

## **Gendered tension: Roller Derby, segregation and integration.**

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### **Abstract**

The reemergence of roller derby as a sport ‘by women, for women’ has brought with it great hope. As a fast, aggressive, contact sport there is the potential for women to challenge gender norms of passive heterosexuality and spectatorship. Played mostly by women, yet officiated mostly by men since its reinvention in the early 2000s, issues of gender are central to all aspects of the sport, including its governance and management. Yet currently, the role of men in roller derby – as referees, coaches, and players – is unexplored. While the common conception of derby is that it inverts the gendered sporting dynamic – women playing and men in support roles, the reality is a complex interplay. This article examines the rise of mixed-sex/gender roller derby leagues and what this means for both the experience of participants, and the future of the sport more broadly. Drawing on ethnographic approaches to the study of sport and physical culture, the article provides detailed accounts of current points of tension in roller derby as they relate to sex integration/differentiation. Perspectives from players and officials, both in Australia and the US, are explored to illuminate the varied ways sport and gender can be thought about, governed and experienced as roller derby continues to gain popularity around the globe. The gendered tension in derby mirrors wider arguments within feminist movements about the role of various genders in ‘women’s’ spaces and movements. Consequently we offer an empirical exploration of the lived experiences of this discourse within a sporting context.

**Key words: Sport, Roller Derby, Gender**

## **Introduction**

Sport is one domain where gender segregation has remained (for the most part) formally and traditionally unquestioned (Anderson, 2008). It is also one domain, among many, where males are taken as the universal subject. For example, in football the men's world cup is called, 'the world cup', whereas the women's is gendered as 'the women's world cup' (Engh, 2011). Gender segregation has served the interests of both men and women. For men, participation in all male sports enables them to secure their position as the universal subject, as the embodiment of 'sport' as a masculine, competitive, aggressive contest (Anderson, 2008; Woodward, 2009). While for women, segregation had provided a space away from male aggression and violence on the field (Theberge, 1987) as well as greater control of sport more generally (Hargreaves, 1990).

Despite some of the benefits of segregated sport for women, scholars such as Hargreaves (1990) have noted the ways that separatism makes damaging assumptions about biologically determined reasons for male domination and fails to account for the fluid and changing gender relations in sport. More recently, researchers such as Anderson (2008), Pfister (2011) and Channon and Jennings (2013) have written about the benefits of sex integration as a way for people of different genders to learn more about the embodied capacities of each other.

Early this century the sport of roller derby undertook an 'all girl revival' (Mabe, 2008). Originally a popular, professional sport played by both men and women (Storms, 2010), this revived version privileged women's participation, as players and leaders. As a contact sport played on roller skates, where women would often wear sexualized uniforms including short skirts/shorts and fishnet stockings and take on a moniker, for example Al-pocalypse, or Barilyn Monroe (Two Evils, n.d.), roller derby has been seen as a site of empowerment and sporting success for women around the world (Beaver, 2012; Finley, 2010).

As roller derby continues to gain popularity, there remains contestation over issues of national and international governance (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014). The largest governing body, the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), is, as their name suggests, a majority women's only organisation, promoting a majority women's only sport. Yet, as noted above, separatism in sport (as in other areas of

life), has not addressed issues of sexism, discrimination, and marginalization. And, more importantly, the idea of ‘women’ as a coherent category has undergone rigorous critique (for example, Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994). The idea that any one woman can speak for all women has been contested (Brown, 2011; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013; Watson & Scraton, 2012), and it is more widely accepted that women, like men, have multiple and sometimes competing desires, motivations, and (sexual) preferences.

This being the case, WFTDA’s focus on ‘women’s roller derby’, while also positioning itself as the authority in the development of rules, structure and future directions of the sport are somewhat problematic. Since the initial revival of roller derby, men have and continue to have important support roles as coaches, referees and non-skating officials. Men also play roller derby, with a Men’s Roller Derby Association (MRDA) recently established (based in the US). And, of primary interest in this paper, mixed gender leagues have begun establishing themselves. These men’s leagues, and, in particular the mixed gender leagues, pose a challenge to the mission of WFTDA and requires a more complex interrogation of the gender dynamics at play (at local and global levels), to which this paper contributes.

Highly problematically, the WFTDA reproduces dominant narratives regarding the category of ‘Woman’ as normative, biological, binary and absolute. To play in a WFTDA (2014) league a skater must be “living as a woman and having sex hormones that are within the medically acceptable range for a female”. Conversely, and somewhat non-typically for a Men’s sporting organization, the MRDA (2014):

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

The history and practice of gender verification in sport is one of invasive medicalization of socially construed gender binaries that have profoundly discriminated against athletes (Henne 2014). It must be noted that this type of sex verification only occurs in Women’s sport and is often based around a perception that a person cannot be female because of the way they ‘look’ (Vannini and Fornssler 2011). Despite an image to the contrary, the WFTDA is reproducing aspects of

gendered discriminatory sport practice and have no space for men as skaters nor leagues wishing to allow men or gender diverse skaters to play. This paper is the first analysis of mixed gender roller derby in the academic field and therefore takes an exploratory and ethnographic approach to begin to map out some of the key tensions at play.

