“Game Time is My Time. I Get to Define That:”
Gender, Identity, and the National Football League’s Female Fans

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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August 2014

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of James Robert Yates.
I love and miss you every day.

Scooter

Acknowledgements

Dr. Joy DeSensi: I am forever indebted to you for your guidance and support. When I lost direction and could not see past my own failures, you offered the perfect blend of understanding and encouragement, along with a small kick in the pants. Thank you.

Dr. Lars Dzikus: I still vividly remember the first day I met you. Had you not leapt across the hall, I might have decided to wait for another time. And that time may never have come. Your enthusiasm was and is infectious. You, sir, are a rare gem and I am so fortunate to have met you on this journey.

Dr. Leslee Fisher: On the rarest of occasions, you find yourself in the right place, surrounded by just the right people, at precisely the right time. This happened for me the semester I walked into your Women, Sport and Culture class. Thank you for providing the space and opportunity to express myself, and for agreeing to be part of this experience.

Dr. Trena Paulus: Truth be told, I almost didn't make it through my first semester in your class, but I am so very glad I did. You taught me not only about methods, but also about life. I have such profound admiration and respect for you, and you deserve every one of the accolades and opportunities coming your way. Thank you for helping me grow.

Mom: You are neither football fan nor feminist, but you continue to love and accept me unconditionally. And that is all that ever really matters.

Erin Ellen: You are truly one of the most amazing people I know. Thank you for doing your best to keep me sane all these years. #BABF

Robert Jerrod: No one challenges me or accepts my challenges quite like you. You, my friend, deserve far more than honorary status.

Paul Small: I will never forget how you waited for me to realize what you already knew.

Al Dunkleman: My sociological teammate. Thank you for carrying the load so that I could spread my wings.

To all the friends, family, and colleagues who listened and waited, they say it takes a village. Thanks for being mine.

To those who came and went along the way, this dream was bigger than all of that.

Abstract

Based on existing literature relatively little is known about the female football fan in America. Previous research has acknowledged that these women exist, often in startling proportions. It has also identified some of the reasons why they attend the game and some of the perceived benefits of their participation as fans (Clark, Apostolopoulou, & Gladden, 2009; Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000). Yet we do not know the value they place on their fan identities, nor how they manage to negotiate being both women and fans in a sport environment that both subtly and not-so-subtly continues to reinforce the model of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore how the identities of female fans of the National Football League (NFL) were constructed and negotiated through the language used to describe their experiences. To that end, 35 blog posts from OnHerGame a website dedicated to female sports fans, during the 2012-2013 NFL season were collected and five women who self-identify as National Football League (NFL) fans and currently write for the site were interviewed for this study; in addition, my own bracketing interview (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997) was also included. The resulting data were analyzed using feminist poststructural discourse analysis (FPDA), revealing three major patterns of discourse: a) reproduction, b) resistance, and c) reinscription. Reproductive discourse included language that reinforced hegemonic ideas about football as male space (e.g., women as less knowledgeable and primarily heterosexually interested in the men who play), while resistant discourse was often employed in an effort to defy these stereotyped subject positions (e.g., portraying female fans as competent, knowledgeable and authentic). Though women largely produced these two forms in their online posts, interviews with participants revealed a third pattern whereby female fans reinscribed reproductive discourse practices in an effort to differentiate themselves from other women (e.g., assuming other women do not know, are not interested).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Spectator sports are an integral component of American society's leisure-time activity. Football games of beloved teams are sold out before the season begins, and there is an ever-expanding market for merchandise that displays the symbols of these teams. Indeed, there are many members of society willing to spend a great deal of money, time, and effort in order to participate in the game experience or display their association with it, and this desire is not lost on women. However, a review of literature on the topic of sport spectators/fans would tend to suggest otherwise. Even though sports fandom is an oft-investigated topic, this line of research has tended to ignore *female* fans (Jones, 2008). As this population grows in number, however, their investigation becomes more relevant.

Today, more women follow the National Football League (NFL) than ever before. To put this in perspective, in 2010, the Super Bowl had more *female* viewers than the Academy Awards had in total that same year (Sanserino, 2010). Numbers like these certainly have not escaped the attention of those who stand to profit. Indeed, the discussion of female fans of professional football is a timely one given that the NFL recently launched its second iteration of a marketing campaign specifically targeting women (Ahmed, 2012). Appropriately labeled "Fit for You," the merchandise for sale is designed to fit women's bodies and suit women's interests. Notably, this is the NFL's second attempt; its original strategy, commonly referred to as "shrink it and pink it," attempted to take a man's product, change the color to pink, and shrink it in size (Vega,

2010). While that gimmick may have sold to some, it likely fell short in reaching the large numbers of women who claim to follow the sport

In 2006, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell went on record as saying that the league wanted to court women viewers as a major source of new growth, but it was still working out the best strategy to attract them to a traditionally male-oriented competition (Gershberg, 2006). When ESPN launched its "'sub-brand' called ESPN W" in the fall of 2010, Eleanor Barkhorn of *The Atlantic* suggested it would be "a tricky, potentially problematic task to determine what…women want" (Barkhorn, 2010, para. 8). Moreover, in her study of female fandom and men's professional football in England, (Jones, 2008) similarly queried, "How is it possible to be both a woman and a fan?" (p. 518). This dilemma, predicated on some seemingly inherent conflict, is critical to the research presented here. Historically speaking, women have a long-standing presence as spectators of male-dominated sports, including football; yet, we know so little about these women, or the reasons why they stay committed to a game that does not appear committed to them. Thus, I was inclined to wonder, as feminist theory often does, where were the women in all of this? And further, how could it be possible for women to support an institution and practice that had systematically denied their entry? What would that look like?

Statement of the Problem

Recently, it has been estimated that 64% of U.S. adults watch the NFL, including 73% of men and 55% of women (Braverman, 2011). Moreover, the NFL is consistently ranked as the most popular sport among Americans, with 31% of the population claiming

professional football as their favorite sport; baseball continues to come in second with 17% (Corso, 2011). The NFL currently consists of 32 teams playing in four divisions from cities across the United States; collectively, these teams generated an estimated $8.3 billion in revenue during the 2010-2011 season alone (Badenhausen, 2011). Such numbers provide clear evidence of the massive impact professional football has on members of American society and further validate its position as a social institution worthy of investigation. Furthermore, in this paper I suggest that American football offers a unique context in which to study the influence and implications of gender as this organization has consistently resisted the infiltration of women in a way that most others have not (Burton Nelson, 1994).

To date, however, only a few studies have been conducted which focus on American football and its fans, specifically those who follow the NFL. Clark, Apostolopoulou, and Gladden (2009) conducted an online survey to identify gender differences in consumption of the NFL's Super Bowl; Kraszewski (2008) designed a case study to investigate the role of place in sports fandom, and Duncan and Brummett (1993) explored potential sources of female empowerment within sport media by observing those who consumed it. McDowell and Schaffner's (2011) critical discourse analysis of *The Gender Bowl* (a televised football game staged between men and women) focused on the language of players but not the fans, and Davis and Duncan's (2006) research on fantasy sport league participants utilized only male focus group participants. Thus, the experiences of female fans remains largely unexplored and an opportunity to contribute studies that explicitly emphasize their voices awaits.

From a purely academic standpoint, highlighting women's experience as football fans contributes to a discourse from which they have long been left out. While studies have been done to explore the experience of the female athlete (Fisher, 1997; Finley, 2010; Halbert, 1997; Meàn, 2001), even the female athlete participating in more traditionally masculine and violent sports (Ezell, 2009; Harris, 2005; Theberge, 1995; Young, 1997), the existing literature remains virtually silent when it comes to the experience of the female football fan. What remains to be understood is the lived experience of a woman participating as a fan of American football, a highly male-defined social institution. Still, there is reason to believe this trend of overlooking women's fan experiences may be changing; though the experience of American female football fans remains unexplored, there have recently been a number of qualitative studies which examined female fans of other sports including baseball, hockey, soccer, and rugby (Balfour, 2011; Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Jones, 2008; Pope, 2010). Studies like these are the first step in filling the void. Thus, my intent for this research was to contribute to a growing body of work in sport sociology, within which my specific research interest in (a) fans and (b) female fans was even less prominent.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to explore how the identities of female fans of the National Football League (NFL) were constructed and negotiated through the language used to describe their experiences.

Research Questions

In this study, I adopted a qualitative research approach and used feminist poststructual discourse analysis to address the following research question:

How do female followers of the NFL accomplish being "fan?"

Significance

Why does this matter? One might be inclined to believe that the absence of literature on female fans of American football is not without good cause, that this topic is somehow not suitable for academic inquiry. But it is difficult to accept the idea that this is not a worthy subject when NFL marketers are busy launching targeted campaigns designed to capture this very audience. Indeed, the league as a whole appears interested in finding ways to grab the attention of this female segment of the population. By far one of the most noticeable efforts is the NFL's "Crucial Catch" campaign, widely publicized in conjunction with Breast Cancer Awareness month each October (National Football League, 2010). So, on the surface at least, the league appears attentive to its female fan base. Though the true extent of this interest may be debatable, at a minimum, it seems concerned with cultivating a previously untapped and unrecognized market. Thus, as the NFL works to expand its audience, women appear to hold the key. Given that women account for approximately 73% of U.S. consumer spending, this translates to a great deal of buying power (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009). Consequently, those in the position to effect change are beginning to listen, and the door may finally be open for research which focuses on these women and their experiences.

For social science researchers, however, this study has relevance beyond learning how to sell to an audience, as I attempted to explore the interaction between two salient social constructs: gender and identity. Because football has traditionally been male-dominated and male-defined, women, on the basis of genetics alone, have historically been excluded. "Women…DON'T understand football" (McDowell & Schaffner, 2011, p. 555). But what is more, in American society we largely take it for granted that women don't *want* to understand. As the research of Crabbe, Brown, Mellor, and O'Connor (2006) suggested, women are often depicted as partners to rather than fans in their own right, and any knowledge they acquire is presumably the indirect result of associations with the men in their lives. This, of course, is an unfair assessment, as there are indeed women who choose to follow the game of their own accord. Nevertheless, the game of football is still widely accepted as part of a historically defined male domain which women have little to no interest in challenging. And though we are 40 years post-Title IX, women have rarely been encouraged to participate or take an interest in football the way they have been urged to play basketball, softball, and soccer (see Cahn, 1994; O'Reilly & Cahn, 2007). Moreover, this disparity in participation has arguably translated into an assumed disparity in interest about the game. What is interesting to consider, however, is what happens for those women who decide to challenge the boundary by claiming their own fan identity. Is it possible to be both a woman and an "authentic" football fan? If so, how is this accomplished?

To summarize, based on existing literature relatively little is known about the female football fan in America. Previous research has acknowledged that these women exist,

often in startling proportions. It has also identified some of the reasons why they attend the game and some of the perceived benefits of their participation as fans (Clark, Apostolopoulou, & Gladden, 2009; Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000). But no qualitative study has been conducted to date that seeks to understand the unique elements of their experiences. We do not know the value they place on their fan identities, nor do we know how they manage to negotiate being both women and fans in a sport environment that both subtly and not so subtly continues to reinforce the model of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore how the identities of female fans of the National Football League (NFL) were constructed and negotiated through the language used to describe their experiences.

Theoretical Frameworks Guiding Research on Female Fans

Contrary to this trend, there has recently been a notable increase in the number of qualitative studies published about female fans of other men's professional sports (see Cere, 2002; Kim, 2004; Llopis Goig, 2008). Indeed, many of these reports focus on the game of football (Pope, 2010; Ben-Porat, 2009; Rodriguez, 2005); the complicating factor, however, is that these are fans who follow world football, commonly referred to in the United States as soccer. Certainly, there is a great deal of insight resulting from these studies which may be transferred to the study of fans of American football, but it would be unwise to assume there are not also meaningful points of departure. As previously stated, no known research has been conducted to explore the experience of American professional football fans, specifically those who follow the National Football League. Much of the work that has been done on female fans of men's professional sports,

however, falls into a few frameworks: exploratory, feminist, and grounded theory research.

Pope's (2010) study of football and rugby union fans in Leicester, UK, employed a grounded theoretical approach while claiming a feminist sensitivity. Pope's main objective was to consider both continuity and change among generations of fans in a particular geographic locale. While she classified the research as exploratory, she also utilized a grounded theory approach in developing a model for female types. Mewett and Toffoletti (2011) also used a grounded theory approach to explore female fan socialization and developed four categories to explain how women accomplish fandom in Australian rules football: in-the-blood, learner, convert, and sexually transmitted (STF). Each type was meant to represent a distinct way in which a woman may become a fan. Still other studies have been more exploratory in nature. Cere (2002) approached the study of Italian Ultras from both a feminist and exploratory stance, claiming:

> The single most important thing to note about female football support is its 'invisibility' in Italian society at large…Like the story of witches, uncovered in the last few decades by many feminist researchers as women who did not submit to the will of man and Church, the women ultra are on the whole seen as 'different' because the association of 'women' and 'ultra' is viewed as an unlikely one. (p. 168)

Though the context may be different, the sentiment is certainly one shared here.

Jones's (2008) research on female fans of men's professional football in England was guided by Connell's (2005) framework that suggested, "people practice masculinities

and femininities rather than *having* or *being* them" (p. 518) and her attempt to identify strategies women employ in the setting of a soccer game was largely exploratory in nature. Similarly, Llopis Goig (2008) drew upon Connell's orders of masculinity to depict the construction of masculinity through football. Kim's (2004) reflective essay on the 2002 World cup aimed to position Korean female football fans in relation to the historical event. Ben-Porat's (2009) essay on the changing nature of Israeli football took a case study approach to the game's female fans, examining how they become fans, how they practice fandom as a way of life, and how they behave in the stands. Finally, Rodriguez (2005) published an essay analyzing the media portrayal of female fans in Argentinian football; again, the resulting work was both feminist and exploratory in nature. These studies and more will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Before moving on, however, it is important to note that the label of "feminist research" encompasses an array of approaches, including liberal, radical, critical, and socialist feminisms, all of which "seek to understand and eliminate the oppression of women" (Costa & Guthrie, 1994, p. 235). This study was guided by the principles of postmodern feminism, a position which is "skeptical about the universalizing claims of reason and science, and do[es] not believe that humans, female or male, have the capacity to generate absolute and universal knowledge" (p. 249). It also aligned with third wave feminism and its efforts to deconstruct gendered identities which were understood in this dissertation to be diverse and multiple, performative rather than essentialist, context-specific, and co-constructed (Baxter, 2003). Finally, it was poststructural for its assumption that "language is the place where actual and possible forms of social

organisation and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested" (Weedon, 1997, p. 21), and for its emphasis on women's resistance to and reinterpretation of stereotyped subject positions rather than notions of struggle against a larger system of social subordination (Baxter, 2003).

Delimitations/Limitations

This study was limited to interviews with and online contributions of female NFL fans over 18 years of age who currently blog for a website dedicated to female sport fans. Only those blog posts made available during the 2012-2013 season were included for analysis, and only those bloggers who made their contact information publicly available were approached for interviews. Because of the disperse geographic locations of the participants, interviews were conducted over the phone and via Skype, which potentially impacted our interaction (i.e., limitations). Male fans of the NFL were not included in the data collection process as my intention was to solely focus on the female fan; therefore, their accounts of experience and performance of identity will not be considered here. Moreover, female NFL fans not blogging for OnHerGame during this time were excluded from this study (i.e., delimitations). The findings of this research did not produce data that was generalizable to the larger population of female NFL fans. Instead, I aimed to achieve what Stake (2005) referred to as naturalistic generalizability, where the reader was able to see herself in the work I produce. Nevertheless, Goodman (2008) made a strong case that discursive strategies (e.g., the working up of an identity claim) may be generalizable across multiple contexts.

Definition of Terms

1. Sport: "well-established, officially governed competitive physical activities in which participants are motivated by internal and external rewards" (Coakley, 2009, p. 6).

2. Sports Fans: Broadly defined in existing literature as someone possessing a level of commitment/attachment to the sport, a team and/or its members. Melnick and Wann (2004) define a sports fan as, "a person with an abiding interest in sports" (p. 1).

3. Gender: Socially constructed categories (i.e., masculine, feminine) that vary both across and within cultural groups. Gender is not something that one is, but rather something that one does (Butler, 1988).

4. Hegemonic masculinity: "the culturally idealized form of masculine character that emphasizes the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness, as well as the subordination of women and marginalization of gay men" (Nylund, 2004, p. 139). In contemporary American society, this system privileges White, middle-class, heterosexual men.

5. Qualitative research: "The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process…of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (Merriam, 2009, p. 14).

6. Feminist theory: Emphasizes the implication of gender in systems of power and privilege. Though not one cohesive approach, feminists are collectively invested in the struggle to end sexist oppression (hooks, 2004).

7. Poststructuralism: A "plurality of theoretical positions" which resist universal explanations and emphasize contested meanings as well as the discursive construction of identity (Baxter, 2003, p. 6).

8. Discourse: According to Foucault (1972), discourses are "practices that systematically form the object of which they speak" (p. 49). Moreover, "discourses are forms of knowledge or powerful sets of assumptions, expectations and explanations, governing mainstream social and cultural practices" (Baxter, 2003, p.7)

Organization

In Chapter One, I provided the background and context for the study, stated its problem and purpose, explained its significance, delineated the research questions, offered a review of relevant theoretical frameworks, noted the limitations and delimitations of this work, and highlighted some key definitions. In Chapter Two, I will review the existing literature on sports fans, including the ways they are currently defined and classified, as well as the intersection of gender and fandom, before turning to specifically focus on the institution of American professional football.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, I offer a review of the literature around gender and sport. I begin with an expanded discussion of the terms "sport," "fan," and "gender," before commencing a discussion of the particular position of women as sports fans. In order to provide context for the research, I examine how fandom has previously been measured and categorized, explain the concept of gender as a performance, prior to combining the two ideas. I then provide a historical review of women as spectators followed by a depiction of the specific relationship of gender and American professional football. The chapter concludes with a discussion of theoretical frameworks.

Sport

Sports, as generally defined by Coakley (2009) are "well-established, officially governed competitive physical activities in which participants are motivated by internal and external rewards" (p. 6). While acknowledging there may be some variation among individual definitions, most scholars agree on these main elements. Coakley used this definition in an effort to distinguish sport from other activities, most notably play (an activity engaged in for its own sake) and spectacle (a performance intended to entertain others). With regard to modern day American professional sports, one would be hard pressed to argue that athletes participate solely for the purposes of play; on the other hand, in their present form, quite a few might contend they walk a fine line between sport and spectacle.

Alternatively, one might define sport by asking the following questions:

1) What activities are defined as sports in a particular group or society?
2) Whose sports are most strongly supported and funded, especially with public facilities and money?
3) Who is advantaged and disadvantaged by the accepted definition of sports and the priorities used to allocate resources to sports? (Coakley, 2009, p. 8)

For the purposes of this paper, American professional football as practiced by the National Football League (NFL) was considered an appropriate answer to these questions and was therefore explored further. Subsequently, this examination lent itself to a discussion of one particularly disadvantaged group: women.

American Football

In 2011, the average in person attendance at a NFL game was 67,394 (West, 2012). This statistic, however, does not account for the millions of at home viewers who follow the game from afar. Yet football, as it is practiced today, has a relatively brief history in the United States. A product of cultural diffusion, it was originally inherited from England's rugby, a game popular in the late 19th century among middle and upper class men (Reisman & Denney, 1951; Burton Nelson, 1994). Locally, the game was taken up at the collegiate level by Ivy League institutions engaging in a style of play that most closely resembled soccer (or "world football"), with the first "official" game reportedly taking place on November 6, 1869, between Princeton and Rutgers. At that time, "young men—all white, Protestant, and from the upper class" played the game (Rader, 2009, p. 84). Indeed, "until the 20th century, college football remained a distinctively upper-class sport" (Rader, p. 85).

Furthermore, in its original inception, football was a place for young men to channel their excessive and sometimes aggressive energy while learning skills that would better prepare them for life (Rader, 2009). Walter Camp, in fact, once described football as "a gentleman's game" (p. 85). Yet many of the rules have changed since that first game in 1869; a line of scrimmage was established, forward passes were approved, and downs and distance were negotiated. "If not revolutionary, the cumulative rule changes…did mark the beginning of the 'modern' game of football" (Rader, p. 182). And it is this "modern," more aggressive, version that provides the backdrop for this paper.

Still, it is important to note that the origins of professional football were remarkably different than its collegiate counterpart. The professional version of the game first arose in the small towns of western Pennsylvania and Ohio, by way of local clubs and a few interested individuals playing primarily on Sunday afternoons (Rader, 2009). The men who first played the game were largely working-class, blue-collar laborers who needed to schedule the games around their professions. "Unlike college football, the ambience of the pro sport was ethnic, Catholic, and working class" (Rader, 2009, p. 261). Nevertheless, both versions of the game shared one resounding similarity; they were, and continue to be, almost entirely male.

Sports Fans

In order to adequately address the topic at hand, it may also be worthwhile to more clearly explain a number of terms, including "fan" and "identity" before proceeding. According to Guttman (1986) "the terms overlap but are obviously not identical" (p. 6). Being a spectator *may* be a necessary but not sufficient factor in

becoming a fan, but it is also possible that one may be a fan in the absence of this practice. For the purposes of this discussion, the terms are used interchangeably, as it would be almost impossible to ascertain the entire range of definitions employed in previous research.

Moreover, the concept of "fan" is not consistently defined in sport literature. In a Scarborough Marketing report (2010), a sports fan was anyone who attended, watched, or listened to a game over the course of a year. In the work of Dietz-Uhler. et al. (2000), being a fan meant "attending, watching, and cheering at sporting events, preferably in the company of family and friends" (p. 227). Jones (1997) suggested, "fans will have more intensity [than spectators] and will devote part of every day to the team or the sport itself (Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008, p. 18). Meanwhile, Hirt, Zillman, Ericksin, and Kennedy (1992) claimed that being a fan entails a great deal of emotional significance. In other words, what set fans apart from spectators in this case is the degree of passion. Still other studies left the definition open to interpretation and allowed participants to self-identify (Clark et al., 2009). Thus, it appears there is no universally agreed upon definition for fan, even less so for female fan, though researchers working in this area generally concur that this identity includes some element of commitment to the sport, the team and/or its members. Yet, despite the apparent lack of consensus, male behavior remains the standard by which all others are measured and compared. When women are mentioned, they are widely characterized a less authentic and committed than their male counterparts (Ben-Porat, 2009; Clark et al., 2009; Crabbe et al., 2006; Jones, 2008).

In its most general sense, a person's identity is comprised of the meanings attached to the self by one's self and others (DeLamater & Myers, 2011). These identities are often linked to the social roles one enacts (i.e., gender) and the groups to which one belongs (i.e., football fan). For Wann and Pierce (2003), identity was discussed as a psychological attachment that could be measured in terms of degrees. "The role of team follower is a central component of the self-identity of highly identified fans; for lowly identified fans, the role of team follower is only a peripheral component of their self-concept" (Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000, p. 199). Still other scholars emphasize a more social construction of identity. For example, the Social Identity (SI) perspective (Krane & Barber, 2003) accounts for both individual and social sources of identity, while paying particular attention to the social context from which a given identity emerges. Both approaches, however, acknowledge the implications of a person's identity on her subsequent behavior (see Dietz-Uhler, et. al., 2000; Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008).

Measuring fandom

Researchers in one of the more prevalent areas of academic research related to fandom have attempted to categorize fans based on "objective" criteria such as strength of commitment, longevity, and emotional attachment (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). To that end, a number of measures have emerged which aim to delineate between highly-identified and less-identified sports fans. Maybe the most foundational instrument of its kind is Wann and Branscombe's (1993) Sports Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS). A seven-item, Likert-scale questionnaire, the SSIS asks respondents to rank their responses to questions about attendance patterns, player

recognition, and time/monetary investment on a scale from 1 (low identification) to 8 (high identification). More recently, Wann (2002) developed the Sport Fandom Questionnaire (SFQ), a five-item Likert-scale survey which focuses on general sports fandom and produces results much like the SSIS. The higher a person's resulting score on the SFQ, the greater the degree of fandom. Similarly, the Psychological Commitment to Team Scale (PCT) is a 14-item, Likert scale instrument addressing comparable constructs in an effort to assess "the strength of fans' commitment to a particular sports team" (Mahoney, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000, p. 21). Again, the objective of each is to delineate between varying degrees or levels of fan identity. Consequently, these scales are often employed in research as a measure for comparison when investigating behavioral outcomes (Wann, Royalty & Roberts, 2000; Wann, Schinner & Keenan, 2001; Wann & Zaichkowsky, 2009).

While these instruments are no doubt useful as tools for segmenting a population, they fall short of providing the kind of detail and nuanced depiction of what it means to be a fan. Providing participants with a predetermined list of items and limited response options restricts the range of what they are allowed to share. How can we be certain these are the most important elements in any one individual's fan identity? Moreover, the instruments cited above have been consistently administered to college students, and the results from this sample cannot be taken as representative of fans across age groups. This is particularly interesting given what is known about a female sports fan's "career" and how it is implicated by domestic responsibilities in ways that men's are not (Pope, 2010). In other words, life changes (i.e., marriage, parenthood) tend to place greater constraints

on the leisure time pursuits of women, but not men, in traditional familial arrangements. Finally, though respondents have been both male and female, and biological sex has been considered as a factor with regard to fan identity, recent research has indicated that gender role orientation, or a person's conception of herself as feminine, masculine, or some combination thereof (Hoffman & Borders, 2001) is a better predictor of sports fandom (Wann, Waddill, & Dunham, 2004). However, this gender role orientation has been assessed using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (1974). Though the case has been made that this remains a valid instrument for measuring masculinity and femininity, the outdated nature of the assessment may be cause for concern.

A Fan Typology

Building off these previous endeavors, Giulianotti (2002) suggested there are four ideal types of spectator identity that can be found in contemporary society: supporters, followers, fans and flaneurs. Though this taxonomy was developed by studying fans of world football (soccer), he argued the classification system holds true in other sport settings as well. "In North America, elite baseball, basketball, American football, and, to a lesser extent, ice hockey have all undergone extensive commodification and remarketing, resulting in different and new kinds of spectator relationships to the clubs" (p. 26).

Giulanotti's (2002) classification system centered on two axis: traditional-consumer and hot-cold. Supporters were characterized as both traditional and hot. People in this category had a long-term personal and emotional investment in the club (team). Followers were said to be traditional and cool. They were "followers of clubs, players,

managers, and other football people" and their connection to the game was often mediated through electronic sources (p. 34). Fans, on the other hand, were hot consumers, or those modern spectators who were susceptible to and swayed by celebrity; their fan identity was validated almost entirely through product consumption. Finally, flanuers were both cold and modern. People in this category were the least committed types; they were window shoppers and lived only in the moment. They followed the "hot" team or athlete, moving from one to the next with no sense of obligation to any one in particular.

Interestingly enough, though gender was not an express concern of Giulanotti's (2002) work, he did make the following comments: "in it's contemporary manifestation, I would suggest the flaneur is less gender specific" and "the football flaneur may tend to be more male than female, but not by definition" (pp. 39-40). As this was the only mention made of gender, however, he essentially left the door open for the reader to interpret women as neither traditional nor hot, but rather less committed than their male counterparts. Or, as Free and Hughson (2003) pointed out, setting up categories of fans based on traditional (more authentic) and consumer (less authentic) criteria "*performatively* reproduced the gendered opposition of 'active' men and 'passive' women" (p. 146). Further, Pope (2010) reiterated "these 'new' fans are often assumed to be *female*, and consequently this seems to have impacted upon much of the existing research on sports fandom, which either seems to invisibilise the experiences of female fans or else excludes them only as inauthentic, consumer fans" (p. 34). The assumption here is that "new" fans are necessarily less authentic types who do not posses more traditional geographic or familial bonds to a team.

Fan Socialization

Previous research has also explored the role of socialization in the development of a team attachment for women and found that many female fans say they learned about sport, and subsequently about how to be a fan, either from their fathers or through their involvement with their (male) children's sports participation (Rosenberg, 2010). This is an interesting insight considering Eastman and Land's (1997) observation that "effectively enacting the role of sports fan is widely understood as evidence of masculinity. Young males copy the behaviors and attitudes of older fans as part of learning to be men" (p. 171). So what sense can be made of women who learn to love the game? Are they also learning to be men?

Ben-Porat (2009) posited there are two primary male figures that impact women's participation as fans: fathers and boyfriends. Often, when a female becomes a fan at a young age, it is attributable to the influence of her father; when a woman becomes a fan as an adult, it is frequently because her significant other is also a fan. The "socialization of a young girl into a football fan is dependent on…family, teachers, and peers. However, being a female fan is not fait acompli" (p. 887). Further, it has been implied that a sporting event provides women with an entertaining atmosphere in which they can fulfill a social need (Bush, Bush, Clark & Bush, 2005). Women are interested in the game, but they are also interested in the people they go to watch and watch with, beyond the confines of any particular event. And while they do tend to watch sporting events in the presence of male company, one can only begin to speculate as to the many varied reasons why (Ben-Porat, 2009).

Fan Motivation

Another substantial area of research on American sports spectators has focused on motivation, or an attempt to understand why fans behave in the ways they do. Drawing on the previous work of Sloan (1989), Trail and James (2001) contend "sport spectators may be further categorized along a continuum ranging from mere observers of a sporting event to highly committed fans" (p. 109). In their 2001 work, Trail and James considered the validity and reliability of several previously constructed scales for measuring sport fan motivation and found each lacking. Building off of Wann's (1995) Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS), Milne and McDonald's (1999) Motivations of the Sport Fan Consumer instrument (MSC), and Kahle's (1996) Fan Attendance Motivations (FAM) measure, Trail and James constructed the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC), a 27-item assessment focused on nine key factors: achievement, acquisition of knowledge, aesthetics, drama/eustress, escape, family, physical attractiveness of participants, the quality of the physical skill of the participants and social interaction (Trail & James, 2001).

In this study, surveys were administered to 275 season ticket holders of one major league baseball team; yet, gender was not considered in the interpretation of results. It is unknown how many of the respondents were male or female, nor how or in what ways their responses on the assessment items may have been similar or distinct. This omission is particularly noteworthy given the inclusion of "family" as a factor on the questionnaire, as women have been shown to be particularly interested in the social element of the game experience (Clark et al., 2009). Participants were asked to agree or disagree with the

following items using a 7-point Likert scale: 1) I like going to game [sic] with my family; 2) I like going to games with my spouse; and 3) I like going to games with my children. Because gender was not addressed as a variable, the reader is left to presume the reported statistics are reflective of for both men and women. Given what is known about some women and their connection to family, it is entirely feasible that these results may be different if controlled by gender.

Gender

A great deal of attention has been paid to the terms "sex" (i.e., female and male) and "gender" (i.e., feminine and masculine) in the preceding sections, and I turn now to expand the discussion around those concepts. Gender, as it will be applied here, is a socially constructed, performed, and reinforced identity which actually has little, if anything, to do with a person's anatomical sex categorization. The position taken in this paper is therefore in line with Butler's (1988) call to be "critical of naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality that assume the meaning of women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology" (p. 520). Being identified as biologically "male" or "female" does not, consequently, indicate a direct correlation with the presentation of "masculine" or "feminine" characteristics. The terms "masculine" and "feminine" are, in fact, socially constructed categories that vary both across and within cultural groups (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is not something that one is, but rather something that one does; or as Connell (2005) explained, masculinities and femininities are "configurations of practice" (p. 72). Moreover, as Wheaton and Tomlinson (1998) asserted, defining "masculinity and femininity as separate and

dichotomous entities ignores the process through which power relations between men and women are constructed, negotiated, and contested" (p. 254).

A Performance

To expand this point further, I draw primarily upon the works of Judith Butler as well as Candace West and Don Zimmerman which describe gender not as an essentialized, internal or biological trait, but rather as a socially constructed identity. For Butler, gender "is real only to the extent that it is performed," and, does not, therefore, reflect some inner nature (Butler, 1988, p. 527). Thus, the ways in which we present ourselves externally is absolutely all there is; gender is performative rather than expressive, and "these attributes efffectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal" (p. 528). In other words, one does not behave in a certain manner because s/he is inherently male or female; rather s/he is deemed masculine or feminine because of the ways s/he "performs."

Yet, the range of these performances is not without bounds. "There is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that gives those terms the intelligibility they already have" (Butler, 1990, p. 148). People are, therefore, constrained by their understanding of what is possible. Hence, while the performance of gender as Butler conceived it allows for individual agency, it also acknowledges the constraint of one's social and cultural context. The potential to challenge mainstream, traditional, and dominant notions of masculinity and femininity exists, but only to a point. For example, in Jeanes' (2011) study of preadolescent girls participating in football, she noted that performing gender acts outside of a heterosexual matrix "is a risky process for

women who face accusations of being ‘not normal’ or not real women” (p. 405). Or, as Layton (1998) characterized it, the performances are not happenstance. Instead, the gender norms of one’s cultural group dictate what can and cannot be done, whom one identifies with, even whom one can love. The performance also requires a rejection of the “opposite” or that which lies outside these culturally prescribed limits. “Identity is based as much on disidentifications as on identifications” (p. 50).

