Sport, media, and the gender-based insult

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Sport, masculinization, and feminization

Since the institutional establishment of sport as a regulated, professionalized form of physical activity in the nineteenth century, sport has been a major focus of sex/gender division and hierarchy. For example, in few other pursuits is highly invasive sex testing conducted in very public circumstances, as occurred recently in the case of the South African runner Caster Semenya (Cooky et al. 2012). Sex-based classification is integral to many, if not most, forms of sport, which in turn is the foundation of constructions of gender that, in the main, privilege dominant forms of masculinity over those of femininity (see Scraton and Flinto 2002). This is not to argue that sport is entirely a male preserve. Many women are skilled participants and enthusiastic spectators. But sport’s historical legacy as a sociocultural domain where men place themselves at the center and marginalize women remains resilient in its constructions of celebrated, exclusivist masculinity that both overtly and covertly tends to position femininity as subordinate, peripheral, sexualized, and even contemptible (McKay et al. 2000).

Sport remains a male-dominated institution—institutionally, economically, ideologically, and culturally—despite policies dedicated to eradicating sexual and gender inequality. Abundant empirical evidence attests to this inequality, ranging from the ownership and control of sports clubs and associations and the distribution of material rewards in sport, to the differential quantity and quality of media coverage of sportsmen and women (Hartmann and Pfister 2003; Bruce et al. 2010). The specific focus here, however, is the gender order inscribed within the language of professional male team contact sport in some instances that have garnered massive media attention. The media are especially important given their role in helping to reveal and circulate how gender power is exercised in male sport’s everyday routines. Occasionally, especially during “live” sports contests watched by large and even global audiences, and in subsequent disciplinary and legal proceedings, broadcast footage and commentary across a range of media play key roles in indicating who said what to whom, and in shaping meaning and significance for wider gender relations.
Public evidence is increasing that the gender-based insult is routinely practiced even within those male team sports that are subjected to intense media and public scrutiny, and whose associations are officially mandated to eradicate prejudice and discrimination, and to foster respect among players, officials, and fans (such as the “Respect” and other social responsibility initiatives of Union des Associations Européennes de Football [UEFA], the governing body of European association football).

However, what is perhaps more shocking about the common resort to gender insult as a weapon is that it generally fails to shock or to incur widespread condemnation. In stark contrast to the consensually condemned racial insult, the comparative normalization of the sex/gender-based insult is often thrown into sharp relief during media sport scandals arising from confrontations in male team sports, where masculinist insults (based on the assumed innate superiority of aggressive maleness) are revealed as routine constituents of inter-player discourse. This observation by no means implies any diminution of the gravity of the offense of racialized denigration in sport, nor does it try to set up forms of denigration in competition with each other. Indeed, as will be argued on pp. 398–400, “race-” and gender-based insults are not infrequently combined in the exercise of a more comprehensive vilification of sporting opponents, and of those with whom they are materially and symbolically associated (see also Rowe 2010a). Nor do I suggest that sportswomen do not also sometimes insult each other (such as by using the common misogynistic term “slut” or through expressions of “violent femininity”—Gill 2007). The foci of this chapter, however, are the gendered power relationships within and surrounding sport that clearly persist beyond “plain sight” despite professed dedication to the eradication of gender inequality in sport, and in which the media are key players. Here the gender-based insult in sport is analyzed as a form of “power play” exercised through everyday, naturalized masculinization and feminization. It comes to light often only incidentally in pursuit of another kind of offense reported in the news and sports media.

**WAGS, scandals, and other media creations**

The media, including the specialist sport and entertainment rounds and “beats” of journalism, are constantly involved in the “patrolling” of masculinity and femininity. For example, the focus on the so-called WAGS (wives and girlfriends) of elite sportsmen (as fictionalized in the now-discontinued British television drama Footballers’ Wives) can be read as a tracing of the contemporary contours of male and female conjugal roles and, to some degree, as a re-instantiation of a more gendered traditional nuclear family division of labor, albeit one with a distinctively twenty-first-century celebrity consumption orientation. Here the media’s concern is often with the “distraction” of elite sportsmen by women and its potentially debilitating impact on men’s sports performance. Indeed, the classic patriarchal notion, which received “scientific” credibility in the nineteenth century, that sex with women (it does not contemplate male homosexuality) “drains” men of their athletic vitality continues to be reproduced (Rowe 2010b). Even where the WAG has her own high-profile career,
as in the case of Victoria Beckham, wife of the world’s most famous association footballer, David Beckham, the arrangement is usually set up as one of competition rather than complementarity or independence.

