

Is Women's Rugby Culture being Sacrificed for the Professionalization of the Sport?

An Ethnographic Study of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford
Women's Rugby Team

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I hope you all like it!

-Micaela

Abstract:

This ethnographic thesis investigates collegiate women's rugby and the conflict between the 'cultural ideology' surrounding the sport and a current drive towards what I term a 'professionalization' of women's rugby. The focus of the thesis is on the Bryn Mawr-Haverford women's rugby team, a bi-college team comprised of women from both college campuses.

One side on the debate on the future of women's rugby in the United States advocates a more professionalized image of the sport. The organization, USA Rugby, for example, is pushing for varsity status for collegiate club teams. In this way, they hope to achieve a more 'legitimate' image that will help raise funding opportunities and increase competitiveness among US teams. However, rugby's historical status as a marginalized sport and its strong ties to an alternative rugby culture result in a strong resistance to professionalization.

On the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team, changes in recent years have led to what I describe as a more 'heterosexual' and 'mainstream' image. In the past, the team has also been perceived as less legitimate than other sports at Bryn Mawr and Haverford. Moving away from an aggressively alternative team identity associated with lesbianism, rowdiness, hard partying, and open sexuality has helped the team become more integrated into the athletic environment at Bryn Mawr. However, this professionalization of the team image has also been at the expense of traditional rugby culture.

Chapter One: Introduction and Brief Overview of Anthropological Study of Sport

This ethnography explores the ‘cultural ideology’ of women’s rugby and current trends pushing the sport to become more ‘professionalized’. Advocates of this professionalization consider the mainstreaming of rugby as an opportunity for a validation of the sport, increased funding, access to facilities, and exposure.

As a sport, women’s rugby remains closely associated with lesbianism, masculinity, aggression, and violence. Because of these reasons, women’s rugby at Bryn Mawr has in the past been perceived as a marginal and less legitimate varsity sport at the college. Current trends are leading the team away from its previous alternative or ‘transgressive’ identity. This alternative identity originates from a nation-wide ‘rugby culture’ with which many women’s teams identify. The team no longer completely embraces this transgressive image. Rather, women’s rugby at Bryn Mawr is moving towards a more mainstream image that is more compatible with the broader student population, more likely to gain more respect from administration, and would enable the team to increase support from the athletic department.

However, there remains a strong resistance towards this professionalization of women’s rugby due to its strong ties to ‘rugby culture’ and its established identity as an alternative and transgressive sport. This image is a draw for many players of the sport, especially those at the post-collegiate women’s club level. Critics of this movement are reluctant to move away from the traditional club structure and towards the varsity collegiate status proposed by USA Rugby. They argue that this change will negatively impact traditional ‘rugby culture’.

In this first chapter, I provide an overview of the thesis, beginning by outlining the methods and procedures I followed during the research process. Next, I place my essay within the broader context of recent essays and books written by anthropologists on sport. I review anthropological work that demonstrates the value of studying sport as part of broader survey on 'bodily practices'. This concept of bodily practice borrows from Bourdieu's definition of 'body culture'. 'Body culture' is comprised of a wide variety of things that people do with their bodies. Susan Brownell elaborates body culture to include 'daily practices' of dress and fitness, as well as 'ways of speaking', rituals, dance, sports, and other types of 'body performance'. Anthropologists who study sport see sport as a means in which gender, sexuality, and other types of cultural body practices are expressed. I focus on the works of anthropologists such as Noel Dyck and Susan Brownell whose ethnographies examine these issues through the cultural lens of sport. I follow Brownell and Dyck's assumption that sports should be analyzed as part of a collective culture of the body. In addition, anthropologists such as Dyck and Brownell see the value of sport and sporting events as an arena is one in which the body is on constant public display.

I found some ethnographic work on the specific subject of women's rugby, including master's theses on women's rugby, journal articles, and chapters within edited anthropological texts. However, women's rugby remains a relatively obscure topic. Past anthropological and ethnographic work on women's rugby has tended to focus mainly on the construction of a distinct rugby culture and a transgressive feminine identity. I use these texts to show how gender, sexuality, and the body are expressed and understood in the context of women's rugby.

The second chapter contextualizes the sport of rugby by giving an overview of its origins and early aspects. This historical section focuses mainly on men's rugby. Women's rugby was not developed until after men's rugby was well-established, and much of the transgressive identity of women's rugby originates from men's rugby culture. In this chapter, I also define rugby culture and examine existing stereotypes of rugby players—particularly of female rugby players. I show how the history and origins of rugby have played an important role in the formation of culture of the sport today and in the reluctance to 'professionalize' the sport.

The third and fourth chapters place an emphasis on my own experiences as a player, and research as a participant-observer. The third chapter looks back to my first year playing on the team, outlining the ways in which rookies are initiated into the rugby team culture, including team traditions, attitudes, and identities. I include a section about rugby songs that emphasizes the ability of women rugby players to assert their ability to be sexual and aggressive, and not just passive recipients. Female rugby players use the songs (and the sport of rugby) to claim an agency that is usually reserved for men.

In the final chapter I look at what I consider to be a shifting identity of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team. In recent years, the team has altered its identity to emphasize a more heterosexual, mainstream image. I examine several factors that I see as the main forces behind this change, including a change in coaching. Changes in team culture and dynamics have resulted in what I call a 'straighter' and more 'mainstream' team. I base this argument on the perspectives of team-members and alumni, as well as my own experiences.

In my conclusion, I present the theory that the nation-wide resistance to professionalization of the sport of rugby, and in particular, women's rugby, stems from what I

call 'rugby culture' and its foundation in an alternative and transgressive identity. I discuss the conflicts that have emerged as the Bryn Mawr team professionalizes as an example and the impact this has had on a new rugby identity and its ability to continue to promote female agency.

Methods:

For this ethnography, I conducted field work as a participant-observer on the Bryn Mawr-Haverford women's rugby team from September 2007 through April 2008, during the fall and spring seasons. In addition, I have been a member of the team since October 2004. I draw on my experiences during the entire time that I have been a member of the team (four years), as well as the past year of participant-observation. I participated in practices, matches every Saturday during season, team dinners in the dining hall after practices, and the Saturday night team parties, called 'rugby socials'. On Tuesdays and Thursdays when there was no practice, I usually worked out in the gym with a smaller group of team-members. I would like to emphasize I did not join the team with the intention of researching for this paper. I originally joined the team, (and have continued to play), simply for the love of the game.