Still, this depiction of gender is one that allows for multiple, fluid, and changing categories; indeed, there may be many variations of gender which exist on a spectrum rather than as distinct, dichotomous categories (Jeanes, 2011). However, “the act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (Bulter, 1988, p. 526). In the continual reenactment of limited interpretations, these performances become embedded as cultural norms and are subsequently understood as part of a “natural” gender order (Krane, 2001). Indeed, Krane contended that part of this script entails a heterosexist assumption, that “performing femininity encompasses performing heterosexuality” (p. 121). What does this mean for female fans? Previous literature has leveled a critique of women who “sexualize” the game by overtly focusing on the male body (Rubin, 2009); yet, how can they perform a socially appropriate femininity without crossing a line which invalidates their authenticity as fans? Moreover, Krane (2001) claimed that “females in sport know the social expectations of appearing feminine and the repercussions of not appearing feminine” (p. 121). Can the same be said of female fans of sport? Furthermore, some acts of gender performance are understood to be involuntary, but require individuals to make a

deliberate effort to appear "normal" (i.e., heterosexually feminine). Are female fans engaging in these types of behaviors, and if so, what are they?

To summarize, Butler's notion of gender performance clearly places gender identity outside the individual, the result of a collaboration among actor and audience. "As a public action and performative act, gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual" (Butler, 1988, p. 526). Individuals may express agency in their performance, but this agency is limited in scope. Those who challenge the boundaries of the social norm risk facing "punitive consequences" (Butler, 1990, p. 139). It is a complicated and complex process which goes far beyond the confines of anatomical sex. "The idea of gender as performative analytically foregrounds agency of individuals in the construction of gender, thus highlighting the situational fluidity of gender; here, conservative and reproductive, there, transgressive and disruptive" (Messner, 2007, p. 16). There is opportunity and there is limitation. The performance of gender in one setting may reinscribe existing notions of femininity; in another, it can challenge those same ideas. Or, as Butler (1988) herself put it, "Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure" (p. 531).

Doing Gender

Though Butler's work is often considered key to any discussion of gender performance, other theorists have contemplated these ideas as well. Most notably, West and Zimmerman (1987) outlined a model of gender performance that is a) context dependent, b) collectively created; and c) socially/culturally determined. To begin, an

individual's performance is shaped by the social structures in place, including religious and educational institutions, as well as the family unit. Thus, the performance of masculinity or femininity may be valued more or less in one context than it would be in another. "Simply put, institutional and organizational norms play a significant role in shaping the behaviors of members" (Sallee & Harris III, 2011, p. 413). West and Zimmerman also posit that gender performance is the collective property of groups (Connell, 1987). That is to say that individuals collaborate in the production of a group norm. Still, it is often the case that one way of doing gender tends to dominate over all other configurations in a group (e.g., hegemonic masculinity). Individuals may choose not to conform to the dominant standards, but these challenges are often met with negative sanctions from the group. Still, over time, an accumulation of encounters may potentially initiate change (Sallee & Harris III, 2011). Finally, West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest that the performance of gender is culturally regulated. In this sense, acts of policing and regulating gender are also performed by an individual's peer group(s), as these people are often in position to administer the most immediate and personal sanctions for departing from the norm.

West and Zimmerman (1987) "conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating the most fundamental divisions of society" (p. 126). They further support the idea that people's actions are often influenced by their desire to avoid social sanctions; in other words, individuals engage in a deliberate attempt to manage the impression they present so that the outcome is favorable. If they elect to challenge the

existing norm, they do so with an awareness of the possible repercussions. If individuals have been properly socialized, that is, if they understand how to properly perform their gender according to the cultural standards, their actions ultimately serve to reproduce and legitimate the current gender order. If they fail in this act, it is the individual, not the institution, which will be held accountable (e.g., She may be labled a "bad" person. It may be assumed he does not know how to behave. Someone may call her a "bitch"). Yet, the social order we so readily draw upon to measure these performances will not be called into question. It is the person who has the problem, not the system. "Gender is a powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category" (p. 147). As long we continue to subscribe to such notions, we will continue to reproduce the same results.

Still, this does not mean there is no room to develop alternative gender performances; indeed, many individuals may elect to combine elements of both traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" roles, as well as other variations, in their self-presentation. While claiming a "feminine" identity outside of the sporting context, women may also engage in some effort to downplay their femininity, or at least not to emphasize it, when enacting the role of "fan." To be considered "one of the guys" in these situations may be an accomplishment they take pride in achieving. This leads me to wonder, if gender is what one does, rather than who one is, what exactly are the implications for women (i.e., female football fans) who participate in traditionally male-dominated spaces? As Laberge and Albert (2000) attest, "cases of women venturing into men-dominated fields…constitute rich social facts that can shed light on key issues about

the dynamics peculiar to the construction of gendered social life and gendered identitites" (p. 195). What is more, it leads me to acknowlege that when I ask "How are the 'female' and 'fan' identities negotiated?" I am ultimately seeking to understand how a woman orients herself in a given situation.

Female Masculinity

One version of alternative performance which has been addressed in the literature is "female masculinity" (Halberstam, 1998). The term was originally coined by Halberstam in her analysis of Drag Kings (Francis, 2010), but is understood today to incoporate various forms, including transexuality, which challenge the boundaries of traditional gender and sexuality concepts (Cooper, 2012). At its core, the definition involves "masculinity without men" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 17) and "is used to account for, and render legitimate, female performance traits and desires normally attributed to males" (Boyle, Millington, & Vertinsky, 2006, p. 101). Using a traditional binary classification model, these traits range from characteristics such as physical strength, power, and speed to courage, independence, and bravery, or any number of other features which run contrary to the idea of women as fragile, weak, and submissive. For example, Boyle et. al. (2006) described the main character Maggie in the film *Million Dollar Baby* as a transgressive figure who embodied an unconventional gender performance. As a female boxer, the character accomplished female masculinity in her quest to make a name for herself in a male-dominated sport. She was competitive, aggressive, physically capable, and refused to shy away from pain and injury (Boyle, et. al., 2006). Similarly, the character of Brandon Teena, a female-to-male transsexual in *Boys Don't Cry*

exhibited a female masculinity which blurred "the conventional boundaries of sexual identity and open[s] a space to experience gender and sexuality as performative rather than biologically assigned" (Cooper, 2012, p. 363). In both of these instances, the enactment of an alternative femininity threatened to "destabilize binary gender systems" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 29).

Further, it has been suggested that another feature of female masculinity, one particularly pertinent to the study of female football fans, is a refusal to remain on the sidelines. For women participating as athletes, this is meant to be understood in the most literal sense. For female fans, however, the implication is no less direct. Historically, the *only* place for women in football has been on the sidelines (or in the stands), as cheerleaders, family, and friends. However, the presumption has also been that women's performance in these roles was less serious, less authentic, and less informed than men who occupied the same. "Few areas of contemporary society construct dualism of gender and sexuality and maintain heterosexual dominance more vigorously than sport" (Walk, 2000, p. 31). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that this dualism is not just present on the field, but off of it as well. So, how does a woman perform "fan" in a way that gets her off the sidelines? Does she adopt a male model? As Walk's (2000) research on women student trainers indicates, "though some researchers have found that women in male-dominated sport have been able to carve out pockets of resistance to masculine hegemony (Theberge, 1995; Young, 1997)…most women in this study had to accommodate to an androcentric environment" (p. 45). Is this what women who aspire to be "just one of the guys" are doing? What would a pocket of resistance look like? According to Paechter

(2006), "a rejection of the feminine goes along with identification with the boys, with the adoption of a form of hegeonic masculinity and a claiming of a share of male power through acting as an honorary boy" (p. 257). Is this the necessary tradeoff?

Still, there are those who would criticize the underlying assumptions of applying such a label as "female masculinity," primarily on the grounds that it reinforces the very binary classification system it professes to work against. According to Francis (2010), gender performance is complex, and if gender is not an essentialist characteristic, if there are multiple forms of masculinity and femininity, then identifying those instances of female masculinity become more difficult. "This problem of shifting definitions is exacerbated by our inability to define either masculinity or femininity except in relation to each other and to men and women" (Paechter, 2006, p. 254). If gender is not about the body but the performance, then any attempt to classify those acts runs the risk of stereotyping and/or reifying the existing gender binary. In the complicated labeling process, what is the reference point? Is it still that what is feminine is the opposite of, or absence of, what is masculine and the reverse? Yet, as problematic as it may sound, "this is precisely what is demanded by any empirical analysis of gender performance" (Francis, 2010, p. 478).

To illustrate the complexity, Gardiner (2009) considers the work of C. J. Pascoe in *Dude, You're a Fag* (2007), pointing out that:

> Pascoe's category of female masculinity…may be seen as at least in part a result for the desire for an alternative gender position bound neither by gender

> normativity nor by heterosexuality, although still located within the binary grids of boys/girls, masculine/feminine, and dominant/submissive. (p. 625)

The young girls in this study make efforts to masculinize the body by minimizing their breasts and referring to their genital area as their "jock" (Gardiner, 2009). Yet this type of behavior seems to replace "feminine" with "masculine" rather than creating a new space for expression. Rather, it would appear that these girls aspired to be more like the boys, supporting Harris's (2005) claim that "the attribution of masculinity is always valued over a debased and rejected femininity" (Gardiner, 2009, p. 629). In her conclusion, Gardiner asserts that the forms of female masculinity illustrated in Pascoe's work reflect a form of "androgyny that continues to privilige the masculine, as female participants can appropriate to themselves…some masculine prerogatives while still retaining female identity" (p. 632).

It is perhaps the case that this is exactly what female fans of American football do as well. In a highly male-defined setting such as this, it is entirely possible that they employ those "masculine" characteristics that privilege their entry into the group while attempting to retain their "female" identity. In Collins's (2002) work on feminism and aerobics, she discusses the feminine apologetic where women compensate for athleticism by emphasizing their femininty and the "feminist apologetic" (Wughalter, 1978) where women participating in a feminine sport feel inclined to reiterate their feminist orientation. Based on the findings from a pilot study I conducted, neither of these strategies accurately depicts the behavior of the NFL's female fans. They do not appear to be accentuating their "femaleness" nor asserting their feminist positions. Instead, they

seem to aspire to be "one of the guys" while still being recognized distinctly as "one of the girls." This accomplishment, of course, requires quite a balancing act if we are limited to an understanding of gender that offers only two distinct categories. Using this schema, a woman can fail to achieve that middle ground if she exaggerates her performance in either direction. If she behaves too much like one of the guys, her gender and/or sexuality may be called into question. However, if she behaves too much like one of the women, it is much more likely that her fan identity will be rendered inauthentic. To that end, Rubin (2009) wrote:

> In a sense, football's defense against women is foolproof; if a woman finds sexual expression in watching football, then she is not a real fan; if, on the other hand, she demonstrates full knowledge and enjoyment of the game for its own sake, well, then she is not a real woman. (p. 71)

It is certainly possible that she employs many of the same identity management strategies identified in Collins's (2002) research, including distancing and asserting agency. Paechter (2006) further suggested that distancing from femininity can be a claiming of power, and this may indeed be true given this particular set of circumstances.

Harris (2005) noted that, "There is a complex relationship between participating in a perceived male sport and constructing an appropriately feminine, heterosexual identity" (p. 195). Indeed, Halbert (1997) argues that while women who participate in other male-dominated arenas may be considered nontraditional, "the label of *deviant* is often highlighted among women in athletics" (p. 11). My concern here is that the focus has too long been only on the female athlete, and has not fully considered the plight of

women who participate in the sport in other ways. Still, it is not my intent to pit the two against each other; as with previous examples of women navigating male-dominated terrain, it is highly likely that there is more similiarity among than difference to be found between the two. The bigger issue, it would appear, is in how we define and label the concepts.

In an attempt to simplify a very complex process, much can be lost. Finley (2010) claimed that "women likely negotitate among *multiple* femininities and the ways they do and do not complement masculinities in gender relations" (p. 362). Rather than working to expand the concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" so that they are more inclusive, perhaps a better solution would be to adopt Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia. As it applies to gender, heteroglossia indicates that individuals are more accurately depicted as a blend, who posses traits of both genders and fall somewhere in the middle, occupying a space that is less easily categorized. Conceiving of gender in this way would allow us to better understand those "that do not 'fit' the monoglossic gender-sexuality order…and the contradictory productions that I maintain inevitably characterise all performances of gender" (Francis, 2010, p. 480). Nevertheless, while such an idea has the potential to be incredibly liberating for some, there remains reason for caution. Finley (2010) suggests that "in scenes that are disproportionately dominated by men or where men control the resources to classify women and femininity, it may be hard to build alternative femininities that do not reproduce male dominance" (p. 366). Given the deeply entrenched nature of football as "male domain," consider female fans challenged.

Gender and Fans

To better understand the unique circumstance of female spectators in contemporary American society, I turn now to offer a brief historical overview of their presence in the stands. This synopsis suggests that the phenomenon is not nearly as novel as some might assume. Indeed, women have actively followed sport for centuries. Yet, this does not mean her participation has been uncomplicated and unrestrained. Despite historical evidence to the contrary, the image of sport as a "man's game" persists and women remain relegated to the sidelines.

A Woman's Place is in the Home

> If one examines what has been written about contemporary sports fans by Marxists, Neo-Marxists, and non-Marxists…one finds an indictment which can be summed up as follows: (1) *Sports spectators are essentially passive.* They do not participate actively in sports. They are, in economic terms, consumers rather than producers of the spectacle. (Guttman, 1981, p. 6)

Given this definition, one might presume that only in this capacity could women fulfill their socially appropriate role. Indeed, G. Stanley Hall (1904) said a woman "performs her best service in her true role of sympathetic spectator rather than as a fellow player" (p. 207). Yet these comments offer an incomplete picture. In order to fully understand the role of women as fans, one must also consider the dictates of the prevailing gender order at any historical time point. Prior to the late 20th Century in America, women's socially appropriate place was meant to be in the home, not at the ballpark. Moreover, the game became a "refuge from femininity [and] domesticity" for the predominantly male

audience (Rader, 2009, p. 38). In addition, women were "presumed to be more delicate and sensitive than men…to cultivate compassion, gentleness, piety, and benevolence" (Rader, p. 24). These were not the qualities that would ultimately become associated with either competitive sports or its spectators. Women who concerned themselves with, or participated in, such spheres "violated every Victorian standard of feminine propriety". (Rader, p. 32)

This emphasis on the domestic sphere for women is not a new development. "The sports spectators of Roman and Byzantine times were men more often than women if for no other reason than the traditional Roman emphasis upon the domestic role of wife and mother" (Guttman, 1981, pp. 16-17). Given how long these ideas have been around, one can better understand why women are often largely presumed to be less informed, less knowledgeable and ultimately less dedicated fans. In addition to their obligations at home, women of respectable social standing were neither historically expected to nor even allowed to participate in the more violent contact sports. If women did not and could not compete, they could not fully understand. This notion still lingers, even as we enter the 21st century, a time when women are, for the most part, no longer similarly constrained. Indeed, it remains so pervasive that it continues to shadow women's experience today.

In more recent American history, Rader (2009) claimed that while sports have greatly impacted American attitudes about race and religion, "The equal opportunity in sports…did not, however, extend to women. Women were almost always depicted in supportive roles—as cheerleaders, girlfriends, or mothers" (p. 240). But with the advent

of radio and ultimately television, even from the "sidelines," women were able to fashion their own relationship to the game. Working within the confines of their domestic roles, women could listen to and then watch the game; as a result, one could make a strong case that this technology played a significant part in further facilitating their involvement. If "television could provide experiences unavailable to fans in the stands or radio listeners," (p. 252) then the women at home may have been the primary beneficiaries. Though they may not have always been welcome in the stands, radio and then TV allowed women to experience the game in their own space. "Watching the games filled a gap in the lives of many Americans…[and] television helped the novice fan understand and appreciate the intricacies of the sport" (p. 263). Thus, one cannot ignore the implications of sports being broadcast to the women at home.

A Historical Precedent

That is not to say, however, that women never attended the actual games themselves. Evidence of their participation can be found as far back as Rome's Circus Maximus where "contrary to Greek custom, men and women sat together" (Guttman, 1981, p. 10). In 16th century Renaissance Italy, gentlemen were encouraged to dress well as "the fairest ladies of the City" would be in attendance to watch the games (Guttman, 1986, p. 51). During the 17th century, Queen Elizabeth was reported to have enjoyed the sport of bearbaiting so much, in fact, that "she prohibited theaters from performing plays on Thursdays" because they interfered with her pursuit of sporting pleasure (pp. 54-55); it is quite unlikely she was the sports only female fan of her time.

In the eighteenth century, "women assumed an increasingly visible presence in formalized and often commercialized recreations for both sexes" (Struna, 1991, p. 24). More than that, "promoters targeted women as prospective participants and consumers, and organizers encouraged women to attend events" (p. 24). Though this practice may have taken a variety of forms over the years, it is certainly not a novel idea. In the late 1700s, ladies' purses were offered at thoroughbred racing events; moreover, facilities at the race venue were upgraded in an effort to better accommodate female spectators. This included the provision of seats specifically assigned to women. "What all of this suggests, of course, is that horse racing…was not primarily or even predominantly, a male practice" (p. 25). By the end of the 19th century "the presence of upper-class and middle-class women was [seen as] a good indicator that there was no great danger of bodily harm" at college football games (Guttman, 1986, p. 94). Consequently, these women were then charged with being moral entrepreneurs of the setting and were encouraged to attend with their male companions in an effort to keep men's behavior under control.

After World War II, bowling, a popular sport among working-class men and women, made a special appeal to the suburban housewife. "Proprietors [built] bowling alleys in the suburbs and made special pitches to women. They 'sanitized' their lanes by replacing smoky bars and spittoons with beauty parlors, nurseries, and coffee shops" (Rader, 2009, p. 335). Yet as progressive as this effort may first appear, "the primary identity of women bowlers continued to be as wives and mothers" (p. 335).

The Struggle for Recognition

Around the middle of the 20th century, the American press began to publish articles recognizing the "growing trend" of female fans. An article published in the *New York Times* on June 30, 1940, made the claim that "The female sports fan is more and more in evidence" (Duval, 1940, p. 87). To support this, the author suggested, "even though there is not more than one girl to every ten men at a prize fight, the attendance of women is on the increase there also, especially around the ringside at any Joe Louis fight" (p. 87). She went on to explain that though the idea of female boxing fans ran contrary to the idea that women were too weak to handle violence, they indeed did, even as their critics would claim that "fights were no place for a lady" (Guttman, 1986, p. 116). While promoting the idea that women could hold their own in the sports arena, Duval also distinguished between two main types of fans "those who get taken and those who go under their own steam" (Duval, 1940, p. 87). With these words, she reinforced the idea that some women did not attend of their own free will. Still, she argued "all of them, passive or active fans, go to games for much the same reasons as men—to find excitement, a safety valve for pent-up emotions, and the escapist pleasure of visualizing one's self in the player's shoes" (p. 87).

In 1949, at least two articles published in the *New York Times* emphasized the role of technology in creating female fans.

> Instead of costing sports customers, radio made countless thousands of new fans. It brought sports into the kitchen, where they never before had been, and, womanly curiosity being what it is, the female of the species came stampeding out

> from her pots and pans to see what the dashing athletic heroes looked like in the flesh. (Daley, 1949, p. 17)

While this characterization seems to suggest that women were primarily interested in the physical attractiveness of the male athletes rather than the games themselves, it does not tell the whole story. Aline B. Louchheim, associate art editor for the publication, included the note in her byline that she was particularly fond of the artistry of the New York Yankees (Louchheim, 1949, p. 101). Yet based on the content of her writings, one doubts she was only interested in player aesthetics. As she put it,

> Ever since a radio voice first droned, 'The count is now three and two' into a kitchen, the number of 'lady sports fans' has been increasing. Strikeouts have replaced the soap opera as the lesser of the two afternoon radio evils for thousands of women listeners (p. 101).

Further perpetuating the feminine stereotype, she shares, "radio has succeeded where patient males have failed…. Mel Allen, Red Barber and the other announcers have done the impossible and explained the game to women" (p. 101).

Prior to this time period, it was widely assumed that men would attend sporting events by themselves, while women were left behind at home. "Now [women] approve of, and often even originate, them" (Louchheim, 1949, p. 101). Still, not everyone welcomed the female presence, and her participation was met with some resistance. As previously suggested, women were widely criticized for not understanding the intricacies of the game. As far back as 1890, Ella Black, an editor for *Sporting Life,* publicly

lamented the fact that she could not get an interview with the top administrators in baseball:

> I suppose they would laugh and think it all nonsense to talk to base ball to a woman. Everyone seems to think that all a woman knows how to do is work around her home, talk dress and fashion. I only hope some day, unless THE SPORTING LIFE should remove me from its staff, to be able to force some of the brilliant masculine members of humanity, who have seen fit to ridicule the idea of a woman writing base ball, to admit that I am competent to do it. (Black, 1890, p. 10)

Louchheim herself wrote that some women still appeared to have more enthusiasm for rather than knowledge of the game, while optimistically stating that "most of the sports world agrees that women are now genuine sports fans" (Louchheim, 1949, p. 101). She offered the following evidence to support her claim: "sports writers receive fewer crackpot letters from women than from men. In a seven-week Yankee player identification program on WINS, the female contingent claimed 75 per cent of the 2,800 answers and three out of seven prizes" (p. 101).

Yet this information suggests that women indeed focus primarily on the players, a critique previously alluded to in this paper. In the same article, Louchheim appeared to contradict her own good intent when she stated,

> Women sports fans confirm a long held male contention of the difference between the sexes; namely, that women are more concerned with personalities than principles, with the personal rather than the abstract. For it is true that almost all

> women are interested in the play in terms of the player. (Louchheim, 1949, p. 101)

Is it any wonder that such ideologies persist when women themselves cooperate in their reproduction?

One last critique leveled against female fans in the late 1940s was that, once allowed to participate, they were not able to control their actions well enough to behave like socially appropriate ladies.

> Compared to men, the women at any event behave with an appalling lack of restraint. They yell louder, more frequently, and with less reason. If they are partisan at all, they are ferocious and violent; their team is always right no matter what it does. (Duval, 1940, p. 87)

Here again, pervasive female stereotypes are supported through the mainstream media. Louchheim (1949) argued that women "betray their feminism by their violent vocalism and easy excitement" even as "the gentler sex is credited by many observers with being more sadistic than the stronger one, secretly more delighted by a gory eye at a prize fight or a vicious tackle on the football field" (p. 101).

According to Duval (1940):

> [The] majority [of men] deplore the whole situation…twenty years ago the crowd at any big sports event was largely made up of men—watching games was a mysterious pleasure understood only by the male half of the population. The few women who did go were regarded with amused tolerance; every man felt secure

> in the knowledge that woman's place was in the home, and that the few women who crept outside it were just freaks such as every community had to cope with. (p. 87)

As their numbers began to rise, these "freaks" could no longer be explained away so easily. In fact, these women did not consider themselves strange at all.

> "Even though they admit there is a difference in their attitude and actions, women fans defend their mass immigration into the sports world as another example of equal rights. Just as she learned to stand in a bus and sit at a bar, the woman is convinced that she should be allowed her place not as a 'lady fan' but as a 'fan' in the sports world. Her passport, she believes, is in the fact that she has learned the game and follows it ardently. (Louchheim, 1949, p. 101)

Old News?

Given the history of female spectators, it is rather perplexing to find that current research continues to suggest women in the stands are a novelty, a phenomenon newly discovered. As this review has illustrated, the truth is quite the opposite. But football is an "old" sport, deeply entrenched in an American subculture that reifies hegemonic masculinity or "the culturally idealized form of masculine character that emphasizes the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness, as well as the subordination of women and marginalization of gay men" (Nylund, 2004, p. 139). Thus, control is not often relinquished easily nor politely.

More than 70 years ago, Duval (1940) wrote, "the sports promoters agree that the increase in female attendance is fine for business, but they wish that the same gross could

be achieved without the ladies" (p. 87). Yet this sentiment does not seem far removed from what some might still say today. Maybe there are some men who truly view the incorporation of female fans as a necessary evil. Or maybe, as Louchheim (1949) so bluntly put it:

> On the whole…male fans have accepted the inroad into their world and actually enjoy the company of the lady fan—that is, if she has found and hews to that difficult line of avoiding foolish questions yet being careful not to know too much. The male still believes in his superior knowledge of sports and even if every day becomes ladies' day, the wise woman will nurture his illusion. (p. 101)

In other words, there is a fine line defining appropriate female fan performance by which a "wise woman" will abide.

Thus, while it appears female fans have been acknowledged since the earliest days of sport, the institution as a whole seems to remain ambivalent. "Despite their recognition of women's importance to the gate, promoters have done very little to cater to the fair sex. 'Ladies Day' exists only in baseball, and several promoters doubt if the institution makes any essential difference in the total picture" (Louchheim, 1949, p. 101). These words may have been written in the past, but the message is not irrelevant today. Moreover, as recently as 2005, these not-so-revolutionary words were printed, "For the sports industry, the consumer segment with perhaps the greatest potential is the female market" (Bush, et. al., 2005, p. 258). Indeed, this brief review of history indicates the potential of the female market has long been overlooked, even underestimated. So, why the recent increase in interest? One potential answer is because, as Jamie McCourt, CEO

of the Los Angeles Dodgers put it, "behind every man is a woman with her checkbook" (Sy, 2009). Perhaps it all boils down to the bottom line.

The Changing Social Climate

In this dissertation, I suggest this "sudden" interest in the female fan is more than that, however. Beyond the pursuit of a potentially profitable market, I contend that the increased visibility of and attention to these women is the result of a constellation of events that occurred during the late 20th century. In 1960, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the first birth control pill for women, effectively granting women a larger degree of control over their own reproductive lives than ever before. Indeed, some feminist scholars would claim there was no bigger step in the women's liberation movement than this, because gaining control over one's own body opened up opportunities for women that were previously unimagined. Since that time, women have frequently chosen to delay marriage and motherhood and focus instead on their education and careers. Along those lines, they have moved into the workplace en masse, spurring an increase in dual-earner households. Greater earning power, consequently, opens the door to more egalitarian social relationships, where women have more financial and symbolic freedom to choose their leisure pursuits.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to paint a picture of women as entirely "free" in this regard. Near the end of the 20th century, women no longer needed a "gender permit" to participate in sport, yet their freedom was still constrained by the will of men (Ben-Porat, 2009). Moreover, as the research of Pope (2010) illustrates, women's careers

as sports fans are more frequently constrained by domestic responsibilities in ways that men's experience is not:

> Feminism is rarely an individual's motivating force [for participating in sport] but always the result…her involvement implicitly challenges patriarchal constraints on her behavior. Sport for women changes the woman's experience of herself and others' experience of her. It alters the balance of power between the sexes. It is daring. It is life changing. It is happening every day. (Burton-Nelson, 1994, pp. 30-31)

Women's freedom to participate as sports fans can be attributed, at least in part, to the changing social climate detailed above; it has also been influenced by changing ideas about and loosening restrictions around what constitutes socially acceptable behavior for women. Undoubtedly, one of the primary factors in this evolution was the passage of Title IX in 1972. This legislation, though not specifically targeted toward athletics, prohibited educational programs receiving federal funding from discriminating based on sex. This meant that participation in many high school and collegiate activities, including sports, were implicated. Institutions that had never before fielded women's sports teams were now pressed to do so. As a result, in the 40 years since, women have had the opportunity to compete in many, but not all, sports. It stands to reason, then, that women's personal engagement with the game may have also facilitated a heightened interest in following sport. And although women's opportunities to play football may have been less than other sports, the mass media coverage of the NFL, the portrayal of its

athletes as celebrities, and the targeted (female and family-friendly) marketing campaigns have certainly aided the cause.

Female Fan Subcultures

In American society, sports fans effectively constitute their own subcultural group. As commonly defined in sociological literature, a subculture is a group of people, existing within and retaining the essential elements of the dominant culture, yet also embracing distinctive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting which differ somewhat from those of the larger society (Benokraitis, 2010). More specifically, a culture consists of shared values, beliefs, and material objects that are passed from generation to generation through the process of cultural transmission. In other words, culture is learned, and people must be properly socialized if they are to share in this collective agreement.

To that end, Donnelly and Young (1988) discuss a sport model that demonstrates the stages of assimilation into a subculture. The stages outlined are as follows: pre-socialization, selection and recruitment, socialization, and acceptance/ostracism. As historically practiced in the United States, this model suggests a clearly defined progression for male sports fans, but what about for women? Hartmann (2003) characterized sport spectatorship as a way for men to "reinforce, rework, and maintain their masculinity" (p. 17). The model presented here does not highlight gender as a variable; however, given that acceptance/ostracism is conveyed upon the group member by his/her peers, it seems logical to conclude that in a male-dominated fan atmosphere, this may present additional complications for women. "When this avenue for masculinity maintenance is threatened by women, men feel vulnerable. On the other hand, when

women participate in a way that reaffirms masculinity and male supremacy, participation is not considered threatening" (Davis & Duncan, 2006, p. 257).

Indeed, much of the current ethnographic research conducted regarding American sports fans has overlooked or downplayed the role of gender. However, Grossberg (1992) suggested "fans need to be studied as actively creating their own meanings…and should not be conceived of as a singular homogenous entity" (p. 53). Moreover, while Free and Hughson (2003) concede that gaining access to women in the course of ethnographic research on predominantly male subcultures can be tricky, "to omit women because they do not feature prominently in the public-domain activity of men is to suffer from a similar kind of myopia to that of the men being studied" (p. 152).

Subcultures are often distinguishable by their distinct language features, behavior patterns, and/or belief systems. This model, I argue, is no less true for sports fans. There are differences to be noted in the way each team's fans conduct themselves (e.g., Green Bay Packer fans may behave differently than Dallas Cowboy fans), just as there are apt to be variances between men and women. Yet, it is also entirely plausible that these groups share a great deal of common ground. What are the points of similarity and departure for female fans? What are some of the possible challenges, tradeoffs, or rewards? Can being female in a male-dominated space constitute its own form of privilege? For instance, in potentially violent fan atmospheres (fueled by alcohol and animosities), are women truly considered "safer" than men?

It is difficult to adequately address such questions when all that is currently known about these women are a few descriptive statistics. As previously mentioned, there

is a void in the current academic literature; no known research exists which explores the experience of the NFL's female fan. In fact, Coakley's (2009) chapter on gender and sport fails entirely to mention the unique condition of female as spectator. In addressing the topic of gender and fairness issues in sports, the focus is solely on the active sport participant or athlete. One could make a strong case, however, that much of what excludes women from playing the game itself would also serve to exclude them in the stands. If sport worlds are indeed male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered, then women are, consequently, alienated at all levels. Only men are qualified. Only men can participate. Only men understand.

So what sense can be made of the female who claims a fan identity? Coakley (2009) claimed, "in male-identified social worlds, women in positions of power or authority arouse suspicion about how they obtained their power and what they might do with it" (p.247). Could it not be argued that knowledge of the (male-dominated) football game is a form of power for women? If football knowledge functions as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), then it has some exchange value, some currency in social relationships. Therefore, if a woman knows about the game, she can participate; if she does not, it becomes yet another way in which she is excluded. Furthermore, if this knowledge is indeed recognized as power, it has the potential to shape her interactions with other fans, in particular, other men.

Indeed, Davis and Duncan (2006) recognized sports knowledge as a form of power in their research on fantasy sport league participation, and suggested that "sports have been presented as a means for men to display sports knowledge as well as bond in

social settings" (p. 251). If these assumptions are taken for granted, then women who also display sports knowledge while engaging in sport specific social settings pose a challenge to the existing social order. Moreover, Davis and Duncan cite Hartmann (2003) to suggest that "displaying sports knowledge offers men a chance to indirectly evaluate what it means to be a man, reaffirming masculinity in sport spectatorship" (p. 254). Still, in an earlier work, Duncan and Brummett (1993) claimed that sport could also function as a source of empowerment for women. As sports fans, displaying one's sports knowledge is adherent to the dominant (male) social norms. Men are expected to do this easily and often; women, they suggested, "may also acquire and display sports knowledge in the pursuit of liberal empowerment" (p. 66).

