

## **“I Used to Think Women Were Weak”: Orthodox Masculinity, Gender Segregation, and Sport**

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*This article explores the cultural and structural forces that help influence the reproduction of sexist, misogynistic, and antifeminine attitudes among men in team sports. It first shows how the segregation of men into a homosocial environment limits their social contact with women and fosters an oppositional masculinity that influences the reproduction of orthodox views regarding women. However, this research also shows that when these same men compete in the gender-integrated sport of cheerleading, they positively reformulate their attitudes toward women. These findings therefore suggest that gender-integrating sports might potentially decrease some of the socionegative outcomes attributed to male team sport athletes, possibly including violence against women.*

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**KEY WORDS:** cheerleading; gender; masculinity; misogyny; segregation; sexism; sport.

### **INTRODUCTION**

There have been numerous investigations into the socialization of males into the institutional and organizational norms of masculinity in organized, competitive male team sports (henceforth, simply “team sports”). These findings mostly agree that team sports promote an orthodox form of masculinity that promotes socionegative (sexist, misogynistic, and antifeminine) attitudes toward women (Anderson, 2005b; Bryson, 1987; Burstyn, 1999; Burton-Nelson, 1995; Crosset, 1990; Curry, 1991; Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Messner, 1992, 2002; Muir and Seitz, 2004; Nixon, 1994; Pronger, 1990; Robidoux, 2001; Sabo and Panepinto, 1990;

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Schacht, 1996). Yet few have formally questioned the influence that segregating males from females has on producing these attitudes (Boeringer, 1996, 1999; Caudwell, 2003; Messner, 2002). Based on qualitative research, I first theorize a model of the cultural *and* structural influences that help reproduce orthodox masculinity among men in team sports. I then explain how competitive male team sport athletes might maintain socionegative attitudes toward women even in a time when institutional sexism has been shown to be decreasing (Bryant, 2003; Burton-Nelson, 1995; Johnson, 1998; Reskin and Roos, 1990).

Findings suggest that the complex reproduction of orthodox masculinity in men's team sports, the kind of sports Messner (2002) describes as the institutional center of sports—such as football, basketball, and hockey—are largely influenced by segregating males into a homophobic, sexist, antifeminine, and misogynistic gender regime that only promotes those who aptly conform to the orthodox sporting ethos (Anderson, 2005a; Connell, 1987; Ewald and Jiobu, 1985; Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Nixon, 1994; Robidoux, 2001). It is suggested that in this top-down socialization system, acquiescence to masculine norms grows greater as one matriculates through the sporting hierarchy, potentially withering away at an individual's agency to contest the bifurcated gender system (Anderson, 2005a; Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1961; Robidoux, 2001).

Then, utilizing data from heterosexual men who were first socialized into the masculinized sport of high school football but later joined the feminized sport of collegiate cheerleading, I show that despite years of socialization into orthodox masculinity, informants largely reconstruct their views regarding women. Virtually all informants who had not previously respected women's athleticism reported changing their attitudes; and all informants said that they had learned to better respect women's leadership abilities and to value their friendship.

The results are not conclusive, and this research does not examine the effect that gender integration has on *women's* experiences and outcomes in sport; however, it does suggest that there may be important socionegative implications for gender-segregating competitive sporting programs. Perhaps of most concern, it questions whether the hegemonic view of segregating the sexes in order to protect women from men's violence does not, instead, engender such violence.

## THEORY AND METHODS

To understand how men's team sports reproduce orthodox notions of masculinity, particularly sexism and misogyny, I tie together several

theoretical concepts, linking them to a set of grounded observations and in-person semi-structured interviews, upon which a theoretical model is built. To understand the relationship between men's team sports and these socionegative attitudes, I rely on a sociofeminist theory of masculinity that maintains gender is produced through a complex interaction of institutional power, organizational culture, and individual agency (Acker, 1990; Anderson, 2005a; Dilorio, 1989; Martin and Collinson, 1999; Messner, 1997, 2002; Thorne, 1993; West and Zimmerman, 1987).

The study consists of a nationally representative sample of 68 self-identified heterosexual male university cheerleaders who formerly played high school football, but later, when they were unable to make their university football teams, became collegiate cheerleaders.<sup>2</sup> Because these men had never played institutionalized team sports on a gender-integrated team (I use gender integration as synonymous with sex integration), the design allows for the influence of gender segregation and gender integration to be analyzed. In this manner it is more reliable than simply comparing the attitudes of current football players to cheerleaders. However, because most failed high school football players do not try to become university cheerleaders, a self-selection process cannot be ruled out; it is possible that those most influenced by the masculinization process of football may not join cheerleading. Still, almost all the informants report that upon entering cheerleading they held sexist views regarding women's athleticism and almost half reported maintaining misogynistic views (largely seeing women as sex objects), so conclusions about the affect of gender integration are likely relevant to other groups of men in conservative gender environments too.

My orientation into the culture of collegiate cheerleading began with informal discussions among friends who were collegiate male cheerleaders and through the analysis of cheerleading web sites. Twelve collegiate male cheerleaders were then contacted on America Online by using the member profile search, which provides a search engine for accessing AOL's 33 million subscribers. After conversing with these cheerleaders through instant messaging, they were asked for in-depth, taped telephone interviews. From these initial informants, I used snowball and theoretical sampling techniques to obtain an additional 12 interviews.

