

# **WOMEN PLAYING RUGBY, AN 'OLD BOYS GAME': BEYOND THE SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Female participation in sport and physical activity has been identified as being less prevalent than for males, particularly in Australia. For those women who are participating in sport, there are strong socialisation influences for them to play sports such as netball, hockey, swimming and gymnastics. These sports have subtly been noted as being acceptable for women. Generally, similar pressures have endorsed men to play sports such as rugby union, rugby league, cricket, and soccer as the sports principally sanctioned as measures of maleness. When women participate in a sport that is typically thought of as being 'male', such as rugby union, they appear to be moving outside the social expectations. What motivates women to play a 'male' sport and what is the associated culture that surrounds them that keeps them in the sport? Seventy two women were surveyed using

questionnaires, and two were purposefully sampled for follow up interviews. Group results indicate the majority of women are university educated, and they have participated at competitive or representative levels in other sports before playing Rugby. Most women are influenced by their peers to join the sport, and the social culture was their major motivation to play. Two case studies are presented as profiles of women who love to play rugby and they represent and confirm the relevant trends found in the group data.

## INTRODUCTION

Women's participation rate in sport has been identified as being less than for males (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997). Generally women "have fewer, different and less convenient opportunities for leisure and sports than most men" (Hargreaves, 1997) due to relationships and pressures within their home life (McPherson & Brown, 1988). Not only do women and girls drop out of sport in greater numbers than for men and boys - but for women remaining in sport, having children is identified as another critical factor in discontinuing their participation (Higginson, 1985).

Adult family members influence the type and intensity of physical activity for children depending on gender (McPherson, 1986). The most prevalent trends are that boys model their behaviour on their fathers and girls model their activity levels on their mothers and teachers. Variation in these trends for boys and girls are also attributable to race (Greendorfer & Ewing, 1981). The socialisation patterns tend to endorse more activity for boys when compared to girls, and the boys are engaged in different types of activity than girls (Ignico, 1990).

Varpalotai (1987) suggested that not only are there subtle and passive factors that discourage participation in sports for girls and women, but the decision to participate in sport for women may be considered to be 'bordering on antisocial behaviour.' Women who play sport may be considered to be countering these subtle and passive pressures and are considered by Varpalotai (1987) to have placed themselves outside the social mainstream.

Additionally, as a consequence of playing sport, women may be facing subtle pressures to conform to traditional social expectations. This pressure to conform may vary according to the type of sport played. In addition, as part of the cultural sporting ethos, Hargreaves (1997) indicated that "sports are viewed as either 'masculine-', and 'feminine-appropriate' because of fiercely defended heterosexist traditions" (p. 171). For example, sports considered to be more 'feminine-appropriate' such as netball, gymnastics and swimming may have less social pressure associated with them when compared to sports considered to be more 'masculine-appropriate' such as many of the football codes. The implications are, that when women play sports identified as being more 'masculine-appropriate' it places pressure on heterosexual women to play the 'feminine game' and stigmatise homosexuality (Hargreaves, 1997).

There are varying levels of acceptability assigned to different sports for women. Depending on the level of acceptability, a corresponding level of social ostracism may exist. For example, within the football codes, soccer, due to its minimal physical contact may be considered to be more acceptable to play when compared to the other football games such as AFL, league and rugby.

Of note, the rugby culture is one that is steeped in the British boarding school tradition where the game of rugby is characterised by acceptable male-to-male contact and is justified as a 'training ground' for middle class men. The game is highly valued as a team-building and masculine socialisation tool, which purports to sanction attitudes and values such as

homophobia and the denigration of women (White & Vagi, 1990). Women have traditionally been excluded from active participation in the game.

One level of female participation in the rugby culture has been described as that of 'domestic servicing' by a number of authors including Thompson (1988), Hargreaves (1997) and Carle and Nauright (1999) who describe the role that women play as that of support for sons and husbands - transporting them to games and practices, cleaning uniforms, and cooking meals. The role of women within the rugby sphere has been traditionally one of provision rather than as an active participant.