Given all of this, exactly "how is it possible to be both a woman and a fan?" (Jones, 2008, p.518). According to Jones' (2008) research, the answer requires a delicate balancing act. Her study, which examined the ways women negotiate their identities in the context of an English football game, is a rare exception to an otherwise nonexistent literature. Within the setting of an English football game, Jones found a woman may be faced with many challenges to her feminine identity, including the use of language and images that she may otherwise find offensive. Similarly, Adams, Anderson and McCormack (2010) noted that "homophobia, misogyny, and extreme sexual violence" often pervade the language around sport (p. 286). Thus, in the given setting, a woman must decide how best to express herself as both female and fan.

Gender and American Professional Football

Having provided a review of the historical presence of women as fans, I now move to focus specifically on women's relationship to the game of football. Specifically, I begin with a depiction of the current state of affairs in the NFL. This is followed by a discussion of women's professional football leagues. The section concludes with an examination of literature related to female football fans and a summary of current initiatives.

The N(o) F(emales) L(eague)

In September 2011, The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) at the University of Central Florida published their annual report on racial and gender equity in the NFL. This assessment attempted to answer the question: "Are we playing fair when it comes to sports? Does everyone, regardless of race or gender, have a chance to score a touchdown or operate the business of professional football?" (Lapchick, Clark, Frazier, & Sarpy, 2011, p. 2). Originally published in 2001, TIDES assigned grades based on how accurately the diversity of the NFL owners, administrators, staff, and players reflected the demographic composition of the general population. Overall, the NFL earned an A for its racial hiring practices of coaches, administrators, and support staff for the second consecutive year and a C for gender hiring practices in those same positions. The process for calculating these scores will be discussed in greater detail below.

In the office. Using data from 2010 season, Lapchick et al. (2011) focused on the demographics of players, management, and coaches, as well as senior administration, professional administration, physicians, head trainers and broadcasters. At the highest

organizational levels, there were 15 female employees holding positions at or above the Vice President level in the League Office in 2010, up from 11 total in the previous year. Thirteen of these women were White; one was African American and one was Latina. There were also 25 female Vice Presidents of NFL teams, yet Pamela Browner-White was the only woman of color to hold this position. "Detroit, Indianapolis, Miami and New Orleans were the only teams in the NFL with more than one woman [holding a position] as vice president" (p. 12). Amy Trask of the Oakland Raiders remained the only female president/CEO of a team in the NFL, a position she held since 2005. Denise DeBartolo York of the San Francisco 49ers and Virginia McCaskey of the Chicago Bears were the only two primary female owners of NFL teams. In 2009, Venus and Serena bought minority ownership in Miami Dolphins, making them the first African American females to be part owners; also in 2009, Gloria and Emilio Estefan were the first Cuban Americans to become partial owners when they bought into the Miami Dolphins franchise (Lapchick, et al., 2011).

The highest concentration of females working in the National Football League occupied support staff positions in the NFL League office (58.2%) followed by 29% of professional administrative positions (i.e., assistant directors, coordinators, supervisors and managers). Women made up only a slightly smaller percentage of the professional staff (27.6%) and senior administrators (21%). Jobs in these categories included assistant general managers, legal counsel, and public/community relations directors. Three percent of NFL team physicians were female, yet there were no female head trainers (Lapchick, et al, 2011).

In the spring of 20011, in an effort to further support those women who are currently working in the NFL, the League office launched the Women's Interactive Network (WIN), an "affinity group" open to all employees and "designed to provide a forum for networking, best practice sharing, and active dialogue on strategies to drive career growth and development" (Lapchick, et al., 2011, p. 6). At the time the Racial and Gender Report Card was published, WIN claimed approximately 130 members. The guiding intent of this initiative was to recognize and accommodate the increasing gender diversity within the league; accordingly,

> The mission of WIN is to help accelerate the career advancement of women at the NFL while deepening the engagement of all employees at the league. WIN (1) allows an opportunity for male and female employees in all office locations to educate each other on gender and diversity issues in the workplace; (2) provides a peer network for participants and (3) helps foster the hiring, retention, career development and promotional opportunities of female employees. (p. 37)

Other gender-based outreach programs sponsored by the League included an NFL Girls Flag Football Leadership program and a number of charitable causes including its breast cancer awareness campaign called "A Crucial Catch."

On the field. According to Burton Nelson (1994), "American manliness is defined, symbolically, by and through football and other combat sports" (p. 25). To that end, no female has ever played in the NFL. That is not to say she cannot play the game. Numerous women have competed on the same field as men at the local and collegiate level (McManus, 2011a), but not beyond. And while professional women's football

leagues currently exist (IWFL, 2012; WFA, 2011; WSFL, 2011), they have yet to receive the same attention or regard as their male counterparts, a point I will return to later.

As for the approximately 2,600 men who did play during the 2010 NFL season, 36% were White, 67% were African American, 1% were Latino, 2% were Asian, and the remainder identified as "Other" or "International" status (Lapchick, et al., 2011, p. 19). There were no female head coaches, assistant coaches, or general managers in the NFL during this time, yet somewhat remarkably the report made no mention of gender for these positions. The assessment also ignored gender as a factor in its report on game officials. Meanwhile, at the time of this writing, there had never been a female official at an NFL game, though several women were working to change this statistic. According to an ESPNW online article by Jane McManus (2011b), "Carl Johnson, the NFL's head of officials…did say that there are women who are currently under consideration, and that he expects he will be hiring to officiate in the NFL. 'We have some in our pipeline, and I expect we'll see it soon'" (p. 1).

To reiterate, the grades assigned by the TIDES report (Lapchick, et al., 2011) are assigned "in relation to the overall patterns in society" (p. 16). As it relates to gender, this means the NFL received an A if at least 40% of the positions being considered were occupied by women, a B if 32% were women, a C for 27%, a D for 22% and an F for anything below that. These benchmarks were meant to reflect the federal affirmative action standards that "state that the workplace should reflect the percentage of the people in the racial group in the population" (p. 16). Yet what is interesting to note is that the NFL received an A+ for players though not a single woman has ever taken the field in

this game. In fact, while most categories were assigned grades for both race and gender, players were not. There was only one grade indicated, one that arguably reinforced the assumption that gender was irrelevant here. The same omission occurred for head coaches (A), assistant coaches (A+), and general managers (B/B+). Taken together with the previous discussion of game officials, the Report thereby symbolically bolstered the notion that women do not belong either on the field or in positions that govern what occurs there.

Women's Professional Football

As previously mentioned, despite a glaring lack of opportunities for women and young girls to play tackle football in an organized manner, there are indeed women who find their way to the sport as adults. While young boys are typically encouraged to begin participating by the age of five or six (Kids Sports Network, 2010), young girls most often find themselves relegated to the sidelines as supporters, spectators, and cheerleaders. Women who participate as athletes in traditionally male-defined sports challenge the assumption that sports equate to masculinity (Burton Nelson, 1994). Still, women from a variety of backgrounds and skill levels, raised as both athletes and fans, now have the chance to play the game at a higher level.

At the time of this writing, there are at least three formal organizations in place representing women's tackle football in the United States: the Independent Women's Football League (IWFL), the Women's Football Alliance (WFA), and the Women's Spring Football League (WSFL). These amateur and semi-professional leagues offer women the opportunity to play under the same rules as men; the only noticeable

difference being that they use a slightly smaller football. "The origins of women's tackle football stems back to the mid 1920s when the NFL team Frankfort Yellow Jackets hired a women's football team to serve as entertainment during halftime" (Fenell, 2009, para 2). In 1965, the first semi-pro league formed in Ohio, and until the early 21st century, numerous independent leagues existed; over time, however, many of those groups disbanded or became defunct, and the remaining clubs realigned to form new memberships (Fenell, 2009). Today, the IWFL is home to 30 teams; the WFA has 70 teams split between multiple divisions, and the WSFL lists 11 teams in its "11-man" division. These organizations represent both major cities (e.g., Pittsburgh Passion) and smaller locales (e.g., the Arkansas Rampage of Fayetteville, Arkansas), making the game accessible to women across the country (WFA, 2011; IWFL, 2012; WSFL, 2011). Moreover, according to a 2009 CBS news report, the leagues had "recruited more than 3,000 players" (Miller, 2009). Yet additional demographic information for these athletes could not be located and may, quite possibly, remains undocumented.

Despite the existence of these leagues, in public discourse in the United States, the term "football" continues to be commonly, if not completely, associated with the men's game. This is evidenced by the fact that one must gender-mark the term in order to specify it is "women's" football being discussed. Will the women's game ever reach the same level of popularity the men have enjoyed? It seems unlikely given the history and nature of the game itself coupled with the deeply entrenched gender expectations of American society. If the example set by the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) is any indication, the outlook is bleak. Nevertheless there are indicators that the

sport is gaining some critical support as well as momentum. For example, in 2011, Franco Harris, a former hall of fame player for the Pittsburgh Steelers (of the NFL), purchased a "significant share" of the local women's organization, the Pittsburgh Passion (Spencer, 2011). Then, in April 2011,

> In front of a packed house and the biggest crowd in history, the Passion completed an all-around history making night. The[ir] home opener aired live on ESPN3, a pioneering and landmark step in women's football. The Passion became the first women's football franchise in history to broadcast a game on any platform in the ESPN family of networks. (Pittsburgh Sports Report, 2011)

Add to that a partnership with the NFL and USA football along with coverage by *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN's *SportsCenter*, and the Passion may indeed be blazing a trail toward changing the face of the game (Pittsburgh Passion, 2011).

Beyond the Xs and Os

Having addressed the specifics of who plays the game, who coaches, manages, and governs it, I turn now to explore the connection between gender and American football in a broader context. Given the backdrop detailed above, where men dominate the football landscape at almost every level, it would be easy to overlook the less explicit ways in which women have managed to claim space. In order to avoid such a miscalculation, one must also consider women's (arguably) more indirect involvement. To that end, this dissertation attempts to expand the conversation by incorporating those women who follow the game as fans. While administrators and athletes are understood to have an express interest in the outcome of any game, there is no such obvious return on

the investment of time, money, and energy that fans expend. Yet as previously alluded to, 55% of women currently comprise the NFL's television viewing audience (Braverman, 2011). What sense can we make of numbers like these? And what can we learn about the women they represent? In the sections that follow, I draw upon existing literature that helps to further depict the culture of the game in general and then specifically turn to highlight the unique position of the female football fan.

A "safe" space. One of the most consistent themes pervading the literature on gender and football is the idea that the game provides some sort of "safe" space for men, separate from and unchallenged by outsiders, specifically women (Davis & Duncan, 2006; Rubin, 2009; Wenner, 1996). Whitson (1990) claimed that in modern American society "much has changed on the terrain of gender relations and that male dominance has been and is being challenged on a great many fronts" (p. 24). Thus, as gender roles are increasingly contested at work and at home, football has subsequently been embraced as an important proving ground for one's masculinity, in a very literal and physical sense. Similarly, in her book *The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Love Football*, Mariah Burton Nelson (1994) argued:

> Women are now competing with and against men in almost every conceivable vocation and avocation. Women *are* gaining economic, social, and political power. But while colleges, Congress, corporations, and other American institutions become painstakingly integrated, football clings to its all-male status, resisting women's attempts at participation whether as players, coaches, administrators, or reporters. Football is male, masculinity, manliness. So when

> women demand the right to play, control, judge, report on, or change football—and other manly sports—their struggle is not just about equal access to fitness and fatlessness. It's about redefining men and women. It's about power. (p. 11)

Though Burton Nelson did not expressly reference women's engagement as fans in the passage above, one could make a strong argument that the "participation" she spoke of occurs on many levels. In fact, she characterized any deliberate departure from what has been defined as "women's place" as a threat to this male power, and thus a feminist act. Women who break with tradition, who choose themselves and their sports interests over husbands and families, "are a threat—not to men exactly but to male privilege and to masculinity as defined through manly sports" (p. 30).

Accordingly, when a woman stops being a spectator, when she rejects the role of cheerleader in both the literal and figurative sense, and becomes active (rather than passive) and knowledgeable, she challenges the gender binary. If what it means to be female in this society is defined by its opposition to what it means to be male, then it is easy to delineate between the two; however, in this case, when women become interested, active participants in football, the lines are blurred and gender identity, as it has been traditionally defined, is called into question (Burton Nelson, 1994). What does it mean to be a man, if not the opposite of a woman?

Still, Burton Nelson's (1994) discussion did not address a woman who acquires knowledge without participation. This begs the question, is physical engagement necessary in order to truly understand? American men are expected to know about football, and are often called into question when they do not (Davis & Duncan, 2006).

The reverse is frequently true for women in this culture. As previously mentioned, women do not hold decision-making positions on the field, and are represented by only a few in similar positions off the field. Furthermore, "women held [only] 3% of the total broadcasting positions in the NFL" in 2010 a number that suggests women in these positions are also not largely called upon to offer their analysis (Lapchick et al., 2011, p. 14). Patterns like these do not occur in a vacuum, but instead result from a constellation of social forces.

The power of messages. In American society today, approximately "15 to 20 million U.S. children and youth participate in organized sports, excluding high school teams" (Coakley, 2009, p. 124). And while "by the 1990s, girls had nearly as many opportunities [to participate] as boys …until the 1970s, girls were largely ignored by [youth sport] organizers" (p. 125). Consequently, women who lived out their youth prior to this time were unlikely to have been encouraged to partake in organized sports activities from an early age in the same way as young boys. Indeed, to be a young man in this society and *not* participate in sport is to depart from the norm. As Burton Nelson (1994) suggested, "Sports have a particular salience for men, who share childhood memories of having their masculinity confirmed or questioned because of their athletic ability or inability. They embody a language men understand" (p. 27).

This socialization process was a key element in Foley's (1990) study of high school football in a South Texas town, which further examined the ways in which the game "symbolically stage[d] class, gender, and racial inequality" (p. 112). In his analysis, Foley specifically addressed the ways in which "the spectators, the men in the

community, socialize each new generation of players" (p. 125). For example, fathers and sons, brothers, and an older generation of former athletes all passed along stories of their experience to the current generation of players. The townspeople congregated in local settings to talk politics and sports, and those who had the means took it upon themselves to hire young football players for part-time and summer jobs. In other words, playing high school football in this town was a way to gain social status in the local community. Moreover, as one participant indicated, football "makes a man out of you. [It also] helps you get a cute chick" (p. 126). Part of learning to be a man also involved learning to play through pain. "Pain is a badge of honor. Playing with pain proves you are a man" (p. 127). In sum, "team sports, and especially American football, generally socialize males to be warriors" (p. 128).

In contrast, Foley (1990) also included the depiction of another annual ritual at this high school, the powder-puff football game. Staged as an act of humor, it served to reproduce and reinforce traditional gender roles. For this event, young girls performed the role of football player while football players acted as cheerleaders. As characterized by a member of the high school community, the game was "a silly, harmless event that helped build school spirit" (p.119). Yet while the men tended to exaggerate to the point of absurdity, the women appeared to take the opportunity more seriously. Where male students thought the game was "good for a laugh," some females reportedly saw it as a chance to "prove" they could also compete (p. 118). In the end, Foley surmised, "this ritual generally socialized both sexes to assume their proper, traditional gender roles.

[What is more] the women seemed to participate unwittingly in staging this expression of male dominance and privilege" (p. 119).

Likewise, in her research on female Israeli soccer fans, Ben-Porat (2009) noted that a male agent traditionally socialized both men and women to become sports fans. For women, this tended to involve a father or boyfriend. For men, the options were seemingly endless; they could model the behaviors of male family members, peers, or even the athletes they saw take the field. Moreover, in Eastman and Land's (1997) work on public spectating, they claimed:

> Public behaviors of sports fans can serve as social modeling…effectively enacting the role of sports fan is widely understood as evidence of masculinity. Young males copy the behaviors and attitudes of older fans as part of learning to be men. (p. 171)

Again, the intended audience for this socialization was male. While public spectating was said to provide special experiences for men, giving them "permission to open up," nowhere was the same said to be true for women (Wenner, 1996, p. 13). Instead, women were largely ignored in the literature, and when represented, were generally painted as inauthentic "WAGs" (wives and girlfriends) who accompanied "real" male fans to the game (Rubin, 2009, p. 273). These women were not presumed to be interested in their own right.

Relatedly, in an EA Sports Research Report by Crabbe, Brown, Mellor and O'Connor (2006), gender was discussed solely in relation to its potential to generate tension in relationships with non-supportive partners. This "gendered" element assumed

that men were the fans and women were the ones who kept them from the game. Again, football was something men could use to distance themselves from their female partners, along with any associated domestic duties. This report, which focused on world football fans, described the activity as a way for men to spend time with other men, while "football widows" were left behind. Indeed, in the resulting fan typology, "imprisonment" referred to a situation where "football…overrides commitments to family and domestic responsibilities, often against the wishes of one [female] partner and in which they are left, literally, holding the baby" (p. 97). In light of such statements, it is important to remember that these ideas are not the creations of individuals; rather they are deeply embedded elements of the cultures in which they occur.

Gaining Ground?

What does the landscape of sport studies research look like today? Is there reason to believe further studies of gender and football are warranted? In particular, can a study of female NFL fans contribute something valuable to the academic discourse? Might there also be utility beyond this context? It would appear so. Not only will this kind of research fill a void in the literature, but there is also mounting evidence that the study of female fans is a burgeoning area of interest, one which could produce tangible outcomes for those in a position to apply what is learned (Pope, 2010; Cecamore, Fraesdorf, Langer & Power, 2011).

Recognizing this need, a program endorsed by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), FIFA Master, and organized by the International Centre for Sport Studies (CIES), issued a report in 2011 entitled "Sports Fandom: What do

Women Want?" (FIFA, 2012). The aim of this document was to present a multi-sport analysis of female fandom in order to offset the current lack of research. The assessment included the "major" U.S. team sports (NFL, NBA, NHL and MLB) as well as soccer and rugby played outside the United States (Cecamore, et al., 2011). Generally speaking, the authors of the report, which surveyed eight different sports across five different countries to examine the ways in which female fans were being addressed, suggested "sport has traditionally been seen as a male domain…where women have struggled to gain both admission and acceptance" and that women often "find that their heterosexual femininity is challenged as a result of their interest in sport" (p. 20).

Similar to Davis and Duncan (2006), Cecamore et al. (2011) further proposed that physically competitive sport has become a refuge for men who feel their masculinity being threatened in other social institutions (i.e., work, home) and proclaim it to be "one of the last bastions of masculine hegemony" (Cecamore, et. al, 2011, p. 20). These authors also claimed that men participate in the protection of that space through both the direct and indirect exclusion of women. The report suggested women were excluded in two primary ways: logistically and socially. Logistical exclusion focused on the ways women continued to be constrained by domestic responsibilities in ways that men were not, despite making significant gains in control over their leisure pursuits. These obligations had a direct impact on a woman's ability to engage with sport, such that married women and women with children were often unable to invest themselves to the same degree as their male counterparts. Social exclusion, on the other hand, was an "othering" based on "cultural expectations and gender discrimination" (Gosling, 2007, p.

252). This type of marginalization occurred because, in mainstream American society, women were not expected to know about, participate in, or "speak the language of" sport. When they did, they remained at the mercy of men to grant them symbolic admission to "the club."

Nevertheless, with regard to American sports, there is mounting evidence to suggest that female fans are gaining ground. According to Lorrie Freifeld (2003), the "Title IX generation of women have jobs and disposable income" which makes sports teams looking to build or expand a consumer base take notice (p. 31). Still, change is happening slowly. Direct marketing campaigns of the NFL have emphasized the production of women's sport licensing apparel (e.g., Victoria's Secret Pink) and Football 101 workshops, as in the case of the Pittsburgh Steelers Women's Training Camp (Buckley, 2011). Indirectly, teams have been working to "clean up" the behavior at their respective arenas as well as the images of their players. Cecamore et al. (2011) explained, "One of the stated reasons for doing so was to…make it more attractive for a female audience" (p. 39). The report concluded that what women want is: (a) facility improvement, (b) a family-friendly environment, (c) tailored marketing and merchandise and (d) ownership of their own fandom (Cecamore et. al., 2011). Three of the four are within the control of the sports organizations themselves; the final item may be less so, but could arguably be facilitated through greater recognition overall.

NFL 101

As mentioned in the FIFA report (2011), the NFL's most widely recognized program targeting female fans is commonly titled Football 101. This initiative, as practiced by the

NFL, was originally influenced by Betsy Berns' 1996 book *The Female Fan's Guide to Pro Football* (Berns, 1996). In the opening pages, Berns wrote, "Football is for Women Too!" (p. 1) and there is an undeniable attempt at making the process of learning about the game both fun and engaging. According to Berns's website (www.femalefan.com), on or about this same time, she consulted with officials in the NFL on the design and implementation of the original Football 101 programming (Female Fan, 2007). Much like the book, the workshop was meant to be divided into four quarters of information and to cover each phase of the game: offense, defense, and special teams. In addition, an overview of the rules of the game, the history of the league and the draft process were included. Today, this program is being offered in a variety of forms, from classroom sessions to on-field drills (Powell, 2007).

Though this Football 101 initiative has a 15-year history in the NFL, there has been little research into its practice. The only reference available in the current academic literature is a brief description that suggests Football 101 as a way the League could reach out to its female demographic (Clark, et al., 2009). Much of the data cited in this article came from a *Washington Post* news story (Powell, 2007) that focused on the event's history with the Baltimore Ravens organization, which, by 2007, had already expanded their operations and moved beyond presenting the Football 101 program as it was originally conceived. Yet apart from these two pieces, no other scholarly sources related to the topic could be found. Interestingly, Football 101 is not mentioned as one of the primary outreach programs of the NFL in the TIDES 2011 Racial and Gender Report Card.

Theoretical Frameworks

Given the paucity of research in this area, it is somewhat difficult to identify predominant theoretical framework(s). Because so little is known about female football fans, researchers are only beginning to ask questions, guided largely by their own observations and what little data that does exist. Clark et. al., (2009) based their work on a theory of gendered consumption that they then connected to respondents' sport profiles. The primary data collection instrument was an online survey, reflecting a positivist epistemic orientation. Kraszewski's (2008) ethnographic investigation of a Steeler's bar in Fort Worth, Texas, was grounded in "theories of television studies, cultural geography, and diaspora" (p. 155). Duncan and Brummett's (1993) feminist study used televised football to "show that resources for female empowerment are grounded in the fact of electronic mediation" (p. 62). In an effort to understand how people both watched and used televised football, they collected data from three focus groups: one all male, one all female, and one coed.

Two premises guided Foley's (1990) study: a multiple-system-of-dominance perspective and a theory of community sport as resistant and counterhegemonic. In considering the multiple forms of dominance, Foley insisted, "the cultural practices of gender and racial dominance must *also* be included with a class theory perspective of sports" (p. 131). Moreover, he suggested that the participation of marginalized groups (e.g., women) could potentially make a positive impact on the larger sporting culture. Based on the presumption that women had a more "nurturing and humanistic" nature, he

proposed “a massive new presence of women in organized sports will at least have a humanizing effect” (p. 131).

Other works began with a general interest in the subject and theoretical interpretations were provided to help ground the results. Attempting to investigate the impact of the internet on sport consumption, Davis and Duncan (2006) performed a textual analysis of one fantasy sport website, observed participants interacting through the fantasy leagues, and conducted a (all male) focus group. The findings from this exploratory study were interpreted under the heading of “Doing Gender” and included issues of control, the importance of sports knowledge, competition, and bonding. Conversely, McDowell and Schaffner (2011) applied a critical discourse analytical framework from the outset of their study. In evaluating the transcript of the televised event, they sought to “explore how the creation of discourses of masculinity and femininity undermine most women’s access and acceptance into American football” (p. 547). It is this type of research that most closely resembles the work of this dissertation.

In order to add to the literature on female football fans and their experiences, additional qualitative research is needed. While statistics such as those offered in the early part of this paper (i.e., fan demographics) are useful, they provide only an outline from which to begin a more in-depth pursuit. Critical scholarship is also called for, and in that sense, I can build upon the research of Duncan and Brummett (1993) and Foley (1990). That is to say that just as there is no one “fan” experience, neither do I believe there is one “female fan” experience, and it will therefore be important to consider the

multiple and complex identities of any one particular individual (e.g., race, gender, social class).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I offered a review of the literature around gender and sport, including an expanded discussion of the terms “sport,” “fan,” and “gender.” I examined how fandom has previously been measured and categorized, explained the concept of gender as a performance, and provided a historical review of women as spectators. I also highlighted the specific relationship between women and American professional football. The chapter concluded with a discussion of previously employed theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 3

Methodology

As introduced in Chapter One, the purpose of this research was to explore how the identities of female fans of the National Football League (NFL) were constructed and negotiated through the language used to describe their experiences. To recap, my research question was as follows:

How do female followers of the NFL accomplish being "fan?"

In order to address this question, discourse analysis was my methodological approach. Discourse analysis focuses on "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1). Within this genre, however, there are multiple and distinct forms of practice. In the sections that follow, I highlight those approaches most relevant to my study of female football fans, discuss their underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions, state my positionality as a researcher, and describe the research design as well as the methods of data collection.

Discourse analysis

In the 1950s, a "discursive turn" occurred in the social sciences that shifted the focus of subsequent research onto "the power of language and the possibilities it affords in the understanding of social life" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, x). This new perspective emphasized three major tenets: a) talk as action; b) talk as the focus of study; and c) an emphasis on variability (Wood & Kroger, 2000). With a new focus, a new set of methods also developed. Today, people commonly speak of discourse analysis as both theory and method, as Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) point out, "in discourse analysis, *theory* and

method are intertwined and researchers must accept the basic philosophical premises in order to use discourse analysis as their method of empirical study" (p. 4). Having said that, the term "discourse analysis" is an umbrella term used generally to indicate any number of applied approaches including conversation analysis, discursive psychology, critical discourse analysis, and (feminist) poststructural discourse analysis. For the purposes of this research, I begin by introducing a number of key principles in critical discourse analysis before turning to specifically focus on feminist poststructural discourse analysis, a distinct yet highly related approach.

Critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysts (CDA) assume that reality is socially constructed; however, they also recognize not everyone plays an equal part in its creation. Discourse "cannot be considered neutral" (Rogers, 2011, p.1). Language not only reflects the social world, it also constructs it. Because it reflects the culture it is imbedded in, social positions are worked up, reinforced, and challenged through our conversations. Further, context is made relevant in CDA because a person's identity, including her social status (i.e., race, gender, social class) matters. Some of these social positions are privileged over others and we would, therefore, expect to see this hierarchical arrangement reproduced in the language we use; in turn, the language serves to reinforce the existing social order (Fairclough, 2001). Finally, CDA is guided by three central tenets: a) discourses are shaped and constrained by social structures; b) discourses shape and constrain individuals; and c) the relationship between words (i.e., discourses) and social context is key (McDowell & Schaffner, 2011).

Critical discourse analysis also acknowledges the politics involved in social interaction, and makes room for researchers who advocate for change. "CDA is known for its overtly political stance and is concerned with all forms of social inequality and injustice" (Lazar, 2005, p. 2). Scholars who work from this perspective are not only interested in describing the interaction as is, but are also invested in suggesting alternative depictions of how things could or even should be. Instead of focusing solely or primarily on conversation features and structure such as sequencing and turns as in conversation analysis (CA), CDA is much more interested in how the conversation is being taken up, who is controlling the exchange, and what is being made significant (Gee, 2011). Moreover, Gee argues:

> We can use language to make certain sign systems and certain forms of knowledge and belief better or worse, relevant or privileged, 'real' or not in given situations; that is, we can build privilege for one sign system or way of claiming knowledge over another. (p. 22)

Naturally occurring data and written text are key features of most discourse analysis work, and are sources arguably less affected by a researcher agenda (Silverman, 2001; ten Have, 2007). CDA makes no assumptions about the speaker's intended meaning; there is only what *happens*. Therefore, the words that someone elects to use have tangible implications. They do something. In this sense, even if someone does not mean to insult someone else, it does not negate the fact that the other person may indeed be insulted. Thus, CDA offers an alternative way to understand a given exchange. Instead of presenting a researcher's interpretation of the participants' understanding of the event,

transcript or textual data serves as evidence in and of itself. Something was accomplished in the interaction, and by analyzing the discourse, I can suggest at least one version of what that might have been.

Feminist poststructural discourse analysis. According to Baxter (2003), Feminist Poststructural Discourse Analysis (FPDA) is best understood as an "additional" or "supplementary" form of analysis (p. 3). Though not altogether unlike CDA, FPDA is "an approach to analyzing intertextualised discourses in spoken interaction and other types of text [that] draws upon the post-structuralist principles of complexity, plurality, ambiguity, connection, recognition, diversity, textuality, playfulness, functionality, and transformation" (Baxter, 2008, p. 245). In FPDA research, the aim is not to identify *an* answer to a question, but to recognize that there are many answers. Furthermore, it emphasizes the connection to and recognition of a larger social context. Individual discourses are not presumed to exist in a vacuum. And finally, "FPDA does not have an emancipatory agenda, but a 'transformative quest'" (p. 245). Rather than aiming for large-scale revolution, FPDA endeavors to create opportunity for small-scale, localized change. As it applies to this research project, FPDA was employed to analyze the language women used to construct their identities as American professional football fans.

More specifically, in this research on female football fans, FPDA was used to understand how language contributes to the performance of a gendered identity (Butler, 1990). This approach fits well because of its "interest in deconstruction: working out binary power relations…and challenging such binaries" (Baxter, 2008, p. 246). My aim was not to do work which attempted to supplant a male-defined model of football fandom

with a female one, primarily because I do not conceive of gender as an either-or binary, but rather as a multitude of expressions across a spectrum. Therefore, what I worked to produce was an analysis that challenged the underlying assumption that what is male must be the opposite of what is female, and that the fan identity cannot encapsulate a range of expressions.

"From an FPDA perspective, there are always plural and competing discourses constituting power relations within any field of knowledge or given context" (Baxter, 2003, p. 8). Because it is a poststructural perspective, FPDA does not (as opposed to CDA) assume a material reality, in this case patriarchy, which imposes itself upon the individual or the resulting discourse. Instead, women may be both oppressed and oppressor in the course of any one conversation. The presumption, therefore, is not that men are always empowered and, by default, women are necessarily always disempowered. In fact, one of the key aims of FPDA is to "examine the ways in which speakers negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in the world according to the ways in which they are *multiply* located by different discourses" (p. 10).

FPDA is further guided by the following principles: self-reflexivity, a deconstructionist approach, and a feminist focus (Baxter, 2003). In terms of reflexivity, FPDA not only requires a researcher to make her theoretical positions clear, but also to be "self-reflective about the deployment of a specialist technical vocabulary" (p. 59). Researchers doing this kind of work are encouraged to use "writerly" (Barthes, 1977) techniques, and to make clear the choices they make as the narrator of the report. In addition, FPDA scholars should work against "narrative closure, and allow space for an

open-ended verdict" (Baxter, 2003, p. 64). While the process of deconstruction requires the analyst to challenge, overturn, and substitute alternative discourses, the resulting interpretation is openly acknowledged to be but one of many which could result. Finally, a feminist focus:

> Involves highlighting key discourses on gender as they are negotiated within specific, localized contexts [and] making sense of the ways in which these discourses position female speakers (in particular) as relatively powerful, powerless, or a combination of both. It acknowledges the ambiguities and differences in the experiences of particular female speakers, as well as focusing on the possibilities for resistance and reinterpretation of social practices. (p. 66)

To summarize, FPDA is a postmodern perspective that allows for the multiple, often competing and conflicting, discourses of individual women. It is anti-grand narrative. That is, FPDA does not suggest that what is true for one woman, or group of women, will be true for all. FPDA is also postcritical/poststructural, meaning that it is anti-materialist. Social structures (e.g., patriarchy) are not presumed to exist external to the individual, nor do they exert unilateral power over the women engaged in conversation. Instead, women are both empowered and disempowered by the language they use, and in any exchange the power dynamic is in a constant state of flux. To reiterate, women are not the "victims" of a patriarchal system in a one-way, top-down relationship, but they can (and do) resist this positioning, often assuming places of greater power in relation to others, including men. These shifts in power are situational and context specific, changing along with the discourse.

In terms of its feminist underpinnings, FPDA most closely aligns with third wave feminism that emphasizes the intersectionality of one's gender with one's race, class, sexual orientation, religious preference, and so forth. FPDA is also local and specific in its emancipation focus, and in that way is similar to other action-oriented research efforts. FPDA does not aim to liberate "women" as a whole on some large-scale social level, but rather to improve the position of a woman or set of women within a particular community of practice. How can FPDA be both feminist and poststructural? Through its emphasis on making room for multiple voices and those who have been left out, FPDA finds common ground with third wave feminism. Likewise, FPDA is action-oriented, if only on a much smaller level.

Epistemological and ontological assumptions. As discussed previously, for discourse analysts, "truth" lies in the discourse. There is nothing to be assumed about the intent behind or motivation for any discursive exchange; however, what can be ascertained are the words that were used, how they were taken up and what happened next. Because there are numerous forms of discourse analysis, it is difficult to speak in generalities, but it is clear that the text, spoken or written, is the primary source of data.

