

## The 'Male Preserve' Thesis, Sporting Culture, and Men's Power

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### *Introduction: Studying sport and gender*

Since the mid-nineteenth century, when the modern Westernised form of competition sport took shape, there has been a shifting yet robustly gendered structure to the experience of playing, consuming, managing, teaching and marketing sport. In this regard, save for a number of important examples, sports in various forms were created by men, for men (and boys). In light of this, critical studies of men, masculinity and sport culture have emerged as a major area of research in the sociology of sport (e.g., Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990). Drawing on various feminist, social constructionist, or poststructuralist theories of gender, these scholars argued that sport served to sustain symbolic idealisations of male power, normalise the marginality of women, and reinforce rigid status hierarchies among men themselves. In exposing the inequalities enshrined within sports culture, along with the manifold dangers endured by boys and men in the stakes of 'proving' masculinity<sup>1</sup> in and through sport, this body of scholarship placed the potentially harmful nature of the masculinity-sport relationship firmly into the academic discourse on sport and society.

Furthering recommendations for positive change, scholars of men, masculinity and sport joined wider feminist activism challenging the established male hegemony in sport. Coupled with shifting social attitudes towards women's athleticism (Cahn, 1994; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Theberge, 1987), and growing, yet somewhat limited, public enfranchisement of sexual minority groups (Anderson, 2009; Pronger, 2000) from the mid-1990s onwards, the activist ambitions of pro-feminist scholars have begun, in part, to be realised. Yet despite this, the long-standing relationship between men, narratives about masculinity and certain sporting spaces has been maintained, recast, and in some places reinforced (Aitchison, 2006; Matthews, 2014; 2016a; McKay et al., 2000; Robinson, 2008; Wellard, 2012).

In this chapter, we explore these social processes by turning attention to the concept of sport as a 'male preserve'. With this notion as our starting point, we outline in turn how sport has historically constituted male power in both structural and symbolic ways; how its role in doing so has begun to be challenged from without as well as within; and how those at the centre of this relationship have managed to 'hold back the tide' of change in several important respects. Throughout, we explore the dynamics of gender relations, rather than simply focusing on 'masculinity', as it is within the detailed unfolding of such social processes that we argue scholars are able to more adequately evidence, conceptualise and theorise the lives of men. Although our focus is necessarily limited due to the constraints of space, we argue that these dynamics represent a key analytical problem for academics interested in sport and critical studies of men, as they point to pertinent questions around social change, gender relations, and the operation and preservation of power.

### ***Sport as a Male Preserve***

Against the general trend of a lack of early interest in gender within the scholarship on men's sports, Kenneth Sheard and Eric Dunning published one of the first sociological research papers about sport in which gender was explicitly explored as the central theme. 'The Rugby Club as a Type of Male Preserve' (Sheard and Dunning, 1973) placed their account of rugby subcultures within historically shifting patterns of gender relations in England. They argue that such spaces serve to insulate men from wider social changes threatening to undermine their traditional, taken-for-granted, superior social status. Dunning's (1986) later work developed this reasoning further, suggesting that technological innovation, modern state formation, and the general pacification of day-to-day life in Western societies had exerted an equalising force on the balance of power between the sexes, removing several structural bases of men's social power. In the face of widespread cultural and institutional change, sport provided men a site where the formal exclusion of women, and the overt celebration of powerful and aggressive visions of masculinity, enabled them to continue to construct idealised versions of themselves as rightfully dominant. Sporting spaces thereby 'preserved' notions of masculinity which would support – through pervasive and powerful symbolism – the continuation of male supremacy<sup>2</sup>.

As scholarly attention to gender, sport and masculinity began to accelerate, the notion of sport as a male preserve quickly gained conceptual purchase (Birrell, 1984; Bryson, 1987; Dunning, 1986; Theberge, 1985). In highlighting the gendered dimensions of the historical development, ideological underpinnings, participation levels and administration of sport, critical scholars effectively demonstrated that such social enclaves can provide "dramatic symbolic proof" (Messner 1990: 204) of (heterosexual) men's physical and psychological superiority over women and 'other' (that is, effeminate or gay) men. Increasing focus on such issues continued through the 1990s, with research on women, sport and gender highlighting the manner in which sports served to exclude, control, disempower and/or sexualise women (e.g., Greendorfer and Rubinson, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994; Kane and Lenskyj, 1998). If women had any place in sports at all, it was shown to be one that was subordinate to men, and particularly one that served the interests of an assumed all-heterosexual male audience; an imaginary construct that nevertheless served as the *de facto* authority on sporting consumers' taste.

