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Gender Division in Sport: Through the Eyes of Female Student-Athletes at CMS

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GENDER DIVISION IN SPORT:
THROUGH THE EYES OF FEMALE STUDENT-ATHLETES AT CMS

by
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For my Athenas

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Introduction	
Organization of Chapters	6
Hegemonic Gender Division and Sport	8
Ethnographic Methods and Description of Population	10
Chapter 1: Social Construction of Women’s Sports and the Female Athlete	16
Origins of Modern Sport	
Title IX and the Women in Sports Movement	22
Iconography of the Female Athlete in Media.....	29
Chapter 2: Gender Division in Campus Discourse and Experiences	38
Introduction	
Athletic Ability.....	41
Body Image	50
Sexuality.....	61
Chapter 3: Implications of Defying the Male Gaze	71
Introduction	
Pride	73
Sisterhood.....	80
Resolutions for Gender Equality in Sport	86
Conclusion	91
References and Works Cited	93

Introduction

Research question, theory, methods, and description of population

Introduction

Female athletes have made huge strides in the traditionally male-dominated sport community since the passing of Title IX of the Educational Amendment in 1972.

According to current reports from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), the number of female teams and participants in high school and intercollegiate athletics has skyrocketed since the '80s (NCAA Report, 2016; NAIA Report, 2014). In 2017, there are vastly more opportunities for girls and women to participate in sport and these opportunities are reciprocally met by eager young athletes who pursue them. Accompanying the structural changes that occurred at the school level in the '70s were professional heroines who, at the time, began changing the way society perceived traditional notions of gender roles through their domination and excellence in their respective sports. Those pioneers served as role models for younger generations of women and used their status as accomplished professional athletes to advocate for women in sport at all competitive levels.

Despite the progress of women's overall participation in sports, female athletes today continue to face a lack of appreciation for their accomplishments, harmful stereotypes rooted in historical cultural ideologies, and social pressures to manage their dual identities as females and athletes. As many scholars have noted, female athletes face a "female/athlete paradox" in which the two identities clash with each other due to hegemonic ideals of femininity and masculine athleticism, resulting in a need to resolve or cope with it (Krane, 2004; Paloian, 2012). In other words, while women may be

allowed to participate in sports through systematic institutions that create opportunity, they are still evaluated by the standards of a patriarchal perspective, or hegemonic “male gaze.” This, in turn produces a gender division on major cable networks where male athletes and competitions dominate airtime and content, a one-sided representation on major sports magazines that portray women as sexual icons rather than elite athletes, and a polarized popular discourse on women’s athletics by both men and women.

As a collegiate student-athlete in a community ripe for these sorts of discussions with my peers, I embarked on a mission to illuminate how the cultural pressures mentioned above take shape on college campuses. My initial purpose for this senior thesis was to explore the multi-dimensional female student-athlete experience through an understanding of the various social pressures faced by student-athletes like myself to fit in as both a gender-defiant athlete and a gender-compliant female. As someone who has spent over half of my life immersed in this sports culture where women always come second to men, I found this ethnography to be an incredibly enlightening exploration of a topic that is very dear to my heart. In this ethnography I illustrate various components of the female student-athlete experience while addressing the binary gender division in sports culture through an analysis of stereotypes shaped by the history of women’s sports, iconography portrayed by mainstream media, and the reinforcement of stigma and pressure to conform to social norms by college men and women.

As a basketball and former volleyball player, I’ve grown up being constantly compared to men and repeatedly disappointed when I fall short of their potential; feeling a pressure to fit some sort of body ideal and overanalyzing images of women; and from a young age, when I went to my first WNBA game, I was told that basketball, a sport I

have played almost my entire life, was “for lesbians.” Three common stereotypes made about women’s sports that persist in Claremont and in the broader context, as I explore in Chapter 2 of this ethnography, are: 1) that men are better athletes than women, 2) that female athletes have an overly masculine or mannish body, and 3) that women who play sports are lesbian. While it is true that many of these stereotypes are a result of a hegemonic ideology based on heteronormativity – what I call the “male gaze” – in women’s sports, I found that female athletes surprisingly reinforce them in their own language. Thus, I don’t discredit the responsibility of men to reframe their perspective on women’s sports, but I do explicitly address the responsibility and agency female athletes carry to help promote gender equality in sports discourse. While college women have a keen awareness of the existing gender disparity of athleticism and make criticisms of it, they sometimes reproduce the very same disparity they are subjected to by reinforcing internalized stereotypes through articulations of female homosocial spaces, feminine ideals, and the worthy emulation of men’s athleticism. I address the various roles women themselves play in this unequal dynamic and call for a self-reflective reevaluation of the way female athletes think and talk about women’s sports.

Organization of Chapters

In this thesis I will explore the following research questions:

1. How has society constructed the female athlete over time and how is she perceived today?
2. What kinds of stereotypes do female student-athletes at CMS currently face that are distinct from those faced by male student-athletes?
3. How do CMS female student-athletes manage these pressures and what sustains them through the struggle?

In order to address these questions, I organized the thesis in the following three chapters: In Chapter 1, I examine how current stigmas, stereotypes, and iconography of female athletes have been constructed over time since the introduction of modern sport beginning in the 20th century. I use previous research on the topic to show how the modern sports culture has been cultivated by and for men, examine the direct effects of Title IX and a number of professional athletes who inspired younger generations of girls and women to participate in sports, and show how mainstream media has cultivated the sexualized image of the female athlete.

In Chapter 2, I examine the gendered discourse of women's sports by men and women, specifically in the realms of athletic performance, sexuality, and body image. I examine the way men engage with these topics in formal interviews and how women convey this existing discourse through a narration of their own experiences. While these are themes that could be discussed apart from gender divisions, it is noteworthy that all of my informants discussed them in terms of the hegemonic binary that reinforced stereotypes, despite acknowledging its harm or fallacy.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I explore the effects of resisting the perverse hegemonic male gaze and suggest a solution to advancing women's inclusion in sport. By looking at two ways female student-athletes cope with and manage negative stereotypes – through athletic pride and sisterhood – I highlight how women can be more supportive of their fellow female athletes in order to challenge the patriarchal world of sports. I argue that although Title IX brought significant gender equality to sport, we still have much work to do to mitigate the apparent gender division through the reevaluation of gendered discourse in media, by men, and most importantly, by women themselves.

Some of the themes I discussed with my informants included general athleticism, gender inequality, body image, race, sexuality, academia, and social life. From these conversations I drew a compelling intricacy in the way male and female college students talk about women's sports. I found that college students naturally discuss sports, and these domains in particular, with a binary gender division between men and women, straight and lesbian, and masculine and feminine. Thus, I figured this ethnography to be a continuation of gender studies with a narrowed focus on its implications to sports. In it, I argue that while we have made significant strides in gender equality thanks to the legislative efforts of Title IX and its effects on the participation of female athletes in high school and college, there remains a large, normalized gender divide in the American sports culture that is manifest through mainstream media and everyday discourse by men and women, thus perpetuating the visible gender gap in sports.

Hegemonic Gender Division and Sport

In this ethnography I often refer to the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and femininity that have shaped modern sport and influenced stereotypes of female athletes. According to gender studies academic R.W. Connell (referenced by Mimi Schippers, 2007), the theory of gender hegemony is a binary system tied to white, heterosexual, middle-class status that includes the normalized "social positions" of masculinity and femininity. By operating as a social position, individuals, regardless of gender, can move in and out depending on the practices embodied by the individual that are characteristically "masculine" (strength, violence, authority) or "feminine" (vulnerability, inability to use violence, compliance). Sport-specific traits cited by gender academics as

masculine include individualism, competitiveness, aggressiveness, power, strength, and toughness, while feminine includes cooperation, relationship-oriented, interdependence, and attractiveness (Steinfeldt, 2011). This gender binary is further separated by a link to sexual desire in which the attraction to women is masculine and an attraction to men is feminine (Schippers, 2007; Caudwell, 1999). Steinfeldt (2011) notes that even a strong sex drive alone is a traditionally masculine trait, while sexual fidelity is feminine. Though as Schippers says, “Heterosexual desire can sometimes take a back seat to other, more salient masculine characteristics within a particular context” (Schippers, 2007). As I explain in Chapter 1, Section 1, sports were actually a solution for overly feminine men to reclaim their masculinity. That is why lesbian women receive more criticism than gay men in sports because a gay man’s athletic ability embodies masculinity and overshadows his subordinate gay identity, while a lesbian woman is “masculine” because she likes women *and* plays sports, two subordinate characteristics of hegemonic femininity. I will explore this association between masculinity and lesbian homosexuality further in context in Chapter 1, Section 1.

Using terms from Schippers (2007), gender hegemony operates through the subordination and marginalization of non- “hegemonic masculinities” (those who are not straight, white, middle-class men), including “subordinate masculinity” (gay men), “hegemonic femininity” (straight, white, middle-class women), and “pariah femininity” (lesbian, bitch, slut). Those who do not fit the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are stigmatized as the “other” in society. In this thesis, I discuss the subordination and marginalization of female athletes who fit into the hegemonic and pariah femininities in the sports culture that has been shaped and dominated by men who embody hegemonic

masculinity. As Lenskyj (1990) said, men have historically been used as the “yardstick to measure all human behavior,” especially when it comes to athletic achievement, even though there is little validity to the claim that men’s sports are worthy of emulation over women’s. According to Schippers (2007), although pariah femininity displays certain masculine characteristics, it is not considered “masculine,” but rather a contaminated and undesirable kind of femininity that differs from the hegemonic norm. Regardless of what term is used – masculine, contaminated, undesirable – modern sports culture marginalizes women simply on the basis that femininity is symbolically inferior to masculinity, and that women, grouped as the “other,” are legitimately dominated by men who embody hegemonic masculinity – and that’s including women who embody *all* types of femininity. Hegemonic masculinity, defined by its separation from femininity and attraction to heterosexual desire, is not a fixed state that *belongs* to men, though it is traditionally male-dominated. This masculine perception on the subordination of women’s sport and value of heteronormativity is what I mean when I refer to the perverse “male gaze” in this thesis, especially in Chapter 1, Section 3.

Ethnographic Methods and Description of Population

As a member of the Claremont-Mudd-Scripps (CMS) women’s basketball team, participant observation proved a key method to understanding the female athlete experience. As an insider I found myself able to observe part of the population of this study in a way that others would be unable due to restricted access to locker rooms and closed practices, and the general rapport and community of being a member of a team. Much of my participant observation contains valuable, personal experiences because of

my role as an insider and my ability to relate to the population of interest as a fellow female student-athlete going through the same struggles. I recognize that this approach is much different than that of many other ethnographers because I did not have to assimilate into a new culture and therefore, my existing role as a member of this community was extremely helpful to my research because I had already established rapport with many of my informants and had mutual connections to participants I wanted to interview.

Despite recognition of my own position within the CMS community, in staying true to anthropological research I set out to familiarize the unfamiliar and de-familiarize the already familiar world of athletics by opening myself to new experiences. With approval from the CMC Institutional Review Board (IRB), I conducted fieldwork and interviews with a variety of people in the CMS community. I most heavily relied on key interlocutors from various varsity sports teams to recount their experiences as a student-athlete. My key informants include one athlete each from cross country, track, golf, golf/rugby, soccer/ rugby, swim, lacrosse, and tennis, two athletes from water polo, volleyball, and softball, and multiple basketball players. I formally interviewed 10 Claremont McKenna College (CMC) athletes, 3 Scripps College (SCR), and 3 Harvey Mudd College (HMC), which included participation from every class. Though I identify these athletes as key interlocutors, my research also included casual conversations with dozens more female student-athletes at CMS. I originally found many voluntary participants through social media and snowball sampling as word got out about my research, but also sought out student-athletes who could specifically broaden my fieldwork with their experience as HMC, SCR, lesbian athletes, and student-athletes of color. I additionally conducted interviews with a softball coach, a former volleyball coach and student-athlete

at CMS, CMC's Assistant Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion and Chief Civil Rights Officer, a Dean for Residential Life at HMC, former HMC Administrator of Student Activities and current staff member at CMS, the Scripps Title IX Coordinator, and I acquired statistical information from CMC's admission office and CMS Sports Information Director. To gather information about how male student-athletes perceive female student-athletes at CMS (in Chapter 2), I talked to two groups of college males comprised of a varsity water polo player, club rugby player, varsity swimmer, and former soccer player in one group, and three varsity tennis players and a club lacrosse player in the other. I modified all of the names used in this ethnography as pseudonyms to protect the identities of my informants.

CMC, HMC, and SCR comprise the three liberal arts institutions in Claremont, California that join together to compete as the Stags and Athenas for the CMS Athletic Program. The CMS program has fielded men's and women's teams since 1976, though CMC and HMC competed together as a men's program before joining SCR beginning in 1958 (Starr, 1998). CMS is a member of the NCAA Division III class, which is made up of 450 institutions who do not provide athletic scholarships to their 180,000 student-athletes. Division III schools emphasize academics as the primary focus for their student-athletes, while offering a uniquely competitive environment that "pushes student-athletes to excel on the field and build upon their potential by tackling new challenges across campus" (NCAA Mission Statement). In the most recent Forbes "America's Top Colleges" list, all three schools found a spot, with CMC at No. 31, HMC at No. 59, and SCR at No. 83 (Forbes, 2016). On a side note, I want to point out that CMS students feel a great deal of pressure to achieve on and off the field, though academic pressure is not

one I will discuss in this thesis despite its importance in the lives of male and female student-athletes. In addition to the three colleges' academic prestige, the athletics department is equally as competitive, especially when compared to 20 years ago. According to a former student-athlete who played back then, "The competitive level and expectations were to win the conference and if you get to the NCAA [championships] it's a bonus." Today, many CMS teams set their sights on playing in NCAA post-season championships as more of an expectation than a bonus, and the majority of men's and women's teams receive berths to National tournaments by winning the Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SCIAC) championships.

There are currently (based on 2015-2016 statistics) 211,886 female student-athletes who play collegiate sport in NCAA divisions I, II, and III (NCAA Report). That does not even take into account the number of athletes competing in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), a smaller governing body of collegiate athletics with 248 member institutions. With that being said, it is important to note that CMS female student-athletes make up a very small percentage (< 1%) of the total population of female student-athletes competing in the three NCAA divisions. I presume there are many similarities between the experience of CMS and other athletes around the country, but when reading this thesis keep in mind that the CMS experience is especially unique because of the intricate makeup of this joint athletic program. The athletic experience at each school differs based on the representation and acceptance of athletes at each institution coupled with the notion that CMS is a very "CMC-centric" program.

CMS is made up of 71% CMC students (207 men, 154 women), 17% HMC students (54 men, 33 women), and 12% SCR students (60 women) (Common Data Set).

CMC athletes make up 27% of the student population at CMC, compared to a meager 6% at SCR and 10.5% at HMC. Coupled with these glaring numbers, through my participant observation and interviews with numerous informants, I found that athleticism seems to be a social norm at CMC, whether by playing a varsity or club sport, participating in intramural leagues, or continuing physical regiments from time as a former high school athlete. CMC student-athletes don't often find themselves walking against the grain on their own campus because they see other student-athletes all the time in dorms and classrooms. That, and not to mention, the fact that all athletic facilities are located on CMC's campus perpetuates the norm even more so. Student-athletes from both of the underrepresented schools remarked "sticking together" with their fellow "Scrippies" or "Mudders." An HMC student-athlete said, "All of the Mudd athletes stick together, probably because we're up latest doing the same work because we had practice." Similarly, a SCR student-athlete said, "There's not that many of us so it's different. We stick together. Most of my friends are athletes."