The 44 other informants were acquired over 2 years of attending local, regional, and several national collegiate cheerleading competitions, each drawing thousands of athletes from throughout the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Informants were included only if they had played football throughout their 4 years of high school and had not previously played competitive, institutionalized team sports with women. The sample consisted of athletes in equal parts from the U.S. West, South, East, and Midwest.

Here, informants were strategically selected and asked if they were willing to participate in my academic research. In total, 68 interviews with self-identified heterosexual male cheerleaders were transcribed and coded (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). The men, between 18 and 23 years of age, represent diverse regions and city sizes from throughout the United States, and consequently reflect the racial and class composite of men who cheer in the United States. Eighty percent are white, middle-class men, so generalizations are limited accordingly.

The semi-structured interviews began by asking informants to discuss their life history in sport and the process by which they came into cheerleading. I asked them to retrospectively reflect about their perceptions of women's athleticism and leadership qualities throughout their socialization and matriculation in sport, as well as how they view women today. Although it is recognized that retrospective attitudinal accounts can be problematic (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997), their recollections are supported by the large body of literature regarding men in team sports. Then, in order to see if these responses varied in the presence of others, 12 informal group interviews (60–120 minutes) were conducted on gender-integrated cheerleading teams, in which both men and women were asked about their social networks.

In addition to these interviews, I conducted 300 hours of participant observation on four strategically selected gender-integrated cheerleading teams. These teams were solicited in advance of a major competition and each agreed to be observed and interviewed over a 4-day competition period. Observations also took place at practices in their home states and while socializing away from the athletic arena. Field notes (with either a micro recorder or pocket-sized memo pad) were recorded outside their direct presence, as not to interrupt the socializing process. My experience as a coach, and knowledge of kinesiology and sport psychology, enabled me to both speak their language and help with their athletic endeavors, thus influencing their willingness to be observed.

## **ORTHODOX MASCULINITY IN SPORT**

Gendered institutions are always dynamic arenas of tension and struggle, but perhaps there is no other institution in which gender is more naturalized than sport (Caudwell, 2003; Davis, 1990; McKay, 1997; Messner, 2000). As a highly segregated, homophobic, sexist, and misogynistic gender regime, sport not only contributes to the gender order, but it also reproduces a conservative and stabilizing form of masculinity that renders considerable costs for both sexes (Anderson, 2005a; Burstyn,

1999; Connell, 1987, 2002; Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1992, 2002). Of concern to this research is not so much what these outcomes are, but to examine how team sports manage to reproduce themselves as organizations that value orthodox masculinity. I then explore how this process might be disrupted through gender-integrating sport.

The tenets used to define orthodox masculinity include, but are not limited to, a number of achieved variables: including risk taking, homophobia, self-sacrifice, the marginalizing of others, a willingness to inflict bodily damage, and the acceptance of pain and injury. Of specific concern for this research, however, is that orthodox masculinity looks disparagingly at femininity and thus helps reproduce patriarchy (Anderson, 2005a,b; Eveslage and Delaney, 1998; Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990; Muir and Seitz, 2004; Schacht, 1996). This is something Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:844) reconfirmed: "To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women."

Because of the sexist and (often) misogynistic ethos associated with the presence of orthodox masculinity among men in team sports, the performance of femininity by men, or transgression of masculinized boundaries, is deemed highly contentious and is severely penalized (Adler and Adler, 1998; Anderson, 2005a; Davis, 1990; Hughes and Coakley, 1991; McGuffey and Rich, 1999). Those who do not make athletics their top priority or those who refuse to make sacrifices for the sake of victory are deemed *loose cannons* and are stigmatized as not being *team players*. Men who play within feminized terrains, like cheerleading, gymnastics, or ice skating, are generally subordinated by those who play within masculinized terrains, like football and basketball, a status that makes them the targets of homophobic and misogynistic discourse (Adams, 1993; Anderson, 2000, 2002, 2005a; Davis, 1990; Eveslage and Delaney, 1998; Muir and Seitz, 2004). The collective policing of these masculine borders is so severe that I have previously described competitive team sport athletes as members of a cult of athleticism (Anderson, 2005a). These are men who tithe their agency and vow complacency to rigid team norms. As members of this cult, these men express near uniformity in thought and action—reverent to the ideology of orthodox masculinity.

These identity management techniques are considered a reflection of the social process of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987); however, it is important to clarify that I use orthodox masculinity and *not* hegemonic masculinity as a category of dominance. Although Connell (1995) describes the contemporary form of hegemonic masculinity as including sexist and antifeminine attitudes, she does not give a categorical label to this group. This makes it easy to erroneously conflate the process of

hegemonic masculinity with an archetype of masculinity, something Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:854) firmly reject: “While we welcome most modifications of hegemonic masculinity ... we reject those usages that imply a fixed character type, or an assemblage of toxic traits.”