Most of the empirical work is on current members of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford women's rugby team. I also draw on feedback from alumni and document analysis of published work on women's rugby, and conducted informal and formal interviews including informal email interviews to alumni who live far away. My assistant coach, Trisha Hall, was instrumental in helping me contact former players. Trisha posted a blurb about my project on the Bryn Mawr College alumni website, asking rugby alumni to contact me if they were interested to help with my senior thesis. These enthusiastic alumni provided me with a lot of feedback about rugby culture and a verbal history of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team.

Through an alumnus of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team who currently plays on an older women's club team, the Back in Black, I contacted several members of this over-30 women's team in the Philadelphia area. I asked these players about their concepts of rugby culture and community. All of these older players told me that they continue to play rugby because of aspects of rugby culture and rugby community that they love.

Team-mates, many of whom I consider close friends, served as 'informants' during this process. Typically, I recorded their perspectives in my field notebook. They were especially useful in writing the sections about rugby culture and community.

Through the course of fieldwork and observation I have come to the conclusions that I have outlined in the previous paragraphs. I do not intend this essay as criticism of the current rugby team and culture. My goal is to describe the changes that I see as part of a broader trend towards professionalization and a perhaps inevitable progression of women's sport. Women's rugby in the United States would have a lot to gain from a more mainstream identity. However, I feel that it would be a shame to lose the unique rugby culture that for so long has been an integral part of the sport as the actual game.

Why should an Anthropologist Study Sport?

In the past, the study of sport has been remained on the periphery of academic disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. Anthropologist Noel Dyck relates this reason back to the origins of anthropology, "traditionally defined as the science of the non-modern and 'primitive' ...implicitly exclude[ing] the study of sports and competitive games because they were perceived...as central features of modernity." (Dyck 2000: 14) In recent decades, the focus

of the discipline has changed, yet the study of sport remains underdeveloped. There is still no established sub-field of the anthropology of sport, nor are there any journals or associations concerned with this topic. Originally published in 1985, Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Cheska's seminal work *The Anthropology of Sport*, gives the following argument for the importance of an anthropological study of sport:

“Anyone who reads the newspaper, watches television, or listens to casual conversation...is aware of the ubiquitous nature of sport. It is everywhere...It has become its own medium of communication and has important ramifications for international and multicultural relationships. There is no topic that should be of greater interest to social science in general and anthropology in particular than the study of human sport.” (Blanchard and Cheska 1995: xvii)

Anthropology, in Blanchard's words, is a comprehensive discipline concerned with the 'study of man' and 'every imaginable facet of human behavior'. (Blanchard and Cheska 1995: 2) As such, a study of human culture and interactions would be incomplete without the addition of sport, an activity that takes up a good deal of time and resources of many people within the United States. Blanchard points out the significance of studying sport and sporting rituals in order to analyze social and cultural practices.

'Body Culture' and the Study of Sport

More recently, Susan Brownell's work studying sports in China, titled *Training the Body for China*, approaches the study of sport using two main underlying assumptions. The first is that sports should be analyzed “as one set of practices [among many] that people do with their

bodies... [or] as part of the entire culture of the body.” The second assumption Brownell makes is that sports “occupy an important place within the culture of the body because sports events are one of the main arenas in which the body as a cultural artifact is publicly displayed.” (Brownell 1995: 8) It is these two assumptions that I aim to use in my own analysis of women’s rugby. Brownell’s approach to the analysis of sporting practices creates a compelling argument for an anthropological study of sport. Brownell equates sport with other forms of body and cultural practice—including as ways of speaking, eating, rituals, dance, and other types of body performance. This definition also describes ways in which these practices are ‘trained’ into the body, “the way the body is publicly displayed, and the lifestyle that is expressed in that display.” (Brownell 1995: 10) Authors such as Brownell in *Training the Body for China*, and Noel Dyck in his work *Games, Sports, and Cultures*, study sport as one of many bodily practices in which ‘body culture’ is expressed and publicly performed.

Transgressive Behavior on the ‘Pitch’

In my analysis, I follow Brownell’s model of viewing sport as a means in which to express body culture. For example, in women’s rugby, players express transgressive identities of gender, sexuality, and femininity. They do this through displays of the body including behavior and appearance. Further, through the traditions and rituals of women’s rugby participants claim an agency to be aggressive and sexual in ways usually only claimed by men.

In “Kicking Stereotypes into Touch: an Ethnographic Account of Women’s Rugby” author P. David Howe explores problems experienced by a women’s rugby team in Wales. The women faced many negative stereotypes including the ideas that women rugby players are lesbians, undesirable to men because of their muscularity and other ‘masculine’ traits, and

associated with violence, aggression, and sexual dominance. In addition, the team also struggled to have their club team recognized. The women's team often found themselves overlooked and dismissed, even though they were a successful club team, while the men's club team always enjoyed better access to facilities and endorsements from sponsors.

In Steven P. Schacht's journal article "Misogyny on and off the "Pitch": The Gendered World of Male Rugby Players", Schacht approaches rugby through the perspective of a participant-observer. He joins and plays on two men's rugby club teams for his fieldwork. Schacht examines masculine-feminine gender roles and how the players subjugate women through expressions of sexual dominance both on the rugby pitch and at rugby socials. In addition, Schacht makes the argument that this hyper-masculine form of male rugby culture is presently being challenged by the cultural practices within the growing sport of women's rugby.

To help place my own thesis within the context of previous work done on women's rugby, I searched for theses that had been done on topics close to my own. With the help of Haverford College's librarians I located 3 graduate theses written about various aspects of women's rugby.

While none of these theses were written by anthropologists, the methods the authors used in their projects were very similar to the anthropological approach. All three pieces were based on ethnographic research including participant-observation and informal and formal interviews. These theses focus on the construction of a transgressive 'sub-culture' created by women's rugby teams that challenges hegemonic notions of masculinity, gender, and female sexual agency. In particular, the authors find that female rugby players take an extraordinary amount of pride in the fact that they play rugby, and in its transgressive nature. One author, Kendal Broad, explains this

pride as a coping mechanism through which players manage the stigma they incur by playing rugby by embracing its transgressive identity.

In “Dangerous Bodies, Resistant Spaces: An Ethnographic Study of Women’s Rugby”, Laura Chase describes the ways in which women experience the sport of rugby. She studied two women’s rugby teams in the Midwest. Chase focuses on the body and physicality of women’s rugby, and views the women on the rugby teams as participating in the construction of an alternative or transgressive space.

