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Boobs and balls: Exploring issues of gender and identity among women soccer players at Stellenbosch University

Marizanne Grundlingh

abstract

This *Focus* explores the gendered dimension of women soccer players at Stellenbosch University (Maties). It is suggested that women soccer players at Stellenbosch University are active agents in shaping their own sporting experience, albeit in a dominantly male and patriarchal environment. The analysis focuses on two aspects of the women soccer players at Stellenbosch: firstly how they got involved in soccer, and secondly how their participation in soccer influences their perception of their gender identities.

keywords

women, soccer, gender, identity, Stellenbosch

Introduction

Sport fanatics, the media and the general public worldwide, fixated their attention on South Africa for a soccer¹ extravaganza in June this year, as South Africa hosted the FIFA World Cup. The soccer euphoria that permeated the South African society, alerts us to the importance of sport and the need to address its function in society. As an avid soccer supporter this sparked my interest to research women's soccer at Stellenbosch University (Maties). The main objective of this *Focus* is to firstly, reveal how women soccer

players at Stellenbosch University got involved in soccer, and secondly, to determine how women's identities are shaped by participation in soccer.

Background

This section provides a brief history of women's soccer in South Africa and gives an explanation of the development of women's soccer at Stellenbosch University. Pelak (2005:63) posits that:

despite their construction as outsiders, women have an over 30-year history of playing

organised soccer in the Western Province.

The first South African national women's team was established in 1993 and became known as 'Banyana Banyana' ('The Girls'). Estimates in 2004 indicate there are more than 300 women's soccer clubs in the 25 South African Football Association's regions, with a pool of about 50 000 players (Saveedra, 2004). Since the dismantling of Apartheid during the early 1990s, women's soccer has experienced substantial growth (Pelak, 2005). However, with women's soccer being one of the fastest growing sports, these figures may be outdated. Unlike their male counterparts who participate in a professional league, the Premier Soccer League (PSL), women soccer players in South Africa have not been able to establish or compete in a professional league.

Women's soccer at Stellenbosch University

Maties women soccer players have largely developed their own codes and embedded understanding of the game

came into existence in 1999 when a group of women, affiliated with Stellenbosch University, arranged for a social soccer match to take place among them. Popular and traditional women sports at Stellenbosch University include hockey, netball, swimming and horse riding. The interest and enthusiasm among this group of girls, who participated in the social soccer match was high and as a result structured training sessions were started. This initiative resulted in the establishment of the official Maties women soccer team alongside the men's team. Women's soccer at Stellenbosch University has therefore been in existence for 10 years (Personal communication with Maties women's soccer coach who established the Maties women's soccer team in 1999).

Considering the background of women's soccer in South Africa, it is evident that soccer is considered a predominantly male-orientated sport,

mostly played by men and women soccer players are often not accorded the same status within this sporting environment. The male domination of soccer readily evokes a discourse of patriarchy. Weedon (1997:3) states that:

to say that patriarchal relations are structural is to suggest that they exist in the institutions and social practices of our society and cannot be explained by the intentions, good or bad of individual men or women.

In structural terms, it is possible to argue that soccer as a game which has a long history of being played by males is shaped to some degree by patriarchy as a set of male-dominated values and signifiers. Without wishing to deny the salience of this point, there is an inherent danger that in deploying patriarchy in a mechanistic fashion, women's agency in shaping their sporting life can be unduly minimised or even misinterpreted.

My *Focus* focuses primarily on women as active participants in soccer, a sport where Maties women soccer players have largely developed their own codes and embedded understanding of the game on a grassroots level. The ethnographic nature of the research enabled me to interact with Maties women soccer players on and off the field and allowed me to interpret their experiential quality of involvement in soccer.

Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted over an 8-month period, between February and November 2009. Qualitative semi-structured interviews and participant observation were the main methodological tools used to obtain data². Informants included players from various racial groups, with five informants being Coloured and six informants being White. The 11 first team players were selected as respondents based on their regular participation in practices and matches throughout the 2009 season. Respondents were also determined by

the consent they gave to conduct interviews for research purposes. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the respondents and they agreed that the data collected could be used for research purposes. Participant observation was particularly suitable for the nature of this research project, as I could partake in practices and matches and share in the emotion, turmoil and physicality that the informants had to endure. It is argued that although soccer is traditionally a predominantly male sport, the members of the Maties Women's soccer team, with whom I conducted informal interviews and casual conversations, regard their participation and identity as women soccer players seriously, and want to be hailed as athletes, irrespective of the sport that they participate in.

Gender and Identity

The research questions that underpinned the data collection for this study were; firstly, to determine how Maties women soccer players were introduced to the game of soccer and secondly, to determine how participating in a predominately male-dominated sport, informs their gendered identity.

In this section I discuss how gender and identity are understood in relation to the study. Wallace and Wallace (1985:346) assert that:

gender roles are those roles men and women are expected to play according to society's definition of masculinity and femininity.

According to Moffet (2008:104):

Gender is one of the most complex and most misunderstood terms in use today and yet our basic survival, as families, as communities, as nations, even as a planet, is absolutely dependent on how we approach gender issues in this century.

Both gender and masculine and feminine traits are socially constructed expressions of identity. Moore (1999:155) summarises the concept of gender as an expression of identity and states that:

Gender is seen as central to a process of becoming, of acquiring an identity, of structuring one's subjectivity, and can no longer be thought of as a structure of fixed relations.

Gender and identity intersect in the context of soccer for Maties women soccer players. Their identity as women playing a traditionally male sport, such as soccer, is a facet of their gender identity that they perform in the sporting context. Feminine and masculine traits, as markers of identity, also inform how they are perceived.

Butler (1999:17) reflecting on the performative theory of gender writes that the:

performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself.

She argues (1999:17) that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual".

Therefore, in understanding Maties women soccer players, their gendered identity as women soccer players is situated 'outside' themselves by their 'performance' on the soccer field. Moreover, the repetition and ritual of attending practices and matches enhance the gendered "performativity" to which Butler (1999:17) refers. The 'performance' of gender in the soccer context is a socially constructed element of the women players' identity. Gender and identity, therefore inform one another, as the Maties women soccer players' identities are shaped by their gender, the sport they partake in and the team they belong to.

In line with post-structural feminists who argue that identity is not fixed or single, Maties women soccer players can be said to hold a multitude

of identities. Jackson (2001:386) discussing the notion of complex and fluid identities states that:

poststructuralist theories of subjectivity reject the humanist notion of a unified, fixed self that has a stable, essential core and instead propose the self as a site of disunity and conflict that is always on process and constructed within power relations.

In addition, feminist post-structuralists assert that subjectivities are shaped in the various discursive fields that mould them and that the individual is “always the site for conflicting forms of subjectivity” (Weedon, 1997, quoted in Jackson 2001:386)

In summary, the identities of Maties women soccer players can be considered as a continuous process, formed by their subjective experiences as women soccer players and therefore gendered. Their identity is neither single nor fixed, but a process constructed within power relations.

Interpretation of data

Reasons for Playing Soccer

It became evident, from the interviews conducted, that most of the girls had been playing soccer from a young age. Their interest in soccer was developed by playing with their brothers in their home gardens or with neighbours in the streets of their suburbs. This trend is not unique to women soccer players at the Maties football club. Cox and Thompson (2000:10) found in their study conducted among 16 members of the premier women’s soccer team in Auckland, New Zealand, that:

players were introduced to soccer predominantly through the influence of males, such as fathers, brothers, boys in the street and male schoolteachers.

Scraton *et al* (1999) argue along similar lines by proposing that male approval and encouragement

is necessary in order for young girls to gain entry into the informal male football culture. The Maties women soccer players that I interviewed indicated that they participated in any sport which involved fun during their primary school years. They attributed their athletic enthusiasm and involvement in soccer to being young and playful. Keiz³, a Coloured girl and also the captain of the Maties women’s soccer team commented that:

Since I was young, I enjoyed being outside. I grew up on a farm and I can remember as a young girl, I would be playing soccer with the boys outside, till late. Then my mom would shout through the window: ‘Keiizzz, dit word donker, los nou daai spelery en kom bad’ (Keiizzz, it is getting dark, stop playing and come take a bath). For my mom it was just ‘playing’ (spelery), but little did she know that soccer would play an integral part of my life later on. The soccer bug bit me at a young age and I have just not looked back since then (Keiz interview, 13 June, 2009).