### **Collaborative, reflexive ethnography in mixed sex/gender derby**

This paper is an empirical case study of mixed sex/gender roller derby. Incorporating ‘brief ethnographic visits’ (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002), together with auto-ethnographic research sustained over longer periods of time, our methodological approach is eclectic (Wheaton, 2013). We use a range of data collection methods common to sport ethnographies, including participant observation (in ‘real’ and virtual spaces), informal conversations, in-depth interviews and analysis of blog content and official website text (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2012).

Mixed sex/gender roller derby is a contentious issue. A reflexive ethnographic approach, sensitive to the complexities of power and gender in roller derby, has been employed to ensure an ethical and productive analysis. The first author self-identifies as cismale and is currently participating in roller derby in a mixed sex/gender league. The second author, who self-identifies as cisfemale, is an ex-roller derby participant. Women have written most of the literature about the contemporary revival of roller derby, with the exception being Travis Beaver (2012). This paper contributes the first collaborative, ‘mixed sex/gender’ ethnographic approach to the growing literature on roller derby. As derby skaters (past and present), we have (varying degrees) of ‘intimate insider’ (Taylor, 2011) knowledge of roller derby in Australia. Notions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions in ethnographic research have been problematised over the years, and particularly when it comes to gender, this area is only beginning to be interrogated by researchers (Olive and Thorpe, 2011; Pavlidis, 2013). In this paper we argue that that ‘insider research’ can be rigorous and valid, while also acknowledging the fluid boundaries of identity and belonging that typify contemporary life.

Through our eclectic ethnographic approach we practice what Denzin and others have called ‘triangulation’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). By incorporating multiple methods (participant observation, interviews, analysis of text) and using a collaborative approach, we triangulate our findings in the hope of providing a

nanced and productive account of mixed sex/gender roller derby. This is not to claim an authoritative ‘truth’ to our analysis and findings. Instead, our goal is to sensitively examine the tensions created by mixed sex/gender roller derby and to argue for mixed sex/gender derby as an important step forward for the sport.

The first author has been participating in roller derby from mid-2013 (but has been watching and supporting a partner skate since 2011) and is currently skating in a mixed sex/gender league. He has kept a research journal, writing down observations and reactions related to the issue of gender in the sport. The second author participated in roller derby 2009-2011 and had made ethnographic notes throughout her participation. Both authors also conducted informal/formal interviews with participants who gave informed consent (names of people and leagues have been changed for privacy and anonymity, UNSW Canberra ethics approval: A-14-16). Blogs, online news sites, and the sites of roller derby leagues were also examined for policy statements and opinions to issues of mixed sex/gender derby. A range of views has been included to show the diversity of reactions and responses to issues of gender in the sport.

## **Findings**

In their study of co-ed martial arts, Channon and Jennings (2013) note a number of strategies employed by their participants to downplay or erase overt gendering that highlights sexed differences. Some of these strategies included explicitly not dating within the sport/gym, wearing of gender hiding training and sparing cloths (such as a Gi and special bra) and overt displays of initial aggression to ‘prove’ their toughness and resilience to violence. Conversely, female derby skaters tend towards overt sexualisation displays with make-up, sequins, fishnets, tight and often revealing clothing for both training and bouts, even in mixed environments. The empowering/disruptive nature of the sexualised derby attire (and names) has been debated at length (Cohen, 2008; Finley, 2010; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014). What is of note here is that derby participants have not attempted to erase gender via the androgenising of uniforms/behaviour as has occurred in the martial arts space. Men in derby tend towards ‘practical’ sport attire – short and t-shirt/singlet being the standard outfit.

The policing of sexual activity also does not occur in derby – with no leagues having either a formal or informal non-fraternisation policy (such a policy would be

highly unlikely to ever work), many co-ed teams consist of partnered skaters (traditional cis-pairings/heteronormative pairings). Indeed, the partnered component of the skaters in co-ed leagues would mitigate against the more egregious masculine anti-women attitudes often displayed in sports (Anderson 2008). A key difference is that derby starts as a female space (Donnelly, 2012), with men being the ‘outsider’ entering an established field of action. Men are the travellers in this domain – but don’t need to erase masculinity nor sexual desirability. This is because of wider social expectations of the primacy of male-ness and sexual seeking activity. Men don’t need to suppress desirability to be taken seriously in the sporting domain.