First, there are negative aspects to this transgressive identity. I use Chase’s definition of ‘transgressive’ in my analysis of women’s rugby. Chase categorizes rugby as a ‘male preserve’, referring to its historical ownership by men. Anything that women’s rugby players do that are “contradictory to normative ideals of femininity...are transgressive.” (Chase 2002: 99) Examples of transgressive behavior in this definition include lesbianism, physical aggression, sexual dominance, muscularity, and strength. Chase concludes that women who play rugby are looking for a sport that is very physical and allows them to be aggressive. They therefore actively seek out and create transgressive space.

Second, women’s rugby allows the women to reject normative feminine body ideals. Chase argues that the women that she observed on the rugby teams valued different body types, including larger body types. Many of the women on the team lifted in order to become bigger and stronger. Larger women were actively sought after and pursued during recruitment for the team. She says that for some of these larger women, this was the first time that they had been viewed positively for their weight and size.

In addition, Chase's ethnography presents female rugby players as occupying a marginal space. For example, the women's rugby teams have trouble getting access to practice fields. These are frequently taken over by male sports teams. In tournaments, the women are relegated to the most peripheral fields, those furthest from the central stadium. The women feel what Chase describes as a gendered stigmatization and marginalization.

Kendal Broad's thesis "Women's Rugby: Sport, Gender, and the Female Badass" (1993) also examines the stigmatization that women rugby players face. Broad finds that women who play rugby face a great deal of stigmatization from those she categorizes as "outsiders": the general public (anyone not part of the rugby community). In particular, female rugby players face stigmatization from the "perception of gender nonconformity of rugby playing women" (Broad 1993: iv). Broad finds that women rugby players take pride in their deviance, and, she writes, manage their stigma by embracing it. She argues that because they have no control over the public's perception of themselves, they instead choose to embrace their stigma, taking 'socially taboo' traditions and making them a central part of their identities.

In a similar way, Elizabeth Wheatley's thesis, "A Women's Rugby Subculture: Contesting on the "Wild" Side of the Pitch" (1988) examines how female rugby players construct their femininity and sexuality. Wheatley describes the various processes that she sees the female rugby players using to construct these identities, including humor, language, singing, clothing and dress, ritualistic performances, and the ways in which they 'appropriate the male preserve' of rugby. Wheatley views aspects of women's rugby culture to be derived from men's rugby culture, but altered in ways that allow the women to challenge and redefine ideas of male and heterosexual dominance in both sport and society.

Wheatley in particular focuses on the rugby social as playing an important role in the formation of identity in both men's and women's rugby. She gives the rugby social a role equal to that of the physical game itself in the construction of identity within a rugby cultural context. For example, Wheatley writes that it is at the social that teams are able to 'redeem' themselves in the event of a loss, by instead competing well at the after-party games and drinking competitions. Public nudity and immodest behavior is also listed by Wheatley as common aspects of rugby culture that contribute to the formation of an alternative rugby identity. Wheatley highlights the singing of rugby songs as a way in which women's rugby successfully manages to distinguish itself from the "male preserve" of the men's rugby. She uses the lyrics of women's rugby songs to show how the verses empower women and female sexuality, while challenging the masculine and heterosexual dominated norm. In her examples, Wheatley presents an array of rugby songs (most taken from men's songs) that the women's teams sing. Songs about gangbanging, marriage, sex, and even bestiality are re-worded in ways which place the women in a central and dominating role. In this way, rugby songs play a role in effectively challenging and constructing new identities of sexuality and gender, with verses that redefine the boundaries of what is acceptable for women.

Wheatley's presents women's rugby as a 'deviant' practice that is experienced very differently by male and female rugby players. Men who play rugby enjoy a social space in which to act and be 'supermasculine'. In contrast, women's rugby represents to Wheatley a subculture that is an "exception to typically male-centered, defined, controlled and practiced sport". Women's rugby reproduces a "female autonomy which neither strives to emulate a male standard, nor to attract a male audience" (Wheatley 1988: 74). For example, she mentions that

men generally feel unwelcome at women's rugby socials. Husbands and boyfriends generally feel uncomfortable being present, and do not participate in the women's socials.

Styles of dress, humor, rugby songs, and language are viewed by the above authors as contributing to the deconstruction of the 'male preserve' of rugby, and a resistance to ideas of male and heterosexual dominance. Women who play rugby challenge the 'male preserve' of rugby by embracing the transgressive culture of women's rugby. In addition, women's rugby culture is also seen by these authors as a response to the perceived stigmatization and marginalization of its players.

Conclusion:

Past academic texts on women's rugby have tended to focus on the marginality and transgressive aspects of women's rugby culture. My thesis examines these associated aspects within the context of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team. I maintain that these aspects of rugby culture are present in women's rugby as a whole, and at Bryn Mawr. I believe that my thesis can be placed, following arguments made by Susan Brownell and Noel Dyck, within a wider context of anthropological studies of body cultural practices, and one method to study the expression of gender and sexuality.

Chapter Two: The Origins of Rugby Football

Introduction:

This section seeks to show how the history and origins of rugby are important to understanding the structure of rugby clubs today, and why rugby has been slow to respond to efforts to professionalize the sport. At the collegiate level, this means a slow response to the movement to elevate rugby from ‘club’ or ‘club varsity’ status to NCAA full varsity sanctioned teams.

I would like to look first at the very beginning of the sport, in order to contextualize contemporary practices. I discuss rugby’s origins, early aspects, and how the game has changed over the years, including in the years after its introduction into the United States. This history follows men’s rugby almost exclusively until the 1970’s. Before this time, there are few records of women’s rugby being played.

Rugby’s origins as an amateur sport and organization as a ‘club’ sport has contributed to the way that rugby is structured today. The organization ‘USA Rugby’ has led a drive to convert more women’s collegiate club teams to ‘varsity’ status. The goal of USA Rugby is to increase the level of competition within rugby at both an international and domestic level. Proponents of this change see the elevation of status from collegiate club to full varsity as crucial for getting the recognition and exposure that would lead to more competitive teams across the United States, and ultimately lead to a more competitive international team.

