after Agatha Christie) or "feminizing" some name, like "Femme Fatales" or "Lady Die". And still others use gender neutral names, such as "Mace of Shades" or "Red Hawk". But Raging Cock uses a name that is using a male phallic connotation. If one heard the nickname, one might think it's a guy's name. For me, this tells me that this player likes to break the rules of convention and doesn't care what other people think. And the fact that she is an aggressive player (something most people think would be a more "male" trait), also sparks my interest in her as a player and the aspect of gender roles in general (Olive, in email communication).<sup>[129]</sup>

Along with skill and personality, she chose Raging Cock<sup>130</sup> as her favourite player because the pseudonym plays a role in disrupting gender expectations. That which is traditionally viewed as masculinity is rewarded, at the same time that there is a challenge to this gendered association.

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<sup>129</sup> This email was a follow-up to the in-person interview.

<sup>130</sup> Incidentally, "Raging Cock" was one of the names criticized in the controversial blog post, "Derby Names: Not Ready for Prime Time" by Ginger Snap (2011).

Names are not always so provocative. Some described roller derby pseudonyms as like vanity plates (Herbert, Calvin), representative of the players' personalities, on and off the track (Corinna, Julia), but others distinguished the player's persona from the rest of the player's life. The pseudonym allows the spectators to cheer for a "superhero" (Sophia, Chloe, Olive), potentially unavailable if players use their legal name. Charlotte and Patrick raised this issue of derby players leading segregated lives when they compared the players to superheroes, and in explaining the importance of pseudonyms:

Charlotte: [Their pseudonym] helps them separate from their normal life I guess. 'Cause I have one friend who's kind of volunteering with them [...] and she said that they, she's like "Oh some of them are, you know, lawyers and accountants and all this stuff and you just never would think oh her name is probably like Melissa or Tiffany or something you know," kind of helps to separate, like, um-

Patrick: Probably help in mediation though.

Charlotte: Like Superman.

Patrick: [laugh] Like Superman.

Charlotte: You wouldn't say "Hey look, it's Clark" [laugh].

Q: It doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

Patrick: It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Clark from the news room.

Just as being a roller derby player comes with certain connotations, so does being a woman with a name like Melissa or Tiffany, who are framed as contrary to the roller derby player. It is possible that no superhero would go by their legal name, but it could also relate to the feminised names of Melissa and Tiffany and their juxtaposition to the people who would play a full-contact sport. That a name has meaning was also referenced by Brent who believed pseudonyms to be "an interesting kind of take on identity, because it allows you to sort of take elements

of your identity that may not necessarily be encompassed in whatever your [legal] name is.” For Olive, a pseudonym provides “some sort of fantasy [...] like wrestling [...] they’re not like some football player or whatever there’s just like this super hero kind of thing.” Notably, Olive’s interpretation differed from Aaron’s, who wanted to compare skaters to American football players:

in a way it almost makes them seem larger than life I guess. [...] They’re not just people skating, they’re actually like [...] a football player, like a big time athlete. [...] You get really into it because of, I think, because of the alter egos. [...] I like the fact that you’re not, like I said, you’re not cheering on Allison, you’re cheering on a stage name.

It not only provides a fantasy for the players, but also provides one for the spectators. Spectators imagine that the players are “superheros.” Why women in roller derby need to have the pseudonym to elevate their status to that of “big time athlete” is uncertain.<sup>131</sup> However, possible explanations will be analysed as I evaluate the role of the pseudonym in creating a transformation, or the allusion of a transformation, amongst the players, who are seen as having a different personality or life off of the track.

The separation between the player and non-player persona may be necessary because of the gendered expectations placed on women and the privacy the names allow. Roller derby is an escape from feminine norms, a space where women are rewarded for nonconventional behaviour. Some, like Calvin, believe that the pseudonym

is part of the reason that it allows them to be so off the wall so to speak. Um, dress, as they do, and get out there and make a spectacle of themselves. Because you’re not saying, “Oh yeah, I bought lunch from her today,” or “Oh yeah, I saw her walking down the street,” because they look so much different it just, I think it adds to a level of freedom for them.

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<sup>131</sup> Football players may have nicknames, but their legal names are used by spectators as well. However, Brent notes that players in XFL, an unsuccessful and thus “disbanded” American football league, used pseudonyms on their jerseys.

The players' changes in appearance, and adoption of pseudonyms, are seen by some, including Galen, as providing a level of anonymity, or disguise, where they can cast off restrictions that bind them at work and elsewhere, and embrace the freedom found on a roller derby track. Madeleine also described her derby playing sister as having three "totally different person[as]" (one for work, derby and home). She explained that "Like her derby persona is I'm going to get out there, I'm going to do it. I'm going to rock it. I'm going to be amazing. And then when she's at home she's like 'Eh, I'm family, what are you going to do about it?'" This division between her home, work and derby personae may reflect what is allowed in each of these different settings.

Drew describes this separation for the players as a "fight club syndrome"<sup>132</sup> where the nicknames and personae represent achieved aspirations, and uncover the personality that one may not have had the opportunity to experience before. Pseudonyms and alter egos "bring the real you out of it. They bring the person out of you that you didn't even know that you had. And you end up being better for it." Drew notes that this separation exists for players, who previously dissociated from how they acted on track, and, if replicating the "fight club syndrome," they eventually realise that their derby persona is the same as their real, everyday self.

However, if players are perceived as acting nothing like they are in their other roles, it may make it easier for spectators, who do not necessarily see themselves as capable of playing derby, to identify with the players. Ellie "really like[s] the idea of taking on another personality that you don't necessarily have in your day-to-day life, of having an alter ego or something, where you can be more outgoing and brazen than you necessarily would be." If she were a player, she would take advantage of the pseudonym so that she could push herself: "I can be very introverted and shy [...] so the idea of having a persona where [...] I can just walk up to anyone and be like 'what are you looking at' [laugh] not in an obnoxious way, just in a you know, um, in a really confident way." Daphne also discussed how the pseudonym might be helpful in allowing spectators to imagine themselves as derby girls: "They look empowered, I feel like I could kick ass too,

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<sup>132</sup> Fight club syndrome is a reference to the novel or movie *Fight Club*, released in 1996 and 1999 respectively, where the narrator realizes that he, and another character, are two personalities existing in the same person.

and it's part of that uh, that alter-ego aspect of it, I guess could come from like maybe part of yourself doesn't feel like outwardly that you could do that, but if you had that name, or I could kick some ass on the derby floor." The idea that the women are different from their off-track persona can make roller derby accessible to spectators, as well as some players, who do not see themselves naturally as derby girls. But it can also be interpreted as assuming that the player may only be strong on track, but not in their everyday life.

While Ronald said that the names are "just name[s], joking names," he attributed stage personae to roller derby players. When I asked Ronald to describe the personality of a derby girl, he wondered if I wanted to know "about a girl on the track, or a girl who she is" in day-to-day life. His idea of a split-life was rooted in his friendship with a derby girl, whom he characterised as:

pretty, and [...] she looks soft, does that make sense? [...] you would[n't] think she would have this you know whatever. [...] I know she's got the skills I mean as far as toughness, [...] but [...] [on track] it seemed like she became more mean, aggressive, I just, she played the role, if that makes sense. I mean she, literally, the alter ego came out of her. She became the aggressive girl, you know, she wasn't afraid to drop an elbow on somebody, or bend the rules, or knock somebody down.

Ronald's description situated this woman's on-track personality as a part of her, as far as skill and "toughness" were concerned, but still as an exaggeration of her normal self. He suggested that she had to alter her personality in order to play roller derby. Galen, like Ronald, described a player who is "nice and personable" off track, but different when bouting.

Eva, a player, explained how media and spectator interpretation of pseudonyms differed from her own:

a lot of reporters um are very excited to ask us you know what is [sic] your derby name mean to you and what is it like to become this other person on the track? Is it your alter ego? And I finally realised that it's not for me. And it might be, I guess, for some skaters [...] but it's not the case for a lot of us and I think that's one of the many story lines



that writes itself, like the “She’s a nurse by day and a roller girl by night.” We always laugh about those articles, and I think that you know it’s just an easy story line and it’s not true, I don’t think, of most of the players. [...] Very few of us invest a lot of our effort into making our roller girl self drastically different from our day to day self. [...] If you didn’t think that dressing up in the clothes that you’re going to wear on the track was right for you, you wouldn’t, you wouldn’t do it.

She challenged the idea that the players have distinct personae on and off the track. Instead of a player becoming someone else, the game enables one to participate in activities that are not allowed, legally or socially, in other spheres of life:

[My] coworkers who come are often blown away that – “I can’t believe you do that. And you are that person.” [...] But if you look really close it’s just that I’m wearing knee pads today. It’s the same it’s just that you never had a reason to try and race somebody or try and take their physical space away from them; it’s just a different set of actions (Eva).

By her interpretation, roller derby is not seen as a challenge to what women can do, but an avenue in which women are able to express behaviours otherwise thought inappropriate or unacceptable. It is, for example, inappropriate to shoulder or hip check one’s employer. On the track, however, that action would be celebrated. Despite her not believing that derby players lead separate lives, Eva did argue that:

the names are a part of the whole package of roller derby that makes it attractive enough to the women who never played sports; that makes them want to play this game here. Um, and then they get to be physical and full-contact and they love it so much. And I think that without the names and probably the clothes and the- maybe the after parties per se, but the whole spirit of international and national roller derby [...] Without all of that, we would start to miss those women

who weren't trying to be athletes, but just wanted to be roller girls, and became athletes in the process. If you take the names away, I think that's one less piece out of that puzzle.

The names, therefore, have merit. They help to foster an unusual culture within a highly athletic sport. Those who "weren't trying to be athletes," but wanted to be "roller girls" became athletes by default. It was not that they have found they had a different personality they can portray on the track, but they already wanted to identify as a "derby girl."

Others may have different experiences with the pseudonym, however, and treat it as an alter ego. Claire suggested that derby participation, and, in particular, the pseudonyms, alter the players by allowing them to create a different personality than their normal day-to-day one:

some of us, roller derby just gives them an opportunity to be something that they're not. It gives them the opportunity to have bravado and confidence that they don't normally have in their 9 to 5 job or at home. I mean- some people naturally are that way, some people are not that way. It just, it depends on the person (Claire).

The skater plays a role, not connected to her actual self. Claire, however, reminiscent of Drew's "fight club syndrome" comment, found that her alter ego was really a part of her. She had previously used her alter ego as an excuse for her behaviour:

I'm just really shy and afraid of people, derby made me have to come out of myself, and part of that was having an alter ego, you get to live behind this whole other person that you become when you get into derby, and you've got this extra person and you know if something goes wrong, you can say "Oh I didn't do that [my derby alter ego] did it." [...] I found a happy medium where [...] I can say Claire did that.

At some point, Claire stopped separating her alter ego from herself.

Deborah never seemed to segregate her life in the way that Claire did, but became aware of how others saw her differently because of derby. She described this with some ambivalence:

I was never really a tough girl; I was never sporty or athletic. I've always been like kind of an artsy person and um. I know more in politics, more bookish, and so that I have people think of me like being a bad ass is like odd. It's still something that I'm kind of coming to terms with. [...] I kind of embrace it while still kind of being a little perplexed that people think this of me. [...] I think that people have a lot of different sides to them and this is just a different side of me that maybe a lot of people didn't know about before. So. Um. It's a side of me that I didn't know I really had before. So that's um, that's still something I'm trying to get used to, I think (Deborah).

Deborah was open with her colleagues about playing derby, but downplayed it in some circles. At fundraisers, when her employer told others that she plays derby, "I try to change the subject quickly." She felt she had to manage others' perceptions of what a derby girl is and protect herself from others thinking that she engages in activities such as fist fights when not at work, because of the way roller derby can be depicted.

Some believe that the pseudonyms have perpetuated derby's perception as an illegitimate sport. For this reason, players in the league Race City Roller Derby began to use their legal name in 2011.<sup>133</sup> Although eliminating the pseudonyms may help to legitimize the sport, it is possibly the stigmatisation of derby players, or certain behaviour seen on the track, that forces some to take a pseudonym. Galen emphasized the importance of a pseudonym; rather than derby just being a venue for self-expression, it also serves to protect the player: "you can be freeist [sic] when you're wearing a mask. [...] Nobody knows who you are. And it's an outlet for a lot of them. [...] They [pause] a lot of them, feel liberated by their alter ego. [...] She has to be so stuffy so much and then she hits that track. Haha,

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<sup>133</sup> Additionally, in 2009, many skaters for the Denver Roller Dolls' travel team, the Mile High Club, chose to skate under their legal name when travelling nationally: "These women have proven they have the talent and dedication to compete with the best in the sport, and they choose to own their accomplishments— to be recognized by their real names for their skill and achievements" (Denver Roller Dolls 2009: np).

let's rock.” Indeed, some derby players have to hide their derby involvement because of their employment, and, therefore, the segregation of derby and work life is sometimes necessary. Andrea talked about several players who hide their derby life from their coworkers, and one who hid her legal name from her fellow derby players:

I think it's really odd that she keeps those two lives very separate. [...] My guess would be that they need to keep those lives separate because of the stereotypes of derby girls. [...] I remember reading one journalist who said that roller derby was a low brow sport. [...] It could have a negative impact on your career, obviously don't want to do that. No matter how much you love the sport itself, it's your career.

Derby, and the culture associated with it, may be misunderstood, as indicated by the stigmatisation associated with women playing a full-contact or “low brow sport.” But it is not only the stigmatisation of the sport that has led some to abandon pseudonyms in derby. Potential benefits exist as well, such as lessening the belief that players are significantly different on than off track. For example, WFTDA's response to queries about roller derby names contributes to the notion of skaters leading separate lives:

Skaters are “normal” during the day. We work; we're moms, students, etc. Roller derby is our escape from day-to-day life and our opportunity to embrace a tough, edgier side of ourselves. When you step into the rink, your derby alter ego takes over. Derby names are creative and fun and can either be tough or just plain funny. As amateur athletes, some skaters also prefer the relative anonymity of a derby nickname. There are a few leagues whose skaters play under their legal names (2011: 7).

Why is argued that “skaters are ‘normal’ during the day”? The misconceptions about roller derby may cause some to struggle with the idea of “traditional” mothers and wives playing the sport, which may be why it is said that some moms leave their “normal” self behind so that they can “embrace a tough, edgier side of ourselves.” However, this assumes that “moms, students, etc,” on track cannot fulfil the role of “derby girl.” While I am sure this is not the intent of WFTDA's explanation of alter egos, it is worth noting how this compares to the media

representation of mothers and wives in roller derby discussed in Chapter One. While the “derby girl” label has the potential to radicalise mothers and wives, conversely, the mother and wife role may be used to sanitize players, who could otherwise be viewed as problematic women.

