**Gender and Roller Derby: Women Keeping it to Themselves**

**Introduction**

Recent years have seen discussion of sex segregation in sport. Sailors (2014) rejects a one-size-fits-all approach and suggests a horses-for-courses policy, contoured by the contrasts between individual and team sports, direct and indirect competition, contact and non-contact sports, and amateur and professional sports. We have ourselves (Davis and Edwards 2014) dipped our toes in this discourse, in our suggestion that sex-segregated sport might be in part an innocuous cultural preference that could outlast the material and symbolic inequalities which scaffold it, and in our agreement with Karkazis and Young (20??) that segregation should be sport specific and a moving target. And, since the publication of that piece, Kretchmar (2015) has written an arresting defence of value pluralism in sport that affirms sport as a site of (among other things) ‘individual identity, solidarity and community.’ (15) Celebration or expression of a collective gender identity and, indeed, the challenge to the limits on gender identities are apt for inclusion in that list of possibilities which, in Kretchmar’s words (15), please him no end. This dovetails with Pavlidis and Connor’s (2015:5) approval of Butler’s observation that ‘not all aspects of gender are constraining or limiting and both masculinity and femininity has both damaging and liberating aspects that can be negotiated and influenced in a range of ways.’ On the other hand, Pavlidis and Connor (2015), in the same essay, assert in liberal feminist fashion that integrated sport should be the goal of all, echoing Jennifer Hargreaves’ (1990) twenty-five-year-old vision of a fundamentally different model of sport where sex is unimportant. And sandwiched between is Tannsjo’s (2000) compelling rejection of sex-segregated sport. Each of those visions – the rejection of sex as a structurally significant variable and sport’s capacity to spin or un-spin narratives of gender – has considerable attractions. They might also, however, be in some unavoidable tension.

The comparatively recent revival of roller derby (Derby from now) arguably showcases the preceding tensions. Originally a systematically female enterprise, the defining qualities of the activity, its organisation and its culture have been considered emancipatory for women as a result of both the capacity for gender affirmation and the scope for challenge to the limits on female identities. The latter potential inspires Sailors (2013: 250) to endorse Finley’s (2010: 362) application of the term ‘gender manoeuvring’ to derby. We elaborate soon on those observations. However, men have become involved in derby, in coaching, refereeing and both sex-integrated and men-only versions of playing. This has proved a matter of controversy. The place of men in derby is, as described by Pavlidis and Connor (2015), a deeply contentious issue. Sailors (2013: 253) notes, for instance, the comment of derby player Shotgun Shell, ‘Being that it was resurrected and built up solely by women, a lot of us get defensive about men pushing their testosterone into it.’ Pavlidis and Connor (2015: 9) similarly report a female player who said, ‘Look, I know it’s not politically correct to say it and people will hate me for it, but I just wish the men would fuck off from derby, it’s our sport and I just want the female energy.’ Sailors herself (2013: 253-4), with little argument, aligns men with money as the two greatest threats to the female emancipatory potential of derby.

We wish to provide some interrogation of the preceding anxieties about men in derby. This involves, first, rehearsal of the qualities in which its female emancipatory potential is taken to reside; consideration of the consequences of male engagement for some of these qualities; and finally, some consideration of whether all of derby’s putatively female emancipatory qualities are in fact emancipating for women. We do not propose any particularly partisan conclusion in this vexed area. We hope merely to advance a very tricky discussion in an area which as Pavlidis and Connor (20015) note has not had too much critical interrogation. First, however, we sketch the basics of the sport.