Although it was a non-CMC student-athlete who referred to CMS being very "CMC-centric," which is something that really struck me due to my previous lack of acknowledgement of this fact, CMC student-athletes are very aware of the disparity of HMC and SCR athletes. As one said, "In terms of acceptance, it makes a Mudder or Scripps person more of an anomaly because they're an athlete. And it may make them more respected because their schools aren't flooded with athletes they aren't as accommodating." CMC student-athletes recognize that there are few HMC and SCR students in the athletics program and even fewer on their respective campuses. I choose to point this out because social pressure is another theme that could have been discussed

in this thesis. However, despite the pressure these student-athletes face in navigating unique social and academic norms on their respective campuses, they still share many experiences that I will discuss throughout this thesis.

Finally, it is important to note the gender makeup at each school. At CMC, women make up 48% (658) of the student population and at HMC women comprise 46% (383). Of this general population, women from CMC comprise 62.3% (154) of CMS's female population, women from HMC make up 13.4% (33) of CMS' female population, and SCR makes up 24% (60) of CMS' female population (CMS Sports Information). Even though CMS female student-athletes make up a fairly equal proportion of both their respective institutions and CMS population (48% women) per Title IX regulation, the degree of total cultural acceptance is not as equal. Female student-athletes at each of the three institutions of CMS share many experiences relating to their gender, and have coped with, managed, and challenged various pressures through their continual participation in collegiate sports.

Chapter 1: Social Construction of Women's Sports and the Female Athlete

A look at how stereotypes, stigmas, and icons were molded over time

Section 1: Origins of Modern Sport

The hegemonic construction of stigma against masculine women in sport

What we know of today as modern sport first originated from the Victorian era and developed into the 20th century. The Olympics, which are the most modern displays of sport internationally, first appeared in Athens for the first Olympiad in 1896 as a revival to ancient games between Greek men. Guided by Victorian ideals of recreation and muscular Christianity, sport and exercise took off as a response to the “feminization” of non-labor working, middle- and upper-class men (Cahn, 2015). Worried that these men would become soft and weak leaders, sport became an avenue to renew their virility. Thus, we can see that modern sport and athleticism began with this connection to hegemonic masculinity I explained in the introduction.

While sport initially grew as a solution for renewing manhood, soon after it also became an avenue for improving womanhood. Some feared sport threatened a woman's reproductive system, but eugenicists and social Darwinians saw it as a way to increase fertility in upper-class women when played in light physical vigor (Cahn, 2015). Sports played by men were often modified for women to be less physical in order to appease the opposition, otherwise women were mandated to play existing “sex-appropriate” sports, such as tennis, swimming, skiing, field hockey, or archery, which posed no danger to their reproductive system nor traditional characteristics of hegemonic femininity (Cahn, 2015; Kane, 1988). Sex appropriate sports are traditionally characterized as “beautiful, graceful, nonaggressive, and aesthetically pleasing,” and are often individualistic rather

than team oriented (Paloian, 2012). These individual sports, minus field hockey, did not invoke fears of “masculinizing” women as team sports did because of the lack of physical contact with other players, and team sports, such as field hockey and lacrosse were “considered proper for women” because they were never associated with men's games nor did they “carry the stigma of overt masculinity” (Courturier, 2010). Thus, women’s sports were originally stigmatized as “masculinizing” women, and over time “masculinity” became increasingly connected to lesbianism, which explains the current stigma of today.

Between 1890 and World War I women trained in moderation, while still able to reap the positive benefits of sport – for “health, fun, sportsmanship, and a cooperative ethos” – without tainting their femininity (Cahn, 2015). One of the first hugely popular sports with women was basketball, invented in 1891 as a game for men and women. However, this game strikingly contrasts the one played today, as women wore long skirts, could not run with the ball, and played on a shorter court – all of which were considered “feminine” game rules to domesticate the sport and make basketball acceptable for women’s play. A quote by sailor F.C. Sumichrast (1890) illustrates this male gaze on women’s participation in sport in the early 1900s:

In a word, nearly every sport pursued by men has become in the present day more or less a favorite with the ladies: and as far as these sports do not overtax their strength and the pursuit of them does not involve any loss of that grace and charm of femininity which when all said and done is the crown and glory of woman, there can be no valid reason given why ladies should not be encouraged to benefit themselves by frequent open-air life.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, the image of the female body shifted from the pale and frail Victorian lady to the fit, modestly athletic woman. As women’s enrollment in college increased from 85,000 to 283,000 from 1900 to 1920, so did their participation in physical education, though not without controversy (Cahn, 2015;

Courturier, 2010). The increased interest by women in sports added to the already existing social unease about changing gender roles in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Women's sport in the first two decades embraced the image of a new athletic woman through moderate participation. This was short lived, though, because the next era introduced a new level of competition for athletes and a redefined image of femininity. In the 1920s ideas about femininity were prioritized and re-defined again by sexuality and the modern flapper girl (Cahn, 2015; Krane, 2004). Physical educators, who valued moderation and feared the "masculinization" of female athletes, clashed with popular sport reformists, who valued competition and the beautification of female athletes, though neither denied sports were masculine in character. To reinforce hegemonic femininity, athletic women and sports teams were often linked up with the sexual images of women in forms of pop culture such as dance, movie, and beauty pageants coinciding with national championships, thus earning "appreciation for sexual appeal as much as athletic ability" (Cahn, 2015). By the end of the 1930s, America had two competing images of the athletic woman, but an image nonetheless: a "healthy, wholesome athlete of moderate ability and limited activity; and the exuberant, sexy, competitive athlete" (Cahn, 2015). Both of these images embodied at least one characteristic of hegemonic femininity to please the male gaze.

Despite criticism and social barriers, nothing could stop women from finding ways to be physically active. In fact, the 1920s are regarded as the first wave of athletic feminism for women, a precursor to the women in sports movement of the '60s and '70s (Courturier, 2010). Founded in 1923, the Women's Division and Committee on Women's

Athletics (CWA), renamed in 1917, tried to counter the “male model of sport” through a democratic approach under the motto “A Sport for Every Girl, and Every Girl in a Sport” (Cahn, 2015). Under this motto physical educators introduced “play days,” which led to the formation of competitive teams in colleges. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) introduced national championships to swimming in 1916, track and field in 1924, and basketball in 1926. While drawing significant fan and media interest, conflict between educators and reformers remained intact and made it difficult for women’s sport acceptance to grow significantly. In a 1936 and 1945 study, still only 16-17 percent of colleges offered intercollegiate varsity sports to women (Cahn, 2015). In addition, female athletes still met sexist criticism on their participation in competitive athletics, from college to professional. After the first appearance of women’s track and field at the 1928 Olympics, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) banned long races until the 1960 Olympics due to “grossly exaggerated reports of exhausted runners in the 800-meter race” in the *New York Times* (Gottesman, 2001). These are just a few examples of the social unease about changing gender roles I mentioned earlier.

During the 1940s and ‘50s, women looked to a new idol, perhaps more fitting to their new athletic bodies, in a strong, independent Rosie the Riveter. When men went away to war, women stayed home still raising the family, but now also worked in factories and played sports. Softball, invented in the early 1900s as a derivative of baseball, took off beginning in the 1930s as a low-cost, moderate-ability sport perfect for Depression-era working-class men and women. In 1943 P.K. Wrigley started the All-American Girls Professional Ball League (AAGPBL) to ensure that high-quality baseball remained intact while the men were away for World War II (Gottesman, 2001). However,

the league was incredibly sexist. Women had to adhere to feminine principles regarding appearance, off-field conduct, and personal life. According to *LIFE Magazine*, women were mandated to wear feminine attire, forbidden to smoke or drink in public, and could not have dates “except with ‘old friend’ and then only with the approval of the ever-present team chaperone” (LIFE, 1945). Despite giving women a largely popular arena to compete, the AAGPBL perpetuated stereotypes against female athletes who challenged hegemonic norms.

Post-war and the return of male soldiers pushed women out of factories and back into domesticity, thus redefining [white] womanhood in terms of domestic life. Entering the Cold War era women were forced to navigate new stigmas as African American and Soviet¹ “Amazon” women dominated competitive sport (Cahn, 2015). By mid-century track and field, along with basketball, had earned a masculine reputation unsuited to female athletes as the two Superpowers competed internationally. Black female athletes who entered the “unsuitable” sport after white women abandoned it, excelled tremendously, but did not fit the hegemonic white womanhood and were viewed as overly masculine or “mannish” – aggressive, tough, passionate, intense, strong, physical, and competitive (Cahn, 2015). Although these females represented prominent elite athletes, track and field, and sport in general, would remain an illegitimate activity for females to the male gaze. In addition to the new racial stigmas attached to sport, the Cold War era also perpetuated the stigma on homosexuality due to the “Lavender Scare,” or homosexual panic, of the 1950s (Cahn, 2015). The thought was, as sport “masculinized” women, they would develop masculine qualities, including attraction for their own sex – as Schippers called pariah femininity (Schippers, 2007). Nonetheless, lesbian women

¹ The Soviet Union joined the Olympic stage in 1952.

who competed in basketball, softball, track and field, bowling, and field hockey between the 1930s and '60s found the sport arena a relatively safe and receptive public site for them to find community. However, they were required to hide their sexuality and play under the "Play It, Don't Say It" motto to avoid condemnation from other players, coaches, and fans (Cahn, 2015). While most teammates didn't seem to mind, lesbian women found that succeeding at their sport and being a part of the community "legitimized" their role in a society that had, for decades, categorized them as "unwomanly, perverted, failed members of their sex" (Cahn, 2015). So yes, lesbian female athletes found community in sport, but sport did not "turn" them lesbian. At the same time, however, because they were forced to hide their homosexuality, outsiders assumed "mannish" athletes were lesbian and the "feminine" athletes were heterosexual.

Leading up to the sports movement of the '60s and '70s, women had already faced many challenges in the realm of sports as society redefined their identity time after time and stigmatized every aspect of their participation. At first, women's participation in sport seemed to threaten their reproductive system and femininity. Sport was, after all, created as a way to renew 20th-century men's masculinity and involved rigorous, physical activity. As the American sports culture grew more competitive in the '20s and '30s, society began to see sport as an acceptable activity for women's health, but still a threat to their femininity. Sports competitions teamed up with beauty pageants to reinforce the sexual appeal of women who participated in such masculine activity. Then during the Depression Era and World War II, when society gave women more independent and valuable roles, women found their place in sports as competitive athletes and factories as part of the working-class. But over the span of one decade, women's

roles in society radically shifted from sexual tools for men to strong independents and back to dependent housewives. After the war, prejudices that had been slowly developing over the year came out in full force, as black and lesbian women had to navigate through the two worlds in which they faced the most stigma.

So, the second half of the 20th century leads us to the middle of a growing feminist movement where female athletes had to find a way to manage traditional views of femininity, heteronormativity, and race, or be stigmatized and outcast from society. Even though I will explain a huge shift in the women's sports movement in the following chapter, it is important to understand that this stigma did not go away with Title IX.

Section 2: Title IX and the Women in Sports Movement

The first major tipping point for female athletes to garner respect from the community

In 1972 President Nixon signed into effect Title IX of the Educational Amendment Act, which states:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

While nowhere in this law are athletics mentioned, these 37 words significantly changed the course of women in sports. In the 1971-72 season, only 29,977 women participated in intercollegiate sports (NCAA Report). Already by the 1981-82 season, 74,239 female athletes participated in 4,776 championship sport teams (NCAA Report).² Today, based on the most recent NCAA Report from the 2015-16 season, the number of female participants has increased over 700% to 211,886 athletes competing on 10,449 championship sport teams (NCAA Report). Title IX also had direct effects on the

² Report begins with the 1981-82 season

founding of the CMS athletics program, the site of this ethnography. After its founding in 1946, Claremont Men's College competed with coeducational Pomona College (founded 1887). In 1959 Claremont dissolved the partnership with Pomona and began competing with coeducational Harvey Mudd (founded 1958). It wasn't until July of 1972 that Claremont's Board of Trustees began a "serious discussion" to admit women to the college so that in 1976, when the first female class entered, Claremont Men's College³ and Harvey Mudd joined together with Scripps College (founded 1926) to field women's teams in volleyball, basketball, swim and dive, track, cross country, and tennis (Starr, 1998). Today, CMS fields ten men's and eleven women's teams for a total of 21 varsity teams competing in NCAA Division III with some of the finest facilities the division has to offer.

Title IX brought changes to equalizing high school and collegiate athletics in terms of participation, funding, facilities, and staff. While it played a huge role, legislatively, in promoting female athletics at the college level, the law was also met by other organizations formed by female activists, which became known as the women in sports movement. In 1966 the new generation founded the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW),⁴ which governed major tournaments and became the sole sponsor and chief advocate of intercollegiate sports (Cahn, 2015). These organizations drove many formal changes to women's participation in sport and society to ameliorate the gender gap. Feminist scholar Susan Birrell wrote about how feminist theories have been used in sports studies since the modern feminist movements of the '80s (2000). She reminds us that "a central part of the contemporary feminist project is to discover and

³ Renamed to Claremont McKenna College in 1981.

⁴ Later the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) founded in 1971.

theorize links to the lived experiences of other oppressive relationships [besides gender]” (Birrell, 2000). In that case, the women in sports movement is not just about equality for women but also about improving the discourse around the other intersectional aspects of being a female athlete such as sexual orientation, class, and race. As Lenskyj (1990) said, “Contemporary radical feminist analysis identified patriarchal and heterosexual hegemony as two powerful forces that shape women’s intellectual, social, economic, and political lives.” Specifically, as I will talk about in this thesis, these forces shape stereotypes on the female body and sexuality.

Concurrently with the women in sports movement came the “fitness boom” of the ‘70s and ‘80s in which women took up jogging, aerobics, walking, weight training, bicycling, and swimming in pursuit of improved physical and mental health (Cahn, 2015). This era introduced what we still see today as the skinny body image ideal, an ideal revealed through multiple studies done between 1959 and 1988 (Leit, 1999). Gymnastics and bodybuilding both took off as sports that allow women to take control of their bodies and sculpt them into “objects for public display and evaluation” (Cahn, 2015). Gymnastics became a sports that parades small, defined female gymnasts in sparkly leotards in front of panels judging beauty and execution, while bodybuilding presents women with large, well-sculpted muscles to a panel judging bulk and muscularity. While seemingly more “feminine” is gymnastics, both sports actually challenge what society thinks of as typically masculine and feminine features of the body, especially with respect to physical strength. Additionally, the women in sports movement simultaneously occurred while America experienced a cultural revolution in sexual expression, where women started to become more sexually promiscuous, and the

technological revolution, which allowed sports to be more widely accessible to the nation (Cahn, 2015). What followed was the popularization of sports in American culture and a consumerist economy driven to buy into sports and its requisite equipment. Coupled with the modern body ideals and growing consumerist society, women's sports, and specifically the athletes, became commodified for this particular market.

On paper, the women in sports movement looks like a success in terms of increasing the opportunities available for women to become part of the sports world. Whether or not they were accepted into this culture is another question. Female athletes continued to face the same criticisms and barriers as they had before, though activists, mostly at the professional level, played a huge role in redefining what it meant to be a female athlete. As said by Paloian, women were beginning to “challenge the [hegemonic] views by reframing what it means to be feminine in society” through competing and, most importantly, *succeeding* in a variety of sports (Paloian, 2012). Success stories of female athletes from the post-Title IX era have served as inspiration to a younger generation of girls and women interested in pursuing sport. While women mostly fought for gender equality in terms of equal opportunity and pay for women, they shaped the controversial image of the new female athlete through identities that had been, and still are, stigmatized by society. I chose to highlight the following professional athletes to show that the best female athletes of their time had to overcome social barriers with relation to their sexual orientation, race, and gender. As pioneers they inspired the younger generation of girls that women can compete and succeed in sport even if they don't fit the heteronormative ideals of society.