### ***“Soft-Spoken Mothers” or the “Anti-Hero of Women”***

Some media have been complicit in promoting sanitized versions of the female players, as noted by Kearney’s analysis of the production of *Rollergirls*, which emphasized players’ status “as domestic creatures” (2011: 295). Two of my respondents (one player, Eva, and one spectator, Ellie) were also concerned with the portrayal of derby girls in media. Eva explained that: “There’s a format to [news coverage] ... ‘Across the nation women are lacing up their skates, and they’re mothers, they have children, and they have day jobs and they take on names like,’ and you get about six names that the media people found impressive, and then the footage of girls skating [laugh].” Ellie was most critical of the coverage, and pointed to a particular article that assured readers that the players are not as scary as they appear: “I don’t even remember what the name [of the player] was but it was some tough kind of name, but you know, ‘Oh she’s really a mother of two’ and this and that, and it’s like why? Why [do] those things seem so remarkable to talk about?” The emphasis on motherhood and marital status has a normalising effect on women who may otherwise be seen as too masculine and thus threatening to the gender order.

Motherhood, wifeness, and the noted professions of the skaters – “lawyers and accountants” (Charlotte), “teachers and librarians” (Sophia) – feminise or, in the case of “lawyers and accountants,” make the players appear to fulfil more respectable or higher-class roles than what might be associated with derby. While some discussion of the women as mothers and wives may serve to heteronormalise them, and can thus be criticised as ignoring lesbians or limiting what is considered to be acceptable women’s behaviours, this heteronormalisation should not be dismissed as having no value. Instead, some women may perceive the sport as more accessible to them. Of three female spectators who mentioned motherhood in relation to derby, two, Chloe and Sophia, related more to derby players because of their status as mothers. Their identification with the players

was gendered, and the players' domestic roles allowed them to see themselves as potential derby players. Chloe explained that derby "seems more attainable. Like, these people are more like me. As opposed to, you know, baseball players or volleyball players on tv. Or even, even the football team in high school. I was there with the band, and we watched the football team, but that wasn't ever going to be me." However, in roller derby, the players are "about my age, they're, they do other jobs, they might have kids. They go grocery shopping, but every now and then they dress up and do this sport. [...] They just seem to me more approachable. More like normal people." While the language used here was "these people", she later explained "the *girls* that I see, seem to be more like me" (emphasis added). It is partially the amateur level that keeps derby attainable, but there is also a gendered element in this discussion. Players take on the persona by dressing up, and participate in a *women's* sport. Chloe did not relate to the high school football team because, while amateur, it is rarely associated with female players. Male athletes also have children, but it is the caretaker role, and the fact that they can do both (play a sport and care for their young) with which Chloe identified. It may be worth noting that most of the interview occurred with her small child on her lap.

Sophia also "can relate better to them rather than like body building exercise effects men, like these are all like real people that, I mean [...] they're like teachers and librarians, and mothers, and they're just like real people who have an uncommon hobby." This normalisation created, for Sophia and Chloe at least, an atmosphere of accessibility for heterosexual women, rooted in the idea that these women led similar lives and fulfilled other roles.

Although heterosexual women, including mothers and wives, do participate, Eva described how her friends expected the women to try to differentiate themselves from these other identities. Some of her friends:

are most surprised [...] that very few of us spend that much effort trying to be "the roller girl." [...] Like they thought they would be meeting women who would be expelling [sic] a great deal of energy showing how tough they are [...] and they're really I think surprised to meet my teammates [...] who are very proudly soft-spoken mothers

[laugh] and like they're like "It's just people playing this." I go "Yeah, well it is. [...] It's not it's not the anti-hero of the women."

The "anti-hero of the women" is an interesting phrase that implies that these individuals, before watching derby, assumed a nonequivalent relationship between derby players and "women." Mothers were not expected to be derby girls, but, if they are, they were expected to distance themselves from this identity on track. When they do not "transform" and become something other than a "soft-spoken mother," spectators are then confronted with the image of mothers playing a full-contact sport. Heteronormalisation, therefore, may problematise the stereotype of mothers, or the mothers in roller derby may still be viewed as exceptional, and unlike other mothers.

While the roles of mother and wife have altered over time, and are no longer considered the only option for white middle-class women, some respondents still presupposed that these roles have certain, determinable attributes. This distinction between the derby and non-derby mom was clear in Joanna Cattnach's article for the *Dallas Morning News* when she wrote of a ten-year old girl's exchange with her: "'Other moms cry when they get hurt,' Jacelin says, but not her mom. 'Our mom is awesome'" (2010: np). Jacelin sets a standard for "other moms," in contrast to derby mothers, and values her mother's toughness as unique. Distinguishing between derby and "other" moms poses the question of what is thought of as acceptable, or normative, behaviour for mothers. Alva, a spectator, also reflected on mothers who play derby as disrupting a norm: it "still blows my mind that some of these women are mothers" because "I didn't grow up with thinking that it was a motherly thing, like a thing that a mother could do." However, becoming a mother is not the only thing that creates social restrictions on women's behaviour; rather, Alva describes, how "in general, [...] women are raised to be polite and quiet, seen and not heard. [...] What's kind of cool about roller derby is that it um, it encourages women to not be those things. So it's an outlet for women to [...] kind of assert that they don't they don't have to fit that category." A woman who is "polite and quiet" is a more traditional image of mother than the one that the roller derby mother provides. Alva did not differentiate between derby moms and other moms, but instead discussed how

derby broadens options for women and showcases the flaws in stereotypical gender expectations.

The Austin Roller Moms, organised in 2006, play “by ‘mama rules’, which include no fighting, tripping, pushing, or any other kind of dirty playing. This won’t save you from some bruising, however, since we skate fast and block hard in roller derby, so you WILL fall down and feel the pain at some point” (Austin Roller Moms nd: np). Labelling the rules as “mama rules” establishes a certain code of conduct that is specifically for (and by) mothers, even though the women are still participating in the full-contact aspect of the sport. One of my respondents, Corinna, explained that motherhood is what prevents her from considering participation: “Probably because I’m a mom [...] I don’t know, I wouldn’t do something that would, could realistically, I could get hurt at.” This is not necessarily reflective of gender misconceptions, but the reality of being a caregiver for children. As such the Texas Rollergirls Recreational League<sup>134</sup> offers access to childcare: “This is the beauty of starting out as a ‘mom’s league’!!” (Texas Rollergirls nd: np).

Such gendered expectations exist, and it is not just particular types of contact, injury, and carer obligations that are considered a barrier to a mother’s participation, but the culture of dress as well. This is described in Blanche’s discussion of why she asked her daughter’s opinion on her joining derby:

Because I’m forty-seven, and [...] my mom has this saying, “Don’t be a sheep in lamb’s clothing.” You know act your age, basically. And you know, it is kind of funny to see an older woman dressing with like midriffs or something like that [...] and so for me, to be walking out of the house with a skirt, fishnet panty hose on [...] I didn’t want her to go “Oh geesh, oh my God, look at my mom.” [...] I didn’t want to embarrass her.

Although age is a factor, it was her daughter’s approval that Blanche sought, and her daughter whom Blanche was wary of embarrassing. Teasing out issues of age and motherhood is difficult, and it may be a matter of both that causes some

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<sup>134</sup> The all-mother league disbanded to join under the Texas Rollergirls Recreational League (Rec-N-Rollerderby) and is open to all women, not just mothers.



individuals' uneasiness. Dorothy plays in the same league as her daughter and joined partly due to her daughter's involvement and, at fifty-one years of age, because she "wanted to do it before I'm too old." Her family members had varied reactions:

Dorothy: My daughter loves it. She's really excited. But like my mom and my sisters and everybody and people at work think I'm crazy. But they think it's cool.

Q: Why do they think you're crazy?

Dorothy: Because they think I'll get hurt. Or it looks like you could get hurt or they're tough and all this stuff.

Their concern may be because of her age, status as a teacher, or because her personality is so markedly different from what is often, and – as suggested by players – wrongly expected of derby players. Her role as mother and former wife may have influenced why friends and family liked her derby participation. She said that they enjoyed it "probably because my daughter's involved too. But also just cause, um, [pause] well I've been single for quite a while, and I work real hard, and sometimes it's just like I didn't really have a social life either, now I got tons of things happening. And so, you know maybe they're happy I got, you know I can get out and meet some more people too." As illustrated in the interview, derby was an opportunity for her to be close to her daughter, while also allowing her a life of her own.

The wife and mother role, historically, has not been associated with independence. However, Margaret, a mother and a wife, used roller derby to mark her individuality and strength, distancing herself from the restrictive, traditional interpretation of mother and wife:

I needed something like outside of like my family [...] that was about me ... [roller derby is] very fulfilling for me, like it's very empowering, and, because my mother is very um very old-fashioned, like very, like my father handles all the finances, my mother will actually ask him for money. [...] She's always been a homemaker [...]

very old-fashioned, like you know, very like kind of subservient to my father and [...] I am not like that. I don't cook. I don't clean. I don't do laundry. [...] And I needed something that was kind of empowering, because I still felt that, like I always asking my husband, "Hey I want to go shopping," and it was very, um, like I needed something that made me feel like I am independent and I am strong.

Her husband and son were both supportive of her involvement in derby, but her in-laws disapproved of her "[non]domestic" activities and wanted her to be more traditionally "family-oriented." Part of their discomfort was due to the "alternative image that derby girls portray, you know, like I've shown up in you know fishnets and combat boots and you know my league wear, and my hair all crazy, and lots of makeup and they just kind of look at me like what a freak. [...] 'You don't look like a normal person, you don't act like a normal person.'" One may even add that she did not look, or act like, a normal *woman*. As mentioned by Alva, the derby woman described by Margaret breaks from the notion of women as invisible and passive, whose only role is that of the familial caregiver.

Blanche elaborated on Margaret's discussion<sup>135</sup> of finding independence in roller derby, and the potential conflict between mother/wife and derby player, by saying: "It's almost sometimes even like guilt, like I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing [...] fitting into the [...] stereotype." This sentiment was shared by Margaret, influenced by her in-laws' expectations. Although there is resistance to the derby girl as good mother, for Blanche, these roles were complimentary rather than conflicting. She cried when she described how she viewed herself as a derby girl, in relation to her other roles, and her daughter's perception of her based on her derby girl status:

She has her little MySpace [...] it said, "My dad is the smartest, strongest man I know. My mom is a [League name]<sup>136</sup> roller girl."  
[...] I can't believe I'm crying about it. [...] just that one sentence [...] says so much, that she gets it, she gets what it's doing to me [...] as a

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<sup>135</sup> Blanche and Margaret were interviewed together.

<sup>136</sup> The league name was removed to preserve anonymity.

woman, as a mother, as a wife, as a sister, everything. [...] just to say “roller girl” [...] [means] my mom is a strong woman, because she had to give descriptive words for her father [but] “My mom is a [League name] roller girl.” [...] She didn’t have to say anything else.

Existing within the category of roller girl has meaning. Without “say[ing] anything else,” the MySpace posting informed Blanche that her daughter not only saw derby as communicating various attributes like strength, but as affecting her other gendered roles - mother, woman, wife, and sister. While being a derby girl has the potential to conflict with her role as a mother (represented by the guilt that she may not fit the stereotype and concern that her daughter would be embarrassed by her), she described being a roller derby girl as influencing her other roles for the better, rather than being mutually exclusive or contradictory. Wife and mother were not stagnant identities that stood in isolation from Blanche’s other activities.

What has been thought of as acceptable for mothers and wives, and the meanings attributed to these identities, has changed. This transformation is especially evident in the roller derby community’s adaptation of the term “wife” to describe particular female friendships. Although the meaning of wifhood has changed, many respondents still communicate shared understandings of normative wifhood to explain the importance of derby wives. The role of a derby wife may conflict with one’s role as a real-life wife, which is indicated by the potential rift between heterosexuality and devotion to a women’s community. However, more often, the derby wife concept symbolises a way for women to unite as a supportive community of women.

### ***A Wife Less Ordinary: Heteronormativity and Derby Wives***

The “derby wife” relationship, unusual for the terminology used to describe it, may disrupt heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy in several ways: it (i) places value on women’s friendships and activities, (ii) represents a public acknowledgement of women’s love, respect, and/or commitment to one another, and may raise questions about lesbianism in doing so, (iii) challenges and adapts common understandings of the role of wife and applies them, primarily, to same-

sex friendships. Generally, the phrase “roller derby wife” is utilised to characterise friendship in the sport<sup>137</sup>; however, as Dolores explained: “I think a derby wife is different to everyone, to some a best friend[,] to some a partner in crime, to some just something you do.”

Other organisations also have friendships with familial terminology, like sororities with “big” and “little” sisters (Danielle), the military’s notion of “shield brothers” (Julie), and nineteenth-century female boarding school students’ references to older students as “Mother” (Smith-Rosenberg 1975: 19). I was particularly intrigued by how the term “derby wife” became the prevailing terminology within the roller derby community to describe female friendship, instead of other, more common, phrases like “best friend.” Although a few respondents used “sister” to describe other derby relationships (Lana, Nicola, Dolores), or even to define what a derby wife is (Sabrina), the use of “derby wives” breaks from metaphors that places the women as blood relatives, and instead uses a word linked to a marital and romantic relationship. “Derby wife” did not have to become the popularised way of expressing female friendship in roller derby, but something about the phrase resonated within the community.

I asked respondents to explain what the term meant to them; in return, I received numerous definitions with some commonalities. The significance of the term was not uniform, and I am wary of overanalysing, or politicising, the terminology by applying more meaning to the concept than other derby participants would. Rachel, who had no real attachment to the phrase, hinted at this possibility in answer to the question why she liked the term “derby wife”: “Never really thought about it. I guess you couldn’t have a big drunken wedding if it was your ‘derby best friend.’” When expressing what a derby wife meant to them, two respondents (Kathryn and Daria) sent sections of “The Origins of Derby Wives” as posted on the Rollercon website (Bomber nd). Some participants may not reflect on the concept of derby wives, but are involved because “it’s a tradition” (Rachel),<sup>138</sup> or because they prefer the term for other linguistic reasons.

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<sup>137</sup> This is perhaps an oversimplification of the meaning of a derby wife, and will be discussed at greater length throughout this chapter.

<sup>138</sup> Rachel even said that the reason why she and her derby wife had a derby wedding was because “We just did what everyone else did. Took part in the tradition.” The use of tradition to describe derby wives and weddings plays on the idea of heterosexual weddings as a tradition. While it may not seem long enough to count as a tradition, derby wife origins only began two years after the roller derby resurgence – and thus is significant in its length of time in comparison to the sport.

