Abstract

This article focuses on the experiences of a group of women footballers growing up in England. It specifically looks at their similarities and differences in relation to how they entered the world of football and whether gender relations continue to impact on both their access to and opportunities in sport. The discussion draws on information from nine semi structured interviews with women of varying ages and mixed abilities who have grown up and played football in England. The interview data highlights the prevalence of early male influence within the game and what effect the school education system has on young girls. What emerges from the interviews is that male figures tend to be the most influential in encouraging girls to play football. Developments seem to be being made at primary school level as girls’ access to football is improving. However, whatever strides are gained becomes lost as soon as the girls commence secondary school, due to the absence of football from the curriculum. As the girls reach adulthood the traditional feminine values are more highly sort after, so ‘tomboyish’ behaviours are considered unsuitable and unnatural. There are entrenched cultural attitudes towards the women’s game, which are proving hard to break down. These along with the physical barriers make women’s involvement in sport very difficult, even more so with football.

Key Words: Gender, barriers, socialization.
Being the youngest child with two older brothers meant that I was outnumbered from the start. They wanted to practice their shooting, so needed someone in goal to shoot against. To this day, I know it was more about having someone to go and collect the ball each time than to actually save it! My father loved it when I used to ask him to play with me. So did I, as it meant it was my turn to shoot and his to collect the ball! At school, I would join in with the boys in the playground and made it into their team. The opportunities out of school weren’t great but I did play on and off for Southampton Saints for girls. I was chosen for Saints’ academy for girls at my local college progressing through to playing for the Saints women’s 1st team, who played in the top league in England! Everything seemed to be heading in the right direction, when an injury left me unable to play for two years. However, even more devastating was the effect of the Saints men’s team being relegated from the Premiership. To save costs the club dropped all the financial support they gave the women’s team. Without the money, the club fell apart, leaving many women without the chance to play. It seems that no matter how far the women’s game progresses, it is still in the hands of men.

Over the years, sport has become increasingly significant, as it remains one of the last few strongholds where can men still assert their dominance and supremacy (Birrell & Cole, 1994; Hong, 2003; Mean, 2001). The traditional values and traits associated with many sports - physical contact, violence, and aggression, are considered by many to be male traits (Caudwell, 1999; Cox & Thompson, 2000). For males, achieving success in sport reinforces and promotes their masculinity; whereas for women achieving success in sport is often considered as having rejected feminine values. In one sense, women can be viewed as having failed and, in a symbolic way, had ‘become’ men (Willis cited in Mean, 2001). In the past, many people have considered that a woman’s physical build and nature prevents her from being successful in sport (Green, Hebron & Woodward, 1990; Hall, 1996; Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw & Freysinger, 1999). For instance, women lack the strength or the stamina to run, kick, or tackle. Furthermore, women have often been excluded from many sports and physical activities on the premise that they risk medical harm and physical trauma (Green et al, 1990; McCrone, 1988; Vertinsky, 1994).

Although change has been slow, the opportunity for women to engage in a range of sports has grown. Since the 1990s, western women’s participation in male dominated sports has increased steadily. This is generally attributed to improvements in women’s social and economic power through liberal political agendas and the equal rights legislation (Cox & Thompson, 2001, Williams,
In 2002, football became the fastest growing female sport in the UK, replacing netball (The FA, 2007) however, it has "...received little attention from academics (Cox & Thompson, 2001, p.5)," and the research tends to focus on women outside of the UK (see Cox & Thompson, 2003; Fasting, 2003; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003; Koh, 2003; Rodriguez, 2005; and Wedgewood, 2004).

For the past 30 years, much of the research about women and sport has had a distinct feminist leaning within it. The studies have aimed to correct both the invisibility and distortion that has surrounded female experiences, and to change the way that a male's view of the world is the view (Brayton, 1997; Patton, 2002). Broadly, the research has focused on adult women's experiences within a sport and whether their positions as sportswomen had either challenged or had been accepted by the male dominated gender roles. Research has been undertaken in contact sports such as rugby (Carle & Nauright, 1999), boxing (Halbert, 1997; Mennesson, 2000) and ice hockey (Theberg, 2003), as well as in some other male dominated sports including football (Caudwell, 1999 & 2003; Cox & Thompson, 2000; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunel, 1999; Wedgewood, 2004).

The study of women's football in England is somewhat limited and begins with two key autobiographies. Sue Lopez (1997) and Wendy Owen (2005) provide a good insight into the struggles and barriers that they, and other female players, faced when initially trying to become involved in football, through to maintaining this involvement as they grow up. Lopez (1997) played for Southampton Women's football club from 1966 to 1986 as well playing for England from 1971 to 1979, winning 22 caps. In her book, she acknowledged that there are powerful socialisation agencies, such as family, peer groups, and school, which have an effect on attitudes towards women's sports. She believes that the behaviour of parents and other adults was instrumental in enabling girls and women to play and succeed. Many women football players in England according to Lopez (1997) have acknowledged the role their brothers, fathers and husbands had in encouraging them to be involved in football and to overcome the stigma attached to women playing football.

Lopez (1997) also argued that girls in England are channelled into stereotypical behaviour in sport, both at home and at school, which were reinforced through magazines and television programmes. In addition, although the school curriculum includes football, girls still face a problem as they had fewer out of school opportunities to play than the boys do. This means that boys are far more competent than girls are, even at an early age. Hargreaves' research (1994) continues to emphasise that by the time children leave primary school, they are most likely to have started playing in single sex teams, boys playing rugby, football, and cricket, and girls playing netball, hockey, and rounders. Opportunities for female footballers were virtually non-
existent until 1996 when the first football centre of excellence for girls was opened. Since this date, effort has gone into improving the league structure and the number of development opportunities available for girls (Lopez, 1997).

