Smash Mouth Football: Identity Development and Maintenance on a Women’s Tackle Football Team

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Abstract
Opportunities for women to participate on professional women’s football teams have expanded over the past decade. Still the experiences of these players have largely gone unnoticed by the general public in the United States and underanalyzed by scholars. Using a feminist interactionist framework, this research examines how women on a successful Midwestern football team developed and maintained their identities as football players. The major themes that emerged from participant observations and semistructured interviews include play the right way, recognize uniqueness, and demand respect.

Keywords
women’s football, identity development, gender, contact sports, coach–player relationship

There is little question that football holds a dominant place in American culture (Messner, 2002; Nelson, 1994; Oriard, 2001). Some scholars have suggested that football’s rise in popularity is linked to fears of the increased feminization of American society (Messner, 2002; Nelson, 1994). Indeed, lessons learned on the field are believed to prepare players “for life within the ‘sex-gender system’” (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990, p. 115). The assumption here, of course, is that the players are males. Yet, girls and women have taken up the sport in numbers not seen before, and some suggest that their

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involvement in sports that were once reserved for men provides us with an opportunity to see gender roles as constructed (Nelson, 1994; Theberge, 1997).

As the history of women’s football is unearthed, information regarding women playing on football teams in the early part of the twentieth century has been uncovered. Though originally limited, opportunities for girls and women to participate in the game have expanded throughout the ensuing decades. There are girls such as Holley Mangold who played on the offensive line for Alter High School outside of Dayton, Ohio, who received interest from several smaller universities and, more recently, Monique Howard who played right tackle for Detroit Pershing High School (Hannah, 2007; McCabe, 2011). Furthermore, Hnida (2006) played at the college level for Colorado and New Mexico. Currently the two most prominent women’s professional leagues, Women’s Football Alliance (WFA) and the Independent Women’s Football League (IWFL), are home to 92 teams giving thousands of women the opportunity to play tackle football.

Although more females are playing football, the sport remains a male preserve in numbers, structure, and values. According to the National Federation of State High School Association (2011), boys made up 99.87% of high school football participants (1,108,441). The number of girls who played was 1,395 (0.12%; National Federation of State High School Association, 2011). Furthermore, players such as Hnida remain an exception at the collegiate level and no woman has suited up for a National Football League (NFL) team, which remains the standard of football in the United States. Even the organizational structure of the women’s professional leagues includes a majority representation of males especially as coaches. As Coakley (2007) noted, structural power is often integrated with ideological power thus it is likely that the current structure of women’s professional football would influence the characteristics and beliefs that are valued in the sport. This article examined women’s experiences on one successful Midwest team. The research question this study sought to answer was: How did the women formulate and maintain their identities as football players on a successful Midwestern women’s football team? Of central importance to this question were the roles team membership and the head coach had in determining the boundaries for the normative role of football player to be enacted.

Although there has been an increase in the opportunities for women to play football, little research is available about these players’ experiences on these teams. The intent of the study was to examine the experience of a women’s professional football team from a feminist interactionist perspective. I sat out to explore how the players on the Thunder (the name of the team and all players are pseudonyms) formulated and maintained their football identities on this team given their lack of previous experiences with organized football. This interpretive approach allowed me to focus on the ways in which the women created meanings and identities out of their interactions with each other, the coaching staff, and the larger society while the feminist framework encouraged a focus on power in the gender relations within and outside of football. The feminist framework was of particular significance given the key leadership roles held by males. As football opportunities continue to grow for females in the
United States, this study provides an opportunity to better understand the ways players’ identities are being constructed and maintained within a successful team environment.

**Identities: Construction and Confirmation**

Research that develops out of an interpretive framework seeks to understand “the meanings and realities of individuals within social settings” (Silk, Andrews, & Mason, 2005, p. 7). Generally, such research examines the overlapping issues of socialization and subcultures (Donnelly, 2002). In such, the socialization process is seen as a key aspect of identity formation (Donnelly & Young, 1988). From this perspective, it is believed that people create meaning through social interaction (Beal, 2002). Thus, one’s understanding of one’s identities are constantly being constructed, confirmed, and negotiated through our interactions with others and the world around us.

The symbolic interactionist approach places the focus on the formation and maintenance of identity through social interaction. Through the examination of everyday interactions, an interpretive sociology attempts to understand individuals’ actions in relation to societal norms of conduct (Mead, 1934). This suggests that people’s actions are influenced by societal and subcultural expectations (Pike, 2005). As Birrell and Donnelly (2004) noted, “Goffman characterizes interactions as theatrical performance in which generally known ‘scripts’ for action are enacted by participants who take turns in their roles as actors and audiences” (p. 51). Donnelly and Young’s (1988) research examined how people entering climbing and rugby subcultures enacted subculturally appropriate roles for designated audiences. The “neophyte” performed their identities to both audiences of the larger society and of the subculture in which they are attempting to become members. Donnelly and Young (1988) found that once “neophytes” became members of the subculture, they “ceased to consider outsiders as a valued audience” (p. 224). Thus, as one becomes socialized into the subculture more value is placed on the acceptance from others within the subculture.