Tamlyn described “derby best friend” as sounding “weak,” while Megan claimed it sounded “lame,” emphatically stating that “DERBY WIFE IS THE BEST TERM EVER!!!!”<sup>139</sup> Others suggested that they accepted the term because it was already “ingrained” (Ashlinn) in the culture, or for the ease, as Sabrina states: “it’s universal so we all know what it means.” Daria did not question the phrase “because that’s what it’s called and I don’t have a problem with it” [sic]. Few queried or rejected the term derby wife, and this unquestioning acceptance of derby wives as part of the culture made studying it a difficult task. There appears to be an understood meaning, but one that is difficult to explain, yet easy, for most, to accept.

The cultural specificity of derby marriages was suggested by sixteen respondents who claimed that insiders have an exclusive understanding. Kim compared derby wives to a similar practice in rugby, but Dolores believed that the derby wife “relationship is completely unique, not occurring anywhere else in nature” [sic]. Kirsty, similarly, said that “outside the derby world, ‘derby wife’ does not translate well. But then, neither does a lot of derby.” Even if a derby union is difficult to understand outside the derby community, many mentioned very supportive, “understanding” (Sarah) or “amused” (Julie) responses from family and/or friends; although, for some, there was initial confusion. Both Kathryn and Alexandra had people in their lives who thought the relationship “cute.” Others had at least one family member or friend who “love[d]” (Megan, Liz, Kathryn and Yvette) the concept and/or the player’s wife or “courtesan” (Yvette). Megan’s friends and family “understood and they love the fact that I have someone to ‘have and to hold.’”

The significance of a derby marriage was speculated on by a few respondents while they were still derby outsiders. Kayleigh was most descriptive: she was “enamored by the concept. I had no idea what to think of it at first, but when I did a little research, I loved it. And I wanted a derby wife so badly that I felt like I was longing for it sometimes. I wanted that connection, that sisterhood with somebody.” As derby wives now appear to be an integral part of belonging to the derby subculture, some may move swiftly to obtain a derby wife as part of

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Millie also described it as a “tradition.” Sarah referenced the “traditional derby vows” (see “Dearly Beloved, Ladies and Broads...” nd: np).

<sup>139</sup> All derby wife interviews were conducted by email. These interview quotes are submitted without edits, aside from the exceptions mentioned in Chapter Three.

integrating into the community. Yvette explained that as “an almost institutionalized form of support [...] In our league it’s incredibly rare to not have a wife 6 months after induction. In the past 3 years a lot of new girls have proposed within their first month of officially being a league member and derby girl.” These quick engagements met with resistance by Ashlinn who saw them as diminishing the meaning of derby wives: “lots of ladies in my relatively new league quickly claimed derby wives, as if it was a way of quickly immersing themselves in derby and fitting in.” Quick engagements are not universal; some noted the length of time it took them to find a wife. Millie “waited 4 years to get married.” Dolores “waited patiently for 2 years to make sure I never needed a divorce.” Tamlyn joined those who “find the right wife” before marriage, since her first two wives were out of “convenience”, and both resulted in “divorce.” The divorces occurred in rather unconventional ways, marking derby marriage as different from marriage in the real world: one announced “in a program that she wanted a divorce” and the other used the medium of Facebook.

Participants use the language of marriage, whether it lasts “forever” or ends in “divorce,” to explain a phenomenon that no other phrase can seemingly capture. It is an often publically named commitment, which has a standing not necessarily akin to a “best friend.” Commitment does not mean derby players are forever tied to one another, as derby marriages may be comparable to legal marriage in their rate of success:

To me a wife or a best friend or whatever takes time to realize, so picking a “derby wife” who you're supposed to be “devoted” to forever and ever amen just seems silly to me. Half the girls who start derby end up quitting anyway (which is why a lot of people ask about derby divorces! haha) so our success rate is almost like modern-day traditional marriage rates! (Rachel).

In personal email communication with Injure Rogers, she told of Vagine Regime’s interest in conducting derby divorces at Rollercon. While it may never occur, the

initial plan was to have a sort of “anti-wedding” ceremony that looked like a funeral procession. We'd all wear black and do our own

ceremony across the street from the derby weddings at the same time. I envisioned picked [sic] signs, as well. I thought the whole thing was funny. Some skaters have told me that the idea makes them feel uncomfortable 'cause its a sort of public "fuck you" to another derby girl, but most people have found it to be entertaining or even outright hilarious (2010: np).

Rollercon, the Mecca for mass roller derby weddings, would then also provide participants with the option for a public dissolution of these arrangements. It is not necessarily a rejection of another player though, as it may be the case that the marriage ends because someone has left the derby community.

### **Derby Wife as Best Friend**

If roller derby wives are representative of female friendship, what does the term derby wife achieve that other terms do not? Comparisons between these relationships (friendships and wifhood) were noted by nineteen respondents, although others distinguished between the two. Of those who differentiated between these relationships, four (Liz, Fran, Ashlinn, Megan) described the derby wife relationship as a derby specific best friend, like "my BFF on skates"<sup>140</sup> (Liz), even if the friendship extended beyond derby. Others distinguished between their skater best friends, or derby best friends, and their derby wife (Danielle, Kathryn, Ani, Dolores). Sabrina utilised two other titles, best friend and sister, saying that a derby wife is like "having both."

These relationships were sorted hierarchically by some participants, and three respondents interviewed (Adele, Kayleigh, Sarah) established the relationship as having meaning greater than a best friend. Sarah, who initially disliked the term, "use[s] the term now because I don't know of another way to describe our relationship. It is more than just a best friend, I don't believe you can have the trust we have with each other with someone that has the title of best friend." Despite her seeing it as "more than," she explained to her "male friends that it's a way we express our BFF in Derby, my family got the BFF version as well. I would like to think they fully understand but you just never know." The cultural specificity of derby wives makes it difficult to explain the relationship to outsiders, and also marks the difficulty of linguistically capturing the relationship.

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<sup>140</sup> BFF stands for "best friends forever."

Saying “best friend” to describe the relationship is not appropriate as it does not “feel like a best friend adequately describes the level of commitment to one another that we have with derby and derby wives” (Adele). Kayleigh explained that the “bond feels different” from her connections with female best friends when she was younger:

I’m not sure if there’s an easy way to quantify it [...] the way the bond is made- solely over the sport. A lot of people say they’d do anything for their friends, but to me, the bond is richer in a sport like this. My derby wife jams, and I block; it’s my job to actually physically protect her from taking very nasty hits and potentially getting knocked down or hurt. I quite literally protect her with my body. That’s not the kind of bond that you get to test on a regular basis in “real life.”

The circumstances in which friendships are formed in roller derby are different from those in most day-to-day situations, but there may be parallels in other sports. In female rugby, there is a comparable relationship, but without the marriage rhetoric.<sup>141</sup> A participant in Carle and Nauright’s study made a statement similar to Kayleigh: “you are kind of putting your body in the hands of someone else” (1999: 61). Kayleigh and Carle and Nauright’s participant implied that this situation was unique to their respective sport. Carle and Nauright suggest that, beyond the full-contact aspect, female friendships in rugby “may also be enhanced due to the marginal nature of rugby as an acceptable female sporting practice within wider society” (61). Kirsty contended that it was “the intensity of derby,” the “consuming” nature that makes derby unusual in sport and it is this intensity that forms the foundation for the derby wife relationship. But not all utilise the wife role to explain friendship in derby. Caroline, for example, disliked the term derby wife: “it’s silly. If you have someone you’re close to, I call it a friend.”

Millie only married because it was important to her wife; whereas she previously equated the relationship to that of a clique:

My initial reaction to having a derby wife was akin to proclaiming you have a best friend like we all did in high school which I loathed. I was

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<sup>141</sup> Rather, I am unaware of rugby players using marriage rhetoric to describe their friendships.



not particularly fond of little pairs of skaters deciding they were exclusively together because to me I believed everything should be focused on the cohesiveness and friendship of the team and secondly, that of the league. I have now changed my mind as it is a personal choice of what level you want to take it to.

Instead of encouraging bonds among women, here it is described as the privileging of one relationship, which could have the effect of undermining community cohesion. Millie's concern was alleviated when she determined that these close friendships did not have to exclude others. Similarly, Tara, who did not participate in derby marriages, said that "For those on that team that have 'derby wives', they do act differently around other members of the team. They tend to be a little more exclusive with their time and conversations further isolating themselves from the team." No other respondents suggested that derby wives cause disunity. Instead, derby wives were seen by the majority of respondents to be about building a supportive community of women, particularly by having someone in the sport they could rely on continuously to encourage their derby involvement.

### **Derby Wife as a "Wife"**

It is interesting, given the feminist critique of the role of wife, that roller derby participants would choose to use this word to describe, what appears to be, an egalitarian friendship amongst women. Although some had not considered the meaning of using the word "wife," others were more analytical in their understanding of its linguistic significance. The commitment communicated by the wife role was one of the reasons why it was the preferred term. Additionally, the relationship was described as comparable to marriage, or the broader social meaning of wife beyond the implied commitment. For example, Alexandria said the term was "perfect, because she IS like your wife. You have a special relationship and connection much like a marriage." Megan, in a description of derby wives that mirrors traditional Christian wedding vows, emphasized the longevity of the relationship: "*Through sickness n health my DW<sup>[142]</sup> has been*

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<sup>142</sup> DW stands for derby wife.

there. Through my darkest times when I felt I had no one to rely on or talk to she has been there for me” [emphasis added]. Her family “love the fact that I have someone to *‘have and to hold’* through my derby days for now” [emphasis added]. She implied that wife had an intrinsic meaning by stating that “The term derby wife means exactly how it sounds.” She, and others, borrowed common understandings of wifehood as a way to explain the relationship. For example, Yvette explained the relationship to others by asking, “Well, you know what a wife is[,] right? Well, it’s like that but in your derby life.” The question she posed, in “laymens terms” [sic], assumes that “wife” is a universally known and understood label.<sup>143</sup> She seemed closest to her “derby courtesan,” another category she used to describe the female bonds in derby, and explained, in detail, the meaning of her courtesan; however, the explanation of her wife was more limited. She explained that her:

“derby courtesan” is my favorite person ever. We chose courtesan for a number of reasons. Foremost, she hated the idea of being a “mistress”, having actually been someone’s mistress before. The word seems dirty to her. Moreover, I love the classical ideal of the courtesan which fit our relationship to a T- I see her more often than my “wife” we’re out together socially quite a bit, and I rely on her for wisdom, insight, and advice.

She also detailed the meaning of a “derby bootycall” – the one she has fun with, without the commitment. Despite descriptive analysis of the meanings of these two roles, she assumed that I understand the intrinsic meaning of wife, or did not give the role much meaning, when she responded to my queries with: “My wife is my wife.” Even contrasting the limited description of wife with the more vibrant courtesan illustrates how wife has a common, understood, meaning.

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<sup>143</sup> However, this is not the case. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (2007: 9) note the legal differences in the meaning of wife amongst the international community. When in countries that recognize their marriage, they refer to one another as “wife”, but change the language to “ex-wife” when they move into a country that does not recognize same-gender marriage. When respondents note a common and shared understanding of the wife role, it is not in a legal sense and does not reflect the changing meaning of wife from country to country (or, in the United States, state to state). My respondents are only discussing the attributes associated with the wife role (like supportiveness). They do, however, compare legal marriage to derby wives in order to focus on the tradition of being a wife.

Others used common understandings of wife to explain what a derby wife is, but formulated these meanings in a more concrete way. Fran explained that one's derby wife "really is your 'rock', *in the same sense of the word 'wife'* - they are by your side, thick and thin" [emphasis added]. She continued: "When I say 'wife' I am referring to the marital sense of the word, having an obligation to someone to be by their side, help them through problems, be there when they win, lose or get hurt, they are your partner, all without the legal paperwork." Dolores described the relationship as "like a marriage," in part because of the level of commitment: "good times bad times but in the end we would fight to the death for each other and nothing is strong enough to tear us apart." Although Rachel did not compare it to marriage, she said that the term "makes sense for what it's used for. It alludes to commitment & all that good stuff." Julie borrowed from her experience of being a wife to describe a derby wife:

I'm not sure honestly if it is simply my experience based on being a wife that has this mean so much to me. But when i watch derby wives interact with one another, and interact with my own...i see a lot of similarities that was to my past marriage. The good and the bad, you are both committed to each other through derby. [...] "This is my derby partner", "This is my Best Friend from Derby" ....it just doesn't have the same ring to it as, 'This is my Derby Wife' From the onset, in my opinion, it shows that there is a bond that is deeper than most btwn those 2 skaters.

It was the value she placed on the wife role that enabled her to compare "derby wives" to a legal marriage. Those who also compare it to a legal marriage (Alexandria, Tamlyn and Ani) all had consistent and shared interpretations of wife, as a supportive and committed partner. The wife role was not tied to sexual practices at all. In fact, Tamlyn emphasized that she liked the phrasing "derby wife" because of "the asexualness that it portrays (at least to me)."<sup>144</sup> It could be the qualifying of "wife" with derby that creates a sense of asexuality, but it also

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<sup>144</sup> Unfortunately, Tamlyn did not respond to follow-up questions, so there is no further information provided to detail how she perceives it as asexual.

appears that the word wife did not connote a sexual meaning for many participants. Instead, they focused on wife as a supportive role.

The term derby wife does not, in practice, reflect the heteronormative and heteropatriarchal meaning of a “good” wife, which entails “servitude, subordination, self-sacrifice” (Kingston 2004: 3). Participants have altered the meaning of wife in a way that disrupts these assumptions. Laura’s description of what a derby wife does uses the imagery of the heteronormative housewife, but places it in a new context where women, as individuals, come first:

I like the term “derby wife” because while it echoes the 50s mindset of a housewife (someone to care for you and be there for you), at the same time, it completely rejects that notion. In the first place, we are both playing derby! We are both keeping full-time jobs (or going to school, or raising families.. [sic] what have you). We are independent women with our own lives who happen to also have wives.

Some people are married to their careers, we are married to derby. We are married to our friendships that come out of derby. Derby is about close female bonds--because where else are you going to find that once you leave school in a place that isn't Bible Study or Book Club or Quilting Circle?

Laura enjoyed the contradiction between the traditional and the acceptable woman (a 50s housewife or participant in Bible Study, Book Club or a Quilting Circle) and the women who play roller derby. Derby girls challenge the limitations placed on women, as players and by recognising the power of women’s friendships. Women’s bonds through derby marriage were important to both Laura and Kayleigh and this emphasis on women’s relationships appears to be at the root of their problematisation of heteronormative marriage. Kayleigh, a married heterosexual, claimed that “the idea of derby wives turns hetero-normative marriage on its head a little bit” in that:

A lot of people seem to have this idea that once you're married, your spouse is the person you're closest to, that you discuss everything with them, and they're the person that knows you the best. A derby wife

relationship runs very close to that, it just doesn't (usually) have the sexual component. It reminds me a lot of the importance of homosocial bonds between men, especially in past ages, like Shakespeare's time. In derby, it's very accepted, and even considered important, to have a relationship like that with someone else.