Owen (2005) was another member of the first English women’s team and won 16 caps for her country. In her book, she highlighted some of the struggles both her and other women faced during their involvement in football. She grew up at a time when there were no female role models. Her role models were strictly successful male players in the game. With the help of her father, her passion for the game flourished outside of the educational system. Owen stated that her skills were developed through hours of practice with her younger brothers and other young boys in the area. She claims she was only accepted, as she was better than most of them, although new boys moving to the area were not as accepting at first. Furthermore, she mentions that by playing with the boys the word ‘tomboy’ was never far away. From a very young age, the author was aware that although people close to her may have accepted her, this view was not reflective of the wider society. As with Lopez’s experience, Owen never had the opportunity to play football at school, and felt that her traditional girls grammar school was not ready for her or her for it. She describes her experience of school as feeling like a “square peg in a round hole (p16).”

In addition to the autobiographies there has been a few empirical studies undertaken on women and football. Caudwell (1999, 2003) carried out a detailed study on women in football using both qualitative and quantitative research to demonstrate how gender functions in the cultural arena of women’s football. Her initial research (1999) suggested that many female football players were labelled as ‘butch’, which implied an overt masculine, lesbian identity. This clearly disturbed players’ notions surrounding their identity. The research suggested that there was a clear link between football and the butch style some lesbians manifest. What was also evident from the research was that gender boundaries were clearly defined, apparently impermeable, and prevalent and these boundaries were socially and culturally constructed and maintained. Caudwell (2003) also offered a feminist critique of football’s system of sexual difference and concluded that sex, gender, and desire were identified as inter-related and socially and culturally produced and reproduced.

Scraton et al (1999) investigated international similarities and differences with respect to how women entered the world of football and whether gender relations continue to impact on both their access and opportunities in the sport. The data came from 40 semi-structured interviews with top-level women footballers from England, Germany, Norway, and Spain. The interviews were structured around six key themes: sporting biography, social networks, daily life, gendered identities, the body, sport and life plans. Unlike Caudwell (1999, 2003) only the interview technique was adopted in this study in accordance with other scholars that had highlighted its benefits over the quantitative style.
This approach allowed the sportswomen to articulate their own feelings and experiences in a greater depth and detail. Whereas Caudwell (1999) only focused on the issue surrounding sexuality, this method enabled a series of issues to be raised and then subsequently researched further.

Scraton et al’s (1999) initial observation was that there had been an increase in the access to sporting opportunities. This had opened up more opportunities for female players in all of the four countries researched. However, the research also identified that women still have to overcome barriers that the male world of football continues to impose. In addition, the findings showed that the development of a well-organised youth policy for girls and women would seem crucial in increasing female participation rates. Policies in Germany and Norway have been very successful. More importantly, the school system in England was found not to provide the encouragement that is needed for young women to fulfil their football potential, particularly while schools continue to be influenced by power/gender ideologies. Finally, the researchers highlighted the image problem of the women’s game. They concluded that images of femininity were diversifying as women gained access to traditionally male defined activities, however just how far the women are actually transgressing the boundaries of acceptable femininity is still open to debate.

In the past, research has been conducted by an ‘outsider’- someone who simply has a keen interest in the area. Wedgewood (2004) takes a slightly different approach. She focuses on a group of schoolchildren playing football in Australia and adopts an anthropological approach. She went to great lengths to become part of the group to reduce the distinction between the researcher and the participants. This change in hierarchical status enabled her to develop an empathy with the young women. One interesting finding is that by playing football all the girls and young women expressed themselves as powerful, defensive, skilful, and assertive. This suggests that if given the chance women can resist the traditional ideal of women as fragile, defenceless, weak sexual objects.

Whilst this is not an exhaustive review of the literature, it is clear that more in-depth research is needed. The general conclusion from the literature is that women do face barriers and obstacles playing football and although this has improved greatly in recent years, just how far have women come in removing the social stigma attached with playing a ‘man’s’ game?

Methodology

This study followed the work of Caudwell (1999, 2003) and Scraton et al (1999) and adopted a predominantly ethnographic design using interviews for data
collection and a grounded approach for their analysis. This approach acknowledges the importance of qualitative accounts in allowing sportswomen to articulate their own experiences and feelings about being women who play and enjoy sport (Lenskyj, 2004; Young, 1997). Furthermore, this method enables a richness of data to be obtained, as the interview process offers a unique insight into the meanings and significance of lives and the lived experience (Caudwell, 2003).

Nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with women that either played football since 1960, or continue to play football in England today. In order to get an idea of how the experiences of the women had changed over time, the participants ranged in ages. We initially used own contacts and links with a number of clubs to identify potential participants. However, we also selected people that we knew would be open, in order to gain as much detail from their interviews as possible. This could be seen as a limitation of the sampling method but this type of method is suggested appropriate when dealing with sensitive issues (Caudwell, 2003). From our own experience and from the findings from previous research (Scraton et al, 1999; Caudwell, 2003) we were fully aware that some of the research obtained might be considered sensitive, for example, issues surrounding sexuality, so therefore felt the positives outweighed the negatives.

Although we were generally able to identify our main participants, snowballing was used to recruit two of the three older women. One was a friend, and she directed us to others that she knew would be helpful, and who could contribute valuable information to the study. This was similar to the method used by Caudwell (2003) in which she initially used the people she was in contact with and subsequently used these people to identify additional participants. All the women were geographically located close to the Southampton area. It is therefore impossible and undesirable to generalise their experiences and claim that they represent the wider female footballing community. It is important for us to highlight that the research material represents very specific situations and contexts, and the experiences that each individual woman faced.