Goffman’s work provides several sensitizing concepts to better understand the act of socialization (Beal, 2002; Donnelly & Young, 1988). Goffman defined a team as a group of individuals who assist in staging a routine. Goffman’s concept of team was especially relevant to this study, as team membership had a profound influence on how individual players came to identify as football players. In addition, each team has a director or a person who is “given the right to direct and control the progress of the dramatic action” (Goffman, 1959, p. 97). On sport teams, the director is most often the coach, as was the case in this study. Sabo and Panepinto (1990) suggested that the “coach–player relationship is the epicenter of football ritual” (p. 116). Throughout their work examining football as ritual, Sabo and Panepinto (1990) noted the various ways in which coaches get their players to conform. Some of the methods introduced by Sabo and Panepinto (1990) that were examined in this study include the “manipulation of in-group/out-group tensions to insure conformity” (p. 119), “promises of grandeur” (p. 119), and ridicule (p. 119). Donnelly and Young (1988) referred to the final...
stage of identity formation as acceptance/ostracism. This stage involves the “confirmation of the identity by established members of the subculture” (Donnelly & Young, 1988, p. 226).

In addition to the concepts of teams and directors, Goffman also noted that teams often adopt a “party line” that represents the team. Through the research with this team, it became apparent that the team’s “party line” was smash mouth football. The directors and party lines help team members know what is expected of them in their role as football players on this team. In *Encounters*, Goffman (1961) noted that a “role consists of the activity the incumbent would engage in were he [sic] to act solely in terms of the normative demands upon someone in his [sic] position” (p. 85). In this case, to maintain “face” team members have to enact the proper role of a football player. When players deviate from these expectations, they are seen as being “out of face” (Goffman, 1963, p. 8) and often receive some sort of corrective action from the director or other team members.

Team membership can have a profound impact on the development and maintenance of an athletic identity. In her research on women’s ice hockey, Theberge (1995) noted that “one of the most significant features of sport participation involves the experience of team membership” (p. 389). Theberge went on to examine the role of team identity, and the contribution of the coach’s influence, on the athletes’ development as a team and as individual hockey players. She also noted that this shared player identity helped to unify these women who were from diverse backgrounds. This was also found in Jackson, Keiper, Brown, Brown, and Manuel’s (2002) research on first-year Black and White intercollegiate athletes in which they determined that “White and African American athletes’ sense of racial identity may be minimized or overshadowed by their athletic identity” (p. 159). These authors go on to state that coaches will often downplay any intergroup differences in order to provide a united front for the purpose of winning contests. This is further supported in Murrell and Gaertner’s (1992) research on the benefits of a common group identity, which found that a strong team identity may be an important component of team success. All of which is relevant to this study as it will be shown that to form, and even more so to maintain, one’s identity as a football player on the Thunder team was to accept and to reproduce the characteristics of the larger team identity that itself was mostly influenced by the head coach. In addition, any race, ethnic, or class differences the players may have had were downplayed for the overall success of this team. Furthermore, due to the high level of success this team experienced, it is safe to say that all players who made the team (passing both the physical tryout and the coaches’ interview) and stayed with the team experienced extreme normative pressure for their individual football identities to take on the same characteristics of the larger team identity.

In their 2005 study, Jones, Glintmeyer, and McKenzie used an interpretive biography method to explore the role of coach–athlete relationship in the development of disordered eating in a former elite female swimmer. The study examined the sometimes problematic and oftentimes underanalyzed role of coach’s discourse in the development of athlete identity. They note the “culture of conformity” that often exists in such relationships in that the coach takes on the role of the “knowledge giver and...
athletes as receivers who need that knowledge to better their performance” (Jones et al., 2005, p. 378). They found that the coach’s discourse about losing weight to become a better swimmer combined with other factors, such as societal expectations of the slender female body, pushed the female athlete to develop disordered eating that continued after her competitive days were finished. Their examination of the impact of the coach on one athlete’s actions is of particular interest to this study as it was found that the coach of the women’s football team took on a key director position, influencing the way in which the women came to identify themselves as football players.

In one of the few studies to examine women’s involvement in football, Migliaccio and Berg (2007) explored the benefits and constraints women experienced in participation on two teams in Northern California. The benefit that stood out the most to the women was the development of teamwork and a family-like environment that they experienced. Additional benefits included meeting a diverse group of women and the opportunity to experience the physicality of football, while the constraints examined included injuries, demands on time, finances, and relationships, and the perceptions held by the general public. Although the research provides an insightful exploration of women’s experiences in football, the role of the coach(es) in influencing these experiences went unexamined.

In Knapp’s (2011) article on becoming a football player on a Midwest women’s tackle football team, the influential role of the coach was first acknowledged. Knapp (2011) explored the factors that influenced women’s decision to play football and how they began to develop their identities as football players. This study examined the initial stages of women’s involvement in football and found that women often got involved in the game because they love football, want to be a part of history, and/or because of the physical nature of the game, while their development of their football identities was dependent on their abilities and personal characteristics, significant others and the influence of veteran players. It was within this final theme, influence of veteran players, that the coach’s role in socializing players into football was most noticeable as it was noted the coach often used veteran players as role models of proper behavior for new players to follow. Through the inclusion of coach and player narratives, one can see how influential the coach was in this initial developmental stage in which the women became football players. This current study attempts to build on this research by exploring the next phase of identity development on a women’s tackle football team and in doing so reinforces and expands on the influence of the head coach in not only the development but also the maintenance of a football identity. Indeed, the coach played a central role in the normative pressure athletes experienced to conform their personal football identities to the characteristics of the larger team identity, as formulated by the coaching staff.

