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### Female Athletes Don't Throw Like Girls

Women who participate in sports are often filed under certain stereotypes that surround their discourse although they are hardly ever accurate. Female athletes are constantly fighting for recognition in the world when it comes to receiving equal funding or working against being bullied for their sexuality and being seen as the “weaker sex”. There is no shortage of obstacles that these women have to overcome in their daily lives. Studies and movements have worked to expose these inequalities and misconceptions surrounding the female athlete discourse, which will be looked at in this paper in order to get a better understanding of how these stereotypes came to be and how they are currently being rewritten.

One text that participates in the discourse is an article by Kerrie J. Kauer titled “*Scary Dykes*” and “*Feminine Queens*”: *Stereotypes and the Conflicting Social Identities of Female Athletes*. Here, this sports and leisure study presented by Bowling Green State University investigates the stereotypes of heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual female athletes and their reactions to such stereotypes. It is often found that there are adverse effects, both positive and negative, from the misconceptions of female athletes. Commonly seen as more masculine because of their participation in a sport, these women are found to have a higher likelihood of being bullied for their sexuality or lack of femininity but also can have a higher self-esteem and positive self-image at the same time due to sports. Kauer (2002) wrote, “Characteristics, such as assertiveness, strength, and muscularity, often are associated with men and masculinity. Further,

when female athletes develop perceived masculine qualities, their sexual orientation sometimes is called into question.” (p. 14). These differences can set women apart in either positive or negative ways, and their experiences directly affect their identities.

I believe this sends several key messages about the meaning of being a female athlete. First, it covers the large expanse of what it is to be a female athlete, not allowing for them to be “put into a box” or stereotyped as just one single social identity, allowing for a more complex comprehension of female athletes, by seeing them as more than just their sexuality and athleticism. Secondly, it shows the evolution of women athletes through history. Women in the past were not allowed to play sports, then they were only allowed to participate in feminine sports such as cheerleading, gymnastics or figure skating. After that was the integration of colored athletes into the sports world and in more present time, we are still dealing with the newer issue of people accepting female athletes with different sexualities than the mainstream of heterosexuality. Equity for women in athletics, especially those who are not white or straight, is making a slow transition into a more accepting time, although stereotypes in the sports world hinder this evolution of acceptance and equality.

A prime example of today’s current efforts towards moving away from these toxic stereotypes of athletic women is the NCAA’s Title IX statutes for women and gender equity in high school and collegiate sports. These rules were enacted 45 years ago in order to ensure that women would gain access to the same level of equipment, access to resources and equal recognition as men’s teams. Title IX’s main statement is; “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (Women, Gender Equity and Title IX, 1972). This was one of the first steppingstones to creating

opportunities for women and allowed for other problems to gain publicity in later years such as racial and sexual orientation discrimination against female athletes. Title IX has given recognition to the discrepancies between men and women's sports and addressed them with legal efforts such as equal funding and access to quality faculty and facilities, but something that the policy can't change is the way that people perceive and treat women in sports. With years of rhetoric that has kept women in a position that is considered lesser than a man, it is difficult to rewrite this discourse.

As years have gone on, schools and especially colleges have started campaigns to publicize and address these issues of discrimination against female athletes and the many negative stereotypes around their discourse. An example that encompasses this movement is the Chico State University's "We Don't Say" campaign which focuses on changing the



*Figure 1 - Chico State University "We Don't Say" Campaign Poster*

marginalization and offensive language often used in and around collegiate athletics and changing this language to be more inclusive. The movement was a collection of posters that addressed a plethora of

offensive sayings commonly heard used against athletes including 3 posters that I found that directly related to the negative image of the female athlete discourse. Each poster addressed the same issue but framed it in a different saying from; "I don't say 'like a girl' because gender has no limits," (fig. 1) Another stated "I don't say 'shemale' because a woman's strength does not undermine her femininity," and lastly "I don't say man up because it insinuates that women can't

be courageous.” All of these posters were set up the same with a grey background, the quote written in plain text on the right-hand side and an image of one of their athletes from the college in their team uniform standing to the left. They all show common examples of the types of phrases and inequity that is used against women athletes, and also though it is much less obvious, exemplifies how far we have come from the sheer fact that women were not even allowed to participate in sports at all in the not so distant past. Interestingly enough the discourse has come from non-existence because women were seen as too weak to compete in sports, to a point where women today are condemned for being too muscular and athletic.

There is a reason for this newfound voice of women in sports: news and social media recognition. Now, not all media has been positive portrayals of women in sports either, it has actually been multiple findings through studies such as Daniels & Wartena (2011) discussing “the pervasive practice of objectifying female bodies in Western media and detailing the numerous negative effects associated with this practice” (pg. 566). Some conclusions made from this study were that the media’s portrayal of women directly affected how men and women alike talked about these female athletes. When the media chooses to discuss the athlete’s success in their sport a dedication, they focus more on the athlete’s success than their body or looks, and those who focused on a woman’s body were more likely to focus attention on bodily features.

Woman in sports themselves have the ability to control their own narrative too through social media. Another study analyzed prominent female athlete’s social media presence and common themes that they promoted on their pages such as empowerment, body positivity and self-love. It was found that “each of the sportswomen in this study is carefully negotiating the blurred lines between “athlete” and “feminine”, with an implicit understanding of the risks of appearing too strong (and thus challenging the maleness of sport), or too sexy (and undermining

one's credibility as an athlete, and women's progress in sport more broadly)” (pg. 28). This is a complicated and new area that female athletes have to represent themselves in because they cannot always rely on the media to do so properly; but this is important work as women in sports need representation and these brave women are walking a fine line in order to make others feel seen, and not just seen as their stereotypes.

The negative side effects of being a woman in sports is not the only thing that arose over the years, but also positive comments are commonly made about these same athletes for their hard work and dedication to a sport. Going back to the Kauer article, she states “on one hand, the athletes recognized that they were stereotyped on a daily basis; on the other hand, the women also reported hearing positive feedback about their identity as an athlete” (p. 82). Through this progression of time, one can see the transformation that this group has undergone, being that its beginnings started largely with negative reactions to women entering into the man’s world of sports but as time goes on, though there is still a negative narrative, it is being combatted and snuffed out by positive movements that discuss the importance of inclusive language and equality of access to sports for women of all races, religions and sexualities.

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