The structure of the interview was based largely on the lightly structured depth interview (Wengraf, 2001). This comprised of an initial general question. The responses were then explored by the interviewer. Towards the end of the interview, other issues that had emerged from previous interviews were included. Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, and Alexander (1990) argue that the strength of this method lies in its ability to highlight the participants descriptions of the phenomenon and is useful, "...to elicit and understand the significant experiences in the informants ... life" (p.96). Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and was, with the participants' permission, audio recorded and subsequently transcribed fully into a word processing program. Once the interviews had been transcribed, a copy was sent to the participant who was
asked to read to ensure it was a reflection of what they had intended to say. Any amendments or additions they wanted to make were added before the transcriptions were analysed. A grounded approach similar to that advocated by Esterberg (2002) and Coffey and Atkinson (1996) was used to analyse the interviews and to identify the relevant phenomena and to develop meanings.

Findings

All nine participants gave permission to use their real names and we have provided some background information to help inform the readers understanding of their situations.

Tash: 18, has played competitive football since she can remember, including participating at the national level u17 trials. Her access to opportunities and experiences was very different to many.

Tina: 20, enjoyed a successful start to her football career when she played with the boys on their teams, only to find that as she grew older Government laws undermined her involvement. The number of opportunities she had to play diminished to a point where all she could do was to give up.

Emily: 22, a university student who grew up in a rural town near Southampton. With a football-loving father and a football-hating mother, her experiences highlight that of many girls who show an interest in a traditionally non-female sport.

Kat: 25, has been working for many years as the women’s and girl’s football development officer for the Hampshire FA. She has been a dedicated player for her entire life and her aim is to try to give the female players the same opportunities as the males.

Liz: 29, a former General Manager of a football centre in Southampton. She has been involved in a number of ‘traditionally male sports’ and is more than aware of the suggested woman’s place within these.

Helen: 30, was brought up with a very strict mother and Polish grandparents as her father worked abroad. She always had a keen interest in football growing up, but although her family were supportive, they had their own views on what type of activities they would support.

Lisa: 33, an ex-England netballer, who has always had a keen interest in football. Although full time work commitments including a fair commute every day, she finds it extremely difficult to get the time to participate in sport much now.

Steph: 38, was once in the army where she was encouraged to be actively involved with football. Although no longer in the army, she still finds the time to play on a social, recreational level.
Sue: 55, has been involved in football since she was a young girl back in the 60s. She has been witness to a fair amount of change and development in the sport. Also from being involved in the men’s game as a successful coach and referee, her experiences will add extra light to the topic.

The analysis of the interviews revolved around five main themes: becoming a footballer; the school education system; development in the community; the image of the game; and, comparisons with the males. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

**Becoming a footballer**

The way in which individuals become involved in any activity and the early experiences of it will mould and shape involvement within that activity. Football, being traditionally a man’s game, means that many women have to go against the norm to become involved. Each of the women had unique experiences although there were many elements of each that were strangely similar.

*Kicking about with the lads*

All of the interviewees became interested in football from a very young age. For many of the girls it was literally one of their first memories. These early experiences of playing football were generally in informal spaces in and around where they had lived and grown up using any equipment they could. In recalling their earliest memories, many of the women reported the equipment they had used along with the significance of streets and local fields as the spaces where they first began their footballing careers:

I can always remember being involved in football from, well, my first memories really having a kick around in the park with my brother and his friends. We would just use trees as goal posts or even just jumpers. It used to be great. (Tina, age 20)

um, from then on started playing football with my brother who is younger than me so I would go and play with his mates in the street or down the local field. (Kat, age 25)

I started hanging round with the boys... so I started playing, when I played in Wellingtons is my first memory, and I basically toe punted the ball. (Sue, age 55)
In her book, Lopez (1999) highlights interviews that have been undertaken with some of the key players of the most successful post-war clubs in England. All the women mentioned that they began kicking a ball around in informal games with the boys in their area or other male figures in their lives, such as dads and friends. Many of these women, as with the women in this research, felt that by playing with the boys it made them stronger and more skilful. Owen (2005) remembers very clearly how her skills were developed and honed through hours of practice with her younger brothers on the green just across the road from her house. If it got too wet, they would all move to the garage area provided for tenants where there was a concrete playing surface. Owen recalls however, how she still had to get approval from the boys in order to be “accepted by the group” and allowed to play (p15).

In his research into sport and masculinity in the USA, Messner’s (1992) interviewees revealed that their earliest childhood memories of sport revolved around masculine ideologies and occurred in an exclusively male world. Even from such a young age, the strong connection between being involved in sport and masculine identities was very clear and evident. Similarly, it would appear that all of the women in our research gained access to the male sporting world of streets and fields through their contact with brothers or male friends. None of the women in this study even mentioned any female figures in their very first memories of football. Each was encouraged initially by either their fathers, brothers or other male figures in their lives.

Family support

It seems that the support from the family is crucial if girls are to develop their interest of football into actually playing and becoming successful (Lopez, 1999; Owen, 2005). For many of the women interviewed their interest and ability to be allowed to play football stemmed directly from the interest of their father:

and my dad was always into football, he always watched England matches, he was always a Saints supporter... my interest in football then kind of like spurted me into watching football a lot more, so I became, so I watched a lot more saints games... and then I started to go to actual saints matches. I got a season ticket with my dad and that’s when I really got into football. (Emily, age 22)

I sort of followed football from a young age, cos my dad supported Man. United. It was just me, my dad, and my brother and it was easier for him to take me and my brother out to play football then it would be for him to take me to go to netball or to ballet or something like that. (Kat, age 25)
Interviews with boys’ teams have revealed that football, masculinity construction, and fathers were inseparable in the lives of young men (Wedgewood, 2004). Surprisingly, previous interviews with members of women’s and girls’ teams, and with the women of this study, revealed that football also appears to serve as an emotional bond for some fathers and daughters. Emily (22) described getting a season ticket was a “bonding moment” for her and her father. Many of the women interviewed often bonded with their fathers through playing, watching, or talking about football together. For example, Helen (30) would go, sit, and watch Arsenal with her dad at the pub, a team they both supported.