Kayleigh argues for recognition of the importance of close female friendships, despite others' expectations that a heterosexual marriage precludes such relationships. She also acknowledges the potential for a sexual relationship between wives, even though derby wives are not defined by such a relationship.

Although the emphasis on derby wives may be primarily on female friendships, Kirsty was in the unusual position of having a husband who also fulfilled the role of her derby wife. Kirsty defined these roles, husband and derby wife, as separate and, in some ways, mutually exclusive: "Our roles as derby wives often conflict with our roles as husband and wife. [...] There are clear times when we are derby wives and when we are husband and wife for us. Derby wives wins out a lot more for us." This conflict reflects how the derby wife role functions differently from both the husband and the wife role within their marriage. Even though referring to her real-life male husband, Kirsty emphasized the significance in her use of the term "wife." She chose to use the phrase derby wife in reference to her husband because "I respect modern derby as founded in a matriarchal system. There's a lot to this and it influences a lot of how the sport is represented and the values it holds. ... So couplings in derby as wives, and even the spawning of 'wife collectives' is something I embrace." This gendered concept of derby wives is useful then in honouring roller derby as a "matriarchal system," and in describing the gendered relationship she had with her husband when he is acting as a derby wife. Kasey Bomber, in explaining her belief that the role of derby wife should not belong to one's romantic partner, writes that

calling your romantic partner your derby wife trivializes the depth of your romantic relationship, and being romantically involved with your derby wife squanders some of the benefits of that relationship as well. Why combine these two incredible things into one, when you have the option of picking a separate person to fill each role? (Bomber 2011: np).

Despite her suggestion, she acknowledges the diversity of marriages, stating: “Ultimately, it's whatever you need to get you through this derby experience as emotionally intact as possible.” Responses like Kayleigh and Laura’s appear similar to what Kasey Bomber is saying – that there is value in primary relationships outside of marriage. This is not questioned by Kirsty, who clearly considered her husband/derby wife’s role in relation to their romantic relationship, friendship and derby wife relationship. Kirsty asked her husband to be her wife because she “went back to the very foundation of what I believed a derby wife to be: someone who had your back - always. My husband is my derby wife not because he's my husband but because in life he truly is my best friend and in derby he really is a skater.” It becomes a celebration of all the roles her husband/derby wife occupies.

Tara objected to the term derby wife because she saw it as a trivialisation of her legal marriage and her relationship with her husband. This seems akin to Kasey Bomber’s desire for the concept to not devalue romantic relationships. In order to respect her romantic relationship, Tara made a conscious decision to use the phrase “derby sister” to describe a potentially equivalent relationship as a derby wife. She did not deny the value of female friendships, but “wife” had a significant meaning that could not transfer from her marital life to the derby community:

I have a husband of two years and will always be his wife[,] derby or not. I believe the term is derogatory [to] our husbands. I was married before I started derby, and he has supported me more than anyone along the way. He hears all the bitching and crying. He knows when I'm frustrated or hurt. He runs my baths with Epsom salts or makes me ice packs. He's an excellent personal coach and therapist. I LOVE my derby sisters and wouldn't trade them for the world, but I know that my husband will ALWAYS be there.

The bond between husband and wife symbolised, for her, an everlasting commitment that derby relationships did not, and could not, resemble. The term wife for others, though, signified the same level of commitment found in a legal marriage. Derby wives may not necessarily follow legal marriage’s monogamous

norms, as six respondents had, at some point, more than one derby wife (others had other variations, including mistresses). However, there were two respondents who mentioned a “claim on” (Ashlinn) or possessiveness over one’s derby wife. Nicola, despite having two derby wives, said: “Derby wife is a commitment to one another, derby friends is what we all are derby sisters is what we all are.. [sic] My Derby Wife Is MINE. Almost like a possession.” This degree of possessiveness was unusual, but is similar to the idea of a wife becoming one’s possession in traditional marriage

Although Tara’s husband found the term “to be a bit degrading,”  
Kayleigh’s husband was not

bothered by the concept. He is the head referee for our league, so he’s been around the sport as long as I have, so he’s very used to the culture. *My derby wife actually made sure that it was okay with him that she proposed* before she did it, but he’s been okay with it from day one, and he understands that she’s there to support me, and I her [emphasis added].

Kayleigh did not know why her wife checked with her husband, but was told by her husband that it was to make sure their derby marriage would not “bother” him. Perhaps the potential friction between wife roles may have instigated the derby wife to check with her husband, as further discussed below.

### ***Lesbian Continuum***

The potential conflict alluded to here is congruent with the idea that a heterosexual marriage is supposed to be the primary relationship in a woman’s life. By extension, the description of derby wives may answer some of the concerns feminists have regarding heterosexuality as a detriment to feminism. Feminist debates on the role of heterosexuality in supporting heteropatriarchy, illustrated in more detail in Chapter Two, are partially rooted in the fear that heterosexual relationships impede women’s progress by mandating that women place men first and women’s commitments to one another and their equality last. Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum” was, in part, an attempt to recognise heterosexual women’s commitment to women and create unity amongst a

fragmented feminist movement that resisted, in different circles, lesbian or heterosexual inclusion. Following Rich's original article, many, including Rich, have argued that it is not enough for women to have a "women-identified experience"; in order to exist on the lesbian continuum, one must also question the privileges of heterosexuality. One cannot rely on women's friendships as representative of women's solidarity if these friendships are qualified to ensure that one's heterosexuality is not being undermined, and homophobia<sup>145</sup> and other forms of discrimination are maintained. I am not suggesting that the term "lesbian continuum" is the most useful in describing the significance of concepts like derby wives. Taking a great deal of poetic license to Rich's lesbian continuum, I think that a modern interpretation (e.g. derby wives) enables gendered support for women in sport that is not necessarily contingent upon the participants being female – although the majority appear to be. Rather, men and women alike can engage in "wife"-like behaviour that shows same-gender love and affection across genders, without necessarily identifying as heterosexual, gay, bisexual, lesbian or queer.

I am interested in the application of a more general theory behind the lesbian continuum. What is important about the lesbian continuum in this context is that the ideas expressed are pertinent in understanding reactions by outsiders to derby wives as well as the continued stigmatisation and construction of lesbian invisibility, the lack of vocabulary to capture the relationship between women, and potential rifts between the derby wife and romantic partners. The phenomenon of derby wives and the sport in general lends itself well to testing Nelson's application of the lesbian continuum to female athletes. Beginning with declarations of love for their derby wife, I will discuss the relationship between roller derby, lesbianism, stigma and celebrations of diversity.

### **Love for Other Women**

Mariah Burton Nelson contrasts the acceptability of male athletes who discuss publicly their love for fellow teammates and coaches with the women who are less able, socially or publicly, to do so. Although homophobia is a problem in male sport, she cites a male sportscaster who said "I love him" (1994: 38) when

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<sup>145</sup> Homophobia is not the only issue, but was featured in the debates amongst feminists. Classist, racist, ablist, and transphobic actions, amongst others, are equally problematic.



referring to a coach. She asks: “When was the last time we heard a woman publicly declare her love for another woman or team of women?” (1994: 38). In roller derby, and most notably through the concept of derby wives, such declarations occur frequently. Dorothy, a player, explained how those in derby, and not just derby wives, are “loving because they hug everybody and they tell you they love you sometimes, but they’re just so friendly and they welcome even me.” All-female derby itself, and not just wife relationships, are described here as providing a supportive community of women.

Proclamations of love for one’s derby wife are perhaps the most public and obvious examples of love within roller derby. T-shirts are sold that enable participants to wear their allegiance to their derby wives: “I claim her loudly and proudly, we call each other ‘wifey,’ etc. I just bought an ‘I love my derby wife’ t-shirt that our league sells, and plan to have her name emblazoned on the back” (Kim). Some t-shirts do play on the idea that a strong commitment between women implies lesbianism, like a Vagine Regime shirt that reads “I’m not gay, but my derby wife is.”<sup>146</sup> Nancy Finley also mentions this shirt in her brief discussion of derby wives, and says, more generally in response to the concept, that the “supportive” role of derby wife “evokes conventional roles but disconnects them from heterosexual relations, and even sexuality” (2010: 375). While the derby wife relationship does not necessarily have a sexual component, it is understood through manipulating a “conventional role” within heterosexual discourse. This connection, therefore, is not completely removed. Through acknowledging, and showing solidarity with, a lesbian existence, the wearer of the Vagine Regime shirt simultaneously asserts her own heterosexuality<sup>147</sup> and brings her heterosexuality into doubt.

The derby wife relationship, as an example of “primary intensity between and among women” (Rich 2003: 27) and love for other female players, could exist as part of the lesbian continuum: “No one within the sport will judge you for saying that you ‘love’ this person, and no one will act like a bond like that automatically has to be sexual” (Kayleigh). Tara, who did not like the phrase derby wife and did not use it, still used “love” to describe her “derby sisters.” The

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<sup>146</sup> This shirt is sold by Wicked Skatewear and can be viewed at their website. Available at: <<http://wickedskatewear.com/imnotgaybutmyderbywifeis.aspx>>. [Accessed 2 January 2012].

<sup>147</sup> In an alternative reading, the wearer could be bisexual. However, as it says “gay” instead of “lesbian,” I would interpret the use of “gay” to mean any sexuality other than heterosexual.

positioning of women's friendships is a priori in roller derby; Megan explained that she "love[s] my team mates but my wife is my top priority besides myself...then again I do have a derby mistress lol what can I say I like to have my cake n eat it too lol."

Sarah, who was concerned about others interpreting the relationship as lesbian, had embraced "derby wife" as a way to express her relationship, openly saying: "I do have love for my wife and she has love for me." Derby had given her "a better understanding of not just having a derby wife but also the concept of having truly close female friends." Several others discussed the "love" that exists in the relationships among derby wives (Lana, Sabrina, Kim), and, ideally, the "love and sportswomanship" in derby (Daria). Stories of meeting derby wives and the friendships that developed from them were stories of love and affection. Some illustrated complete acceptance: "[My derby wife] befriended me no questions asked. It didn't matter if I was fat, ugly, short, skinny, black, white, gay or straight" (Sabrina). Liz hoped that this acceptance could transcend into the non-derby world: "Derby has a place for all no matter what you look like or who you like etc. It makes you think if a little community can then the big world can get over it too." Similar to that, women's derby participation is a microcosm of women's empowerment in larger society; acceptance in roller derby may give hope for acceptance beyond roller derby as well.

Others' stories of meeting their derby wife reflected almost a love at first sight narrative: "As the fresh meat came in I feel for one almost right away, the way she skates her big smile, big heart and her laugh. All reasons someone feels a connection to another human being." Perhaps the most elaborate description was provided by Dolores, who said:

"Why her?" [My derby wife] is the most powerful, strong, resourceful woman I've ever met. I can't explain in words how much she means to me and how amazing she is. Completely selfless in all things she would give a stranger her last bit of food if she though[t] they needed it. She puts her children and friends in front of herself and never expects a thing in return. We just had our 2 year anniversary and looking back I don't know if I would have made it through those years without her shoulder to lean on.

The celebration of derby wives (or these types of female relationships) is a feminist act. Those who are vocal proponents of the concept claim the value of their love for other women and the importance of supporting one another in all aspects of their lives. The language of marriage to describe what a derby wife means to them, as more than or different from best friend, is yet an example of the derby wife as representative of love for other women. There is no doubt that for many of these women the derby wife relationship was incredibly important, and, overwhelmingly, they were committed to it and other women.

This commitment to other women, and the language used to describe it, is sometimes confused with lesbianism. The theme of suspected lesbianism was present in my initial interviews with derby players and spectators, but for reasons other than those described in the derby wife interviews. The association of lesbianism with derby wives was not based on women's participation in sport, but the attribution of lesbianism to strong female friendships. These themes are intertwined, but are important to distinguish. It is not just the fact that women are playing a full-contact sport, the players' body types, or their clothing, but also the friendships within derby that instigate questions of lesbianism.

### **“We are All Raging Lesbos”**

According to Liz, it is not just the word “wife” but the relationship between women that may have others suspecting a lesbian undertone. When others “see people that actually give a shit about each other and occasionally shout hey wifey people wonder...lol.” The use of the term derby “wife” has caused confusion, with some respondents revealing that their or others' initial reaction to the phrase was to assume that players with derby wives are lesbian. Forty-six percent of respondents had some experience that connected the term derby wife to lesbianism, or, at least, queerness.<sup>148</sup> Within these recollections are claims of either derby wives' platonic nature or recognition of the potential for a sexual component.

It is important to understand that, according to my respondents and the originator of the term, Kasey Bomber, derby wives are not defined by a romantic

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<sup>148</sup> This does not include those who discuss their significant other's relief, or worry, regarding their derby wife's sexuality, which relates to lesbianism but not in the same vein as the others discussed. This also does not include the interviews from spectators and other derby players who discuss the general expectation that derby players are lesbian.

or sexual relationship (though some, like Sarah, Ashlinn, Kim, Sabrina and Alexandria, thought it could involve that). Although it may occur, there is nothing inherently sexual in a derby wife relationship. However, there is at least one occurrence of a respondent who was involved with her female derby wife. The desexualisation of the practice, as well as the acknowledgement that some derby wives may be sexually or romantically involved, is a problematic balance. It is important to challenge presumptions of lesbianism when it is meant to deride women's bonds, whilst recognising a lesbian existence. As Kim stated: "S/he is probably not your lover, though it's not unheard of." Sabrina was more specific, even though she still spoke abstractly: "some girls actually have romantic relationships with their wives which for the most part end in divorce or that is when you see the [derby] mistresses' come out, the smart ones are platonic."<sup>149</sup> Ashlinn distinguished between the meaning she gave to a derby wife, and the meaning others might give to her: "To me it means a derby best friend but I get the feeling it could also mean a best friend you may be sexually attracted to." She offered examples in her league of "previously 'straight' girls hitting on each other and sleeping with each other. A few were derby wives. So, I concluded that sometimes that can be part of being a derby wife, if you happen to have bisexual tendencies." These occurrences are all either conjecture or hearsay, but one respondent pointed to direct experience of "a somewhat sexual [same-gender] relationship with my now ex-derby wife." This does not mean that the derby wife relationship was sexual, as relationships may be compartmentalised, so that even if the two have a sexual relationship, it is not necessarily part of their definition of a derby wife. For example, the respondent who had a relationship with her ex-derby wife did not mention a sexual or romantic relationship in her definition of the relationship.