**What is Derby?**

Essentially, derby is a full contact, “simultaneous offense/defense team race” (Breeze 2014, p.19). The aim is to score points by lapping members of the opposing team. Games are referred to as bouts; a bout is made up of 60 minutes of play divided into two 30 minute halves. Teams consist of five members who roller-skate around an oval track in the same direction in a series of two minute ‘jams’ (Kearney 2011). Each team identifies a scoring player, known as the jammer, who scores points for every skater they pass on the opposing team. The other four members of the team are ‘blockers’ who attempt to prevent the opposing jammer from lapping members of their team, while at the same time trying to get their own jammer through (Sailors 2013). In a recent ethnographic account, Breeze (2014) provides a vivid description of derby in action:

Both jammers line up slightly behind the other skaters *[the blockers]*…At the whistle signalling for the jam to begin both teams jostle each other frantically, and strategically, for position; skaters plant themselves in the way of their opponents, skate full force into members of the opposite team, form ‘walls’ with their team mates and begin to move in roughly the same direction, anti-clockwise, around the track. Each jammer must pass through, and over-take, the ‘pack’ made up of blockers from both teams. Blockers…use hip-checks, shoulder-checks and full-body checks to knock their opponents down or off the track, as well as tactical variations in speed, direction of travel, and pack formation.

**Why Might Derby Be Emancipating for Women?**

The phenomenon of derby has elicited a stimulating essay by Sailors (2013), for whom it carries emancipatory potential for women through (i) the sport’s DIY character; (ii) a core aggression constitutive of the definition of masculinity and ideologically at odds with conventional femininity; (iii) simultaneous attachment to elements of conventional femininity, e.g. revealing clothing; (iv) the extension of the said clothing to women of different body shapes and ages; (v) the parody of conventional femininity; (vi) inhospitality towards ‘girl drama’ and (vii) the bonds between players.

The re-emergence and rapid expansion of derby from 2001 was driven predominantly by women. Since then, derby has become a unique sport insofar as it is “created by and for women” (Beaver 2012, p.26). As Pavlidis and Fullagar (2013, p.422) note, in the last decade derby has been “reinvented and reclaimed by women as an empowering leisure space where gendered subjectivities are played out through desires for fierce competition, creative expression, and collective pleasures”.

Part of the unique appeal of derby is that it is “more than a conventional game of sport” (Liu, Bradley and Burk 2016, p.29). Kearney (2011) explains that: “Key to understanding contemporary derby and its unique place in women’s sports is its convergence of campy theatricality and fierce athleticism” (p.285). Derby has historically incorporated playful and theatrical qualities integrating “style, costume and attitude” with elements associated with so-called ‘legitimate’ sports (Pavlidis, p.165). For example, one of the distinctive features of derby culture is the creation of skaters’ on-track alter egos via individual pseudonyms, such as *Miss Creant* and *Joan of Dark*. Skaters’ names reflect the parody and inventiveness in derby culture, creating potentially subversive personae, “foregrounding femaleness while playing with rebellion and power” (Kearney 2011, p.285). Similarly, skaters’ uniforms (or costumes?) contribute to derby as an alternative sport where women “eroticize their athletic bodies in ways associated with burlesque via heavy makeup, tight tops, short skirts, and thigh-high stockings” (Kearney (2011, p.285). Derby is a physically tough, full contact sport that, in Kane’s (1995) terms, offers opportunities for women to “experience their bodies as strong and powerful and free from male domination.” (p.194). It is for these reasons that derby is often espoused as a ‘feminist’ sport (Pavlidis and Connor 2015; Kearney 2011; Finley 2010).

**So What if Men Get Involved?**

*The case against*

Many derby women are fearful of male engagement. The dominant grounds are that the meanings they express through derby (examples of the sport values championed by Kretchmar) are imperilled by male involvement and the slightly overlapping fear of male physical strength in the sex integrated version. Howe (2015) invokes Sailors (2013) in her observation that integration in this case might not be advantageous to those already participating. She observes that “pressure has increased on the league to allow men’s participation and to ‘go mainstream’, that is, to tone down its [derby’s] parodic elements in favour of making it “serious sport” (p.169). This seems to boil down to the co-optation of derby into the more dominant conception of sport, with surrender of control to the usual suspects and domestication of meaning. That is, the definitive meanings embodied by female participants would evaporate in favour of the same old meanings characteristic of hegemonically masculine sport. Female derby players would find their efforts inevitably and disparagingly compared to those of their male counterparts, tacitly confirming a male standard of excellence and a broader male sport and cultural hegemony. This prospect might be thrown into particularly sharp relief in sex integrated derby. ‘Real’ sport equals ‘real men’ and indeed real life, leaving women with the Scylla and Charbydis of sport failure or gender failure. Female emancipation? Forget it.