**Method**

Due to the nature of the research question—How did the women formulate and maintain their identities as football players on a successful Midwestern women’s football
team?—a feminist interactionist framework was used in collecting and analyzing the data. An interactionist framework is concerned with the meanings and identities people create through interactions (Blumer, 1969). Goffman’s concept of the team, as a group of individuals who assist in staging a routine, was useful in providing a deeper understanding of the meanings and identities that developed out of the Thunder players’ interactions. At the core of these interactions, and the team, was the head coach who acted as the director (Goffman, 1959). Based upon his past experiences as a player for a Big Ten football powerhouse and as a coach for boys’ and men’s teams, the head coach dictated what the expectations would be for each player on the team. The feminist perspective helped to examine the power and gender dynamics that infused all such interactions. As Sabo and Panepinto (1990) noted in their own research with men’s football, it is the coach that sets the standard to which all players are expected to conform and thus the team is able to provide what Goffman (1959) referred to as a unified expression. Goffman (1959) noted that within each team, one depends upon one’s teammates to maintain a unified expression. He suggested that this can be especially tenuous because at any time a member could disrupt the performance. In the pages that follow, the narratives of the players and coach are used to explore the ways in which a football identity was created and maintained by women on this team.

**Study Participants**

The participants for this study were members of a highly successful (five national championships in almost as many years of existence) Midwestern women’s professional football team. This team was selected as the focus for this research due to its longevity and dominance in league play. At the start of the research, the team consisted of 52 players whose characteristics varied as is represented by the 10 players who participated in the interview process (see Figure 1). Ages of team members ranged from early 20s to early 50s. The racial makeup of the team was diverse with almost equal number of African American and White women as well as a couple of individuals that identified as part Native American descent. In terms of class, the players occupied both the working- and middle-class strata. The interviewees were comprised of four women in their first season with the team and six women with multiple years of experience with the team. The majority of the interviewees identified as African American (60%) with the remaining identified as White (40%). All of the interviewees had participated in college athletics in sports other than football. In fact, none of the women interviewed had experience with organized football outside of the women’s professional leagues.

While the women did not have previous experience playing organized tackle football, the all-male coaching staff had an impressive football pedigree. For example, the head coach often reflected on his own playing experiences on a successful Big Ten football team during his talks with the Thunder. In addition to their coaching duties with the women’s team, many of the coaches also coached boys and men at the high
school and college levels either concurrently with their duties with the women’s team or previously. As with the players, the majority of the coaches were African American. Taking into consideration the variation in coaches over the years, five of the coaches were African American, one was Latino, and two were White.

**Data Collection**

The feminist interactionist framework that guided this research helped to determine the methods of data collection for this project including participant observations and semistructured interviews. Conquergood (1991) suggested that “the performance-centered research takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history” (p. 187). Furthermore, Berg (2001) noted that for researchers to understand the meanings that are created through interactions, “he or she either must enter into the defining process or develop a sufficient appreciation for the process so that understandings can become clear” (p. 9). In addition, such methods have also been used in research that focuses on issues of gender within the sporting realm (Blanchard, 1995).

In an attempt to better understand how the players formed and maintained their identities as football players on this team, participant observations and interviews were conducted. After approval from the Human Subjects Committee was received, the researcher made contact with one of the team captain’s through the team website. This captain was instrumental in speaking with the other team captains and coaches.

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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
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**Figure 1.** Participants’ demographics.
regarding approval for this study. Upon approval of the team leaders, the researcher was introduced to the team before one of their early season practices. During this initial contact, I told the players and coaches about my history as a spectator of their team, experience playing on a women’s football team, and desire to conduct research with the team regarding their experiences playing the game. The players agreed to my involvement with the team as a participant observer and were advised that I would also like to conduct interviews with players.

In an attempt to better understand the meanings the players and coaches created and maintained through their interactions, I spent two seasons observing the team at practices and at both home and away games. Berg (2001) noted that the amount of time spent in the field is another way of validating one’s findings. During this time, the team gave me free range. During games, I was on the sidelines with the team and in the locker room during pregame and halftime. Field notes were taken throughout the two seasons with the team. With his approval, I recorded the head coach’s practice, pregame, halftime, and postgame talks with his players, which were later transcribed verbatim. The field notes and transcripts from the coach’s talks provided a strong data set to cross-reference with information compiled during the interviews and thus worked as another means of validation.

In addition to observations, the focus of this project encouraged the use of interviews to further understand how players formulated and maintained their identities. An in-depth, semistructured interview guide was developed based off from past research on women in contact sports (Cox & Thompson, 2000; Sisjord, 1997; Theberge, 2000; Wedgwood, 2004) and my own knowledge of women’s football as a former player and longtime supporter. The interview schedule consisted of three subsections: coming into football (i.e., How did you start to play football?), the football experience (i.e., How have other players influenced your experiences in football?), and concluding questions (i.e., Are there any additional questions you wish I would have asked?). For the purpose of this article, the second subsection of the interview schedule was of most importance. The questions in the second subsection were constructed to better understand how the participants created meaning around their identities as football players.

A pilot study of the interview schedule was conducted with two of the researcher’s former football teammates to assess the understandability of the questions, determine if the questions prompted the necessary information to answer the research questions, and to see if there was a logical flow to the interview schedule (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once with the team, two players approached the researcher for interviews while the researcher approached additional players who were representative of the larger team. Thus the sampling was one of convenience and purpose. This type of sampling is common in qualitative research due to the smaller samples sizes (Morse, 1991). Interviews were conducted till the point of saturation whereas saturation is said to be the “point in the research where collecting additional data seems counterproductive” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136). The saturation point for this project was reached in
10 interviews. The length of the interviews averaged 1.5 hr. All interviews were taped with interviewee’s consent and later transcribed verbatim.

The data analysis process was guided by the research’s guiding critical feminist interactions framework. All interviews and coaches talks were transcribed verbatim. These transcriptions were then sent out to the participants to check for accuracy. In addition, participants were informed that they could clarify, make changes, or request that certain information be omitted. Allowing participants the opportunity to read transcripts and make any modifications is another way of validating one’s data (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991). Such methods are important in not only helping to control for bias but also are in the line with the critical feminist framework as it provides the interviewees with some power in the research process.