In 1973 Billie Jean King made headlines by defeating Bobby Riggs in the tennis “Battle of the Sexes.” While King had been an advocate for equal pay to tennis players years before this match and Title IX, she used this “victory against sexism” and the succeeding prize money to finance *WomenSports* magazine and founded the Women’s Sports Foundation with former Olympic swimmer Donna de Varona (Cahn, 2015). King, and another highly successful tennis player of the time Martina Navratilova, enjoyed endorsements and public popularity in media. That is, until both admitted to lesbian relationships in the ‘80s and lost millions in endorsement money (Cahn, 2015).

In 1988 Florence “Flo-Jo” Griffith Joyner became the fastest woman in the world after setting world records for the 100-meter and 200-meter sprints at the U.S. Olympic Trials and Seoul Games (Rowbottom, 1998). As a black athlete, she is one example of the many athletes who found success in track and field after white women abandoned it during the ‘40s and ‘50s. However, critics accused Flo-Jo of using steroids due to her increasingly masculine physique of defined and stringy muscle, even though her tests always came out negative (Cahn, 2015). Since the 1968 Olympics, and up until the 2000 Sydney Olympics where the law was repealed, women were subjected to compulsory sex-testing by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) essentially to prove that women could be such successful athletes (Gottesman, 2001). While some women have elected to use steroids to enhance their sport performance, the assumption that women as a group cannot be great athletes has created this kind of doubtful stereotype, especially in black and lesbian athletes who do not fall under the category of hegemonic femininity.

Heywood and Dworkin call the year 1996 as the “Year of the Woman,” in which sports fans emphasized the recognition of women for their achievements and not their

looks (2003). Team USA took gold in four team sports at the Atlanta Olympics in basketball, gymnastics, softball, and soccer, as well as in individual sports track, swimming, and tennis (Killion, 2016). What followed was the founding of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) league and a bigger presence of women's soccer in the U.S. when, three years later, the U.S. hosted the Women's World Cup soccer and took home gold for the first time in U.S. history (Killion, 2016). Yet again, even though women made significant steps toward improving equality and challenged stereotypes by dominating in their sports, criticism never ceased. While the 1999 World Cup team changed the face of women's soccer and led to its recognition as one of the most popular sports, many remember the immediate sports bra "scandal" and sexualization of Brandi Chastain, who celebrated as any male athlete would by ripping off her jersey and sliding onto the field after scoring the final penalty kick to win the World Cup. While this act of celebration kicked off a momentous stride for women's soccer, viewers criticized her for showing off her breasts, thus catapulting Chastain and women into the deep thrones of sexualization. For women, to attract viewership requires they overcome the stigma of lesbianism and "mannishness," but doing so walks a fine line of being overly sexual to the heterosexual audience (Cahn, 2015). This perverse male gaze on female athletes in media is something I will address more deeply in the next section.

More recently, the 2000s have also seen a fair share of successful female athlete activists: Serena Williams became a household name after becoming the first African American to win the Grand Slam after 41 years in 1999 (Gottesman, 2001). She is currently the highest paid female athlete and 40th overall, according to Forbes' 2016

World's 100 Highest Paid Athletes; Abby Wambach, an openly lesbian member of the women's national soccer team, remains the world's top scoring international soccer player for both men and women, even after her retirement following the 2015 World Cup (Wagner, 2015); And mixed-martial-arts fighter Ronda Rousey broke the "nice-girl" attitude of female athletes after becoming a powerful catalyst for creating the women's UFC league (Hedegaard, 2015). Despite all of these athletes' national and international success – King, Flo-Jo, Chastain, Williams, Wambach, and Rousey – each has faced harsh criticism (that will also be reflected on in this thesis) with regards to stigma against their sexual orientation, race, and deviation from hegemonic femininity, as well as a blinded focus on their sexual appearance over athletic ability.

The last 30 years of the 20th century produced huge accomplishments for women's participation and interest in sport at the high school and college levels, especially due to policy changes addressed in Title IX. Had it not been for Title IX, the coeducational CMS athletics program may not even exist today. Whatever stage – high school, college, or professional – women stop playing competitive athletics, sports participation at any level is incredibly beneficial to the development of women and has played an even greater role in the lives of those who choose to continue at the higher level, like my informants. Although early female athletes faced heavy criticism as they crossed into characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, key professional activists and icons inspired a new generation of athletes in the 2000s to continue challenging stereotypes and limitations of female athletes. The message professional athletes send to society is what affects younger generations. By using their power and prominence in mass media, professional athletes can most significantly change the culture of sport and

how society views female athletes. As said by Mean and Kassing (2008), "Having supposedly achieved central status in the athletic identity category, we might expect that professional women athletes would be able to perform athletic identities that challenge and resist predominant discourses about females in sport." With professional athletes leading the charge and acting as role models for younger generations, female athletes at all levels are inspired to push against the glass ceiling in sports.

At this professional level we can see, as outsiders, a bit into the culture of women's sports. However, the very same causes professional athletes fight for, such as gender equality, and stereotypes they disprove, such as redefining what it means to be feminine, are alive and well at the college level where the spotlight is a lot dimmer. Female athletes who play at the college level, specifically at CMS, face and manage the very same pressures to conform to hegemonic norms related to their gender that we see professional athletes advocating for on the national stage. In other words, Title IX had significant effects on increasing the visibility of women in sport, but has not had as significant of an effect on changing the general discourse and stigma on women's sport.

Section 3: Iconography of the Female Athlete in Media

A capitalist portrayal of female athletes in mass media through sexual appeal

In the sports culture I have previously explained has been created by men for men, trespassed and challenged by women, it is all too natural for mass media to represent slanted views on female athletes. The blatant sexualization of female athletes tailors to the "assumed heterosexual, white, male audience" of television, magazines, and news (Crosby, 2016). Whoever writes the story, calls the game, or interviews the player creates a hegemonic atmosphere that "shapes what audiences digest" (Crosby 2016). In

other words, implicit and explicit biases of those in sports-related positions, most commonly male storytellers, not only reflect a one-sided view of female athletics, but reinforce the age-old stereotypes women continuously fight for today. As Kane (1988) so eloquently said, “The mass media have become one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping values and attitudes in modern culture. Mass media portray the dominant images or symbolic representations of American society. Females are both reflected in and created by mass media images.” The images of female athletes portrayed by the media reflect some of the same perverse stereotypes that occur in everyday discourse, including those on their athletic ability, appearance, and sexuality. In this section I will explore some of these images circling around in a variety of mass media outputs and why women are underrepresented and misrepresented in their coverage. These images shape the hegemonic male gaze on women’s sports and the body image ideals that CMS female student-athletes try to live up to.

In American culture, hegemonic masculinity and femininity are structured by those who are “white, heterosexual, and middle-class with an ideal physique that differs according to one’s gender” (Paloian, 2012). Often times, female athletes don’t represent the “feminine” ideal as constructed by society because many of the characteristics embodied by athletes are traditionally “masculine” in nature. As Kane said, “[Sports] represent the antithesis of what women are supposed to be, so that athleticism becomes a detriment to the female image” (Kane, 1988). Thus, these female athletes, especially on the professional level where they are cast into the spotlight by mainstream media, encounter conflicting difficulties when balancing a “feminine image with the masculine qualities associated with their sports” (Paloian, 2012). These female athletes who don’t fit

the hegemonic ideals of mainstream America – the “pariah femininity” kind – are stigmatized by society and are rarely ones we see in the media.

Gender and sexuality researchers characterize “sex-appropriate” sports for women by their “expressive qualities and graceful movements that are meant to visually please the audience by emphasizing” the “aesthetic movements of the female body” (Paloian, 2012; Dadario, 1994). We easily talk about sports in a gendered tone because the naturally-occurring “anatomical differences between male and female athletes are constructed in sport as natural differences that are used to legitimize sex-exclusive sport activities” (Dadario, 1994). Although many sports are regarded as gender-neutral, such traditionally “feminine” sports, as it will be, include figure skating, gymnastics, tennis, golf, and swimming. These sports not only flaunt graceful movements of the female body, but they also differentiate from male sports through apparel that ensured feminine propriety, such as tunics, blouses, dresses, and skirts (Courturier, 2010). Additionally, these individual sports “did not invoke fears of 'masculinizing' women the way team sports did” because of the lack of physical contact (Courturier, 2010). These kinds of “feminine” images of women participating in sex-appropriate sports are what we most often see in 20th century media, especially in print, such as sports magazines.

Although women have made tremendous strides in breaking down traditional gender norms and redefining femininity through success in their respective sport, female athletes continue to be portrayed as sex icons in the media today. According to Kane, women make up 40% of athletes but only a paltry 2-4% of all media coverage, and when they are featured, they are more likely to be “off the court, out of uniform, and in highly sexualized poses” (Tucker Center, 2013). One of the biggest reasons for this is due to the

notion that the entire sports world is dominated by the capitalist economy, which is another domain of hegemonic masculinity. In this economy, sex sells sex, so regular women in generic media and female athletes in sports media are sexualized to appeal to the consumers. As Mary Jo Kane alludes to in the film *Media Coverage & Female Athletes*, sports media sells sex not athletics, and this is a key reason why female athletes continue to be sexualized in mass media outputs (Tucker Center, 2013). Though based off of a comment made by one of my male informants – an example of “male gaze” in action – I would argue that *women’s* sports media specifically is meant to sell sex because of the previously explained notion of male domination in sport. As a male rugby player, Richard, admitted when looking at magazine covers, “When you showcase guys and you see them in a speedo you look at their muscles and their athletic ability, but if you look at a woman in a swimsuit you think of the attractiveness first and then the athletic ability.” I argue then, if a naked male athlete is admired first for his athletic appeal while a naked female is for her sexual appeal, it is evident that even the economics behind mainstream media are gendered to sell different products to the same consumers. Thus, female athletes have not only been caught up in a sports culture that has been previously dominated by men and hegemonic masculinity, but also an economy that is currently produced by men with the perverse male gaze in mind.

In another film, ESPN’s ‘Nine for IX’ documentary, *Branded*, a range of female athletes and male businessmen were interviewed to explain what it takes to be a successful athlete in today’s society (Ewing & Grady, 2013). Their answer ties into what I was talking about above: female athletes are rewarded financially for sexual appeal over athletic ability. According to sports marketer Leonard Armato, selling sex is never going

to be outdated because sport is a business about getting viewers and performing; "If you want to be successful as a woman who is an athlete, sex appeal has to be part of the equation," he said (Ewing & Grady, 2013). Similarly noted by business analyst Darren Rovell, "In order for women's sports to survive, you need men to be into it" (Ewing & Grady, 2013). Female athletes typically accept whatever sponsorships they can attain because it is their best chance at making a living. As explained by Heywood & Dworkin in *Built to Win* (2003), "Women pose in photos for the economics of playing sports that are under-funded." *Branded* gives multiple examples of professional female athletes who have capitalized on the small door of opportunity that opens with a little bit of athletic success and a lot of attractiveness. Mary Lou Retton (gymnastics), Danica Patrick (race car driving), Gabrielle Reece (beach volleyball), and Anna Kournikova (tennis) are professional athletes who accepted endorsements to enhance their career because being a successful athlete alone wasn't enough to pay the bills. The film also featured track star Lolo Jones, who consciously sought out endorsements by increasing her social media presence and followership (Ewing & Grady, 2013). One athlete who did not exercise this choice was 1999 World Cup soccer champion, Brandi Chastain, who admitted in the film she did not sell her black sports bra from the title game, although it was valued at far more than her salary, because "it wasn't what [she] wanted to represent" (Ewing and Grady, 2013). Each of these professional female athletes claim agency to either use their body for monetary endorsements or not, thus binding them in a choice between financial stability or moral goodness. Although female athletes recognize the harm in the way sports media is driven by a male-dominated capitalist economy, they often feel forced to conform to the hegemonic ideals because of this ultimatum. When they do agree to be

cast as sexual icons in media, young athletes grow up with these images and create a normalized perception of female athleticism shaped by the perverse male gaze of mainstream media.

One area of underrepresentation in mass media appears in print media, notably sports magazines. Magazine covers, specifically, are referred to as the most important feature because the cover is the first thing we see on a stand and most widely circulated aspect of the complete edition. Magazine covers can be searched for online, even though the inner content can only be read through purchase. The cover mainly functions to distinguish itself from competitors and attract readers to buy it (Anderson, 1996). It represents an editorial identity and reflects the “ideological implication of content that in turn reflects the producer's perceptions of culturally agreed upon rules, goals and values,” or in other words, the hegemonic ideologies of American culture (Anderson, 1996). By looking at magazine covers from the past we are able to make assumptions about the perceptions of female athletes at that time. For this reason, I decided to analyze the representation of female athletes in magazines as a visual demonstration of the role women play in the capitalist sports economy.

Sports Illustrated (SI) is the longest running sports magazine (1954-present) that has been used in multiple studies to illustrate the disproportionate representation of female athletes on its covers. In its first decade from 1954-1965, *SI* featured 74 women (12.6%) on the covers (Weber & Carini, 2012). These sportswomen included those in equestrian, skiing, bowling, ice skating, archery, fencing, golf, and scuba. Generally, these images appear posed and very few look as though the woman is actually in competition. From 1966-1989, women are beginning to be portrayed in action poses

while playing tennis, basketball, track, and gymnastics. By the '90s, almost all images of female athletes on the cover were portrayed in action. Though it surprised me to see that this decade decreased in female representation (only 4.9%) from the 1954-1965 years in which 12.6% of covers featured women because I expected representation to *increase* after the post-Title IX era (McKenna, 2008). And most recently, from June 2011-September 2016 *Sports Illustrated* featured 15 women (5.9%) on their covers, showing a slight increase in coverage, but same representation of women in “sex-appropriate” sports such as tennis. Through this analysis, I concluded that women’s representation in sports magazines has not improved, despite my prior inclination.

Sports Illustrated has failed to reflect the changing views on women in sports as exemplified by other institutions who accept women’s participation in sports and by those women who have broken gender norms by succeeding in their sports. *SI*’s coverage on women has not increased, nor has the representation of women in action photos playing “gender-deviant” sports. At the same time, perhaps *SI* provides a good illustration that the dominant discourse around female athletes has not changed much even after Title IX. Coupled with the notion that the entire sports world is heavily dominated by the masculine capitalist economy, *SI* is one of the longest running sports magazines because it successfully navigates this market. Other magazines that try to feature female athletes in different, arguably more positive and accurate portrayals, such as *Sportswoman*, *Women’s Sports*, and *Sports Illustrated Women* have not seen as much success, as many end up having to fold. Arguably, the only magazine to successfully portray female athletes as athletes and not sexual icons has been the *ESPN Body Image* issues, which “celebrate the athletic form of both men and women of all shapes and sizes without

disproportionately hypersexualizing female athletes” (Crosby, 2016), though there have been arguments against this opinion as well. The *Body Image* issues, which showcase over 50% of female athletes, were only started in 2009 to combat the limited 3.6% of female athletes on the cover of the regular *ESPN The Magazine* issues.