The tabloid news media, in particular, such as the now-closed British “scandal sheet” the News of the World, are deeply implicated in the exposure of cases of infidelity involving prominent sportsmen. Here the use of paparazzi photographers, private Investigators, paid “confessions” by female participants, and unsavory or illegal practices, such as “blagging” (paying for confidential private information) and phone hacking, generate media scandals. The resultant prevailing images of promiscuous sportsmen and rapacious women combine prurience and moral condemnation. The most infamous of such male celebrity sport infidelity scandals is that of golfer Tiger Woods, whose scripted televised public apology was the BBC’s lead story of the day (February 19, 2010), but there are many others, including basketball’s Kobe Bryant and footballers Ryan Giggs and John Terry. Indeed, such scandals may now be said to constitute a media genre in their own right, at the heart of which is a concern with sexual conduct and gendered behavior.

Although these stories have political dimensions (including the politics of image management of heterosexual celebrity families, sexual desire, and gendered norms), they are principally concerned with salacious revelations within the private sphere. Of greater sociopolitical import, perhaps, is the gender-based sport insult that takes place and is partially captured in that manifestation of the mediated public sphere that is live, televised sport.

Manifestations of masculinist insult discourse in sport

Masculinist insult discourse is mobilized in two common ways in sport. The first is to feminize the opponents by comparing them either to women, especially younger ones (“playing like a girl”), or, at one remove, to homosexual men (through insulting epithets such as “faggot”). The latter practice, alongside homophobia among some sports fans and administrators, and the reluctance of sponsors and advertisers to contract with gay and lesbian athletes, helps explain why sports professionals rarely “come out” (Anderson 2005). This phenomenon can be broadly understood as the exercise of an aggressive hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) that posits itself as inherently superior to femininity and to “feminized” forms of masculinity.

The insult involves likening male opponents to women (thereby signifying their athletic inferiority), or casting aspersions, usually of a sexual nature, on significant women in their lives, especially wives, girlfriends, mothers, and sisters (thereby signifying their social inferiority). News media have provided evidence of this practice in forensic detail through transcripts of captured or alleged conversations, but, at least in some of the most highly publicized cases, largely as a byproduct of another transgression. As noted above, in the current era the charge of racism in sport has been taken particularly seriously, it has been in pursuit of racial vilification that gender-based insults have been recorded. Indeed, race and gender may be entwined in significant ways.
One of the most conspicuous examples of this connection concerns the expulsion of the French captain Zinedine Zidane from the field of play for violent conduct during the 2006 FIFA World Cup Final in Germany. The image of Zidane headbutting Italian opponent Marco Materazzi in the chest was prominent across the world’s media, alongside detailed speculation of the cause of this act; some newspapers even employed multilingual lip readers. The most dramatic explanation was that Zidane, a self-described “non-practicing Muslim” of Algerian descent, reacted violently when Materazzi called him the “son of a terrorist whore.” This alleged insult, combining racial, religious, and sexual offense, was widely condemned in newspapers such as the UK’s Sun, Daily Star, and Daily Mail, and, if proven, could be regarded as a case of sexual racism, which I define as combined, mutually reinforcing sexual and racial prejudice that, for example, links sexual promiscuity with “racial” genetic inheritance (Rowe 2010a). However, Materazzi subsequently successfully sued these newspapers for libel after this accusation was deemed unproven by the Disciplinary Committee of FIFA, the world governing body of association football. His only admission was that he had insulted Zidane’s sister, although Zidane continued to insist that his mother was also subjected to “very hard words.” A BBC interviewer began by saying to Zidane that “everyone” wants to know exactly what Materazzi said:

ZINEDINE ZIDANE: They were very serious things, very personal things.
INTERVIEWER: About your mother and your sister?
ZINEDINE ZIDANE: Yes. They were very hard words. You hear them once and you try to move away. But then you hear them twice, and then a third time, ... I am a man and some words are harder to hear than actions. I would rather have taken a blow to the face than hear that.

(BBC 2006: n.p.)

What was actually said in this exchange will never be known comprehensively, but the case suggests what appears to be the common use of gender-based insults in elite male sport.

Association football is by no means the only sport in which this phenomenon is apparent. For example, in early 2008 during a cricket Test match in Sydney, Indian cricketer Harbhajan Singh allegedly called Andrew Symonds, a UK-born Australian cricketer of African Caribbean and white parentage, a “monkey.” This confrontation garnered enormous media coverage in India, Australia, and in other cricket-playing countries. It provoked similar attempts at multilingual lip reading to determine what was said: one suggestion was that Singh had actually called Symonds a “teri maki” (a term corresponding to “motherfucker” in Hindi), which had been misheard as “monkey” (Rowe 2011). Here, as with the Zidane–Materazzi case, the defense was that the alleged racial insult was “only” gender based; an offense which, if proven, would have incurred no comparable or, indeed, any likely sanction. Because of its standing as the “global game” and claim to be in the forefront of anti-discrimination and prejudice in sport (FIFA 2012), though, conflicts over accusations of vilification in football receive particular media prominence.