From my informal conversations and interviews it became evident that it was acceptable for girls to play soccer outside, with the boys and have fun, until a certain age. Engh (2007:3) suggests that:

Children’s gender roles are relatively fluid and childhood allows for some boundary crossing in relation to gender roles and stereotypes, adolescence is expected to mark the ascendance into femininity.

For women soccer players, like Keiz, who take their participation in soccer seriously, she was never going to grow out of it. The gender role and stereotypes of how and what sports are appropriate for girls was therefore never an obstacle for players like Keiz to continue their passion and involvement in the game.

The perceptions that are constructed by

outsiders of the game, regarding women's participation in a predominantly male sport, do not seem to unduly concern many of the Maties women's soccer team players. For them soccer is a way of getting fit, enjoying themselves and the soccer field gives them the opportunity to express themselves and relieve tension, through exercise. Simi, who played in the midfield, said that her parents encouraged her to play sport for the health benefits of being active. She had a keen interest in soccer and having been overweight during her primary school years, soccer was a sport that assisted her in shedding unwanted kilos.

Ironically soccer, although perceived as a masculine sport, gives women soccer players physical features, like leanness, toned and healthy bodies that portray a feminine identity. This does not imply that characteristics such as leanness and toned bodies are essential traits in determining a feminine identity, but rather that identity is socially constructed in a specific context, in this case sport. Cox and Thompson (2000:13) assert that:

if the players strive to attain the ideal soccer body in order to play at an elite level, they may also attain the tightly managed body, thus highlighting their attractiveness as females.

Similar trends were noticed among Maties women soccer players. Six out of the 11 Maties interviewees concurred that they played soccer to maintain a healthy body, to remain fit and to 'keep in shape'. Debra who is a health fanatic and who is very concerned about her physical appearance said the following:

Girls need to watch their weight and I am particularly obsessed with looking good. I hate going to the gym and running on the treadmill. That is why I love playing soccer, because I get fit unknowingly. I have fun, run after the ball and before you know it, you have worked up a sweat. Soccer develops all your muscles in

your body and is a good cardio workout. After a few weeks you see the results and don't feel like you had to work hard to achieve it. Soccer is great to stay in shape and look good (Debra interview, 31 May, 2009)

Many of the Maties women soccer players play soccer not only for the social aspect of playing a team sport and for 'the love of the game', but also because it keeps them fit and slim. Although soccer is a useful way to maintain fitness, the physicality of the game and the potential injuries that can be obtained was noticeable. During the 2009 season, seven Maties women soccer players had serious injuries, which saw them sitting on the sidelines for a few weeks. Common soccer injuries occur on the ankle and knee joints and range from torn ligaments to ankle sprains and broken bones. Three of the seven players who were injured during the season stopped playing soccer permanently. Gardy, one of the players, was determined that she would never stop playing even when she was injured. Her obsession and love for soccer was evident, as she came to watch all the games, even though she could not participate in the game. She also often updated her Facebook status with how the Maties women's soccer team had performed in their matches. Soccer is literally what she ate, breathed and slept for.

During my interview with her, she recollected how she felt after she was injured. She was tackled off the ball and fell badly on her right arm, breaking her collarbone in a friendly match. She told me that when she was lying in hospital after the surgery, she still believed that she would return to play soccer and that motivated her to 'cope' during that difficult time. I asked her whether she ever considered stopping playing soccer because of the potential high injury occurrence and she responded with:

I will never stop playing soccer, even if I was to break my leg. Of course you can get hurt in

soccer, but that does not mean that you should be 'bangerig' (scared) on the field to go into tackles and play hard. Look I got hurt and was in a lot of pain, but that is part of the game. I hated sitting on the sidelines watching the team play. Ek het gejik om terug op die veld te kom (I was desperate to get back on the field) (Gardy interview, 29 June, 2009).