As I’ve mentioned, these sexualized images of women help shape society and the young girls who see their professional icons in these kinds of poses in mainstream media. Female athletes are misrepresented as sexual icons and underrepresented as elite athletes on sports television networks and print media. These images help shape what society thinks about traditional gender roles and what female athletes base body image ideals on. Additionally, throughout my research I’ve seen many articles about women’s sports that reinforce negative stereotypes about them in general. Recently, I came across a controversial article about a former WNBA player who made claims about the WNBA being 98% gay and hostile of her heterosexual identity (Leonard, 2017). Another article that explained the reason many females like volleyball more than basketball is because they are able to be more girly in their appearance and still aggressive without having physical contact with other players (Friedman, 2017). As a basketball and former volleyball player, I couldn’t help but think back to my own experiences seeing majority lesbian women in the stands at WNBA games and the overt “ultra-girly, rah-rah, dainty” persona of my volleyball teammates. I was reminded through both of these articles of the reinforcement of the same stereotypes that professional female athletes have been advocating against since the women in sports movement began. Through the hegemonic male gaze of most mainstream media, it is as if certain media outputs are a way to encapsulate women in a space in which men will always rule.

Although CMS student-athletes don't have to face the same pressure professional athletes do to make a living from their sport, the images and portrayals of female athletes in a variety of media outputs shape stereotypes and assumptions about women in sports, and influence student-athletes' pressure to conform to them. This kind of iconography both influences stigma on body image, traditional gender roles, and homosexuality, and, because of the acknowledgement by female athletes of the harm in these stigmas, also make these topics taboo. I found that when talking to CMS female student-athletes, they are reluctant to admit to conformity of body image ideals, but convey an illicit conformity to them anyways through personal experiences and stories from other teammates. Student-athletes have internalized these ideals after growing up in the kind of society that values physical appearance and promotes conformity on television and in media. CMS fields five more women's teams – with the addition of lacrosse, soccer, golf, softball, and water polo – than they did when it first became coeducation in 1976, but the pressure to conform to a hegemonic ideal of traditional femininity still drives student-athletes who play 40 years later.

Chapter 2: Gender Division in Campus Discourse and Experiences

Exploring athletic performance, body image, and sexuality through a gendered lens

Introduction

Both male and female student-athletes at CMS face many challenges related to their commitment as a member of a competitive Division III program and their respective liberal arts institution. While CMS executed the colleges' original mission in 1976 to promote healthy physical education among college students (Starr, 1998), the current program sets higher standards as a serious competitor of NCAA Division III that student-athletes feel bound to achieve. The NCAA website acknowledges this commitment as dedication to "achieving their potential," in which "student-athletes must manage their busy schedules, keep up with class work and face the same challenges as the rest of the student-body" (NCAA Mission Statement). Female student-athletes, however, face much different and often more psychologically influential social pressures as they additionally navigate the double standards placed on women in American society and the overt gender disparity. Although they are neither paid nor perform on such a publicized stage as do professional athletes, female student-athletes at CMS are no strangers to the kind of marginalization female athletes experience in modern sports culture. Despite achieving a high level of athletic success in CMS' 41 years, female student-athletes apparently still have a bit to prove to their critics.

Before going specifically into the themes I explored for this thesis, I want to give a broad overview of the general experience of being a CMS student-athlete. My informants all recognize that being a collegiate female student-athlete is a balancing act,

one in which you must allocate time to sport, health, academics, and social life. As noted by basketball player, Grace,

There's more pressure to perform in every area of your life and be a perfect person whereas guys, it's okay for them to stay in their little niche. It's cool for a nerd to not work out and for an athlete to not be good in school but for a girl we have to be good at everything otherwise we're wasting our time and we should just go back to the kitchen.

Generally speaking, student-athletes must commit a huge amount of time to their sport from practice, weight training, film for scout preparation, competition and travel time to competition, community service, injury rehabilitation, and meetings with coaches. Many times, student-athletes must “sacrifice things for sports,” as noted by a water polo player, Christina. On top of this student-athletes must schedule classes around practice times, find time to study, which often means late nights, and attend labs and professors' office hours. One basketball player described missing academic opportunities such as workshops, guest speakers, and trips because of the time conflicts with her sport.

Additionally, student-athletes must take care of their own health for the sake of school and athletics. This includes getting enough sleep and fueling the body with plentiful nutrients, which was noted by a water polo player and cross country runner. Christina said, “When you're in [water polo] season you feel like you're bulking up, but in pre-season and when you're not in season I'm really aware of what I'm eating. You feel like you aren't working out as much and burning as many calories, but during season it's important to be healthy to perform at your peak.” For Jenny, having an optimal body weight is necessary to compete at peak performance, so she and her cross country teammates are extremely conscious about what they eat. In my participant observation, I've noticed that not all athletes are equally conscious about what they put into their

bodies. CMS does not offer a nutritionist nor health specialist to work with each team on a regiment, which has its advantages and disadvantages (i.e. cost effectiveness in finding proper nutrition in dining halls), so eating habits were not necessarily a concern expressed by all my informants. Finally, student-athletes complete the balancing act with social life. Many athletes find it difficult to connect to non-athletes due to different priorities and time commitments, which results in athletes finding themselves surrounded by groups of other student-athletes because they feel a disconnect to non-athlete friends.

Most of these experiences of having to balance different aspects of life are shared by both male and female student-athletes, especially with respect to the social pressures, a theme that came up often with my key informants. I can't speak for male student-athletes, but I recognize they may share some experiences with female student-athletes, particularly in the realms of academic and social pressure, and being racially underrepresented. However, it is my presumption that female student-athletes face much different and often more severe forms of pressure, stigma, and stereotyping due to gender double-standards shaped by hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity. Through my research I was able to pinpoint some general themes felt by female CMS student-athletes, many of which were expressed to the point of saturation, in that I kept hearing similar stories over and over again by student-athletes from different sports. As I noted in the introduction, these themes were discussed in relation to a hegemonic gender divide between male and female athleticism, which suggests that we are *not* diverging from talking about gender division in sports culture despite the progress in gender equality in access and participation due to Title IX.

To demonstrate the gendered division in discourse on women's sports I have broken this section down into three experiences faced by female student-athletes: 1) a pressure to achieve athletic excellence through constant comparison to men, 2) a pressure to conform to body image ideals represented in mainstream media, and 3) a pressure to defend heterosexuality because of the stigma on lesbian homosexuality. This chapter makes use of the interviews I conducted with male and female student-athletes at CMS between September 2016 and February 2017. As a reminder, all of the names used in this section have been modified to protect the identity of my informants.

Section 1: Athletic Performance

Constant comparisons to men and the nature of women's sport contests

During interviews I first asked my informants to describe to me what makes someone a good and successful athlete. The purpose of this was to inexplicitly analyze what kinds of values are placed on athleticism. Male student-athletes responded with traditionally masculine terms (Steinfeldt, 2011; Kane, 1988): "bigger, faster, stronger," aggressive, muscular, ruthless, intense, and showing no mercy. Female student-athletes also used traditionally masculine terms such as powerful and strong, and some even added "more masculine" or "able to keep up with the main group of guys" (from a cross country runner). As water polo player, Evan, described, "[female athletes] almost have to do the same thing that men do. If they're gonna be that good, they have to." Immediately, my informants made a comparison between male and female athletes, demonstrating that to be a good athlete, a woman essentially needs to embody masculinity. While both genders agreed that good athletes must be disciplined, dedicated to their training, and have a competitive drive – perhaps what academics might call gender neutral terms – my

female informants added some descriptors that were never mentioned by male athletes: finesse, teamwork, and sisterhood. If we categorize these terms into the gender binary, they would most likely go under femininity because of the value placed on cooperation (Steinfeldt, 2011). Interestingly, as I will describe in Chapter 3, it is the latter two values that constitute ways female student-athletes manage social pressures. Thus, sisterhood is not only valued by this population as a characteristic of *being* a female athlete, but also vital to *supporting* her.

The next thing my informants described when constructing an ideal athlete is their athletic performance. When it comes to this, it is incredibly natural to compare men and women, even though as female athletes we have been raised *not* to compare ourselves to men. Both male and female informants agree that genetically, men are typically always physically superior to women. They can run faster, jump higher, and punch harder. Because of this, female student-athletes know it is an unfair comparison to make, but nonetheless intrinsically compare their abilities to men. Jenny, a cross country runner, said, “Without even thinking, people compare their times to males’ times. I think it would be hard to separate the two without comparing them the whole time.” Women also compared female athletes to men when I asked them to name elite professional athletes. Kelly, a soccer player, listed players such as Abby Wambach, Serena Williams, and Katie Ledecky because they are all women who “have better stats than men.” However, the comparison between male and female athletes is especially ironic to be made by someone who believes that men and women can rarely ever compete equally against each other.

Kelly acknowledged this point when she said, “The fact they can compete with men is an added bonus. If we say they can compete with men, then we have to say

women can compete with women and based on biology men will usually come out superior.” As Lenskyj (1990) wrote, “Men as a gender group outperform women as a group in strength and endurance, even though there is a significant overlap between the sexes. Therefore, men can maintain the illusion of athletic superiority by naming these attributes as bona fide requirements of the ideal athlete.” This resembles an explanation made by sports scholar Mary Jo Kane on why women compare themselves to men. She explained how young girls are raised to think that women can never beat men, even though on this “social fact continuum” it is also true that some women can beat almost all men (Tucker Center, 2013). Women who have comparable stats to men, as described by Jenny and Kelly, stand out of the crowd because they make up the “some women who can beat almost all men” in the small fragment of “overlap between the sexes.” Because men as a group are athletically superior to women as a group and there are such few women where it actually makes sense to compare them to men [of equal level of competition], student-athletes find it more socially impressive to make this comparison to men than to the athleticism of other women. Evidently in this way, athletic success in our society is based on the ability of male athletes and this notion of male/ masculine superiority is reinforced by my informants who judge athleticism from a gendered comparison.

Reinforcement of male superiority in athleticism can also be seen through the idea that many female student-athletes consider themselves “one of the guys” because they are athletes. Emma, a basketball player, noted that she is accepted by her guy friends as an equal because they high-five or give handshakes when they greet instead of hugs, like other girls. To her, this kind of greeting shows a mutual respect because the men greet her

as they would greet one of their male friends. Aly, a track runner, also expressed that with the guys she “wasn’t a girl to date, but invited to hang out with them.” While it doesn’t threaten her to be considered un-dateable, she actually expressed a feeling of offense when her male friends didn’t think she was capable of doing things for herself. Some other women expressed this disempowered feeling when men attempt to be traditionally chivalrous by opening doors or carrying her bags. Although student-athletes feel pride in being “one of the guys,” Emma acknowledged this perception and said, “Though maybe it shouldn’t be a guy thing [to be athletic].” Regardless, I found more female student-athletes who are proud to be “one of the guys,” than men who enjoy being “one of the girls.” Is this their way of saying girls don’t belong in sports, I wonder? It appears that this kind of language used by female student-athletes reinforces the idea that the sports world is dominated by their male counterparts.

Continuing this constant comparison of gendered sports, I found that my informants often view athleticism in terms of the way the game is played. Although male student-athletes respect their female peers as student-athletes because they understand the time commitment, rigor, and dedication to participating at the college level, both genders have noted that women’s sports are less physical, played with less aggression, and are less exciting to watch than men’s sports. The following dialogue between a male water polo and rugby player illustrates what is meant by the difference between men and women’s sports:

Evan: “Women’s competitiveness is at the same level of men’s competitiveness in that their attitude and the drive is the same. It’s just whether –”

Richard: “–athletic ability is different.”

I found interesting the following breakdown of sports in terms of physicality as explained by Richard: There are *finesse* sports (i.e. golf, ping-pong), *non-physical*, meaning non-contact, sports (i.e. swimming, running), and *physical* sports (i.e. soccer, football, rugby). According to Steinfeldt (2011) and other scholars, this breakdown resembles the organization of sport by contact, in which rugby, soccer, hockey, and basketball are said to be the most physical sports, traditionally dominated by men. Usually when talking about “physicality” of the game, as done here, it refers to the aggressiveness or extent of physical contact between players. Because soccer is a “physical” sport and women play with observably *less* physicality than men, the women’s game is said to be played more with skill than physicality.

To illustrate this, I’ll point to some examples. Some male informants noted that in soccer women play with better passes and dribbles than the men. In other words, they say the women’s game is more “technical” than the men’s “aggressive” game. They say women often have refined technical skills in their sport because they *have to* in order to be good. Grace, a basketball player, agrees: “We have to work harder [than males]. We have to be more skilled because we’re not as athletic.” My informants would agree that women have higher skill competency because they are not as physical, whereas men can get away with less skill because their physicality and aggression will compensate. Due to the consensus that men, in general, play more aggressively than women, many men do not enjoy watching women’s sports because the level of physicality they are accustomed to in their own sport is unmatched by that in women’s sports.

As Dylan, a male swimmer, said, “We [athletes] want to see the most intense, physical game and we appreciate the athleticism of it, but if I wasn’t an athlete I wouldn’t

care so much about her athletic ability. I just want to watch because she's hot." I include the whole quote here to make a distinction that in this section I am talking about male athletes' interest in women's sport and the varying contexts for which they do and do not enjoy watching women's sport. Male student-athletes often made comments about women's games being slower, in addition to less physical, thus aiding their lack of interest. At one point in my interview, the male athletes in my first focus group began discussing MMA fighter Ronda Rousey, who graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in 2015. Rousey's cover photo promises a physical fight, thus increasing interest as we can see in the following dialogue between a soccer and rugby player:

Eric: "How into your sport and aggressive you look on the covers will make you think about how masculine their performance is gonna be. It's directly linked to that. So how masculine you look, like Ronda Rousey looks scary as s***. I want to see her fighting someone, because it's going to be a masculine fight. And by masculine I'm thinking of ruthlessness –"

Richard: "– Aggression, tension –"

Eric: "– All those muscles we named that give way for a more interesting, exciting performance."

Richard: "The more athletic they look on the picture the more I want to watch them perform."

Additionally, Mike, a male tennis player, said women's rugby games are "fun [to watch because] they tackle each other." Though as I will explain in Section 2, although the male student-athletes now respect her masculinity because it makes the game more appealing to watch, they later criticize the very same rugby player because her embodiment of masculine traits signifies lesbianism. Still, without explicitly saying, it is evident that sports are inherently located within a man's realm because the games they enjoy watching are those that reflect the same level of physicality in their own.

Similar comments about the enjoyment of women's games were made by female student-athletes as well. A soccer player said her teammates don't like watching women's

soccer because it's "a slower game and they don't find it as exciting," while a basketball player agreed that the men's game is "faster paced and more interesting to watch."

Additionally, some female student-athletes don't enjoy watching sports, period, because they would "rather be playing it," as expressed by a lacrosse player, Ellen. Based on my participant observation, this latter sentiment could be because of the way young girls are socialized. While girls grow up encouraged to solely participate on sports teams, sports culture as a whole, in terms of fandom and fantasy sport, is ingrained in boys as soon as they start playing sports. As some male informants expressed, they have grown up watching sports and keeping up with teams, while this kind of experience was never expressed by any of my female informants.

