

Sporting a Uterus

by Julie MacArthur - Monday, July 11, 2011

<https://politicsrespun.org/2011/07/sporting-a-uterus/>



Following the Women's World Cup this year has been an enlightening experience for me. So far, some matches have been heart-stopping (Brazil-USA), and some have been crap (Canada-France), just like any tournament. The Canadians ended up knocked out in the first round bottom of their pool despite (overly) high expectations pumped up to justify the fact that CBC was covering matches at all.

I'm both delighted and disgusted with what I've observed so far. First off, watching women like Marta sprint down the field at amazing speeds, swear, cheer, celebrate and just generally express a whole range of human (rather than typically celebrated 'feminine') actions/emotions is brilliant. I have to admit at getting fairly choked up seeing all-female teams, officials, and attendants sell out 74,000 seater stadiums for the first time in my life. I love that athletic bodies of many nations are disturbing common tropes of what women should look like. And am happy that, for the first time in Canada, CBC (and Sportsnet) have provided full coverage of all the matches, which is peachy because in many places (like England) the matches aren't actually being shown on regular TV channels.

I'm disgusted, on the other hand, with the sexism—institutional and socio-cultural—and outright misogyny that the women's game provokes in (mostly) men. Astonishing displays of athleticism are met with nauseating displays of sexism from many, if not most, sports writers, commenters and, indeed, FIFA's own president, Joseph Blatter. You'd be hard pressed to find stories with more comments blocked for 'violating acceptable terms of use' (where they're moderated). Some of the tamer critiques proceed along the following lines:

“Women's bodies just aren't made to play this game”

“Tennis is a better sport for women, it's sexy”

“In a competitive marketplace for viewers, watching women is a waste of time”

These are not new prejudices by any means. In the 20th century, one finds that women's soccer was prohibited and defunded in a number of nations (Germany and England, for example). Women were banned from playing in Germany in 1955 since, apparently, "this combative sport is fundamentally foreign to the nature of women" and that women's "body and soul would inevitably suffer damage". You know what's damaging to our bodies and souls? Sexism. The multitude of messages given to girls and women reminding us continually that we, despite making up more than half the planet, are somehow *less*. Heaven forbid you run, pass, kick or do anything 'like a girl'.

You'll not catch me buying into the 'at least we're not as bad as x' argument either. That beauty's been used for too long to silence critics and keep sexist, racist, classist and homophobic systems in place for generations. While I fully accept that things are 'getting better' in Canada in the sense that at least there is some coverage, that funding in some places is increasing, and the sexist men are being balanced out by people who actually love the game and don't care about sexual organs of the players, this process is entirely too slow. This silencing tactic is applied in many conversations where one (often privileged) party just doesn't care. Having your pay or safety provisions cut at work? At least you're not a Chinese coal-miner! (so shut up). Sexually harassed on the job? Thank your lucky stars you're even allowed to vote and drive! (so shut up).

The issue of media coverage in perpetrating the myth today that women's football is a non-starter is important. A common refrain one hears is: "why would the media cover a sport no-one watches?" The logical flip of this makes far more sense: "why would anyone watch a sport that isn't covered?" How are you ever going to care/see/know without having access? Without promotion? Sports pages, aggregator feeds, and sites in most countries have buried the tournament behind youth, amateur and practically any male event, anywhere.



Another common trope is that men are just awesomer. Hence, men's leagues are just better, and why watch 2nd best? How do we know all this? As Ron Burgundy put it so eloquently in *Anchorman*, it's *science*. But where else do we subscribe to the logic that if you're not the fastest in the whole world, you (and people like you) are a waste of time and money? Imagine the following:

Pat: I just spent years writing a book that recently won a Giller award.

Mary: Did it win a Pulitzer?

Pat: No.

Mary: you [insert insult here]! I'd prefer to watch paint dry than waste time and money on some second-rate Giller winner.

It is the songs, stories histories and all the socio-cultural work that goes in to creating and maintaining passion for a game. Work, by the way, that men's associations have been doing for hundreds of years. Search movies genres for sports films. I dare you to find more than a handful decent ones about female athletes. Most movies fail the [Bechdel test](#), true, but sports films take it to a new level. Consider: Rudy, The Right Stuff, Rocky, Raging Bull—and that's just the R's.

This isn't even an issue of people not caring about soccer in general. FIFA's own president, Joseph Blatter, couldn't care less about the women's game, choosing to spend his time elsewhere. To the extent he is involved it is to police dress codes: wishing for skimpier outfits (he once called for tighter shorts to attract spectators) and banning the Iranian team's participation if they wore headscarves. Beyond Blatter, one notices that soccer fan sites are either completely ignoring the tournament or full of indignation that precious webspace and airtime would cover athletes without penises. The horror!



None of these issues are unique to the sport of soccer, of course. Tennis, which at least gets coverage, has been plagued recently with a spate of commentary about how 'unfeminine' women grunting when they hit a ball at 100mph. I mean really, ladies, it makes you seem so 'undoable'. Which is really the problem, right? That's why female athletes are so scary or even maybe (gasp) *lesbian*, as in not sexually available. Hockey, rugby, soccer—all the 'grunty' sports in fact—seem to be difficult for many fans and commenters alike to wrap their head around. Guess what? Some people are athletes. Some athletes are women. Some women are lesbians. Some women are not. See where this is going?

The real deeper issue here is whether women, fit, healthy relatively young women, are playing their proper role and making themselves attractive and available to a male viewing public. If not, they've abdicated their central role as mobile sextoys. Because, really, that IS what we're here for, right? That's why any story about 'the beautiful game' tries to find the hot players, and why the 'sportsbra' picture made women's soccer visible in the media, and (barfably) any athlete who poses in playboy makes more headlines in a day than her whole sport in a year. How will we keep the population stable (forgetting of course, that we're almost at 7bn now) if women stop caring about whether they're sexy at all times of the day? Lingerie Football Leagues are a case in point of a new wave of objectification. Popping up in pants all across the U.S., these commercially successful sporting ventures are a rare case where women can play a sport, draw crowd and get paid for it—in panties and a bra. Think of it—hooters AND dirt! Talk about the best of both worlds. And yes, I'm being sarcastic.

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I hate to end on that note, so I'll leave you with this quote from Elizabeth Cady Stanton: "Come, come, my conservative friend, wipe the dew off your spectacles, and see that the world is moving." The sexism that comes out of the woodwork when women's sporting events take place is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. I don't know about you, but I'm going out this weekend to watch the final matches, drink a few beers and kick the ball around 'like a woman'. I might even throw in a few grunts if that helps me.

Note: the WWC semifinals are this Wednesday, July 13 and the Gold medal game is on Sunday, July 17th.