Channon and Jennings (2013) identify ‘intimate touching’ as a key concern in contact sports. Derby is a full contact sport, both in terms of impacting opposing players (blocking) and assisting your own teammates via pushing/pulling and otherwise directing. Actions like ‘smearing’ are recognised blocking strategies – were a skater rubs/holds their body against the opponent with as much contact as possible, often facing each other chest-to-chest. One incident is illustrative of the negotiation of intimate touching. During a mixed training session focusing on blocking, a female skater contacted the groin of a male skater with her hand as part of a normal skating motion. In an attempt to defuse the embarrassment/normalise the touch the female skater loudly proclaimed to the training group “shit I touched his cock”, followed by giggling all around the track. Nothing else occurred in the incident. Conversely, intimate and playful, pseudo-sexual touching between female skaters is common – bottom pinching and slapping, and hugging are normal practice. Adele noted that in her experience, being slapped on the backside was a sign of acceptance from the other women. Breasts are a particular challenge for male skaters negotiating their touching of female skaters as the (front) chest is a legal blocking/hitting area. While the female skaters may be empowered by the ability to wear clothes as they wish, this does not stop observers interpreting their actions via their own gendered/sexualised lens. During an all male referee discussion on where to stand at the start of a jam (there are seven referees, with particular roles at the start of each jam) James noted the following observations. A male referee stated that the ‘Inside Pack’ position is the best for looking down the tops of female skaters – and that ‘man it is hard to pay attention sometimes when you can look down at four racks when they [skaters] lean down’.

As Channon and Jennings (2013: 488) note “feminist scholars have explored mixed-sex participation, suggesting that personal empowerment, along with broader challenges to hierarchal gender discourse, can be strengthened immensely when men and women jointly experience the potentials of differently sexed bodies”. However, exposure may also serve to cement and enforce ideas of gender as the protagonists struggle to negotiate/live the mixed sporting experience. Some men have refused to engage in co-ed scrimmage/contact on the basis of not wanting to ‘hurt the girls’. This discourse of ‘weakness’ is exemplified by the idea that men should ‘pull’ their hits on women to not hurt them. A number of discussions reflect this narrative of softness, including the idea that men are pre-disposed to be more aggressive and violent and thus can hit harder. In response to the first time she watched a ‘boys against girls’ derby bout a skater wrote:

The girls got pummeled. I mean, sure, there were some great jams. But there really isn't much you can do when it's 150lbs vs. 250lbs. The majority of the guys on that team towered over the girls. Naptown kept sticking one of their tiniest jammers out and one of the biggest guys would just get in the back and beat on her, over and over again. It was uncomfortable to watch. Doesn't matter that it's sport, doesn't matter that the girl knows what she's doing, I'm still watching a big guy hit a small girl. It sucked. (Joan of Dark, 2013)

The idea of ‘don’t be a douche’ is a common refrain from men in the sport, and it is used during mixed games/training to suggest that men should not be mean or hard about their blocking with women that might be easier because of a perception of superior size/weight and hitting power. Conversely, a number of women have found this idea deeply offensive and sometimes patronizing (Olive, McCuaig & Phillips 2012), indicating as it does that women are weaker and inferior. Some men have also questioned the universalizing of gendered strength/power/skill noting that some women are ‘far more scary then the blokes’ (usually in reference to bigger, more experienced female skaters). Derby is far from a pro-women space, or perhaps even a neutral one with these interactions demonstrating the on-going sexualisation of skaters via a male gaze and the re-iteration of weakness and sporting inferiority via being ‘soft’ on the girls.

## **Conclusion**

The contested nature of men in roller derby illustrates the construed and performative nature of the tension. As one derby skater put it,

I am female, I am a skater in a co-ed league and every time I see or hear a rant bemoaning men playing derby and citing feminism as the reason, I feel like smashing my head against a wall. (LouiseyRider, 2014)

Adele's experiences, skating with an all female league and conducting research with mostly all female leagues, highlighted the problematic denial of the role of men in derby. Men's involvement, as referees, coaches, partners, supporters and fans was often not accounted for (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014) and in this way, women's position as 'empowered' was sometimes undermined by the lack of transparency and openness to (gendered) differences. James' experiences highlighted the challenges in negotiating gender and sexuality in mixed derby. In the masculine space of martial arts, Channon and Jennings (2013) noted the ways women and men were able to 'de-sexualise' themselves (to a greater or lesser extent). In roller derby, as a primarily feminine space, this is more complex.

Gender is an on-going area of contention in derby. The position of authority claimed by WFTDA is making it difficult for leagues that wish to be co-ed and/or non-gendered to establish themselves and compete. Despite its potential, derby does reproduce and reflect dominant gendered discourses about appearance, bodies, strength and power and skaters are sexualized. These interactions occur from the policy level to everyday interactions of skaters and without further interrogation may impede the growth and success of the sport.

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