The feeling these male and female college students have about a slower women's game being slower could in fact be true, especially in sports where there is a counterpart team, in part due to official rules that regulate women's sports. Take basketball and lacrosse, for example. In 2015 the NCAA issued a series of rule changes to women's basketball (NCAA, 2015). This included a rule that structures the women's game around 10-minute quarters, replacing 20-minute halves that had been used in the past and what the men's game still is. Furthermore, referees are instructed to call fouls away from the basket when they observe too much contact between the defender and offensive player. Women's lacrosse is seen as a "totally different game" than men's, according to a male lacrosse player, Kyle. The women's regulations include a smaller field, lack of pads and helmets, and more illegal maneuvers such as checking (hitting the other player with your stick) – the latter thus making the game "less physical." As Ellen said, "Lacrosse is inferior because for guys it's a more aggressive sports and it's more fun to watch because

you can't touch each other [in women's]." Women's volleyball could equally be compared to the men's game because their net is lower and they don't jump as high, as expressed by a volleyball player, Claire, but she doesn't feel a pressure to be compared to men because CMS does not field a varsity men's volleyball team. We could say, then, that factors causing women's contests to be "less exciting" than men's have nothing to do with the athleticism of female athletes, but rather the governing body that hinders women from asserting masculine traits, especially for sports that field both a men's and women's team at the collegiate level.

Not only does embodying traditionally masculine traits like physicality increase the interest men have in watching women's sports, but seeing aggressive, dominant, and muscular women is also seen as a desirable trait, at least as far as male student-athletes are concerned. As Eric said, "I've seen women here at college who are an average, good looking person and then on the field owning what they do and wrecking and it's just so much more attractive." Richard echoed this when he said, "There's this girl who goes to the gym a lot and she's built and a lot of the [rugby] guys are attracted to her because it's kind of cool to see a muscular girl." In other words, athletic women who break social norms are surprising, impressive, and incredible because it's not what is expected of them. This resembles the perception that female athletes who can compete with men are better athletes than those that can compete with other women – again, because it's more *impressive* for them to be on par with the men.

At the same time women who portray aggression and masculinity are praised as successful athletes, they still face that female/athlete paradox and double standard by straying against traditional gender norms of hegemonic femininity. When female athletes

do appeal to the male audience by portraying masculine traits, some men actually fear them because they threaten his own masculinity. A sensitive threshold exists in this gender binary where women cross from a safe, attractive athleticism into a threatening, disruptive athleticism. For example, Dylan said, athletes like Ronda Rousey “scare the s*** out of me. Some of those girls [who are aggressive] scare me ‘cause, like, I don’t have to be aggressive in my sport, whereas they do.” Eric added, “There’s a point where a woman can be too ripped, too masculine, to be attractive.” And when discussing the workout regime of the women’s rugby team, Richard said, “I think most of them are lesbians, anyways.” On these three occasions, male student-athletes stereotype “pariah-feminine” female athletes as intimidating, too manly, and lesbian. Not only are these traits undesirable as antithesis of femininity, but they also challenge a man’s masculinity. As noted by Evan, playing sports gives male student-athletes a confidence and ego complex:

I like my sport because it’s a very masculine sport. It is. It’s a lucky sport because it promotes our confidence. It’s probably one of the most confident sports, but also the fact that we’re wearing swimsuits. It’s an attractive sport and we all get huge egos for that.

This ego can be easily threatened when subordinate masculinities, like women, come along and challenge their strength. However, they are able to reclaim their own masculinity by doing precisely what female student-athletes *don’t*: while female student-athletes judge their athletic performance by comparisons to men, male student-athletes judge a woman’s athleticism by comparisons to other women. Do women not think other women are worthy of similar athletic comparisons?

In the following dialogue between a male swimmer and rugby player we see two important maneuvers for this masculine confirmation. First, Dylan assures everyone that

he is superior to a woman in at least one athletic ability. Then, he retracts his statement about a female athlete being athletic, and perceives her ability only as superior to other female athletes:

Dylan: “I’ve definitely dated girls who are more athletic than me, who train harder. I’m just faster.”

Richard: “But are they more athletic than you or than other girls?”

Dylan: “Well, how are we defining athletic?”

Richard: “Like strength, speed...”

Dylan: “Okay, well then, yeah I’m way more athletic. She is more athletic than other girls then.”

When female student-athletes judge their own athleticism based off of performance by male athletes, they reaffirm male superiority in sport by inferring that reaching the level of men is the highest achievement. In this dialogue, it doesn’t even make sense for Dylan to compare himself to a female athlete because he is already acknowledging his superiority. However, a male student-athlete is able to acknowledge the athleticism of a woman solely by comparing her to other women, which is something that my female informants didn’t give enough credit to. This distinction between the way men and women view a female athlete’s athletic performance demonstrates a pressure female student-athletes feel to achieve athletic excellence by rising up to the level of male athletes. It also illustrates the gender division in the way athletic achievement is defined and perceived by male and female student-athletes, which places value on hegemonic masculinity.

Section 2: Body Image

Female student-athletes are prone to body image insecurities like everyone else, though they must manage the pressure to conform to both binaries of the gender

hegemony. Female athletes have to manage cultural ideals of the “feminine” body type that is skinny and toned, while being physically able to best perform their sport. And despite an absence of any financial benefit to doing so, as seen with many professional female athletes in Chapter 1, Section 3, female student-athletes still feel a pressure to conform to these ideals so deeply embedded in American culture. Sociologist Shari Dworkin did a study (2001) on how women manage cultural body ideals through exercise routines and described that “women focused on weight work and bulk as ‘masculine’ bodily villains and cardiovascular work as a ‘feminine’ bodily savior.” In a separate study two years later, Dworkin described “today’s erotic athletic flesh [as] hard, muscled, tense and mean” (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003), which is the kind of athletic body type desired for both non- and athletic women. Female student-athletes I interviewed explained a number of concerns they have with ill-fitting uniforms, a stigma on bulking up and appealing appearances. Most interestingly, though, my key informants never admitted having personal body image issues, though their responses definitely suggest some internal insecurities. What I found is that there appears to be a taboo on body image for student-athletes who subconsciously judge their bodies according to hegemonic ideals, but cover up their insecurities to the outside because they are conscious that having such insecurities are frowned upon as an athlete, whose confidence is one of their strongest qualities.

One of the greatest pressures female athletes face when it comes to body image has to do with the uniform. Uniforms are a mandatory part of the sport and little can be done to change it, which gives female student-athletes little agency in this realm. While many student-athletes I conversed with expressed pride in showing off their athletic and

muscular bodies, there were still times when she obsessed about putting on muscle or how she looks in and out of a uniform. Even when athletes take off their ill-fitting or revealing uniforms, feeling good about their bodies is still an issue they must face in civilian clothes. Kelly admitted, “I have no fashion sense because I’ve spent my life in uniforms. Finding clothes that fit athletic bodies is hard and I don’t have a lot of friends that identify with that.” It seems as though female athletes are sometimes put in a lose-lose situation when it comes to uniforms. While some find uniforms to be unattractive for their body shape or too promiscuous, others have a hard time finding non-uniforms that appropriately fit their muscular figure.

Grace described her basketball uniform as being for a “very masculine body” and an ill-fitting one in which there “was never a single female in the making.” In the locker room I hear many teammates complain about areas where the uniform doesn’t fit, especially in the bust area for bigger-chested women, and even in the small neck and arm holes. Grace also said, “It sucks because we’re the only sport that wears long shorts and you kind of like wearing short shorts.” In fact, though basketball shorts worn by both men and women were historically short and then lengthened, the trend seems to be reverting back to the liking of short shorts, as the majority of my teammates roll up their shorts during practice and competition. Perhaps rolling up her shorts is an athlete’s response to the institution that created long, baggy shorts to hide her so-called unattractive body. Another basketball player, Emma, compared masculine basketball uniforms to more feminine uniforms as seen in soccer and volleyball. She said, “Finding femininity as a basketball player is a pressure because soccer players are still feminine in their uniform and their culture and volleyball is the most feminine because it’s a non-

contact sport.” It’s not exactly clear *what* makes the uniform feminine – perhaps it is because the uniform shows more skin or is better fitted to the female body – but it obviously comes out as a unique concern felt by many basketball players. One volleyball player, Claire, actually acknowledged that her tight-fitting uniform is probably a main reason why her team receives so many student fans at competitions.

On the other side of basketball masculinity, tennis uniforms emphasize the playfulness and girly side of female athletes. As Stephanie said, “I’ve grown up always playing in skirts so I don’t have a problem with it, but it seems impractical. You have the cute tennis girls — especially in high school tennis with the ribbons – but this is college sport now and you’re trying to do well and you’re still sometimes viewed as it’s very girly and it’s different from the guys’ team.” In basketball, uniforms for men and women are very similar in style, but in sports like tennis or lacrosse, the uniforms vary by gender. In a way, it acts to visually remind viewers that they aren’t watching athletes, but *female* athletes. Kate, another tennis player, said, “I like [wearing skirts] because it’s part of the tradition, like, women playing tennis have always worn skirts. For me, it’s classier to wear dresses and skirts in a match, even though I prefer shorts.” Although she couldn’t explain why she felt this way, Kate considered sports like golf and tennis more “classy” and “traditional” sports in which women have and always will wear skirts, but says it doesn’t make sense that lacrosse players wear skirts. She categorizes lacrosse with sports like basketball and soccer where there is more contact and running, which again reinforces the idea that the use of skirts feminizes female golfers and tennis players. As we will continue to see with female student-athletes from other sports, growing up playing their respective sport for so long has almost made them immune to the idea of

wearing different uniforms. They are accustomed to the tradition and have learned to deal with the uniform they are mandated to wear.

Swimmers and water polo players express a similar concern for uniforms, though unlike those in basketball, these athletes' bodies are severely exposed rather than hidden. Haley referred to the "bikini body" so present in society's representation of the ideal women that causes athletes, especially those with bigger body types, to be self-conscious about their own body image. Christina said, "I try to resist the pressures, but it's hard with body image I think to be confident in and out of the pool. People are so focused on body image and it should really be about the sport." While both water polo players I interviewed did not explicitly express any of their own body concerns, which I will discuss shortly why that is, they did describe the difference in the way some women shower. Christina explained, "Some girls flaunt it and shower naked and are just really confident in their bodies, but there are other girls who will use towels to change, and some in the middle. [Body image] is a locker room and pool deck issue, but once you're in the pool it's not really a big deal because you can't see anything." Both water polo players manage this pressure by pure exposure to the sport, which has, in a way, hardened their concern for uniforms. Haley confirmed, "I've always been in a swimsuit, growing up in the sport, so I've been more comfortable, but in a one piece [versus a bikini]." Christina similarly said,

A lot of us are blessed that we grew up in the water, so we grew up where what you wore was a swimsuit and you played around in it. So water polo players in general have pretty solid body image because we're in swimsuits 24/7, but there are girls on our team who struggle...People use high energy sports like water polo to manage these body image issues by using it to get in shape by having to wear a suit. You develop a level of comfort to wear a suit and motivate you to stay in shape.

Some athletes are able to accept their body for how it is, while others, such as water polo players or swimmers, are conditioned enough to not let fears about how they look in a swimsuit affect them so strongly. Though it isn't to say such female athletes are hardened and immune to body image concerns. As Nicole said, "People talk about the 'Freshman 15' and people joke about it, but I think they're actually serious that they need to lose weight. There are two piece suits people wear and some people are more comfortable wearing them than others." Similar concerns were expressed by athletes with a totally different body build than bulky swimmers and water polo players.

Jenny explained that "body image is a big deal in cross country than other sports because you're trying to find that optimal weight to get you the best times, and you see people with eating problems sometimes. I know some girls feel pressured not to take off their shirts when we run because they're body conscious." While some may consider cross country runners to have the "ideal" skinny female body type, it is important to note that these athletes do not see themselves in the same light. As Aly said, "When you get into longer distances, I find that I meet a lot of girls that are controlling and semi-eating disorder through high school and in college now. They get very — they're personality is very controlling. I don't know if this is body image or a need to control things, maybe because distance draws such a disciplined person." I don't discuss mental health among female athletes, but there is definitely reason to look into that side to athletics when talking about body image. Sometimes, a student-athlete's perception of her self-image may border on the edge of a mental health issue, but other times she sees her body type as being optimal for performance. Jenny said, "In college it's different than high school. We emphasize strength and core; having a strong, more muscular body, than weaker, skinnier

body because the end of the race is really important. You see on our team here these girls who have the athletic, muscular body type are the best.” Here she noted the importance of being healthy and muscular, even if the physique of most runners is inherently skinny because of the large quantity of calories burned. However, female runners don’t have the same sort of concern when it comes to putting on muscle because they keep their skinny figure. For most other student-athletes who put on weight for their sport, there remains a big stigma around weight-lifting, which I will discuss next.

Female student-athletes are extremely critical of their body because they are trying to please society’s ideals of a fit and toned, yet skinny woman and the sport’s physical demands. Grace noted, “I don’t really have a feminine body and I never have. I’ve always been really thin and basketball kind of makes that worse because it gives you muscle but, like, still no curves.” Similarly, Molly, another softball player said,

CMC is the second most fit school in the country and as a female athlete I struggle with the way society thinks we should look and how sports think we should. I feel like I’m too big for how society thinks we should look, but too small for how an athlete should look. Pitchers are known for having big thighs and hips and people say I don’t have ‘pitcher hips.’

In one way, it can perhaps be a compliment that this athlete does not have big hips because she is able to conform to society’s ideals of the feminine image, but on the other hand, it disrespects her identity as an athlete because she feels like she doesn’t fit the physique of a typical athlete in her position. That being said, student-athletes are constantly compared to images of ideal body types in the media and even more so by their female colleagues with whom they interact on a daily basis. Bri, a golfer, notices workout patterns by non-athletes at her school, which in essence describes what kind of body a woman is trying to achieve when she goes to the gym. She said, “Even in the

fitness center there's all girls and in the weight room is all guys." Molly noted this same gender disparity in spaces used by men and women in the gymnasium, and even expressed times when she has been kicked off of machines in the weight room by men. In regards to seeing other women workout, Claire said, "My non-athletic friends want to work out and stay in shape and want a small waist versus I'm trying to put muscle on my legs." Roxy confirmed this disparity in workout regimes when she said, "I go to the gym and do more than just run, like I lift weights and try to put on the 'Freshman 15' of muscle. To tell another girl that I'm trying to put on 15 pounds is completely unheard of." And it's not just working out and putting on muscle that's different, but also eating more meat and filling their plates higher in general. Haley described the shame in eating when she said, "We order a lot of food because we can since we're athletes. No one wants to be seen eating too much unless you're with your team or in team stuff, because then it's okay – you're doing 'athlete things.'" I will further discuss in the conclusion the implications of student-athletes feeling like they can get away with doing "non-feminine" things, such as the eating habits described above, by masking them under the excuse of simply being an athlete.

As an athlete, putting on muscle is necessary to perform well in one's sport, though as described by many of my informants, they dislike "bulking up" because they think it makes them look less feminine. As Haley said, "When you're lifting you don't want to get overly buff or built and water polo players are conscious of that. You want to be strong and you want to be skinny, but you don't want to have a six pack. You want to have strong legs, but you want to be skinny." As someone who admires a strong abdomen, and quite frankly the look of having a six-pack, I asked Haley why she does

not desire a six-pack. On my team, everyone gawks at the teammate who has a ripped body and chiseled abs (there have been two in my time), even if they know it is an impossible goal for themselves. To this Haley answered, “Nobody wants a defined six pack because that’s really hard. And girls with defined six packs are kind of scary. You want the ab ‘V’,” which is a figure that becomes prominent with a tight core and slim figure, something commonly found with male swimmer bodies.