Again, as Baxter (2003) suggests, FPDA is best understood as a supplementary approach; therefore, it is important to consider the underlying assumptions of not only FPDA but also its close counterpart, CDA. To begin, CDA is a critical approach, while FPDA is poststructural/postcritical. Researchers working within a critical paradigm accept that there is a material reality even if it is not made relevant in the conversation of the participants. For these theorists, the structure never ceases to exist, and all exchanges

must be understood in light of their social and historical context. Poststructural/ postcritical theorists, on the other hand, do not accept this material reality. In the case of female football fans, someone working from a poststructural/postcritical perspective would not claim that living in a patriarchal society automatically subordinates women, not even in a highly male-defined sporting space.

While the two approaches diverge on the existence and impact of structure, both CDA and FPDA share a critical foundation. According to Coakley (2009), "people using this [critical] approach want to produce and apply research-based knowledge to shrink 'the gap between what is and what could be' (Burawoy, 2004)" (p. 49). Critical theorists ask questions about who has power in and who is disadvantaged by any given social arrangement, as well as what can be done to bring about change. In terms of sport spectators, then, it would seem clear that women are certainly disadvantaged.

> For critical theorists and feminists, the material world is made up of historically situated structures that have a real impact on the life chances of individuals. These structures are perceived to be real (i.e., natural and immutable) and social action resulting from their perceived realness leads to differential treatment of individuals based on race, gender and social class. (Hatch, 2002, p. 16)

In the context of my own research, hegemonic masculinity is called into question as the "norm." This notion presumes that what is male is opposite of what is female and that masculinity is valued over femininity. Because we have socially constructed these two dichotomous categories, there is no room for overlap. Instead of a continuum, we have created a disconnect. Therefore, when a man exhibits "feminine" traits, interests, or

characteristics, he is often deemed less of a man. When a woman exhibits "masculine" traits, interests, or characteristics, she risks being seen as not a woman at all.

These categories limit our human potential, especially as women. Given the fact that we are less valued, less is expected from us. Therefore, when we become educated, independent, or interested in doing the things that men do, we face social sanctions. If a young girl wants to play rough or get dirty, she is labeled a "tomboy." If an adult woman is aggressive or assertive in business or in life, she risks being labeled a "bitch." Relatedly, if I want to watch the game, *really* watch the game, there must be an ulterior motive. I probably just want to watch men in tight pants, or hang out with my boyfriend, or flirt with the guys who actually care about what is going on.

Positionality, Commitments, and Epistemic Orientation

Moreover, according to the critical/feminist paradigm, the personal is political. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) claimed, "the investigator and the investigated object are assumed to be interactively linked, with the values of the investigator inevitably influencing the inquiry" (p. 110). In this sense, I am "guilty" on all counts. In this project, I co-constructed the interview data with my participants guiding our conversations to address topics set forth on a pre-approved protocol (Appendix C), and my underlying desires and motivations were not set aside. I openly acknowledged my position as a female fan, and personally responded to the same set of questions I asked of other women through the use of a bracketing interview (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Doing so not only allowed me to examine my own beliefs and assumptions, but also granted me the opportunity to more fully become a participant in my own research (Roulston, 2010;

Johnson-Bailey, 2001). My choice to investigate women was personal; I am also woman. My decision to focus on fans was personal; I am also a fan. I have lived my own experience as such and wanted to learn about others. Thus, I influenced the research in making these choices as opposed to others. There was no such thing as "objectivity" here.

Before moving ahead, it is important that I further address my position as a self-identified female football fan. This is to say that I had a personal interest in learning more about the identities of women in this research. For most of the years of my life that I can remember, the label of "sports fan" has been a crucial part of my identity. Thinking back, it began as way of bonding with my father. As an only child, and a female, there were not many interests I can say we shared. However, his teams became my teams and sports became a large part of the glue that held us together. Region also shaped this identity as we rooted for the home team and against all those who challenged them. Later, an alumni affiliation added yet another layer to this already deeply entrenched self. And while family, geography, and team affiliation are all facets of the fan identity that have been previously explored, these do not, I believe, fully explain the depth of my experience or potentially that of other women. Though many years have passed and much in my life has changed, my status as a fan continues to matter to me in a way that most things in life do not. Yet, I have been excluded. And, it is only now, when I am well into my thirties, that I am beginning to understand the many forces that shaped my experiences and lack thereof with regard to sport.

As a woman, I am not fully a part of "the club," and I am reminded of this each time I engage in conversation with someone who does not quite accept my self-

identification as a fan. Typically, that someone is male. I cannot recount the number of times a man, after spending some amount of time getting to know me, has declared with a distinct measure of surprise that I actually know what I am talking about. But those are the "good" stories, and not every situation ends as well. Most recently, I was charged with "throwing my credentials around" when I attempted to defend my status, having been challenged with the question, "What do you know" about being a fan? This is neither the first nor the last time I expect to face such circumstances, and with each encounter my determination to challenge these assumptions is reinforced.

Based on my own experience, then, I have come to understand that there is only so far I am allowed into this club without repercussion. I can claim a team. I can wear their colors. I can root for the players. But, I cannot watch *SportsCenter* in the morning, listen to sport radio in the car, or hold a subscription to *Sports Illustrated*. I cannot possibly understand the draft system, play formations or illegal motion penalties. I am a woman; therefore, I can never "know" the game as well as a man does. True, I may not experience it in the same way, but that does not preclude me from sustaining my own relationship with the game, or from knowing it on my own. As I have recently become inclined to ask, what does having a penis (or not) have to do with it? In this case, what exactly is it about being born a woman that must mean I cannot possibly comprehend the game?

Without a doubt, my own set of life experiences colored both the types of questions I took up in this research, as well as my interpretations of the resulting data. Though I did not intend to "set aside" my own understanding, engaging in a bracketing interview hopefully made my positions more transparent to the reader. "The intention [of a

bracketing interview] is not to have the interviewers become objective—only to have them become more attuned to their presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the present phenomenon" (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 48). Moreover, in feminist research, "the researcher herself becomes a subject matter…and must take into account her personal experiences as part of the research process (Ardovini-Brooker, 2002, para. 34). Thus, in this project, the bracketing interview not only served as a measure of self-reflexivity, but also as a means of further connecting me with other women who shared their own experiences, as mine was also included in the data for analysis.

Epistemic Orientation

In terms of my personal theoretical leanings, until recently I was an advocate for a critical feminist perspective, an approach which contends that gender matters, that it is always relevant, and that it would be no less so in a historically male-defined sporting domain such as this. According to this standpoint, gender implicates women in tangible ways, affecting their access to resources and often resulting in differential treatment and discriminatory practices (Butler, 1988; Messner & Sabo, 1990). Moreover, I did not think it was possible to fully understand the nature and experience of women's participation as fans of the game of football without considering the impact of her gender. While this identity may be downplayed in a particular social context, I would contend that it could never be fully ignored.

Where I began to part ways with the critical/feminist paradigm was with respect to its emancipation agenda. While constructivists aim to understand, it is widely understood that critical theorists seek to emancipate. Yet, I did not hold consciousness-

raising for the purposes of transformation as a primary goal, at least not on a larger social scale (Hatch, 2002). Certainly, I believed that through the process of my research, questions which were previously unconsidered may arise for these women. Neither did I doubt there was the potential for the women to view their circumstances differently as a result. In this way I aligned myself more closely with a poststructural/postcritical stance that emphasizes small-scale, localized change, rather than liberation of an entire social group. I did not seek to make women "aware" of their oppression, or at the very least their marginalization, so that they might lose whatever joy they took from engaging in this practice. Rather, I hoped that through the process of this research each of us may become more aware of our own power to shape, reinforce, reinscribe, challenge and alter traditional notions of what it means to be a female football fan. For some, watching sports is an escape, even a release. Indeed, it is possible that other women may make a deliberate choice to turn a "blind eye" to their gendered position in order to just be a part of something. I understand. It is an experience I have had to personally surrender in the pursuit of this research. At times, it can feel alienating. Accordingly, it is because of my own self-awareness that I did not seek to impose my choices upon them.

Do I want change? Absolutely. I want to "make conditions better for women" (Hatch, 2002, p. 17). But I do not know what other women want and do not wish to speak on their behalves. And, even after this research, my sense is still that what will make things better for one woman will not be true for all. "The object is to reveal for others the kinds and extent of oppression that are being experienced by those studied" (p. 17). We may have learned from each other through the course of this project. We may have

become more attuned to the power of language and the opportunity we have to impact how we understand ourselves and how others understand us. And in that sense, the women who participated in this research may have been directly affected; yet, a more broad-based change can only occur if we each feel compelled to put this awareness to use and translate it into action.

Issues of Objectivity and Generalizability

Given my position as a researcher, it is equally important for me to acknowledge how my proximity to my research topic influenced the work I produced. On a much larger level, I absolutely aspire to do work which empowers women. In this particular case that meant I wanted to see those women who claimed a fan identity feel validated in making that assertion. I also wanted to see them recognized as knowledgeable and authentic fans in their own right and to dispel this perception that they must occupy a second-class status based solely on their gender. Furthermore, I do not accept the claim that there is some "natural" gender order that can be used to account for the current state of affairs and am "critical of naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality that assume that the meaning of women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology" (Butler, 1988, p. 520). I do not believe our lived experience can be summed up by a check box on a form, and instead suggest it is possible that both women and men express multiple gendered identities throughout their lives. If this is indeed the case, there is room to understand a woman who wears dresses, makeup and high heels and at the same time knows how many yards her favorite running back racked up against the opposition's defense in Sunday's game.

Undoubtedly, there will be those who contend that a feminist agenda coupled with personal interest compromised this research in some meaningful way. I would argue that all research is guided by similar, if not identical, intent. Thus, my aim was simply to be transparent about who I am in relation to the research at hand, and to support my work with enough detail that the reader could decide for herself whether my findings resonated with her own experience and understanding (Tracy, 2010). That is not to say the claims made here were unwarranted; I contend they were both trustworthy and sound (Wood & Kroger, 2000). My interpretations were both guided by and grounded in existing academic literature and challenged by fellow scholars. Yet, it is ultimately up to the reader to determine whether or not she can see herself in the work I produced, a phenomenon Stake (2005) referred to as naturalistic generalizability. Having said that, Goodman (2008) also made a strong case that discursive strategies (e.g., the working up of an identity claim) may be generalizable across multiple contexts, and that could indeed be the case here. In the end, my goal was simply to get the academic conversation started; then we can legitimately begin to debate process and procedure.

Methods

Because discourse analysis emphasizes both conversation and text at some level, the methods I used for data collection were similar in aim. Baxter (2008) detailed a process of textual analysis that highlighted both *synchronic* and *diachronic* approaches to the understanding of discourse. Synchronic analysis, as she described it, involves a "detailed, micro-analysis of stretches of text associated with a particular speech event" and lends itself toward data sources such as interviews and focus groups where there is an

immediate response or exchange among participants (p. 247). Diachronic analysis, on the other hand, highlights "the language of a particular social group over a longish period of time…[and] allows for recording overall patterns and developments in the discursive relationships of a given social group" (p. 247). Blog posts were, therefore, taken to be an appropriate source of data for this form of analysis. In this discourse project, spending time in an online environment (i.e., a female fan website) allowed me to gain a greater sense of the larger "D"iscourse surrounding female fans during a particular time period which, in turn, aided my interpretation of individual fan accounts given via personal interview.

Site Selection, Gaining Entry, and Human Subjects Approval

The site for this study was OnHerGame.com (formerly HerGameLife), "the largest female owned and operated online media outlet dedicated to serving female fans of the National Football League" (PRWeb, 2012, para. 1). Founded in 2012 by Lauren Sickles and Shamika Lee, this forum offered publicly accessible blog posts written by any of approximately 200 female contributors (HerGameLife, 2012). By collecting all posts (35 in total) published on OnHerGame related to female football fan identity and/or experience during the 2012-2013 NFL season, I felt I could adequately address the diachronic element of FPDA, or that element which examines the patterns of discourse expressed by a group over time. In addition, I interviewed five of the women who predominantly blogged about female fan identity and/or experience for the site and included my own bracketing interview data for analysis. Collectively, these interviews

were used to address the synchronic component of FPDA, which focuses specifically on interactions that occur during a particular exchange.

At this time, OnHerGame offers blog posts on a variety of topics beyond the NFL, including more sports, game day fashion, and tailgate recipes. There are scrolling images of key stories on the NFL, NCAA football, a female swimmer, and a NASCAR personality. A ticker across the top lists the "hot reads" of the moment, and the left sidebar offers a quick connection to the "top bloggers" of the week. In addition, there are sections of the front page dedicated to recent news, top sports news, off field topics, and shopping (Figure 1). The NFL is given its own dedicated space on the page, while MLB, NBA, Racing, NHL, College Sports, Soccer, Women's Sports and Fantasy Football are all found under the label "More Sports."

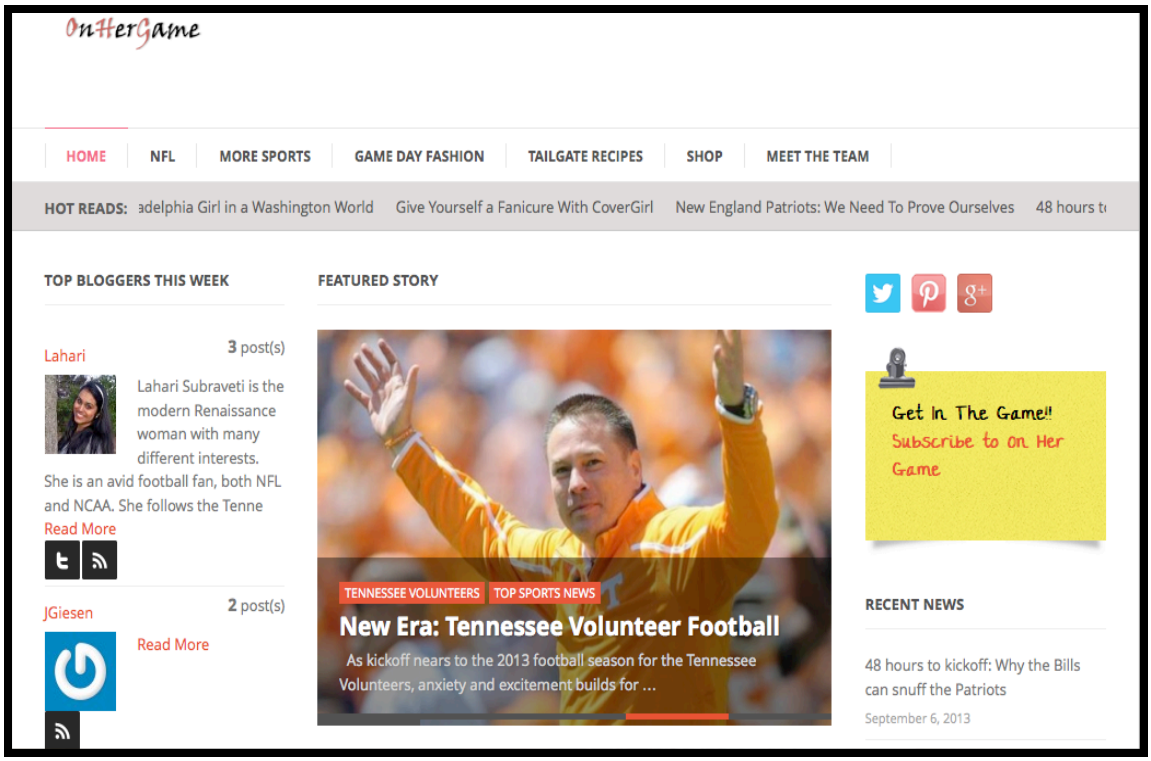

Figure 1. Front page of OnHerGame.com

Finally, according to the information found in the "About On Her Game" section, the site is "dedicated to voicing the opinions of female sports fans" and putting "a distinctive feminine spin on all things sports"(OnHerGame, 2013).

Ethical concerns. Publicly accessible websites constitute, by and large, open settings that do not require special access. Still, the Association of Internet Researchers published a report from its ethics committee in 2012 which recommended a case-based approach to online research that considers the context, purpose, subjects, benefits and risks of each study individually (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). As it relates to OnHerGame, material on the site is copyrighted, and presumably not intended for research purposes, thus I sought and received consent from the person currently in charge

of its content. Following the contact information listed on the website, I introduced myself and my research via email and requested permission before beginning my data collection. Beyond that, the blog posts produced for this website by individual contributors did not require any special authorization to obtain. I took a similar approach in order to contact potential interview participants, utilizing a variety of social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) they provided online in order to reach them. To introduce the study, I sent a recruitment email (Appendix A) to each blogger, and once she agreed to participate, I obtained her formal informed consent using the form approved by the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board (Appendix B).

Sampling

From within the OnHerGame website, I employed purposeful sampling techniques (Merriam, 2009). Because I was interested in the larger discourse surrounding female football fans, I specifically focused on blog posts about female fan experiences and the authors who contributed them. While there were sections of the site that highlighted other sports as well as fashion and recipes, I drew upon those blog posts written about the experience of being a female NFL fan (e.g., *A Female Football Fan's Top Pet Peeves* and *Confessions of a Female Football Fan*). These posts incorporated the work of 16 different women, allowing me to get a greater sense of the overall discourse present on the site, rather than concentrating on one particular woman's perspective. The women in my sample also represented a range of demographics. Though this level of inclusion is not an express aim of discourse analysis, because of my postmodern commitments, I felt strongly that any work I produced should strive to for diversity.

Because so little has been written about these women, my main objective, first and foremost, was to learn about being a fan from a female perspective. But this also meant being cautious not to take any one "type" of woman's experience as indicative of them all. Just as I do not subscribe to the idea that there is only one way to experience "fan," I did not wish to perpetuate an idea that there was only one way to do "female fan." To be clear, though I would not expect all women of any one particular social category (e.g., race, class, religion) to profess a monolithic experience of fan, given the historical precedent of exclusionary research practices, I felt it was my responsibility as a (feminist) researcher to make this my deliberate and intentional effort. My aim was not to achieve some measure of generalizability; rather I aspired only to include a range of individuals who claimed this fan identity.

Participants

Attending to the feminist orientation of this research, the women who blogged for OnHerGame and I were participants together in this endeavor. Not only did I openly identify myself as a fellow fan, I was also interviewed by a fellow doctoral student trained in qualitative research methods and asked to respond to the same questions I asked of others. By interviewing those women who blogged for OnHerGame, I was able to investigate the ways in which the larger public discourse about female fans was reinforced and/or resisted in individual conversations with the very women who helped to create it. Again, within those limits, I aimed for diverse perspectives. The concern here, for discourse analysts, would be that "when the discourse is produced by persons who occupy multiple membership categories, any one of which might be relevant to discourse

production…we [may] make unwarranted assumptions about those categories" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 78). Though Potter and Wetherell (1987) pointed out that what is most important is the text, rather than the producer of that text, Wood and Kroger (2000) also suggested that the nature of the sample is often determined by a researcher's theoretical approach to the study. Some approaches, they argued, "want to begin with participants who, although similar in some sense, are different enough that they might give different versions," in this case, different versions of fan experience (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 79). Indeed, I wanted the participants taking part in this study to be reflective (if not representative) of a larger population of female football fans. This was a deliberate effort on my own behalf to resist suggesting there was but one female fan "type."

My only inclusion criteria for interview participants in this study was that a woman self-identified as a professional football fan and produced written material for OnHerGame about that identity; therefore, all contributors who blogged during the 2012-2013 NFL season were considered as potential participants. While I intended to interview only those women whose posts I included for analysis, ultimately all women who contributed to the site during this time period were considered for the interview portion of data collection. In order to recruit interview participants, I initially attempted to contact those who most frequently and directly blogged about female fan identity and/or experience by providing a list of those names to the site's creator and asking her to facilitate my communication with those women. Given the time constraints of the project, however, I ultimately utilized contact information listed online to reach out to these women directly. I attempted to contact eight unique bloggers; no one refused to

participate once contacted, though there were two initial messages that went unreturned. There was one additional blogger who expressed interest in participating that I was unable to consent and interview in time for this study. Therefore, in the end, I interviewed five women who blogged for the site.

In terms of data saturation, discourse analysts are much less concerned with numbers of participants, and focus instead on "whether there are sufficient data to make an (interesting) argument and to warrant or justify that argument" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 81). The goal here was not to continue collecting data until nothing new or novel could be found; rather, to have collected enough data to make a thorough case (Wood & Kroger, 2000). As Merriam (2009) similarly noted, "the crucial factor is not the number of respondents but the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon" (p. 105). Ultimately, I expect the five interviews I conducted, in addition to my own bracketing interview, provided sufficient opportunity to consider the relationship between the discourse of the individual (synchronic) and the larger social group (diachronic).

Sources of Data

For FPDA research projects, documentation of discourse is key, meaning the researcher needs tangible evidence of the exchange in order to perform an analysis. This may take the form of archived exchanges that occurred without researcher influence (e.g., audio and/or video recordings of naturally occurring talk), researcher-driven interviews, or even text (e.g., media accounts) (Wood & Kroger, 2000). For FPDA in particular,

> a powerful source of data…apart from transcripts of talk or written texts, is that

> which is gained from a range of different voices: whether those of the research subjects themselves, other members of the research team, theorists in the field or, indeed the author's own voice. (Baxter, 2003, p. 67)

In this project, two primary forms of data were considered: (a) 35 blog contributions posted to OnHerGame during the 2012-2013 NFL season; and (b) five individual interviews with authors of these posts. In keeping with the feminist aim of FPDA, this data was supplemented by the bracketing interview of the researcher, thereby contributing yet another "voice."

Text as data. Given that there is no known physical space where only (or even primarily) female NFL fans congregate, an online forum run by and for these women offered a prime "place" to study this population. With nearly 200 current contributors, OnHerGame (formerly HerGameLife) has become "a daily publisher of original and intriguing content related to the NFL" (PRWeb, 2012, para. 4). This amounted to a considerable collection of written material from which to draw upon. For the purposes of this research, all articles written about being a female NFL fan (or the female fan identity) and published during the 2012-2013 NFL season (between August 2012-February 2013) were considered. Collectively, that totaled 35 blog posts for analysis. These posts, written wholly apart from the study, were considered naturally occurring data; in other words, they were not influenced by the researcher's agenda. On the other hand, under these circumstances, the data produced for public consumption was all there was; if the blog post did not address certain topics, there was no immediate opportunity to

request it. To allow for a more directed conversation, I sought interviews with the authors themselves.

Interviews. For FPDA, transcripts of talk (e.g., interviews) are a primary source of data (Baxter, 2003). Therefore, one of the main data collection methods for this project was the qualitative interview. The women who agreed to participate were invited to share their thoughts about being a female football fan in a semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) (Merriam, 2009). Because the women who blog for OnHerGame lived in various locations across the United States, four of these interviews took place over the telephone and the remaining two via an internet calling system (i.e., Skype); all interviews generally followed the predefined protocol mentioned above. Though no one elected to do so, I also offered to make arrangements so that interviews could be conducted face-to-face. Interviews lasted between 36 minutes (shortest time) and 50 minutes (longest time), were audio-recorded, and designed to allow me to address topics related to my stated research question, specifically: How do female followers of the NFL accomplish being "fan?" Following each interview, an electronic transcript of the conversation was emailed to the participant for her review. In addition, I employed member checking by soliciting feedback from participants regarding my preliminary analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Forms of Analysis

In terms of data analysis, Baxter (2003) offers three guiding principles for interpreting text: a) focusing on the synchronic-diachronic dimension; b) recognizing denotation-connotation; and c) emphasizing intertextuality. The synchronic approach

involves "a detailed, micro-analysis of short stretches of spoken discourse" which allows a researcher to capture a specific moment when a discursive power shift occurs (Baxter, 2003, p. 73). This form of analysis is crucial not only in identifying moments where speakers shift between positions of power, but also in illustrating the constant negotiations that occur, thereby reinforcing the idea that "speakers are never uniformly powerful or powerless, only temporarily constituted…within given locations" (p. 73). In this research, interview transcripts were subjected to synchronic analysis. The diachronic dimension, on the other hand, focuses more broadly on the language of people over time. In FPDA, this involves noticing the way certain speakers are consistently positioned as more or less powerful over a range of discourses and offers "a more subtle and complex picture of the differences *within* and *between* girls/women" (p. 74). With regard to the blog posts collected for this research, this form of analysis was used to identify the diverse ways women constructed their "public" fan identity. Utilizing a more ethnographic approach over the course of an entire NFL season made it possible to identify expressions of identity that covered a range of power positions (e.g., strong identities, challenged identities). The passage of time over the course of one NFL season further provided a boundary for the data to be collected and allowed me to identify not only recurring topics, but also patterns of language used to depict these subjects.

In the denotation-connotation pairing, denotative analysis offers concrete descriptions of what is going on in a text while "a connotative analysis is concerned to demonstrate how speakers are continuously positioned and repositioned by a range of competing discourses pertaining to a given social/institutional context" (p. 77). The

former is tied directly to the text, indicating precisely what has been said and "making close and detailed reference to the verbal and non-verbal interactions of the participants" (p. 75). The latter is an abstracted form of analysis, and involves more "interpretive commentary" (p. 76). For FPDA, it is important to consider larger social discourses that may be identified in a particular setting. While it is not always possible to recognize these within a singular interview, it may more likely be found by observing a group's interactions over time. Finally, the strategy of intertextuality foregrounds the connectedness of individual forms of speech with larger social discourses. That is, any discourse is influenced by, and finds meaning in, what has already been said before. For instance, our discussion of what it was to be a female fan did not result in something altogether novel, but was instead was highly intertwined with a previously (culturally) prescribed set of options for articulating this identity. As it applied to this project, I expected to find elements of the dominant discourse (e.g., football is a man's game) in the language used by women to describe their experiences. This is because the range of discourse available to describe that experience is understood to be both prescribed, and circumscribed, by the prevailing system of reference.

Analysis. Before the data can be analyzed, it must be collected and/or produced in a suitable format. To that end, text from all blog posts from the OnHerGame website which meet the aforementioned criteria were printed in hard copy for the purposes of organization and analysis. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed with the use of InqScribe software, and the resulting text was also printed in hard copy. Both blog posts and interview transcripts were read through first for content and jottings were

made. Excerpts from the posts were then compiled in a word document, which was subsequently printed. The interview documents remained wholly intact. Data from both sources was then categorized according to discourse pattern, and subcategorized by topic, resulting in the major findings and subheadings included in Chapter Four to follow. In the end, I was able to identify a number of larger (D)iscourses (or discursive strategies) that were supported by excerpts that illustrate how the language was taken up in individual accounts.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the qualitative research approach and corresponding methods I used in this dissertation. Discourse analysis, in the form of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist Poststructural Discourse Analysis (FPDA), was acknowledged as an appropriate methodology. Next, I addressed my researcher positionality, as well as issues of objectivity, generalizability, and ethics before discussing matters of sampling and the characteristics of participants. Finally, blog posts and qualitative interviews were identified as data sources that would be collected and analyzed in order to address this study's research question.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, I offer my analysis of both publicly produced blog posts and qualitative interviews with women who produce these posts. My primary focus is on the patterns of discourse as well as how language choices contribute to the performance of a fan identity. Honoring FPDA's postmodern commitments (Baxter, 2003), I felt it was important to recognize each woman as an individual with her own unique background and experiences, and to resist talking about this group of women as if they collectively represent a definitive social construct termed "female fan." Therefore, each of the participants in this project is introduced to the reader via a brief biographical profile before any further analysis is produced. First, however, I begin with an analysis of the blog posts.

Blog Data: Reproduction

One of the primary aims of FPDA is to identify the ways in which subjects are located within multiple, competing, yet interwoven discourses (Baxter, 2003). Moreover, FPDA employs the use of diachronic analysis, or the study of group discourse over time, as a means of recognizing these practices. An analysis of blog posts published on the OnHerGame website during the 2012-1013 season revealed two primary forms of public discourse used to depict the identities of female fans: (a) discourse which reproduced existing notions of hegemonic masculinity in the context of "doing fan;" and (b) discourse which resisted those assumptions. In the excerpts described below, I provide examples of text which illustrate these patterns, and suggest that beyond the topics of

discussion themselves, the language chosen to portray these subjects is equally, if not more, revelatory.

Before going further, I should remind the reader what is meant by "discourse." As it is used here, the term is understood to indicate "powerful sets of assumptions, expectations, and explanations" that have a tangible effect on the way perceive the world around us (Baxter, 2003, p. 7). Therefore my intent was to identify cases where these messages were embedded in, implied by, or directly stated in the blog posts. I begin by presenting blog post data classified as reproducing existing, prevalent, and often stereotypical ideas about female fans, including what they should know, how they should behave, and whom they should learn this from.

What women want. In a weekly series of blog posts entitled "5 Things You Need to Know to Make You Smarter Than Your Boyfriend," the introductory paragraph reads:

> This weekly column is your one stop shop to get in the know about everything going on around the league. From injury updates, and holdouts, to news off the field, your football knowledge will surely grow week after week. Don't believe me? Put your knowledge to the test with friends and that certain someone. You'll surely be able to hold your own and then some in conversation. (Jenna, 2012)

The implication is that there are specific things a female reader needs to know in order to "hold [her] own" in conversation with other fans, presumably men. Some forms of knowledge are valued over others, and those that allow her to pass "the test" are most revered. Who is going to administer this test? Not only friends, but also potentially that "certain someone" who one must conclude, given the title of the piece, is once again

male. Thus, this seemingly innocuous opening statement is actually full of language which effectively positions the female fan as one still aspiring to learn about the game and emphasizes the role of men in validating that achievement.

Similarly, in September of 2012, a separate post advertising a new program called SportsDivas was published. The stated goal of this initiative was to "empower" female sports fans. As part of the promotion, the following was asked:

> Are people around you talking about the upcoming NFL season and the city's beloved Bears? Are you a bit of a novice in the X's and O's of the game and don't want to ask your male friends what a 'nickel defense' is? SportsDivas, Inc. is the answer for busy women who want to learn and follow sports, but are unsure *how* to start, *what* to ask, or *where* to go. (Emily, 2012)

Again, the language used above reproduces the assumption that women are "novice" fans and that men are the ones who hold the required knowledge. When the author suggests people "around you are talking," the implication is that the reader is being left out of the conversation. The second question insinuates that the reader is an amateur in a very specific way as she presumably does not understand "the X's and O's of the game," and is perhaps afraid to ask her "male friends" to explain. This therefore assumes men possess this form of knowledge and that it has enough value to be worthy of acquiring. Why should she be afraid to ask a man? In describing the scenario this way, the author conveys the message that it would be safer to learn from a woman and avoid any potential negative social repercussions from men.

Later in the same post, the program's founder suggested "other sports outlets and media…assume that the reader is already an educated fan" (Emily, 2012). Educated, how? One might presume that the educated fan is one who understands the language of the game (e.g., statistics, analysis) and that that person is also likely male. If this is indeed the case, it is all the more interesting to note that the director of the program went on to say, "There are lots of women who are not so much interested in the play-by-play or the heavy stats…they just want to know why the hype and what's the story" (Emily, 2012). This statement fosters the impression that women *do not want* to learn "play-by-play or the heavy stats" and consequently will never be the "educated fan" mentioned above. It further insinuates women are interested in the "story" of the game rather than the game itself. If men are presumed to be interested in stats and women in stories, then a line is effectively drawn between them in terms of how they orient toward the game.

Furthermore, SportsDivas founder claimed "women are inherently social" and, with regard to fantasy football participation, "you don't have to be a football nut or an NFL genius in order to play. The computer does so much of it for you…I always tell women to play because the computer prompts you in everything you do. It's super easy, but you always become a fan" (Emily, 2012). Stereotyping women as "inherently social" feeds the notion that their primary interest in the game is by association. Perhaps their husbands, boyfriends, fathers, or brothers are fans and because they want to spend time with these men, they claim to be a fan also. In the context of fantasy football, these women are encouraged to participate, even if they are not "a football nut or an NFL genius." Why? Because "it's super easy" and "the computer does so much of it for you."

In other words, women should not worry about what they do not know. Taken together, these statements combine to paint a picture of women as only superficially interested in the game, focusing more on storylines and socializing and less on substance while at the same time embedding value in the forms of knowledge which men are presumed to hold (X's and O's), and positioning those who do not possess it (i.e., women) in less empowered social positions.