For many of the girls they lived in a male dominated household in which male interests and activities prevailed. This meant that often they would grow up valuing what are considered masculine activities and values over those considered to be feminine (Scraton et al, 1999). Fathers often provided a key role in encouraging the women to be involved in football, whether it was playing the game or simply watching the game. Most of the women stated how their fathers would take them to watch matches, whether it was simply to watch their brothers’ football match, or a professional one.

The consensus was that it was always the father giving the support. However, with Tash and Tina, the two youngest participants (18 and 20), they mentioned how their mum also encouraged them. As much as it is the tradition that football is a man’s game, Tina’s family had a tradition of their own. They lived “across the road from Highbury” (Tina), Arsenal men’s home stadium. She described how “football was basically a way of life for everybody, women, men, old people, and young people” as it was “bred” into them. This highlighted that traditions form a very strong connection for people making them tough to break down.

In a society in which women do most of the child rearing, emotional closeness with fathers is not only less common than with mothers, but also problematic. Wedgewood (2004) states this is due to expressions of emotion (except anger) having been socially defined as feminine. She continues to say how football provides a common ground for both sons and daughters to interact and develop a bond with their father. Football is defined as a masculine arena so for the sons it confirms masculine identity. In contrast, she argues that for daughters it means eschewing traditional femininity in order to meet on their father’s social territory. This distorting of feminine values is where, for many, the trouble first began.

*Family Pressure/Kicking against tradition*

By encouraging their daughters to engage in the “informal male football culture (Scraton et al, 1999, p102),” fathers were allowing their daughters to
move away from what was viewed as traditional feminine values. By strengthening the bond with their fathers through football, this inevitably had to weaken the bond with their mothers. Emily (22) highlighted how her mother became very disappointed that she had taken up any sport generally, as it was not a “girlie” thing to do. In order to be successful in sport one must have traits of competitiveness and aggression, and these were seen to be distant from feminine qualities (Scraton et al, 1999).

Throughout the interviews, for the majority, it felt as if when the players were talking about the male figures in their lives, they spoke very highly of them. In contrast when asked to comment on their mothers’ opinions in some cases the tone somewhat changed:

basically my mother ABSOLUTELY hated the fact and she always has and she always will do, HATES it like uh... And there was [sighs] there was one time... and she basically kind of did associate football with being a mans sport, a boys sport... and because I enjoyed it as much as they did that was the way I was heading. (Emily, age 22)

my mum had a few choice words to say about it. Um yeah she, she, I’m sure she actually said on several occasions, ‘why do you have to play such a rough sport?’ (Liz, age 27)

my mum was very, very, strict on what I could and couldn’t do you know. When I was younger she was a bit of a control freak bless her. (Helen, age 30)

The male domination in society seemed to triumph over the outcomes of which parent would succeed. In many cases, the mother didn’t agree to their daughter’s participation and as Kat (25) recalls, tried to encouraged her to go into ballet, a more feminine activity. Her mother was over-ruled by her father and therefore it seems even from such an early age, the opportunities for girls to choose their physical activities were largely dependant on the male encouragement and approval. Emily, without realising, cleverly summed it up by saying how her mother had to “watch from the sideline” as she followed her dad’s love of the game. Although for many girls their father particularly showed a keen interest in allowing their daughter to play football, all of the women were aware that this did not show a true reflection of the view of the wider society.

Several authors have found that the influence of parents is a crucial factor in encouraging, and perhaps more importantly, not stopping girls from participating (Lopez, 1999; Owen, 2005, Scraton et al, 1999). Without the encouragement from one or both of the parents, female players find it very difficult to be involved and to be successful in football. Sue, (55) the oldest interviewee, despite being prompted, talked as little about her parents as
possible. She acknowledged that it was their view that football “was something that boys did, not girls” but from then on chose not to discuss them further. She went on to be a very successful player, and although her parents contributed nothing to that, one male figure reoccurred throughout her entire interview. A man, a coach, that not only helped her break into the game, but one she would remain in contact with for her entire life, highlighting the importance of early relationships with male figures in female footballers’ lives.

Males have been very significant in the vast majority of women’s lives, in encouraging and allowing them to be involved in football. Fathers tend to hold a very special role in their daughters’ minds. Interestingly Tash, (18) the youngest participant in our study, refers to how her father had no part in her life after divorcing her mother from a very young age. Not only did Tash still choose to play football, but she also managed to become very successful. Her mum gave her all the support and encouragement she needed. Tash acknowledged that it was because of her mum’s support that she was so successful; she drove her to every training session and match however far away it was.

There were some more interesting findings through the interview with Tash. The importance of streets and parks for the early football experiences was very prominent for all the girls except her. All of her earliest memories focused around competitive matches in formal, structured areas. This is interesting if we reflect on the changing pattern of childhood play. Scraton et al (1999) highlights that in England, the recent events and changes in society could affect the way children play and get involved in physical activity. For example, the ‘moral panics’ associated with recent cases of child abduction and murder, are likely to result in parents more rigorously controlling children’s street activities. This, along with drastic improvements in technology, such as computer consoles and satellite television, may potentially move outdoor recreation towards more home based leisure and activities. This would unfortunately mean that street and field games could be outdated, as Tash may have experienced. If so, then it is vitally important that the amount and range of opportunities for sports participation offered by formal institutions (e.g. schools, clubs, and leisure centres) is improved (Scraton et al, 1999). It may become increasingly more important in the future for girls’ and young women’s access to sport, so should reflect this.