Many of the athletes I interviewed did not admit to feeling this same kind of pressure in the weight room, though they are always able to give examples of teammates who do not like to lift. Nicole said, “I don’t mind having bulky arms and broad shoulders; I like lifting. But people [swim teammates] definitely talk about not wanting to be bulky.” Similarly, Stephanie said, “I’m trying to increase performance because I want to do well and you need to be strong to do well. I have [tennis] teammates who talk about losing weight and wanting to get their arms skinnier.” And Molly added, “I have a [softball] teammate who said she doesn’t want her forearms to be big so she can’t roll up her sleeves past them.” These sports mentioned in particular demand physical strength for maximum performance. You need a strong back and arms to propel yourself through the water or throw a ball, you need big quads to get in low, defensive stances for basketball or a softball catcher, and you need strong forearms to pack a tennis serve with force. As I said before, I picked up on the fact that almost every time I discussed body image with my informants, insecurities about particular stigmas, such as bulking up, were never a concern for them, but were definitely expressed by their teammates. Body image concerns are typically linked to mental health concerns, which are also stigmatized by

society, thus creating a taboo on admitting a pressure to conform to heteronormative social standards of beauty.

For some sports, though, being muscular isn't as important as speed, for instance. Ellen said, "I have tiny-ass legs and make it work. I'm not very muscular. A lot of athletes here are really muscular and for my sport [lacrosse] you don't need that." Here, she recognized the needs of her sport and acknowledged that those demands may be different from other sports. According to Ellen, she doesn't see the value in lifting for her sport, whereas other athletes may not like bulking up, but they realize it's a demand for the sport they play. A dual sport student-athlete recognizes some differences between soccer and rugby, which overlaps with the butch stereotype in rugby when she refers to the "nature" of rugby. She said, "On my soccer team people don't want to lift that much because they don't want to bulk up. People lift very light, some individuals. For rugby not at all. It's very different. It's the nature of rugby." Ironically, there seems to be a fine line between society's ideal of the female body and athletes' ideal body, both boasting the "athletic" body type. As Jenny said, "Girls in college in general want more of an athletic build," as is the cultural ideal these days. However, the "athletic build" sought out by non-athletes includes toned, tight muscles, especially in the arms and abdomen, while the actual athletic body type typically has much more defined muscle in the same areas and muscle where non-athletes don't want to gain muscle, such as the upper thighs.

Finally, when talking about body image and appearance, my informants told me about the pressures they feel to look "girly" by wearing makeup or dressing up in non-athletic settings. An ex-softball player explained, "I almost feel more pressured to make myself look a bit girly-er. Before it was okay because I was an athlete to look a little

manly.” Again, she makes an excuse for not looking “girly” because she is an athlete, but nonetheless feels a pressure to conform to some sort of social ideal now that she can no longer identify as a student-athlete. This pressure doesn’t just come internally from the student-athletes, but is often reinforced by peers as well. A basketball player noted one time that a student came up to her at a formal party and said, “Wow, you look like a girl!” Just as many of my informants denied disliking lifting weights, here again they deny wanting to conform to this hegemonic ideal: Claire said, “I don’t feel the pressure to dress up and wear makeup all the time, but my [volleyball] team definitely does.” It’s interesting to me here, too, that volleyball players, a traditionally feminine sport in nature, often wear more makeup than other student-athletes both on and off the court.

Perhaps it is for this very reason that outsiders reconfirm the apparent “femininity” of volleyball because they see athletes who look “girly.” Even though Claire doesn’t feel a pressure to be girly “all the time,” she does say, “During week I don’t wear makeup. I roll to class. I don’t care what people think of me. I’ll dress up on Saturdays because I’m a girl.” Note here that she doesn’t dress up because it makes her feel good, but because it almost feels like an obligation when going out to a socially public event. A SCR student-athlete expressed a feeling of “not living up to a certain standard” when she comes to class sweaty and without makeup, too. I’ve noticed that both on and off (though mostly off) the field student-athletes conform to beauty ideals whether it’s by doing their hair for games, wearing makeup, jewelry, or painting their nails, or getting done up to go out to parties and other social events. There is a clear contrast between the student-athlete who wears athletic clothes and doesn’t care about her appearance and the student-athlete who dresses up to remind people that yes, she is a girl too.

I found extremely interesting the taboo my informants placed on body image concerns and the pressure to conform to socially acceptable body ideals by denying their own body insecurities. Clearly these insecurities exist, as shown by the actions my informants take to conform to them and by the explicit acknowledgement of insecurity in their teammates. This could perhaps be due to my role as an interviewer and acquaintance, as opposed to guidance counselor or close friend. It could also be telling of female student-athletes' inability or discomfort with making themselves vulnerable by admitting a flaw when sports should make them confident about their body image. Through interviews with student-athletes from multiple sports, these kind of concerns are prevalent and observable on women's sports teams and would be worthwhile to explore in future research as it relates to mental health. Nonetheless, this pressure female student-athletes feel to conform to body image ideals of hegemonic femininity demonstrates another gender division between the general female and female athlete.

Section 3: Sexuality

Although the concept of sexuality encompasses many aspects and is a fluid identity, when discussing sexuality in this section I specifically refer to a binary sexual orientation of hetero- and homosexuality as conveyed by CMS student-athletes. In this analysis, it is therefore easy to mirror the stigma on homosexuality in women's sports as it manifests at the college level. Some sports – notably softball, basketball, and rugby – have a stereotype of being full of lesbian athletes for various reasons, including the association between masculinity and lesbianism as mentioned in the introduction and Chapter 1. Even heterosexual women, when they display masculine traits that commonly accompany athletes, are affected by the stigma on homosexuality because of this

association. Thus, this stereotype is often put on all female athletes in general, not just in the sports listed above, because heteronormative ideology exposes both queer and straight women to very narrowly defined gender norms. For this reason I was able to talk about this topic with each of my informants. What I found most interesting is the contrast between the management of this stigma by straight and lesbian female student-athletes. Concurrently, straight female student-athletes feel the need to defend their heterosexuality, while non-straight females face much adversity because they don't fit the heteronormative ideal in sports culture.

Just about every female athlete I have encountered has had some experience with confronting homosexuality, whether or not they are gay, though athletes in the sports listed above have dealt with it more often because the stigma is so strongly identified with their respective sport. For example, a volleyball player is able to dismiss the topic altogether because homosexuality isn't even thought of to be associated with her sport, whereas a softball player repeatedly encounters awkward tension when talking about her orientation. Emma, a basketball player said, "Growing up I felt [basketball] was manly, and was perceived to be lesbian. I had friends quit because it was looked at [by society] as a dyke sport." Haley, a water polo player, shared encounters she has had with other people regarding her sport. She said,

[When I tell people I play polo] the go to is always 'water polo? Oh rough sport.' They'll ask you really inappropriate questions like 'do you get your boobs grabbed?' People feel they can ask you any questions they want because they want to know the dirty details. They'll ask very intrusive questions. They make inappropriate jokes about showering with other women.

Questions like this again illustrate the heteronormative male gaze on women's body and identity, specifically in homosocial women's spaces. This perception makes straight

female student-athletes feel uncomfortable because it is a false and fetishistic assumption about their woman-only space inside the locker room. However, at the same time, she unintentionally reinforces the stereotype by internalizing the stereotype and applying it to the way she thinks about water polo and lesbianism. Haley added, “When they say I *look* like a water polo player, I’m like, do I look like a butch lesbian or athletic?” (emphasis added). Without questioning the essentialism, the assumption that someone perceives you as athletic-looking because you look like a lesbian again reproduces the association between masculinity and lesbianism because the athletic body type embraces and emulates “hypermasculinity” (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Perhaps, as an alternative explanation, Haley’s response would be an exhaustion of the many times she has been mistaken for a lesbian and she wishes to clear the misconception early on. Yet, it should be noted that homosexuality almost always carries a negative connotation because of the heteronormative male gaze on women’s sports, even when discussed by female student-athletes.

On more than one occasion my informants expressed actually feeling offended for being mistaken for a lesbian and corrected the misunderstanding by defending their heterosexuality. Molly, a softball player said, “It’s a very common stereotype that softball players are lesbians, which if you really look at the spectrum of athletes it’s pretty normal percentage. It wasn’t a stereotype I appreciated because I would have conversations with people and didn’t always want to reveal that.” She continued, “I hate that sexuality has to be brought into it. It doesn’t matter the way you act outwardly. It’s really annoying because you have to be hyper aware of it, like I’m straight but I have to make other people aware of it.” Emma, who is in a relationship with a male, expressed feeling

“offended” when a former coach assumed she dated a female partner. This was a huge curiosity for me. I wanted to know why heterosexual female student-athletes feel such unease at the presence of these occurrences. When I asked why she was sensitive to this coach’s comment she explained,

I didn't have boys like me growing up because I was very boyish and didn't hit puberty until late, so it made me self-conscious. And also playing basketball pushes that stereotype too. So I feel like it reflects on my attractiveness and my ability to relate to guys. It's almost like an insult to be called lesbian.

For Emma, the answer has to do with her past and the association between lesbianism and masculinity. Because she felt unattractive and non-feminine in her youth, the idea that she is lesbian brings up memories of this scarring past. She interprets being called lesbian as seemingly appearing unattractive to the opposite sex, which triggers the feeling of sensitivity and insecurity. With this insecurity about attractiveness and acceptance, women subject themselves to the heteronormative male gaze and reinforce their hostility toward non-conforming LGBTQ identities. I asked the same question to a group comprised of a swimmer, tennis player, and softball player. Roxy, a softball player, replied, “I would say I feel offended when people say that because I know I'm not, so I don't know why people would assume that I am.” The tennis player and swimmer offered a more concrete explanation:

Stephanie: Maybe a reason why you're offended is because we typically think of lesbian as a minority and so it's like, why would you assume I'm in the minority?

Nicole: I think it's because there's fewer lesbians, so why would you assume I'm different. Being different – it's not a bad thing.

For these athletes, being called a lesbian is taken as an offense because it means you are different, belong to the minority, and this difference is a bad thing. In a

way, these female student-athletes, as part of the heteronormative norm, reproduce the male gaze upon themselves. These interviews might not be enough to unravel more personal and structural reasons for their feelings of distaste for the lesbian stereotype attached to women's sports, though I can offer some possible explanations: Perhaps female student-athletes are simply tired of critics who use homosexuality to delegitimize women's sports and want to promote their own heteronormativity in order to show that "feminine" women can be good at sport; perhaps they fear being outcast from society as something different, or "other," and embrace their heteronormativity to reclaim hegemonic femininity; or perhaps this shows that homophobia still prevails in the subconscious of female athletes, even though they are outwardly supportive of teammates who are lesbian. I found it interesting and very telling of the kind of culture here to see the contrast between student-athletes who are offended to be mistaken as lesbian and actual lesbian student-athletes who have faced tremendous struggles in coming out at this community.

In Michael Kimmel's book *Guyland* (2008), he explains, "Guys like sports because it's the easiest way to choose 'guy' over 'gay'—and make sure everyone gets the right idea about them." Although homosexuality is an identity stigmatized by society in both men's and women's sports, lesbian women face a lose-lose situation. As I explained in the introduction, gay men are able to reclaim their masculinity through athletic ability because this characteristic is a cornerstone of masculinity; however, lesbian women are disadvantaged both because her homosexuality "contaminates" her hegemonic femininity and her athletic ability as a woman is subordinate to that of men (Schippers, 2007).

CMC's Title IX coordinator explained times when students have visited her office regarding insecurity with sharing their sexuality. She said, "Some athletes said they've been on the same team and they didn't share that they were gay. 'I never really felt a space in which I could come out' said a student. So whether they're doing it intentionally or not, they felt that they couldn't show that side of themselves." While there are various reasons that may contribute to why queer students feel secluded from the larger community – there being no queer resource center on CMC's campus, the queer student-athlete club no longer functioning, or possibly that this society isn't as comfortable with queer identity as we think – some student-athletes feel uncomfortable expressing their sexual identity because the community is very small and unknown. As Lauren, another lesbian student-athlete, said, "It's not normal here to be a non-white, non-straight student at CMC," which projects a fear some lesbian athletes may carry of coming out. Heteronormativity is strongly confirmed and unquestioned as the norm, and as described by heterosexual student-athletes above, anything else is regarded as different and potentially negative. Fortunately, I was able to find a couple of key informants to tell me about their experience as a lesbian student-athlete at CMS. Here, I use both pseudonyms and do not reference their sport to protect these women's identities.

Lauren is on a team in which sexuality was openly discussed at the beginning of their season. Her coach explained, "On my team we have emotional stability and are open about talking about sexuality so our team knows that you're safe to be what you are." She commented on the principle of some other coaches

and continued, “There are some coaches here who would look the other way if someone is gay.” That is not to say that a coach looks down upon a team member who is queer, but rather that sexuality is a topic too uncomfortable to address in front of the group. A separate student-athlete from another team has played with at least two lesbian-identifying teammates in her four-year career, and explained that never once did the team hold a discussion in front of the coach about sexuality. While it may seem like the lack of discourse denotes an inclusive community for sexual identity, knowing a team member’s sexual identity can avoid experiences like a member of this current team had at the beginning of her season. Sarah experienced an uncomfortable interaction with a teammate who was asking about her sexuality and explained that she felt really uncomfortable asking her if she was straight or bi-sexual. Since then, she explains that the team is very comfortable with her talking about her girlfriend and accepting of her identity. I wouldn’t necessarily suggest that all queer athletes should feel a pressure to “come out” to their teammates because this reinforces the negatively perceived difference of homosexuality. However, until queerness is normalized in sports culture or society, athletes in this era may have to do this to break down heteronormative ideals and create a larger queer athlete community.

To illustrate one experience of coming out, I will relay Lauren’s story about how she and a teammate started dating. As explained by a non-dating team member, “It was weird at first and my coach was weird about it and gave them rules how they have to act around the team, which was weird because they were best friends last year and now they’re dating they can’t talk at practice or sit

together at dinner.” In a separate interview, her coach explained that she gave the dating teammates certain rules so “people don’t think they are a little clique within the team.” In imposing these set of rules, the coach hoped to keep team values the top priority. Lauren explained that her team gave her “the most accepting and welcoming response [she’d] gotten so far,” especially compared to a negative response by her roommate, which caused some tension in their friendship. As the first ones to come out on her team she continued, “They said its 2017 and it doesn’t matter. It made me feel guilty keeping it a secret so long because they were so accepting. We got lucky with our team and got such a great response.” However, even Lauren feels uncomfortable making her teammates uneasy and is hyper-aware of this dynamic. She said,

We don’t talk about it very often so I don’t know where everyone’s comfort level talking about it is. I’m comfortable talking about it and I’ve told my team that, but I don’t want to make other people uncomfortable. It’s sad that I can’t talk about my girlfriend because I’m afraid it makes someone uncomfortable.

Despite having this feeling, heterosexual student-athletes I’ve talked to say they are very accepting of teammates who are not heterosexual. It could be that this feeling of unease by both sides is due to the fact that these discussions about identity don’t happen enough. Furthermore, as explained earlier, student-athletes feel uneasy when outsiders assume they are lesbian, thus ensuing there is a divide between negative connotations of homosexuality for the self vs. other.