Further contributing to this image of women as less interested and less knowledgeable, a weekly column in a "Cheat Sheet" publication SportsDivas aimed to produce was to include a "Nurse's Corner" where a writer, also a nurse, would "profile one player...then prescribe some proverbial medicine, whether that's for added success on the field or help in the love department" (Emily, 2012). One form of knowledge, that which would make the player more successful on the field, could arguably translate into some social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) for a woman attempting to bolster her fan identity claim, whereas the other form, focusing on a player's romantic interests, would undoubtedly not. Another of the program's productions, "The Weekend Roster," was billed as "an essential go-to guide—and there are men reading it too…but with a woman's slant" (Emily, 2012). It is difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint the precise meaning of the expression "woman's slant," but given the preceding discussion where women were characterized as "inherently social" and interested in the "hype" as well as the "story," one could infer at the very least it implies something less focused on stats and figures, with more emphasis on relationships. If indeed these are the embedded assumptions, what messages are the women (and men) reading it expected to receive?

And are they not, potentially, continuing to reinforce the notion that sports are inherently male domain?

Expanding this focus on off-field relationships, a post entitled "Every Woman Wants a NFL Big Man" went live in November 2012. The subject of this piece was a physical altercation that took place between an NFL offensive tackle and defensive end. In explaining his actions, the offensive tackle stated, "I've got two contracts in my life. One, with my wife, because we're married. And, two, I've got a contract to protect [teammate]. I'll do both of those to the best of my ability" (ChocLadyBengal, 2012). What was the female blogger's response? "Uhm, give me a minute, I'm still swooning…" (ChocLadyBengal, 2012). The entire blog post is dedicated to lauding this man for his comments about his commitment to his wife and his team, in that order. Indeed, the author queries, "Now tell me what woman doesn't want a man that will protect her from anything and anyone!?!" (ChocLadyBengal, 2012). The implied messages are that (a) women are in need of protection; and (b) men are the ones who can and should provide it. In that sense, not only does the language of the article position men as, quite literally, more powerful than women, but also reinforces a heteronormative assumption, where male-female relationships are privileged over other forms. In the case of female fans, it also works to promote the classic stereotype that women are only interested in the men who play, not the game itself. The author concludes the piece in the following manner: "Okay, cue the romantic music soundtrack right now…Hey, anybody know of some single offensive tackles out there? The NFL Big Men clearly deserve love

too!" (ChocLadyBengal, 2012). In doing so, she locates the NFL player as an object of romantic interest, one worthy of pursuit by the women who follow this blog.

Beyond the blog posts' focus on storylines (Emily, 2012) and relationships (ChocLadyBengal, 2012), several instances of sexualizing and/or objectifying men were also identified in the posts. For example, in one of the weekly "5 Things You Need to Know" columns, *People* magazine's "Sexiest Man" issue was the subject of discussion. A number of professional athletes, including at least one NFL quarterback, were recognized, leading the blogger to write, "While this [*People*] magazine issues is always a special treat, it's nice to see some notable athletes making the cut" (Jenna, 2012). In a post about the "Top Five Football Flicks for Chicks," the review of *Any Given Sunday* lists "hot guys, great action" as partial justification for its inclusion on the list (Adrienne, 2012). And finally, and maybe most interestingly, a post entitled "Your Cheatin' Heart" likens an unsuccessful football season to an unsuccessful relationship. "So what's a girl to do when the home team can't keep her satisfied?" the author asks (Adrienne, 2012). Acknowledging that "temptation abounds, and…it's easy to stray," she suggests "cheating" with another team under these circumstances is sometimes not only unavoidable but also understandable (Adrienne, 2012). "You know what they say, every now and then a girl's gotta get a little on the side" (Adrienne, 2012). The entire analogy presented here of female fan as romantic partner panders to the notion that women are interested in the players, and by extension the game itself, not for what happens on the field but rather what one may fantasize could happen off of it.

Here's to you, man. "At the end of the day, the best teacher is experience" (Jenna, 2012). This sentence, written in reference to the referee lockout, may at first appear quite simple. Yet it is actually indicative of another layer of discourse identified in the blog posts that serves to reinforce the principles of hegemonic masculinity. If experience is similarly valued in the case of football fandom, then only men can presently attain it by playing professional football in the NFL; hence, the knowledge they gather through this involvement is worth more than other forms, namely those which women and other men who have not played can obtain. But even men who may not have first-hand experience are spoken about in a manner that suggests we (women) owe them a debt of gratitude for sharing their knowledge with us, for teaching us so that we may comprehend. "We owe a lot to the ones who taught us the difference between 1st and 4th down, shared with us that really heartbreaking loss and talked excitedly with us at the kickoff of every new season" (Sara, 2012). The sense here is that without them, we might never know.

One man in particular is further addressed as a key agent in this socialization process: Dad. "My Dad was one of those fathers whose dreams for his 'son' were eventually, but not reluctantly, poured into his daughters—his only kids. While Mom took the lead on our educational pursuits, dad was the extra-curricular expert" (Morgan, 2012). Several items are worth noting in the sentence above. To begin, Dad had dreams, first and foremost, for his son yet under these circumstances he was able to redirect them toward the children he did have, his daughters. While the author goes on to say he was not reluctant to do so, the phrasing alone suggests that sharing these dreams with his

daughters was not his initial plan. Second, the sentence positions Mom as the person in charge of the children's education while Dad was responsible for extra-curricular pursuits, which effectively assigns a set of traditional gender roles to these respective statuses and implies an appropriate set of interests for each. Later, the author recounts, "I remember vividly watching…and having my Dad explain to us the rules of the game" (Morgan, 2012). Here again, we find the experience of watching the game was directly impacted by her father, who shared his understanding of the "rules." It is not unlikely that his interpretation was taken for granted as "truth," and perceived as positively contributing to her overall fan experience, given his role of influence in her life. Further highlighting this idea, she writes, "Football was always so personal for him. And so it became personal to us" (Morgan, 2012). Thus, what mattered to her father mattered to her. In establishing a connection to this man, she identified with his interests and took them on as her own. In this case, that meant the game of football. "So here's to Dad. Not only mine, but to all the fathers that instilled the love of football into their little girls...we will be ever grateful for the man who made it happen" (Morgan, 2012). In closing out this piece, she speaks to the reader in general, and seems to assume a shared experience such that others will be able to identify with her story. She credits her father, and others, for the significant role they played in creating this female football fan identity, and offers gratitude on behalf of us all. Presumably, without this male influence, it simply would not be.

Sunday funday. As women are often socialized to become fans through their interactions with men, it is not altogether surprising to find that female fans then take up

male-defined and established norms for "doing" fan. For instance, in a blog post about ways to make new fan memories, recommendations included "challenging each other" to act like announcers, ranking football movies, watching games and eating snacks like "root beer and Cheetos" or "ice cream sundaes and mojitos" (Sara, 2012). In addition, readers were encouraged to play fantasy football together and plan trips to watch games. Another post contained a list of "What I Love About Sunday," and included the following: "[waking] up early, when you could be sleeping in, just to check injury reports and set your fantasy football lineup" as well as "knowing what you're going to wear—your favorite team's jersey—and…[not having] to give your outfit another thought" (Haley, 2012). Appropriate food and drink were also discussed, as "it's socially acceptable to pour your first beer at noon" and "chips and dip constitute a whole meal of food" (Haley, 2012). Indeed, the epitome of all football Sundays, Super Bowl Sunday, "is a national day of celebration for most of the country…[and] a reason to gather, be merry, go off diet and drink a fair amount of booze" (Jennifer C., 2013). The same blogger also wrote, "I will likely consume three times the daily recommended caloric intake. I probably won't even notice, but if people were around me, they most certainly would. It most certainly won't be pretty or lady-like" (Jennifer C., 2013). Thus, the behaviors listed above (i.e., being highly competitive, not caring about fashion, eating and drinking freely) are juxtaposed with a set of different social expectations deemed appropriate for women that the largely female readership presumably shares.

Furthermore, "You don't get upset with your boyfriend/husband for constantly flipping back-and-forth between multiple channels and multiple games so as not to miss

any of the action" (Haley, 2012). Of course, the suggestion then is that typically you would get upset with your male significant other who behaves in this manner, but this is football Sunday and the norms are somehow temporarily suspended. "Your best friends become your biggest enemies as your rival teams and/or fantasy teams duke it out" (Haley, 2012). Relationship dynamics are considered in flux and dependent upon team allegiances. "Your creative juices start flowing as you rack your brain to come up with great fantasy smack talk" (Haley, 2012). Being able to talk smack and hold your own in this type of conversation with other fans is an integral part of one's fan performance, though you may never be expected to engage with others in this manner outside the given context. As another blogger reiterates, "I will find any opportunity to trash talk about your team. Talking trash is a sport of its own that needs frequent practice…[and] the cardinal rule of trash talking is to always have the last word" (Deepi, 2012). Finally, the blogger writes, "…you can jump up and down and scream at your t.v. and none of your neighbors will file a noise complaint" (Haley, 2012). More than that, the context of football watching may provide one of the few opportunities for women to express themselves in this way and not be otherwise stigmatized by those who witness such deviant behavior.

Play your position. Throughout the season, a number of blog posts directly addressed the reader as girlfriend, wife or mother. One piece in particular focused on the hectic life of a sports mom, whom the author identifies with by writing, "I love watching my boys play more than anything" (Jenny, 2012). In doing so, she locates herself as spectator, while her male children play the game. This is something she claims to enjoy,

even while acknowledging it can at times be overwhelming. She paints a picture for the reader with the following:

> So for all you mothers out there with post-its on your steering wheel, mouth guards in your purse, and sunflower seeds stuck to your pant leg, just keep chugging. While this time of your life may be frenzied and hectic, there is no greater joy than watching your children play the sports they love. (Jenny, 2012)

Once again, she contrasts the depiction of a harried lifestyle with the assertion that "there is no greater joy" than this. In effect, this depiction sets up a scenario where the (presumably male) children's enjoyment of playing the game is worth more than a mother's peace of mind. It also reinforces a stereotypical "soccer mom" image, where her primary involvement is as taxi driver and cheerleader. She concludes her reflection with these words of encouragement: "… on the bright side, a dinner of concession stand nachos means we didn't have to cook" (Jenny, 2012). In other words, moms can do all of this and still manage to feed their children, even if a few compromises must be made.

The role of Mom was not the only one to receive special attention, however. In another blog post, one recently engaged blogger examined the delicate nature of intimate relationships between fans of rival teams. As girlfriend, and now fiancée, she shared her own experiences and imparted lessons learned about how to navigate that particularly tricky combination. In fact, the couple's first date took place while their respective teams were playing one another. Reflecting on that decision, she wrote, "In hindsight, we probably should have chosen a less stressful first date. Like skydiving. Or race car driving" (Jenny C., 2012). As far as the reader knows, it was equally stressful for them

both. Still, as the relationship progressed, she encountered additional challenges. For example, she proclaimed, "Thou Shalt Not Trash Talk. Ever. Seriously your team will lose. I spent the offseason barraging my guy with talk about how the Giants would destroy the Cowboys. They would decimate them. They would eviscerate them" (Jenny C., 2012). As discussed previously, trash talking is an oft adhered to norm of fan behavior, and yet in this unique context, it is advised against. Not explicitly because she is female, but because she must continue to share space with her significant other after the game is over. In fact, she describes herself as the one who doesn't handle it well, admitting that, "You can go ahead and call me a poor sport; it's probably deserved. Immature would also fit. I mean come on! I'm 25 years old and can't stand to be in the same room as the love of my life because my team is losing?" (Jenny C., 2012). Of course, this description also adds to the image of a female as less rational and more emotional than her male counterpart. There is no discussion of how he may have responded, similarly or otherwise, only her further confession that "when the game concluded, I could lock the door and sulk for a bit" (Jenny C., 2012). And while not a mom yet, this blogger is already preparing for that role, and how she will handle the challenge of a divided family:

> I will simply say, we've already divided up our four imaginary children. This way there are no scuffles over who is a fan of whose team once they're old enough to watch football. And please don't ask what we plan to do if they either don't like football or, worse still, like the Eagles. We have no plan for those apocalyptic scenarios. (Jenny C., 2012)

Looking good. Three of the blog posts from this site during the 2012-2013 season specifically addressed one of the NFL's most recent marketing campaign targeted towards women. In the "It's My Team" promotion, several prominent celebrity females, including former United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and sportscaster Melissa Stark, were depicted wearing the symbols of their respective teams. As one blogger explained, "Each of these women is shown representing her team and styled in their own unique way, whether it's in jeans and a jersey or a flirty mini skirt and t-shirt…All of these items are part of the new clothing line…with a feminine twist" (Rachel, 2012). Interestingly, the language choices described above set up two rather contrasting images, one more casual and perhaps even more masculine (i.e., jeans and jersey) than the other (i.e., flirty mini and t-shirt). Still, the author suggests all options offer a "feminine twist," the meaning of which is left open to the interpretation of the reader, yet implies a shared understanding. Another face of the campaign, Olympic gold medalist Serena Williams was described as follows, "…partial owner of the Miami Dolphins, Williams is more than just a tennis phenom! She's looking great in turquoise and orange" (Brandie, 2012). Certainly her individual athletic and professional accomplishments are significant, but what's more, she looks good. Serena is not alone, however. Suzanne Johnson, wife of New York Jets owner Woody Johnson, "doesn't only look great in green but is one of their biggest supporters" (Brandie, 2012). Emphasizing a woman's physical attractiveness is nothing new, especially in an ad campaign centered around clothing, and yet it is difficult to ignore how even here, in an area where women have largely been ignored, some of the same patterns are repeated.

Blog Data: Resistance

Having provided examples from the blog posts that reproduced conventional ideas about female fans, I turn to examine a discourse of resistance also evident in the posts. Discourse was considered resistant if it challenged or contradicted prevalent (hegemonic) assumptions about whom female fans are, what and how much they know, or how they should perform those identities.

Hand over the remote. "Who says women can't be football fanatics?" (Deepi, 2012). This question, posed directly and indirectly in a variety of forms, was one of the most prevalent examples of resistant discourse identified in the blog post data. In fact, several of the bloggers publicly engaged in a simulated version of this conversation for their audience:

> So why is it that men are SHOCKED when a woman legitimately follows the game? Newsflash: Women can and do have enough knowledge to comprehend fantasy football…Plus, our highly refined verbal skills allows for much more interesting smack talk! (Deepi, 2012)

Not only is this writer challenging the idea that women do not have a genuine interest in the game, but she is also combatting the notion that women are not smart enough to understand, in this case, how to play fantasy football. In her last sentence, she attempts to leverage the stereotype to her advantage, suggesting that women's verbal acuity actually contributes something to the game which men lack, while simultaneously ascribing value to talking smack. This phenomenon, whereby the discourse resists some conventional

ideas while at the same time reinforcing others, is evident in the following statement as well:

> So forget everything you think you know about women watching football. We are not just watching it for the tight uniforms or to keep our men company nor are we burly, manly women. We are the new face of football fans…Now hand me the remote, my game is on. (Deepi, 2012)

Here, the author begins by suggesting none of the stereotypical ideas about female football fans are correct. She specifically addresses the assumption that women are simply interested in the physical attractiveness of the men who play, or that they are just fulfilling an auxiliary role as wife or girlfriend, before turning to refute the suggestion that to follow the game is to trade off one's femininity. To this point, she seems to suggest that the "new face" of football fans is complex, multi-faceted, and empowered. Yet, she closes with language that, while likely intended as humorous, takes up a stereotypical image of male football fan and effectively re-simplifies the conversation.

The secret lives of female fans. Bloggers also answered the earlier "who says" question by confessing their presumed-to-be-secret and not altogether flattering fan behaviors. I use the word "confessing" deliberately here, as there is a sense as reader that the women are admitting something that would otherwise be kept private, yet with which others may identify. For example, one blogger wrote, "I have a sordid history of ignoring my real-life commitments in favor of football, fantasy or otherwise" (Jessica, 2012). Referring to her history as "sordid" suggests that there is proper order for priorities, and this is not it. Thus, she already indicates how the reader should interpret her decisions.

Another blogger admits, “Sometimes my football priorities supersede my mommy priorities” (Deepi, 2012). Again, the underlying assumption is that there is an appropriate order of operations and undoubtedly, as a female, one’s role as mother should come before one’s leisure pursuits. Beyond an order of priorities, however, women also pushed back against notions of suitable behavior. “I can be a bad sport,” the blogger admitted (Deepi, 2012). As if women were not susceptible to the same forms of expression as men (i.e., verbal outbursts, aggressive behavior), or should possibly rise above them.

Another blog post focused on drinking, and the story of how one woman learned that beer was not an appropriate choice for women:

> As a woman who grew up loving football and was a ‘guys girl,’…it wasn’t until I encountered [a friend’s] mother that I ever considered beer to be a man’s drink. I certainly enjoy imbibing spirits or a nice glass of Riesling but you cannot watch a sporting event while drinking a margarita. (Erica Blob, 2012).

Several gendered messages are embedded in this story. First, the author claims an identity as a “guys’ girl” which, presumably, involves a love of football and is somehow different than a “girls’ girl,” though it is unclear exactly how. Second, she is taught that beer is a man’s drink, and, therefore, as a female, this is an improper choice. Finally, she juxtaposes her enjoyment of wine and other presumably less “manly” spirits with what she deems appropriate for the occasion. In another context, she might choose these drinks, but not here. A margarita and a sporting event are incompatible pleasures.

But this was not the only combination of interests that did not add up. Other women expressed their aggravation over extra demands competing for their attention. “I

get annoyed when things are scheduled during football games. I know this is an unrealistic expectation, but I can't help it. The worst thing I have ever done is to miss a friend's entire wedding…Awful, right?" (Deepi, 2012). In this excerpt, the writer clearly prioritizes her participation as a football fan above other social engagements, up to and including the nuptials of her friend. In suggesting to the reader not only that this request is unrealistic, but also that her conduct was "awful" she preemptively labels her own behavior and implies a shared understanding that others will (accurately) judge her likewise. In a similar vein, another blogger admitted:

> I don't want to socialize. It's not that I don't like my friends, or my friend's friends. It's not that I don't want to help new NFL fans understand the game. It's not that I can't do two things at once. It's just that the Superbowl (sic) is the finale of the season, the culmination of an inordinate amount of work and effort made by my team and I feel that they deserve my undivided attention. (Jennifer C., 2013)

In explaining why she could not attend a Super Bowl party, this fan contradicts the assumption that women emphasize the social aspect of the game. In fact, she makes clear she has no interest in attending to her role as friend or mentor in this situation. She does not want to chat; she does not want to explain. She only wants to focus on watching the game. Of course, this sentiment is complicated further when she strongly identifies herself with the men on "my team" who deserve her undivided attention, where those present around her do not. Perhaps this is why she closes by saying, "I'd prefer not to expose these behavioral traits to people who don't know me well and might, as a result,

think I am a little off my rocker." Once more we find the writer has already offered her readers an acceptable interpretation of and opinion about her admission.

Crime and punishment? While many of the blog posts share a common thread of resistance to conventional notions about a woman's "place" as and performance of football fan, one article in particular addressed some of the potential social ramifications for women who push the boundaries just a bit too far. "Life as a female football fan, as with anything, has its ups and downs…but those of us who may love football too much face some pretty serious downsides too," the author wrote (Jessica, 2012). But what exactly is too much, and who defines it? In response to the first question, she offers the following clarification: "I don't mean 'female football fandom' as in 'a female who can enjoy watching football,' but as in 'diehard, don't-miss-a-game, naming my firstborn after my QB sort of fandom'" (Jessica, 2012). Consequently, she draws an imaginary line between female fan behavior which is generally acceptable and that which is subject to social repercussion. Who holds the power to bestow these consequences? Men. In fact, she claims, "Female fandom appears to result in a man-repelling pheromone emission" (Jessica, 2012). Accordingly then, these sanctions only have impact for those who seek the support of men. If male approval was of no value, then their disapproval should carry no weight.

However, it seems this is not the case, as the push-back against excessive fandom is:

> symptomatic of the dialogue I have over and over again with boys—friends, romantic interests, male bosses [who] begin to wonder about my [team]

> dedication—is it too much? It appears greater than this dedication to his own team, should he be worried?" (Jessica, 2012)

In this depiction, men are positioned as the standard against which all other forms of fan should be measured. Therefore, if a woman seems more invested in her fandom than a man, it challenges his position of power and threatens to upset the balance of male-female relationships in the given context. To that end, the author laments, "I'm constantly watching lovely men walk away as punishment for my being super into something most boys are as well. Oh, the irony. Just another trial for the female football fan" (Jessica, 2012). It is evident in this passage that she does indeed value the opinion of these "lovely men" who punish her for not performing her role as female fan according to their expectations, even as she recognizes the inherent double standard. The reader is therefore left to wonder, whom should we blame? The answer is no clearer in the extract below:

> But I suppose it's no surprise that male egos are such fragile things, and my guess is that this walkaway effect I see so often results from guys' growing hugely insecure over the fact that I know football like an ESPN anchor and would be happy watching every game if I had the time…Not because they don't want to watch every game…but because they feel like less of a man for not schooling me in football trivia. Woe is female. (Jessica, 2012)

Though it may initially appear that she is placing the onus on men, she ends by highlighting the plight of the woman in these circumstances. So, while acknowledging that male egos can be fragile and men may be insecure, she does not suggest these factors should or even could change; rather, she takes these as given and insinuates that women

must learn to work with (or around) them. Thus, though her performance may be resistant, her aspiration is perhaps not.

Pretty in pink? Previously, I introduced a discussion of the ways in which bloggers spoke about fashion that reinforced traditional notions of female fandom. In at least equal measure, the women also wrote about their opposition to this image. Again, taking the NFL's most recent marketing campaign for women as their focus, they did not often mince words. "Let's face it. No matter how smart the people are in the front office, their fashion sense has not always been on point," one article began (Jenna, 2012). What was their primary offense? Pink jerseys:

> I hate pink jerseys. I like pink and I like jerseys but I absolutely abhor pink jerseys. I mean, I really want to support the NFL selling women's apparel but even I have to draw the line somewhere. Wear your team's true colors. Save the pink bedazzling for the twelve-and-under crowd. (Deepi, 2012)

The conflict, it would appear, is in wanting to support the NFL's recognition of women as fans, while being provided limited, if not demeaning, options to do so. The association of the color pink with all things female and feminine is beyond simplistic, and does not take into account the diversity of women claiming a fan identity, nor the variety of ways which they my wish to symbolically express it. In the quote referenced above, the author suggests another rather simple idea (i.e., wearing your team's colors), but one which does not reduce the fan identity to the equivalent of "it's a boy" or "it's a girl" gender determinism. Her final sentence also serves to dispute the practice of equating women

with children, in this case, young girls. This position is stated even more strongly in the excerpt below:

> This has been bugging me for YEARS. Pink bedazzled football jerseys drive me bananas. I am not 10 years old and I do not need to see my favorite player's jersey in cotton candy pink and sparkly sequins in order to wear it. I follow the sport and therefore can handle the REAL team colors. I find this so offensive because it really underestimates why a woman like myself would follow sports. It implies that I can't handle the real thing and making it more "girly" is the way to draw me in. I have boycotted pink bedazzled jerseys since their inception…everytime (sic) I see a pink jersey in a woman's size, it makes me see RED! (Deepi, 2012)

Here, the author starts out making a clear distinction between herself (a grown woman) and a child. She professes a strong personal reaction to the pink jersey and then argues that the marketing of this type of apparel suggests she cannot "handle" wearing the colors of her team, in effect belittling her status as fan. She calls the tactic "offensive" and questions the thought process behind the campaign. It is clear then that this form of hyperfeminization does not appeal to "a woman like myself." The implied question, and the one left unanswered above, is whether it attracts "other" women, and how those women are perceived to be similar to and/or different from the author of this piece.

A woman divided. The conversation around female fan apparel also highlighted another interesting trend in the blog discourse, one where the prevailing gender binary is upheld while simultaneously being challenged. For example, in another discussion about pink jerseys, a blogger wrote:

> For as long as I can remember, I have been deeply disappointed by most of the apparel offerings for women. As a lady who loves (ok, obsesses over) fashion, I wanted to see more clothing that wasn't just glittering and pink. Thankfully, the NFL has heard the collective cry of female football fans everywhere…and will be introducing a revamped version of its women's clothing line this September. (Rachel, 2012)

On the one hand, the piece acknowledges one woman's obsession with fashion, which is stereotypically assumed to be a female interest. It also tacitly accepts the existence of pink jerseys, as it does not suggest that these items are themselves problematic; it simply requests that more options be made available in addition to them. And yet the language used to open and close the conversation suggests that something wrong is being made right. The writer's disappointment is going to be alleviated because the NFL now recognizes its female fans want something different and it plans to deliver. That something different will presumably not be "just glittering and pink," and, therefore, will not serve to further reinforce the gender distinction among fans.

In another discussion about female fan behavior, one blogger wrote, "I may be a girly girl who loves shopping, talking, and watching chick flicks, but there are some confessions I have about my love of the NFL that only a true fan would understand" (Deepi, 2012). Effectually, the line drawn here is between true NFL fans and people who are interested in "shopping, talking, and watching chick flicks." This sets up a scenario where the reader imagines the two identities as oppositional, and incompatible within the same individual, even as the author proclaims that she is both. Moreover, the choice of

activities which are used to contrast what "a true fan would understand" are stereotypically classified as female, or in this case, "girly girl" interests. If the reader understands football to be primarily male domain, then the traditional gender binary is quietly maintained in an article where the intent is likely to do anything but.

One final example begs discussion here. Still playing off the dichotomy between what is male and what is female, this blogger shared:

> After a stressful day, watching football cheers me up instantly. There is nothing better than curling up in front of the television to watch a great NFL game. It's like eating chocolate cake, wearing your coziest pajamas, and watching a Real Housewives marathon all wrapped up in one. (Deepi, 2012)

As a fan, she vehemently proclaims that there is "nothing better" than watching the game. Yet, as a *female* fan writing for other *female* fans, she chooses to parallel this experience with a collection of other experiences she must assume will help her readers relate. This list includes eating special foods, wearing comfortable clothing and watching reality television, all of which are stereotypically presumed to be female interests. It is interesting to consider, then, how this discussion may be different if her readers were assumed to be men. Would her original sentiment require supporting examples? And, if so, would they be the same? Likely not. So, again, we find that while on the surface the author's intent may be to defy traditional conceptions of female fan, there is a good deal of reinforcement going on as well.

Interview Data

In addition to the diachronic analysis of blog posts over the course of a football season, I turn now to offer a synchronic analysis of interviews conducted with five women who blog for the site. Moreover, based on the tenets of FPDA, my own bracketing interview was also included for analysis. Interestingly, the examination of this data supported both patterns previously identified in the blog posts (i.e., reproducing and resisting) as well as a third form of discourse, one that reinscribed existing practices among and between female fans. I begin with a brief biographical sketch of each woman, including her age, occupation, geographic location, and self-identified racial/ethnic category, before presenting interview extracts I believe work to reproduce dominant portrayals of the female fan. In an effort to protect their identities, self-selected pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Participant Profiles

Camille. Camille is a 26-year-old Hispanic female who currently works as a production assistant in the Northeast. She grew up on the west coast and enjoys following players rather than one particular team.

Lucy. Lucy grew up a New York Giants fan living in the Northeast. She is 32, White, and presently resides on the west coast where she works as a sports producer.

Rachel. Rachel was born and raised in the Southeast where she continues to live and work as a mortgage specialist today. She is 53, Black, and the proud grandmother of one. As a young girl, she rooted for the Miami Dolphins, but for the last 40 years has been a staunch supporter of the Dallas Cowboys.

Taylor. Taylor is a Black female in her early thirties and a Dallas Cowboys fan. Taylor grew up in the Northeast, and has lived in locations throughout the United States. She presently resides in the South and works in financial services.

Traci. The author of this paper, Traci is a White female in her mid (to late) thirties who has never known anything other than being a Dallas Cowboys fan. Arkansas will always be her home, but she currently lives, works, and writes in North Carolina.

Victoria. Victoria is a 36-year-old African American freelance marketing and communications professional. She grew up (and currently resides) in the Northeast, once lived in Philadelphia, and has forever been a fan of the Eagles.

Interview Data: Reproduction

Male mentoring. Not surprisingly, almost every one of the women interviewed in this study attributed her introduction to the game of football to a significant man or number of men in her life at the time. For most of the women, it was the direct impact of their father's influence that was retold in their stories. My own recollection began as follows:

> I started doing what my dad was doing. I was an only child, so I don't know, sometimes I used to think my dad wanted a son and he didn't get one, so it was kind of my place to like, do the guy things with him. So we had something to share.

Embedded in this account is the suggestion that it was my place, as an only child, but also as a substitute for the son my father did not have, to share in this pastime, not unlike the story previously shared by Morgan on the blog website. For Taylor and Lucy, it was also

a father's influence that brought each woman to the sport, as they watched with and learned from him. The more knowledge Taylor acquired, the more her interest grew. "Once I started getting a better understanding of what was going on then we started really watching games together and I started really getting into it," she shared. Camille's story was unique, and yet still similar, as she came to love the game through a group of friends playing fantasy sports. These friends, as one might expect, were male:

> It was a group of friends that were all talking about it and, being a sports fan, male friends are around me and they were all talking about doing a live draft and it just sounded so fun and interesting so I thought I want to be a part of that. And so probably the first four years in that league of 12 teams, I was the only girl.

Victoria was also socialized by her peers, and shared Camille's interest in the competitive group dynamics, with one additional layer of interest, "Also, the guys were good looking. So that attracted me to the sport as well." Rachel concurred. And while this interest in "good looking" men is often leveled as a criticism against female fans, the common thread here should not be overlooked. We were all, in one way or another, brought to the sport by men, and traces of these experiences will likely be found in the language we use to portray our fan identities today.

Experience matters. One of the most prevalent ways we reinforced traditional ideas about football fandom was by talking about game experience in a way that valued it above other forms of knowledge. For example, in a discussion about whether women could truly be considered fans of a sport they have not (generally) played before, Camille

was quick to dispel that notion. However, taking the conversation a bit further, she offered:

> Analysis? Me, personally, I just will believe a coach or an ex-player more than anybody else. And that's just because as an analyst they do recall well, when I was on the field, when I was in that situation. I would rather hear that from a commentator.

While not specific to a fan identity claim, the statement above does illustrate a privileging of first-hand knowledge. Camille was not alone in making this distinction, however. Lucy also shared similar thoughts:

> I wonder when are we going to see women more in the analyst role as opposed to the host role. I mean they can ask questions but they can't really interject quote-unquote expert analysis because a large majority of us have never played. I mean, I grew up playing touch football, but I mean for me there was always just a chance at cheerleader…I guess that's a legitimate point that we as women don't know what it's like exactly to be on that field and play the game. But I don't think that makes us any less fans. It's only a legitimate point if you're going to be an analyst on television saying well I wouldn't have done that as a team or I would have called a different play, then okay, having experience helps.

Though she begins by focusing on the disparity between analyst and host roles currently available to women, she then talks her way through a justification of this arrangement, suggesting women cannot really offer "expert analysis" given that they have never played the game. She appears to bolster that claim when she shares her own experience, and the

limits of it, before arriving at what seems to be an uncertain conclusion. She "guess[es]" it is a "legitimate point" that women do not have the field experience; still, she does not place this expectation on fans, only those who are in positions to offer more formal analysis.

In my conversation with Rachel, however, female fans were directly implicated. Throughout much of our discussion, Rachel presented herself as a highly knowledgeable and competent fan, at times taking issue with others who did not stay up to date with their teams. Yet, even as a woman in a position powerful enough to influence others with her writing, she shared:

> Because like my son…I have to respect the fact that he played and he does know more than me. I mean, I don't say that I know everything. But I know that there's another level. Like I know. But he definitely knows. Because he played it. You know he's been in the locker room. So that's the kinds of things I get from my son. The locker room experience. And I do go to my son and ask him stuff sometimes if I'm getting ready to write one of my blogs.

Thus, Rachel positions herself both as knowledgeable and less knowledgeable in relation to others. She declares "I know" and yet "he definitely knows." Why does he know more, and why is that form of knowledge more highly valued? Because he played the game, and that experience, she believes, deserves her respect. She, therefore, situates her son as expert and defers to him when she is uncertain.

Though she may not consider herself the most well informed football fan, Rachel does seem to recognize the contribution she is able to make in conversations with others,

and feels good when that input is acknowledged. After being picked as a trivia teammate for a pre-Super Bowl work event, she shared, "It's a nice feeling to know that people picked me because I know football. That's a compliment to me. It really is." Rachel was not alone in identifying this "compliment," however. Indeed, Lucy used the same language in the following excerpt:

> I don't know. I feel like I impress people sometimes with my knowledge. Like I've definitely gotten that compliment. I guess that's a compliment, from some people. Recently I was at my husband's company party and people are just amazed. They're like 'Well how do you know all this? Like why do you care so much?' And I was like, 'Well, I'm a fan. I grew up this way.'