However, women are electing to play the sport of rugby, in increasing numbers throughout Australia, Great Britain, Canada, USA, New Zealand and many other Western and Asian countries. Evidence of diverse cultural participation comes from the inaugural Women's Rugby World Cup, held in Wales 1991, when teams from twelve countries participated (Hargreaves, 1997). These women are behaving in a manner that is often regarded as being outside the (rugby cultural) social expectations.

This research investigates a view of women's rugby from a rural perspective. The results are compared and contrasted with previous research that focused on a metropolitan view of the women who elect to play the game of rugby (Carle & Nauright, 1999). Their research focused on a metropolitan club in Brisbane. In the most specific form, this paper addresses the following research questions.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ; What has influenced women to participate in a 'male dominated sport' like rugby?
- ; What has been the perception of the players, of the views significant others, with regard to the desire to participate in rugby?
- ; Is the reaction to women playing rugby the same as the reaction to their participation in other sports?
- ; What is the previous level of experience of the respondents in rugby and sports other than rugby?
- ; Has there been a shift over time away from some sports in favour of others?

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to answer the five research questions centres on descriptions of the participants and instruments. The data analysis plan is included in this section.

## PARTICIPANTS

Questionnaires were administered to female rugby players at a range of locations during the 2001 playing season. Three people distributed the questionnaires to the players. These were the principal researcher, a team manager at the Northern University Games at Townsville and the captain of a women's rugby team. A total of eighty eight questionnaires were distributed and seventy two were returned. This represents a return of 82%.

## INSTRUMENTS

The questionnaire was constructed based on the research questions and the literature. The instrument was piloted with twelve players and the questions were modified to eliminate or minimise ambiguity. The questionnaire was designed to elicit the following information:

- demographic profile of the participants;
- participation history in other sports and level of competition;
- what were the influences on the women to play rugby;
- were there any changes in the type of sport they played over time;
- what was the perceived level of approval of them playing rugby; and,
- is this approval different from other sports.

Following the analysis of data, referred to as 'group data' that was collated from the questionnaire responses - two women were purposefully sampled to be interviewed. The basis for selection for interview was that the two players represented different profiles. One for the women selected comes from a rural background and plays rugby in a metropolitan area and the other player was from a rural area who plays rugby in a rural area. The interviews were conducted on the phone and in person, and they were tape-recorded for later transcription.

#### DATA ANALYSIS PLAN

The questions were designed to measure the relative importance of a range of sociological factors attributable to women playing rugby. The respondents were required to rank, in order of preference, the factors that would account for them playing rugby. The responses to the questionnaire were tabulated. The frequency of the highest ranked response was used to gauge relative importance of factors. Phenomenological interview data were organised to elicit and emphasise the words and meanings (Hycner, 1985). The interview data were subsequently used to compare and confirm the group data trends.

#### RESULTS

In answering the research questions that centre on the participation and motivation to play rugby the methodology involved a survey of post-secondary school competition players. The results are presented in thematic order. The data from the themes were gleaned from the questionnaires. Additionally, where there are data from the interviews of the two case study subjects, (Lee and Sarg) transcript excerpts are presented under the relevant themes. The themes are presented under the headings of the Player Profiles, Influences to Play Rugby, Reactions to Playing Rugby, and Women's Rugby Culture,

#### PLAYER PROFILES

The demographic profiles elicited from the responses from seventy two women playing rugby in the 2001 season showed their average age is 21 years, with a range of 16-46 years of age. Students comprised 82% of the sample and 98% were at the tertiary level - the remaining 2% were senior secondary school students. The metropolitan areas of Sydney and Newcastle comprised 47% of the sample, 31% came from rural cities and 22% of the women were from smaller rural towns. Rural cities were defined as those with a population

of over 20,000. In addition to the group data, the two people involved in the case study; Lee and Sarg are described. A description of the two women interviewed follows.