I argue that rugby's origins contribute to this resistance to the professionalization of rugby, including a resistance to a change from club to NCAA varsity status. The attempt to change the face of women's collegiate rugby began in 2002. Six years later, only 5 teams have joined the NCAA. Some collegiate teams are not supported by their athletic departments to make the transition, others simply do not see the need. Many teams would like to keep rugby as it is--a club sport. The current culture of rugby promotes autonomy and leadership of the teams by their own players, not college administration.

Rugby has traditionally been a masculine-dominated sport. But that has begun to change. Women first began playing rugby in the 1970s in the United States. Recently, rugby has played a role in the dialogue on equity in women's collegiate sport. USA Rugby has been at the forefront of the debate for gender equity in women's sport and equal spending, with its current push for the transition from club to full varsity status for collegiate teams.

Women's rugby can be seen as a challenge or opposition to men's rugby, and traditional gender roles. Why do female rugby players play rugby? What do they like about rugby, and what do they dislike about it? How do women rugby players react to the stereotypes associate with women's rugby?

Further, the traditionally marginalized status of rugby in the United States contributes to the appeal of the sport to some players. To others, it is an annoyance. Whether they embrace them, deny them, or simply ignore them, all female rugby players are forced to confront the stereotypes surrounding women's rugby.

Lastly, the current culture of collegiate and club rugby in the United States has been shaped by the origins of the sport. Men's, and later women's rugby in the US has maintained what Elizabeth Wheatley calls the 'traditional British amateur ideal', that focuses on good sportsmanship and high participation. Wheatley writes that the origin of men's rugby in England is key to understanding the culture of the sport, including the sexuality, drinking, and party rituals associated with rugby.

Origin of Men's Rugby:

One legend on the origins of the sport of rugby begins in 1823 at a small boarding school for upper and middle class schoolboys in Warwickshire, England. The school was called the Rugby School, and it still exists today. In this version of rugby's origins, a young student named William Webb Ellis is credited with inventing the sport during a pickup game of football (soccer) with his classmates. The young boy is said to have shown a "fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time at Rugby school, [when he] first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive features of the rugby game" (www.rugbyfootballhistory.com/). This style of playing a form of football using the hands as well as the feet grew in popularity in schools around the area, and the version was called 'Rugby football' after the school where it was said to have been first been played.

To this day, the popular legend of William Webb Ellis is commemorated in two major ways. First, a bronze statue of a young boy running with a ball in his arms has been erected in the town square. Second, the trophy for the Rugby World Cup has the boy as its namesake: it is called the "William Webb Ellis" trophy.

This is certainly a popular tale, but not the only one explaining the origins of the sport. Some historians argue that rugby was not the first version of football to involve handling of the ball with the hands. Some Irish historians make comparisons to an ancient Irish game called “Caid”, and argue that perhaps Ellis could have seen the game as a young child in Ireland, when his father was stationed over there in the army. Richard Bath argues that Ellis could have been giving a ‘demonstration’ of the game of Caid to his peers at the Rugby school, not inventing a new sport. (Bath: 1997: 1)

In addition, past versions of football in England were not similar to modern versions of soccer. Bath includes a description of a version of a game called “foote balle”, that was popular among the lower classes in the 12th century in England. The game “pitted one village against another in wrestling wars of attrition that ranged over distances of many miles and could go on for days at a time. The games were often brutal, savage affairs with blunt implements used as a means of gaining advantage over the rival village” (Bath 1997: 1). Bath writes that these games were not popular with the chroniclers, or the upper classes, for that matter, who at times attempted to ban the competitions because of the amount of physical violence in the games. A chronicler named Phillip Stubbs wrote in 1583 that “Football playing...may rather be called a friendly kind of fight than a play for recreation, a bloody and murdering practice than a felowly sport.” (Bath: 1997: 2) Unfortunately for the lower classes, Bath writes, the playing of football was ‘increasingly suppressed’ from the 1750s on. In 1835, the ‘Highways Act’ was passed, effectively outlawing the lower classes from playing the game.

The style of play of rugby has changed over the years. Early records, such as those at the Rugby School in the 1800s, indicate a game that was loosely organized with few formal rules.

For example, while being played by the young players at Rugby school, the game “had developed with unequal...sides (teams) and large numbers” (Chandler 1996: 19) In some written records, there are accounts for games in which there were 30 or more players on each team. Rugby lacked a set of universal rules until 1841. Until that point, the game had been played with varying rules by different schools. Some sources assert that these rules were only written by students at the Rugby School to preserve the specific version played there, while other schools continued to play their own various versions of the popular game (<http://hubpages.com/hub/rugbyhistory>).

After 1841, rugby continued to spread from the Rugby school and other schools where it was also popular, such as Cheltenham, Blackheath, and Marlborough. The game continued to be played with varying rules.

In 1863 a split occurred between two sides. One, called the “Kicking Codes”, was supported by the schools of Charterhouse, Eton, Westminster, and Harrow. The second, called the “Carrying Codes” operated under a set of rules popular at Cheltenham, Marlborough, and the Rugby school. The two sides argued over various rules and practices, such whether the ball could be handled with the hands or only kicked, “hacking” (a practice in which players were allowed to kick their opponents shins during play), and tripping of opponents. This split resulted in rules for two different styles of play that later became “Association Football” (modern soccer) and Rugby Football (Bath: 1997: 3). In 1871, the Rugby Football Union was formed. The organization attempted to bring rugby football under one universal code of rules.

In the beginning, rugby football, or simply “rugby”, was a sport played almost exclusively by the upper and middle classes. In 19th century public schools, sports, including

rugby football, football (soccer), and cricket, were considered necessary to the proper development of boys. Sport was mandatory at many schools, including the Rugby School, Marlborough school, and others. Sports were believed to further mental toughness and create moral character. Chandler writes that the “public school came to be regarded as *the* place where manliness, chivalry, and patriotism were best learned by young men” (Chandler: 1996: 24). Sports were seen as important *leisure* activities in which the younger boys learned the characteristics of gentlemen. As it spread and became played by the working classes, differences arose in the game that led to clashes between conflicting ideas of how rugby should be played.

Disputes over Professionalism

Major disagreements began to arise in the 1870s over the professionalization of rugby, and this controversial issue continues to be hotly contested in the rugby arena today. One side of rugby adherents wanted rugby to remain a purely leisure (non-competitive) and amateur sport, while the other wanted a more professionalized version of the game. They wanted to place a greater emphasis on winning, scoring, and the ranking of teams culminating in championships. They also wanted to pay players, and to give greater recognition to individual stars. All of these ideas clashed with the ‘old school boys’ ideology of rugby.