Fitting with the framework of the research, the field notes and transcriptions were coded using an inductive coding approach to better understand the meanings and identities created and maintained by members of this team. Starting with the interviews, the coding process began using a line-by-line analysis, examining each word and phrase carefully in order to begin to develop categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once a strong list of codes was developed using open and in vivo coding, whole sentences and paragraphs were coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In vivo coding is the process of taking words directly from the transcriptions and using them as codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The field notes were coded in the same manner. The categories that emerged from the field notes often supported or added to the categories that came out of the interviews but at times they also provided counternarratives.

Developing and Maintaining a Football Identity

As noted earlier, interpretive research acknowledges that there are societal expectations associated with various roles, and people are judged against those standards (Birrell & Donnelly, 2004; Pike, 2005). The role of a football player has very specific meanings and standards in U.S. society. Thus, this research attempted to examine the ways in which women on a successful Midwest women’s tackle football team developed and maintained their identities as football players specific to this team. A key figure in this construction was the director, or head coach, of the team (Goffman, 1959). Through the coding of the data it became apparent that there were several defining characteristics that were used to typify the Thunder team and thus by which the women came to identify as characteristics to perform to construct and then maintain an identity as a player for this team. The broad categories that developed were play the right way, recognize uniqueness, and demand respect.

Play the Right Way

The most dominant theme to emerge was that of “play the right way.” This was an in vivo code taken directly from a number of the coach’s talks and players’ comments.
In an early season, pregame talk, the coach outlined some of the characteristics of playing the right way:

We will be the most disciplined, fundamentally sound, and consistent group that you have ever played for. All the talent in this room, and there is an abundance of it. That ain’t got a thing to do with you being a good football team. You have to be disciplined. You have to block, and you have to tackle.

As one can see from this quote, the concept of playing the right way was complex as it incorporated a number of ideas or ways of being.

Throughout the two seasons, it was emphasized that the team had a responsibility to the public to play the right way. In the players’ minds, the expectation that they play the right way was one thing that set them apart from many of the other teams and thus was a key way in which they came to identify as players with this specific team. Members of the team believed that it was this type of play that made their games entertaining to watch, as was seen in comments made by coaches and players. Players and coaches often stated that they owed it to the people who came out to watch them to play the game the right way, as depicted in the following halftime talk given by the coach:

All you worry about is that you’re playing good football and disciplined football and fundamentally sound football. You have a lot of people out there rooting for you. You still have to go out and put on a good show. Still need to make sure that you do everything the right way.

The rhetoric of play the right way was often couched in terms of showing people that women are capable of playing “real” football. This finding is consistent with Goffman’s (1963) concept of a line; “that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he [sic] expresses his [sic] views of the situation through his [sic] evaluation of the participants, especially himself [sic]” (p. 5). In this case the line, or role, is that of a culturally defined football player and to maintain face as football players the women on the Thunder team were expected to perform the role “correctly.”

A major component of this theme was a sense of accountability. In a pregame talk the coach emphasized, “Got to do it the right way, all the way through the game. Every play is important. Everybody got to do their job, every single play.” The expectation was that the coaches and players would be accountable and do their jobs well. During one practice the coach yelled at a player, “You make plays, don’t make excuses.” During an early season practice, the coach scolded one rookie who dropped a pass by saying, “regardless of who you are, you need to be accountable.” The same type of talk came from the players themselves during their interactions with each other as noted in an exchange that took place between Brenda, a more veteran player on the team, and Latricia, a rookie. Brenda, a 36-year-old African American educator, approached Latricia, a 24-year-old African American high school athletic administrator, on the sideline and put her hand on the top of Latricia’s helmet saying, “whatever they throw
you, you have to catch it. It’s too fucking important. This is big. You need to catch everything. This is how you earn your trust, right here.” Being accountable meant that your teammates could count on you. Migliaccio and Berg (2007) labeled this as “trust.” Teammates on a football field need to know that the people they are lining up with know their roles and will play them. The team’s success on the field demands this coordination but in many cases accountability or trust also helps to lessen the chances of injury to one’s teammates.

Most of the talk revolving around being accountable involved the pursuit of future success. This was demonstrated in a talk given by the coach during which he stated, “everybody in this room has some accountability issues when it comes to this team. Everybody in this room has something they have to do today to make sure that we get to the next level.” This statement came at a time when the team had a number of key players out with injuries, so it could be read as the director of the team reminding all players what it takes to be a member of this particular team.

Mental Toughness. As noted in Figure 2, players were expected to play the right way and show accountability by being physically and mentally tough. Mental toughness was talked about in terms of focus and competitive spirit. It is interesting to note that many players talked about how mentally exhausting it was to play football. A captain of the team stated, “I know that I am both physically and mentally exhausted by the end of the game. I think more mentally than physically.” Indeed, the mental demands of football were often the biggest surprise for most players coming into the sport. When comparing football to other sports she played, Rachel, a 27-year-old African American pharmacy tech, noted:

It’s 80% mental, 20% physical. When you think football, you think physical cause it is so much hitting, its passing, its running. I mean it is a full-body sport and it’s really not that, it’s not as hard as you make it. It’s not as physical as you
think it is. Being on the offensive line and defensive line, it does become a lot more physical visually, but they are trying to work on getting off the block so they have to outsmart the person who is trying to block them or the person who is trying to get through the block.