Both women classify the recognition of their football knowledge as a compliment, but Lucy immediately turns to question this characterization. She feels like she impresses "some people" with this information, but who are those people exactly? The people at her husband's party who were "just amazed?" The same ones who questioned, "How do you know all of this" and "Why do you care so much?" What power did they hold to bestow or withhold approval that mattered to her?

Membership has its privileges. At least one potential answer to these questions is suggested by this next pattern of discourse. During our conversations, I asked the women if they thought there were any benefits to being a female fan, and if so, what they might be. Beyond what Rachel and Lucy offered above, three of the remaining women identified the opportunity to enter into conversation with men as a primary advantage of the female fan identity. For Taylor, interactions at work were key:

> I work with financial services, which is a very, very male-dominated field, and I do feel like over the years I have gotten ahead and gotten more airtime with my male co-workers and managers because I can talk sports. It comes in especially handy…[during] like a recess time at work and everybody is just huddled around and they don't want to talk about work anymore and you can have those conversations or they don't feel like they have to change the topic because you walked in on that conversation. I have female friends and I have female co-workers who knew absolutely nothing about sports and not that it's more difficult, but it's a lot easier, at least in my field, when you can talk about those things.

In the excerpt above, Taylor describes a male-dominated environment where one might argue the burden is on her, as the female minority, to adapt to the conventions of the larger group, rather than the reverse. In this case, because she can talk sports, she can continue the informal interactions with her colleagues, as they do not need to make any special accommodations for her. Compared to those women who cannot engage in this form of conversation, Taylor concedes her experience may have been a bit easier:

> I also spoke about this benefit, both within and outside the context of work. So I am a single woman living in [North Carolina] with no family and only the friends that I've made along the way in Charlotte or whatever now for like eight years. So I will say that…I have gotten out and met a lot of people and been able to have a lot of conversations because I can sort of join the club. I have definitely been able to sit at a sports bar and watch a game and start a conversation and I've had those develop into friendships over time that went beyond the context of

> sport. I definitely think it gets me just a little bit further along in being able to have those, develop those relationships. Maybe it even gets me a little bit of additional, I almost want to say street cred or respect or something. I feel like there are some guys…who reach out to me and talk to me and the first things they ever want to talk about is sports. My teams. So, in that way, it may foster relationships that I just didn't realize I wouldn't probably have otherwise.

Several elements of this selection are of note. As a single woman, I suggested that being able to talk about sports facilitated social interactions that might otherwise not have occurred. Those people that I met were predominantly men, as were the members of the club I claim to have joined. To this point, I have positioned myself in the discourse as someone seeking the acceptance of others. By granting myself "street cred or respect or something," however, I suggest that I may actually hold some power, or something at least worthy of exchange, in these interactions. Yet in order to obtain this, I must be able to hold conversations which men are presumed to value; nowhere is the suggestion made that these exchanges would occur otherwise.

Rachel and I also spoke about our ability to engage with men in this way as though it might increase our worth as heterosexual partners. While talking about the benefits of being a female football fan, Rachel shared, "I think guys find that even more sexy about me. I have guys that will sit up and say, 'Golly, you know, why aren't you married? Because you sit at home and watch football all day on Sundays.'" In this illustration, she suggests another layer of positive reinforcement for heterosexual women who demonstrate football knowledge, as men may find her fan identity "sexy." The

question then becomes, “Why aren’t you married?” because clearly, if you watch football, you are considered marriage material. Whether or not Rachel is interested in this sort of relationship is irrelevant; she has been deemed “qualified” and should arguably feel better about herself as a result.

As for myself, I struggled with whether or not this should be classified as a benefit, if I believed it, and how that idea made me feel:

> I don’t know if I think there are benefits. I have been told by girlfriends that they think this is like I hold the brass ring or something. And I had sold myself on that idea at one time, that the benefit to being a female football fan would be, you know, it’s kind of like another shared experience. So it would be another thing that I could share. So if a guy watches sports, and, again, this is all in the context obviously of heterosexual relationships, but if a guy watches sports and he finds a girl who watches sports, then one might think it could be a benefit. I hate to say that in terms of just, you know, finding common ground with a man. That sounds pathetic.

The suggestion embedded above is that my status as female football fan made me the ultimate “prize” in the context of heterosexual relationships, and that it would somehow set me apart from others based on its rarity and value. Yet, I open by saying, “I don’t know if I think there are benefits.” At one point in my life, I was more apt to believe that having this shared fan experience would afford me some sort of advantage in relationships with men, but I find this sentiment problematic today. Namely, I take issue with the part of my statement, “If a guy watches sports and he finds a girl who watches

sports." Much like I previously discussed (e.g., women adapting their conversation to fit in with men), this language suggests that male interests take priority. I did not say, "If a girl watches sports and she finds a guy who watches sports." The implication of that statement would be quite different, and I believe more empowering to women. I even judged myself as I realized what I was saying, noting "that sounds pathetic" at the end of my reply. Whether my assessment is appropriate or not, I must recognize that the language I choose to portray my experience has a tangible impact on the way it is understood.

Camille talked extensively about engaging in these larger conversations, and specifically tailored her blog posts to facilitate the interactions. "I wanted it to be able to be where if you're around your dad, your uncles, your brother, your boyfriend, your husband that you would be able to know what is going on and be able to chime in," she said. Again, the idea is not that the reader should enter into conversations with other women, even other women who also read these blog posts and claim a football fan identity; rather, the assumption is that the people you will be talking with and that you will need to hold your own with, are men:

> My dad told me the saying like 50% of business that he does is done on the golf course...than it is in the boardroom. It goes a long way I think. I feel like males want to connect. They're, almost like they have the upper hand in business and I feel like if you know your sports and you're confident about it, it's almost they appreciate it and they take you more seriously. I think that having that knowledge

> of sports…it's like symbolic of how women are still not on the same playing field as men.

Once again, being able to engage in conversation with men about sports is portrayed as a benefit for women, not only in business but also beyond it. Camille suggests that men "want to connect;" however, since they hold the upper hand in the sports world as in business, the responsibility for forging that connection rests with women. If a woman can learn to speak the language and speak it well, she may be appreciated, taken more seriously, and subsequently empowered. If she cannot or will not learn to play by these rules, she risks being left on the outside looking in.

This is how we do it. Each of us, in some form or fashion, managed to talk about our fan experiences in ways that reinforced masculine norms. Whether it was how we defined fan, how we performed it, or what we cherished most about being one, the influence of our socialization by and frequent association with male fans was undeniable. In an effort to define fan, I pondered:

> What is a fan? What's the fan a derivative of? Like, fanatic, so that's not very pleasant or flattering. But there's something in the, I don't know, the culture of sports fandom that doesn't make me feel like it's okay for it to be like a flash in the pan thing. You know, there's a rhetoric about bandwagon fans. And that's a negative thing to say to somebody, that they're a bandwagon fan…I would not think somebody was a real fan not only if they weren't committed fully to one team, but if they didn't seem to be able to have those conversations I said before.

Even while admitting that the root of the term is "not very pleasant or flattering," I continue on with a depiction of fan as one who is strongly committed to their team and use that criteria to draw a line between "real" fans and "bandwagon" fans, thereby utilizing jargon commonly employed by men against other men and women who are perceived as less dedicated. Lucy, meanwhile, focused on an element of suffering as critical to the fan identity. "You've got to be able to take the good times with the bad times. You've got to suffer with your team, and if you can't do that then I don't know what the point is." Though less direct, the message implied here is still one of dedication and commitment to the team, and in effect, draws a similar distinction between "us" (real fans) and "them" (everyone else). Victoria added, "I feel like a real fan rides with the team no matter what and there's a lot of disappointment in that if you're not a winning team. And I also think there's an emotional tie there you can't really put your finger on." Though she adds "an emotional tie" element, her definition largely adheres to those offered before, all of which reproduce existing and male-defined notions of what it means to be a fan.

Taylor, Camille and Rachel emphasized appropriate ways to perform that fan identity. For Taylor, sport media consumption was key:

> I used to keep up through magazines, so I had a subscription to *The Sporting News*. I had a subscription to *Sports Illustrated*. I read the newspaper. When *ESPN* the magazine came out my senior year in high school, I got a subscription to that and then by the time college came around, you could just go on the Internet and check scores and recaps and all that stuff.

As a fan living in an area outside her team's local market, these resources played a key role in allowing her to follow her team's progress, at least in terms of "scores and recaps." Taylor also talked about the value she placed on competition, claiming, "You actually do want to watch some sort of competitive game. You don't want it to go down to the wire necessarily, but you do want it to be a good game." Hence, a good game is equated with a competitive one. Likewise, Camille was drawn to participate in an all-female fantasy sports league in part because they seemed to adhere to some masculine group norms:

> I liked that they were trash talking and that it was like the same competitive style because I guess it's almost like a guy thing to like call your best friend an idiot and know that it doesn't mean anything where girls can be sensitive. Like, are you really mad at me that I drafted you? I don't want that.

Possibly because of her experience in and familiarity with predominantly male leagues, Camille places value in "trash talking" and a "competitive style" and uses these as a measure by which to evaluate other group dynamics. Moreover, she equates a lack of sensitivity (e.g., in name-calling) with "a guy thing" and regards this as the more preferable response.

My conversation with Rachel highlighted two additional forms of adherence to masculine norms. First, in professing her love for the game, Rachel acknowledged, "NFL is my second choice, really. But I do love it. You know I sit down and watch games on Sunday like a guy." The use of this expression "like a guy" situates male behavior as a standard for comparison. Therefore, when she watches games on Sunday, she suggests

she is performing masculinity. Additionally, Rachel claimed she had never been asked to prove herself as a fan, an experience most of the women in this project shared. Explaining her thoughts behind why this might be, she offered:

> People know automatically I'm a Cowboys fan. Soon as I open my mouth, they know. I've never had to prove myself. Matter of fact, if anything, people are really like, 'Oh, here's that sickening Cowboys fan.' People they know I'm a Cowboys fan. And anything I say, I have the facts to back it up. It's not like, 'Oh, okay, I'm a Cowboys fan.' No, I can back up what I say.

Thus, we find another example of how being able to speak the language can potentially impact a fan's experience. In essence, by having the facts to "back up what I say," Rachel is able to preemptively circumvent any challenges to her fan identity. This form of knowledge (i.e., facts), as previously discussed, is traditionally valued among male fans, and, therefore, serves to distinguish Rachel from novice or auxiliary types. Apparently, however, there is also a risk of expressing too much information. Based on her performance, Rachel has been labeled "that sickening Cowboys fan" and while it is unclear whether this assessment is gender-specific, one can safely presume the audience members in the position to apply it are undoubtedly male.

Aiding and abetting: The female fan stereotype. Somewhat surprisingly, the women who took part in this research project also used language that perpetuated stereotypical ideas about the female fan. For instance, Taylor mentioned:

> I have a lot of female friends that ask me questions about sports because they don't understand what their boyfriend is saying. They don't understand what their manager is saying. They need help with their pools and things like that.

In effect, then, she reinforces the idea that "a lot" of women she knows do not understand sports, and positions herself as having the power to dispense this information, thereby facilitating their interactions with the men in their lives who do. Taylor also offered praise for one particular blogger who was able to convey sports information using pop culture references. "Last year during the draft one of our best writers…compared the Patriots draft picks to her favorite Madonna albums. Which we thought was brilliant." Would she have provided the same assessment if the blog's primary readership were male? Is the implied suggestion that comparing draft picks to Madonna albums will make it easier for women to comprehend?

This presumed lack of understanding was further highlighted in Camille's story about her early experience of participating in a fantasy football league:

> The first four years, I would say the first year my male friends were like, 'Oh, you know, like you're doing okay but next year you should really think of this strategy'…I definitely think that in the beginning there was this learning curve of maybe like, 'Oh, yeah, she can be in our league. She won't really know much.'

Though Camille does not suggest she personally holds this opinion of herself or other women, she clearly faced additional scrutiny from her male counterparts, as they seemed to anticipate little competition from a female.

For Rachel, it was an emphasis on heterosexual attraction that fueled the stereotype. “I kind of lost interest in the Dolphins somewhere down the road and I fell in love with the Dallas Cowboys because they were all good looking,” she shared. Not only does this foster the idea that women are primarily interested in the attractive male athletes, but it also implies a lack of commitment as she “lost interest” in one team only to fall “in love” with another. In addition, she describes herself as a “football mom” who followed her son’s career from high school through college, a depiction that places her in a supportive, yet secondary role.

In considering her response to the question “what makes a real fan,” Lucy offered the following:

> I think we just bring a different perspective to the game. How I watch or participate in football is not from a numbers standpoint. And maybe that’s not something particularly female but it’s more of a gut reaction. I have a gut reaction about what’s going to happen or how a particular game is going to play out and just more of an instinct. I go with an instinct rather than well, you know this guy scored thirty, has an average QBR rating of this or averages 20 carries, 100 yards in this many games against a 4-3 defense…I just have more of an instinctual relationship with the game. I think it’s a benefit because it’s fun when people don’t expect you to know as much as you know, or being as dedicated a fan, so in certain social situations where you can inject into a conversation and be like, oh yeah, and relate with men or even other women about football and they just don’t expect it from you. That’s kind of cool. And maybe that’s part of what’s driven

> me to be a fan of football is always just because it's not expected of women. It's something different. It makes you a little bit more unique in a way.

In the beginning of this reply, Lucy focuses on how women's relationship to the game may be different than men's, proposing that women may have a more instinctual or gut reaction to the game. At the same time, she positions this type of connection as different than, perhaps even opposite of, a male perspective that emphasizes statistics and numbers. She goes on to portray her understanding of the game as unique, and describes it as "fun" when she is able to defy the expectations of others. Here again we find that evidence to support the stereotype that women do not take interest in football because "it's not expected" of them.

In addition to these ideas about what women should or should not know, Victoria also spoke about her relationship to the game, comparing and contrasting that with a male archetype:

> I'm like more of an emotional fan than like an aggressive fan. It's almost like my fandom comes in the almost mother or girlfriend role. Like how would I parent this player? I don't know if a man would look at it that way, but as a woman it was painfully obvious…I don't know if a man would look at it that way, but…as a woman I could definitely tell. So I mean I feel like I experience fandom almost like these people are my brothers or my sons, whereas I don't know if men look at it that way. And because I'm not a man and don't have that level of…I don't know what their experience is…So I think maybe men are a little less empathetic

> and merciless. But I do think there's probably women who, depending on how their fandom has evolved, exhibit the same traits that maybe a male fan would.

In the excerpt above, Victoria starts by identifying herself as an emotional fan rather than an aggressive type, then further describes herself as occupying either a "mother" or "girlfriend" role, all of which are conventionally associated with being female. Much like Lucy, she ponders whether her experience is the same as or different than a man's, concluding, "I don't know what their experience is." Meanwhile, she maintains that some things were "painfully obvious" to her as a woman, which effectively implies the same may not be true for a man. In the end, she is more direct in her assessment about men being "less empathetic and merciless," yet quickly follows with the caveat that there may also be women who exhibit the same characteristics.

The importance of "looking cute." Another particularly salient element of the female fan performance is the way she expresses her identity through clothing choice. As in many other contexts, a woman's appearance is often subjected to scrutiny in a way that a man's is not, and the evaluation of her performance has implications that reach far beyond a simple surface assessment. When I asked Taylor specifically about her thoughts on the NFL's pink apparel, she shared:

> I have a cute Dallas Cowboys halter-top that I wear with skinny jeans and heels. I think that's totally fine. It's just not pink. So I'm not at all opposed to female-styled sports clothing and wearing heels and looking cute in your stuff at all.

Though she, along with most of the other women, was personally opposed to wearing pink, she did not take issue with the goal of "looking cute" or emphasizing one's

femininity while representing the team. Camille agreed, saying, "I want to make sure I look cute. The sizes do help." Rachel, however, openly embraced the pink option and felt it indicated an acknowledgement of her identity by those in positions of power:

> It's nice that we don't have to wear manly looking stuff. I have a real cute pink Dallas Cowboys shirt. And that's the thing. I love the way the NFL has incorporated and embraced us because they're making big bucks off of the NFL women's apparel…and it's so nice to see that they realize there's women out there that love it. That we enjoy it. And that we know it. I mean it's really nice.

More than that, however, Rachel used feminine clothing to emphasize the line between herself and her male counterparts:

> To me a feminine football fan is you wear jeans, but you can dress up. Like today I had on my Dallas Cowboys jersey that my son bought me…but I still had on boots with heels on them. So even though I'm a Cowboys fan, like I said, I'm a woman. I want to still feel like that. I want to always feel like I'm a woman. And guys look at me and say, oh, okay. She's a Cowboys fan but she's not dressed like a guy. You know there's women who do wear the jerseys and the Timbs and all that stuff and I'm just as feminine as they come and like I told you I even have shirts that I wear to the gym that are very feminine and have Dallas Cowboys on them. So I love that. I just, I'm not trying to be a man. I'm not trying to be a man during football. I'm still a woman and I still want to look like one when I'm out representing the Cowboys.

In the passage above, "feminine football fan" seems to describe some hybrid combination of female and football fan, a male equivalent. When Rachel says, "I want to always feel like I'm a woman," the implication is that being a football fan somehow challenges that identity. Therefore, she emphasizes her femininity through clothing choices, so as not to be misunderstood by her intended audience, men. She further aims to distinguish herself from women who wear jerseys and casual boots, as this type of performance could potentially blur the gender line and create additional problems. "I don't want you cursing around me. I don't want you using vulgar language. Like, no. No no no no no. We can talk football, but don't cross that line."

Interview Data: Resistance

One of FPDA's primary concerns is to examine the varied, and often competing, ways that people are located by different discourses (Baxter, 2003). Thus, while I have previously identified numerous instances where women were positioned as less empowered in their roles as female football fans, there are equally as many occasions where they resisted that placement. In the section that follows, I offer examples of this opposition.

"A trained monkey can do that." One of the first examples of this push back could be found as women struggled with how to define "fan." Quite crassly, my own response to the suggestion that women cannot truly be fans has consistently been, "Oh yeah, that's crap. What does having a penis have to do with it?" Fortunately, the other women in this study were far more articulate. More than anything, we took issue with the insinuation that to be a "real" fan you have to: (a) have played or currently play the game;

and/or (b) possess specific forms of knowledge about it (e.g., statistical, historical, technical). Addressing the question of experience, Taylor had this to say:

> First of all, women can play football. There are plenty of flag football and tackle, co-ed tackle football leagues that you can play in recreationally. And second of all, there are coaches in the NFL that have never played football before, so if someone can be a coach or even a head coach in the NFL and have never played before I don't think that there's any reason why a woman that hasn't played can't be a fan.

Her opening statement challenges the assumption that women cannot play, though her second sentence qualifies that declaration by using examples of flag football and recreational leagues. She then moves on to point out there are men coaching in the league that have never played before, and uses this as evidence to strengthen her claim that there is no reason why a woman cannot be a fan. Furthermore, she offered:

> I would also say how many men have driven in a racecar? But they're clearly fans of NASCAR. Or how many men have boxed before? And they're huge fans of boxing. So I don't think you have to physically participate in an activity to appreciate it and know about it.

In a similar vein, Lucy shared these thoughts:

> I guess that's a legitimate point is that we as women don't know what it's like exactly to be on that field and play the game. But I don't think that makes us any less fans…Just because you can't play a game doesn't mean or not that you can't play a game. Just because you didn't play it doesn't mean you're any less of a fan.

> I mean that's kind of silly. There's only a small percentage of people in this world who are able to play professional sports.

What is particularly interesting about her response are the shifts that occur within it. She begins by conceding that it is "a legitimate" point that women have not played the game, and, therefore, do not know that experience, but then quickly turns to make the assertion that this has no bearing on one's authenticity as fan. She goes on to say "just because you [women] can't play" before correcting herself to acknowledge it's not that women can't play, but rather that they generally do not. She concludes by proclaiming it "silly" to think that experience matters, as most fans, male or female, will never be able to obtain it. Likewise, for Rachel the answer was simple. "You don't need to play the game. You don't need to have a son that played. You've got to know something, but you don't have to play."

Where Taylor, Lucy, and Rachel challenged the notion that game experience matters, Camille, Victoria and myself had more to say about what real fans need to know. In fact, Camille got straight to the point saying, "I don't think necessarily that a real fan needs to spew out stats. I think anybody, a trained monkey can do that." In two short sentences, she effectually undermines the value often placed on this form of recall. Victoria concurred, stating:

> I don't think fandom is always evaluated by your knowledge of stats or your knowledge of those types of, you know, the numbers per se. A lot of times it's your knowledge of the history and heritage of your team and where you were when this play happened or favorite players from years and years gone by.

The caveat, of course, is that she says fandom is not "always" evaluated this way, which leaves room for its validity under certain circumstances. She places greater significance in the collective memory of major moments in a team's history, but went on to explain:

> I feel like the challenge is that only men know that much about football. And I don't know if that's true. You know what I mean? Like I said, I haven't run into a female fan that does but it doesn't mean that there isn't one….So it's interesting and I personally don't process sports that way. It's possible that if I had been, if I was the daughter of a football fan, maybe I would but since I sort of took this on of my own accord, my experience I think is a little bit more psychological than emotional.

Though Victoria does not "process sports that way" (in statistical terms) and suggests it unnecessary, she still manages to privilege those forms of knowledge through her discourse. "Only men know that much about football," she says, or at least she has not encountered a woman who knows as much. In the end, she wonders aloud if she might have been that woman had she been socialized differently.

How do we define fan then? Can we agree on what it is, or only what it is not? The answer is not entirely clear. My own response included the following:

> I think that the trouble isn't with like accepting women with a fan identity. It's what does that mean? And it's the question of what can we really talk about? And I don't see that happen with men. I don't see men ask other men, "are you a fan?"

In essence, then, I only provided more questions. What does it mean? And maybe more curiously, why are women struggling to define their fan identity while men's are accepted without question? Camille also spoke to this issue, offering:

> I think the difference between male football fans and female football fans is as a male you're almost expected to know the knowledge and so you're not necessarily quizzed. Whereas I feel like women NFL fans need to go above and beyond to prove their loyalty to their team or their players and almost fact check and back up every statement they say.

This statement has multiple layers of implication. First, male football fans are expected to know information that female football fans are not. Hence, men are not quizzed. Second, women need to do something additional to prove their loyalty to team or players, and one way to do this is to "fact check" and "back up" anything she says. Consequently, we find another example of the embedded message that some forms of knowledge are worth more than others.

Even in the absence of a concrete definition, if such a thing were possible, what is glaringly apparent is that we are all implicitly agreeing to play by a male-defined set of rules. When we use men as measure for our own identities, we normalize their behaviors and beliefs. For example, Rachel shared:

> Guys still think you don't know what you're talking about. They still think that you're female and it's only ever so much you're going to be able to talk about and…it's just challenging that guys think that you're not sincere. That the only reason you like football is to be around a bunch of guys. So you still have that

> challenge that they still think you don't know what you're talking about and the reason why you're around them. They don't always believe that either.

Hence, guys think women do not know what they are talking about. They think women have a limited understanding, are insincere, and only want to be able to hang around men. What does it matter what guys think? Why are we granting them the power to define our identities for us? Even after all my education and training, I am forced to recognize the way I still participate in the process:

> I actually have had men who say they love that I know something about sports and then turn out like a little bit further down the line that they're not quite as thrilled about it as they thought they would be. Because I think maybe I have a little too much to say about it. You know what I mean? So I wonder if that's not a backlash.

Perhaps because the fans we spend so much time interacting with are predominantly male, we use them to evaluate ourselves. Are we performing appropriately? In the passage above, I use the term "backlash" to describe a negative response from men who are not comfortable with the way I "do" fan. By granting them the power to bestow consequences, I end up deferring to their expectations rather than advocating for my own. Still, in this scenario, at least I have been recognized. In the next excerpt, I ponder what may be a more detrimental situation:

> I don't think that there are separate boxes and you need to fit into one or the other. If you don't fit in THE box right now, I feel like that people can understand as sort of female fan, then if you're outside of that, people are confused by you. Or

> maybe don't think about you at all. I don't know. You know what I mean? Like until they're confronted with you, and maybe that's why I get the surprise that I know what I know sometimes because people haven't really thought about other options for how women can be fans. You know, there's sort of this one way they see that women might do it and then anything else is kind of strange and foreign.

What starts off as a statement of resistance about fitting into prescribed categories turns into a suggestion that, perhaps, female fans are not considered at all. That if we do not fit the mold of wife, girlfriend, or other auxiliary fan, we are so perplexing it is simply easier (for men) not to think about unless and until they come face to face with one. I then apply this theory as a way to explain the reactions I have personally encountered. In the end, all of this dialogue ultimately serves to empower men, who are charged with recognizing and validating our existence.

My time. The women in this study also had plenty to say about how they behaved as fans. For instance, Taylor identifies with one team while living in another team's market; as a result, she was often challenged to account for herself:

> Even if I was going to a game where Dallas wasn't playing, I might still wear Dallas stuff. People would say, "You can't wear that here. You live here." And I'm like "I don't care. I'm not rooting for [that team]." I'm like, just because I live here doesn't mean that I'm supposed to root for them.

Thus, Taylor resists not only the suggestion that she cannot wear her team's symbols when and where she wants, but also that she must support the local team because that is

where she happens to reside at the time. Camille behaved similarly, yet received no negative response. She reasoned:

> I think the fact that because I'm from southern California and it's not a market where there's a huge team, I think that's why people haven't said anything. If I was from New York or Dallas, everyone would be like what? How are you not like a Jets, Giants, or Cowboys fan?

Camille's fan behavior was especially interesting as she professed her loyalty to individual players rather than a team. Therefore, on any given Sunday, she might be found changing jerseys from one game to the next, in a show of support for the players on her fantasy team. Given this context, it is particularly noteworthy that she did not face the same challenge as Taylor. Moreover, the fact that she provided the aforementioned account serves to acknowledge her awareness that she violated the group norm.

Lucy is so highly identified with her team, she admitted:

> I am someone who will turn down invitations to do things because the Giants are on television. People who plan weddings on a Sunday or plan parties or meetings or anything on Super Bowl Sunday, I don't understand. I'll be driving to work on Sunday and I'll see people going to brunch and I'm like why are you going to brunch when you should be watching football. I'm the type of fan who really thinks they're, in some way, a part of the team. I say 'we.' I don't say the Giants. I say, 'We won.' 'We did this.' To really become a part of it.

Her story challenges the perception of women as less committed fans as she clearly prioritizes watching the Giants play over other stereotypical female interests like

weddings and parties. In fact, she is so committed she claims to not understand people who schedule these other events at times which conflict with the game. When she comments about what people "should" be doing on Sunday (i.e., watching football), she takes up what may typically be considered masculine norm and makes it her own. Finally, she blurs the boundary between the men who play and women who watch when she identifies herself as part of the team. If "we won," then she is deliberately included.

Victoria also challenged the notion of conventional female fan behavior, as she made it clear that game time was her time, and she did not care to socialize within it:

> Football to me is like an escape. It's the ultimate escape. It's a respite…A lot of times I watch the games by myself because I don't want to be bothered. I'm not interested in any small talk if it's not about the game. And if you're not bringing something to the game for me…So I do a lot of football watching by myself. Like that's my time and it's almost funny that's actually a very masculine I think trait.

Victoria's depiction of football as "the ultimate escape," and more specifically an escape from interactions with others, goes against a set of assumptions that imply a woman's interest in sports is primarily social. Furthermore, as she is not interested in any superfluous conversation, she tends to watch by herself, a behavior also largely attributed to male fans. To this point, she has simply been describing how she performs her fan identity, but in the final line seems to recognize the irony, and characterizes her performance as "very masculine." She does not indicate that she perceives herself as masculine (or male), only her behavior, and therefore highlights a disconnect between who she is and what she does.

Can I see your ID, please? During our conversations, I specifically asked each of the women if she had ever been challenged to prove she was a fan. Overwhelmingly, we had. Though each woman's story was unique, they also shared a common thread. Who was asking them to prove themselves? Men. As Taylor recalled, "I constantly get challenged on whether or not I'm really a football fan. Like no one really questions me about being a Dallas fan. The question is, well, do you really know about football in general?" And when I followed up to ask who it was challenging her in these moments, she replied:

> Always men. Always. And they come up with these ridiculous quizzes that they for some reason feel like you should have to answer to prove to them that you really know what you're talking about. And when I was younger, I used to engage and actually answer the questions and answer even more information. Now, whenever a guy asks me that, I just don't even respond and I go talk to somebody else. Because it's just rude. It's like there's no other topic where as soon as you say, "Oh, well I really like that or I'm interested in that or I follow that" that somebody will say okay, well answer these three questions so that I can really tell if you know what you're talking about. And I just feel it's insulting.

When people asked what she "really [knew] about football" as opposed to what she knew about the team she claimed to follow, the implication is that the two fan identities are distinct with only the former being potentially problematic. Thus, in order to assess the validity of her claim, men come up with what she refers to as "ridiculous" quizzes and "for some reason feel like you should have to answer to prove" yourself. In doing so, men

are situated as gatekeepers of the fan group, and those who consent to their appraisal grant them the power to offer or withhold membership status. Taylor confesses that when she was younger, she participated in this process. Today, however, she exercises her own agency by refusing to partake, a move that arguably places her in a more empowered position. She further classifies the evaluation practice as "rude" and "insulting," two terms that serve to devalue its meaning.

Taylor also fired back, challenging the notion that being male was an automatic qualifier:

> I just think that there are just some ignorant men out there and the funny thing is that as many women as there are that are surface football fans, like don't have deep knowledge, there are just as many men. I meet so many guys that only know what they saw on *SportsCenter* and that's it. They just get away with it because they can add a sound bite here or there because nobody's asking them any deep questions.

In the process of challenging men's claim to football knowledge, Taylor reproduces the idea that there are "many women" who are surface football fans. She goes on to assert that there are just as many men who could be similarly classified, then adds, "They just get away with it" because they are not being scrutinized in the same way. As I shared earlier in this section, we just do not see men asking other men these same kinds of questions. Yet, for women like Camille, this type interaction is far from extraordinary:

> It could just be like watching Sunday ticket at a bar and I'm cheering or I'm like 'offensive foul' and start yelling at the TV and all of the sudden two guys will

> look over like what, what are you talking about? Why do you care about this game? It's always a big explanation versus oh, cool, you're a fan. It's oh, what? Like what's going on over here? It's like I'm a fan of football, a fan of individuals. Like there's always that explanation.

When Camille performs in a manner that indicates she knows something about the game (i.e., by yelling "offensive foul"), she draws the attention of men who appear to be confused. What is she talking about and why does she care, they wonder. Sports, and football in particular, are intended to be male domain, so when this woman challenges that idea, their reaction is to question rather than accept her. Perhaps because Camille felt "there's always that explanation," one of the main objectives of her online post was to provide women with information that may help:

> It's just being a part of the conversation from the get go before anyone can even question you. You're contributing to the conversation and the men may not realize that oh, she's adding stuff before it dawns on them that you're a female fan.

In effect, then, she aims to arm her readers with enough knowledge that they can avoid being questioned. Of course, the forms of knowledge she provides are those which one presumes men will accept. Even more interesting, a key element in this preventive strategy is to be able to present well enough that "men may not realize" you are female before they have had a chance to listen to you. The objective, it seems, would be to perform such a strong fan identity that being female is temporarily rendered invisible or certainly somehow less relevant. Moreover, the insinuation is that if men orient toward

the female identity first, they will be less inclined to listen and/or will require her to account for what she knows. Reflecting further on this issue, Camille offered:

> I feel you know it's just the whole topic of proving, it's almost like symbolism for our entire life that you know men are traditionally in more power. Men make more money than women. Men are in control of this and women are still fighting for the same respect and knowledge of being a football fan.

Taking a step back to contextualize the status of female football fans within the larger cultural system, Camille acknowledges, "Men are in control of this" (football fandom) much as they are in many other areas of social life. If "women are still fighting for the same respect and knowledge of being a football fan," then they are both empowered because they fight and less empowered because they are not there yet.

As women writing publicly about their lives as female football fans, they also spoke directly about the burden of proof related to their work. In my conversation with Camille, we realized that working in the sports industry seemed to grant her some credibility that others could not claim:

> The work environment is very accepting. Just because even like the males there they expect you to know your knowledge. And they don't, and it's almost like that expectation but they're not quizzing you because you're there and you're there on purpose. That's pretty much the end of the conversation. Which is nice. It's not like 'Oh, you guys are going to be in a fantasy league? That's cute.' None of that.