Although the community of lesbian student-athletes is quite small – so small, that Lauren exclaimed, “When I found out there was another [lesbian] I was like, ‘Oh! I’m not the only one on a sports team with a girlfriend!’” – those

who take the leap by coming out to their team are greatly accepted because of a mutual respect for members of the team, no matter their identity. However, I find it quite interesting the separate ways in which straight and lesbian student-athletes approach the stigma on homosexuality and the lack of communication at times between the two parties. Lauren, who is also a student of color, explained a fear in insulting her white teammates when people assume she is white. She said, “I can’t complain when someone thinks I’m white because I don’t want [my teammates] to think I’m insulting them. When people assume I’m white I find it offensive and I can’t tell my teammates that.” Although she is talking about race, the same idea can be applied to sexual orientation. Similarly, straight student-athletes feel the same guilt in expressing their true feelings about homosexuality. Those who told me that they feel offended when people accuse them of being lesbian also expressed that they would never admit that to a lesbian teammate. These sentiments can reinforce the value female student-athletes place on the sisterhood they don’t want to disrupt by discussing sexual orientation with their teammates.

An analysis of discourse on sexuality by straight student-athletes illustrates another intricacy of this gender divide in women’s sports. The heteronormative and male dominated notions of sexuality remain pervasive, and the response of female student-athletes remains passive or conforming. Female student-athletes reinforce homophobic concerns and the male-centered, oppressive view of a woman’s body and identity when they promote their heterosexuality in defense of the stigma on homosexuality in women’s sports. This is harmful because it conveys a lack of effort to question the very

fundamental assumptions of heteronormativity and create an open and inclusive environment for sexual diversity. Not only is sport gendered in the sense that lesbian women face harsher criticism than gay men, but it is also divided in the sense that even within the homosocial space of women's sports, heterosexuality takes precedence over other sexual orientations.

Chapter 3: Implications of Defying the Male Gaze

Revealing values of sports participation for female student-athletes

Introduction

As discussed in previous sections, female student-athletes face many pressures related to their dual identity as a female and athlete. These pressures can be constructed through media portrayals, encouraged by peers, and even reinforced by the athletes themselves. One thing I haven't yet discussed is their frustration with the glaring gender inequality that prevails on their campus and in the broader culture. In February of 2017, I observed a clear anecdote of this sentiment on my basketball team, though it is a topic that is continuously brought up by female student-athletes of all sports. At this time, one particular men's basketball rivalry game [against Pomona-Pitzer] received more promotion than typical from the athletic department, administration, and campus-wide. My teammates felt extremely undervalued and underappreciated to see the game being advertised as the "first rivalry game in the new Roberts Pavilion," even though both we and the women's volleyball team had already played Pomona-Pitzer in the new pavilion at an earlier date. The day of the game we received countless emails and notifications on social media about the game, which just about threw my team over the edge. I noted some of their responses in my field notes:

"I'm just so tired of gender inequity being normalized."

"It's bulls**t. People don't care about women's sports and it comes from the top down."

"It's just frustrating that they don't understand that it hurts us and affects us when no one cares for so long."

I had personally drafted an email response meant for the CMS Senior Women's Administrator and Athletic Director that ultimately never got sent. I first wanted it to be

read by someone else in the department, but the importance of this issue slipped through the cracks on all of our parts. My coaches, my teammates, and other women who had expressed similar discontent never followed up with any CMS administrators, which in hindsight is something I now regret. Perhaps women internalize gender inequality too much and don't believe they have any agency to change it. Perhaps we felt that this incident was a micro aggression that didn't deserve recognition. So what will it take for college female student-athletes to take a stance like their professional counterparts and start a change, even if it's over something trite like game advertisement?

Although my teammates were extremely frustrated about the constant institutional male-centeredness that renders female athletes invisible, I found a silver lining that inspired part of this chapter. I came to the realization that all of the things that frustrate us – gender inequality, under-appreciation, harmful stigmas, etc. – are what bring us female student-athletes together. I don't mean to say we can only bond over negativity, but I do mean to point out that the power of women coming together like this can be incredibly rewarding and powerful, as I will explain more in Section 3, especially if they mobilize.

All in all, despite the challenges associated with being a female student-athlete, my informants feel that their participation has greatly enhanced their collegiate experience at their respective institution. Student-athletes have found ways to cope, ignore, manage, or challenge certain stereotypes of women's sports while embracing this athletic identity they have constructed through participation in them. Even though “being a male athlete is always a positive thing,” according to Grace, female student-athletes have developed a huge sense of pride manifested through their mutual support network. In this section, I will discuss two values that have come out of their athletic participation.

The first is pride in their athletic identity. Female student-athletes feel empowered through sport, they have learned how to manage body image issues, and they enjoy disproving negative stereotypes about female athletes through their own success. The second theme is strength of the sisterhood. Female student-athletes have developed a close bond with their teammates and fellow student-athletes that encourages a commitment to support women who must face the same everyday challenges. While the sisterhood is not an automatic nor natural phenomenon, when it *is* carefully cultivated by participants, it can create a healthy, supportive, and accepting environment for women of diverse backgrounds. Finally in Section 3, I will describe how women can use these two values to enhance the female student-athlete experience and progress the movement for gender equality in sport. In this section I address the responsibility women have in reinforcing hegemonic male-dominated perspectives and heteronormativity in sport, and the agency they have to change the internalized discourse on women's sport by reconfiguring their own behavior and language.

Section 1: Pride

All of my informants have expressed an incredible amount of pride in being a CMS Athena. Some describe a sense of empowerment in having both successfully received a good education that will set them up for a bright future and continuing the passion they have for playing competitive sports at a high level. Stephanie explained, "I know I'm dedicated to my sport and my team, but I chose [Division III] to get a good education. I don't think I'm giving up things by being an athlete. It's giving me a better experience to do these things." As Aly said, "I've always been pretty prideful of being an

athlete and a student. I really enjoy talking about track and running so it's not something I hide." For her and some other informants I talked to, the athletic identity isn't one that she shuts off. Female student-athletes constantly wear CMS gear, share photos and articles about their team on social media, and talk about their sport with their peers. Part of this is due to the time commitment of being a collegiate student-athlete. As Molly explained, "[Softball] takes up so much of your time and energy so the identity is not something you can just turn on or off." Regardless, she wears her athletic identity at all times because she feels as though she gets something out of it, and at the same time she knows that she is also a student, a member of a club, a mentor, or some other position on campus. Aly continued, "I know there's obviously more to me. Saying you're an athlete people have ideas of what may or may not be true because the word athlete is loaded with so much stuff. I don't think people understand that athletes are more than just jocks."

Because of this pride, student-athletes like Bri *choose* to spend time with others who have it, too: "I'm pretty set in my identity as a female athlete so I model my life and surround myself with people who mesh with that identity. That's something I am very sure about, at heart." It would seem as though this is another viable explanation for why student-athletes often feel ostracized from their non-athlete peers – they want to spend time with people who appreciate their athletic identity and will support them unconditionally. Once a student-athlete reaches the epiphany that she will be happier when surrounding herself with people who support her, I found she more comfortably wears her athletic identity with pride. As Kelly said,

I went to an all-girls school in high school and was very conforming and didn't understand why I was so unhappy – like why am I doing this, I'm so unhappy – and when I started doing things I wanted to do – I'm not really a people-pleaser – I think that's just who I am. I wouldn't say I

don't care what people think, but I make a concerted effort to do what I want to do. Everyone cares what people think, which can sometimes be hard.

Many of my informants have learned to brush off negative comments made about their sport, their body image, or sexuality because they know what's true and what isn't. In other words, being a female athlete has caused them to develop "thick skin." As one lesbian athlete, Sarah, said, "People think she's more athletic because she's masculine and she's more masculine because she's gay, even though there are a lot of fallacies with that. I don't mind, I think it's awesome." Besides learning to affirm her non-hegemonic identity by not caring what others think, Sarah acknowledges that many of the stereotypes about women's sports are untrue, so there is no point in listening to the people who believe in them.

Another epiphany some student-athletes have realized is a newfound appreciation for their athletic body. As Aly explained,

Competing means so much to me so I know I need to give it what it needs. Body image gets wiped out during season because food becomes what it's supposed to be, which is fuel for your body. I'm so used to feeling strong in myself because of sports so when I'm not, it negatively affects my image. It's not that I need to be skinny or curvy, it's that I feel myself being weak and that really bothers me. With sports what's really awesome is it gives me so much strength and confidence in that my legs can take me wherever I need to go. Without sports it's difficult for me to maintain that perspective. Sports have really solved a lot of body image issues for me because I think about it in a simplistic way: 'I can eat this food and perform well and I'll be healthy in order to perform,' instead of thinking 'I'll only eat a little bit of food because I'll get fat.' Working out and feeling strong during season just also makes you feel good anyways.

Bri affirmed this appreciation for strength and bodily competence: "I have an athletic build and a lot of girls don't want that look, but I take a lot of pride in that because being strong was so important." Many student-athletes expressed this feeling of security especially when in season. They don't have to worry about

being in good shape because they have scheduled practices and can appreciate the hard work they've put in to sculpt their body. As Grace said, "You should appreciate your body. You worked hard for it." Out of season, female student-athletes may retreat back to that pressure to conform to body image ideals by not lifting as much, but they still value having a strong body and voluntarily work out when season is over. In the off-season, I have found that many female student-athletes take time to focus on working other muscles through cross-training that they would otherwise be too tired to pursue during season.

Another way in which female student-athletes gain pride in their athletic identity is through disproving negative assumptions about women in sports. As Bri said, "Guys always underestimate girls. It's a mission of mine to prove them wrong, so by being an athlete and holding onto that athletic ability and desire to do things, I'm standing up for women in a lot of ways." Nicole echoed her statement and said, "I've always grown up that men are physically better and having people tell me that and know that has made me more proud to be a female athlete. Not having the physique that men have, that people think is easier, and being able to do all the same things they can do and sometimes better [is empowering]." Besides physically disproving the critics of women's sports, these student-athletes have learned to cope with stereotypes by reassuring themselves that everything about sports is constructed by society. Perhaps student-athletes were forced to think about these things in the interviews because I had them deconstruct the world they live in, but it is notable that during many of my

interviews, female student-athletes questioned the patriarchal system and gender hegemony that guide sports.

Many of my informants acknowledged that sports are not and should not be a gendered division. Haley reasoned, “I don’t think that any sport needs to be gendered. It’s in your perception on what women and men should do. No sport is inherently gendered, it’s just the activities we associate with genders.” Grace explained that “it’s annoying when people try to force [the idea of being a dominant athlete] into a gender construct.” As Olivia said, “I’ve never considered [aggression] a masculine trait. I don’t consider a woman masculine because they dominate in their sport, they’re just good at it.” We must be cautious and question whether or not these student-athletes actually believe in this ideology or if they expressed this system of reasoning because they knew the premise of thesis research. I believe that even though I found many instances when my informants reinforced stereotypes about gender hegemony, they genuinely acknowledged the construction of sport, but also that there is little they can do about diverging from the male-dominated culture they grew up in at this point. However, there were times when my informants tried to challenge the hegemonic discourse about women’s sports. Grace explained,

I’m so sick of the narrative of ‘she’s a good *female* athlete,’ like that’s the qualifier, she’s not a real athlete because a real athlete is male. But she’s putting in twice as many hours as men and honestly none of them will step on the court with her anyways. Or like Candace Parker and Britney Griner talk about these NBA guys, like they don’t want to get on the court with them. Sometimes you’re just the best basketball player, period, regardless of gender.

It's this kind of discourse that can positively shape the way society thinks about women's sports. When women aren't afraid to be honest about their opinions, as they have been with me in these interviews, we can see progress in redefining what it means to be a female athlete. Besides, some student-athletes like Bri recognize other ways to be "feminine" if they really need to: "You can be feminine in your personality, how they hold themselves, like in conversations they have – the things they say, the struggles they face are very female things, or whether getting a period in middle of match or things like that." Many of my informants recognized that the hegemonic femininity we know is a total social construction with too much emphasis on physical appearance.

Some athletes reconcile giving up certain feminine characteristics because of this pride for their athletic identity. As Haley said,

Being an athlete gives you a way better excuse to not put makeup on because you can throw your team jacket on and put on running shorts and people just say, 'Oh they're doing athlete things.' Other people can't do that. If you're a narps⁵ who looks bad, you just look bad. If you're an athlete, you're an athlete.

I like to contrast this with an ex-basketball player who says she can't "rock the sweatpants look anymore" or an ex-softball player who said, "I almost feel like now I can't just wear athletic clothes and sweats and a sweatshirt. I feel like I'm less able to do that because I'm not an athlete who is tired, busy. I almost don't feel right wearing the brand anymore because I feel like I don't have a right to." According to these informants, being a student-athlete has its privileges, one of which is the ability to compromise their feminine identity in a way that is still socially acceptable. In conversing with multiple student-athletes, it seems as

⁵ Colloquial term for non-athletes: Non-Athletic Regular Person (NARP).

though many recognize this ability to ignore their appearance, but only if they excuse it as “doing athlete things.” They recognize the hard work they put into their athletic identity and use this to reason for indifference to their appearance. In many ways, this indifference benefits the self-esteem of female student-athletes, though there can also be consequences for dismissing non-feminine actions for being an athlete, as I will discuss in Section 3.

Finally, my informants expressed many instances of empathy and appreciation for the amount of hardship and work that goes into being a female athlete. For this, student-athletes respect their peers because they understand what it’s like to face negative societal pressures. As Haley said, “I think it’s so awesome when any person is dominant at anything [because I know] the extra bulls**t she has had to overcome and continues to overcome to be a dominant athlete.” Even though in Chapter 2 I noted reasons women *don’t* like watching women’s sports, Kelly appreciates the athleticism in women’s soccer: “Men’s soccer can be more impressive in certain ways, but for women I know how hard it is to do things that they do. For men I have no conception of how to run that fast.” Furthermore, Christina added that female athletes don’t get enough credit for their athleticism, specifically pain tolerance, which is another reason to be impressed by successful female athletes. She said, “Female athletes don’t get enough credit for how much we are able to suck it up during a game. You see ridiculously dirty things happening in a women’s soccer game and the same thing happens in a men’s and they fall on the ground crying.” In this respect, we again see female

student-athletes comparing women to men, but this time in a way that frames women as the superior.

Even though female athletes as a group make significantly less money than men at the professional level (and for this, many collegiate female athletes are deterred from playing professionally), there is an overall sense of pride female athletes feel in understanding that they play purely for the love of the game. As Roxy said,

In the athletic world you're respected among your peers because they know how difficult it is to manage work and do all the other things involved with being a student-athlete. Narps are just unaware of the extra stuff that athletes have to do. [They often ask:] 'Why do you even care, why do you do it?' Sometimes you play a sport because you love a sport; It doesn't need to be a career.

I argue that it is these underlying values described by my informants that constitute the identity of a female student-athlete, not the ones shaped by the hegemonic masculinity that has dominated sport. The culmination of these values gives student-athletes pride in their athletic identity, which helps cultivate a more empowered individual and encourages the unity of these empowered women through the second value of sisterhood.

Section 2: Sisterhood

One of the greatest values of participating on a women's sports team is the community that is built among teammates and among fellow student-athletes. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Section 1, female student-athletes include "teamwork" and "sisterhood" as descriptors of female athletes. This value speaks especially true for college women who participate on elite teams that bring together athletes from around the

country and from different backgrounds. A college student-athlete is not only exposed to teammates with differing socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and race, but also to the stories of their previous experience having played sports in high school and before. A black student-athlete told me she felt more connected to her black identity only after having underclassmen teammates who had embraced it more in their past. In facing similar experiences and disproving negative stereotypes about women, female athletes create a bond rooted in mutual respect. Additionally, the amount of time spent together through the multiple-month commitment of each sport aids female athletes in creating even deeper connections with those they spend the majority of their collegiate career with. Many of the athletes I spoke to expressed a team value of having open dialogue about sensitive issues. Kelly described her rugby team as such:

One of our values is come as you are, so we accept anyone how they are. So if you are a lesbian we don't want you to hold back. If you're a super girly-girl, we want you to be that way. Rugby needs different body types in order to be successful. We do better by players being true to themselves.