The number of players who noted the high level of mental focus as one of the most challenging aspects of playing football may surprise some people. Most people focus on the high level of forceful physical contact when they suggest the reasons women cannot/should not play football. Yet, for the women of the Thunder, it was the mental part of the game that proved most challenging. Most likely their reactions come from the fact that they knew that the game would be physical when they tried out for the team, but being ostracized from involvement in organized football for most of their lives, they did not know the mental demands the game would make on them and the specific expectations of mental fortitude expected on this particular team.

For members of the Thunder, the emphasis on being mentally focused was to help ensure that they played the right way. Staying focused was often tied to other aspects of the game and ultimately to the team’s continued success. During a pregame talk, the head coach emphasized the need to focus.

You are going to make mistakes, I understand, but you are not going to make mental mistakes. You are not going to beat yourself and you’re not going to beat the team with your lack of focus. The mistakes you make will be physical mistakes. That happens sometimes because maybe you were slower than the person in front of you, maybe they were stronger than you, maybe their techniques were better than yours. But, you will not beat us with your mental capacity or lack thereof.

The same theme came through at the end of the season in a playoff game pregame talk during which the coach reminded the team what focus could do for them. “The mentally prepared football team wins. That is the only thing that matters, that your mindset is success.” The coach believed that the players’ ability to be mentally tough was a cornerstone to the team’s success.

Competitive spirit. In addition to being focused, mental toughness on this team also meant having a competitive spirit. Anika, a 29-year-old African American corporate fitness associate, who often played both sides of the ball, talked about how competitive she was in almost everything. She explained, “I’m loving and everything but when it comes to sports and the fierceness of it and all that, then I’m a total competitor. I’m just doing everything to win.” She went on to explain, “I’m not playing just to play. I wanna win, you know. I’ve always wanted to be on top. I’ve always wanted to win. It’s a good feeling. It’s the best feeling.” This competitive spirit was a unifying characteristic of the Thunder team. There was an underlying belief on the team that women with a championship drive came to play for this team while women who just wanted to play football were welcome to join the other football team in town.
For some, their level of competitive spirit made their role as rookies almost intolerable at times. Amy, a 35-year-old White CEO of a design company, who had played soccer in college proclaimed that “it is the hardest thing in my life to be sitting on the sidelines watching a game and not playing. I never had to do that in my entire life. In all the sports that I played, I’ve always been a starter.” The coach often built on this competitive spirit to get the team ready for games as seen in this pregame talk:

I think we have a tough football team out there waiting on us. I think that is a great thing for us. I think we relish and we kind of feed off that. You guys want people to be good football players that you all play, and that says a lot about who you are. It says a lot about your competitiveness. It says a lot about your perseverance to make sure you’re doing everything you are supposed to do.

Within the coach’s talk, it is apparent that competitive spirit is seen from the director’s perspective as part of this team’s identity, it is “who they are.” As seen in the examples from the coach’s talks and the players’ comments, being competitive was a key part of the identity construction and maintenance for this team, and thus its players, and part of what they thought set them apart from many other teams.

**Physical Toughness.** Regardless of the mental demands of the game, it is still a brutal contact sport and the players were expected to be accountable for their level of physicality on the field. Indeed, physicality was a key way in which one began to identify with this specific team. The coach often yelled things such as, “we got to be the more physical team. Everybody has got to do their job.” Such comments highlight the connection between physicality and accountability or what was considered playing the right way on this team.

During her interview, Anika talked about how some people like to describe women’s sports as being about finesse and technique but she explained that doesn’t work in football, “You know you go out there and you try to finesse and tackle your way up the field and watch you get laid on your back.” Unlike Theberge’s (2000) findings with women’s ice hockey, the women of the IWFL are not restricted by rules that make the women’s game any less physical than the men’s. In ice hockey, women are not allowed to body check but women tackle and block in football. This is not to imply that there are not imposed limitations placed on the women in football. One example that best illustrates this point is when a referee came into the Thunder’s locker room during halftime to tell one of the offensive guards to stop hitting the other team’s players so hard off the line. One would be hard pressed to find a similar scenario in men’s football.

All the women agreed that football was a much more physical sport than anything else they had played. When comparing it to her experiences in soccer, Amy explained:

I think it is so much more aggressive and physical. The pushing and shoving and tackling and all are so different because in all other girls’ sports you’re not allowed to do that.
Tackling defined the sport for many of the women. Angela, a 23-year-old African American graduate student, recalled the first time she was tackled in practice. “I think the very first time was when we got out with full teams, and when she hit me, I was like, ‘okay, yep, playing football here’.” When explaining what she gets from football that she does not get from the other sports she has played, Lisa, a 38-year-old White machinist, explained that “you don’t know physicality until you play football. I thought I knew before. Not so much! It’s a whole different level in football.” The physicality of football allowed the women to experience their bodies in new ways.

In my first year with the team, one particular player was often singled out by fellow players and the head trainer for her perceived failure to meet the expectations of physical toughness. As the defense came off the field during one particular practice, a fellow defensive player said to Heather, “I’m going to start calling you Miss Glass. You are always saying, ‘oh, my hand hurts, oh my chest hurts’.” No other player, coach, or trainer stood up for Heather against this ridicule. Another example of such reprimands toward this particular player occurred during a game when Heather was hurt on the field. She managed to walk off the field but when she reached the sideline she asked the trainer for an aspirin for a headache. The trainer replied, “you don’t need no aspirin for that headache” and walked away. In a game earlier that season, Heather approached this same trainer and the trainer yelled out, “Heather has an actual injury this time.” As Sabo and Panepinto (1990) noted, ridicule is one of the means by which members are taught to conform to team identities. It seemed Heather successfully conformed in this regard as by the second season she was no longer receiving such reprimands and had become a key person on the team’s defensive side.