Meanwhile, critical attention to men in sport turned to the irony of how sport's symbolism empowered men as a group, but unevenly so, and often at the cost of mental and physical damage in the lives of those men whose efforts produced such symbolism (Connell, 2005; Messner, 1990; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Whitson, 1990; Young, 1993). Messner (1990) captured this process with his pithy notion of the 'body-as-weapon'. Here, in learning to consider their bodies as machine-like objects of ritualized violence, male athletes not only caused acute and chronic damage to their opponents/colleagues<sup>3</sup>, but similarly caused physical and mental harm to themselves. This 'maim-or-be-maimed' (Hoch, 1972) mentality is regularly taken as a given 'part of the game' in men's sports (Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Matthews and Channon, 2016; Messner, 1990), such that this mechanism for sustaining men's social superiority also works against the interests of those whose labour underpins it. By the mid-late 1990s then, scholarship exposing the operation of sport as a male preserve had developed a number of critical trajectories revealing the harmful, exclusionary, sexist, and exploitative nature of this enterprise.

In more recent years, gender-focused research on men and women in sport has proliferated, covering many different and intersecting topics, although themes pertinent to the role of sport in constructing and confirming male power remain central to many – if not most – analyses. With particular respect to men and sport, research has revealed several phenomena which are instructive in this regard. Among many others, these include the mediating role of race relations in men's power chances within sport, largely evidencing the favourable experiences of whites (Anderson and McCormack, 2010; Carrington, 1998; Lawrence, 2016); the intersection of sport, masculinity and (dis)ability, suggesting sport serves as a vehicle of masculine recuperation for disabled men, although often in ways which may reproduce sexism (Lindemann and Cherney, 2008; Sparkes and Smith, 2002); the increasing commodification of men's body image in sport and fitness cultures, which has led, among other things, to the proliferation of various pathological behaviours among men (Atkinson, 2007; White and Gillett, 1994); but also the gradual – if partial – 'softening' of narratives about masculinity in sport, creating new possibilities for identity construction and gender performance for both gay and straight men within sporting spaces (Anderson, 2009; Anderson, McGrath and Bullingham, 2016; Channon and Matthews, 2015a; Pronger, 2000).

Collectively, this research has done much to describe and critique the masculine archetypes that are (or at least, have historically been) normative in sports worlds, and which underpin the social significance of sport as a male preserve. Such an ideology usually draws on constructions of 'real' men as 'naturally' strong, tough, competitive, muscular, and aggressive, visibly expressed through dramatic performances of the male body. Perhaps, above all else, such performances highlight men's ability to dominate others, which is arguably a central characteristic in constructions of 'hegemonic' forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Indeed, Connell's (2005) hegemonic masculinity thesis has become something of a *lingua franca* for those wishing to theorise men's power, bodies, and relations with women and each other within sport. This 'hegemony' can involve instances of direct physical domination through acts of violence<sup>4</sup> (Connell, 2005; Messner, 2002), but also through the symbolic capital which embodied images of masculinity-as-power invest in the majority of men, as part of what Connell (2005) terms the 'patriarchal dividend'. This conflation of (usually) heterosexual men with physical power, relative to the construction of homosexual men as effeminate and weak (Pronger, 1990; Wellard, 2012), and all women as the inevitably weaker and inferior sex, has long been seen to lend support to the power relations at work in a gender order centred on heterosexual male privilege (e.g. McKay, et al., 2000; Messner & Sabo, 1990).

As such, exclusion from sport, and/or trivialization and ridicule within or through it, have often been the experience of women, gay men, and various others who sit outside of the narrowly-defined norms of gender built around such spaces. Meanwhile, generating and maintaining such symbolism means that some men – who would superficially appear to benefit from this system the most – may ultimately pay a costly price for their efforts. When presented in this light, the role of sport as a male preserve has been criticised for its role in perpetuating social injustice. In many respects, such challenges have led to previously male-dominated sporting spaces undergoing significant change. In the following section, we discuss two such changes to sport that have gone some way in

undermining the role it can play in constructing notions of male supremacy, drawing on case studies from our research into combat sports to do so.

### ***Challenge and change***

As noted above, a defining feature of sport's sociological utility as a male preserve has been its exclusion of women, and gay men, along with any others who do not conform to masculine archetypes. The work of evidencing heterosexual men's 'natural'<sup>5</sup> pre-eminence in the spheres of bravery, competitiveness, strength, toughness and so on cannot proceed very effectively if women and gay men can appear alongside them, demonstrating those same attributes (Bryson, 1990; Cahn, 1994; Channon and Matthews, 2015b, 2016; Theberge, 1987). Yet, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century women's gradual inclusion in sport ate away at the exclusive male territory it represented, with all but a tiny minority of elite-level sports now open to women competitors, and participation figures at the Olympic Games now at near-equal levels (International Olympic Committee, 2016). LGBT people, meanwhile, have similarly become far more visible in sports, with a series of high-profile athletes 'coming out' over the past few years, along with the establishment of LGBT sports clubs and movements, such as the Gay Games (Krane and Waldon, 2000; Pronger, 2000; Waitt, 2003). Together, these have constituted important shifts in sport's potential role in constituting structures of gender and power.

