

Why is men's football the default "proper" sport, while the women's game is merely a pale imitation?

Everything a women's football team does is taken to represent the "quality" of the sport as a whole, while male players are allowed to be judged as individuals. We have to put an end to this sexism.

By [Martin Cloake](#)

The mere introduction of women's soccer as a subject of conversation provokes 'common sense' observations from sexists about how "no one wants to watch women's soccer" because women are weaker, slower etc. That is sexist. That the people who work on women's soccer have to defend women's athletic ability in order to participate in any conversation about women's soccer – that is sexist."

Jennifer Doyle

I'm never sure whether to be amazed, disturbed or amused at the kind of conversations that can come up when the subject of women and sport, particularly football, is

introduced. I'm a little more sure that writing my thoughts about it is going to lead to whole load of grief.

The quote at the top of this blog comes from [a revealing post by Jennifer Doyle](#), a feminist academic who writes extensively about sport, particularly football. Her football writing can be found at the [From A Left Wing blog](#), and her current wider writing about sport at [The Sport Spectacle](#). It is interesting to read Doyle's piece *On the Sexism of Football Scholars and Sports Critics*, or indeed much of her other writing, in the light of [the post made by sports journalist and academic Carrie Dunn on this website just a week ago](#). Or rather, in the light of some of the comments posted on that blog.

Dunn's blog questioned the routine erasure of women's sporting achievement from much discourse, and went on to raise some pertinent points about the relative absence of women's voices in football journalism – about which I'll say more in a minute. And yet, once again, many of the comments pitched up the old "women's football is not as good/interesting/lucrative as men's" argument. This argument spectacularly misses the point.

For many people, myself included, women's football and men's football are separate sports. So the discussion about which is "better" is irrelevant. What's more relevant is why one is seen as the default "proper" sport, and the other a pale imitation. Or why the England women's team's failure to progress from the group stages at the last women's

World Cup is seen as so much more of a let-down than the failure of the England men's team to do the same at the last men's World Cup. The failure of England's women was used in many quarters to write off the women's game, while the failure of the men was merely used to write off individuals. It reflects a wider culture in which an individual woman achieving or not achieving is all too often taken as an emblem of what all women can do, while what an individual man does is indicative of no more than that individual.

Diverting the discussion into the kind of "men are stronger than women" argument that Doyle says she had to deal with as an eight-year-old on the school bus is quite a handy way of avoiding the more serious issues about why women's sport, and women's sporting achievement, is treated so differently. And that matters because sport needs an audience, and the commercial prospects that audience offers, to thrive. If the message being constantly peddled is that women's sport is somehow less valid than men's, it becomes so much more difficult for women's sport to develop, and for women athletes to have the same chances as men.

It matters, too, because of the kind of thing that happened to English women's football team the Doncaster Belles, [which I wrote about](#) in a [couple of posts](#) last year.

Interestingly, it was put to me while I was researching those pieces that much of the press interest in the case came from a media that rarely concerned itself with the women's game, so criticism of a Football Association that was at

least trying to implement some solutions was a bit rich. As Dunn, who I asked for a comment on the piece, said at the time: "It's almost as if they're saying 'Well, you complained when we did nothing for women's football; now we're doing something so you should be grateful!'"

The real anger provoked by the Belles case, and many others around women in sport, is over why women should have to prove themselves in ways men would never be expected to, or accept different frameworks that go beyond arguments about biological determinism. And it's at this point that the kind of links that powerful elites worry about can be made. Because, [as Doyle pointed out when she wrote about the Doncaster Belles](#): "Sexism does not stand alone. The FA did what it did to kill the women's game in the 1920s not because women weren't suited to football (that's the official reason they gave)... The FA did what it did because the women's game was organised differently. It represented a different cultural possibility."

What also angers the many women interested in both men's and women's football, and the women interested in one or the other, is being told by men how they we should enjoy or consume sports. That comes up regularly in the discussions I have with women football fans and football journalists. And it comes alongside a list of irritations including commissioning men to write pro women's sport pieces because that carries more gravity, the apparent ease with which a woman criticising anything that can be dubbed "feminism" seems to have in finding an outlet, or

simply drivel such as the *Telegraph's* "[How to sound like an expert while your boyfriend's watching football](#)".

I know that because I have conversations with those women. It's an indication of how much is wrong with this whole discussion that I even have to write that. But discussions of this sort are often marked by the lofty pronouncements of people speaking on others' behalf, and I'm conscious that, with every sentence of this blog, I'm walking a tightrope.

That pressure on every move is something many women sports writers are acutely aware of. Few I speak to want to go on the record about this stuff, because it further decreases their chances of getting an overwhelmingly male sports journalism establishment to commission them. As one told me: "I could probably earn more money in a year writing about the 'problem' of coverage of women's sports than I could from writing about women's sports."

That's not to say that there are no women's voices in the sports media. There are many excellent female journalists in print and broadcast plying their trade. But, as Eleanor Oldroyd observed on her Twitter feed in the run-up to Saturday's England game:

That prompted former *Guardian* sports journalist Ian Ridley to tweet

The writer Ridley referred to was Hadley Freeman, [whose piece on her assignment to the World Cup, published on 2](#)

[June](#), almost prompted a number of people I know to punch their computer screens out. That, incidentally, is no criticism of Freeman, a writer I like and whose dispatches from Brazil have included some sharp observations of the absurdity of FIFAland. But it's not hard to understand why that piece, with its perpetration of the ditzy female footballing ignoramus, prompted much slapping of foreheads. Raising the point is not so much a criticism of Freeman as of the mentality of the sports department that came up with the wizard wheeze.

As I've already said, merely writing this has involved something of a tightrope walk. From checking my privilege to being overly right-on, I'm opening myself up to a comment thread flaying. When I tweeted my annoyance at that *Telegraph* piece, one female sports writer who is a very good friend of mine tweeted back that she thought it was quite funny. But that's the thing. All women don't think the same. A bit like men.

The point is that, when there's a disagreement among men, the conversation does not quite as rapidly progress into one that challenges their ability or even right to hold an opinion at all. As Doyle points out in the quote at the top of this blog, it's this seemingly inexorable line of conversation that is the problem.