If derby wives are not romantically involved, however, then derby wives remain:

a category of relationship that is unique and unifying across any sexual orientation. There's already a name and definition for someone you are romantically involved with - and that's been around for

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<sup>149</sup> Several skaters mentioned derby mistresses, and other forms of female friendship in roller derby. Derby mistresses are defined differently by those who mention them. For the case of this quote, Sabrina "guess[es] a derby mistress is a girl who you also get along with but can be danger if she would interfere. Or someone who is just really hot gay or straight that you just think wow if I was single I would so do you."

centuries. If the concept of derby wives had been created from romantic notions, there are so many derby girls out there who wouldn't be enjoying it now. I know plenty of rollergirls and boys who are both gay and straight who are in committed relationships, but who love the opportunity to bond in a different way with their derby wives/husbands [...] None of the philosophical stuff really came along till later (Bomber 2011: np).

In this way, the phrase derby wife may achieve what the lesbian continuum does not. It recognises a powerful relationship that does not trivialise the meaning of lesbian or limit women's participation. However, perceived segregation of the concept from romantic ties enabled some participants to negate a lesbian existence, and part of what was positive about the concept of a lesbian continuum was that it forced an investigation of the lesbian existence. For most respondents, derby wives were not involved in a sexual relationship, but, for outsiders, the typical association of "wife" with a romantic or sexual relationship may serve to associate the concept with such a relationship.

Although not integral to anyone's definition of a derby wife, three players (Sarah, Kathryn and Megan) all initially described their reaction to derby wives as having something to do with lesbianism. While Megan later explained that she did not think it described lesbian couples, her first reaction was to wonder if "I was gonna have to be part lesi lol."<sup>150</sup> A few other responses distanced the concept from lesbianism by explaining it as a relationship between best friends. Kathryn was told that "derby wives are like best friends" but initially "thought it was a lesbian thing.. [sic] I was so stupid to the derby world." Her statement implies the cultural specificity of derby wives to the derby community, and a distinction between best friends and a "lesbian thing." Sarah similarly assumed that derby wives necessarily "included some type of sexual relationship as well as a friend," and "didn't like the term Derby Wife at first because like anyone on the outside looking in, I thought it had a mean[ing] that now I don't believe it has." She was:

uncomfortable with people I didn't know thinking we was lovers. I held a very pronounced position in the community, now I'm unemployed and so deep into roller derby I don't care about my public image as much as I did. I'm sure there are some derby marriages that

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<sup>150</sup> "lol" is an acronym for "laughing out loud."

extend beyond “best friend” and extend into sexual relationships. In our case we are just best friends and protectors of each other on and off the track.

She now explains to outsiders that “derby wife” is used to encapsulate the friendship she has with her derby wife, and despite initial worries about being labeled a lesbian, she no longer “care[s] what anyone thinks about the term” because of unemployment and her own immersion in the culture. It was not the friendship that concerned Sarah, but the terminology chosen by the subculture that she and, she suspected, others associated with lesbianism. Nancy Finley found in her research that the longer a player is part of the derby community, “the less likely” she will “distance” herself from “lesbianism” (2010: 379). This was demonstrated in my own research. For example, Sarah, who did not use the term at first to protect her reputation, eventually stopped caring what outsiders thought. However, distancing oneself from lesbianism can occur in a multitude of ways, and it does not always have to be overt. It can be a subtle distancing, where individuals explain, without even being asked, how the relationship is not a lesbian one.

Some respondents indicated that the use of the term “wife,” combined with the sport of roller derby, might influence outsiders’ perspective on the meaning of derby wives.<sup>151</sup> Megan’s friends and family “love” her having a derby wife, but “they thought I was turning gay at first” because:

[the] first thing one hears is “wife” so they were like not only are u active and in sports ur gay? lol with a little explaining they got the picture.but yeah they though it was strictly becuz of derby. but when I started derby everyone of my friends assumed i was gay because of the sport i played. when really n truly most derby women are happily married with kids or just happy with a boyfriend. just becuze we do derby doesn’t mean weare all raging lesbos.

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<sup>151</sup> Of course, this is not always the case. Women’s close friendships can be mistaken for more intimate relationships. Liz, for example, explained that one couple, new to the league, assumed that she, a heterosexual, was in a relationship with her derby wife, who was gay. This may not have to do with the terminology of derby wife, but an assessment of their close bond.

She affirmed the heterosexuality of most players, which may be true; WFTDA demographics show that seventy-six percent of surveyed skaters identify as heterosexual. But assertions of heterosexuality could be problematic if they are invalidating lesbianism or reinforcing stigma. “Raging lesbos,” while surely not meant to deride lesbians, does seem an odd comparison to the description of “derby women [who] are happily married with kids.”

Kayleigh’s family was “uncomfortable about the term” and her ring exchange with her wife. They feared that it meant she had developed a “weird’ polyamory thing.” It was the terminology, “wife,” that caused confusion:

I also think that people add sexual connotations to the word “wife” and “husband.” When you say that you have a “derby wife,” they tend to automatically assume that you're sleeping with her, and that the sport really is full of lesbians like some people think. It's sort of like they get uncomfortable because they haven't seen how the relationship works.

The discomfort felt towards potential lesbian relationships signifies the continued stigmatisation of lesbianism, and has led to some negotiation where respondents emphasize the asexual nature of derby wife relationships. The confusion of female friendships with lesbianism caused Laura, who is a lesbian, to choose alternative phrasing to describe the relationship to her mother, to whom she explained “that derby wives were platonic (‘it’s your derby best friend’).” The friendship and bond between women was not in question, as with different phrasing Laura’s mother “warmed to the idea.” Instead, it was the association with marriage, and the meaning of husband and wife, that caused concern, as well as Laura’s own sexuality:

Many people think of the term husband and wife in the old-fashioned sense that can only mean a church and sex and procreating. Even in marriages, this image is outdated. I'm a lesbian--any marriage that I have is not going to involve a church or a man. My mom is just adjusting to THAT idea, and then I throw the term “derby wife” in her face, and she is confused. Derby, for her, is already something strange and sexual--why would someone want to go out and skate in the first

place, it is dangerous, but why would they want to do it wearing little clothing, and why would they want to hit other people? The entire concept is foreign. Adding the idea of wifery or marriage only compounds the idea. Changing the dialogue to “my best friend in derby” helped her to understand the concept better. Now, like my sexuality and other things she doesn't quite understand, we just don't talk about derby wife-dom. [My derby wife] is my “friend” and that is it. Which is fine with me. I'm not going to press the matter on a basis of terminology.

Ani liked the term derby wife, but said “there is already a perception of derby being very lesbian heavy in sexual orientation so wife can be confusing for people and requires extra explanation.” When asked to extrapolate, she said:

about 2/3 of people I talk to who are only vaguely aware of derby immediately ask about how much of the league/sport is lesbian/bi. It's a common curiosity people new to the sport have, not necessarily in a judgmental way. Most people I talk to know I'm straight, but ask how far reaching our “support” for each other goes. I typically classify her as my Person. She's my person I naturally have a solid chemistry with and our relationship is based on mutual support. It's not physical off the track aside from hugs and maybe some ass slaps/motorboating. People either get it or concede that it's beyond them and move on to another topic.

Motorboating,<sup>152</sup> in particular, does generally have a sexual connotation, and it is difficult to imagine this as an asexual relationship. This is not meant to imply that it fits within current constructions of sexuality, or as a sexualisation of an activity that the respondent says is not sexual. However, this example by Ani also illustrates the potential problems of understanding these physical and emotional relationships outside of a sexual context. Another reading of motorboating within

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<sup>152</sup> Motorboating is defined in Krausch's work as “when a person puts their face in the cleavage of a large-breasted woman and vibrates their lips to make the sound of a motorboat, shaking the head from side to side” (2008: 8).



the sport is evident in Krausch's research, where, in a conversation with two skaters, she was told how

another skater just did her first "motorboat." Orphan nods and laughs, apparently remembering [...] Dollface says that she thinks "it's derby" that made this woman finally comfortable enough to do a motorboat (2008: 8).

This is described within the context of an all-female community that allows "rollergirls [to] challenge the norms of what women are supposed to do" (Krausch 2008: 8). These interactions appear to occur separately from sexual identity and are not necessarily indicative of their sexual identification. Gloria Wekker's discussion of the "mati work" – "in which women have sexual relations with men and with women, either simultaneously or consecutively" (2006: 1-2) – also disrupts Western tradition of defining sexual identity as the central focus in sexual activity:

Conceiving of same-gender sexual behavior, embodied in the mati work, in terms of 'identity' inscribes and reproduces Western thought categories with the legacy of dichotomy, hierarchy, and permanency, thus distorting a phenomenon that is empirically experienced in quite different terms. "Homosexualities" cross-culturally have in common same-sex sexual acts, but these acts are also critically different and contextually conceived in multiple ways (2006: 193).

Although Wekker's study locates the mati work as a form of sexual expression, her analysis is useful in understanding the derby wife relationship because it suggests looking beyond binary constructs. While respondents identify as derby wives, there are no prescribed actions attached to this meaning. Motorboating, among roller derby participants, may be an action allowed by one's identity as a derby wife, but removed from other identity praxes, and like Wekker's analysis, cannot be understood by trying to place it within sexual identities – even when there is an appearance of playing with same-gender sexuality among women.

The lack of comparisons for strong female friendship, rooted in a full-contact sport and subculture, means that outsiders may equate the relationship with lesbianism as a way to understand it, or because of the marital relationship intrinsic to the word wife. Several (Liz, Sarah, Adele, Megan, Kayleigh, Yvette, Ashlinn, Daria and Ani) experienced responses from others who thought the term

implied a sexual relationship amongst the derby wives. In a few instances, there were reactions that resituated a potentially sexual relationship between women to a relationship revolving around men. Ashlinn, who did not have a wife, described her husband's reaction to the concept: "My husband chuckled-not sure why-probably thinking like a pervert!! Male friends think it means being bisexual and female friends do not say much." Similarly, Megan said that if she had a boyfriend, he "would want to try something foolish lmao."<sup>153</sup> Her belief was rooted in her experience with her male friends who "just wanna be kinky about everything. i was telling my guy friend about my DW n hwas like 'well we can have a party with the 3 of us' lol men are just horncalls like that" [sic]. In the two cases, Ashlinn and Megan describe situations where it is assumed that not only are the women attracted to one another, but men would be welcome as well.

The sexuality of respondents' derby wives was important to respondents' partners. Kim, who identifies as queer, explained that her male partner:

may have been relieved that my derby wife was very straight. He never had to worry about any accidental make-out sessions or anything, ha. Even our wedding kiss was very chaste. But if he was worried about me being tempted by the ladies, he'd probably object more to derby in general, not just my having a derby wife. Luckily, he does not.

Instead of mentioning sexual relationships, Lana and Nicola both referred to "romantic" relationships as a concern for their significant others. Lana said "My fiancée is pretty laid back, It's not like I'm having romantic affairs with my derby wife, we're just great friends, like sisters." Nicola explains that her husband "really didn't have much to say as long as it never becomes romantic than I'm sure he doesn't mind." These respondents may have meant that their partners would have been concerned about a sexual relationship, so the differentiation between these two was important. A romantic relationship is not necessarily sexual, but could just be a love for one another.

Adele was a married heterosexual, whose derby wife is a lesbian. Her husband "is accepting of anything derby-related because he loves the sport so

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<sup>153</sup> lmao stands for "laughing my ass off."

much! His only concern is that my wife is a single lesbian and he keeps telling me that OUR partnership is legal and binding and that I can't turn into a lesbian for her." While accepting now, he was initially concerned about the relationship, and Adele believed this would have arisen purely on the basis of their friendship, and without derby. At first:

He pretty much just said that she only wants to be my derby wife because she wants to be my for-real wife. I told him that there are plenty of straight girl wives in derby and asked if he thought it was the ghetto booty she was into. (I'm pretty pear shaped and quite the hipchecker,.[sic]) He still teases me about spending time with my wife instead of my husband and I tell him he is welcome to join us at practice.

Adele managed the issue of her husband's concern in several ways. She responded by offering to include him in derby as a referee (a position that Kirsty refers to as "homemaker"), and by emphasizing the heterosexuality of many derby wives, thereby pointing to the platonic, or heterosexual, nature of the same-gender relationship. Sabrina's husband was concerned about her derby wife being a lesbian, but it is unclear exactly what he was worried about: "my husband got a little scared when she moved in. One can never be sure what would happen. But like I said we are family now so he is fine with my wife." His fear stemmed from her derby wife being gay:

He was probably scared to find all out orgies going on upstairs or to come home and find 5 naked girls in the pool, which has happened, he would be like oh no don't go to the kitchen with out a shirt on so she doesn't think your hot. Silly stuff that worked it self out in the matter of 2 weeks. But she needed a place to stay and we really didn't know much about her outside of derby. All I knew was my wife needed a bed.

These issues were not limited to heterosexual participants. Three lesbian respondents described their partners' reactions to derby in similar ways as some heterosexual respondents. Dolores, age 25, thought the heterosexuality and age of

her derby wife might have influenced her partner's lack of jealousy: "she's a 40 year old straight woman. hard to be jealous when she's not interested in my anatomy ;)." Both Dolores and Rachel had dated fellow derby players, who thus understand the concept; although both had also dated those outside the community. Rachel's former partner

was jealous of my derby wife 'cause it had the word "wife" in it and for no other good reason. At the time my derby wife and I lived 400 miles away from each other, my derby wife is straight, and we've been friends since we were 2 years old so its not like the "wife" label changed anything. My ex was a very, very insecure girl and the word "wife" was enough to trigger jealousy/insecurity in her.

Keeping all else consistent, Rachel believed her former girlfriend was bothered most by the label wife, which suggests a particular connotation to their female friendship. What the term wife communicated is unclear; it could have been a reaction to the high valuation of the friendship or the fear of a sexual component. Although the meaning of wife for Rachel's ex is uncertain, the word wife communicated something significant.

Wary of outsiders' interpretations of the concept derby wife, Daria's former league banned it – an overt example of distancing members of the sport from lesbianism. The founders of the league "asked that the term, the act, the whole thing not be done. They did not want anyone to participate in this. They were not going to 'allow' it in their league. And went so far as to say.. [sic] 'we don't want to be seen as just a bunch of Dykes'!" Interestingly, Daria explained that it was not just the term, but the act of having a derby wife that was also banned. If the act of a derby wife is female friendship, then one must wonder how they proposed to implement this – and why outsiders' interpretation of it as lesbian outweighed the benefits of a named and valued female friendship. Daria's experience, fortunately, was unusual amongst my respondents, but it does show how homophobia and the issues that existed during the era of Betty Friedan's "lavender menace" are still relevant.