It would also be inappropriate to use hegemonic masculinity as an archetype because the hegemonic position of men requires them to possess both the *achieved* and *ascribed* variables that align with social masculine dominance. Orthodox masculinity, as I define it (Anderson, 2005b), only refers to the conformity of the achieved variables that currently align with social dominance, something that *all* men can attempt to approximate. Connell offers no archetype for this group of men. Accordingly, the social process of dominance in this article is understood by men *acting* in accord with orthodox masculinity, despite their ascribed traits. These men are then said to perform in opposition to traditionally subordinated and marginalized masculinities (Anderson, 2005b; Connell, 1987, 1995; Messner, 1992, 2002).

### **COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH ORTHODOX MASCULINITY IN SPORT**

There are *many* costs associated with orthodox masculinity for men and women. Researchers have examined how males construct hierarchies around athleticism in school culture, and how those who are marginalized by this stratification suffer emotionally (Anderson, 2005a; Pollack, 1998), socially (Anderson, 2005a; Plummer, 1999), and sometimes physically (Anderson, 2000; Messner, 1992, 2002). This is particularly true for gay males, who are almost altogether marginalized by athletic culture (Anderson, 2000, 2002, 2005a; Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990; Wolf Wendel *et al.*, 2001). Few males are immune from social victimization under this system—and none escape the physical. This is made salient when watching the violence men afflict on each other in team sports, violence that is naturalized as “just part of the game” (Messner, 1992, 2000; Papas *et al.*, 2004; Smith, 1983).

However, men are not the only ones who suffer from such masculine stratification. Although the use of sport in reproducing men’s social, political, and financial dominance over women (Bourdieu, 2001; Burton-Nelson, 1995; Connell, 1987) is somewhat outside the scope of this analysis—as is the positioning of men over women within the institution of sport itself. Rather, of concern to this analysis is that the socializing of men into this violent ethos may have serious implications for the symbolic and physical violence that men commit against women.

Team sports are *at least* partially responsible for the promotion of antifeminine, sexist, and misogynistic attitudes among male athletes (Anderson, 2005a; Messner, 2002; Muir and Seitz, 2004; Plummer, 1999; Pollack, 1998; Schacht, 1996). Male athletes (in general) and team sport athletes (in particular) have been shown to objectify women—often viewing them as sexual objects to be conquered (Burstyn, 1999; Burton-Nelson, 1995; Curry, 1991; Messner, 1992, 2002; Schacht, 1996). Others suggest that, in the same manner that team sport participation has been shown to influence violence against other men (Kreager, 2004), the socialization of men into team sports might also influence symbolic, domestic, and public violence against women (Boeringer, 1996, 1999; Crosset, 2000; Crosset *et al.*, 1995; Koss and Gaines, 1993; Loy, 1995; Papas *et al.*, 2004). Crosset *et al.* (1995) have shown that while student-athletes make up only 3.7% of the men at Division 1 universities, they are responsible for 19% of sexual assault reports to campus judicial affairs offices. More recently, Crosset (2000) has shown that football, basketball, and hockey players—notably team sport athletes—are responsible for 67% of the sexual assaults reported by student athletes, although they only comprise 30% of the student athlete populace.

Despite these findings, hegemonic views continue to attribute sport as a sociopositive institution in U.S. culture, concealing a great number of social problems that sport, or at least the way we do sport, generates (Carlson *et al.*, 2005; Jeziorski, 1994; Gerdy, 2002). Accordingly, this research critically examines not the outcomes of sport, but the influence that gender segregation has on those outcomes.

## REPRODUCING ORTHODOX MASCULINITY IN SPORT

No form of masculinity is self-reproducing. The reproductive process is laden with social tension and ultimately *can* fail (Anderson, 2005b). But in the arena of sport, the process of reproducing orthodox masculinity has proven resilient (Pronger, 1990). Men's team sports have consistently resisted the cultural and institutional challenges of both women and gay men (Anderson, 2002, 2005a; Messner, 2002). It is this reproduction process, the specific mechanisms that explain the resiliency of orthodox masculinity in the sport setting, which I now address.

To do this I employ a theoretical model, in four steps, that explains the synergy of the dominant cultural and structural variables that produce and influence the reproduction of orthodox masculinity in men's team sports. The research component of this article then examines the influence gender-integrating sport might have on disrupting this masculinist system.

*Step 1: Socialize Them Young*

Americans attribute to team sports a *large number* of sociopositive characteristics. Parents believe that sport will teach their sons' moral character, self-restraint, and a sense of fair play. One of the more resilient myths is that team sports teach boys how to work together and to get along well with each other (Miracle and Rees, 1994). But researchers find that the most salient benefits of athletic participation are found in elevated self-esteem, better school attendance, educational aspirations, higher rates of university attendance, and perhaps even postschooling employment (Eccles and Barber, 1999; Carlson *et al.*, 2005; Jeziorski, 1994; Marsh, 1992, 1993; Sabo *et al.*, 1989). I maintain that these quantitative investigations are somewhat misleading because they fail to examine whether the benefits associated with sporting participation are the result of something intrinsic to team sports, or whether they simply reflect the physical, symbolic, and emotional dominance that a socially elite group of males exhibit over marginalized men and women in most jockocratic school cultures (Anderson, 2005a). In other words, do male athletes have higher self-esteem because they score goals, or is this a statistical reflection of the lowering of nonathletes' self-esteem in response to being subordinated by athletes who are culturally and institutionally glorified in the U.S. school system? When these studies do examine the socionegative attributes of team sport participation (Miller *et al.*, 2005), they often examine variables that lend themselves to quantifiable analysis, like disciplinary referrals. Thus, they fail to examine the more important socionegative variables (those that do not lend themselves to quantification), like the volitional and unintentional damage inflicted on those who do not fit this masculine mold.