The underlying message here is that because Camille already "earned" her position at the office, she essentially passed the test. While men are still charged with administering the

assessment, given these circumstances "they expect you to know" so they do not quiz because "you're there on purpose." Thus, for Camille the conversation ends there, and she is pleased when they do not belittle her interest by proclaiming it "cute." Yet it is interesting to think about how these expectations are different when a woman is a teacher or works in financial services instead, like Rachel. By day, she works in an industry unrelated to sports; therefore, blogging about football provides an outlet where she can combine her love of writing with her love of the game. She exercises extreme caution when doing so, as she recognizes "the thing is when we're writing as women, I even write, I even take my time more because I know we're women. Does that make sense? I just want to make sure. Because guys read our stuff, too." As a woman writing about football, she feels the pressure to get it right according to men's measure:

> You better know what you're talking about because they're going to call you out on it. I'm always a little nervous when I first send it because of the fact that you know you just want to make sure that it's right. Because they know that we're women. They know it's an all women's website. So I think the guys a lot of times, whether good or bad, because some men still don't like the fact that women are writing and talking about sports on television, so therefore it's like okay, we want to see what you really know or are y'all just writing a bunch of bull crap. So I make sure that my articles are right. I make sure that I pull the correct information. And if I don't know, I make sure I find it before I post my stuff.

Who is the "they" that are "going to call you out on it?" It is the men who read and presumably judge the content of Rachel's work. She gets "nervous" because she wants to

"make sure that it's right." The suggestion is that there is an added pressure to make no mistakes "because they know that we're women." Quite possibly Rachel senses that men may be waiting, even looking, for her to fail as she explains "some men still don't like the fact that women are writing and talking about sports." Therefore, if she makes a mistake, she may provide ammunition for the argument that women writing about sports amounts to "a bunch of bull crap." So she takes extra caution in her own work in an effort to fight that perception.

Rachel wasn't the only one who felt the added pressure. Lucy shared a story about her experience with proving that began as a child and continued today:

> Especially as a woman…throughout my life, from elementary school I remember getting into a screaming fight…with a kid about what a lateral was. And I knew what a lateral was and he was like you're a girl. You couldn't possibly know…So I remember always having to prove that. Even writing this blog I feel like especially as a woman I can't afford to make a mistake… Like I can't afford to make those type of mistakes because men will just I mean maybe they won't but you have this feeling of if you say something wrong it's going to be because you're a woman and not because everyone makes mistakes…So I mean people make mistakes all the time but as a woman I feel like there is sort of pressure all the time whether or not its founded or not that you've got to know everything and I experience that in work sometimes where I don't know all the stats. I don't know how many yards this guy ran for back in 1985 and whether or not that

> makes, I don't think that makes me less of a fan, but in the eyes of some people it might.

Lucy begins with the phrase "especially as a woman" indicating the additional layer of expectation she will illustrate in her reply. In her story about the childhood argument over what a lateral was, the boy levels the claim, "You're a girl. You couldn't possibly know," which reproduces the idea that biological sex and sport comprehension are intertwined. She then turns to speak of her experience as a blogger, reiterating the phrase "especially as a woman" before sharing her belief that she "can't afford to make a mistake." Why can she not? She starts her next sentence as if the answer has to do with men, but interrupts her own thought with "maybe they won't" before continuing to explain the feeling she has that any mistake she makes will be attributed to her status as a woman when, in fact, she realizes "everyone makes mistakes." Lucy later concedes that the pressure she feels may be "founded or not;" nevertheless, it has a tangible impact on her experience. In the end, she clarifies the type of information "you've got to know," confessing she doesn't know "all the stats." Still, she resists the idea that this admission somehow diminishes her claim to a fan identity, though "in the eyes of some people it might." One wonders, is the perception of those people more important than her own?

Walking the line. Let us assume for a moment that a woman is able to successfully "prove" her fandom to men, what then? According to the women in this study, negotiating a balance between "female" and "fan" is a complex process, one full of potential conflict. Personally, I shared:

> It's almost as if great, I've been like, I don't know, absorbed by the group to the point where they don't see me as different and yet I still am different. There's still this piece of me that wants to not be okay, I'm gonna let that go because I don't want to rock the boat. I want to be just one of the guys. I'm still who I am individually, right? So that's a challenge.

On the one hand, being assimilated into the group of fans is depicted as a positive achievement. On the other, I still express the desire to be recognized as different. When I say, "I'm gonna let that go because I don't want to rock the boat," I am referring to sexist behavior (e.g., objectifying female sideline reporters) which challenges my identity as both female and feminist. In these instances, I am faced with a decision. Do I prioritize fan or female? As there is indeed a choice to be made. Taylor did not seem to face the same choice. "Even when I go out to bars with my guy friends, they still do stuff like hold the door open. Most of them will get my drinks. They'll pull out my chair. So I don't think there's ever a time that they forget that I'm a girl." Taylor offers a list of behaviors that indicate the lines remain clearly drawn. No matter how she performs "fan," it appears her female identity is always at the forefront as men open doors, buy her drinks, and pull out her chair, none of which we would expect them to do for another man.

During our conversation, Camille suggested women "don't really have a role model of what a female fan is supposed to be. And I think that's why women still struggle with their identity as a fan and how to do that with other females. You know, besides the setting of with their dads, boyfriends, husbands, brothers, or whatever."

Because women have largely been socialized by men, she suggests female fans have learned to accept male behaviors and beliefs as the norm, and subsequently "struggle" with their own performance. For Rachel, it was important to respect an invisible "line" in the process:

> I like to be a feminine football fan. I don't try or want to be a manly feminine football fan. I want to be a feminine football fan. I'm definitely a woman. I love football. But I don't want to dress like a man when I'm always representing my team. I like to be still a female.

Describing herself as a "feminine football fan," she distinguishes her performance from that of a "manly football fan," paying particular attention to the way clothing can be used to set the two apart. Yet it begs the question, if she dressed "like a man" would she not "be still a female?" To further explain, she said:

> You still don't want to, you still want that line of man-woman sports fan. I know some women would rather say I don't care. But for me, I still want to be that female. I don't want the guys to all of the sudden say okay, because she's dressed like us, we're going to treat her like us…the foul language or maybe put their hands on you and stuff.

Consequently, Rachel connects the way she dresses as fan with the way men interact with her. If she were to dress more "like a man," she infers she would be treated more like them, an outcome she does not want. The "man-woman sports fan" line appears to be associated with behavioral expectations, as it is "foul language" and inappropriate touching Rachel categorizes as problematic.

Later, I had the chance to ask Lucy if she thought clothing choices hand an impact on her own fan identity or her perceptions of others. She replied:

> It's so silly because I mean growing up I would get mistaken for a boy all the time because I'd have my Giants hat on. I'd have my hair pulled back and I'd be wearing quote-unquote boy clothes. So it's tough like if you're a female fan but you want to be more feminine…it is tough if you want to look a little bit sexier, if you want to feel more feminine then you do have, you walk that line because you're oh, if I wear this will people still take me seriously? It is a tough kind of thing. Especially if you're really style conscious and want to look good and wear a jersey. It's sort of antithetical. It just doesn't work. They're not flattering.

Her story highlights a key challenge in the performance of female fan. When she was young, Lucy was "mistaken for a boy all the time," in part because she wore "boy clothes." She makes no indication whether this presentation called into question her fan identity, only that by wearing a Giants hat, pulling her hair back, and wearing a particular style of clothing, she was associated with "doing" boy. This image is contrasted with a "feminine" version of fan who might "want to look a bit sexier" or "feel more feminine," neither of which is expounded upon. However that may be accomplished, Lucy does characterize that situation as "tough," because the presumed tradeoff for attractiveness is sincerity. Instead of suggesting a woman can be both, she acknowledges, "you walk that line" between looking good and being taken seriously. "It's just sort of antithetical," she concludes. In other words, Lucy situates the two performances as incompatible. If she is correct, women must choose which concession to make.

"It's just too patronizing." As with the blog post data presented earlier, the issue of female fashion came up in every conversation we had, whether I asked specifically about it or not. In our discussions, there was an overwhelming sense of disapproval in response to the NFL's earliest marketing efforts. "It was horrible. I just bought, the few things that I had, I bought in the boys' section. I just got a large in the boys' section. Because I was like, I refuse to wear pink," Taylor said. With only one gender-specific color option originally offered, Taylor "just got a large in the boy's section" as she "refuse[d] to wear pink." Working within the constraints of those alternatives, she opted for children's clothing instead. There is a larger implication here, as previously there were only two options available to women. We could elect to wear a man's jersey or a young boy's, both of which were obtainable in the team's colors, but neither of which was cut to fit a woman's body. The resulting message was one that effectively ignored female fans entirely.

Taylor went on to say:

> [It's] crazy because most women don't wear pink bedazzled anything to begin with…I don't generally wear pink. It's just not a color I would wear in general. And then I also think it's just too patronizing. It's like so the women's clothes have to be pink. I mean, if they had came out with a whole line of stuff and then threw in a couple of pink things, I wouldn't have been as annoyed, but as a choice, like the first items that you put out that are cut for women it has to be pink? Yeah, I was not impressed.

She makes clear in the passage above that she was both "annoyed" and "unimpressed" with the League's offerings; furthermore, she found it "too patronizing" that the first clothing options presented for women had to be pink, as this is "just not a color I would wear in general." In sum, Taylor works to challenge what she seems to perceive a gross oversimplification.

Camille was clear about her feelings as well, declaring:

> I hate, absolutely hate pink jerseys. I mean it's like, it's cute, here's your bedazzled jersey. It's almost belittling you and putting you in this imaginary box of the type of fan that you are, just by the way that you present yourself. And it's the NFL is making sure that you know you don't need to rock the team colors. You need this bedazzled, low cut, pink shirt that has the quarterback…name on it. That's frustrating.

The expression, "it's cute, here's your bedazzled jersey" highlights the perceived slight to Camille's fan identity. She tempers her claim, however, when she suggests it is "almost belittling you." Is it then understood as possible they are not? The NFL, and its decision makers, are empowered in this depiction, as they get to define you, placing you in an "imaginary box" of conventionally understood fan types, based upon clothing options which they both create and limit. It is the NFL who decides, "You don't need to rock the team colors." Instead, as a woman, "you need this bedazzled, low cut, pink shirt" which forefronts your femininity and, as previously discussed, potentially diminishes your credibility.

Victoria also took issue with the given selections, proclaiming, "Oh my God. I do not own a single piece of branded sports apparel. Because it hasn't been cute." Where Camille's critique focused on a narrow representation, Victoria refused to partake on an individual level because she deemed it visually unappealing. Yet she also addressed the larger ramifications, suggesting:

> I might not want the same type of messaging wrapped up in you selling me an Eagles shirt that I get when I look through *Marie Claire* or *Cosmo*. You know what I mean? I might want a different type of feeling attached to my team…And then another possible option is are they basically doing what everybody does which is marketing a look to women that is a look they feel would appeal to men? You know what I mean?

In this case, *Marie Claire* and *Cosmo* are painted as the equivalent of pink jerseys, both emphasizing a particular from of femininity. Victoria actively resists this, claiming, "I might want a different type of feeling attached to my team," though she does not go on to suggest what that may be. Possibly her strongest critique, however, is in the suggestion that the NFL is simply "marketing a look to women that…they feel would appeal to men." The allegation here is that, while superficially appearing to attend to the female fan demographic, the NFL is still, in effect, ignoring them. Meanwhile, they continue to draw boxes based on what men want rather than what women do. In one final statement of resistance, Victoria declared, "But you know game time is my time. I get to define that, you know." Empowering words such as these are embedded with the potential to construct quite a different image of "female football fan."

A season of change? Despite all the aforementioned challenges, there was a sense among at least some of the women, that progress was taking place. Instead of suggesting that female fans were somehow the problem, Camille placed the challenge squarely on the shoulders of those who would resist their advances:

> I think it's all knowledge and passion and putting in the time. I think that just because you don't have that game experience doesn't mean you can't understand how the game works thoroughly and be able to know exactly what you're talking about. I would say that that is very narrow-minded thinking and we need to open up and understand that this isn't geared only for men. This isn't a sport only for men. Sports aren't only for men. Yes, football may be just a sport that men play, but that doesn't necessarily mean that women can't be involved. It's 2014. Let's change it up a bit.

She begins by refuting the idea that game experience is essential to a fan identity, instead suggesting that "knowledge [of presumably a different form] and passion and putting in the time" matter most. Furthermore, she insists that you do not have to play football in order to understand it and "to know exactly what you're talking about," suggesting that to assume as much is to adopt a "very narrow-minded [way of] thinking." She extends her challenge by suggesting that football, in fact sports in general, "aren't only for men." This is perhaps the most radical form of resistance. While conceding "football may be just a sport that men play" she does not accept that, by default, women must be universally excluded and in her final statement, she issues a direct challenge. "It's 2014. Let's change it up a bit." Having said all of that, Camille acknowledged:

> I think we're getting there. I think it's still a new, foreign territory where it's almost like we don't really have examples of what female fans are. And so we're learning along the way of almost how to act in a sense, with a group of a dominant female setting of all being knowledgeable NFL fans. So I think we're furnishing that model as we go.

What does she mean when she suggests "we're getting there?" Where, exactly, is "there?" Is it female fan recognition? Or is it something closer to equality? In the sentences that follow, she paints a picture of female fandom as something "new" and likens it to a foreign territory that has yet to be explored, when, in fact, I offered evidence earlier in this paper to contradict this image. Perhaps "we don't really have examples of what female fans are," or possibly because we are primarily socialized by and continue to interact with male fans, we inadvertently overlook them. Camille's suggestion that "we are learning along the way" may at first seem to place women in the less powerful position of student rather than teacher, but it turns out, she is not talking about learning from men; rather, we are learning how to interact in a "dominant female setting of…knowledgeable NFL fans." This is indeed a novel concept, as more women not only claim and express such an identity, but also begin to recognize they are not alone. And there is great potential for reshaping how "fan" is done if these women decide to wield their collective power and define it for themselves.

Interview Data: Reinscription

Still, I find my own optimism tempered. On more than one occasion, in the course of everyday conversation, I have heard it suggested that perhaps women are as tough if

not tougher on other women. While I would prefer nothing more than to dismiss the idea entirely, the sections below offer evidence to support that very claim, as female fans take up practices at times used by men to deny their identities and use them to separate themselves from other women.

Boys on the side. How might the dynamics in an all-female fan group be similar and/or different? For starters, we might be more inclined to accept each other's fan identity without further question. As I shared:

> I've never met a woman that didn't believe me. I've met women who were thrilled to have met somebody else who loved a team even if it wasn't the same team…it's been more surprise, in terms of finding another person like themselves and pleasant surprise. We're almost at fault ourselves for assuming that other women aren't going to be interested in this. That we're the only woman that wants to hang out and watch sports."

Initially, I describe what may be understood as a positive set of circumstances. Women believe me when I say I am a fan, and are "thrilled" to find others who share this identity. In fact, these moments have "been more surprise" and even "pleasant surprise" when they occur. Why the surprise? Because women appear to be taking for granted some of the exact same stereotypes they are simultaneously working to resist. Not only are we "assuming that other women aren't going to be interested," I claim "we're almost at fault." The use of the word "almost" works to lessen the accusation, yet the implication remains the same. Women are doing precisely what we blame men for: assuming women are not interested in sports.

More than that, we are talking about other women in ways that mimic a conventional and stereotypical discourse. Taylor explained:

> I don't have very many female friends that I can watch sports with. I did have a good girlfriend…we used to go out to sports bars or we'd go to a game. I have more female friends that will do things like watch the Super Bowl or watch the NBA finals or something like that but I don't have too many friends that will actually watch games on a day-to-day basis.

While acknowledging that she did have "a good girlfriend" she could watch sports with on a regular basis, Taylor claims she has "more female friends" who turn up only for the big games. Moreover, she doesn't "have too many [female] friends that will actually watch games on a day to day basis." The use of the phrase "actually watch" insinuates that even when women do show up, they are not paying attention. Thus, her portrayal serves to bolster the perception that most women are not as interested or dedicated as she is or as men are traditionally expected to be.

Camille shared a similar experience, until she landed a job working in the sports industry:

> When I moved…for my job I found a plethora of female football fans. And it's refreshing. Before that there weren't any friends that I could sit with. Any of my girlfriends…would be like 'Gah, really, we have to watch the game?' And you know it'd be more me explaining it.

Indeed, it turns out there are a "plethora of female football fans" to be found; yet from the excerpt above it appears they are unrecognizable outside the professional setting. Clearly,

these women did not become fans as condition of employment, but perhaps there is something unique about this setting that allows, or even encourages, women to express themselves as such. Nevertheless, Camille characterizes the situation as "refreshing," in comparison to times before that when "there weren't any friends that I could sit with." More than that, she depicts "any of my girlfriends" as not only unwilling to participate but also unable to comprehend. Consequently, when Camille says, "it'd be more of me explaining it," she positions herself as empowered and knowledgeable, while her friends who do not know the game are less so.

This pattern continued in my conversation with Rachel. When I asked her who she generally spent time talking to about sports, she replied, "Believe it or not, well, who do I talk to about football? Actually, my best friend, as much as I love her, no. We don't talk about it much. There's not very many females believe it or not that I really talk to about football." The use of the introductory expression "believe it or not" sets the stage for Rachel to reveal something unexpected. She takes a moment to further ponder the question aloud, then admits that even though she loves her best friend, she cannot talk to her about football. Leading with the phrase "as much as I love her," followed by a negative reply indicates the shortcoming should be understood to lie with her friend, rather than Rachel's expectation of her. Much like Camille and Taylor, Rachel also claims there are "not very many females" that she talks to about football. Here again, she inserts the saying "believe it or not," though it is unclear exactly who she is working to convince.

Later in our discussion, Rachel shared her thoughts on interacting with other bloggers from the website:

> It's just a wonderful thing to be able to get with a group of women and talk to them and not all of them are at the same level that I am or some that even know more than me but for the most part to be able to sit and talk to women about football like guys is really nice."

Just as Camille expressed it was "refreshing" to find a group of women to talk with about sports, Rachel proclaims it "a wonderful thing." Yet while in the first sentence she speaks favorably about the group as a whole, she then goes on to draw a line among its members. In the dialogue that follows, she appears to be jockeying for position by asserting that "not all of them are at the same level that I am," effectively awarding her status above others while at the same time owning that some "even know more than me." Interestingly, the words "some" and "even" in reference to those who know more suggests this is a rare occurrence; therefore the effect is to situate herself at the top end of this ranking system. Finally, she indicates that "for the most part," though apparently not always, it is "nice" to be able to "talk to women about football like guys." Of course, this final declaration is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it implies that men and women talk about football differently. Second, it privileges the presumably masculine version of this type of conversation. I will say more about the phenomena of evaluation and separation in the sections that follow.

Before leaving this discussion, however, there is one more feature of discourse worth mentioning. While talking with Camille, several instances of stereotyping became

clear. First, when I asked whether she noticed any differences in her interactions with female football fans compared with her experience of male fans, she shared, "Girls will be girls. We definitely were like, ooh, Decker, yeah. Thanks for that touchdown. Thanks for looking so good doing it." Earlier in this paper, I offered illustrations of discourse which attacked the idea that women were following the game simply because they were sexually attracted to the men who play; yet Camille's admission suggests, at least in this case, there are elements of it at play. Her declaration that "girls will be girls" implies a mutual understanding of her intended meaning, one that presumably rests on a culturally approved stereotype. The "girls" offer their appreciation for the athletic accomplishment, then add, "thanks for looking so good doing it," a move which subsequently highlights the player's physical appeal and their own status as women. Camille went on, "Those conversations just didn't happen with guys. But I mean yeah, I would say a little vain in comments on the looks or even I notice a lot of women would talk about what's going on off the field with the players versus men really wouldn't talk about it a lot." The impact of her statement is twofold: first, she distinguishes between the types of conversations women have and those which men are allowable among men, suggesting there are marked differences. Second, she reiterates female fan's emphasis on "looks" as well as off-field events, both of which serve to reinforce traditional notions about women's relationship to the game.

Please answer the following questions. Given the strong negative sentiments these women previously expressed in response to being asked to "prove" their own fandom, it is perhaps most interesting to find that these very women were often guilty of

doing exactly that: asking others to perform in order to validate their fan identities. Let me begin with my own admission, "If somebody told me they were a fan…then my next question is probably going to be, 'Oh, really? How long have you been a fan?' or something like that." The exact question I am concerned with, "how long have you been a fan?" indicates my assumption that the amount of time invested matters. Thus, I take my own definition, or at least one element of it, and employ it to assess others, a process I would otherwise adamantly oppose. "It's like I'm scrutinizing them for no really good reason." Even though I am able to acknowledge I have "no really good reason" to question them, I nevertheless do it. In fact, it was only here, when I was asked about it directly, that I even began to recognize I had been participating in the process.

I was not the only one to come to this realization, however. When I asked Camille if she would engage with a female fan while out watching sports at the bar, she shared:

> I would watch her a little bit…say she has a running back jersey on and he has the ball. Is she on the phone? Does she go to the restroom? Like is she not even paying attention to what's going on and after the excitement when everyone's cheering, then she's cheering? I don't necessarily think that she cares that much to like strike up a conversation with a stranger. But you know if she was like super into it and that happened to be one of the jerseys of a team I was wearing that day, I would absolutely go and be like yeah, that's awesome…you'd almost have to like gauge their fandom, which, ugh, I feel so judgmental but almost, yeah.

The evaluation process begins as she admits, "I would watch her a little bit." Rather than assume that because she is in the same place (sports bar), doing the same thing (watching

the game) and possibly even presenting in the same manner (wearing a team jersey), Camille needs to see if she's "paying attention" to the game and more specifically, to the running back whose jersey she is wearing. She further assesses the woman's behavior, noting both how and when she reacts to the events on the field. If she cheers after everyone else starts cheering, this reflects negatively on her appraisal, as Camille "doesn't necessarily think that she cares that much" and would therefore not strike up a conversation. If instead, she was "super into it" and at the same time "happened to be" wearing the same symbols, Camille would feel inclined to make an approach. In the end, Camille appears to recognize the implication of what she has said, confessing she felt "so judgmental" as a result. Though she may feel bad, she concludes by saying "but almost, yeah" which suggests that perhaps, while unflattering to admit, she believes the process is justified.

This was not the only time Camille and I talked about evaluating others. In a discussion about pink jerseys, the dividing lines were undeniably clear:

> It's almost like there's a type of girl that's wearing the pink jersey. She has like the full face of makeup and the acrylic nails that are six inches long and the low cut top. She's almost like the boyfriend girlfriend fan. She has a jersey because her boyfriend, that's his team and you know she's also asking if it's time for the 7th inning stretch during a football game. That's when you just put your hand to your forehead and you're just like come on, you're setting back women."

To begin, there is a "type of girl" who wears a pink jersey, one with which Camille does not identify, as she does not perform fan in this manner. A pink jersey is not just a pink

jersey, however. It is merely a symbol used to represent of a whole host of other characteristics associated with that "type" of fan. This fan emphasizes her femininity by wearing a "full face of makeup and the acrylic nails that are six inches long and the low cut top," all of which operate to make the woman sound superficial, if not artificial, in her portrayal of self. The implication for her fan status is such that Camille ultimately classifies her as "the boyfriend girlfriend fan;" consequently, her interest is not understood to be her own. "That's his team" and she is only connected via her association with him. Not only is the perception that she has no claim to her own fan identity, but she also has no knowledge of the game. When Camille suggests, "She's also asking if it's time for the 7th inning stretch during a football game," she effectively buys into the idea that some women are too dumb to know the difference. It seems clear how Camille feels about this type of performance, when she closes by saying "Come on, you're setting back women." As someone working in and writing about a male-dominated field, Camille often struggles to combat these types of stereotypes in the larger sense, yet makes some of the same assumptions about women who wear pink jerseys.

Along those lines, we also talked about her experience of being evaluated by other women, both in and out of the work environment:

> Women still, in the sports world, it's like only a certain amount can be allotted in and once you're in you kind of like almost hold other women down, which is sad. One of my mentors said like there's a special place in hell for women who don't help other women. I think some women I've run into are kind of you know, do the warm up like really? Do you know what you're talking about? And will quiz you

> not saying point blank, oh, well what's this guy's stats, but they're like oh, well did you see Knowshon Moreno's touchdown run for like 40 yards last week? And then you're like yeah. And they'll expect you to comment more about it. And you know women. You can tell that they're completely judging you. That has luckily been the minority of female fans I've found. The majority of us it's almost like a safe haven. Like awesome, there's other girls like us that care. We don't have to prove ourselves. We know what we're talking about and we don't need to put it on blast. We're not at work right now. We don't have to be 'on' and spew out sports. We can just enjoy the game together and not have to worry about what people are thinking."

Her description of interactions among women in the "sports world" is particularly interesting as she perceives "only a certain amount can be allotted in" and "once you're in you kind of like almost hold other women down." In a context dominated by men, Camille paints a picture reminiscent of a quota system. More than that, for those women who are able to infiltrate the system, the expectation is not that they will work to make space for other women like themselves; rather, they will focus their efforts on maintaining their own unique position and cooperate in the denial of entry to others. One means of preserving their status is to develop and administer their own measure for "proving" they belong. In this case, when they want to know if "you know what you're talking about" the indicators for assessment on the "quiz" include a "guy's stats," a form of knowledge conventionally valued by men.

Though she deems this practice "sad," the quote from her mentor that she offers in opposition could actually be interpreted as equally divisive. The statement, "There's a special place in hell for women who don't help other women," at first glance may seem empowering, but considered further, essentially accomplishes another form of separation. Instead of evaluating the women who are attempting to be included, this statement judges the women who do not assist them in their efforts. Moreover, Camille returns to speak of women as if there is a general consensus when she says "And you know women. You can tell that they're completely judging you." Therefore, the questions cannot be understood as basic information gathering; because these are women, judgment is inherent.

While acknowledging these practices exist, Camille defends it "has luckily been the minority of female fans" she has encountered; meanwhile, for most of the women she knows, the opportunity to interact with other female fans is characterized as a "safe haven" where they are able to recognize their shared experience and do not have to "prove" themselves to each other. Furthermore, there is no need to be "on" as if they were at work or to "put it on blast" that they know what they're talking about. All of these descriptors work to convey a sense that the women are able to relax in this environment, to not constantly be on guard as they are elsewhere. "We can just enjoy the game together and not have to worry about what people are thinking." The suggestion, then, is that their performance for each other is considerably different, perhaps even more authentic, than their performance for others.

Where Camille and I spoke about appraising and being appraised by others, Rachel also applied the process to herself. "I'm telling you, I am very very much into

football. I think sometimes it's just not natural. Sometimes I really don't feel like it's natural as much football as I watch as a woman." She openly confesses her love of football, before turning to label something she enjoys so much as "just not natural." Is it the level of attachment that she finds unnatural? No. In Rachel's opinion, professing a deep love of football is only made problematic because she is female, which seems clear when she elaborates, "I really don't feel like it's natural as much football as I watch *as a woman*." In effect, she is judging herself and her own behavior negatively because what she does departs from a widely understood cultural norm. Men watch football; women do not.

Rachel also shared the feeling that female football fans have a collective responsibility to perform their roles competently, as any missteps have the potential to affect us all:

> But for the most part, I just think as a woman if you're gonna kind of be in this, you've got to know something about it. You just can't say oh, I like their uniforms. Because that just puts women back about 50 years when you say that. Like, oh I like their uniforms. Or I like their colors. That sets us back about 50 years.

Much like Camille expressed earlier, there is this sense that not knowing is unacceptable. Rachel does not dictate what, exactly, a woman should comprehend, but clearly charges her with understanding "something about it." She prefaces that statement with "if you're gonna be in this;" in other words, if you are going to claim a fan identity, you must be prepared to learn. "You can't just say oh, I like their uniforms." Doing so would reinforce

ideas about women's potential capacity to be "real" fans. Instead, you must be able to "prove" yourself to the men who are likely to challenge you, who write the "test" by which you will be measured, and who hold the power to confer or withhold your group membership. To present an image contrary to this is to set "women back about 50 years." The underlying assumption, then, is that progress has been made and we do not want to risk its undoing.

For Lucy, talk of the appraisal process was again tied to pink jerseys. I wondered if she might perceive women who wear them as less authentic, and asked her to comment directly about that idea:

> I don't think, certainly maybe would judge them book by their cover and be like oh maybe this person isn't as fanatical as I am, but I would maybe take the extra step to be like, "let's talk. Let's have a conversation" to see if you are as serious a fan. But I definitely think there is something to that sort of culture in there somewhere where other women look down on women who sport the pink stuff. So it is an interesting thing but for me if you like pink, wear it. I don't care."

On the one hand, she owns that she "maybe would judge them book by their cover" and assume that a woman wearing a pink jersey was not "as fanatical" as herself. This indicates one level of evaluation. She goes on to say she would "maybe take the extra step" to initiate conversation with the woman "to see if [she is] as serious a fan," which suggests another level of assessment. Lucy does not elaborate further to suggest how she will know if the woman is as fanatical, but certainly it is implied she will be able to figure this out. She then contextualizes her personal practice as part of a larger cultural

framework "where other women look down on women who sport the pink stuff." Interestingly, it has not been suggested anywhere in this paper that wearing pink might actually be empowering. Therefore, there are only two acceptable responses: look down on them or remain neutral. This is the stance Lucy ultimately claims when she says, "If you like pink, wear it. I don't care." She may not care if you wear it, yet given her previous comments, she may, however unintentionally, factor it into her assessment.

Victoria was much more direct in her approach. In describing her interactions among other female fans, she shared:

> I don't have like a chick fan posse. Some girls are fans and God bless them they don't know much about sports. Like my litmus test for a chick: you have to know players, you have to know positions, and you at least have to know basic penalties. That's my litmus test. If you don't know those three things then you're probably just showing up for the food, the beer or the guys and the apparel. Which is fine."

There are many layers to this passage that deserve attention. First, she claims she does not have a "chick" fan posse. Employing this slang term often understood as offensive to women establishes a less respectful tone from the beginning. She adds to this in her next sentence, using the expression "God bless them" in a patronizing fashion as she categorizes "some girls" who claim a fan identity but "don't know much about sports." In this instance, choosing to refer to these female fans as "girls" rather than women also has a diminishing effect. Having acknowledged these fans exist, she then outlines her process for discerning whether or not a woman is actually a fan, according to her standards. She

refers to her assessment as a "litmus test for a chick" which not only reiterates the use of the negative slang, but also indicates this same test is not used to evaluate men. Thus, the insinuation is that only female fan identities require validation. She goes on to identify knowledge of players, positions, and penalties as key, elevating their importance and making these forms of information worth more than others. Interestingly, players, positions, and penalties are all examples of knowledge that have previously been discussed as valuable to men; therefore, Victoria effectively replicates an existing process. In this case, however, women are being asked to perform not only for men, but also for other women. If the women cannot pass Victoria's test, they are assumed to be "just showing up for the food, the beer or the guys and the apparel," all interests superfluous to the game itself. Her final statement "which is fine," indicates Victoria regards these behaviors neutrally, neither better nor worse than another's performance, an impression quite the contrary to the remainder of her discourse.

I inquired further, asking Victoria if a woman's clothing choice might impact her perception, but she stood by her previous conviction saying:

> I would take it back to my three criteria before I would go to clothes. Players, positions, and penalties. Do you know the three P's ma'am? Like I don't care if you've got on a sports bra and booty shorts. Do you know the three P's? Every cheerleader down there might know the three P's or none of them might."

Although she continues to emphasize a particular form of knowledge that she refers to as "the three P's," she does not altogether discount what a woman wears, either. Victoria indicates she would start with the information assessment "before" considering a

woman's apparel; therefore demonstrating it may indeed be a factor. She goes on to say she doesn't care if a woman wears "a sports bra and booty shorts," as long as she can meet the original criteria. Employing the extreme image of a near-naked woman, Victoria works to show just how important she regards this form of knowledge. In a different set of circumstances, the woman she describes may be deemed inauthentic based on her physical presentation, which is perhaps why she chose this image to make her point. She makes a similar comment about cheerleaders, a traditionally discounted group both literally and figuratively relegated to the sidelines. Every cheerleader or none of the cheerleaders might pass her "litmus test," she offers. The point remains; it must be passed.

Victoria carries this theme forward in the next excerpt, proclaiming:

> There's girls that write for that blog that are gorgeous and there are female sports reporters who are terrific and know everything there is to know about their sport and they're gorgeous, too. And present in a very feminine way. It doesn't make them any less reputable or respectable in their fandom or in their approach to football."

The wording above more clearly implies a contradiction between attractiveness and intelligence. She seems to be defending the "gorgeous" women who write for the blog as well as those who work as reporters against any attack on their competence. But by setting it up this way, the underlying message is one that suggests the two are indeed incompatible and not typically found paired together. She extends this argument to include the descriptor "and present in a very feminine way." One wonders whether this is

intended to distinguish between those women who are gorgeous and present in conventionally feminine ways and those who are gorgeous but do not. She concludes that being beautiful and feminine "doesn't make them any less reputable or respectable in their fandom or their approach to football." Meanwhile, the implied assumption is that it would.