*Evaluation of the case against*

These fears have much credibility and might finally be decisive. However, they require some examination. To what extent might male derby involvement undermine the preceding putatively female emancipatory qualities?

First, some of the (preceding) reasons derby might be emancipating to females have parallels in other sports done by both sexes. For instance, rugby and football are done by both sexes; each is partly defined by an aggression identified with hegemonic masculinity; and many female participants find participation emancipating partly because of this gender disruption. (The same goes in fact for non-sport activities such as the gym and non-competitive bodybuilding.) These features remain in the case of male participation. That is, derby women would continue just the same to exercise an aggression identified with hegemonic masculinity, just as they do in rugby and football. This is not to deny the important disanalogies between derby and sports such as rugby and football; it is to merely recognise that we already have examples of sports done by both sexes which are putatively emancipating for females on some of the grounds that derby is considered emancipating.

The next issue sustains the question of analogy and disanalogy between derby and other sports such as rugby and football. Females have been historically excluded from, or trivialised within, the latter. Feminists and others have challenged such exclusion and trivialisation. They are able to recognise the historical meanings of football and rugby, for instance, as expressions of masculine identity. However, it is just the workings of this identity, for instance the exclusion of women, that they interrogate. Few, if any, would now disagree that these workings had several objectionable elements, including a conservative model of masculinity, flagrant injustice towards females and the broader existential and symbolic ramifications articulated most notably by Iris Marion Young (date?). It is also, again, highly plausible that the said masculine identity is finally repressive to men and betrays their insecurity as much as their solidarity, a conclusion arguably shared by an increasing number of males. To what extent can this account be applied to female derby inclinations to exclude or subordinate men within the practice? First, as we see, there is the fear that male engagement would collapse into male control and business as usual. However, is there reason to consider such a collapse inevitable? Perhaps not. Although male engagement in sport has tended to equate to male hegemony, there is no *a priori* reason to think this inevitable. To think so is to commit the Slippery Slope fallacy. But the moral of the Slippery Slope fallacy is that we need not start on the road down the slope – a little doesn’t logically mean a lot. In this case there is no *a priori* reason why Walzer’s “liberal art of separation” cannot be deployed, much as Morgan (1994) recommends deployment to protect sport from the rapacity of the marketplace. Indeed, in the case of derby in particular, two things should be immediately noted. First, as with netball in the 1920s and 30s, many roller derby leagues have adhered to ‘majority women’ governance policies to ensure men do not ‘take over’ (P and C 2015, p.1). Second, there is evidence that the ideological outlook of male practitioners is inimical to the iniquitous scaffolding feared by female derby players. Female derby player and blogger Louisey Rider safely says: “that a large proportion of the men who play are very respectful of the women’s game and its feminist roots”. Furthermore, the Men’s Roller Derby Association (MRDA) in fact has a more inclusive non-discrimination policy than its female equivalent (WFTDA) (Pavlidis and Connor 2015: 7):

MRDA, pursuant to its mission of promoting men’s roller derby, does not and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion (creed), gender, gender expression, age, national origin (ancestry), disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status, in any of its activities or operations. MRDA does not and will not differentiate between members who identify male and those who identify as a nonbinary gender (including but not limited to genderqueer, transmasculine, transfeminine, and agender) and does not and will not set minimum standards of masculinity for its membership or interfere with the privacy of its members for the purposes of charter eligibility. These activities include, but are not limited to, membership eligibility, disbursement of resources, and eligibility for office. MRDA is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all skaters, officials, volunteers, and fans.