'Lee' is 26 years of age, currently pursuing postgraduate study at a rural university and has been playing rugby for the past 5 years. She is 182 cm tall with physical attributes that would see her classed as having an ecto-mesomorphic somatotype, that is lean and muscular. Her position as a player within her team is 'second row,' and because of her athleticism, height and knowledge is a key player in the 'lineout.' She is the captain of the team in which she plays ( termed 'Phoenix' in this study ) and is a member of the Club's executive committee. Lee has represented her university at Inter-varsity games.

'Sarg' is 24 years of age and when the interview took place she was employed as a casual teacher. She is also active in the Army Reserve, holding a number of positions including recruiting officer, medical orderly and transport officer. Sarg is 160 cm tall tending towards a mesomorphic somatotype. She has competed in a variety of sports, including cricket where she was the only female player in her rural home town's competition. Her brothers introduced her to sports at an early age. Sarg seems to regard herself as a 'tomboy.' She has been playing rugby for 3 years and was introduced to the team she plays for by her male partner. Her position within the team is 'half back' which requires the qualities of speed, agility, ability to "read a game" and be able to deliver accurate passes. Sarg played for a club given the title of the 'Titans' in this study.

Turning now to the total group, 61% had previous rugby playing experience. Of these, one player was a state representative, 26% had played at University, 19% had played at high school and 16% had played at club level. This is contrasted with 39% who had not played rugby before. Almost half of the sample, 52% had relocated to a centre that facilitated further (tertiary) education.

The majority of the group (76%) concurrently plays more than one sport. The sports played most frequently by this group are touch (32%), soccer (20%), and netball (15%). Not only do these women play other sports, but also a high percentage of them play at the representative or competitive levels. For example, of those women who played touch, 73% were playing competitive level, compared with 44% for soccer and 85% for netball, and 72% for hockey.

In response to the question regarding sports that they no longer played, touch, netball, and tennis were reported as the sports that were most frequently abandoned. More women dropped out of netball (n=29) and more of this group were competitive or representative players (n=24). Touch and tennis had equal numbers drop out (n=17). The data pertaining to the level of competition at which these players were involved showed that twelve players were either representative or competitive for touch, and of the tennis players four reported being involved at a competitive level.

## INFLUENCES TO PLAY RUGBY

Peer influence is the factor that was ranked number one, by the respondents, to the question of 'What influenced you to play rugby'. 'Social reasons' was followed by family influences as the next two factors identified as the reasons for these women to play rugby. These trends are further reinforced by the interview data.

Lee expressed the view that "most women play rugby because they are invited by their peers to come down and have a game. She is invited in." Lee previously competed in track and field - and she commented that " I played some touch - but compared to rugby, I find touch predictable - whereas rugby is more like chess."

Sarg was introduced to the skills of the game by her three brothers, when playing in their backyard and can remember being 'spear tackled' by them. However, it was through her male partner that she was persuaded to play competitive club rugby. In addition, Sarg goes outside the 'traditional feminine' role by being involved in the Army Reserve. Sarg is of the opinion that "whatever a boy is capable of doing then a girl can do it too."

In summary, peers, social factors and parents were the rankings allocated by the respondents in order of influence. The other questionnaire alternatives, including the physical factors of staying fit, improving skills and enjoying body contact - were ranked lower in importance, as an influence, than the social factors identified above. It is interesting to note that the data analysis showed that teachers are ranked last as a reason given for playing any form of sport.

Lee indicated that she played sport because there was a good coach at school (track and field), but her reason for playing rugby was because she went to school and was friends with Joe Roff (Australian Wallaby player). However, she said she "always loved the game from a young age." A chance sighting of a rugby game shown on television, which she watched, when visiting her grandfather in hospital exposed her to the game and she was 'hooked' from then on. She expressed regret that she "couldn't play rugby in high school because there were no coaches willing to help."

Sarg indicated she played the sport because of the influence of her brothers. Sarg came from the same locality as Billy McKidd - also an Australian Wallaby player.