Which one of these is not like the others? The end result of evaluation is frequently differentiation, or the separation of self from others. Instead of uniting under the umbrella of our shared female football fan identity and working to recognize what we have in common, we regularly labor to distinguish ourselves as unique or different in ways that reflect favorably on us as individuals. For example, I declared:

> I don't do the, what's the, how would I put it? The casual fan? The oh, it's Sunday, I should look and see if my team might be playing because you know maybe I'll want to watch it…I don't understand that because that's not how I do it. I mean, I can understand that people might do that. It doesn't seem to me like that's a real fan.

What do I mean, "I don't do the…casual fan?" I mean I do not associate with her because "I don't understand" her. We do not share a similar experience of the game; therefore, I preemptively treat her as "other" rather than attempting to broaden my own understanding of the many ways fan may be performed. I make light of her commitment, suggesting she does not follow along as closely as she should. Then, I pronounce she "doesn't seem to me like…a real fan" when measured against my own set of

expectations. It is exactly the kind of practice I refuse to tolerate when being evaluated by a man.

Furthermore, I worked to separate myself from another form of presumably less genuine fan, the wife and girlfriend. “I feel like I struggle with a lot in terms of no, listen to me, I’m not like a wife and a girlfriend kind of fan. Like, you know, I actually have something, like I can learn this just like you can learn.” The embedded assumption here is, of course, that wives and girlfriends cannot, or at least do not, have their own attachment to the game. As a single woman and a lifelong football fan, I constantly fight against this categorization and the associations that come along with it, some of which I replicate above. For example, the phrase “I actually have something” is meant to declare I possess something, in this case knowledge, that those other women do not. I go on to say, “I can learn this just like you can learn.” While I am not speaking directly to anyone in this piece, I am playing out a conversation in which the other person is always understood to be male. I am also suggesting that because I am neither wife nor girlfriend, I have the capacity to learn, while they do not. Logically, of course, I would never insinuate that women somehow trade brains for boyfriends, but that is the effect of what I have said here. Hence, I am to be understood as better than, more than, as a result.

Camille also contributed her thoughts, adding:

> It’s almost like every step we take of like somebody giving you the respect you deserve as a fan, it’s easy to take two steps back because people will see one person that will change their idea of how they think of women as fans. And so it’s almost like the minority know what they’re talking about and can have a

> conversation, where the majority of what people see is just kind of the fair weather fan that's there for the party, there for the atmosphere, there for their significant other.

She opens with a discussion of progress and "somebody giving you the respect you deserve as a fan," but cautions "it's easy to take two steps back." What might impede their advancement? "People will see one person that will change their idea of how they think of women as fans." In this instance, that one person is understood to be performing in a way that undermines the image of female fans. Yet Camille paints a very different picture by claiming "the minority know what they're talking about" while "the majority of what people see is just kind of the fair weather fan." If women who know what they are talking about are the ones who deserve respect, they are actually positioned in the minority here, and are charged with combatting the more popular image of women as fair weather fans, those only "there for the party…for the atmosphere…for their significant other." By depicting them in this manner, Camille clearly conveys a sense that she values this type of female fan performance far less.

To round out this discussion, I offer one final thought from Victoria which harkens back once again to the earlier conversation of pink jerseys. In that moment she offered, "I mean what they're branding is an extension of the cheerleader. And not everybody wants to be that girl. As a fan." Aside from the positioning of cheerleader as something not everyone wants to be, I think there is a larger sentiment touched on in this quote that should not be missed. It seems we are all interpreting the meaning of "that girl" in a myriad of ways. Some of us do not want to be likened to cheerleaders. Others of

us are trying to resist being labeled wife or girlfriend. Still others are struggling to be recognized as more than just fair weather fans. Ultimately, however, the effect is still the same. We are "othering" some representations in an effort to legitimate our own. Yet, just as there are multiple facets to how we define ourselves, could there not also be room for us to accept each other, as varied as we may be? In the spirit of inclusion, perhaps we could work to emphasize what we have in common, rather than what sets us apart.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented and analyzed findings from two sources of data: (a) online blog posts; and (b) transcripts of qualitative interviews. My primary objective was to illustrate how language contributes to the performance of a female football fan identity. At the same time, I worked to highlight the negotiations women often make in situating themselves between more or less powerful subject positions. From the blog posts, I was able to identify examples of discourse that served to reproduce conventional female fan stereotypes as well as occasions where these ideas were challenged. My analysis of interview data revealed one additional feature, whereby women adopted discourse practices typically leveled against them and reinscribed them to differentiate among each other. In the next chapter, I discuss these findings, suggest some possible implications, offer recommendations for future research, and draw some final conclusions.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Conclusions, Implications, Recommendations, and Final Thoughts

The purpose of this research was to explore how the identities of female fans of the National Football League (NFL) were constructed and negotiated through the language used to describe their experiences. In this final chapter, I connect the findings of this research with previous literature, considering both the points of connection as well as departure. I then suggest some of the potential implications of my work, offer recommendations for future research endeavors, and draw some final conclusions.

The Fan Performance

One primary research question guided this project: How do female followers of the NFL accomplish being "fan?" In an effort to address this, I focused on discursive construction of identity by examining the ways in which women wrote and spoke about their experiences as fans. Before entering a discussion of these findings however, I believe it is important to clarify a few points. First, these socially constructed performances must be understood as products of the contexts within which they were created. That is to say the way a woman talks about her fan identity in a publicly produced and consumed internet blog post may be different than, yet equally as authentic as, the identity she expresses in the less public setting of a qualitative interview. As previous discourse studies have shown, the (real or perceived) public nature of any performance may significantly influence the construction of identity (Graff, 2009; Horne & Wiggins, 2009; Lester & Paulus, 2011). Second, FPDA commands that I be reflexive about my use of authorly choices (Baxter, 2003). The quotations included in this paper

were purposefully selected not for their uniqueness, but for what they shared in common with others. Why were these excerpts chosen and not others? This decision was solely based on resonance and personal impact; thus my choices undeniably guided the crafting this particular version of the story. Finally, the distinctions I made as author are entirely subjective. Even in the process of organizing the data, I questioned whether a given excerpt could not (or should not) be better discussed under another heading. So although, for the purposes of organization, I largely handled the quotations as if they were finite and discrete examples of a particular type of discourse, the complexity of the women's statements only serves to highlight FPDA's principle of intertextuality (Baxter, 2003) and quotations that in one moment adhere to the dominant norms may resist them in the next.

Reproduction. Undoubtedly, our conventional understandings of fan suggest a masculine standard of measure. Previous research on sports fandom has focused primarily on men's attendance, participation, attachment and commitment while overlooking women (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Wann, 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). When female fans are considered, they are overwhelmingly portrayed as less authentic and committed than their male counterparts (Giulanotti, 2002; Free & Hughson, 2003; Pope, 2010). Thus, in reinterpreting Coakley's (2009) question about "who is advantaged and disadvantaged by the accepted definition of sports," one might contend that female fans are a disadvantaged group (p. 8). Yet it is exactly these definitions that women draw upon in attempting to articulate their fan identities, so it is no surprise to find large segments of their discourse also reflect and reinforce these ideas.

One element of the dominant discourse about sports fandom dealt specifically with fan socialization. Ben-Porat (2009) and Rosenberg (2010) emphasized that female fans often learn from their fathers or other men in their lives, and the impact of this influence was largely reiterated in our conversations as well as in the blog posts. Interestingly, my analysis of discourse also revealed examples of what Eastman and Land (1997) described as enacting masculinity where, in this case, daughters rather than sons replicated the behaviors and attitudes of the men who brought them to the game. If, as Eastman and Land suggest, learning to be a sports fan is part of "learning to be men," (p. 171) then one could expect the masculine messages imparted early on to heavily influence their present dialogue. Moreover, bell hooks' (1995) concept of "doing it for daddy" could also be applied here as a way to understand the interactions not only between actual fathers and daughters, but also between male and female fans in a broader sense, as we often talked about ourselves in ways that seemed to seek male approval and affection (e.g., from our fathers, our boyfriends, and other men).

Another component of the dominant discourse that the women both reproduced and resisted was the notion of female fans as less interested in the game itself and perhaps more focused on the social engagement (Bush, et. al., 2005). While some of the women spoke positively of their interactions with others, many of them mentioned their lack of desire to be social during the game. Victoria and Rachel specifically admitted they would rather watch alone, and Jennifer C. blogged about her need for focus and lack of interruption. At the same time, even this variation in performance continues to reinforce the image of women in supportive and relational roles (Rader, 2009). This was perhaps

no more clear than when Victoria spoke about the football players as if they were her boyfriends or her sons, or when ChocLadyBengal blogged about her desire to date and/or marry an offensive lineman. Camille further suggested that "girls will be girls" when they talk about the players physical attractiveness, thus reproducing an image of female fans as interested in matters superficial to the game itself. As discussed previously, the perception of female fans as less genuine is not new, and there is a long historical precedent of portraying women as more enthusiastic than knowledgeable, more interested in personalities and players than the sport itself (Duval, 1940; Louchheim, 1949; Rubin, 2009).

An attempt to resist. In Chapter Two, I introduced the discussion of gender as a performance rather than an essentialist trait of man or woman. Expanding that conversation, the research presented here works under the assumption that "fan" is similarly constructed. Yet, a unique set of complications arise when a woman attempts to simultaneously enact both identities in a manner that her audience regards as both appropriate and authentic. While being female is broadly reduced to anything not associated with maleness or masculinity, being a football fan is generally recognized to be synonymous with men (Davis & Duncan, 2006; Foley, 1990; Hartmann, 2003; Rubin, 2009); thus, a fundamental incongruence underlies a combination of the two.

Previously in this dissertation, I also offered an illustration of female fans characterized as "freaks" for crossing the imaginary gender line into sports fandom (Duval, 1940, p. 87). Based on the accounts of the women included in this study, many find themselves still struggling against this image. The mere fact that female fans are

being asked (by men) directly or indirectly assuming a need to explain themselves, to provide justification for why and how they know what they know, implies there is something non-normative about their status. As Coakley (2009) indicated, women who hold power (i.e., knowledge) in male-defined spaces provoke suspicion among men; yet, when women consent to this evaluation process, they reaffirm existing masculine norms (Hartmann, 2003). Or, as Foley (1990) explained, women may "participate unwittingly in staging this expression of male dominance and privilege" (p.119). Meanwhile, the more information they offer to "prove" themselves, the further they position themselves outside the norm, a situation Louchheim cautioned against in 1949, recommending women be "careful not to know too much" (p. 101). Jessica's post about her interactions with men and their response to her displays of knowledge provides an excellent illustration of the modern-day potential for social exclusion (Gosling, 2007). Furthermore, in this research, Taylor was the only person who openly refused to participate in this ritual; the rest of us, with varying degrees of reluctance, adhered to the dominant (masculine) norm by attempting to display our sports knowledge and gain acceptance (Duncan & Brummett, 1993). This begs the question: As long as we comply, are we not, in fact, validating the process?

Burton-Nelson (1994) described women's participation in sport, and by extension, their fandom as an implicit challenge to "patriarchal constraints on [their] behavior" which "alters the balance between the sexes" (pp. 30-31); "It's about power," she said (p. 11). If this is truly the case, and sport spectatorship is intended to "reinforce, rework, and maintain" masculinity, then it is not difficult to see how men may be invested in

maintaining the perception of female football fans as different (Hartmann, 2003, p. 17). Yet Davis and Duncan (2006) suggested that women's participation in sports is only threatening when it challenges "masculinity and male supremacy" (p. 257). On the whole, I would not characterize the performance of fan by the women included in this study as that extreme. Though they challenged the ways in which they were defined and perceived, they did not suggest that men should perform fan differently. In fact, they said much to reproduce and reinscribe the dominant discourse, and in the act of resisting, primarily worked to carve out additional space for their identities to be understood alongside rather than in exchange for others. As long as female fans continue to model their behavior after and measure themselves against male fans, they remain non-threatening.

Still, within the context of a male-dominated NFL space, enacting a female fan identity may itself be understood as a form of resistance, a risky process full of potential consequences whereby the masculine norms of cultural group dictate, constrain, and police performances (Butler, 1988; Jeanes, 2011; Layton, 1998; West & Zimmerman, 1987). To challenge conventional notion of whom is fan and how that is accomplished is to assume the risk, because if the performance fails, it is the individual who will be held accountable, not the structure. When Lucy and Rachel speak about the additional burden of responsibility they carry as women writing about football, they are acknowledging their own awareness of these circumstances. When Jessica talks about being punished by men because she knows too much about the game, the message conveyed is one in which Jessica has the problem, not the man. When Rachel is labeled an "obnoxious" fan, it is

most likely an attempt to control her expression, and when men ask women to "prove" themselves, it is understood as yet another means of regulation. None of this is possible, of course, unless men are positioned as and deferred to as gatekeepers and administrators of this identity. It is a cooperative process.

Making them our own. Admittedly, the most personally fascinating and frustrating finding of this research was what I referred to as a discourse of reinscription, where women took up the practices of men (e.g., evaluating) and applied them to other women. As it turns out, this is not at all uncommon. Indeed, Layton (1998) argued that socially appropriate performances of identity are "based as much on disidentifications as on identifications" which helps to explain why women would work to separate themselves from others (p. 50). In this male-defined space, female fans made concerted efforts to distinguish themselves as "real" so as not to be confused with other females (but not males) who may only be concerned with what they regarded as less important elements of the game (e.g., the food, the party, the guys). One of the ways they tried to accomplish this was by assessing other women's knowledge of the game. For instance, Victoria employed her "3 Ps" strategy (asking about players, penalties, and positions) to determine whether another "chick" knew what she was talking about. I also admitted that I often scrutinized others' fan claims, questioning how long they followed a team and how much they knew about it. Both of our strategies draw upon forms of knowledge traditionally valued by men, which many of us attempted to resist when we were the ones being questioned. I find Victoria's approach particularly interesting as it suggests a level of knowledge often gained through experience (i.e., players, positions, and penalties). Yet,

when women spoke about their identities as fans, they overwhelmingly resisted the suggestion that if they did not compete, they could not fully understand.

In addition to these efforts to segregate based on knowledge, the women also distinguished themselves from each other based on appearance. Most, but not all, of the women included here resisted wearing pink apparel and though they suggested they would not judge another woman who did, they also did not grant her automatic approval either. Camille spoke to this specifically, indicating a list of potentially unflattering attributes she would also associate with a woman who wore pink NFL apparel. Beyond that, even when not wearing the color pink, female fans remained skeptical of other women. For example, Camille said she would need to watch a woman first to "gauge" her before interacting. This hesitation would not be necessary if the fan were a man. At the same time, however, several of the women spoke and wrote about a desire to look "cute," which one may interpret to mean appropriately, conventionally, and heterosexually attractive.

Our presumption of difference went beyond this, however, as we generally talked about ourselves as rare, unique individuals, and seemed to overlook our connection with other female fans. We did not spend time watching games with other women, but more than that, we did not assume other women would want to watch. Why not? All of the women I spoke with blog for a site of all female fans writing for (presumably) other female fans, so why do we talk about ourselves as if others would not understand and act accordingly? Perhaps we have been so well socialized that we unintentionally adopt and apply the same measures we consciously oppose. As a result, we question women while

accepting men. Not to overstate the case, but if we continue to think of ourselves as the only or one of a few female fans, we aid those who would have us believe we are "freaks" and make it easier for them to undermine our identities. If, instead, we begin to recognize what we share in common and with whom, the result could be extraordinarily empowering.

Finding a balance. The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous research of women participating in male-dominated spaces and the negotiations that occur within them. Halberstam (1998) depicted female masculinity as "masculinity without men," and female football fans appear to be performing just that (p. 17). In the context of both the blog posts and our individual conversations, no men were visibly present; yet by claiming a football fan identity, these women are in fact performing "traits and desires normally attributed to males" (Boyle, et. al., 2006, p. 101). While Halberstam (1998) conceived of this performance as a threat to the gender binary, I am not certain that is the case here. For instance, when Rachel openly wonders if it is "not natural" that she watches as much football as she does, and likens her behavior to being "like a guy," she reinforces rather than destabilizes the existing binary classification system. Walk's (2000) research on student trainers found that though there was some resistance, women often "had to accommodate to an androcentric environment" (p. 45). Similarly, the women in this study describe instances of working within and remaining sensitive to the sport environment as it is currently understood to exist.

Furthermore, Paechter (2006) proposed that in order to attain group membership, one must reject the feminine and act "as an honorary boy" (p. 257). Camille spoke to this

when she described women who “break in” to the sports world and subsequently take up masculine norms in evaluating and denying entry to other women. Other women talked about being recognized as “one of the guys” in a football fan context as a form of achievement. Rachel took it as a compliment that people thought she knew her stuff, but did not want men to forget she was always first and foremost, female. She did, however, share the expectation that female fans should not say things to “set women back.”

In our attempts to accomplish “fan,” we are limited by the existing discourses used to depict this identity. At the same time, employing the language of masculinity and femininity in our efforts to understand something much more complicated and complex than the terms suggest only serves to make them appear more “real.” Do women employ “masculine” characteristics that allow them to participate while attempting to retain their “female” identity, and what exactly are the implications of this kind of question? Rubin (2009) suggested the choice becomes one between being a real fan or a real woman. If, as I submitted earlier, fan and female are widely understood as incompatible identities, then a woman must compromise one or the other. When women perform to the approval of men and distance themselves from femininity, they are empowered as fans (Collins, 2002; Paechter, 2006). If instead women elect to highlight their femininity, they risk having their fan claim invalidated by their audience, a circumstance Lucy spoke to directly. Harris (2005) summarized the situation as follows, “There is a complex relationship between participating in a perceived male sport and constructing an appropriately feminine, heterosexual identity” (p. 195). Moreover, Finley (2010) proposed women may find it “hard to build alternative femininities that do not reproduce

male dominance" in spaces that are chiefly controlled by men (p. 366). Given the language female fans employed here, I would have to agree.

Finally, I want to conclude by emphasizing FPDA's call to critically question what it means to be both fan and female, accepting that there is no one "correct" answer; instead, there are multiple ways to construct these identities. The creation of one's gender and, I contend, fan identity involves a process of negotiation limited only by our current and predominant ways of understanding. As a result, when women talk about their experiences as fans, they constantly reposition themselves as more or less empowered, often within the same sentence. It does not have to remain so. FPDA is an explicitly feminist endeavor that encourages localized, small-scale change. Each of the women interviewed for this project, myself included, shared a moment where she recognized something about her performance she had not previously considered. This frequently occurred as we talked about our perceptions of and (lack of) interactions with other female fans. Going forward, if each of us attempts to make even relatively minor changes in our own presentation, perhaps we can begin to make a difference.

Conclusions

By analyzing public blog posts written by and about female football fans as well as transcripts of qualitative interviews with the women behind them, this FPDA study intended to address the following research question: How do female followers of the NFL accomplish being "fan?" As set forth in the introduction to this study, not only is female fandom currently under-researched, but there is also increasing interest among those in the business of selling sport to understand and subsequently target this group. In Chapter

Two, I reviewed the relevant literature on sport fandom, providing the backdrop for the academic conversation to which this study would contribute. Following Baxter's (2003) FPDA model, I subsequently analyzed 35 blog posts found at OnHerGame.com during the 2012-2013 NFL season, five interviews with women who write for the website, and my own bracketing interview, looking not only at the larger patterns of discourse evident over time, but also attending to particular language choices and the shifting moments of power within our individual conversations.

As previously illustrated, female fans accomplish their identities by a variety of means, simultaneously taking up the dominant discourse (i.e., sport fandom as inherently masculine), resisting that same language, and at times applying it in new ways. When women adopted/reproduced the dominant discourse, they talked about performing "like a guy" in ways that indicated positive achievement, placed value in knowledge gained through experience, and felt complimented when others (primarily men) validated their identities. When these women resisted the dominant discourse, they challenged traditional notions of what it means to be a fan (i.e., you do not have to play), contested masculine forms of knowledge (e.g., statistics, history, and game strategy) and pushed back against stereotyped performances (i.e., how they should behave, what was appropriate to wear). Reinscription occurred when these female fans took up the practices traditionally applied by men (e.g., using litmus tests) in an attempt to differentiate themselves from other women who performed "fan" differently.

Each of these responses is in line with the findings of previous research (Finley, 2010; Harris, 2005; Paechter, 2006; Rubin, 2009; Walk, 2000) on female identity

construction and performance in male-dominated spaces. We had our selves challenged by men. We struggled for recognition and redefinition. And we actively worked to separate from those who might negatively impact our own image. In the process of alternately working to prove we were on the same level as men, refusing to accept that comparison, and employing tactics to assess and rank other women, we also managed to quietly cooperate in the reification of a gender binary which posits male and masculine as opposite from female and feminine, as each of us, either implicitly or explicitly, took for granted that sport and fan are fundamentally male and then attempted to locate our female selves in relation to that shared understanding. This "inability to define either masculinity or femininity except in relation to each other and to men and women" (Paechter, 2006, p. 254) is so pervasive that even when we make deliberate efforts to fight against it, we may indeed perpetuate its very existence.

What can we learn from this study? How do female followers of the NFL accomplish being "fan?" From an FPDA perspective, the answer involves a complex negotiation of sometimes conflicting identities which is further complicated and constrained by the language we currently have at our disposal to describe it. Even when we struggle to resist the dictates of hegemonic masculinity, our discourse (and occasionally our practice) manages, at times, to reinforce it such that it becomes "difficult for the actual participants to identify in on-going communication. This comprises part of its power and success" (Mean, 2001, p. 811). Or, as Harper and Rail (2012) found in their study of pregnant women's discourse about health, "despite moments of resistance, these

participants reproduce, or, at best, accommodate the discourse and, in so doing, participate in maintaining patriarchal power relations" (p. 78).

So what can female fans do to bring about change, if they so desire? At the most basic level, we can more carefully attend to the language of our performance, making conscious and deliberate effort not to reproduce stereotypical images that work against our claims to authenticity. We can also refuse to participate in interactions that normalize and stabilize masculine standards of practice. Like Taylor, we can decline to engage with those who ask us to "prove" ourselves. Even more, we can stop positioning men as our standard of measure and seeking their approval both directly and indirectly. Finally, and maybe most importantly, we can start to recognize that we are not alone in our fandom, that there are others out there just like us who are struggling through the same challenges. If we first assume that a woman is a fan, rather than that she is not, the impact could be monumental. As with most things, however, change has a habit of taking time. Perhaps someday in the not-to-distant future, the combination of "female" and "fan" identities will not require so much explanation.

Implications

Of what value is this research and who may benefit from it? I believe there are multiple areas of potential impact. First, for scholars in the field of sport sociology, this study is useful for its contribution to the existing, albeit limited, line of research on gender and fandom. The sport fan subculture has historically received less attention from academics than has been paid to those who play the games, and even more rarely has gender been adequately considered in relation this fan identity. When the two have been

studied together, it has not been in the context of American football, in particular, the NFL. Thus, not only does this study work to fill a void in the literature, it also lays the groundwork for a different stream of academic conversation.

Given the NFL's recent emphasis on targeting their female fans, the findings of this study also have the potential to significantly impact sport marketers who are working to increase the scope of their brand as well as their revenue streams. Recognizing the experiences, preferences, frustrations, etc., of this female fan demographic can only benefit those who aim to connect with the population by creating campaigns that resonate with their prospective customers. The women in this research provided an ample amount of feedback regarding the NFL's previous and current attempts to reach them, all of which could prove useful moving forward.

For discourse analysts and language scholars, this study is relevant not only for its focus on the discursive construction of identity, but also for the unique setting in which it was considered. Much like the discussion of sport sociology above, this is a novel area of research within the discipline. While identity construction has been widely considered, and gendered identity less so, at this time I am unaware of any previous investigation into the construction or performance of a gendered fan identity. My use of FPDA, a less commonly utilized complement to the more popular CDA, only magnifies the unique contribution of this study (Baxter, 2003).

Finally and relatedly, this project has implications for feminist researchers as it examines issues of power and positioning through those language choices. In the context of a male-dominated social space, this study highlights the ways in which women locate

themselves as more or less powerful through the reproduction of, resistance to, and reinscription of masculine norms. This is directly in line with Baxter's (2003) discussion of third wave feminism and "female resistance to, and a reinterpretation of, stereotyped subject positions rather than notions of struggle against the subordination of women" (p. 5). As a feminist work, this project also focuses solely on the expression of female fan identities, which have previously been marginalized in sport research. Lastly, this study may be of interest for its comment on the dynamics and interactions among groups of women, including the ways they do and do not recognize the connections they share, as well as how they occasionally participate in maintaining their own (and other women's) oppression.

Recommendations

As introduced in Chapter Two, there is no clear definition of the term "fan" used consistently throughout current research, which leaves any assessment of its authentic performance completely open to individual interpretation. Though in many ways we continue to impose traditional, male-defined measures upon ourselves, without a common understanding of what a "fan" is, how can we ever feel fully confident in accomplishing this identity? And while it is not within the scope of this research to wholly explore the multiple, often complex and sometimes contradictory definitions of "fan" shared by the women who participated in this research, I strongly believe a qualitative project that attends specifically to these meanings deserves consideration.

Moreover, the intersection of other identities (e.g., race and region) in connection with this fan identity is another area this dissertation is unable to adequately address.

While I note the self-identified racial/ethnic classification as well as the geographic "home" of each woman in this project, I do not give space to the full consideration of how these identities influence and impact one another. Yet I was intrigued to find several of the women spoke about an additional layer of responsibility they attributed to their gender (i.e., because I am a woman) and would be interested in exploring the similarities and/or differences between this perception and those attributed to one's race, region, or other social categorization (i.e., because I am Black, because I am from the South).

It has been widely acknowledged that people possess multiple, layered identities (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981; Lorber, 1995), and that women's experiences are "often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). Thus, a woman's identity is not solely based on her gender. Her identity is also raced and classed, among other factors. Therefore, to talk about the experience of a female fan without also considering a multitude of additional elements (e.g., her birthplace, her educational attainment, her marital status) is to offer an incomplete depiction. While previous studies on gender and American football have not ignored the issues of class, race/ethnicity, and gender, they have not necessarily emphasized them either. Those studies seeking to incorporate a female voice are limited and often examine only one particular portrayal of that experience, a White, educated, middle-class and presumably heterosexual one. Though I worked to be inclusive of female fans from diverse backgrounds, it is a shortcoming of this dissertation that identities beyond "female" and "fan" were not explored. As a result, the door is open for future research that emphasizes those on the margins. Indeed, there has been a recent call in the sport

studies literature for work that incorporates those who have been "othered" in the sporting context, especially with regard to gender (see Free & Hughson, 2003; Gosling, 2007).

Additionally, in line with the research of Jones (2008), this study also suggests there are identity negotiations that occur within the context of a NFL sporting event (e.g., response to language, positioning as fan or female or both) that are worthy of investigation. While the focus of this research was the discursive construction of identity through the retelling of experience, an ethnographic approach involving participant observation of actual sporting events could perhaps capture this best. Along those lines, many of the women suggested that group membership and/or the collective experience was one positive aspect of being a fan. In groups of solely female fans, they found the experience "refreshing" and even called it a "safe haven." Therefore, research which focuses on the interactions within all-female fan groups (e.g., Women of the Washington Redskins) or all-female fantasy football leagues may be in order. In Baxter's (2014) more recent study of female leadership, she suggests, "focusing primarily on women's interactional practices… makes more visible the multiple, competing and non-stereotypical ways in which women's…identities emerge and are enacted" (p. 37). Given what was shared in this study, these all-female groupings may be rare, but they also offer prime opportunities to study group dynamics and identity construction in a unique setting.

Finally, while I purposefully selected American football as played in the NFL as the backdrop for this research, there remain many other professional and amateur sport

contexts in which female fandom has yet to be fully explored. The National Basketball League, Major League Baseball, and the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing immediately come to mind as major American sports sites with unique female fan bases where similar studies could be undertaken. Furthermore, it may be equally if not more revelatory to consider the identity constructions and negotiations of female fans of *female* sports (e.g., the WNBA), as I suspect there may be additional and distinct practices to be learned from there.

Closing Thoughts

Adopting FPDA as a lens by which to understand the discursive construction of identity among female football fans was an alternately frustrating, enlightening, and liberating experience for me. At the outset of this project, I feared that analyzing at the level of language might make this project less personally impactful; I was mistaken. Attending to the language we use when talking about our fan identities, and the ways in which these choices contribute to, oppose, even reinvent our social reality was, in fact, incredibly moving for me. And though I will not speak on behalf of my fellow female fans, I must believe we shared many of these moments. I do know I am forever indebted to these women for taking part in this journey. In the end, the greatest beauty of this endeavor may be that each of us realizes the power she holds to influence how we are understood from this point forward. As listed in *Quotes from Great Women* (1986), Eleanor Roosevelt once famously cautioned us, “Remember, no one can make you feel inferior without your consent” (p. 62). Perhaps we will no longer.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample Recruitment Email

Dear [*Female football fan*],

My name is Traci Yates and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies at the University of Tennessee. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about female fans of the National Football League (NFL). You're eligible to be in this study because you publicly identify as a female football fan and blog about your experiences on HerGameLife.com. I obtained your contact information from the creator of the website.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed for approximately 30-60 minutes and asked to talk about your identity as a female fan of the NFL. Interviews may take place in person, via telephone or over the internet. I would like to audio-record your interview and use the information to further explore what it means to be a female football fan today. In addition, I will ask you to review the transcript of our interview and verify its accuracy.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to email or contact me at my campus address (tyates@utk.edu) or via telephone at .

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Traci Yates, Doctoral Student
Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies
University of Tennessee

Appendix B: Informed Consent Statement

Instructions: Please read the following sections which contain information about the purpose of this research, your involvement in it, any potential risks and/or benefits, and the measures which will be taken to protect your privacy. Keep in mind your real name will not be used in any research reports. If you decide to participate in this study, please sign and date at the bottom of the page.

Project Title: Female Football Fan Identities

Investigator: Traci Yates, M.A.

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this study is to explore the identities of female fans of the National Football League (NFL). This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

What will your part be in this study and how long will it last?
You will take part in an interview process which should last between 30-60 minutes. If at any time you wish to remove yourself from the study, you may leave with no negative consequences. You will receive no monetary compensation for this study.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
You will be interviewed and asked to talk about your identity as a female fan of the NFL. **The interview will be audio-recorded.** After the interview has been transcribed, you will also be asked to review the document and verify its accuracy.

What are the possible risks and/or benefits from being in this study?
Anonymity cannot be guaranteed. However, measures will be taken to preserve confidentiality. If you decide to participate in this study, you will select a pseudonym that will be used in order to protect your identity. Your actual name will not appear in any part of the study or reported in the results.

There are no physical risks to participating in this study.

It is hoped that participation in this study will allow co-participants to: (a) reflect upon their own unique experiences and identities as fans

How will your privacy be protected?
The researcher will exercise every possible effort to ensure that your privacy is protected. Your name will not be used in any write-up of the results. Additionally, all of the interview audio files will be destroyed once they are transcribed. Electronic files of the transcripts will be housed on the researcher's personal computer under password

protection. Hard copies of transcripts will be kept at the researcher's personal address in a locked file cabinet. Informed consent forms will be stored in a safe location, and the recorded interviews will only be accessible to the investigator.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read all of the information provided above, and I have asked any questions that I may have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study, and I am aware that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I understand that I may contact the investigator at any time with questions about the study (Traci Yates, M.A., at).

_____ _____

Printed Name of Participant Date

_____

Investigator Signature

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Topic domain: General Fan Experience

Lead off question: How did you become a football fan?

Possible follow-up questions

1. **What makes someone a "real" football fan?**
2. **How can you tell if someone is not a "real" football fan?**
3. **Have you ever felt like you had to prove that you were a "real" fan?**

Topic domain: Female Fan Experience

Lead off question: Tell me more about your experience as a *FEMALE* football fan.

Possible follow-up questions

1. What are the benefits of being a female fan?

2. What are the challenges of being a female fan?

3. Some people might say that women can't really be football fans. How would you respond?

Vita

Traci D. Yates grew up in Hot Springs, Arkansas, where she graduated from Lake Hamilton High School. She received her B.A. in Sociology from Hendrix College and her M.A. in Sociology from the University of Arkansas. After completing her M.A., she became an adjunct professor at the University of Arkansas before taking a position as a Research Assistant with the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. From there, she moved to North Carolina and accepted a full-time position as Instructor of Sociology at Cleveland Community College in Shelby, North Carolina. A lifelong football fan, Traci enrolled in the doctoral program at the University of Tennessee in the fall of 2010, aiming to combine her love of the game with her passion for sociology. Currently, her research interests include issues of gender in sport, specifically those related to fan identity and discourse analysis.