

Gender and Sport: Why Women Can't Please Them

Women in sports have to navigate the stereotypes of being a female along with the stereotypes of being an athlete and how they contradict one another; women aren't supposed to be athletes because they're supposed to be fragile creatures, however, when race is entered into this conversation, then there's another set of stereotypes to navigate. In "Jackie Robinson without the Charm: The Challenges of Being Althea Gibson," Mary Jo Festle writes that "participation in sports assumed to help boys develop into men, meaning that girls who competed risked being turned into men as well" (191). In other words, athletic women are subjected to backlash to the point where they are assumed to "become men" if they participate in sports that give them strength and change the "feminine" features of their bodies (i.e. muscular arms, less visible "curves" or thin waist). Althea Gibson experiences obvious discrimination in that she's a black woman who faces the dichotomy between the stereotypes of being a woman—playing sports and being black both challenge that. For instance, Festle writes that Gibson was "a female in an athletic world that marginalized women, a working-class woman trying to break into an elitist sport, and a black woman in a racist nation, world, and sport" (189). Although Billie Jean King and Gibson both experienced backlash from being female and trying to enter the world of sports, Gibson experienced discrimination to a different extent because her race had a separate set of stereotypes and associations that hindered her ability to be seen as female—a stereotype that many black women face—because of her physical attributes. King, being a white woman, did experience the contradiction of being a woman trying to navigate the world of sports—in other words, being viewed as a fragile creature, and needing to adhere to such an attribute to fit into social norms, and being a muscular person as a result of sport

proWess. However, she didn't experience the contradiction that Gibson did: Gibson was a black woman, fighting those stereotypes of "less feminine" attributes, and an athletic woman, which was as contradictory for Gibson as for King. However, on top of King's contradictory identity as an athletic woman, Gibson was also a black woman.

Of course, King also challenges the stereotype by playing a sport despite not being heterosexual—she's heterosexual-passing and white, so she fits into the box more neatly than Gibson, yet still experiences discrimination for being outed. More specifically, Susan Ware, in "The Outing of Billie Jean King," wrote that, because "women's professional sports still had a long way to go to gain acceptance with fans, the tour wanted its image to be one of heterosexual glamour, not lesbianism" (194). Essentially, King had to present herself as heterosexual in order to fit into tennis, and sports in general, as a woman. Any hint of her not fulfilling the stereotype of females would jeopardize the progress that she had made because of her victory in the "Battle of the Sexes." This differs from Gibson's role as a black woman in sports because she didn't want to shoulder the burden of change and integration, given that being a black person and woman in sports was enough of a challenge. She even argued that "the black press turned on her because she did not sufficiently use her fame to advance the cause of integration" (201). King, on the other hand, had the privilege of being a white, athletic woman attempting to disrupt the stereotypes of women in sports and women in general. Ware goes more in-depth on this issue of privilege when she states that King "still held on to her heterosexual privilege, thanks to a complicit spouse and less intrusive media" (183). King was a white woman, heterosexual-passing, and, therefore, making headway as an athletic woman, but she only had this privilege because her affair with a woman wasn't outed until much time had passed since her

defeat of Riggs and, even then, her husband stood by her to vouch for this affair as a “meaningless dalliance” and not a demonstration of her repressed, closeted sexuality. Overall, both women face a common battle, but Gibson has other non-passing facets of her identity that don’t offer her the same privileges as King—intersectionality. I find both of them equally compelling because they both represent two women's struggles to overcome female stereotypes and their connections/lack thereof with sports. Lastly, being a woman in sports means that, to be at all accepted, you must do your best to apply social norms for women and “femininity” to be accepted and not abused.

2020, and Why Women Still Aren't Paid the Same

The gender system undermines both men and women in that it forces both men and women into categories that don't necessarily fit them; in other words, the division between men and women, arbitrary to begin with, leads to issues for every gender identity. This couldn't be clearer in the fight for equal pay for the U.S. women's soccer team. As discussed in class, the U.S. women's soccer team has recently sued for equal pay in relation to the men's soccer team. The case has also recently been thrown out by the court, who argued that there wasn't sufficient proof that the men were being paid more than men—in other words, there wasn't sufficient evidence that the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) was violating the Equal Pay Act (EPA) by paying men more than women.¹ The United States Women's National Team (USWNT) argued that they weren't getting paid as much as men, to which the USSF responded by turning the conversation to total compensation rather than rate of pay.² When the USWNT produced documents that demonstrated the pay for both men and women, the court concluded that, given the women's team made more money and played more games, the documents didn't conclusively suggest that women worked more hours for more pay—therefore, there wasn't conclusive evidence that the USSF was violating the EPA.³ The women's team argued that they were disregarding bonuses and benefits that the men's team was receiving that the women's team was not, despite requesting it a few months before the current president,⁴ Carlos Cordeiro, who was campaigning at the time, admitted that the team were being treated unequally (16-17, 20).⁵

¹ Central District of California. *Alex Morgan Et. Al v. United States Soccer Federation*. 1 May 2020, assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6881283/Document.pdf. pp15.