However, what is important to this analysis is not whether sports deliver these sociopositive outcomes; rather, what is important is that Americans *believe* they do, something reflected in team sport participation rates. Compared to the 6% of U.S. parents who discourage athletic participation, 75% encourage it (Miracle and Rees, 1994). Largely a fact that the United States remains one of the few Western countries to intertwine public education with athletic programs (Gerdy, 2002), some U.S. high schools report participation rates as high as 72% (Carlson *et al.*, 2005). Thus, there exists great cultural and institutional pressure for boys to participate in these types of sports (Anderson, 2005a; Messner, 2002; Miracle and Rees, 1994; Plummer, 1999; Pollack, 1998). Their participation is pressured by peers, made compulsory by parents, or is mandated through public education. As a result, if there is any institution described as being *all-important* in the lives of boys and young men—it most certainly is sport.

*Step 2: Separate the Sexes*

Largely a product of men's desires, men and women occupy separate spaces in the sporting world (Anderson, 2005a; Crosset, 1990; Frye, 1999; Hargreaves, 1993; Kidd, 1990; Pronger, 1990; Whitson, 1990). Few other institutions naturalize the segregation of men and women so near perfectly as do team sports (Davis, 1990; Messner, 2000, 2002). Although occupational sex segregation is declining in other institutions (Cotter *et al.*, 1995; Johnson, 1998; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Rotolo and Wharton, 2004), formal and traditional reasoning has left team sports a largely unexamined arena of gender segregation (Caudwell, 2003; Messner, 2000, 2002). Although this segregation has *many* male-driven purposes, it is important to note that feminist separation also occurs in sport.

One can certainly understand the feminist desire to play sports away from men, particularly where women are protected from the violence of male athleticism (Kreager, 2004; Smith, 1983). Gender segregation in team sports is therefore confirmed by both men and women. It is then naturalized through notions of "opposite" phenotypes (Davis, 1990; Messner, 2000) and myths about boys' elevated levels of innate aggression and athletic advantage over girls (Butterfield and Loovis, 1994; Messner, 2002). Collectively, sex segregation in sport, as Messner (2002:12) describes, is "grounded in a mutually agreed-upon notion of boys' and girls' 'separate worlds.' "

*Step 3: Control the Environment*

Athletes who emulate the institutional creed of orthodox masculinity are usually selected over players who break from its tenets, influencing them to adopt the gendered norms associated with orthodox masculinity. Ewald and Jiobu (1985) show that some athletes so overly adhere to the norms of sporting culture that they disrupt family relationships, work responsibilities, and even their physical health—all guided by a masculine creed of *giving it all*. I have previously shown that gay athletes largely remain closeted for these same reasons, fearing that coming out will thwart their athletic progress (Anderson, 2002, 2005a).

Hughes and Coakley (1991:311) describe this social deviance as *overconformity* to the sport ethic, saying: "The likelihood of being chosen or sponsored for continued participation is increased if athletes overconform to the norms of sport." Of course, athletes do not see overconformity as problematic, rather "they see it as confirming and reconfirming their

identity as athletes....” Building on Hughes and Coakley’s (1991) overconformity theory, I examine the structural mechanisms that help reproduce sport as a site of orthodox masculinity by highlighting the near-total institutional aspects of team sports.

Goffman (1961) describes a total institution as an enclosed social system in which the primary purpose is to control all aspects of a person’s life. Foucault’s (1977) description of the military serves as a useful example. Foucault maintained that, through intense regimentation and implementation of a standard ideal of behavior, the military has the ability to transform peasants into soldiers. He posited that men become more docile to the system because their growing identity as a soldier is one of a withering of agency—that the longer a soldier remains in the institution of soldiering, the less agency he has to contest it. Though I do not maintain that competitive, institutionalized team sports *are* a total institution (athletes do have the freedom to quit sport), I do argue that team sports approximate a “near-total” institution. This is because, much like the military, sport uses myths of glory, patriotism, and masculine idolatry, along with corporeal discipline and structures of rank, division, uniform, rules, and punishment, to subordinate individual agency and construct a fortified ethos of orthodox masculinity (Britton and Williams, 1995; Woodward, 2000).

When athletes think in alignment with their teammates, they are given social prestige and are publicly lauded; they are honored by their institutions and celebrated by fans and community (Bissinger, 1990; Messner, 1992, 2002). Hughes and Coakley (1991:311) say: “Athletes find the action and their experiences in sport so exhilarating and thrilling that they want to continue participating as long as possible.” Coakley (1998:155) later adds, “they love their sports and will do most anything to stay involved.” Thus, it is understandable that from *their perspective* sport is a socially positive vessel. And while I think the reasons athletes will do almost anything to remain in team sports are more complicated than just the thrill one receives from playing them, the point remains that athletes who withstand the selection process do so because of their outstanding athletic ability *and* their willingness to conform to orthodox masculinity. In doing so, they limit who they befriend, shut out other cultural influences, and are therefore less exposed to those who do not fit orthodox masculine requisites (Anderson, 2005a; Robidoux, 2001).