Daria feared this homophobia would stigmatise the young women in the accompanying "Jr. league." She was not concerned with the rejection of the

concept of derby wife, but the way that lesbianism was demeaned by the league founders. She described roller derby, as a whole, as an accepting community, arguing that the founders' homophobic actions were outliers, and certainly "NOT DERBY!" Daria explained that heterosexuality, or at least not being lesbians, was important for sponsorship:

The founders also receive money from a very very Christian reform group. If that group had any clue that a player or they were gay the group would not sponsor. Sick really. Perpetuation [sic] of a serious social issue....so, as much as it sucked because I'm a killer player and have all but stopped skating.. [sic] I took a stand a said no thanks. This dyke is out...

If the phrase "roller derby wives" becomes better known outside the derby community, one might wonder if leagues will still have concerns about losing sponsorships. Daria shared her experience in the hopes that it would:

educate and eliminate any confusion about the truth of the 'derby wife' and what it means and stands for. If I could in anyway [sic] share my story or what it is I have seen or been faced with regarding a stereo type or poor image. As you are probably aware, it has nothing to do with Homosexuality and everything to do with friendship and loyalty and respect as a player and leader.

There are several parts to Daria's story. She encouraged openness and acceptance of lesbians in derby, recognising the importance of "out" role models, but also urged recognition of the separation between derby wives and homosexuality.

If someone decides to distance themselves from lesbianism, it may be because of the continued stigmatisation of lesbians. This continued discrimination was evidenced by two players, in the original field work, who faced obviously hostile comments based on derby's association with lesbianism. Imogen's former boyfriend harassed her about going to practice to "lick pussy." Imogen's ex derided the activity out of jealousy, and focused his anger on the community of women within derby by using lesbianism in a way that undermined her athleticism. The remark illustrates the way women's communities can be derided

by associating their relationships with lesbianism, as they also deride lesbian relationships. Deborah described a similarly negative encounter with one of her coworkers:

[he said] “Oh you know, you just like to go up there and get your hands all over girls.” [...] “Oh let me know if you grab a handful [at practice].” And I was like “A handful of what?” Like, “Oh, you know, just a handful.” And I was like “A handful of what?” Like I just kept getting angrier and angrier and um, yelled at him a little bit and was like you can’t say that, and then like the next day I went to him and was like, that was really crossing a [line]. [...] That really got me mad. It still like gets me upset to think about it um. Because. You know all my coworkers know that that I do roller derby and um, I had a few of them come to the bouts and they’ve always been really supportive and um, I felt like they they had like a image of me of like a tough girl who was like could get the job done, um, but to like hear one of them had this kind of sexualised image of me like that. That’s just something that I really wasn’t prepared for.

He took what was empowering and important to Deborah, and trivialised it. Instead of her coworker discussing her strength and position as subject, he reduced her to the position of sexual object.

Andrea lists lesbianism as one of many misconceptions about derby girls, along with “that we’re not very smart,” lowbrow, “tattooed white girls.” According to a bartender at Rollercon, in 2009, “eighty percent of the derby girls are lesbians” (Blanche). But calling derby players lesbians is not necessarily meant pejoratively. Imogen described reactions to players as “super hot lesbians” because of the attire worn, unlike the historical association of sport with the unattractive or threatening lesbian. It is purportedly their attire that shifts them to the realm of fantasy lesbian, the object of men’s desire, instead of the lesbian who, as the “other,” is sexually unavailable to men. Imogen’s analysis of spectator responses to the attractive lesbian aligns with the idea that with an increased feminine, and [hetero]sexy presentation, even potentially otherised individuals can achieve mainstream acceptance. Similarly, Ellie told of responses that both queer

the players and heterosexualise them for the male viewers: “[Derby outsiders think] it’s all just a bunch of lesbians and [...] conversely, [...] they’re also [...] like ‘It’s not a real sport because they’re all just trying to like look hot for guys.’ I don’t know how you do those both at the same time.” Because of the combination of feminine, sexualised clothing with the full-contact aspect of the sport, roller derby is a complicated phenomenon for individuals to assess. It does not fall neatly into the categories of sports traditionally associated with heterosexuals or lesbians. Even though female athletes’ sexuality may be more often questioned than male athletes’, it is not necessarily homophobic for spectators to question players’ sexuality. What is problematic is when these questions are used to demean, objectify, or make invisible whole populations of women.

An interaction between Marilyn and Imogen illustrates how questions of lesbian demographics in derby may be used to delegitimize the women’s community.

Marilyn: I don’t know if it’s negative or not but [...] [a] common question that I get asked [...] “What’s the ratio of lesbians on your team?” You know? That’s just a weird question. But any time you give women any sort of power, [...] any time you bring women together and give them power, men are going to try and tear that shit down. It’s just normal.

Q: Why do you think that is?

Marilyn: Genetics. Society. Societal pressures. It’s just written in the you know, it’s like written in the-

Imogen: They’re afraid all of our periods are going to align and we’ll take over the world.

Marilyn: If women took over the world I mean, it would really freak men out. So, they’re scared. They’re scared.

Enquiring as to the percentage of lesbians on a team is not necessarily negative, but is still framed from a presumption of heteronormativity and the threat of being

rejected because of lesbianism is evident in Marilyn's interpretation of the possible intent of the question. Here Marilyn and Imogen describe a strong, cohesive community of women as a threat to the structure of the world. Lesbianism was used as a stigma, by those Marilyn and Imogen mention, to break a cohesive community of women. This is part of what Rich attempted to counter with the lesbian continuum. The stigmatisation of lesbianism should not enable "men [...] to try and tear that shit down" (Marilyn).

None of the spectators I interviewed discussed lesbians in negative terms. Although the diversity of the audience was valued by several respondents, the majority of spectators did not mention lesbians, or gays, at all. Andrea, however, notes that there are some spectator demographics, including lesbian couples, which are "less acceptable" to "communities of color." Few others commented on lesbian spectators, but normally as a celebration of the inclusion (Vivien), or an acknowledgement of the demographics (Ronald, James, Claire, Dorothy, Ellie). James described the spectator demographics as:

at least three-fourths was evenly divided between like the crowd that you'd expect to see at the tractor pull and the lesbian community [laugh]. And it was just hilarious, first of all seeing the juxtaposition, and then seeing [...] this bizarre combination of like people taking the sport completely seriously and at the same time this just sort of bizarre kind of cultural deconstruction of the sport.

Part of the cultural deconstruction that he describes is related to the "joke names" or pseudonyms in derby, which sparked the conversation between him and his partner, Penelope, as to what counts as lesbian innuendo.

The only spectator to discuss "out" lesbians as derby players was Vivien. The inclusion of the lesbian and gay community influenced her enjoyment of the sport:

For us as a family, that a lot of players are out and there's a really comfortable place for gay people to be, but [...] it's not like a woman's sport that feels completely about being gay. [...] I do a lot of work with gay youth. [...] And I always want to bring them here because this is like one place that it's just totally cool to be exactly



who you are. [...] When they announce peoples' weddings, they might announce a gay person's wedding. It's just kind of completely normalised.

The normalisation of gays and lesbians by roller derby is important to note. When I hear respondents explain that the players or spectators are "normal," my initial reaction is to construe that as a means to heterosexualise those of whom they are speaking. While this may be true in many cases, it is important to consider the social context the individuals are located in when they say normal. Derby, in particular, is regarded as a diverse and accepting community.

Claire's description of the changing demographics of spectators indicates the incorporation of the lesbian community into roller derby, as well as some of the conflicts between different demographic groups. When she skated, she saw the audience as "a nice melting pot, people of all walks of life were coming." However, since her retirement, she had become "uncomfortable" attending bouts because she felt excluded. Someone told her that she could not sit next to them, but once a former teammate called her by her derby name, the audience member offered her the seat. I would have interpreted this to mean that the woman decided to let Claire sit next to her because she was a veteran derby player, and there is credibility in being a derby girl; however, Claire believed she was rejected because of her perceived heterosexuality. Claire was "a breeder [...]" that was the reason she wouldn't let me sit next to her." The "jeerleaders" for the league are mostly, if not all, lesbians:

They're known about town, and they're activists, and that's all great and everything, but then they become our jeerleaders, and then they call all of their friends, and all of their friends come, and then it just naturally assumes because everybody that's supporting our team is of that persuasion that we all are. And it's just a whole different can of worms I didn't want to be bothered with.

Claire thought her former league was straddling the line of hetero-sexualising and lesbianising the women: "they're still trying to appease everybody, and you can't. You can't, you can't do this wholesome thing for little girls you want to join

junior derby but then also be wild and crazy for the fraternity boys who want to go the [names a strip club], and then also be accessible to the ladies that go to [names a gay club]. [...] They're spreading themselves thin trying to appease this ideal."

Despite some leagues' associations with the gay community, several interviewees engaged in a process of normalising the players by heterosexualising or feminising them in response to questions of lesbianism and class issues. Sophia discussed size in a way that normalised and, perhaps, heterosexualised the players by disputing others' notions of their "butch" appearance: "Everybody's first thing they say is like 'Oh those girls are tough, aren't they, like aren't they like wicked butch? And like, they're scary huh?' But you look at them and you're like- [...] No, they look like me. They look like you. They're normal people-" (Sophia).<sup>154</sup> Similarly, Betty responded to her father's concerns by reassuring him of the heterosexual demographics:

My dad [...] had this whole idea that it's just a bunch of rugged, uneducated, tattooed lesbians. [...] I really had a hard time breaking down that perception. And you know, it just kind of thing, yeah, there are a lot of tattoos, though some people don't have tattoos, but there are a lot. Basically I'd explain to him, really? This is, this is only women who have ambition and energy are going to do this. [...] You're going to draw all kinds of interesting women with all these great backgrounds and so it's just amazing, the the different professions and education levels that women have in roller derby league. [...] not everybody's rough. It's like there are [...] normal people. And I tell him, yeah there aren't any more lesbians in roller derby than there are anywhere else. [...] It's perfectly normal, you know, there are moms and women with husbands. [...] I think that's part of this image that a lot of people they just think well it's just some tough butchy, sport for high school drop outs or something.

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<sup>154</sup> Interestingly, another spectator, Ronald, and I had a conversation about a streaker at a roller derby in London. He asked if the streaker was female, and I was curious to know why he would think the streaker was. His response helps to illustrate the meaning of the word "butch": "a lot of roller derbies in Oklahoma, there's a gay community. Now the gay community is all females. [...] Now here's the cool thing too because usually when people think of a gay girl, they think of a butch, you know the big girls. Not at the roller derby. There's some very beautiful you know gay girls. So it's like they get hit on too. So I could see a pretty gay girl showing her [inaudible]."

The inclusion of lesbians and heterosexuals was normalised, and representative of demographics in larger society. Betty thus celebrated the diversity within the community, acknowledged a lesbian existence, but restated the normality of participants, taking into account the perspective of her father, by refocusing on the women who are “perfectly normal” and fulfilling the role of mother and heterosexual wife.

Very few participants in the original interviews discussed the reality, rather than the perception, of lesbian players in roller derby. As noted earlier, according to WFTDA’s survey of skaters, “seventy-six percent of skaters identify as straight; the remaining 24 percent identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other” (Women's Flat Track Derby Association March 2010: 3). In my initial research, only one player identified as anything other than heterosexual/straight, and she identified as “confused.”<sup>155</sup> However, seven of the twelve skaters indicated that they had interactions with individuals who assumed that the majority of derby players are lesbians. Amongst my respondents in the initial research, when lesbians were discussed, it was primarily as spectators of the sport or when denying that players are lesbian. Others simply did not mention lesbians. For example, Richard said a derby player “ranges from college twenty something to just want a physical activity to do like older married women who just need to get away from their kids, to like, and it’s all these women coming together and producing something for themselves.” Alva explained the differences amongst skaters: “There’s mothers; there’s younger girls.” Andrea, who mentioned that “you see a lot of lesbian couples” as spectators, also described the diversity of players, in part saying: “There are doctors, there are attorneys, there are teachers, and there are barbacks. And uh starving artists, and stay-at-home moms.” While some discussed players as mothers and wives, their omission of lesbians when half of the players say that outsiders expect players to be lesbian was striking. This is important to note as it contributes to the emphasis of players’ heterosexuality, or as a motherly figure, and a covert distancing from lesbianism. I am not arguing that lesbians must be mentioned, but that their invisibility contributes to the idea of who does, and does not, play derby.

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<sup>155</sup> Sixteen of the twenty-six derby wife respondents identified as heterosexual or straight. For details of the remaining respondents’ sexualities, please refer to Table 9 (in Appendix A).

## *Conclusion*

The role of wife, and mother, was useful in communicating who plays derby, and how the derby player persona differs from expectations of women more generally. These constructions of gender based on role (as player or wife) were illustrated by the notion that players had to have separate personae, and that their derby persona was not part of their normal, everyday life. Roller derby may be empowering for participants, but one should question why the pseudonyms, and related personae, are necessary for spectators to understand women's participation in a full-contact sport. It may be useful for other studies to evaluate media coverage of the leagues where players do not perform under a pseudonym to see if there is a difference in the treatment of players, or, more generally, to examine if media coverage, described by Eva as "she's a nurse by day and roller girl by night," has changed with derby's increasing popularity and the potential subsequent normalisation of women as participants. Even if the idea of separate personae reflects the ways in which women are still constrained by gendered expectations, there is benefit to playing under a pseudonym. The tongue-in-cheek names attract fans to a complicated sport. In addition, heteronormativity and the belief that the players' personalities differ on and off the track may allow for some spectators to relate to players in spite of, and because of, the challenge to traditionally feminine sport.

The term "derby wife" is also understood through heterosexual norms, but, like derby participation itself, is potentially threatening to social restrictions on women's friendships and actions. The role of wife had meanings that described the intense bonds amongst female friends, and illustrated the lack of vocabulary, outside a heterosexual discourse, to define women's intense, predominantly non-sexual, relationships. This struggle to define women's friendships, and fear of outsiders' interpretations of the relationship as lesbian, is reflective of many of the same issues that affected the feminist movement when Adrienne Rich proposed the lesbian continuum and highlighted the denial of lesbian history. Rich's critique is also useful in analysing the pejorative aspect of labeling an athlete lesbian. Distancing from, or hiding the existence of, lesbians in both sport and the women's movement has a long and complicated history. While it is inappropriate to assume all female athletes are lesbian, it is equally wrong to deny lesbian existence in sport.

Practices akin to derby wives highlight how participants can embrace and support all women. T-shirts like “I’m not gay, but my derby wife is” also allow for a vocal communication of the existence of both heterosexuals and lesbians, who respect and support one another, in the world of sport. It is these declarations of love between skaters that break, most forcefully, the boundaries constructed by the institution of heterosexuality. In these relationships, there is the “primary intensity” demanded by Rich. Additionally, by publically proclaiming another woman their “wife,” skaters risk the privileges of heterosexuality. They risk marginalisation because, as much as one can argue that there is not a sexual component to “derby wives,” outsiders will first understand the concept through the social construct of a heterosexual “wife” – a concept which has now been queered.