The School Education System

All the women in this study expressed an interest to become involved in football from before they started primary school, with many already playing
small sided games with the boys. It is now the responsibility of the school to develop this interest and to develop their talent. All the girls had strong opinions about their own experiences of their school education system.

Primary School

The majority of the women identified that primary school gave them their first real opportunity to play football other than in and around the local streets and parks by their homes. The majority of the players had grown up playing with the boys and were used to being the only girl. When it came to primary school, for many, nothing had changed. They were used to witnessing a divide between the activities the boys and the girls did. For example, Tina (20) remembers quite clearly on her first day of primary school:

Um, I remember going to the playground and it being split in half. It was half boys and half girls. Boys were playing football against the wall and in the two goals at either end and the girls would be running around playing silly little games that I wasn’t really interested in. (Tina, age 20).

Many of the women stated how they joined in playing football with the boys in lunchtime and in the breaks before and after school. The social stigma surrounding football being a man’s game had not been removed. Some of the woman had to over come the same barriers as before: being accepted by the boys and by them ‘allowing’ you to play. Every women interviewed did play and cross these boundaries, albeit at different times and perhaps in different contexts. It seemed constantly, as if they had to get the approval from different groups of boys and other male figures to be allowed to play.

Tina crossed this boundary as she walked from the girls half of the playground to the boys. As she demanded to be allowed to play the only responses she got were a few laughs and “oh god no she is a girl, she is rubbish, she can’t play and don’t let her play!” An interesting thing happened next. One of the boys challenged her to score past their best keeper, and if successful, she would be allowed to play with them. It was a ‘condition’ of her being allowed to play, but not only did she accept and complete the challenge successfully, the boys actually demanded to their male teacher that she be allowed to play in their team. Some had to battle for opportunities but it seemed that as soon as the initial barrier was broken down things slowly changed. For example Tina found out that “the girls started to come and watch ‘cos there was a girl playing football”, so maybe the gendered boundaries were not as rigid as many thought.
The experiences Tina had were similar to what most of the women had faced, but there were a couple of exceptions. For Sue (55) there was no chance of playing football at all, even mixed at primary school, “um ... they didn’t have girls playing football at school so I would just kick a ball about any time I could.”

Even more interestingly, Tash (18) had a completely different experience. She recalled how her primary school had a girl’s football team in which they competed against other schools even having a mini bus to take them. Despite this evidence of change, other findings suggest that many barriers are still as strongly evident, none more so then those posed by secondary schools.

Secondary School – Only boys could play

The barriers faced by some of the English players were exacerbated when they transferred into secondary school at 11 years of age. Every one of the women commented how they were not allowed to play at secondary school, even those who had obtained access at a younger age. The biggest problem was the continued division of the girls and boys into ‘sex appropriate’ sports:

...it was more like boys done football and rugby and girls did netball and hockey. (Tash, age 18)

and then when it got to secondary school I played hockey and netball. We were never given the chance to do football or rugby or anything like that. (Emily, age 22)

and even at secondary there wasn’t a girl’s football team... it was cross country or netball or hockey. (Kat, age 25)

um, went to secondary school and uh there was no option to actually play football there, not as part of the curriculum or, or after school for girls... when you are in a PE session and girls and boys are split up, boys would more often than not go off and play football and the girls would go and have a game of netball. That was just the way it was, that’s yeah. (Liz, age 27)

Netball for girls and football for boys were only gradually introduced to the National Curriculum with the main aim for basic health and fitness and, in particular, conscription for boys (Lopez, 1997). Undoubtedly, the separate nature of schools helped develop sport for females but in order to survive organised female sports tended to stick with the traditional biological assumptions rather than challenge them (Green et al, 1990; Lopez, 1997). Netball and hockey were seen as sports that did not compromise feminine
qualities as they were clean, non-contact, the girls had to wear short skirts, and it involved the girls throwing or hitting the ball rather than kicking it (Cox & Thompson, 2003). As a result, netball and hockey have remained the accepted games for girls to play with football being vehemently eschewed (Hargreaves, 1994; Lopez, 1997).

For the majority of women at this stage they were not even aware that girl’s football even existed. For example Helen (30) states, “um, to be honest I was slightly oblivious to the fact that girls could play football at that age. I just thought that it was common knowledge that girls didn’t play football.”

The early experiences of the women playing football had revolved around males and playing amongst the boys. Theresa Bennett initially took the FA to court when they prevented her from playing with boys in a boys league (Lopez, 1994). Hargreaves (1994) believes that the FA won simply on outdated biological beliefs that women because of their physiques, should not be allowed to play against males. Although it is legal up until the age of 11, beyond this point it is not so it was at this age that many girls dropped out of football, simply because they did not have the opportunity.

Kat, who works for the Hampshire FA stated in her interview that recently the FA are looking to increase the age girls can play competitive sport together from 11 to 14. In addition, Kat claims that the amount of work developing football in schools is increasing and specified coaches are being sent in to deliver professional sessions. In addition, this is not just for mainstream schools, but to special schools, giving disabled girls their first real opportunity to participate.

Teacher’s attitudes

Up until the age of 11, many of the women were involved in football within primary school. Tina (20) recalls clearly how for her, the male PE teacher “treated us exactly the same as the boys team would have been treated. That was really good.” Despite this, the attitudes seemed to change as the women progressed into secondary school, and the women all had very similar experiences. As many of them had played with the boys teams in primary school, some weren’t even aware that girls even played football.