Conversely, athletes who do not adhere to the tenets of orthodox masculinity are sanctioned by verbal insults and are less likely to be given valued playing positions (Anderson, 2002; Bean, 2003; Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Hekma, 1998). Coming out of the closet, “acting feminine,” or being told that one is not a team player are marks of shame

that are likely to drive nonconformists from the sporting terrain (Hekma, 1998). Thus, desiring peer recognition and social promotion, athletes normally put team expectations before individual concerns, sacrificing individual agency and contributing to the reproduction of a rigid, masculine sporting culture. Of particular concern to this research, this virtually necessitates that those who aspire to the next level must publicly disengage with any stigmatized notion of sexual or gender ideology that is inconsistent with orthodox masculinity (Anderson, 2005a; Messner, 2002).

From an early age, then, athletes befriend each other on and off the field. Their social lives are routinely dictated by a rigid athletic schedule of practices, competitions, and other team functions. Team sport athletes, from this and other research, report that the further they matriculate through the ranks, the less freedom exists to inhabit any social space outside this network and the more their identity narrows in order to be competitive with other men (Anderson, 2005a; Messner, 1992; Nixon, 1994; Robidoux, 2001).

I suggest that this might make gender construction in team sports different from the type of agency-laden gender construction that West and Zimmerman (1987) or Thorne (1993) suggest occurs more broadly. This is because, from youth to adulthood, males socialized into competitive team sports follow a subtle but increasingly institutionalized gender ideology: an incipient notion of gender that slowly erodes individual agency and restructures athletes as highly masculinized conformists in thought and action. The subordination required for retaining one's sporting status, or being selected for advancement, wears away at their agency to construct oppositional masculinities. This is then justified by the prevalent belief that homogeneity is required in sports to produce desirable results (Sabo and Panepinto, 1990), even though there is only a small and dubious relationship between a group's social cohesion and athletic success (Granovetter, 1983; Mullen and Cooper, 1994).

#### *Step 4: Selectively Recruit Coaches*

Not every boy who dreams of making it to the National Football League will. Certainly, the thousands of male collegiate cheerleaders who used to play football did not. Instead of making it to the top, most athletes self-segregate out, are selected out, graduate out, drop out, or are forced out of organized sporting participation through injury. Those who remain are endowed with social capital and this influences longstanding members to define their master identity as that of *an athlete*—making it

all the more difficult for them to break from the gendered ideology embedded in athletic identities and esteemed in athletic cultures (Anderson, 2005a; Messner, 1987).

However, centering one's identity on athleticism carries measurable risks. Sport is a volatile field where careers end on poor plays or missteps, and athletes can, at a moment's notice, be cut from a team (Bean, 2003). In fact, as an athlete, the only thing that he can be assured of is that his career will end; and relative to other occupations, it will do so early. Thus, whether an athlete suddenly loses his association with his athletic identity, or his body ages out of competitive form, all are forced to disengage with competitive sport. And when this happens, they are generally no longer valued in the sport setting (Messner, 1987).

Men who drop out, are forced out, or otherwise do not make the next level of sport often find themselves detached from the masculine prestige they once enjoyed—something sport psychologists call the disengagement effect (Greendorfer, 1992). Athletes who rode atop the masculine hierarchy feel the greatest loss upon disengaging from that elite status. So, for those with no further opportunity to play competitive sports, coaching becomes one of the few alternative venues for getting back into the game. Sport almost always draws leaders from those who overconformed to the previous cohort's ideals, something perceived to give them expertise as coaches (Anderson, forthcoming). As coaches, these ex-athletes rely on hero-athlete narratives to promote their individual experience and to inspire a new generation of boys into a similar ethos of orthodox masculinity (Anderson, 2005a, 2007; Hughes and Coakley, 1991). But for every athlete who has been highly merited by sport, there are many more that did not make the cut, often those who had horrifying experiences in sport.

Those who were marginalized or publicly humiliated in sports are rarely represented in coaching positions. Their stories are seldom told in popular culture. Books are not published, sponsorships are not given, and movies are not made about those who *did not* achieve success in sport. Even when stories of gay (or otherwise marginalized athletes) are told, they normally depict a heroic underdog (Anderson, 2000). In this manner, only highly selective stories are being told about sport; stories that glamorize the struggle and romance of the sporting-hero genre (Stangle, 2001). These stories, fictional or real, make for great entertainment but they falsely bestow on sport qualities that only exist for a few. Conversely, when marginalized athletes drop out, are pushed out, or otherwise leave the sporting arena, their perceptions of how sport ought to operate go with them. Those who were marginalized by sports and those who were too intimidated to play them in the first place, do not go on to coach; and

their ideas about how sports ought to function go unheard. Sport is essentially closed to voices of dissent.