<http://hubpages.com/hub/rugbyhistory>

The issue of professionalization of rugby was largely divided along class lines. The upper class saw rugby as a means to create the ideal Victorian gentleman. The game was played purely for pleasure, friendships, and moral benefits. These ‘gentlemen’ who advocated this style of play were largely from the areas of London, and southern counties of England. They objected to, among other things, taking “rewards and standings, numbering players for identification, [in

addition] the publication of team records were seen as an affront to the game” (Chandler: 1996: 32) and the style of play that these actions promoted.

On the other hand, northern clubs, associated with a lower class contingency, and from more provincial areas of the country, including Wales, the West Country, and the Northern counties of England (Bath: 1997: 4), wanted to promote a more ‘competitive’ game of rugby. In 1888, northern clubs began a campaign to allow for what they termed “broken-time” payments to players that would allow them to be compensated for money lost from wages while playing matches. (Bath: 1997: 5)

Disagreements over the way the game was to be handled climaxed in a split in 1895 that led to 21 northern rugby clubs leaving the Rugby Football Union. They formed a new Northern Union, and altered the game to fit their own ideals of how rugby should be played.

<http://hubpages.com/hub/rugbyhistory>

Rugby and Resistance: A Rugby ‘Counter-culture’

Originally an import from England, rugby is the predecessor of American football. The first official rugby collegiate match in the United States is dated back to 1874 and was played between Harvard University and McGill University (Canada). In 1905, changes in the rules of American football led to a string of deaths in college football matches. This provoked an outcry against football, deemed an excessively violent and dangerous sport, and many colleges began to promote rugby as a safer alternative. However, rules and added safety equipment to protect players in American football were soon added to make the game safer, and it continued to grow among colleges across the country. By the mid-20th century, the history and origins of rugby in

America had largely been forgotten by the American public. Instead rugby had a new identity as a rough, alternative, and marginalized sport.

Rugby also experienced a major decline in popularity in the United States at this time. One contributing factor was that rugby was removed from Olympic competition after 1924. At this time, the United States was a dominating force in rugby, easily beating Romania and France (bronze and silver winners) for the gold. The final match between France and the United States was particularly filled with animosity. Tensions ran high as Americans complained about being denied access to practice fields for the US team in France, as well as a theft of the United States' teams belongings and equipment. During the game, France's star player and leading scorer, Adolphe Jaugery, was removed unconscious from the match after a series of hard tackles. The press following the match contributed to American's perception of the violence of the game. (http://www.wesclark.com/rrr/1924_olympics_2.html). Rugby continued to decline after the Great Depression, and World War II, until its revival beginning in the early 1950s.

Appeal of a Counter-Culture

In his chapter "Recognition through Resistance: Rugby in the USA", Timothy Chandler describes rugby as a sport that "in its 'otherness'...developed an image as an activity that was casual, amateurish, boozy and boisterous-*an activity that was delighted in as much for its pre- and post-match revelry* as for its on-field skills."(Emphasis added). Rugby carried a reputation for heavy drinking and wild partying, and it was this 'rugby counter-culture' that Chandler describes was essential to the revival of the sport.

Rugby club play began to experience increases in popularity again beginning in the 1950s. The decades with the biggest recorded expansion was the 1960s, when rugby's alternative identity made it appealing to many male college students across the country. Rugby became a growing option at this time for college athletes who either were not skilled enough to play football at the college level, or who desired an alternative to the rigid structures and authoritarian coaches of many college football teams (Chandler 1999: 53).

Because of its 'club' status, collegiate rugby teams did not have to adhere to the same 'standards' as other varsity collegiate teams. Greater flexibility and autonomy among players and teams was possible. The organization of club teams was less structured, for example, and teams were able to party hard. Collegiate rugby became strongly associated with drinking lots of booze, hard partying, and singing bawdy songs, a tradition passed over from European rugby teams. Many East Coast collegiate rugby teams at this time began to organize to play in tournaments abroad, or called rugby 'tours', to Europe and the British Isles of the Caribbean. Here the 'rugby culture' of booze and partying was reinforced by teams played while abroad.

One article chronicling the Dartmouth men's rugby club, for example, on a tournament tour in Bermuda in 1959 was headlined 'Ike's Boys Love Rugby and Beer' (<http://www.dartmouthrugby.com/>) This shows the importance of social drinking in the appeal of the game.

Some argue that it was the cultural disruption of traditional masculinity in the 1960s and onward, as well as rugby's established status as a marginalized site of 'resistance', that was responsible for the tremendous increase of growth in the popularity of the sport during this time. Chandler notes especially that alcohol and beer played a significant role in this attraction. The

author writes that the playing of rugby was an “outlet for aggression and feelings of threatened masculinity”. In his view, rugby had a dual role as a “site of resistance (to the control of the authoritarian coach) and as site of release (since beer was a socially sanctioned drug)” (Chandler: 1999: 54).

Rugby’s reputation as a sport tied with social drinking continues to this day to be both a major source of appeal, and a source of contention. Some leaders of rugby unions wish to distance the sport from this ‘negative’ image, while not losing new players.

Women in Rugby

Rugby began as a sport dominated by men, and remains predominantly played by men today. Women’s rugby, however, is growing in popularity, especially in the United States. In the early 1970s, there were only two women’s rugby teams in the United States (Naedele 1994: 1). Today there are over 350 colleges that support a women’s rugby team.

Traditionally, women have had a supportive role in rugby--supporting their brothers, boyfriends, or husbands on the periphery. They did not play themselves. Women provided food after matches, washed gear, and cared for children while the men played. They were also excluded from after-match social functions. Rugby was a sport traditionally entrenched with concepts of masculinity. For example, the Encyclopedia of Women and Sports reported that in New Zealand, “social structures and attitudes restricted women’s involvement in such organized sports, and until the 1990s, women played rugby almost exclusively in backyard games, siblings’ informal matches and kickarounds, and the occasional and unofficial gatherings of women into two opposing rugby teams” (Oglesby 1998: 958).

The earliest record of organized women's rugby play was by a New Zealand team that formed in the 1890s. Led by a woman named Nita Webb, this women's team attempted to take a world tour playing against other women's rugby teams (Oglesby 1998: 958). Unfortunately for them, the male dominated New Zealand Rugby Football Union squashed their efforts, and the tour went nowhere. Elsewhere, there are records of womens' matches in France as early as 1908, and records of matches in England in the 1920s.