A striking example of the phenomenon of alleged racial, and uncontested gender, insults concerns the dispute arising from an on-field confrontation in 2011 between
two English Premier League footballers—Liverpool’s Luis Suarez and Manchester United’s Patrice Evra—after which the latter alleged that he had been racially abused by the former. The following excerpt from the Independent Regulation Commission’s disciplinary inquiry into the matter provides the flavor of their exchange:

178. Mr Evra stated that the goalmouth incident started when he addressed Mr Suarez, beginning with the phrase “Concha de tu hermana.” According to the experts, the literal translation is “your sister’s cunt” and it can be taken as a general swear word expressing anger, although the word “concha” is not as taboo as the English word “cunt.” It is thus equivalent to “fucking hell” or “fuck me.” If directed at someone in particular, it can also be understood as “[you] son of a bitch.”

179. Assuming Mr Suarez responded with “Porque tu eres negro” [author comment: translated into English either as “because you are black” or, as Evra first interpreted it, “because you are a nigger”], this would be interpreted in Uruguay and other regions of Latin America as racially offensive. When the noun is used in the way described by Mr Evra, it is not a friendly form of address, but is used in an insulting way: it is given as the rationale for an act of physical aggression (the foul), as if the person deserved such an attack since they are black.

(Independent Regulatory Commission of the Football Association 2011: 47)

In shifting between sexually oriented provocations concerning a male player’s female family member and retaliatory racist and other forms of abuse, such documented on-field encounters reveal an underlying form of aggressive, ruthless sporting masculinity that is “writ large” when receiving intensive media coverage. While media commentators often express disapproval, both in reporting official disciplinary proceedings and in published opinion, both sports organizations and journalists tend to downplay the implicit process of masculinization and feminization that occurs through the apparently routine practice of gender-based insult between competitors. For example, in its summary and justification of the suspension of Suarez, the Commission noted:

441. The use by a footballer of insulting words, which include reference to another player’s colour, is wholly unacceptable. It is wrong in principle. It is also wrong because footballers, such as Mr Suarez, are looked up to and admired by a great many football fans, especially young fans. If professional footballers use racially insulting language on a football pitch, this is likely to have a corrosive effect on young football fans, some of whom are the professional footballers of the future. It also has a potentially damaging effect on the wider football community and society generally.

(Independent Regulatory Commission of the Football Association 2011: 109)

While insulting behavior by footballers is deplored, it is only “racially insulting language on a football pitch” that is detailed. Its “corrosive” and “damaging” effects
are seemingly limited to the domain of “color,” thereby leaving aside questions of gender. The “young football fans” who may become professional footballers are implicitly male, and the potential impact of gender-based abuse on both male and female fans/players is not articulated. FIFA’s mission statement (2012) states: “We believe it is FIFA’s responsibility to foster unity within the football world and to use football to promote solidarity, regardless of gender, ethnic background, faith or culture.” Apparently, however, neither FIFA nor its affiliates like UEFA or the FA have much will to engage with gender at the level of everyday abuse among male football players. Notably, few journalists have sought to counteract this situation. British newspapers such as the Daily Mail (Lawton 2011) and Daily Telegraph (Winter 2011) barely noticed the offensive gendered dimension of their confrontation. As with the Zidane affair, the scandal focused on racism, with sexism treated as a second-order matter. The “race” and gender orders are made clear here, as well as the sub-ordination of the latter to the former in terms of discursive prominence. Just as Materazzi’s first-ascribed comments about Zidane’s mother were generally focused on the epithet “terrorist” rather than “whore,” and the accusation that Singh had called Symonds a “monkey” mitigated by the claim that he might in fact have said “motherfucker” in Hindi, there was apparently little concern about Evra’s misogynistic reference to Suarez’s sister, or of Materazzi to Zidane’s. This muted response to insults such as “son of a bitch” and “motherfucker” used in an all-male sport environment, treating them as banal or in some way inevitable, illustrates the dominance of a certain mode of masculinity in the field of sport that suggests a degree of complicity among the ranks of another male-dominated occupation—sports journalism (Rowe 2007).