Gardy's father told her that she shouldn't go back to soccer after her injury, because '*dis nie n meisie sport nie*' (it is not a girl sport) and that he would not pay for her medical costs if she was to get hurt again. Despite this discouragement, she returned and was named as one of the best players of the season. The value and priority that members of the Maties women soccer team placed on their participation in soccer was evident. Many of the informants said that they would never stop playing soccer because they love the game and it (soccer) gave them a sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

Maties women soccer players, therefore, are aware of the potential risk of injury that is associated with the sport. It seemed that the physicality of the game is precisely the dimension which many of them enjoyed. Soccer served as an arena where they could 'get physical' and it served as a 'stress-reliever'. The physical nature of the game seemed to appeal to many of the players and did not deter them from participating in the sport.

In the next section I shift my focus to the gendered dimension of women partaking in a dominantly male participation sport, such as soccer.

Soccer boots or high heels: Masculine vs feminine identity

This section addresses the issue of feminine and masculine identity prevalent in women's soccer at the Maties women's soccer club. It focuses on how Maties women soccer players deal with the perception that taking part in a traditionally male sport, like soccer, makes them less feminine

and more masculine, and how this informs their identity.

Morrell (2001:8) asserts that:

masculinity is not inherited nor is it acquired in a once-off way. It is constructed in the context of class, race, and other factors which are interpreted through the prism of age.

Maties women soccer players, therefore, construct their masculine or feminine identity in the context of the sport they take part in.

Wallace and Wallace (1985: 355) suggest that "women and men fit their gender roles largely because they are socialised to do so." With reference to sport, young boys are socialised to take part in traditional sports, such as rugby, cricket and soccer, whereas young girls are socialised to partake in traditional 'girls' sports such as netball and hockey. Therefore, should a girl participate in a so-called traditionally masculine sport, such as soccer, the gender role in which she was socialised to fit is frequently challenged.

Women soccer players are under pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, because soccer is not a sport that society associates with women or femininity. Caudwell (2003:379) argues that:

playing football affects what it means to be a boy/man, or a girl/woman and transgressing football and gender boundaries is discernible. More specifically, (not) playing and (not) looking like a 'woman' rouses comment and self-surveillance.

In my research it became evident that because women are entering the male terrain of soccer, they are seen as compromising their feminine identity and are perceived as being more masculine. How they understood the contestation of their feminine identity as women playing soccer emerged in discussion.

Caudwell (2003:376) writing about women and

soccer reflects on the social prejudice attached to women playing what is seen as a man's game:

Corporeal displays of masculinity by women disturb the ordering of sex, gender and incidentally desire, because masculinity in women has been inextricably annexed to lesbianism, particularly in sport. In the sports arena, butch is used to belittle and devalue women.

The players were asked in the interview whether they agree that mostly men play soccer in South Africa, and girls who play soccer are thought of as 'butch', lesbian or tomboyish. While most agreed that they thought the statement held true, they indicated in their responses that they did not think of themselves as being either 'butch or tomboyish'. Their response to these labels was that soccer is a sport where a considerable amount of skill is required and it is not about brute force.

The suggestion that playing soccer represented a deviation from the expected gender roles did not sit comfortably with the Matie soccer players who I interviewed. They stated that their femininity does not undergo a change because of what sport (soccer) they participate in. Sam, who plays in defence, said:

I can be just as feminine as my friends who don't play soccer. When I get off the field I can exchange my soccer boots, for my high heels. I don't know why people have this idea that being a women soccer player means that you are a tomboy or something like that. (Sam interview, 3 August, 2009)

Feminine identity is not only 'acted out' by dressing up in skirts for social occasions, or wearing accessories, but is also portrayed by the chosen hairstyle of Maties women soccer team players. Cox and Thompson (2000:14) observed that women soccer players often wear unisex gear or kit, which obscures commonly observed indicators

of gender differences. Cox and Thompson (2000) further argue that women soccer players rely on their hair in order to identify themselves as women and to avoid being mistaken for men.