In the United States, however, women did not begin playing organized rugby until the early 1970s, after which the popularity of the sport continued to spread. A Women's Rugby World Cup was first organized in 1991, but the International Rugby Board refused to recognize these matches until the officially sanctioned 'first women's rugby world cup' in 1998. The United States women's teams have remained a competitive force, winning the unofficial 'World Cups' in 1991 and 1994. The United States, Canada, and England are the countries with the greatest number of women rugby players in the world. In the 1990s, women's rugby was the fastest growing sport in England.

Most of the women rugby players in the United States are collegiate. According to the Encyclopedia of Women and Sport in America, there are currently over 20,000 women playing rugby in the United States, at over 350 colleges and universities, and club organizations (Juliano 2007: 1).

In 2002, Division I Women's Rugby became classified as an NCAA 'emerging sport'. An 'emerging sport' is a sport that is recognized by the NCAA to have the potential to increase female participation in collegiate sports. Among other recent emerging sports are equestrian, archery, and synchronized swimming. In 2004, Division II and III women's rugby were also

added to this list of emerging sports. However, four years later, there are still only 5 varsity women's rugby collegiate teams in the NCAA. The first NCAA sanctioned match between two varsity women's teams, West Chester University and Eastern Illinois University, occurred in September 2007 (<http://www.usarugby.org>). In order to achieve regular varsity status within the NCAA, women's rugby would have to increase the numbers of varsity teams to a forty-team membership total by 2012, the date set by the NCAA by which women's rugby must demonstrate enough 'interest' and 'growth' as a varsity sport to continue to receive their endorsement.

Why Join the NCAA?

Being classified as an 'emerging sport' could impact women's rugby in a number of different ways. The incentive for colleges to promote NCAA status is to reach compliance with Title IX standards. Title IX is a legislative sports initiative that aims to achieve gender equity in collegiate sports, by requiring that athletic participation rates match attendance rates in colleges and universities. The other six 'emerging' collegiate sports for women are archery, badminton, equestrian, squash, synchronized swimming, and team handball (<http://www.ncaa.org/>). This list determines which women's sports colleges and universities look at when they want to add new sports to their varsity programs. They would want to do this in order to increase sports participation and scholarships to women, thereby achieving compliance with Title IX gender equity requirements. In order to continue to qualify as an emerging sport, women's rugby must continue to "show growth and progress over time, with the ultimate goal to reach 40 teams, the number needed to conduct an NCAA championship" (Juliano 2007: A01).

Supporters of this movement are motivated by a potential to gain access to higher levels of funding than the sport has enjoyed previously. Better facilities, equipment, coaching, medical care, recruitment, and exposure of the sport all would ideally be achieved if the switch to NCAA varsity status proposed by the USA Rugby's initiative were successful. Further, some collegiate rugby players today see a NCAA status as a 'validation' of the sport.

Why NOT to join the NCAA

The resistance to become entrenched in the NCAA I argue is a result of the strong ties to the club environment in which rugby originated, and the nature of '*rugby culture*'. The Encyclopedia of Women and Sport in America describe rugby as a sport with "a distinct and fiercely upheld culture. Players organize themselves, raise their own funds, and schedule their own games" (241). Regional rugby unions rely on this type of structure to run. Current members of the team are heavily involved in the administrative aspect of club rugby. Collegiate rugby already has a strong network existing between its club teams and regional rugby unions. The relationship between collegiate club teams and their respective athletic departments vary. That is, there exist different 'levels' of club teams.

For example, some teams are classified by their college's athletic departments as simply 'club' teams. They have limited access to the college's athletic facilities. These teams have to fundraise or pay themselves for access to athletic trainers, equipment, fields, and transportation to matches. Another level of club status can be described as a hybrid between 'club' and 'varsity', called 'varsity club'. The Bryn Mawr-Haverford team is one example of a 'varsity club team'. The Bryn Mawr-Haverford team, as a varsity club team, has access through the college's athletic department to athletic trainers and the fitness room, a part-time paid coach, a budget for

equipment and some money towards bus transportation, and use of the athletic transportation vans for a limited distance to travel to away games. Athletes receive physical education credit, access to a field for practice and games, and are included in the annual athletic banquet and award ceremony (Zeigler 2007: 51). In this way, they are similar to full varsity teams, but they do not receive as much funding as they would if they were full varsity. However, they also continue to be run primarily through the club structure.

Many rugby supporters argue that a change in organization will have a negative impact on rugby culture. They feel that switching to a NCAA organized sport would

“...effectively eliminate ‘rugby culture’ as we know it, putting teams under the auspices of college administrators and individuals who never played the game before. As it now stands, rugby clubs are governed by a core group of people dedicated to improving the quality and safety of the game [as well as] preserving the integrity of the ‘culture’—the social element, which is vital, the camaraderie...” (Alum Michele Morris)

To many rugby players, rugby culture is seen as almost as important as the game itself. It is an integral aspect of the sport, and what sets rugby from other sports such as soccer or basketball. It is a large part of the appeal of the sport.

Conclusion:

Rugby’s association with amateurism and a party culture can be better understood by examining the early history and origins of the sport. Both men’s and women’s rugby are associated with these characteristics, however, since men’s rugby predates women’s rugby, I have traced mostly the history of men’s rugby in England and later in the United States.

In summary, rugby has held a traditionally marginal status in the United States. I believe that women's rugby culture can be better understood through the context of the origin of the sport. Men's and women's rugby is very physical and is associated with violence, aggression, and sexuality, characteristics that have led to its historical marginalization. I believe the sport of rugby is currently undergoing a process of 'professionalization', but the process is not uniformly supported, and members of the existing rugby community and advocates of rugby culture are resisting this change.

Chapter Three: 'Rugby Culture'

Introduction:

'Rugby culture' refers to the rituals and traditions that are common or typical among many or most rugby teams. It includes attitudes and traditions that happen while on the rugby 'pitch' (field), and many that occur off it after the game is over. I also describe existing stereotypes of rugby players, and particularly female rugby players. These stereotypes have contributed to the marginalization of the sport of rugby. Later, I discuss their impact on women's rugby.