In another racial dispute in football, but one that entered a legal rather than a disciplinary process, the English Premier League club Chelsea’s captain John Terry was accused of vilifying Queens Park Rangers player Anton Ferdinand by using “threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour or disorderly behaviour” likely to cause “harassment, alarm or distress” due to it being “racially aggravated.” Once again, the accusation was that one player had combined racism and sexism in a single epithet—“fucking black cunt”—in insulting the other. During Regina v. John Terry, at the end of which the Senior District Judge of Westminster Magistrates’ Court found the case against Terry unproven (following which the FA charged him in July 2012 with using insulting abusive words and/or behaviors, again highlighting the alleged racial dimension, that led to a fine and a four-match ban), the language used by the antagonists attracted considerable attention. Some newspapers and all broadcast media did not “spell out” the most offensive words used, apart from the one that incurred the allegation in the first instance—“black”; others, such as the Guardian, provided an unexpurgated account of what was said. With regard to the positioning of masculinity and femininity in the practice of professional male contact sport, the evidence was illuminating. As collated and laid out in many news stories, such as the one below (although with unusual candor), what might in other domains be regarded as conduct extraordinarily detrimental to respectful relationships between men and women was described as “mandatory”:

The truth is it is not particularly revelatory or shocking that footballers use the kind of language and sexual insults that filled courtroom number one.
Yet hearing the various exchanges dissected in these surroundings brought home just how trashy and puerile it all was. The one thing Terry and Ferdinand agreed upon was that being called “a cunt” was almost mandatory in football. Penny’s [the Prosecutor] conclusion was that if referees applied the rule that abusive language merited a red card the average game would last “no longer than 10 minutes.”

As well as the “shagging Bridge’s missus’ stuff” [a reference to a highly publicized alleged affair between Terry and a team-mate’s partner], Terry said he had regularly heard his mother, Sue, being called a “slag.” One of the QPR players had shouted something about her during a post-match coming together between the rival players in the tunnel. But Terry said he had heard this kind of abuse from 40,000 people sometimes. “My mum dated a guy from Liverpool for a while,” he said. “The Liverpool fans made up a song that my mum ‘loves Scouse cock.’” The average football match was depicted as a hateful place, where the crowds look for weakness and then attack with a zombie mentality. (Taylor 2012)

This routinization of abuse is distinctly gendered. The indecencies used by players and fans alike construct a gender order in which women, both in the abstract and in roles as significant others, are systemically alienated from sport through the literally offensive use of language as a strategic weapon. The practice of abusive swearing was described as so common as to have become unremarkable for players themselves. Thus, “Mr Ferdinand told the court: ‘It’s handbags, innit—it’s what happens on the pitch,’ and said he shook hands with Mr Terry” (BBC 2012). The invocation of women through the “handbag” synecdoche (the object standing for the category “woman”) provides another instance of unconscious, reflexive hierarchical gender sorting in sport. Thus, the idea that this everyday object associated with women is ineffectual in physical combat once again symbolically consigns them to the margins of sport, conceived as a domain of potent male warriors and impotent female combatants. This “automatically” produced gender hierarchy seemingly only becomes notable when provocative attacks on mothers, wives, girlfriends, and sisters are revealed in the context of complaints about racial and other forms of vilification. As one sports journalist reported about the Terry–Ferdinand case:

With courtroom deadpan delivery and forensic word-by-word deconstruction, the lingua franca of the pitch lost its pejorative power to shock, displaying instead a terrifying paucity of vocabulary possessed by our multimillionaire sports stars.

“You’re an ugly cunt ... (pause) ... is that one of them [an on-pitch insult]?” inquired Penny of Terry, with unfortunate timing. “Common or garden swearwords, cunt, prick, fuck? That’s normal, isn’t it?”

Yes, replied Terry. Add in “fat”, “ugly”, and gestures that indicate bad breath, before the aforementioned C-word. “Cunt is fine,” Ferdinand said in his evidence, but not if you added the word black, which took it to a whole new level.

(Conn 2012)
The aforementioned space between what is “fine” and what is at a “whole new level” of offense is to some extent marked also by the comments of two sports journalists, both of whom are from well-regarded broadsheet newspapers, and who found the exchanges between the players “trashy and puerile,” with a “paucity of vocabulary,” rather than symptomatic of a much more damaging phenomenon—deeply ingrained sexism.