The subject of hair came up in the change room before one of the matches when the Maties women's soccer team players were putting on their shin-pads and boots. One of the players asked to borrow a hairbrush and received the reply: "Why, we are playing soccer not going to a fashion parade!" The player, Sarah, felt that she needed to brush her hair before the match. Her response to the question why she was worried about her hair before going on to the field to play was about feminine identity:

I don't want to be mistaken for a butch girl. That is why I want to look good going onto the field. I like having my hair tied back. My long hair sends out the signal that I am feminine and the spectators don't have to think I am masculine or butch because I play soccer. My long hair helps with getting that message across (Sarah interview, 22 August, 2009).

Among the team, the heterosexual players wore long hair and they spoke about utilising it, so as not to be mistaken for a boy or a lesbian.

Griffin (quoted in Cox and Thompson, 2000: 15) notes that stereotypes attach to hairstyles in the social construction of sportswomen:

The strong cultural association between sport and masculinity, and other discourses that categorise sexuality, linked the muscular female body with the short hair lesbian stereotypes and provided the framework for constructing the lesbian athlete as the 'bogey' of women's sport.

One of the players, who described herself as a lesbian, was not content with her hairstyle and changed her appearance twice during the season,

focus

reflecting her feelings of ambiguity about her self-representation. Hair can be seen to serve as an identity marker for her that signified who she is and who she wants to be represented as. Being perceived as a lesbian with short hair fitted the identity she wanted to portray.

Her response to the question of why she decided to grow her hair was:

I just decided to grow my hair, for a change in appearance. I didn't think that I would get such a response from all the other girls. I am going to cut my hair short again, I don't feel comfortable with long hair. It does actually take too much time to brush and style (Nash interview, 3 September, 2009).

The gender identities of Maties women soccer players are shaped on and off the field. Soccer having been a traditional male sport, challenges Maties women soccer players to rethink aspects of their gendered identity. Both short hair and long hair, high heels and make-up serve as identity markers for Maties women soccer players in their choice of self-representation.

The Maties women soccer players resist the idea of a narrow understanding of women's roles and negative stereotypes, stretching the meanings of femininity in new directions through their own choices. Sportswomen are actively involved in redefining images and carving the way for more empowered images of woman and femaleness (Hargreaves, 1994). Soccer gives the Maties soccer players an arena in which they can let go of gender role expectations and do what they love doing, namely playing soccer.

When I play a match, I don't think of myself as being a girl and all that is associated with that. I focus on the game and try to do the best at what I love and that is soccer. If anybody else wants to judge me for doing that, that is their problem (Sally interview, 9 September, 2009).

The perceptions that are constructed by outsiders of the game, regarding women's participation in a predominantly male sport, do not seem to unduly concern many of the Maties women's soccer team players. For them soccer is a way of getting fit, enjoying themselves and the soccer field gives them the opportunity to express themselves and relieve tension, through exercise.

Conclusion

This *Focus* has revealed how members of the Maties women soccer team got involved in a male-dominated sport, such as soccer. It is suggested that many of the Maties women soccer players were introduced to soccer, by male figures in their lives. Furthermore, I argue that specific feminine and masculine characteristics, such as long or short hair and the managing of physical appearances contribute to their identity formation as women soccer players.

I have suggested that soccer offers members of the Maties women soccer team an opportunity to express their identity as athletes, and more specifically as 'women' athletes. I have alluded to the fact that the identity of Maties women soccer players is multiple, shaped by the sport they play, as well as by social constructions of gender. Central to the analysis of the gendered identity of Maties women soccer players is the notion that they are active agents in shaping their sporting experience in a patriarchal environment. What is clear is that the commitment and passion for the game sustains them and allows for self-expression in the sporting arena. Soccer is also a way for them to take control of their own leisure time. Ultimately, it signifies the degree of agency that these young women can assert through soccer.

Footnotes

- 1 The term soccer and football will be used interchangeably for the purposes of this article. Football is the terminology used in Europe and soccer is used in Africa and the Americas, both denoting the same sport.
- 2 Interviews took place in coffee shops in and around

the Stellenbosch area and were recorded with a voice recorder and transcribed.

- 3 All respondents were ensured confidentiality and therefore pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the respondents.

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