## Conclusion

The roller derby community is diverse. Each league has its own demographics, advertising policies, individualised boutfits or uniforms, and self-presentation. Therefore, it is a culture which is not easily assessed. Although there is no simple answer to my overarching research question of whether all-female roller derby upholds or challenges the institution of heterosexuality, I have aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of heterosexuality in the sport by examining what roller derby means to the people who watch it, and by evaluating the practice of derby wives. In conclusion, I will revisit the research questions I proposed in the introduction and illustrate how my findings indicate a complicated relationship, as the way roller derby is interpreted both does and does not challenge the institution of heterosexuality.

The first sub-question that I will address uses data discussed more extensively in Chapter Four and Chapter Six, the dress and persona respectively: Do the feminised and sexualized clothing, as well as the pseudonyms, reinforce gender restrictions, despite its being donned in a full-contact sport played by women? I will first respond to the clothing before turning to pseudonyms. Spectators' and players' accounts of the dress, in particular, illustrate the complexity of the type of femininity and sexuality presented through boutfits. While the way the dress is perceived reinforces gender division, the dress also reflects a powerful, and potentially subversive, interpretation of femininity and sexuality because of its location in a full-contact sport; however, not all responses record a reinterpretation of the sexualised/sexual athlete.

Only one spectator explicitly stated that he attended a bout with the intention of voyeuristically gawking at the skaters, but players gave a number of examples of spectators who mistook them for “strippers on skates” (Claire). Despite this, it is generally expected that once spectators have attended a bout, those who initially sexually objectify players will become fans of derby as a *sport*. Additionally, some fans did attend roller derby because of the dress and pseudonyms, but this had different meanings for them. The fishnets and short skirts, contextualised within a full-contact women's sport, led many to reconceptualise what the clothing meant. Rather than being interpreted as part of a “soft-core cheesecake show” (Richard), the clothing contributed to the image of

powerful, tough, sexy women. Roller derby players, consciously or not, are part of redefining athleticism and physical beauty: “they are sexy [...] because they are comfortable in their own skin no matter their body type, and they are perfectly capable and athletic, assertive women competing in a skillful [sic] game” (Olive).

It was the wearing of feminised and sexualised boutfits, and the gendered relationship between players and some spectators, that enabled some respondents to identify with the players. Therefore, one must wonder if skaters had worn more traditional attire from the beginning, they would have received as much attention. Indeed, even though the clothing has become less flamboyant, it is the sexualised boutfits that still attract the attention of spectators. Roller derby may be another example of women having to be feminised in order for their participation in sport to be acceptable, but it is important to note that this is not a typical feminine apologetic, if it is one at all. Where femininity is displayed, it is a non-virtuous femininity. It is not a pacifying beauty that is presented away from the track in the two-dimensional pages of magazines like *Playboy*. Rather, the women are actively engaged both in the game as well as in their individual choice to wear what they choose in bouts. Although “choice” can be, and has been debated (Cohen 2008), spectators argued, very coherently, that the boutfits worn by players were of their own choosing, and that it was not “about getting a response- a sexual response from the audience” (Chloe). The players’ authority in clothing choices, and that roller derby is a full-contact sport, makes roller derby different from other sexualised sports, or images of objectified, pacified, sexualised and feminised women, pictured away from their sport. However, some spectators still sold roller derby as attractive, or “hot,” women on skates. While the femininity and sexuality displayed may have been reinterpreted by many I interviewed, some still used very normative interpretations of sexual dress to invoke interest in the sport.

I do wonder if femininity, transformed or not, still has to be presented in order for all-female roller derby to be accepted, or maybe one’s gender has to be displayed. For example, it was important for both Deborah and Betty to show the audience that they were women: “there’s kind of something about roller derby that I think most of the women, I don’t know if you could ever really mistake anybody for a guy” (Betty). Clearly, the dress and the emphasis on the sport as an all-female endeavour, marks the players as women. In a sport where queer has been argued as accepted and celebrated (Breeze 2010), Betty’s remark allows little

room for gender ambiguity. And when men's derby was discussed, the reactions to the presumption that the men would wear the same type of attire as the women illustrated continued support of gender division. The clothing was acceptable for women, but not men. While the broadening definitions of femininity and sexiness may challenge some aspects of the institution of heterosexuality, I am left with some uneasiness that when, or if, roller derby becomes more mainstreamed and more masculinised attire is worn by women, some will no longer watch the sport. Is it then that our knowledge of the players' gender, visibly displayed and emphasised through markers such as dress, is part of what draws us to derby? If more masculine-appearing women dominated the sport, how would the spectatorship change?

Julia was fearful of coed derby because she thought "more stereotypically masculine women [would play,] which would sort of defeat the whole purpose of having a women's sport." While spoken in response to another discussion, this quote may reveal that the feminisation of the players is important. Indeed, the culture of roller derby, in dress, names and parties, assists in recruiting new "derby girls," who then "became athletes in the process" (Eva). It is this derby culture that attracts certain types of women, who otherwise would not participate in sport. Therefore, roller derby is inclusive of women who want to maintain their femininity, but without playing a "wuss for women" (Betty) sport. If the players were only feminised and did not also have characteristics that are traditionally viewed as antithetical to femininity (physical strength, muscularity, toughness) spectators might question derby's legitimacy.

It is important to some spectators that it is women playing and that they are easily recognisable as women. However, the players do not necessarily exist within normative gender restrictions. In roller derby, women are supposed to get in others' way, to take up space. Women were able to aspire to be a "derby girl," from seeking confidence (Samantha), "push[ing] past obstacles" (Chloe), or leaving an abusive relationship (Andrea). Derby girls were not doing "what a proper lady would do" (Herbert), but were still seen as women. Players expand the scope of femininity and of what is acceptable for women.

The second part of my first sub-question relates to the role of the persona, which I examine through the pseudonyms, or alter egos, in the sport. These findings must be addressed in relationship to another sub-question: Is all-female



roller derby transgressive or is it accommodated by the institution of heterosexuality? Heteronormativity and gendered constructions were part of what shaped spectators' accounts of players' "alter egos," and provided a lens through which to analyse the derby wives' role in queering heteronormativity. However, the study of personae also needs further investigation into the difference in spectators' interpretations of skaters who play under a pseudonym and those who skate under their real name.

In my findings, I have noted that the way in which the pseudonyms are understood by spectators may have contributed to the heteronormalization of players. Is it really more difficult to cheer for an Allison, Melissa or Tiffany than it is to root for a Raging Cock, Triple D-Licious or Toxic Pink Stuff because of gender bias? I wonder if spectators have come to rely on the pseudonyms to explain women's actions within roller derby because these have always existed in the new incarnation of roller derby. Without the pseudonyms, perhaps derby would provide a greater challenge to the gender order. At the same time, however, it is the pseudonyms that allow a few spectators to "visualise" themselves on track: "maybe part of yourself doesn't feel like outwardly you could do that, but if you had that name" anything is possible (Daphne).

The pseudonyms may have contributed to the belief that players must transform in order to participate in such a sport. It is almost contradictory: (i) players are assumed to be mothers and wives, or have feminised careers, off the track; (ii) these roles are often emphasised, or they may even be rewarded by spectators who have invested in this idea; but, (iii) some believe that players must abandon these roles and their own name, via a transformation, to become a "derby girl." They are not "normal" mothers; they are something different. Although Blanche argued that her roles are complementary, that her experience as a derby girl had positively impacted on her domestic life, these roles may still be interpreted as somewhat contradictory, as evidenced by Margaret's in-laws' dislike of her non-traditional take on being a wife and mother.

However, when spectators get to know the players, their perception of them, as skaters and mothers, may change. This was suggested by Eva's experience of friends realising that skaters can be "proudly soft-spoken mothers" who do not alter their entire personalities to become derby girls and in order to distance themselves from who they are off the track. They do not become a

“superhero” or the “anti-hero of the women.” In some ways, this normalisation is resistance to the institution of heterosexuality. It illustrates that players do not have to be anything other than themselves in order to engage in the sport. Therefore, it is the actual women who play derby who redefine gender binaries; it is not the superhero they become who is viewed as exceptional and thus has achieved beyond what most women do. They do not already have to exist outside of what is expected of women. Any woman can be a derby girl.

Others did not think that the women had to abandon their domestic roles to perform in the sport. Instead, it was the heteronormalisation of the players that existed even when they were on track which enabled some to identify with the players, as mothers, in a way not accessible to them in men’s sport. It is this mother identity that then contributed to the challenging of gender expectations. As Alva noted, it “still blows my mind that some of these women are mothers” because “I didn’t grow up with thinking that it was a [...] thing that a mother could do.” It expanded notions of acceptability not just for women generally, but for mothers specifically.

While there are benefits to the heteronormalisation of the players, I would feel more reassured if lesbians were also more represented in spectators’ accounts. What is clear in this research is how accusations of lesbianism are still used to malign women: players are distanced from being “wicked butch” (Sophia) or their own athletic and sexual empowerment is reduced to homophobic objectification (see Imogen and Deborah for examples). Although derby is often celebrated as being queer-friendly, and homophobia is “NOT DERBY!” (Daria), Daria’s experience with a league that banned the practice of derby wives illustrates the concern that sponsors may not want to finance a league that is associated with lesbians. Therefore, derby may risk heterosexualisation as it becomes mainstreamed and dependent on sponsors.

I will now return to the question: Does the practice, or concept, of “derby wives” challenge heteronormativity? Derby wives were indeed the most notable challenge to the institution of heterosexuality that I have found in my research. As an overt expression of women’s solidarity, it may be a modern incarnation of the lesbian continuum. However, there are still concerns in the way in which derby wives are presented, if it contributes to the invisibility of diverse sexualities and derision of lesbians. Additionally, the practice is not limited to women, and future

research should include men, as this would provide an understanding of the transgressive use of the word “wife” amongst them, or shifts in the phenomenon if they choose to be called “derby husbands.” My mistaken belief that men did not participate in derby wife culture, which I only discovered through interviews, may have biased the Call for Participants, resulting in the exclusion of men from this phase of the research. Regardless of men’s involvement as derby wives, women’s engagement in the phenomenon redefines the heteronormative wife role and recognises a relationship that is, most often, highly valued. As the only research to extensively discuss the derby wife relationship, my work provides an understanding of the importance of female friendships, and support, within the sport.

My final question - does the full-contact aspect of the sport actually change how women are viewed, as athletes, in relation to men – is best analysed by looking at the responses to coed and all-male derby, as well as size in roller derby. These findings are represented in Chapter Five and show that gender division remains firmly in place. Roller derby spectators maintain gendered expectations that clearly distinguish between men and women, seen not only in resistance to men in feminised and sexualised clothing, but also in expectations that size differentials between men and women would create an unfair advantage in men’s favour. Some of the problems that spectators had with coed roller derby relied on markedly social issues, including concerns of sexual objectification by male players or their reluctance to see men hit women. That two spectators witnessed the same coed bout, with different interpretations that were constructed through a gendered lens, shows the persistence of gender binaries. Rather than derby dismantling gender division, and the expectation that men are biologically and socially programmed to achieve more than women in sport, spectators recognised a broadening image of women, but did not necessarily see this as reflecting any change in the relationship between men and women. For a few, this was not an issue, but it does illustrate that derby does not always function to challenge heteropolarity, which is a basis for the institutionalisation of heterosexuality. Although more research is being conducted on all-female roller derby, it is absolutely necessary that researchers begin to examine coed and men’s roller derby, as well as men’s involvement in supportive roles within the all-female sport. Without knowledge of what is occurring within these areas, it is

impossible to know to what extent all-female roller derby breaks from gender polarity. Comparative data is crucial for gaining a better understanding of what is occurring. Is men's roller derby given more credit than the women's version? Or will the all-female version of the sport prevail?

If it is because of the bouffits or beliefs rooted in gender essentialism, all-female roller derby may not push the boundaries of the institution of heterosexuality as much as I would hope. While these are still unanswered questions, my research has outlined the topics that need to be addressed by providing an examination of spectators' responses to coed and all-male roller derby. It also indicates that research should no longer focus on all-female roller derby in isolation. This does not mean that research on all-female roller derby should become overshadowed by all-male or coed versions of the sport, as all-female derby is certainly the dominant form and provides new examples of women in a full-contact sport. Additionally, spectators are correct in saying that men have already been involved in this type of sport; what is new is women's participation in a full-contact sport dominated by women. Therefore, we may be able to learn more from studying the women's version. I do argue, however, that researchers will not know how transformative all-female roller derby actually is, if not compared to those same spectators' responses of men's and coed derby. More research should be conducted on spectators of coed derby to see if increased exposure to it influences their constructions of gender.

Unfortunately, players were not asked to comment on coed or men's derby. The questions were asked of spectators to provide an understanding of the meaning of watching women play versus watching men, as the interviews were designed to question spectators' responses to gender in derby. However, female players' reflections on coed or men's derby, in comparison to all-female roller derby, is an area for future study.

This study illustrates the ways in which roller derby both upholds and challenges the institution of heterosexuality. Far from my expectations, I found value for spectators in the heteronormalisation of players. I discovered that the idea that players lead "separate lives" is not isolated to media representations, but also promoted by spectators. Dress is, perhaps predictably, interpreted in a number of different ways but is still predominantly seen as contributing to the feminine and sexual imagery of derby.

With all-female roller derby's many challenges to gender stereotypes, heterosexuality is pervasive and evident in the sport. Even though derby has done much to expand gender expectations, these expectations have only been expanded; they are not diminished or eradicated. Despite this, through all-female roller derby, women are seen as acting in new, transformative ways.

## Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics

**Table 1: Income of Derby Skaters and Spectators (as reproduced from Women's Flat Track Derby Association 2011a: 5)**

Fan household income before taxes:			Skater household income before taxes:		
Less than \$15,000	8%	(2010: 8%)	Less than \$15,000	9%	(2010: 7%)
\$15K up to \$25K	9%	(2010: 9%)	\$15K up to \$25K	12%	(2010: 13%)
\$25K up to \$35K	12%	(2010: 12%)	\$25K up to \$35K	14%	(2010: 15%)
\$35K up to \$50K	19%	(2010: 18%)	\$35K up to \$50K	21%	(2010: 21%)
\$50K up to \$75K	21%	(2010: 21%)	\$50K up to \$75K	20%	(2010: 20%)
\$75K up to \$100K	15%	(2010: 15%)	\$75K up to \$100K	12%	(2010: 13%)
\$100K up to \$150K	11%	(2010: 11%)	\$100K up to \$150K	8%	(2010: 9%)
Over \$150,000	5%	(2010: 5%)	Over \$150,000	4%	(2010: 3%)

**Table 2: Geographic Location of Interviews with Derby Players and Spectators**

		Total (N=50)			
		Spectators	Players	Total	Percentage
Geographic Location of Interview	Atlanta	6	3	9	18
	Baltimore	4	1	5	10
	Boston	5	0	5	10
	Las Vegas	4	3	7	14
	Oklahoma	4	1	5	10
	San Francisco	3	2	5	10
	Washington, DC	12	2	14	28
Total		38	12	50	100

**Table 3: Characteristics of Interviews with Derby Spectators**

		Interviewed Alone or With Others				Total
		Alone	Alone - others nearby	With another	With others	
Interview Location	At bout –	5 Kate, Madeleine, Aaron, Gordon, Drew	2 Mia, Vivien	6 Heather and Jenn; Albert and Samantha; Charlotte and Patrick	0	13
	At bout – prearranged	1 Shawn	0	2 Tanner and Sophie	0	3
	Post-bout, Prearranged	0	0	0	4 Daphne, Hallie, Corinna, and Julia	4
	Prearranged	15 Olive, Chloe, Ellie, Alva, Calvin, Brent, Virgil, Ronald, Jacob, Richard, Galen, Herbert, Carey, Clyde, Mike	0	0	3 James, Penelope and Rose	18
Total		21	2	8	7	38

**Table 4: Characteristics of Interviews with Derby Players**

		Interviewed Alone or With Others		Total
		Alone	With Friend	
Level of Contact with Volunteers	Prearranged	7 Andrea, Claire, Selma, Caitlyn, Deborah, Betty, Eva	0	7
	Not Prearranged	1 Dorothy	4 Blanche and Margaret; Marilyn and Imogen	5
Total		8	4	12

**Table 5: Characteristics of Derby Spectators (Gender and Race)**

		Gender			Total
		Female	Male	Chose not to Identify	
Race	African-American/Black	1	3	0	3
	Asian	1	0	0	1
	Black/White	0	1	0	1
	Chose not to identify	0	0	1	1
	F1 (Human)	0	1	0	1
	Irish/Indian	0	1	0	1
	Puerto Rican	1	0	0	1
	White/Caucasian	14	12	0	26
	White, Jewish	1	0	0	1
	¾ White, ¼ Puerto Rican	0	1	0	1
Total		18	19	1	38

**Table 6: Characteristics of Derby Spectators (Gender and Sexuality)**

		Gender			Total
		Female	Male	Chose not to identify	
Sexuality	Chose not to identify	1	0	0	1
	Gay/Lesbian/Queer	7	1	0	8
	Homoflexible	1	0	0	1
	Mostly Heterosexual	0	1	0	0
	“Normal”	1	0	0	1
	Usually taken to be straight	0	1	0	1
	Straight/Heterosexual	8	16	0	24
?	0	0	1	1	
Total		18	19	1	38

**Table 7: Characteristics of Derby Players (Race and Sexuality)**

		Race		Total
		Black	White/Caucasian	
Sexuality	Confused	0	1	1
	Straight/Heterosexual	2	9	11
Total		2	10	13



**Table 8: Detailed Spectator Information**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Number of bouts attended</b>	<b>How and Where Contacted</b>
Aaron	22	Male	White	Straight	First live bout	Approached – Atlanta, during half-time
Albert	53	Male	Black	Gay	Saw multiple bouts of the older version; first all-female bout	Approached – San Francisco, at half-time
Alva	24			?	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Brent	36	Male	$\frac{3}{4}$ White, $\frac{1}{4}$ Puerto Rican	Hetero	One bout, years prior	Prearranged – Oklahoma
Calvin	25	Male	Caucasian	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Las Vegas
Carey	34	Male	African-American	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Charlotte	28	Female	White	Straight	Multiple bouts	Approached – Atlanta, prior to bout
Chloe	28	Female	Caucasian	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Oklahoma
Clyde	48	Male	White	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Corinna	27	Female	White	Homoflexible	First live bout?	Prearranged – post Baltimore bout

**Table 8: (Continued)**

Daphne	25	Female	Caucasian	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – post Baltimore bout
Drew	27	Male	Black	Straight	Saw older version on television, first live bout	Approached – Las Vegas, during exhibition
Ellie	26	Female	White	Queer	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Galen	36.5	Male	F1(Human)	Mostly hetero	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Gordon	50	Male	Irish/Indian	Straight	Saw older version on television, first live bout	Approached – Las Vegas, during exhibition bouts
Hallie	25	Female	White	Gay	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – post Baltimore bout
Heather	59	Female	White	Lesbian	Saw older version on television, first live bout	Approached – Boston, interviewed at half-time
Herbert	33	Male	White	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Jacob	24	Male	White	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC

**Table 8: (Continued)**

James	50	Male	White	Usually taken to be straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Jenn	54	Female	White	Lesbian	First live bout	Approached – Boston, interviewed at half-time
Julia	31	Female	Puerto Rican	Lesbian	First live bout?	Prearranged – post Baltimore bout
Kate	29	Female	White	“I’m normal” – vocal response to demographic questions	Saw older version on television, first live bout	Approached – Las Vegas, during bout
Madeleine	16	Female	Caucasian	Straight	Multiple bouts	Approached – San Francisco, interviewed prior to bout
Mia	28	Female	Caucasian	Straight	First live bout	Approached – Atlanta, interviewed at half-time
Mike	50	Male	White	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Olive	29	Female	Asian	Heterosexual	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Atlanta
Patrick	34	Male	White	Straight	Multiple bouts	Approached – Atlanta, prior to bout
Penelope	54	Female	White	Hetero	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Richard	24	Male	White	Hetero	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC

**Table 8: (Continued)**

Ronald	36	Male	White	Straight	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Oklahoma
Rose	16	Female	White	Queer	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Washington, DC
Samantha	16	Female	Black		First live bout	Approached – San Francisco, interviewed at half-time
Shawn	39	Male	Caucasian	Hetero	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Atlanta, in between bouts
Sophia	22	Female	White	Hetero	Multiple bouts	Prior contact, interview occurred in between bouts in Boston
Tanner	25	Male	White	Hetero	Multiple bouts	Prior contact with his girlfriend, interview occurred in between bouts in Boston
Virgil	26	Male	White	Hetero	Multiple bouts	Prearranged – Oklahoma
Vivien	45	Female	White/Jewish	Queer	Multiple bouts	Approached – Boston, interviewed at half-time

**Table 9: Sexuality of Derby Wife Respondents**

		Frequency	Percent
Sexuality	At this point, questionable	1	3.8
	Bisexual	3	11.5
	Lesbian	2	7.7
	Married	1	3.8
	Missing Data	2	7.7
	Queer	2	7.7
	Queer-identified lesbian ☺	1	3.8
	Straight/Heterosexual	14	53.8
	Total	26	100.0

## **Appendix B: Call for Participants**

### ***Spectators and Players 2009***

Study of Roller Derby: Spectators and Players Needed for Interviews!

I play roller derby and am conducting a study of the sport for a Doctoral dissertation at the University of York. I would like to interview you if you have attended at least one roller derby bout as a spectator, and do not play on an all-female roller derby team or league. I am also looking for players on an all-female roller derby team, or league, to discuss interactions with spectators. If you might be willing to discuss your spectator experiences of roller derby, please contact me, Geneva Murray, at [mgm502@york.ac.uk](mailto:mgm502@york.ac.uk) There will be no monetary compensation for participation in this study; however, I want to make the project as comprehensive as possible, and your ideas and experiences will be invaluable in helping to shape the research.

## *US Derby Wives Research*<sup>156</sup>

I'd really appreciate it if anyone would be willing to help me with my research! I am a recently retired skater in England (but from Oklahoma), and am conducting a study of the sport for a Doctoral dissertation at the University of York. As part of this project, I am seeking players in the United States who are willing to discuss the topic "roller derby wives." Players do not have to have a derby wife to be involved. If you might be willing to participate, please contact me, Geneva Murray (aka Toxic Pink Stuff) at [mgm502@york.ac.uk](mailto:mgm502@york.ac.uk) Interviews will be conducted by email. There will be no monetary compensation for participation in this study; however, I want to make the project as comprehensive as possible, and your ideas and experiences will be invaluable in helping to shape the research.

Thank you all in advance for any help you might be able to provide, from participating in this research yourself to forwarding the information to your league, as this research can only be completed with your help!

Best,

Toxic Pink Stuff

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<sup>156</sup> As posted in the Yahoo Group [roller\\_girls](#).

## Appendix C

### *Interview Schedule for Spectators*

Thank you for participating in my research. Your ideas and experiences will be invaluable in helping to shape the research. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. You may choose to stop the interview at any time, or choose not to answer any questions. Do you have any questions before we begin? .... Please feel free to ask questions at any time. I'm interested in roller derby from the standpoint of the spectator. I'd like to start by just getting some basic information from you, then we'll talk more specifically about roller derby.

How many games have you attended?

What is the furthest you have travelled to watch a game?

Do you normally attend by yourself, or as a group?

What do you do during the bout? Do you watch? Or talk with your friends? ....

Do you know any rollergirls?

In what context?

Why did you attend your first roller derby? Or the roller derby today?

Why do you come to the roller derby?

Why have you not joined as a player or as support staff?

How did you find out about roller derby?

What was said/seen that made you interested?

Did you find that what had been said/seen was an accurate representation?

How so? How not?

How would you describe roller derby?

How do you think others would describe roller derby? Is their description accurate?

Would you encourage or discourage someone to attend a roller derby? Why, why not?

What do you like about roller derby?

What do you dislike about roller derby?

What makes for a good roller derby bout?

What makes for a bad one?



How would you describe someone who plays roller derby: 'derby girl'?

Why?

How would you describe the support staff and referees?

Which team do you support?

How do you choose the team you support?

Do you have a favourite roller derby player? Who? Why?

Describe your favourite roller derby player

Describe your least favourite roller derby player

What do you think of the way that derby girls dress?

What function do you think the dress serves in roller derby?

What do you think of the personas? The names for the alter egos?

Why do you think they have alter egos? What function do you think the alter egos serve?

What do you think of the full-contact nature of the sport?

What function does the full-contact nature of the sport serve?

Roller derby is often described as a family event. What do you think of this description?

Have you attended a men's or coe-ed roller derby?

Why or why not?

If it was available, would you attend?

Why or why not?

Do you attend their other activities: like fundraisers, charities?

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

If applicable:

You said that you had travelled and seen different roller derbies with different leagues, how did they compare? Did you like one better than another? Why?

Is there anything that we have not yet discussed that you would like to discuss?

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions later, or would like to discuss something, please feel free to contact me.

## *Interview Schedule for Derby Players*

Thank you for participating in my research. Your ideas and experiences will be invaluable in helping to shape the research. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. You may choose to stop the interview at any time, or choose not to answer any questions. Do you have any questions before we begin? .... Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

I'm interested in roller derby spectators. I'd like to start by just getting some basic information from you, then we'll talk more specifically about your interaction with roller derby spectators.

How long have you played roller derby?

What positions do you play?

How do you describe roller derby to potential spectators?

How do you describe roller derby to friends and family?

What are some of the reactions that you have had from friends/family when you tell them you play roller derby?

What are some of the reactions you've liked hearing? What are some of the reactions that you've not liked hearing? (Why did you like? Why did you not like?)

What are some of the reactions that you have had from strangers when you tell them you play roller derby?

What are some of the reactions you've liked hearing? What are some of the reactions that you've not liked hearing? (Why did you like? Why did you not like?)

Have you played in any public bouts?

Could you describe your interactions with the spectators?

What was your favourite interaction with a spectator? Least favourite?

Why?

Have you had communications on Facebook/MySpace, or other online sites, with spectators? Could you tell me about these interactions?

Have you been interviewed by the media about roller derby?

How do you feel they represented you and derby?

What do you think are some of the perceptions of a derby girl?

Do you think these perceptions are accurate?

What kinds of fundraisers have you participated in for you team?

What do you think about those fundraisers?

Is there anything that we have not yet discussed that you would like to discuss?

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions later, or would like to discuss something, please feel free to contact me.

## *Interview Schedule for Derby Wives*

Thank you for your help with my research! Please use these questions as a guide, but note that these questions are optional and you do not have to answer any that you do not want to answer. There may be some questions that are not applicable.

Your written account can be in any format you prefer, and of any length. You may wish to include more information than what is requested. By submitting a written account, you agree to have your account used in part or in full by the researcher; however, you may decide at any time not to submit a written account.

Do not hesitate to email me at [mgm502@york.ac.uk](mailto:mgm502@york.ac.uk) if you have any questions or would like clarification.

- 1) What does the term “derby wife” mean to you? What is the significance of a derby wife?
- 2) What was your initial reaction to the concept of derby wives?
- 3) Do you like the term “derby wife”?
  - a. If yes, what do you like about the term (for example, why use it instead of “derby best friend” or “derby sister”)?
  - b. If you don’t like the term “derby wife,” why not?
  - c. Is there a phrase that you would prefer to use other than “derby wife”? If yes, what and why?
- 4) Do derby wives interact differently with each other than they do with other players? If yes, how so?
- 5) What do your friends/family members think about the concept of a derby wife?
- 6) If applicable, what have your romantic partners thought about the concept of a derby wife? If you have a derby wife, what have been the reactions of your significant other(s) to you having one?
- 7) If you do not have a derby wife, would you like to have one? If yes, why? If not, why not?
- 8) Do (or did) you have a derby wife (or wives)? If yes,
  - a. How many wives do you have?
  - b. How did you decide who would be your derby wife?
  - c. Was there a “proposal”?
  - d. Were you married in a derby wedding? Please describe the wedding, if you had one.
    - i. What did you wear for the wedding?

- ii. Was anything exchanged between you and your derby wife at the wedding? Was there meaning in what you exchanged?
- iii. Were there vows? What were they?
- iv. Why did you decide to have a derby wedding?
- e. If you decided not to have a derby wedding, why not?
- f. Have you ever had a derby divorce? If so, please describe.

## Appendix D: Demographic Form

Age:

Sex:

Race:

Sexual Orientation:

Marital/Partner Status:

Hometown:

Occupation:

Volunteer Work/Unpaid Work:

Educational Background:

Personal Annual Income: (Please circle one)

\$0 - \$19,177

\$19,178 - \$35,999

\$36,000 - \$57,657

\$57,658 - \$91,704

\$91,705 - above

Annual Income for combined Household: (Please circle one)

\$0 - \$19,177

\$19,178 - \$35,999

\$36,000 - \$57,657

\$57,658 - \$91,704

\$91,705 – above

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