Within competitive team sports, then—and from a very early age—athletes are normally removed from the presence of women. They are selected to the next level of play only if they adhere to the tenets of orthodox masculinity, where they are influenced by the top-down modeling of the near-total institution. Finally, the institution itself excludes input from those not within its dominant framework. Thus, this system is more than just culturally hegemonic, it is also structural. Not just structural in the sense of a social, historical, and institutionalized pattern, but literally structured by codified rules of segregation, reminiscent of the same rules that once formally segregated blacks from whites. It is a resilient system that reproduces a more conservative form of gender expression among men, helping make sport a powerful gender regime despite the gains of second-wave feminism that characterizes the broader culture (Bryant, 2003; Johnson, 1998; Reskin and Roos, 1990).

## DISRUPTING ORTHODOX MASCULINITY IN SPORT

The fact that thousands of former high school football players yearly enter the culturally feminized world of collegiate cheerleading (Anderson, 2005b; Davis, 1990; Hanson, 1995) might seem antithetical to the effectiveness of my reproduction model. After all, if the sanctions are so great for breaking this masculine mold, why would so many ex-team-sport athletes choose to transgress into cheerleading, where they are likely to be ridiculed?

The answer is that, for most men, the system *is* sufficiently seamless—preventing most ex-team-sport athletes from breaking its mandates. However, for those who do (my informants), it seems that their transgression is not viewed so much a violation of orthodox masculinity, but as an ironic attempt to remain within it. Most of the 68 heterosexual football players in this study maintained that they entered the sport of cheerleading precisely *because* they failed to make the next level of sport. Cut from their masculinized identities as football players, they reeled in the dissonance between their personal and public personas and desired to get back in the game—any game. But because most of the men who devoted their youth to football were not trained in the rigors of other competitive team sports, they were unable to make, or assumed they would not be able to make, other collegiate athletic teams. Thus, cheerleading became the most likely entry for these informants to be part of a team again. “Everybody knew me in high school,” John said. “I was ‘John, the football player.’”

Here [in college] nobody knew me. Cheerleading was a way to get back on the field.” “I had been a football player all my life,” Tim said. “Everything revolved around it. I thought I’d play in college, but I didn’t make it. I couldn’t believe it. So I’m not on the field now, but it’s better than being in the bleachers.”

To be clear, most athletes’ transition from football to cheerleading is not without tension. Entering a feminized terrain is especially difficult for men who previously ostracized male cheerleaders (Anderson, 2005b). But the transition is aided by existing male cheerleaders who vigorously recruit ex-football players: assuring them access to socially elite women. It was common to hear: “In cheerleading, you get to be around all these beautiful women.”

Sentiment regarding men who participate in cheerleading has also been strategically crafted to maintain that male cheerleaders are anything but “girly men.” On the contrary, they are promoted as “real” men: heterosexual, brave, and strong enough to hold a woman (or two) above their heads, yet agile enough to perform the complex gymnastic routines also required of them (Anderson, 2005b; Davis, 1990). One university’s cheerleading recruitment poster illustrated both these heterosexualizing and masculinizing tactics: “Want strong muscles? Want to toss girls? Our Cheer Team needs stunt men!! No experience needed.”

It is also important to know that the type of cheerleading examined in this research is not simply that of cheering for men’s team sports. Cheerleading squads today compete against one another in complex performances, where men and women dance, cheer, stunt, and tumble to rhythmically synchronized, high-energy music. Higher, faster, and more dangerous are the hallmarks of successful squads, and these qualities demand cheerleaders (of both sexes) to be more than peppy supporters; they must also be courageous acrobats and spirited showmen. Thus, men’s roles in the sport have changed significantly over the years (Davis, 1990; Hanson, 1995). Whereas men in cheerleading never used to “fly” into the air or unlock their arms from rigid straight-armed positions when dancing, today half the men’s squads were shown to do precisely this. Men dance, stunt, and even allow themselves to be thrown into the air, landing safely in the arms of other men (Anderson, 2005b).

Finally, the transition from the masculinized world of high school football to the feminized world of collegiate cheerleading is made easier because of the geographical relocation that often occurs when attending college, removing informants from their previous social network and placing them more safely out of reach of peer devaluation. This helped many of the informants explore cheerleading with *less* social risk than would have occurred had they decided to explore cheerleading in high school.

*I Used to Think Women Were Weak*

Jeff and Tony practiced putting a female athlete into the air by holding her above their heads, but after growing bored with the combination, Jeff said, "My turn" and the athletes switched positions so that Jeff was standing atop the outstretched arms of one man and one woman. After practice he said, "I never would have guessed women could do that before I joined cheer. It's not like I'm a hundred pounds you know." Like Jeff, virtually all the informants viewed men as maintaining an athletic advantage in sport (before and after joining cheerleading) but about 70% of the informants said they had no idea that women could be *this* athletic. This struck me as strange, considering most had seen women cheering on their football sidelines in high school. "Yeah, you see them doing some of this stuff on the sidelines," Jeff said, "but you don't really get an idea of just how physically tough it is until you try it." Tony agreed, "I never really thought about how hard it must be to do what they do. Not until I tried it."

Accordingly, most of the informants maintain that they never really had their preconceptions about the inferiority of female athleticism challenged. Like Jeff, Jim recalled that he used to believe that women were physically incapable of competing with men. He said, "I used to think women were weak, but now I know that's not true." David added, "I never thought women were so athletic before. I hated women's sports. But these women are *athletes*. They do stuff I'd never do and I bet there are a lot of sports women can do better in." Brad summed up much of the sentiment.