However, the ones that were, were determined to play so took the matter into their own hands. By approaching the teachers and using their own initiative to try and get an opportunity to play, they all faced similar responses:

and uh our PE teacher was a bit sexist anyway so didn’t do it that much (Tash, )
they said there wasn’t anyone to play with us ‘cos the football coaches were busy with the boys and we said well can we do it on a lunch break or can we do it after school and it was basically a no. So we were all a bit disappointed. (Tina age 20)

we had one teacher who was keen in, in helping us to get a girls’ football team together and that happened but it didn’t last very long. There wasn’t enough support from anyone else. (Kat, 25)

It seemed that although there was a selected amount of girls wanting to be involved in football during secondary school, for the majority the teachers were sexist and very much set in their ways. When Sue (55) approached her teacher, who was male, and suggested a football team for the girls, she remembers quite vividly the “surprised look on his face” just to be hearing the words ‘girls’ and ‘football’ in the same sentence!

This was an experience witnessed by every single one of the participants in this study. A constant referral to how the teachers were ‘sexist’ was all so apparent during the interviews. It was not for the lack of trying as Emily (22) highlights how she and a few others interested “demanded” to be allowed to play. On the odd occasion, the girls would be lucky and they were allowed to play in the lunch break or very rarely after school. Whatever the scenario they all had the same outcome; the lack of support from the teachers ensured that nothing lasted. The teachers saw it as a passing phase, and it was not long before the girls had no choice but to “just lose interest in the game as we were getting no where basically” (Tina age 20).

Owen (1995) in her book recalls the attitudes that her teachers had towards her and football. Specifically, she highlights how they were not “particularly enamoured with my enthusiasm for the sport” (p16). Furthermore, she singles out one certain form teacher, which she chooses to remain nameless, and states how they were particularly discouraging to the point of trying to stop her playing all together. This was because it distracted her from her studies and would get her nowhere. So much so, they went as far as calling her parents in to the school. The importance of having encouraging parents is reinforced here as Owen’s parents believed in encouraging all of their children in whatever they wanted to do. However, not all parents shared this view.

For many parents still, academic successes are valued over any achievements in sports. Helen, (27) who went to an all girl’s Roman Catholic school was never given the opportunity to be involved in football throughout her education. Many of the women remembered how out of all the teachers very few of them were prepared to let them play. Helen pointed out that her teachers were not interested at all and how more importantly her “parents always encouraged me to do more academic things.” Without the school support, or any support from her parents either, Helen had no choice but to end her
footballing career before it had even begun, a similar story for many women. For most young girls in England the school is the most influential place for motivating them into sport participation and providing them ‘with the opportunities to play in teams (Lopez, 1997; Owen, 2005). Girls have had to fight for their rights to play competitive football in schools and although this seems to have improved in primary school, it’s not the same story throughout the rest of the education system (Lopez, 1997).

Secondary school PE has been characterised “in its historical development by policies and images of difference (Lopez, 1997, pxii). It seems apparent that sport in secondary schools is still run on very traditional lines, therefore labelling football strictly for boys. As Owen (2005) points out, consequently, her passion for the game was to “develop and flourish outside of the educational system” (p12). Therefore, for the women interviewed, it seemed the opportunities available outside of the education system determined how far they got and how successful they became.

Development in the community

Without the opportunities at school to progress the development of the women’s success all centred on what opportunities were available in the community. Many of the women had relied on playing football with the boys, but once they became older than eleven did things have to change. They could no longer play with the boys, so had to move out of what they had come to know and into a world unfamiliar to them.

One of the lads

Males had always been an influence at some point in the women’s lives, whether it was through family members or playing with the boys in the street. During their early years, the women felt more comfortable doing what the boys did. Helen highlights how she felt different from the girls, as “they were interested in mummies and babies and stuff.” Furthermore, for some of the women, they had grown up playing for boys’ teams outside of school as well as in school (primary), For example:

So I was still playing with boys but not in the main league, and started playing 8-a-side tournaments, 5-a-side tournaments. At the same time, I was also playing for Northern Boys Club, um... and another local team. (Sue, age 55)

It seemed as if the opportunities for any of the women to play in a female team were rare. For many of the women it was not even an option as they
were unaware girls teams even existed. Although an interesting finding did emerge through the interviews, Tash, the youngest participant of the study (18) never once played for a boy’s team; her first experience was for an all girls team in her primary school. After that, she went straight to play for Riverside Strikers, again an all girls team. For many of the women they did not have this opportunity, except one, Sue (55) who played for an all girls team outside of school as well as the boys’ teams.

**A whole new world**

For many of the women in this study, they had grown up surrounded by males and had played most of their football alongside the boys, whether it was matches or just a kick around in the park. Once secondary school started that was the end of their football opportunities for the majority of the women interviewed. However, for other women around the country it may have been that they had every opportunity to play. When the women interviewed in this study got invited to development centres or trials for girl’s teams it was a whole new experience for them. Some of them recall how they felt:

a man from the welsh ladies development team came along an invitation to go and train with the U14 welsh girls team. When I got there it was a completely different world to me. It was all women and I hadn’t ever played with women really at that standard. I felt as ill was completely rubbish compared to them. (Tina)

one of my friends... got accepted for the youths England team and we would go and watch her play... and it wasn’t until that stage that we uh actually saw what women’s football was all about. (Helen)

However, this seems to depend on the location of where the child grows up, as it certainly is not even nationwide. For many of the women interviewed here, they felt as if it was all or nothing. Tina went on to discuss how she didn’t get into the Welsh Development Squad, but felt as if they “...basically forgot about us as there was no opportunity to try again next year.”. This emphasises the lack of structure from grass roots football through to the elite, and reinforces the lack of opportunities for girls aged between 11 and 16.