## REACTIONS TO PLAYING RUGBY

Generally, the non-rugby playing peers and friends, of the respondents, were perceived as being happy or thrilled for them to be playing rugby. However, the perceived approval of their friends and peers indicated that 33% were more accepting of them playing other sports. Some of the comments solicited by their friends and family members included 'surprised and shocked,' and some viewed the women playing as 'nuts' or 'crazy.'

Lee's parents were not worried about her playing rugby per se - but objected to the financial commitment and time required to bring her to town to play and practice. This comment applied regardless of the sport she intended to play. Her mother was 'a bit concerned' by the risk of injury to Lee, but this was not of such great concern to Lee, in so much as it prevented her from playing. "I'll be 50 and still playing rugby" Lee was emphatic!

Sarg's mother was concerned about the potential for Sarg to further compound damage to a back injury she sustained through playing rugby. Her mother tried to get Sarg to stop playing but she refused.

Overall, rugby women reported an inconclusive perception about the approval of their friends and peers. This is evident in the contrasting responses of the perception of what their peers reported, with responses that ranged from being 'thrilled' by the fact that they play rugby, but not as approving of rugby to the same degree as their approval given to participation in other sports.

Given the culture of rugby that indicates that involvement in playing the game leads to a team bonding experience and that the strong bonds are formed between the players that carry over to 'off the field experiences' - due to the necessity of teamwork within the game context. Lee said "because individuals do not survive in this game." Perhaps, these strong bonds that are inherent in the game - between the players - may minimise the need for approval from peers who are outside the rugby culture.

## WOMEN'S RUGBY CULTURE

The women's rugby culture centres, and is dependent on, the male clubs. Lee indicated "that there are no independent women's rugby clubs in New South Wales. In all known instances, women's rugby clubs are affiliated to male rugby clubs." This is exemplified by the administrative structure at the Women's Rugby State Organisation (listed on their website) that has four men nominated as the executives. At the local club level the executives are predominantly male. An example of this structure occurs in the 'Titans Women's Rugby Club' that has its own executive, but it must gain 'permission' from the president of the parent 'male' club before any action regarding the day-to-day running of the women's section of club can be enacted. (personal communication, President of the Titans, 2001).

The situation in Lee's team the 'Phoenix' is slightly different. Lee stated that "two female members had been seconded to the committee of the Phoenix Rugby Club in Newcastle and had been allocated roles associated with enticing women to become referees and coaches and to solicit support for their own home ground."

Equal access to facilities and accredited coaches is not apparent for women. At the 'Titans Club' for example, the women are allocated a field for practise, but the men dominated and pushed the women off the field. Their equipment is 'borrowed and rarely returned' and the women tend to practise between fields without access to properly marked fields.

The women at the Phoenix Club thought they were 'lucky' to have games and training fields. The male players and coaches are seen by Lee as "supportive and provide a mentoring role for new players" The men will "come down to the field and stand with a new female player and talk them through the positional play and tactics required during a men's game." Even after the game when they are socialising, the men will offer advice that Lee interprets as "helpful and supportive."

Lee indicated that there was great frustration for the women playing in the Phoenix Club because they do not have an accredited coach and as a consequence, they are not permitted, under Australian Rugby Union's rules, to contest scrums. Other clubs also complained about this situation when they play Lee's club because an integral part of the game was negated, i.e., contesting the scrums. This resulted in frustration for both teams. It is evident that opposing teams must have accredited coaches so this lack of coaching accreditation is not universal among all women's clubs.

Only male referees are available to officiate. In metropolitan areas, the standard of refereeing is high. In the rural areas, the women's clubs must organise their own referees. Generally, the women are happy with the standard of refereeing they receive. Lee says "referees are good and they display a high standard. There is, to my knowledge, only one female ref and she is good." Some of the (male) referees are "sickeningly polite" but "the good ones explain the reasons for their rulings" and "generally the language used by the refs is not condescending." The referees depend on the captains of the team to keep the language standard to a reasonable level and will call on the captain to keep her players in check. This is evidenced when the principal researcher observed a number of high school girls games, during which the referee instructed the male coach to either control his player's language or he would call the game off! Anecdotally, the language difficulty does not appear to be paralleled in male rugby games.