Many rugby team alumni and current players agree that both female and male rugby players share a common 'personality type'. These players say that rugby draws a certain type of person, and requires a certain type of person to stick with it. While some disagree about the causality-whether the game forms certain traits in the players, or if it's the players who bring these traits along with them, I believe that certain traits of the game and a pervasive rugby 'culture' both shapes and is shaped by rugby players.

Male rugby teams are associated with being loud, partying hard, drinking copious amounts of beer, masculinity, and violence. Female rugby teams are associated with all of the above, plus homosexuality and lesbianism. Some players argue that these aspects are part of the appeal of the game. They may be the very reasons that players enter the game in the first place. However, others may enter the collegiate game knowing very little about the reputation of the sport. But regardless of their own attitude towards the stereotypes, these associations serve to marginalize the sport.

'Rugby Culture' and Marginalization

The Bryn Mawr-Haverford team has been marginalized in the past, and responses from alumni suggest that the team has occupied a more marginal status in the past than it has today. The rugby team now has a better reputation on campus and with the athletic department. A Bryn Mawr alum from 2003, Devani remembers that the:

“Other varsity athletes did not respect rugby very much because it was seen as a non-traditional sport. Pretty much everyone thought all the players were lesbians, which was, of course, not true!”

Devani says that rugby was considered a non-traditional sport. It was not seen to have the same priority as other varsity teams for funding and attention. Many of the other alumni agree with this categorization. Other athletes saw rugby as a party sport, and as a lesbian sport. In her response, Devani emphasizes the connection between rugby and lesbians in the campus' image of rugby. These categorizations detracted from the respect that other athletes had for the sport by removing the focus from the athleticism of the sport, and placing it on other aspects, such as the sexuality of the players.

A major issue for the team during Devani's time was the poor interaction between the team and the athletic department. She believes a factor behind this was an established image of rugby as a non-traditional sport. She states that the athletic department didn't think that rugby was a 'valid sport' and it was too much of a 'risk' to have a rugby team because of insurance.

“We struggled a lot with the athletic department and not being given the same kind of support and attention as other teams.”

Rugby: "Elegant Violence"

One popular slogan for women's rugby is "Rugby: Elegant Violence." Another is "Girl Ruggers: We Like it Rough". T-shirts with these sayings, among many others, are a staple of rugby tournament fundraisers. Rugby players are proud of the rough nature of the game. Oftentimes, initial reactions of people when first learning that a woman plays rugby will be to bring up the 'violence', or the physicality of the sport. For example, Devani describes the reactions of most people when they first learn that she used to play rugby in college. She says:

"They are shocked when I tell them that I play[ed] rugby. They know it is a very physical sport and they think it is very impressive that I would subject myself to that kind of intensity."

Both male and female rugby teams are associated with violence, but men's teams are generally considered to be more violent and dangerous than women's teams. Laura Chase emphasizes the connection to violence in men's rugby through her use of Michael Messner's metaphor of the male athlete's body as a weapon. She argues that this is the "primary way the male body has been conceived of in sport, particularly in contact and collision sports such as football and rugby, where the body is used as an object to inflict pain and injury on the opposing player" (Chase 2002: 18). She quotes author Michael A. Messner from *Sex, Violence, and Power in Sports: Rethinking Masculinity*, giving several examples of the use of what Messner terms the "body as weapon". These refer to the pride some male athletes take in taking another player out of a game through physical injury. One male acquaintance of mine related me last year that he was repeatedly approached by the Haverford men's rugby team to play for them. He had played football in high school, and had been known for his hard hits. He took pride in the fact that

during high school play, he had broken an opponent's arm, and taken another out for an entire season with a torn ligament injury. A few of the men's rugby players had wanted him to come and play. They promised that on the field he could hit as hard as he could and be valued for his aggression.

Chase asserts that "male athletes are rewarded for aggressive, even violent, play within contact sports" (Chase 2002: 18), but argues that while women's rugby remains a very physical game, there is less of a focus on violence and aggression during play. The presence in men's sport of an emphasis on physical dominance on the field, including dominance through physical force, and even injury to opponents, is not present in women's rugby. However, pressure on the individual to play through mild injuries and pain is.

Aggressive Play in Women's Rugby: Playing Through Pain

One of the common stereotypes is that rugby players should be tough and play through minor injuries. Some players feel that they have to play through pain for the team. This is fairly common on the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team. Minor injuries that could be played through, including minor concussions, are at times ignored. Often, the player herself won't draw attention to her injury. Other team-mates or the coach are the ones to remove her from the game.

Alum Molly Baade '05 described an incident involving a player during her junior year. Amy, a rookie player at the time, refused to come out of a game after she had an asthma attack and had trouble breathing. Baade became extremely angry with her. "She was being so stupid about it and wouldn't take a knee even though she was clearly not breathing enough. She had some idea about playing through pain-which is a part of rugby-but this was too much."

Other times, the player won't want to come out of the game because they love playing and don't want to stop. One senior, (in the only game that I ever saw her come out of), cried when she was forced to come out of a game because of an injury. She was upset that she had to come out of the game and stop playing. Whether it's because the player doesn't want to 'let the team down', or because they simply love the game and don't want to stop playing, it is a common stereotype that rugby players are tough when it comes to injuries and pain. It is also one that is very true of many players.

Good Sportsmanship and Respect for the Opposition

Rugby teams traditionally place a good deal of emphasis on good sportsmanship and respect for the other team during match play. Players may play as hard and as rough with the other team as possible during play, but it is looked down upon to break the rules intentionally or show disrespect towards the referee or the other team.

The priority on good sportsmanship is apparent when an opposing team member becomes injured during play. All players on the field will show respect for the player by cheering as she leaves the field, and cheer her back onto the field if she is able to return at a later time.

After the game, both teams will lead a cheer that congratulates the other team, followed by a cheer for the referee. Then the team-members will shake hands, wishing their opponents a 'good game'. In particular, players sharing the same rugby position on the opposing team will congratulate their opponent. For example, the opposing team's scrumhalf (name of a position in rugby) will almost always come up to me and thank me for a 'game well played' after the match.

All players must address the referee with respect. During play the referee will generally only listen or speak to a few designated players if any complaints arise over the refereeing or play of the game. These players usually include one ‘forward’ and one ‘back’ player, and of these at least one will be a captain of the team. These players will bring any issues to the referee during pauses in the game. In addition, the referee will also usually issue warnings over repeated infractions through these designated players, and may not even speak to the player who actually committed the penalty. Other players’ complaints about referee calls or penalties by the other team may be ignored, and if too frequent, the referee may warn the team or even call a penalty against them.