Haley echoed the same kind of sentiment for this support network on her water polo team: "We confront the stereotypes by supporting each other to live our lives and do what we do. You develop a certain kind of respect for each teammate regardless of their different identities for someone you have to spend every day with. The experience you have is a lot more important than identity of a person." Based on many interviews, it seems as though the male-centered idea of women's sports has led women to create more emphasis on their own support networks. While these conversations on other teams happen in spaces I do not access, I know that in the beginning of my team's season we discussed identity politics and openly talked about black identity, significantly, in a space

absent of coaches. I have also found that student-athletes typically feel more comfortable having these conversations more with their teammates than with coaches present. Gender division in coaching effectiveness and perception is another area that could be explored with this topic in a future study. Regardless, I still have questions pertaining to this projected acceptance of different identities that I'd like to explore further. When and where do these conversations happen? Are some identities just assumed, and if so, do these conversations not happen at all because it is assumed to be normal? And if the identity is not assumed, is it necessary to force these kinds of conversations?

While this kind of support network grows deeper over time, some student-athletes also noted the comfort in automatically having a set group of friends when they entered the new strange environment of college. Molly says her participation on the softball team enhanced her overall experience. She said,

I don't think I would have had such a great time had I not been participating in sports because the team is super accepting and welcoming and kind of like, welcomed me in even though I never prospected.⁶ When I walked onto CMC campus I automatically had 20 friends and they were automatically going to be my guide for navigating college.

CMC's Title IX coordinator echoed this sentiment and explained that sports teams are a way for students of color, specifically, to find their way through barriers that give them access to the college experience. She explained that student-athletes find a commonality with fellow team members and other student-athletes to form this social network.

According to her, "When you come to college on the basis that you're going to be part of a team, you have a defined purpose, but you also have a lot of time that you spend on a shared resource. You have a built-in network. For other students who don't have this built-in network and access to those who aren't like themselves, you have to find it

⁶ Visited the college as a prospective student in high school.

yourself.” In other words, as Kelly said, being on a team is an automatic way to make friends with people you already share a common identify with, and this bond only grows stronger with time as they continue membership on the team.

Another way female athletes create a sisterhood among student-athletes from different teams is by supporting and attending other sporting events as best they can to show appreciation for their fellow CMS athletes, who are often underappreciated by the rest of the community. Christina said, “We’re not supported by non-athletes. Women’s water polo isn’t a sport people think to show up to games for, it’s not a sport people get hyped for.” In fact, this sentiment is felt by just about all female student-athletes who don’t often see full stands at their competitions, as relating to the gender inequality I discussed earlier. Because of this, some teams, like basketball and softball, have expressed a reciprocal commitment to support each other’s contests when they are out of season.

This sense of community is especially important in women’s sports because it creates a safe network of trusted allies to face similar social pressures associated with being a female athlete. As I have mentioned before, many student-athletes I talked to expressed feeling disconnected from non-athletic peers. Bri said, “Growing up my best friends have been teammates because we go through so many struggles together, so it brings you together and creates such a cohesive unit, family thing. I feel like with my non-athlete friends they don't get it, so it's kind of frustrating sometimes.” Molly also added,

The sisterhood aspect justifies the difficulties; you always have people you can turn to and you have people having your back. It makes it easier to face that kind of stuff. At least in softball, you become so ingrained in it because you invest so much time that the outside stuff stops to matter.

Consistently being with a group of people that is supportive and embraces the physical nature of the sport and not worry about social pressures makes you forget all of that and focus on what matters at the time, which is the team and doing well.

It would be hard for any of my informants to imagine going through these hurdles without having others they can fall back on for support and confirmation on their athletic identity. The sentiment of “not wanting to let the team down,” as golfer Olivia said, applies both to the individual’s athletic performance and her civic duty as a teammate.

However, the sisterhood is not a seamless, perfectly inclusive entity and rather reveals its own limitations. If it breaks down, as it did for a former swimmer, Taylor, it can have negative effects on the female student-athlete’s experience. I found that the support network is beneficial for cultivating a sisterhood around sexual, racial, and gender identities, but here I address the way the competitive nature of sports can get in its way. Taylor was not a highly decorated swimmer and admitted that a large factor in playing for CMS was the social aspect. According to multiple sports psychologists, social acceptance and belonging is a common predictor used to measure women’s enjoyment of sport because the social aspect of sport is a key value for women (Machinda, 2012; Lindgren, 2002; Bowker, 2003; Lancellotti, 2010). Some of Taylor’s teammates, on the other hand, were extremely competitive, cliquy, and did not connect well or support Taylor in a way she expected. Because of it, she decided that her participation was not enhancing any part of her experience so she quit the sport entirely. She said,

There's no point in staying on the team if you're not getting the team aspect out of it. It doesn't make it worth it; it's really depressing. You are an outsider, and yet you're supposed to be a part of the team. If they're respecting each other and not respecting you, then it's just a workout and you're doing it for your own goals, not necessarily the goals of the team.

We assume that the sisterhood is a way to bring females with different identities together through a mutual respect, and thus the sisterhood entity should be an automatic process especially for women who do fit into the hegemonic heteronormative identity, like Taylor. However, Taylor was not accepted into the community, which suggests that the team setting is not just a harmonious solidarity and inclusive community. Even within this hegemonic group, competitive attitudes and jealousy can disrupt the support network and ostracize certain players with different values. This could highlight and suggest the greater difficulties women outside of the white, heteronormative group may face in a team space, and even more so for women who feel like they have to hide or tone down part of their identity, like lesbian student-athletes, because of the way other females reinforce the male gaze as described in Chapter 2. Even though Taylor carried the “luxury” of fitting into the hegemony of sport, she still felt like an outsider to some of her teammates who didn't value Taylor's contributions or friendship. So even though the sisterhood can be represented as an idealized totality in many cases, it should not be assumed that the team space so easily welcomes all difference. The sisterhood works best when student-athletes give a reciprocal amount of effort to create these social support systems.

As I explained in the previous section, one reason female student-athletes play at the collegiate level is purely for the love of the sport. Participation in sport gives female student-athletes a tremendous amount of pride for their identity and thus adds value to

their life. Another reason is the gained social capital comprised of teammates and fellow female student-athletes described in this section. When women create this kind of bond, or sisterhood, through an understanding of mutual respect and hardship, they enhance their collegiate experience because they are surrounded by an unconditional support system that functions as a family away from home. The athletic sisterhood offers an alternative gaze on women's homosociality – one that is said to evoke lesbianism under a hegemonic male gaze – that is significantly more empowering and therefore understood as a significant value to the female athlete experience.

Section 3: Resolutions for Gender Equality in Sport

Why women need to support women better

Researching the complex history of women's sport and the experiences of other student-athletes was extremely valuable to me in order to understand how and why a gender division still exists in sport. In doing so, I understood how stereotypes found their way into women's sports in the first place and how we continue to shape and reinforce them with our own subconscious prejudices. Although it is atypical and historically frowned upon for anthropologists to impose solutions on their community of interest, I find myself in an appropriate position to offer some to a community I am deeply connected to. Therefore, I argue that progressing women's sports and mitigating the gender gap requires the commitment of female athletes to reconfigure the way they view women's sports. Title IX has done so much to alleviate the gender disparity in regards to participation of and access for female athletes through legal action, but it has done little in regards to shaping the culture of modern sport in terms of hegemonic discourse. Typically, when my peers talk about gender inequality and the lack of appreciation for

women's sports they blame men for their hegemonic male gaze on heteronormativity and masculine superiority and their inability to understand what kind of pressures we face.

While this is true to some degree, I wouldn't place the blame entirely on the men.

Through this thesis [and specifically in Chapter 2] I have demonstrated the ways in which female student-athletes reaffirm values of the hegemonic heteronormative gender division in sport. Female student-athletes have internalized this discrepancy in the way they feel about their self, body, and identity. Because these values are so strongly embedded in American society female student-athletes unintentionally reaffirm them through a normalized discourse. This harms all female athletes in the process because it affects the way they think about their self and it creates tension between diverse women who do not fit the normative ideas. To make a change on this pervasive and persistent existence of a gender division would not entail a simple solution. I would rather suggest a series of small changes female student-athletes can make as they become more cognizant and reflective of the way they talk about women and sports.

At the beginning of the academic school year in September 2016, CMS held an event for the women's teams so student-athletes could sit down with CMC's Title IX coordinator to discuss the topic of sexual assault in a safe environment closed off from male student-athletes and coaches. While I was unable to attend the event to know exactly what kind of discussion was had, I heard some very negative reviews from fellow student-athletes. The biggest complaint was that the women felt this kind of discussion should be more directed at the *men* who are the ones who need to be educated on healthy consent. Despite the purpose of this event, according to a CMS coach, being to "offer assistance to [female student-athletes] in a peer-to-peer conversation," women seemed

more concerned about the men not being there than listening to and supporting their peers. As this coach said in an interview months after the event, “Women aren't as supportive of other female athletes as they should be. This generation is so scared to go ‘I don't care what's going on with the guys.’ This terrifies women when we [administrators] are concerned about the girls. It's always ‘what about the guys?’”

First, it seems as though men are always in the forethought of our conversations and there is not enough of a concern for women by women. The anecdote I share above makes me ask, why do women always care what the men are doing? Can we not take an hour to share personal experiences with our teammates and cultivate a support system as this meeting was meant for? As I explained in Section 2, female student-athletes sincerely value the sisterhood because it offers an alternative gaze on the homosocial space of women. In other words, it is void of the male gaze and therefore, the homosocial space should be void of men in order to build the sisterhood. If body image ideals are rooted in an ideological system based on the male desire to see women who embody hegemonic femininity, then we should feel comfortable admitting insecurities to the other female athletes whose bodies deviate from the norm. I'm not suggesting that female athletes stop feeling insecure about their body, because that would require an alteration of an entire social institution, but I do suggest that women take more responsibility to encourage and help others who share similar insecurities. Additionally, female student-athletes should be more supportive of their peers by attending competitions rather than adopting a male gaze by thinking they aren't fun to watch. Women understand, more than men, what it means to see fans in the stands, and know better than to depend on others to fill them.

Second, why do women continue to compare themselves to men? Why can't we take men out of the picture and be genuinely impressed at a woman for beating other women in her league, not just because she can "be one of the guys?" Although it is natural for competitors to set personal goals to achieve the highest level of success, female athletic ability should not be judged solely as a comparison to the ability of male athletes. This only affirms the superiority of men in sport, when this isn't necessarily the case. Referring back to the "social fact continuum" explained by Mary Jo Kane (Tucker Center, 2013), she poses a hypothetical question: How would it change the minds of young girls to grow up knowing that *some women can beat almost all men* rather than *women can never beat men*? Perhaps if girls were socialized this way they would have more female role models; they might challenge each other more in practice because they see that their strongest competitor is not the boy on the other end of the court, but the girl standing right in front of her; or perhaps women can take pride in knowing that they are more athletic than men in some, but not all, ways, and that's OK. Again, I am not suggesting that women stop comparing themselves to men altogether, though I do suggest that female athletes recognize that because many women can and *do* compete with men, the image of the athletic woman has changed enough so it can also be cool to "be one of the girls."

Third, why do we excuse doing non-feminine things for "being an athlete?" Does this not reinforce the stereotype that female athletes are masculine in nature? If we do have to package gender norms into a binary, I suggest we recognize that there are other ways to embody femininity besides looking "girly" or being straight, and that female athletes should stop discouraging homosexuality. Rather than feeling a pressure to display

heterosexual qualities, women should realize that they don't *have* to be straight to be an athlete. Women can embody "femininity" through their personality and values that often come through during conversations or interviews with people. Additionally, we can use these feminine qualities to lift ourselves as superior to men in some ways. For example, we appear tougher because we don't cry in soccer like the men and we have to play through the pain of menstrual cramps even though no one can see. We can act as more positive role models for young kids because we are modest and give credit to our teammates and because we play for the love of the game, not for money, and therefore cultivate a well-rounded life outside of sport. Again, I do not suggest women should stop doing "feminine" things, but they should be mindful of when they do them with the *intention* of portraying hegemonic heteronormativity.

In this ethnography I have illustrated a gender division in sport that is manifest through mainstream media and everyday discourse by men and women. The violence of this heteronormative and male-dominant gaze I have described is that female student-athletes internalize the gaze as well as reproduce the stereotype through narrations of their experience. While it is hopeless to think that sport will someday be ungendered due to the binary gender hegemony so engrained in American society, I do think that it is possible to ameliorate the disparity. As an exploration of the *female* student-athlete experience at CMS, I find it appropriate to conclude that women possess agency to change the harmful discourse around women's sports by starting with a reevaluation of the way they talk about masculinity and femininity, athletic performance, body image, and sexuality.

Conclusion

Further implications of this ethnography, importance, and big picture

As a female student-athlete at CMS, I have found myself incredibly invested in this project. My personal connection to the research question and my participation on the women's basketball team has helped immensely in my research on the many social pressures faced by female student-athletes. Over the years I have gained much rapport with the athletic population at CMS and found it fairly easy to make such connections and talk to female student-athletes because I am one of them. In the process of conducting research for this senior thesis I think I have executed two key concepts in anthropology. One is the use of building rapport. Certain topics I explored were easier to discuss with interlocutors whom I had previously known because they were more open to talking about their experiences and I recognize my positionality in this way as a benefit. I imagine that a male who ventured out to gather the same information would find it more difficult to hear the same personal accounts that proved crucial to this project. Additionally, I de-familiarized the previously familiar experience of a female student-athlete. In this thesis I explored a wide array of subtopics, some of which I was able to relate to and some I was not due to my position as a member of the "hegemonic femininity" group.

I also recognize the limitations of my research and acknowledge that there exist even more domains that I wasn't able to explore in the short six months of fieldwork with this particular population. To name a few: mental health, gendered coaching, race/ethnicity, and class. I would have liked to have interviewed more student-athletes, but in the essence of time – both in regards to fieldwork and six months of my own basketball commitment – I had to draw conclusions from the many interviews I was able to acquire

in that period. Additionally, I recognize the way in which my positionality could have been harmful in my research. Perhaps in my interviews male students held back in their negative comments about women's sports and tried too hard to come off as supportive and unbiased of their female counterparts. Similarly, there is a chance some of my female informants held back in their comments as to not reveal implicit biases or to admit to taboo topics, such as the one on body image insecurity. Despite these unavoidable limitations due to the time and scope of my research, I think I acquired a substantial amount of data to appropriately analyze with a critical eye for this thesis. Overall, I am pleased with the final product.

My findings have proven revolutionary for me and I have had the chance to share certain themes with the greater CMS community in hopes of improving the female student-athlete experience. However, my interest in the impact of sport goes well beyond its effects on female athletes, who are one of many groups that participate in sports worldwide. Recounting the experience of female student-athletes opens a door to the experience of other identities, including race/ ethnicity, sexual orientation on the full spectrum, religious affiliation, and disabled persons. Just as sport has had to accommodate women in its historically male-dominated origin, it will need to be more accepting and accessible to athletes of marginalized and other non-hegemonic identities, not just in America, but internationally. I hope to continue my research on women's sports and the international sport community in future endeavors down the road.

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