Smash mouth football. The in vivo code that best represents the Thunder’s specific notion of physicality was “smash mouth football.” This idea was communicated often by the coaches and by the players. Lisa said, for her, smash mouth represented, “in your face football; body against body; one on one; both trying to run over the other one.” To this team, smash mouth football was about dominating their opponents. Smash mouth football was about playing fundamentally sound football that focused on blocking and tackling correctly, and it was about earning the respect of their opponents. This style of play was about giving the fans what they came out to watch, and it was about proving that women can play this game just as well as men. “Smash mouth football” or “hitting them in the mouth” both represented the expectation that the players would go directly at the other players. They would not back down, and they would be the most physical team on the field.

Many times, talk about playing smash mouth football included references to it being representative of who they were as a team. An example of this was when the coach said: “Offensive line, you got to do what you do. You’ve got to hit them in the mouths every play because that’s who you are and that’s what you do. That’s what we’re about.” At another game, the coach told the team “we got to go out and play Thunder football. We need to hit it, we need to hit it hard, and we need to hit it fast so that we can put the ball in the end zone.” The coach often made statements such as this.
that promised success on the field if the players conformed to a particular team identity, in this case identifying with a physical level of play referenced as smash mouth football (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990).

Thunder football was about being the most physical team on the field. During a halftime talk, the team was told that the coach liked what he saw in terms of the physicality on the field. He said that it showed a lot about what they stood for and about their character. When the Thunder played a new team, playing smash mouth football was about teaching the new team what Thunder football was all about. This can be seen in the following quote from the coach: “You’ve never seen this team before and they damn well never seen you. So you show them who the fuck you are. You succeed in hitting them in the mother fucking mouth.” During a conversation with Myra—a White high school educator in her mid-40s—before practice one day, she indicated that she could not take on the killer mentality she felt her coach and teammates espoused. Indeed in practices, Myra would be commended for being a great athlete but such statements were often followed by a critique of failure to conform to the team’s smash mouth football mentality and style of play. Unable or unwilling to incorporate this party line into her personal football identity, Myra left the team after her first year. Clearly to be an insider on this team was to adhere to the standards regarding physical, smash mouth football.

Recognize Uniqueness

The second broad category of characteristics that the Thunder used to define a football identity for the team and, thus, its players was their ability to recognize their uniqueness as a team. As depicted in Figure 3, one of the main ways by which this distinction was made was through their history as champions. The Thunder won five championships in their first 7 years of existence. Their championship status was linked to ideas about work ethic and their place in women’s football history.

Figure 3. Defining characteristics—recognize uniqueness.
**Champions.** The number of championships the team won helped to boost their confidence on the field and made them distinct from most of the other teams in the league. A pregame talk given by the coach encompassed this idea.

> You got to go out there and you got to show this team what you are made of. They look at you; they want to be able to suit up with you. Nobody has been able to accomplish what you have accomplished. They can see it in your soul when they look at you and they know that this woman is not like me. I need to find out what she got, so I can get it. You got to stop letting people believe that they can play with you. Champions dominate things. They don’t get and fall in line with their opponents. That is who you are!

Because the team often dominated their opponents in the 2 years that I conducted research with them, they were often reminded by the coaches not to “play down” to the other team’s level. During one particular halftime when they were engaged in a contest with an inferior team that was holding its own, the quarterback yelled at the players: “You can’t tell me that those bitches are any stronger than the bitches we go up against every night in practice.” This was her way of letting the other players know that they needed to play Thunder football and not get sucked into playing below their abilities.

At an early season practice, the coach talked about the confidence that comes from being part of a multichampionship team:

> When you come out with that Thunder across your jersey, they are going to feel your wrath. They are going to feel it just in the spiritual sense because when you come out on the field that alone is going to be intimidating to them. They aren’t going to want to admit it but they are going to feel what you are all about because you do have a swagger. You have a championship swagger because you believe in our system, and you believe in your coaches, and you believe in yourselves.

One can see how at this point in the team’s history, there was a deep connection between their championship record and the identity of the players.

**Work ethic.** Part of the system that the coach was referring to in the previous quote was the high level of work ethic that was seen as separating the team from many of their competitors. The coach would remind the team not to forget what they had worked so hard to be, although, with practices 3 days a week, it is unlikely that any of the women forgot how hard they worked. Most practices went for at least three hours. Many players came to practice straight from their jobs. Others got just a couple of hours of sleep before having to get up for work. As noted in all of the interviews I conducted, this time commitment took an incredible toll on many of the women. Because the women received no money to play football, they had to juggle time spent practicing and playing with time pursuing an income from a paying job.
Their high level of work ethic was often credited for their championship success. This idea was extended by the coach during a pregame talk in which he said, “These coaches prepare their asses off and you prepare your ass off. So, you deserve the things that come to you that are good because you workin’ for this, you earning this. Nobody knows what you go through.” The players also made the connection between the amount of work they put in and overall team success. Amy’s rationalization was, “you know, the teams that don’t go out and do that stuff that we do are not going to win.” In her conversations with women of the Blades women’s ice hockey team, Theberge (2000) found similar sentiments. In both instances, the women believed that they were part of something special because of the professionalism and demands the coaches brought to the team. The coach of the Thunder often reminded the players of this dedication to a high level of work ethic at the beginning of practices such as when he told the team: “You get what you get because you put this time in. You are going to be successful because you are here right now. And it’s important to you to win and to be good at what you do. And that’s why you work your ass off. That’s why it happens the way it happens.”