The rejection of a gender binary contrasts with the WFTDA policy which requires all skaters be living as a female, clarifying this with the requirement that an: ‘athlete’s sex hormones are within the medically acceptable range for a female’ (cited in Pavlidis and Connor 2015: 6). Therefore, male derby players do not conform predominately to the male sporting type lamented by feminists and, moreover, are not obviously liable to gender imperialist ambitions. They do not casually instantiate the dread ‘real sport=real men=real life’ equation.

Indeed, it can be fairly said that male derby players are also making gender manoeuvres. Alongside the preceding formal gender inclusivism, they engage in a highly aggressive sport which is ideologically anchored to females. The men’s game is therefore the diminutive version of a game defined by masculine aggression; indeed, some male players were attracted to play through their support for female derby partners. Again, the qualities of derby thought to ground female emancipation seem not to be despoiled as a result of male involvement.

Indeed, it might be that in this respect derby illustrates Patrick Grim’s (1981) point that temporary measures necessary in the present can be abandoned when the objective of the measures is met. That is, it might be salutary for everyone that the re-incarnation of derby was initially confined to females, but it is possible that this should be conceived as a demarche which has done all it can. It is also appropriate to consider the justice of the exclusion or subordination of men within derby. According to co-ed skater Louisey Rider: “just as women should be able to play football if they wish, so men should be able to play roller derby…” She adds, in response to gender exclusivist derby females: “…before you start ranting about the dreaded Y chromosome coming in and taking over ‘your sport’ just stop and think about what you are saying. You’re espousing anti-feminist views under the guise of the feminist cause. Patriarchy is not cool, and by extension, neither is matriarchy. In the much needed struggle for equality, we all need to be working towards the same goal”. This view is echoed by Swirko, a female skater and blogger uncovered in P and C’s (2015, p.9) research, who laments that:

I’ve read all the blogs. I’ve scrolled through the comments. I thought it would have all petered out by now, but still the occasional post pops up on some corner of the web about how men shouldn’t be allowed to play roller derby because they don’t deserve it. I’m sorry, guys: I wish these women would *stop misusing feminism* and hurry up and drop out of this sport which is quickly outgrowing them.

Here seems an account in which derby is unstoppably culturally maturing into a more gender inclusivist enterprise, a process that some other female players in P and C’s (2015) research would like extended in abandonment of the preceding aggressive gender binary inscribed within WFTDA female eligibility policy.

Clearly not all female derby players feel the same on the preceding question. They also have divergent sentiments about the prospect of competing with and against men. Again, P and C’s (2015) research uncovers women who are fearful of male hits and others who emphatically would not want male players to pull their hits on them. These rival perspectives are illustrated in the following comments:

[Female participant in mixed league] *I’m not doing full game practice if there are men involved… I’m scared of it.*

*‘Bullshit’, don’t you dare pull your hits on me* [women skaters]

*C’mon, women can hit just as hard/well – not all men are big and not all women are small* [women skater]

We hope that the brief discussion to this point illustrates the mutual attractions of and persisting tensions between a sex-blind approach to derby and derby’s historical character as an instrument of gender expression, gender challenge and gender manoeuvring. Our aim here was the articulation of some of the worries and some responses to these worries regarding male participation in derby. There are again, no easy answers. Pavlidis & Connor (2015: 12), again, betray this in their concluding suggestion that imaginative demarches might yet be necessary. They invoke, in fact, a female participant’s observation that players are creatively attempting to envision a sex-integrated future for the sport, e.g. women play against each other and every third jam is all-male. Whether such measures reveal themselves as stepping-stones en route to sex-blind competition would remain to be seen.

Davis, P. and Edwards, L. (2014)

Hargreaves, J. (1990)

Howe, L.

Karkazis, K. and Young

Kretchmar, R.S. (2015)

Morgan, W.J. (1994)

Pavlidis and Connor

Sailors, P.

Tannsjo, T.

Walzer, M.