These changes have perhaps been most striking in the field of combat sports, given the symbolic proximity these hold to those characteristics most central to the ideals of masculinity noted above (Channon, 2018; Matthews, 2014, 2016). With this in mind it is not surprising to find that, of all sports on the program of the Summer Olympic Games, boxing was the last to continue the formal exclusion of female competition, with the International Olympic Committee taking until 2009 to stipulate that women should be included in Olympic boxing competitions. Regarding professional combat sports, the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* likewise took until 2012 to introduce women to its roster of professional fighters. Public reception of these athletes has, however, been largely positive – both within subcultural spaces built around the sports, and in more mainstream media coverage (Godoy-Pressland, 2015; Jakubowska et al., 2016; Woodward, 2014). The high-profile exploits of women fighting has provided ample opportunity for the construction of discourses challenging orthodox ideals of gender, arguably weakening the symbolic value of these sports as male preserves.

A similar story can be told of sexual minority men who have, until very recently, been a near-invisible group within combat sports<sup>6</sup>. The coming-out of highly-ranked boxer Orlando Cruz in 2012, as well as the outing of mixed martial artist and former gay porn actor Dakota Cochrane<sup>7</sup> in the same year, were met with broadly positive responses in the press (Channon and Matthews, 2015a; Channon et al., 2013). The opportunity these athletes presented to open dialogue about homophobia in combat sports, as well as provide journalists the chance to reflect on the progressive ethos that seemed to be at work in wider sporting spaces, further revealed a shift away from the exclusionary and overtly hostile climates identified in earlier work on heavily masculinised sports worlds. Around the same time, the rising visibility of 'gay' or LGBT-friendly boxing clubs in several major Western cities (e.g.,

Brighton, Glasgow, London, Paris, New York) reveals shifting perceptions within both boxing and sexual minority communities as to the possibility of sexual diversity in combat sports.

However, while much (if, admittedly, not all) media coverage and fan response towards these athletes was positive, reception of transgender woman and mixed martial artist Fallon Fox has been far less so, often replicating transphobic and essentialist assumptions about immutable, binary and hierarchal sex difference. Typically constructing Fox as a 'man in disguise', whose performances would amount to 'violence against women' (cf. Felt, 2014), such hostility reveals one of the limits of the changes undergone in this particular male preserve. Despite wider inclusion of participants, there remains an ideological commitment to a binary model of sex and a normalised assumption of inevitable male pre-eminence. Interestingly, this observation opens conceptual space to discuss the second aspect of our analysis here – the impact of sex integration in sport on constructions of gender – for while Fox's example indicates the continuation of transphobic sentiment in sport, rationalised through discourses of fairness or (in combat sports particularly) anti-violence, such notions also pertain to debates around mixed-sex competition.

A typical refrain from proponents of sex segregation in sport – an historical norm so pervasive that few ever challenge it (McDonagh and Pappano, 2008) – is that physiological differences between males and females make fair competition in athletic contests impossible. Sweeping generalisations and reductive simplifications notwithstanding, it is true that physiological differences affecting sports performance can very often be observed between sex categories. Yet, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of fair competition between men and women in all aspects of sport; nor does it mean that men and women have not tried to play sports together at all (see Channon et al., 2017). This begs the sociological question of what happens *vis-à-vis* sport's operation as a male preserve when it becomes sex-integrated.

With respect to martial arts and combat sports, several studies have examined sex integration in training and competition (e.g., Channon and Jennings, 2013; Guérandel and Mennesson, 2007; Maclean, 2017). Here, the prospect of cross-sex competition dramatically departs from orthodox gendered logic stressing inevitable male supremacy in the realm of physical contests. From the point of view of such normalised assumptions, the supposition that men might be able to learn something from training with women, and furthermore that a woman might stand any chance of defeating a man in a fight seem highly improbable. And yet, empirical evidence reveals that such exchanges do take place in many martial arts and combat sports – most often with respect to training, but occasionally also in competition (Channon, 2013; Fields, 2005; Miller, 2010; McNaughton, 2012). That women might be accorded respect as men's training partners, or legitimate competitors, reveals a profound change in the conceptualisation of sex difference and gender propriety in sporting cultures ostensibly coded as masculine. This, alongside the symbolic meaning of women defeating men (although relatively rare, such instances are reported in the literature), emerge as key outcomes of sex-integrated training *vis-à-vis* gender.