Many of the women, once no longer allowed to play with the boys, were forced to jump straight into adult women teams.

that lead to me joining riverside strikers ... that was six a side. under 12s and then went up to under 14s ... then, when I was too old, joined Redstar Ladies, which was a step up to an 11 aside. (Tash)
I then decided um to try and play for one of the local girls teams but there were only 2 in about a 60 mile radius, so I decided to try and train with, it was a ladies team um I was only 12-13 at the time... I hated it, absolutely hated it... so I didn't bother going back and gave up. (Tina)

If the girls are lucky enough to play up until the age of 14 with girls, it then seems as if they have no choice but to be thrown into women team after that. For some girls “it was a good experience” (Tash, 18) and they felt they learnt a lot, but for others it was too much. Tina had enjoyed a successful football career in her early days, as she “played with the boys” and felt “as good as them” so thought she was “brilliant.” However, as soon as she was taken out her comfort zone and forced to play with adult women, she felt she had no choice but to give up. This world was completely alien to her.

Tash being the youngest (aged 18) had more connection with female football then most of the others, which could suggest a recent change in the availability. However, although Sue, the oldest (aged 55), played a lot with the boys, she enjoyed many years in both girls’ and women’s teams. This could show that the opportunities for girls have always been there. However, by knowing the women’s backgrounds, we were aware that both of these participants had grown up in Southampton. None of the other participants did, and Southampton is well known for its success in female football (Lopez, 1997).

The image of the Game

Women, who compete in sports that have been historically associated with men, have had to face many obstacles. One that they consistently encounter, and appears to remain, is the problem of sport being an indicator of sexuality. It seems that as a nation we are fully aware that there exists a perceived conflict between the values of sport and what it is to be feminine. Issues directly relating to the women’s own personal perceptions and to their gendered identities was a strong theme that ran throughout the interviews. Some of the women openly talked about themselves as distant from the other girls around them, and this was particularly present when describing certain childhood experiences:

at the end of the day I just felt comfortable in what boys did um and that’s in the way you dress, the way you act, who you go out with, where you go... and so I always reverted back to being a tomboy, like jeans, t-shirt, whatever I felt comfortable in. (Emily)

it was nothing like ...like when I played with the boys team. Once I got settled in to the team I felt like one of them. (Tina)
Within their conversations with us, we could feel how they were building an identity for themselves, one that they considered themselves not to be, that is, girls. They distanced themselves from anything to do with what would be seen as traditionally female. Emily constantly referred to the term ‘girly girl’ when describing the ‘traditional female’ – someone she was not. “I didn’t act I didn’t speak like the girlie girl she wanted me to speak like lowers tone) I was a bloke that liked football and it kind of developed from there (Emily).”

Some of the women either referred to themselves as ‘tomboys’ or wanting to be a boy; and others had used boys’ clothes and were proud to be identified as boys. Sue reported that she fitted in so well with the boys that one scout, then from Southampton football club, asked her to go along for trials “till he realised I was a girl”. None of the women particularly felt that being identified as a tomboy was derogatory in any way. Throughout their childhoods, there was a need for the women to define themselves (as girls and young women) in opposition to feminine in order to gain entrance into world of football. Scraton et al (1999) highlights how women in their study had similar experiences, but rather than transforming existing gender relations, this self-defining just reinforces masculine domination.

**Gendered identities**

Many of the women defined themselves as tomboys or as having had similarities in the way they acted in relation to the boys when they were young. Although this did not seem to pose a problem for the women in their childhood, as they talked about their development as footballers, it became apparent that their gendered identities became more problematic. For example, Lisa points out “... when you reach sort of 14, 15, 16, you get, they get a bit more aware of the stereotypes and the labels that are given to girls that play football.” This was a common feeling amongst all the women. Examples include:

No I knew that at the time, um, if you played, now this is very stereotypical, but if you played rugby or you were seen to be playing football as a girl there would be a lot of speculation around your sexual orientation, lets put it that way. (Liz)

Obviously, generally, you are referred to as a lesbian if you play football and there is no other way around that is there? (Helen)

I think its still, still looked upon that if you play women’s football then you are, are basically labelled as being a lesbian straight away. (Kat)

The examples of quotes illustrate that as the players get older it is then that they become aware of how they are labelled. Tina remembered the exact
minute she became aware that there was a certain label that came with being a girl interested in football. At the age of 13, she recalls:

I vividly remember once coming back from hockey practice with my female PE teacher and all the rest of the hockey team and she said to me in front of everybody... ‘you play hockey and you play football as well, you must be a lesbian, or you are going to be a lesbian – one of the two’.

Tina continued to state she remembered, “feeling absolutely mortified”. The women had openly self-defined themselves as tomboys at an early age, which had not seemed to be a problem. Yet as they became aware of how they may be labelled as adults, they were forced to reject this form of masculinity they displayed and uncomfortably compel themselves to conform to traditional feminine values. For instance:

and I did, I tried my hardest, I did try and dress girlie but I was so uncomfortable, and then, obviously when, I did it because that was the norm. That was what you were supposed to do. (Emily)

Many of the participants noted how easy it was to be stereotyped as many players were “butch” and had “manly haircuts” (Kat). Helen jokingly summed up the stereotypical image perceived by society, “... you know we all have short hair and wear our Dr Martins and dungarees - don't we?” Similar to the findings of Griffin (1998) and Scraton at al (1999) women went to great lengths to resort to the traditional values of femininity to avoid being labelled a lesbian. Sue (aged 55) suggested that football for women and girls might be more accepted today “because you have now got girls that have probably, have got long hair and look more feminine”. Cox & Thompson (2001) argue that by labelling females as lesbian unless they show easily recognisable evidence of heterosexuality is one easy way for the game to be maintained as a masculine domain that does not distort or disrupt the dominant gender order.