I didn't appreciate women as athletes before. [In high school] I heard that another school had a girl on their [football] team and I thought that was wrong. My teammates and I were talking about it, and we all agreed that a woman just couldn't handle what we could. Now I see that women can handle a lot and they aren't as fragile as I thought they were.

Participant observations show why these men have upgraded their views on women's athletic abilities. In cheerleading, men see women performing highly dangerous feats that require the same strength, balance, and fearlessness that they claim masculinizes them (Davis, 1990). And even though men do most of the heavy lifting in the co-ed division of cheerleading, they need only watch the all-women's division to see the same stunts performed by women (Adams and Bettis, 2003; Anderson, 2005b; Hanson, 1995).

Furthermore, virtually all the men expressed a new-found appreciation for the leadership qualities and coaching abilities that women exhibit

in cheerleading. Perhaps this is because virtually all the collegiate female cheerleaders competed in high school, and this gives them considerable knowledge of the sport. Watching David, a wide-eyed new male recruit trying to learn a complicated and dangerous stunt illustrated this.

David listened to Emily's directions, asked for clarification, and relaxed at her encouragement. Immediately after landing the stunt, he turned to hug her, beaming with self-pride. He then awaited her congratulations and smiled again upon receiving it. It makes sense that men listen to women in cheerleading: when one is contemplating flying through the air, performing a back flip, or holding a person above one's head, listening to the experts prevents injuries.

Finally, data from interviews and participant observations also indicate that many of these men rethought their misogynistic attitudes, particularly regarding women as sex objects. Relying on retrospective reports, about half the men said they maintained misogynistic attitudes before joining cheerleading; mostly in that they hyper-sexualized women and desired to socially exclude them from male preserves of power (Muir and Seitz, 2004; Schacht, 1996). Yet most (not all) of these men maintain that cheerleading helped them undo this thinking. Dan enthusiastically said: "Oh, we totally learn to respect women, I mean they [teammates] are like our sisters." Ronnie confirmed: "Yeah, I never really understood women too much before, but my teammates are a family to me. I have grown real close to them, and now I can often see things from their perspective." Ryan said:

In high school it was all about the cheerleaders making signs for our games or baking us cookies. I mean, we hung out with them at parties, but it was nothing like what occurs here [in cheerleading]. We didn't travel with them or have team dinners and stuff. I never really had female friends in high school ... I never really got to know them like I do now.

These results suggest that the sex segregation existent in Ryan's high school effectively denied him the opportunity to befriend women as equal members, not only in social networks but as equal members in sport sharing responsibility for the outcome of a game. I asked Ryan if his high school social network of friends was also comprised of mostly men. "Yeah, my teammates. That's really all I socialized with," he said. Conversely, in collegiate cheerleading, Ryan was able to make friends with women in ways he was not able to in high school. Will concurred, "I've never before had best-friends that weren't men. But now, some of my best friends are women."

This theme was also explored in the 12 group interviews. Here, all the cheerleaders and several coaches were asked about the social interaction between men and women. Collectively, both men and women, coaches and athletes, near-unanimously maintained that cohesion occurs between

the sexes. Jill (a player) said: “The men in cheerleading learn a new respect for women in this sport. They learn that not only are we good athletes, but we are smart athletes and competent leaders, too.” Highlighting how gender integration might also change women’s views of men, Lindsay (a coach) said: “These guys have given me a new understanding of men, and they aren’t all that bad.” Another female coach added:

Oh yeah, they become like family. I mean they spend so much time together, they change in the same locker rooms sometimes, and they just get real comfortable, even with bodily issues. I can’t imagine a more cohesive group of athletes than you find in cheerleading.

Data from this research clearly indicate that there exists a significant sociopositive attitudinal shift regarding women. Informants near-unanimously maintained that they enhanced their beliefs about the athleticism of women; all but a handful reported that they had learned to see women as more than sex objects. Finally, *all* the athletes report having learned to respect and value women as friends, teammates, and competent leaders in the sport of cheerleading. Thus, in the sex-integrated sport of collegiate cheerleading, even once sexist and misogynistic men were able to witness the athleticism of women, befriend them in ways that they were previously unable to, and to learn of their sexual and gendered narratives—humanizing them in the process. And while not all men were equally affected by their experience in cheerleading, the considerable results observed highlight the question of how much of men’s antifeminine, sexist, and misogynistic attitudes might be prevented if team sports were structurally gender integrated across all sports and among all age cohorts.

## DISCUSSION

Research has shown that male team sports influence an orthodox form of masculinity that devalues femininity and promotes sexism and misogyny (Anderson, 2005a; Griffin, 1998; Messner, 1992, 2002). Burstyn (1999), Crosset (1990), Kimmel (1990) Messner (1992, 2002), and others (Muir and Seitz, 2004) have suggested that this is mostly the result of organizational culture and/or historical processes. Within these cultural models, sport is ironically viewed as a sociopositive institution that socializes males through a top-down process of peer-influenced collective culture. Boys and men are thought to adopt socionegative views about women in order to become part of the in-group and to establish their masculine worth among peers (Plummer, 1999). Building on these cultural theories, I utilize qualitative methods to also examine the influence of the

*structure* of team sports; theorizing a model to help elicit the mechanisms of the production and reproduction of orthodox masculinity in team sport settings.