The team’s work ethic was often talked about as separating them from many of the other teams. Anika said that you can see the differences in work ethic when watching films. Other teams may not be as fast or as powerful and in her eyes that was representative of the lack of time they had put into getting better. Lori, who had played for two other teams before coming to the Thunder, explained that on the last team she played for it was not uncommon for only 12 to 20 players to show up for practices. She said it was also common for the coach to show up 45 to 50 min late to practices. As noted earlier, it was often said throughout the 2 years of my research, by coaches and players alike that if you do not want to work hard then go play for the other team in town.

Players that did not adhere to this expectation of work ethic were seen as failing to maintain the proper face of a Thunder player and thus were reprimanded for being “out of face” (Goffman, 1963, p. 8). One player in particular was reprimanded often during my 2 years with the team for what was seen by the head coach as her lack of dedication to the team and her lack of proper work ethic. During such verbal reprimands, it was not uncommon for the coach to engage other players into the discussion in a form of manipulation of in-group/out-group tensions as seen in Sabo and Panepinto’s (1990) research with coach–player relationships in men’s football. After this particular player had missed a practice due to her not knowing where they would be practicing that day, the head coach spent a good portion of the next practice reprimanding the player and while doing so asking leaders of the team (captains and veterans) questions whose answers would demand the leaders either align with the coach or the targeted player. Without fail, during these altercations, the players always aligned with the director of the team, the coach.

Part of history. As their work ethic was seen as contributing to their championship status, the number of championships the team won was seen as making the team a large part of women’s football history. This is similar to Theberge’s (2000) findings...
with the Blades hockey team, in which the players and coaches often referenced their special place in women’s ice hockey history. In each instance, the teams (the Blades and the Thunder) dominated their sports. During a post season, pregame talk, the coach called on the players to maintain their legacy in women’s football:

Who says that the streak has to end, that you guys can’t win five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten championships? There are no barriers for you. You have knocked them all down! You knocked them all down when you started this in 2002, and you ain’t stopped, so don’t you stop now! You are history makers! You are barrier breakers! You created a legacy! If you never did nothing for me ever, you fight for your legacy today.

During their first game of the season, the coach reminded them of their place in history: “They will never be able to say you didn’t do none of this cause you make history every step you take and every breath you take, you make history every step you take.”

Their designated role in women’s football history was at times used to motivate them to greater heights. In a pregame talk, coach declared: “You got the uniform on that represents what women’s football is all about. And you go out and prove who you are and what you stand for!” In a lengthier talk the next game, the coach stated:

It is up to you to choose becoming that next great story that everybody talks about. You are the next great thing. You are already history making in everything you do in women’s football. Now you decide how you and your story will be told.

It was often the coach who stressed the team’s place in women’s football history.

**Demand Respect**

The final group of characteristics that were used to define football identity on the Thunder team revolved around the ideas that the team was a class act that deserved and demanded respect because of their place in women’s football history. Although there were points throughout the 2 years when this classification of the team as classy was apparent, probably the most noticeable was during the championship game my first season with the team.

The championship game was held in Long Beach with the Thunder going up against Atlanta. For the start of the game, each team ran onto the field as the names of their players were announced over the public address system. Atlanta was announced first and then the Thunder. When the names of the Thunder players were announced the whole Atlanta team turned their backs to the field and thus turned away from the Thunder. Everyone on the Thunder team was upset by their actions. As Lisa was waiting to run out on the field, she exclaimed, “it is not even funny how mad I am.” Later, Anika said to me, “they were pretty nasty in the way they handled things and
unprofessional, turning their backs to us.” She then went on to say that “we’ve never, in all the years that we’ve been a team, we’ve never ever been disrespectful to another team.” Rachel told me that in the past they had come across teams with certain players who had bad sportsmanship but never a whole team. She said, “just to see a whole team have poor sportsmanship, and it’s crazy, I mean, it is uncalled for. That’s not part of athletics, you know, even though we beat teams eighty something to nothing, we’ll talk to the team before the game; we’ll say how you doing and will talk to them afterwards. It was just pure rudeness.” At the end of the game, when the trophies were being awarded, the IWFL representative said, “all I can say is that the Thunder is a class act. The team shows nothing but class on the field. You really represent the IWFL, and you did well.” Although kind words were also offered for Atlanta’s team, being a class act was not part of it.

The expectation that the team would act in a classy way was something that Theberge (2000) also found in her research with a successful women’s ice hockey team in Canada. Theberge (2000) noted that great care was given to the team’s image and appearance as part of their “first class” approach (p. 19). An aspect that Theberge focused on was that of the nice jackets the team wore that identified one as a member of the Blades. In my research, the coaches of the Thunder had nice varsity letter style jackets with the team name embroidered on the back. The coaches and trainers also had polo shirts with the team’s logo embroidered on them.

For the Thunder, the expectation that the team would act in what was termed a classy fashion was often talked about during practices, as the team was getting ready for games. As the coach noted, “You go to these games and you have a lot of people who are fans and a lot of people who want to see what you are all about as human beings besides being a football player, so make sure you represent yourselves, make sure you represent this team with the class and character that we always strive for.” Numerous times throughout the two seasons, the team was reminded to act in a classy way. Often times this reminder included the statement, “because that is who we are.” Thus, they should act in a classy manner because, it was believed, they were a classy team.

At one point, during my first season, the team’s classiness was questioned by a letter that was submitted to the team’s website and subsequently read to the players by the coach. The anonymous author suggested that the Thunder was a classless team because the author perceived them as “running up the score” with teams they out-matched. “Seventy-four points for a win. What losers you are.” The letter went on to insinuate that the team lacked sportsmanship.

This is perhaps not surprising given Theberge’s findings with the Blades. She noted that the Blades’ “uncompromising commitment to winning” was the basis for a lot of resentment in women’s ice hockey (Theberge, 2000, p. 24). The Thunder’s success and dominance in women’s football also, at times, brought them an increased amount of resentment.