All of the women were clearly aware of the stereotyping, both from insiders and from outsiders of the game. Despite football being far more recognised and accepted now then back in the 60s, the results of this study show that it is still very much a problem in the women’s game and a reason why girls and women decide not to play. Kat explained how it gets to where not only players are labelled individually but teams are as a whole. One team [who will remain nameless] has been labelled a “team who is gay basically” (Kat). This makes it difficult for anyone who wants to join, or as Kat explains hard for the “2 or 3 that aren’t gay and they don’t look like they are gay” but are all labelled as being so. It is evident that the stereotyping of women footballers and more largely entire teams is still prevalent in the game and continues to present a series of problems, which female footballers must deal with (Caudwell, 2003).
Comparison with the boys

The final section was how the women felt their game compared to the men's game. Firstly, this study highlighted that many of the women felt as if they "were treated as equal" (Tina) to the boys whilst they were allowed to play alongside them. Kat highlighted an interesting point:

if you are training a young boy at 5 and a young girl at 5 and they, they have a ball with them and they grow up playing football until they reach their teens, and then get into... umm... you know centre of excellence or something like that, they would be completely, completely the same development wise.

As Helen points out "it is not like women are genetically inbred to not be able to play football properly." This may be the case, but "girls do not have the same opportunities once they are not allowed to play with the boys" (Steph). When the girls are separated from the boys, this seems to signify the beginning of the rise for males and consequently the beginning of the end for females. Tina epitomises the segregation she felt when no longer being allowed to compete alongside the males:

Girls just don’t have the opportunities that boys do we wouldn’t have grass pitches to play on – as that was for the boys – we would have... um... concrete basketball pitches.

In addition, Tina highlighted how, unlike the boys, getting kit and boots to play in, the girls had to settle for “trainers and whatever they could rustle up, anything that was the same colour we just had to shove it on.” As the women grow older, they can be seen as a bigger threat to male domination so there seems to be more barriers and obstacles thrown in their path to ensure they do not challenge the men’s superiority

In summary, it is clear that women’s participation in football is still hindered by the cultural attitudes and beliefs that are in place. Each interviewee was asked the question, “how do you feel the women’s game compares to the men’s?” They all felt it was nowhere near the men’s as they still felt it was very much a male sport. However, many of the women made comparisons with other countries where women’s football was as far more significant, such as America, and felt that England is on the right track.

Conclusion

Females are participating in football in increasing numbers in England and it has become one of the fastest growing sports in the country (Owen, 2005, Scraton, Caudwell, & Holland, 2005). Despite this, there are nowhere near
the same amount of opportunities for females to participate compared to males. This study shows that women have to overcome barriers that the male world of football continues to impose. Unfortunately, these barriers seem to have changed little since the 1960s.

The initial barrier faced by girls seems to be overcoming the values held by their parents. Our research highlighted that if parents are supportive then the opportunities are there for a girl to participate in football. However, without this support, it is difficult for a woman to remain involved. A second barrier is the school system. In England, physical education is predominately separated into single sex sports. This has not changed much since the 1960s and although effort has gone into challenging this, strong attitudes and beliefs remain pivotal into which sports are chosen. Because of this, there are few school teams and therefore little competition. The school system also creates problems in motivating girls and young women playing football in their own time. Unlike some European countries, such as Germany and Norway, England does not have a strong tradition of junior clubs (Lopez, 1997). Although there are league structures for girls and women, the awareness is not there. Most competitive sport is controlled and organised through the school and while the schools continue to be inscribed by powerful gendered ideologies then the women’s game is going to suffer, as it has done for the last forty years.

Our research findings also reflect the complexities of the relations between gender and sport. Women who challenge the boundaries by getting involved in a sport such as football that involves contact, aggression, and physical strength are demonstrating a shift in what is deemed acceptable female behaviour. Many of the women in this research stated how they did not feel like a normal girl, but in fact felt like one of the ‘lads’, even a ‘tomboy’. This highlights that transgressing the boundaries of acceptable femininity is debateable. Women openly labelling themselves as ‘boys’ or a ‘tomboy’ means they have simply crossed gendered boundaries for a period of their lives in order to gain access to a sport that is associated with male traits. It has been recognised for some time that young girls can be encouraged to cross the boundaries. By doing so they show lively adventurous qualities, ones that seem to be accepted and often admired in pre-pubescent girls. Boys and girls up until this boundary are treated as equal. Yet when the girls mature into young women, adult femininity incorporates a dominant notion of heterosexuality, so the crossing of the boundaries seems to become more problematic (Scraton et al, 1999). By displaying characteristics associated with masculinity adult “women face tensions between their active physicality as footballers and what is deemed ‘safe’, heterosexual femininity. Furthermore, all of the women, no matter their age, highlighted how they are aware of being labelled as a lesbian, simply due to the activity they play”.

This research simply touches on the surface of a subject that needs greater examination. Future studies need to focus on the next generation of players, to see if there has been any further development in opportunities for females. In addition, research needs to focus on a wider geographical range of women involved in male defined sports.

In conclusion, the experiences of women playing in a traditionally male sport have not changed or developed as much as one would like to think since the 60s. There has been a substantial increase in the number of girls and women involved in the game, but it is important to recognise the struggles that the women face in a sporting world that is founded on gender ideologies. There is evidence that suggests that in other countries women have been successful in making inroads into the male establishment and developing their own game. However, at present in England, there are still a number of barriers that women need to overcome, and the game is still in the hands of men.

References


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