² *Alex Morgan Et. Al v. United States Soccer Federation*. pp16-17.

³ *Alex Morgan Et. Al v. United States Soccer Federation*. pp16-17.

⁴ *Alex Morgan Et. Al v. United States Soccer Federation*. pp16-17.

⁵ *Alex Morgan Et. Al v. United States Soccer Federation*. pp20.

It's sad to say, but the women's team, in this day and age, was challenging the status quo by asking for equal pay the USSF essentially won the case because of "inconclusive" evidence. Furthermore, gender plays a role in the court case because it's what has led to a division between soccer teams at all. Without the gender system playing a role in United States soccer, there would be no need for the pay differential. Regardless, considering that there *is* an undeniable gender system at the center of this controversy, gender provides the space for conversation between men and women: the women's soccer team, who is more well-known and successful than their male counterpart, is underpaid and the fact that there is even a question about ensuring equal pay for both teams—without doubt or futile deflection resulting in inconclusive evidence—demonstrates the gender-based struggle alone. Whether this struggle is based on the gender of the USNWT or not, women from the soccer team have been targeted for their identities; for instance, one of the most famous women from the team, Megan Rapinoe, is a lesbian. She has also been called "arrogant" and targeted for the same traits for which men in sports are touted, such as pride in her work and identity. Rapinoe challenges what it means to be a woman, both as an athlete and a member of the LBGTQ movement. Overall, the USWNT proves that the gender system is the biggest issue in society, despite constituting the foundation for society; it affects women the same way that it affects men: adversely. The fact that equal pay is *still* controversial further proves that women in sports is a dangerous and disrespected concept.

Gender, and Other Arbitrary Boundaries

Combining race and gender categories in terms of sports demonstrates the intersection of identity that is necessary to studying both race and gender in any historical inquest. Historians can't develop a full understanding of social dynamics, given the extent to which the race and gender systems pervade society, until they demonstrate the systemic connections between race and gender and the inherent complexities that originate from the overlap and contradictions that arise from such connections. For this reason, women of color shouldn't be left out of any of studies on history because of the intersection of identity—a women of color experiences the world differently from a man of color and a white woman because she has an intersection of identity that leads to a specific experience important to both conversations about racial and gender dynamics in society and history. In other words, in "Gender Matters in Sport History," Patricia Vertinsky describes this idea by saying that "there is no way to detach the relations of power, systems of belief, and practices from knowledge and the processes that produce them" (5). Race and gender are inseparable in the way that they impact one's identity and how one experiences the world. It's impossible, and frankly does injustice to all historically-marginalized groups, to study the history of race without addressing how gender relates to it and vice versa. Of course, it can be difficult to cover this breadth of information when studying history. Regardless, it's imperative that the overlaps between racial and gender identity are explored when studying history because one can't gain a full understanding without such exploration. Furthermore, Vertinsky writes "it is not possible to know what gender is apart from the way that it is produced and mobilized" (9). Thinking about this in relation to sports, a stereotypical and categorical

understanding of gender is based in a public consciousness that shapes the way the public thinks about women in sports.

It's clear that both race and gender have stereotypes associated with whichever identity one chooses to associate themselves or feel they belong, therefore, they are similar in this way. They are also similar because the stereotypes associated with certain races and gender identities are better suited to sports than others. However, one's racial identity can "override" their gender identity in the eyes of society given the powerful race system that determines the dynamics between white people and people of color. Having said that, it's truly impossible to consider race and gender in opposition to each other unless to realize that race can undermine any progress towards gender inequality. To conclude, this discussion about the race and gender systems, and how they impact the freedom with women can operate in the world such as playing a sport, originates from the visual differences between people—this originates from physical attributes and the body, which relates directly to sports. Along these lines, Vertinsky argues that "for all its corporeality the body is not an originating point nor yet a terminus; it is a result or an effect conceived in a specific time and place" (9). The only reason that gender and sport are so interrelated is that sport is stereotypically for men, as it changes the way one looks. Women in sports challenges everything that a woman "should be." Vertinsky's statement represents this idea that the body should not be any determinant: it shouldn't be what categorizes someone as something to which they may or may not feel they adhere. It's necessary to study how the gender and race systems impact historically-marginalized groups and history, in general, given how pervasive these systems are in history and current society, however, they are detrimental to everyone involved and should, therefore, be dismantled..