Findings lead me to suggest that, in the gender-segregated arena of sport, the extreme regimentation and inordinate amount of time required to excel often deprives men of experiences outside the athletic arena, where they might otherwise be introduced to the athletic abilities and sexual/gendered narratives of women. Instead, in the homosocial world of men's team sports, males are socialized into an ethos in which women are valued as sexual objects and devalued as athletes (Anderson, 2005a; Curry, 1991; Schacht, 1996). This is made more possible because there are no women to contest these narrow understandings, and also because coaches are recruited from a pool of ex-athletes who matriculated through the same system. Essentially, I suggest that because team sports are nearly compulsory for U.S. youth, young boys are indoctrinated into a masculinized, homophobic, and sexist gender regime from early childhood—an institution they cannot easily escape. Even if boys are fortunate enough to enter a gender-integrated sports team when young, by the time they reach high school, gender segregation is the norm. Additionally, the demands of competitive sport often consume such quantities of time that it also structures men into off-the-field social networks of teammates—positioning them into a near-total masculine institution. Bereft of alternative gender narratives, and desiring social promotion among their peers, boys and men are more willing to subject their agency to orthodox masculinity, which remains predicated in antifeminine, sexist, and (frequently) misogynistic thinking. In this aspect, segregation on the field is complicated by the effect of a near-total institution off the field.

In addition to providing a model for how orthodox masculinity is reproduced among team sport athletes, my research also suggests how this process might be interrupted. Data clearly shows that when these same men become familiar with the experiences of women (in the gender-integrated sport of cheerleading), almost all adopt a new gender strategy that looks more favorably on women (none downgraded their position). Although some of this change may occur because of the liberalizing attitudes of university life in general (Ohlander *et al.*, 2005), I attribute much of their reconstruction to the gender-integrated sport of cheerleading. Here, the time constraints of training and travel structures athletes into mixed-sex social networks, at least part of the time. Here, men are likely to have conversations with women about sex, gender, sport, and life—the kind of conversations they were often unable to have in a homosocial culture such as football. In partaking in these conversations, informants not only prevailed themselves to hearing the multiple narratives of women, but they

also saw them as worthy and competent athletes, teammates, coaches, and leaders. In cheerleading, even men who were once highly sexist were able to socialize and develop cohesion with women as participants of equal agency and responsibility for team performance and outcomes—something that works against gender stereotyping. Coupled with a more inclusive institutional and organizational setting (Anderson, 2005b), these men were influenced to undo much of their separatist and sexist thinking.

The findings of this research may stand out as odd compared to research showing that the integration of men and women does not always deter gender stereotyping (Jackson and Warren, 2000; Harvey and Stables, 1984). I suggest that team sports may be uniquely effective in reducing gender stereotypes because they necessitate that men and women work together for the accomplishment of victory. It makes sense that men relying on women to obtain their athletic goals look more favorably on women compared to when they compete directly against them. Conversely, it is also possible that part of these results are influenced by the feminized nature of cheerleading and the process these men go through to rectify their masculinity with this feminized terrain (Anderson, 2005b). Either way, these findings indicate that the gender-integrated nature of cheerleading may help *disrupt* the reproduction of orthodox masculinity among men in gender-segregated team sports. This research therefore carries serious implications for the structure on which U.S. team sports operate, calling for further investigation into the effects of gender integrating men's and women's team sports.

I do not claim gender integration to be a panacea for the sexual, social, ethical, and gender-related problems associated with sports; men's team sports are far too entwined with other masculinist systems and institutions for that. Furthermore, this research does not address what effect gender desegregating team sports might have on female athletes, particularly considering that women have been shown to be subordinated by men within other integrated terrains (Britton and Williams, 1995; Connell, 1987; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Williams, 1995). Nor does this research address how gender-integrated team sports might impact on the number of sociopositive attributes that Sabo *et al.* (2004) correlate with women's sporting participation.<sup>3</sup> But whereas dominant ideology maintains that gender segregation is valuable because it shelters women from men's violence, I question whether violence against women might instead be

<sup>3</sup> Sabo *et al.* (2004) show that correlated with women's athletic participation is an improvement in physical health, elevated self-esteem, improved academic standing, greater career mobility, reduced rates of pregnancy, and even reduced sexual victimization. What is not clear however is whether these findings are the result of athletic participation alone or whether they are predicated on gender-segregated athletic participation.

promoted through sporting segregation. If gender segregation in sport is even *partially* responsible for men's violence against women, then this research should serve as a call for further academic inquiry into the effects of gender integrating sports.

Still, it is recognized that gender desegregating sport is a politically charged proposition, and I am aware that among traditionalists of sport the potential implications of these findings may not be received favorably. But only by examining both sides of this question will we come to a better understanding of the impact gender segregation has on athletic culture. Hegemonic perspectives that value gender segregation in sport—whether they be masculinist or feminist in origin—should not stop us from academically examining a counterproposition. As Frye (1999:361) says: “If you are doing something that is so strictly forbidden by the patriarchs, you must be doing something right.”

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