Analysing the impact of male-female touch in such settings, Channon and Jennings (2013) argued that such experiences challenged normalised conceptions of female inferiority among both male and female practitioners. By training together and gaining first-hand experience of each other's physical potential, martial artists in various disciplines were shown to change both perceptions of sex

differences and their behaviour in sex-integrated environments. Such work therefore “became a lived-out ‘undoing’ of gender, impacting upon the practitioners’ understandings and embodied performances of sex difference” (Channon and Jennings, 2013: 500). Maclean (2017) argued, meanwhile, that joint training experiences helped build meaningful, mutually respectful relations between young men and women training in karate. She notes that “the sex-integrated practice of karate elevates the respect given to women by... disrupting ideas of women’s bodies as primarily sexual objects subordinate in ability to men” (2017: 271).

Both observations, supported in other studies that have examined sex integrated sporting spaces (Channon et al., 2017), reveal significant departures from the homosocial, often misogynistic and homophobic, male-dominated subcultures revealed in earlier studies of ‘masculine’ sports. Women and homosexual men taking part in activities that had previously operated as ‘male preserves’ represents an important challenge to men’s exclusive access to the socialisation opportunities, skill development and embodied symbolic capital these sports represent. Yet, sex-integrated sport goes a step further, challenging the often taken-for-granted assumption that (all) male bodies possess insurmountable advantages over (all) females, a doctrine that has long been (and for the most part, continues to be) enshrined within segregationist sports policies (Pieper, 2017). However, neither of these types of challenges have resulted in the complete destruction of sport’s role as a male preserve. In the following section we outline some of the on-going ways in which apparently inclusive, and even integrated sports can continue to shore up ideological notions of male supremacy.

### ***Residual patriarchy: The preserve in pieces***

While it is clear from the preceding comments that the often-simplistic associations between men, masculinity and sport have been undermined and subverted in important ways, evidence from various sources highlights how social power, and with it inequality, is often reworked, renegotiated and, despite some symbolically important evidence to the contrary, maintained (Atkinson, 2011; Connell, 2005; Matthews, 2016b, Pease, 2000). So while clear shifts in what Connell (2005) calls the ‘gender order’ have undermined structural components upon which patriarchal social relations have been built, it is still possible to evidence the manner in which many men are able to lay claim to influence and power by virtue of their performances of masculinity. This is as true in sports worlds (Atkinson, 2011; Matthews, 2014; 2016a) as it is in society more broadly (Matthews, 2016b).

Recognising the enduring character of sport’s role as a male preserve through times of change, Matthews (2016a) reconsidered the thesis in relation to his ethnographic work on boxing. Within a weightlifting and boxing gym, where women occupied a marginalised and minimised position, Matthews (2014) draws attention to the manner in which narratives about masculinity had to be expressed and lived out in carefully considered and contextually-negotiated ways in order to fit with wider social proprieties. While the men in his study believed that their ‘natural’ male biology justified some level of violent and aggressive behaviour, they were acutely aware of shifting social pressures that made such expressions largely illegitimate. As such, they crafted contextually-appropriate performances of manhood which drew on pugilistic codes to frame relatively controlled ‘ritual violence’ in sparring, and ‘self-bullying’ in the form of risky training practices, as somehow

'naturally' masculine. By interpreting such action as contextually appropriate releases of their innate male tendencies, these men were able to explain, justify and legitimate the relative preservation of this space for men and their 'masculine' behaviours (Matthews, 2014, 2016a).

In this sense, Matthews argues that while the straightforward structural organisation of sport as a homosocial space for heterosexual men has significantly diminished, thanks to the opening up of such spaces to those previously excluded from them, "we can [now] think of the male preserve as a site for the dramatic representation and reification of behaviours symbolically linked to patriarchal narrations of manhood" (Matthews, 2016a: 329). In weaving together narratives about manhood, sport and violence, with routine performances that are common within such spaces, this work helps shed light on the manner in which 'male preserves' are maintained, recast and reproduced via discursive meaning-making, even at the same time as they seem to be diminishing in other respects.