The coach and players were outraged at this anonymous letter. The coach went on to explain that due to the IWFL rules for how location for playoff games were
determined, the team had to continue to play hard throughout the entire football game, unless they wanted to risk traveling for first and second round playoff games. Due to the fact that there is little money in women’s football, it is a huge advantage to play games at home. Players often have to put out money for travel expenses and many times the whole team does not travel due to this fact and due to the difficulty getting time off from work. Thus, it was important for the Thunder to score a lot of points and to score defensive points because these were two of the ways that location decisions were made.

The letter writer’s statement about the Thunder being bad for women’s football is similar to comments made about the Blades as Theberge noted in her research. She suggested that “critics also target the Blades for working solely on their own behalf and not for the good of the sport” (Theberge, 2000, p. 35). Due to the large point spread that often separated the Thunder from their opponents, some criticized them for how bad they were making women’s football look. Similar to Theberge’s (2000) findings, the Thunder believed if people saw the high level of football they play that they would have to respect the game. Indeed, it was believed that it was the teams who allowed themselves to get beat by such large margins due to their lack of discipline that were making women’s football look bad.

At times the coach’s desire for the team to act classy was conflated with his need for them to demand respect from their opponents. When it was thought that an opponent had acted in a disrespectful manner to the team, the players were encouraged to go out and demand respect. In one halftime talk, the coach yelled at the team to go out there and demand respect from the other team but to do it in a classy fashion:

You got my permission to go after these people full force and hit them in the mouth as many times as you can, as often as you can, as much as you want to and when you get through, you do it in the right way and you do it in a classy fashion and you have some character.

Although his comments seem contradictory, what the coach was asking them to do was to go out and play a very physical game but to do so within the larger sporting ethic.

Due to the fact that demanding respect was one of the defining characteristics of the team, the coach would often use this concept in his game talks to motivate the women to play a good game as can be seen in the following pregame talk:

Everybody wants to treat us indifferently because we worked our asses off to get to this point. Why? We worked our asses off to get here. We deserve this! Nobody gave it to you. You worked your ass off for it and we’re going to get it and you tell their asses when you hit them in the mouth, ‘you blame that son of a bitch over there’! You be respectful to us! Because we earned it!

This tactic was used in pregame talks against opponents who had little chance of scoring against the Thunder and those who posed more of a threat to the team. The tactic
was not part of the pregame talks for those teams that landed somewhere in between those two on the continuum. For this team, demanding respect was done through playing physical, fundamentally sound football. Coach reiterated this when he said, “but if they don’t want to respect you, then they got an ass kicking coming, I promise you that.” Each of these examples help to highlight the ways in the concept of demand respect became part of the identifying characteristic of this team and thus part of the football identities performed by the players.

**Conclusion**

As noted earlier, football holds a position of significance in American culture. As such, the role the women of the Thunder team were expected to enact was broadly based, and thus, the “face” they worked to maintain was that of a culturally defined football player (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). This is why the coach emphasized playing fundamentally sound football. It was believed that if the women played the game the “right way,” no one could question their role as football players, and thus, they would maintain proper face. Here, the “right way” can be read as how men would play the game, smash mouth football. When players deviated from these expectations, they were reprimanded as they were seen to be “out of face” (Goffman, 1963, p. 8). Such reprimands were verbalized often not only by the coaches but also by other players on the team in an attempt to maintain a unifying expression of a proper football identity which in many ways was unique to this team.

This study builds off and affirms the findings of Theberge’s (2000) research on women in ice hockey. In both instances it was the male version of the sport that was seen as the standard. It was also males who indoctrinated the women into the sports in their roles as league officials and coaches, teaching them what it meant to be an “ice hockey” or “football” player. The role expectation for players on the Thunder team was derived from the coaches’ experiences of having played the game themselves. In addition, we both embedded ourselves within highly successful teams and found that the teams, and thus the players that stayed with the team, created their identities off the idea that they were different from other teams, a part of their sport’s history, a classy organization, and more disciplined.

This research, as well as Theberge’s (2000), also found that women’s entrance into these traditionally male and masculinity-defining sports did not change the sports’ character—they retained their association with males and masculinity even with the women’s involvement. This is seen also in an interview that was conducted with Ickey Woods, the coach of a women’s football team in Ohio and a former NFL player. During the interview conducted by MSNBC (2007), the announcer stated: “Woods brings what he knows from his NFL days directly to the women with no apologies for his style, which can take some adjusting to.” Woods stated:

Football is a dictatorship. There is no democracy in football. So, there is no getting together, putting together a petition, trying to get the coach to change things because it is not going to happen. You know football has been a dictatorship
since its inception and you guys [sic] are not going to come along and change the rules. So, it’s either you go by the rules as laid before you or you don’t play. (MSNBC, 2007, p. 1)

This quote highlights how many of the men who are coaching women’s football use their own experiences as former players in the creation of a normative football climate for their teams. Finally, there is this idea of women being welcomed into football as long as they do not try to change the game.

These findings point to other issues within women’s football that should be further examined. First, would be a more pronounced examination of the player–coach relationship in women’s professional football and the “culture of conformity” that often develops. Due to most women’s lack of experience in organized football before their entry into the women’s professional football leagues, it is possible that the player–coach relationship is even more pronounced in terms of power dynamics than what one would expect to see in other women’s sports. In addition, it would be beneficial to examine the formation and maintenance of football identities on a women’s professional football team that included women in the coaching structure. A final point of analysis that should be examined is the ways in which women negotiate their roles as football players and women in a society that sees the two as incongruous.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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