The referees change some competitions remarkably. Of note, at the Northern University Conference Games, (Coffs Harbour, NSW, July 2001), the referees made a blanket ruling that the women could not contest the scrums. This ruling caused great frustration and a degree of resentment as the women players were disappointed by the fact that a major

aspect of the game, for which they trained, was eliminated for reasons they neither understood nor appreciated.

Media coverage of women's rugby is consistent with the reporting of many other women's sports - it is virtually non-existent. Lee indicates that the Newcastle Annual Rugby Program only devoted a couple of lines to the women's games - even though Lee's club was the first to have a victory during its first year of competition. "The program was full of photos and stories that centred on high profile male players." Lee mentioned that "the media is not interested in women's rugby and when they do pay attention it is displayed in a stereotypical view of women as either butch or superfeminine."

Sponsorship is an issue that illustrates a demarcation between the metropolitan and the rural clubs. A 'pub' gave the Newcastle metropolitan club \$5,000 for sponsorship, and that was split equally between the men's and women's teams. This is contrasted with the rural club that were given financial support (because the men go to the sponsoring 'pub') but the women were given a 'bottle of Bundaberg Rum to raffle.' The management of the sponsoring 'pub' indicated that until the women patronize the sponsoring establishment more, there would be no additional financial support.

## SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

As alluded to earlier, survey data indicated that social factors play an important motivational role for women to participate in the rugby culture. This is evident in the fact that women are 'invited' to play, in similar fashion to the way men are indoctrinated into the rugby culture. Lee stated that "outsiders find it impossible to 'come in' (to Rugby clubs)." Rugby men act as conduits for girlfriends to enter clubs and the women therefore can recommend their friends to play.

The socialising that occurs after the weekly game allows for highly valued interactions for women to women and for women to men. Lee stated that "the men are very supportive because they talk to us about our game, they give advice like a forward might say, when you jump, make sure your prop stands back a bit in the lineout." Lee thought this kind of support was "unique to our club because (she) has not seen it before." Lee believes that "the men are getting on board (by saying) they (women) are rugby players - they are not just there just for the piss-up ..."

The way that women are viewed within the club was exemplified at the Presentation Night. There were awards for the women such as the 'Golden Tampon Award.' This was awarded to the woman who was 'in for one week and out for three.' The 'Brothel Award' went to the woman who had the most number of 'male partners' during the season. The 'Oral Sex Award' was for the woman who 'goes down' on everyone. The 'Life Membership to the Ambulance Fund' is for the woman who had the most injuries and the 'Boat Crew' was awarded to women who drank the most alcohol.

These awards, according to Lee "were unique to the women, although the men's awards centred on similar endeavours such as the 'Pisspot Award' and the 'Pickup Award.' The latter was for 'the bloke who got the most chicks. "

Generally, the social interaction at Lee's club centred on male and female relationships, however, there were 'significant homosexual relationships' between the women that the men would appear to 'tolerate.' This was evidenced by the comments made by Lee when she said that "one lesbian relationship ended and one of the women was the focus of attention of a male rugby player who said he 'tried to get her to turn.' The men regard them (the lesbians) as a bit of a laugh."

The social relationships are a pivotal part of the rugby experience. Sexual relationships between lesbians and between heterosexual women and the other members of the club are a strong part in the rugby culture. For example, Lee stated that "unfortunately, what happens in the club doesn't stay in the club." In regard to this statement Lee said she was "dropped in lineout by a woman who was jealous about the relationship Lee had formed with an ex-boyfriend." This 'drop' resulted in a serious ankle injury and was followed up by an attempt to oust Lee from the club.