This brief survey of the Terry–Ferdinand and similar cases shows that journalists rarely challenged the normalization of gender-based abuse in sport (in this case football). Indeed, the most telling critique (from a feminist academic) of the language of male sport was found in the letters page of the same newspaper (the Guardian) that included the two quotations immediately above, rather than the news or sports sections:

> What strikes me is the indifference with which the usage of the slang term for the female genitals goes without question in society at large. … While acknowledging that some (not I) might argue there is a hierarchy of “isms,” I find it hard to accept that using such derogatory terminology goes unquestioned. The racism is subject to a courtroom challenge, the sexism does not merit a mention. (Briggs 2012)

The key point here is that, while the news media do routinely decry the linguistic impoverishment and crudity of the gender-based insult in male-dominated sport, they rarely represent it as anything other than a rather unsavory but highly predictable product of a masculinist, competitive sport environment. What they signal falsely fail to do is advance a deeper condemnation that would prompt a more telling analysis of sport’s gender order—why is femininity invoked in the context of insulting provocations? And why is there so little concern with the alienation and marginalization of women through the common, if not routine, use of such language among sport and media organizations alike?

**Conclusion: gender and the “lost” media scandal**

These conspicuous instances, which have been widely publicized, demonstrate the largely unconscious and unexamined reproduction of sport’s historical domination by men. They arguably expose one notable way in which sport is implicated in the construction of asymmetries of masculine and feminine power through their naturalization in mediated popular culture. I selected these examples of gender-based insult in sport that attracted a great deal of media coverage and public attention for two principal reasons—they involved male sporting celebrities and allegations of racism on the field of play. At the time of the alleged offenses, millions of people around the world were watching events transpire in real time or on delay via a range of media devices—mainly television, but also on computer, tablet, and mobile telephone screens. In this sense, despite numerous witnesses, the “truth” of what occurred could not be easily discerned, and could only be teased out laboriously through claim and counterclaim.
These were, therefore, media scandals (Lull and Hinerman 1997) that compromised sport’s moral and ethical order. Audiovisual material, media news, commentary and analysis (including the aforementioned multi- and monolingual lip reading), and disciplinary and court transcripts, provided a wealth of detail concerning how professional sportsmen lauded for their athletic prowess conduct themselves in language in practice. In all these cases, the focus of the scandal was racism, an ideology of domination that, like sexism, is also foundational within sport (Carrington 2010). As has already been stated, my emphasis on gender here is by no means an attempt to underplay the seriousness of racism, but is intended to reveal the ways in which one malign expression of power can come to overshadow another. It is clear that sports authorities take racism more seriously than sexism, particularly when one player directly abuses another in racial terms. Sexist abuse is generally at one remove—insulting the female associates of an opponent, or his relationships with them. It could be objected that the words used are simple “equal opportunity” indecencies—for example, evocations of male genitalia, such as “fucking knobhead” and “prick” (the “common or garden swearwords” described in court during the Terry case), were also used. Also, it might be said that women do not need condescending “protection” from “colorful,” sexually graphic language; women often use it themselves—including against each other.

However, close attention to what was said—and how it was said in the cases described above—exposes the ways in which systematic denigration of women was regarded as normal. Thus, the homosocial environment of male contact sport can be described—at least in some instances and in some sporting contexts—as a site where women can be vilified in their absence. Gaye Tuchman’s (1978) renowned refinement and application of the concept of “symbolic annihilation” to gender is pertinent here. Yet, crucially, this is an annihilation of a distinctive kind—one in which women are brought into the male sporting arena in language, only to be expelled from it via the association of femininity with degradation. In this respect, men perpetuate their domination of the institution of sport (as administrators and as athletes in most team and many individual sports), and another male-dominated institution, the media (especially the sports media), does little to intervene in this ideological process.

Finally, then, the responsibility of the media is brought into focus. Journalists and other commentators in these cases have consistently focused on the principal, more “spectacular” narrative—concerning racial abuse—but have failed to grasp the seriousness of the “secondary” one—the gender-based insult. The use of such language is treated as deplorable but orthodox and almost banal. As Taylor (2012) noted above, “The truth is it is not particularly revelatory or shocking that footballers use the kind of language and sexual insults that filled courtroom number one.” Yet it could be argued that the routine nature of such discourse requires not just resigned disapproval by news media, but a vigorous questioning and challenge. Without such a response by (mostly male) sports journalists, including in the “quality” newspapers, and by journalists on the wider news rounds, criticisms of complacency, dereliction of duty, “herd following,” and even complicity gain considerable weight. Such terms are no doubt offensive to journalists. But their reluctance to take offense on behalf of others (especially but not exclusively women) and to challenge the “business as normal” of sporting institutions (principally run by men) has helped install the
gender-based insult and its implicit alienation of women as de rigueur among some of the most popular and prestigious male contact sports.

References


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