Furthermore, this illustrates the micro-sociological and symbolic interactions that underpin the reproduction and reification of a 'male preserve' (Matthews, 2014; 2016a). In empirically and theoretically exploring some of these details it is possible to more adequately describe the means by which sports worlds perpetuate what might be described as a form of 'residual' patriarchal relations. Aside from the continuation of narratives reifying the naturalisation of masculinity through combat sports, this effect is also achieved through various ways in which women's growing presence within them remains subordinated to men's in several respects. These include challenges to the authority of female officials; the relative lack of female (head) coaches in combat sports; the continuing disparity between professional male and female athletes' financial rewards, or access to training facilities; and the sexualisation of female combat athletes in the media (see Channon et al., 2018; Jennings, 2015; Kavoura et al., 2015; McCree, 2015). Each of these phenomena serve as not-so-subtle reminders that men remain central, in both symbolic and tangible ways, to the social world of combat sports.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, similar resistances also emerge when considering the social organisation and lived experience of sex integration in sport. Here, many men and women may initially struggle to grasp the concept of integrated training or competition – specifically in sports involving fighting – as this falls very far outside of everyday gender propriety (Channon, 2013). Discursive constructions of male-to-female hitting in particular as 'violence against women' create a moral imperative to avoid mixed sparring among men, who may also struggle to come to terms with the potential embarrassment of 'losing' to a woman in an activity at which they are assumed to possess an inevitable advantage. Indeed, with respect to mixed competition, in many countries/states' laws and in many combat sports authorities' rules, sex-integrated competitions are illegal, even if mixed-sex training might be a norm. Meanwhile, sexualised connotations of touching others' bodies (particularly in grappling-based sports) create additional hesitations over concerns of sexual impropriety (Channon and Jennings, 2013; Mierzwinski et al., 2014). As such, the inability to step away from orthodox gender constructions may eventually become a major obstacle to successful training, making for awkward and unproductive encounters that frustrate, rather than facilitate, progressive social development through sport.

The consequences of these (and other) problems are varied, but perhaps most pertinent to the present chapter is the effect they may have on women's ability to access the benefits of

participating equally in sports that have historically constituted male preserves. At the interactional level, both well-intentioned hesitation and dismissive hostility from male training partners can lead to women's place within sporting clubs being compromised; unchallenged sexist assumptions derived from orthodox gender expectations can create unwelcoming or off-putting social environments, ensuring few women enter or stay within clubs that are ostensibly open to them; while bans on women competing against men in their respective weight categories leaves women's skills underdeveloped if few female opponents can be found in regional or local competitions (Channon, 2013; Channon and Jennings, 2013; Owton, 2015). Together, such factors operate to perpetuate old systems of male privilege, effectively reducing the symbolic impact of women's entry into male preserves.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

Within the limited space available to us, we have mapped key developments in the sociological study of sport as both reflective of, and symbolically constitutive of, men's domination elsewhere in society. A variety of evidence can be used to unpick simplistic conceptions of sport as purely a male or masculine social endeavour. The argument we have presented here is that, notwithstanding such challenges and social shifts, it is essential to still continue to critically explore the ways in which sport can operate as a male preserve. Indeed, it is incumbent on scholars to move beyond some of the more obvious, headline-grabbing examples of the progressive inroads that women and girls, along with various LGBT people, have made into the traditionally heterosexist and masculine world of sport, in order to explore the subtle ways that the male preserve might be reinvented and recreated. And by centring a focus on such shifting dynamics, scholars interested in exploring the lives of men can produce more nuanced and robust accounts of sport and gender-based power.

### ***Notes***

- <sup>1</sup> In the sense of both asserting one's own status as a man but also in so doing, serving the political project of proving men's power in a more generalised sense
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Hoch's (1972) polemic neo-Marxist treatise, *Rip Off The Big Game*, explores associated themes in American professional sport, although with a stronger focus on their pertinence to capitalist labour relations.
- <sup>3</sup> Somewhat ironically, athletes on opposing sides in professional sport should probably be considered as work colleagues. It is, after all, their collective labour which produces the marketable commodity of sporting spectacle, although this often involves the mutual destruction of each other's bodies.
- <sup>4</sup> Although there is little space to unpack this problematic and complex term here, in Matthews and Channon (2017) we discuss how various forms of 'violence' in sport might be understood.
- <sup>5</sup> See Matthews (2014) for a relatively recent examination of how this process of naturalizing men's performances of masculinity takes place.
- <sup>6</sup> With a focus on men and masculinities here, we omit discussion of lesbians in the interests of space. Needless to say, because of the typical conflation of combat sports with masculinity, and female masculinity with lesbianism, the presence of lesbians or bisexual women in these sports is not so troubling to the typical gendered norms constructed around it as is the presence of gay or bisexual men.
- <sup>7</sup> Despite appearing in a number of gay porn films Cochrane always rejected his public 'outing' and instead claimed to be 'gay for pay' while in a long-term heterosexual relationship.



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