## DISCUSSION

This research questioned the profile of women who choose to play a sport, such as rugby, which is considered to be at the male-appropriate end of the spectrum. For the seventy-two women surveyed there is a strong sense of playing a game they love. They find this game challenging in terms of the tactics and skills required. These are women who have been competitive in a range of sports. The reactions of peers and family that they are playing a game considered to be male-appropriate, does not seem to be given much credulity. It would appear that the women who were surveyed either don't really see the types of reactions their peers have to women playing rugby, and/or that this reaction is different from other sports they play, or they don't care. The inclusiveness of a range of somatotypes is appreciated.

"Everyone can play - If you have a six foot six inch fat chick with an attitude problem - she can't play touch."

Lee

A strong sense of self-concept may account for such reactions. Furthermore, some of the women who play rugby also are acting outside the socialised role attributed to being 'feminine' in other parts of their lives. Sarg for example is a member of the Armed Forces and was the only woman who played cricket in the local rural town team. Lee doesn't seem to care who says what about her chosen sport - she loves it and anticipates playing when she is fifty years old!

Specifically, these women have adopted the culture that surrounds rugby. They appear to be unquestioning of the male support and endorsement at the club levels. They are in most cases, middle class, tertiary educated, who want better coaches and referees, better access to facilities and be able to play the 'whole game' i.e., contest the scrums.

Women's rugby is the fastest growing female sport in Australia. Rugby was originally not socially or traditionally accepted to play... is now highly supported ... It gives women a chance to show their range of skills and perform in a variety of fields. It gives women a chance to get off the sideline to make the big hits and score the trys, instead of watching their brothers, fathers, boyfriends and mates doing it. Keep it up girls!

(18 year old woman - Hawkesbury).

The 'domestic servicing' of the game seems to have been surpassed by women being involved by playing the game. The women are pleased when they are viewed as 'rugby players' not just 'women playing rugby!' The mentoring role the men provide is regarded as a positive and reaffirming act. They think 'we are lucky' and this is the perception of these women despite the fact that they have 'last use' of the grounds, and some have been marginalised when attempting to get access to equipment and training facilities and jerseys.

Despite the idea that to play a game considered by many to be 'outside the social norm' that places women in a position of curiosity, these women appear to be impervious to the reactions of either their peers, family or the men within the clubs. They don't see it!!! so it doesn't exist and therefore they do as they want - "play like guys, drink like guys - screw around like guys" - accept the awards in the same way men may be viewed... and that's just fine by them.

In response to Varpalotai's assertion that those Women who play sport and elite sport particularly - go outside the social norm - these women do and they stay there! They are athletes - and well educated ones at that - they leave the more 'acceptable' forms of sports even the code of 'touch' for a more strategic and challenging game.

Epilogue:

When Lee was asked about the traditional rugby drinking culture she said "Some women can, (out drink the men) and the men think it is great. I've had marriage proposals for it. One bloke said You smoke, drink schooners of 'Old' and you swear like a trooper, I couldn't find a better woman."

Some women play to 'get a man' and others play to 'get a woman.'

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I saw the bruises last year and thought I had to try it - I haven't regretted it yet - I got more injuries playing social soccer. (19 year old).

First game - fucking loved it!\

Some men don't understand that we can get beat - and still love the game.

... most fun I've ever had playing a sport and I've also made some good life-long friends.

Rugby is a great sport it is just a shame that many other men and women can't see the potential that this sport has for women all over. I hope the sport continues to grow. I don't think I could go back to playing non-contact sport or at least I wouldn't enjoy it as much. (21 year old)

It is sexist that our scrums are uncontested! (21 year old)

Women's rugby is a great sport that needs development - but no one up to now have not been willing - at the grass roots - to put in the effort to develop it. (20 year old).

They think I'm nuts. (46 year old).

I love the sport - the physical and mental challenge. (20 year old)

I play to learn new skills and for the physical and mental challenge (20 year old)

Women's rugby needs much more support at the club level - many teams start up and fold after a season or two - reasons? no coach, not enough numbers not being accepted by men at the club who often don't want women around at their 'boys time' and practice sessions are often disorganised. (20 year old university student).

Women's rugby rocks!