Swearing, trash-talking the other team, and dangerous play are particularly looked down upon, players can be penalized for these types of infringements. In rugby, one punishment issued for repeatedly committing the same penalty, or a particularly dangerous play, is called the ‘sin-bin’. The player sent to the ‘sin-bin’ usually must stand behind their opponent’s try zone and is not allowed to talk to any other players or fans. They must remain there for the designated period of time (determined by the referee), while their team must continue to play out-numbered.

The “Third Half”: the Rugby Social

The rugby social, also sometimes referred to as the ‘third half’, is an important part of rugby culture. A rugby “social” is a party hosted by the home team in which both teams eat, drink, and sing rugby songs together. Club teams may bring a keg of beer directly onto the field after the game, and the social may be right on the field directly after the game. However, most collegiate club teams hold their socials in a dormitory lounge or basement.

On the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team, team socials are generally later that night in a dormitory lounge or outside during the warmer months. Because of the rules placed on the team by the athletic department regarding transportation, the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team is usually unable to stay for socials after away games. If the team is playing another local team, the team will first return the college's athletic vans, then return to the other team's college in their own cars for the social.

Rugby socials generally involve a lot of camaraderie and good-natured competition. "Boat-racing" and "flip-cup" competitions are popular drinking contests that are played between groups of players organized alternatively between home/away teams, upper-class/lowerclassmen, and forwards/backs (rugby positions). Both of these competitions are drinking relays. Players good at these games are able to gain an amount of respect at the social, and among the other team. They may be praised for their skills at the games, and requested at later socials to be on a specific team for these competitions.

Another contest involves a shouting match, usually between forwards and backs, (rugby positions), with both teams mixed together. It is called "Shit Damn Fucker Damn Fucker Damn Damn". Both sides take turns shouting a chorus that begins with those words. It contains humorous lyrics, (involving lots of swear words), about a cheating boyfriend and moving on to more future sexual conquests.

Rugby songs are another activity at socials. Songs are usually begun or led by seniors or upperclassmen on the team, and involve lots of sexual humor. But not all rugby players like the rugby songs. Some women find men's rugby songs in particular to be distasteful and degrading to women, but even women's rugby songs can generate this reaction. One player on the team

refuses to participate, and instead will sit in the back during the social whenever songs are being sung. She finds the songs to be “disgusting...not funny, they’re just disgusting lyrics that are gross—and gross towards women.” Most women seem to enjoy the tradition, however. Rugby songs also are usually one of the first topics of conversation in my experience between men’s and women’s rugby players. While the first question is usually “What position do you play?”, close after other players will want to know “What songs does your team sing?” and compare songs. Since songs are passed down orally, not all teams have the same songs, or may sing them differently.

Nudity or partial nudity is also common to rugby, in both men’s and women’s teams. On the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team, streaking, and skinny-dipping have been long-standing traditions and hallmarks of the Bryn Mawr team. In earlier years of the team, for example, it was common for one or more players to have to streak as ‘punishment’ for losing a drinking game. One rookie game involved streaking for all of the rookies. Skinny-dipping in the Cloisters fountain and Taft gardens were also popular traditions for the rugby team, and occurred often in good weather. Now, however, this tradition occurs less frequently.

One time during my freshman year, at Lantern night rehearsal (rehearsal was 11 am on a Sunday morning), the rugby team snuck onto the roof of the Cloisters to flash and moon all the freshman at the rehearsal. The rugby team made no effort to hide who they were. They began the Bryn Mawr cheer, the “Anass”, cheering on the “Horned Toads Rookies”.

Brief Comments on Participation:

In rugby, there is also an emphasis on participation. Ideally, everyone on the team will play during a weekend match, from experienced players to new players, called ‘rookies’. There are usually two matches. The first, called “A-side”, is a full 80 minutes, and the score is recorded. Oftentimes, after this match, a shorter “B-side” match will be played. In this match, teams will put in all of their rookies. If more players are needed, experienced players will play again, but in positions that they do not normally play. In this way, even rookies with little or no game experience can begin to participate and learn new rugby skills right away.

In rugby, participation is emphasized over simply winning. For example, if a team has less than the 15 players needed for a game, the opposing team will usually supply them with players to make up the difference. My freshman year, we were frequently low on players, and usually had only 1-2 extra players, if that. Although usually we had enough players to make it through the A side match, we usually could not come up with a full side of players who wanted to play again for a B side match. The other team usually supplied the rest of the 15 players for our B side.

The tournament play that I experienced over the summer was even more flexible. In one tournament in Canada, the team I was playing on arrived with only 12 players. Before each match, our captain would talk to opposing team, and ask them how they wanted to proceed. According to tournament rules, the other team could either simply call a forfeit or make us play short. But the other teams wanted to make sure the victory was ‘fair’. One team had enough members to supply our team with the extra players to boost our numbers to 15. Two of their players even stayed with our team for the rest of the tournament, playing on our team instead, since our numbers were so low. Two other teams had only enough to play, so instead they gave

our team one and two extra players, and in those two matches both teams played with 13 and 14 players, instead of the usual 15.

Common Existing Stereotypes of Female Rugby Players:

Big, Lesbian Dykes:

The most prevalent stereotype of female rugby players is of what I call the ‘big, lesbian dyke’. It is also the stereotype about female rugby teams that perhaps most female ruggers will agree is at least partially accurate. Many female rugby players identify as either lesbian or bisexual. One respondent to a survey written by Kendal L. Broad for her sociological thesis on women’s rugby agreed that “the main stereotype is that all women ruggers are gay...I’ve played for 12 years and I have to admit 80-90% of the U.S. women playing rugby are gay” (Broad 1993: 68). Another estimated that about 50% of the women’s players that she played with were lesbians. However, in Broad’s survey of a combination of older women’s club teams and younger, collegiate age women, only 37% of the women identified as lesbians, with an additional 3% identified as bisexual.

Broad’s survey results revealed a major difference in percentages of women that identified in the surveys as lesbian or bisexual among the two age groups. She found that most of the women who identified as lesbians were among the older age group (club players age 22 and above), while more collegiate women identified as heterosexual. She also suggests that because the majority of her respondents were of the collegiate age group, her estimates of the number of lesbians in total in rugby may be lower than actually true. Regarding my own team, I would roughly estimate the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team to be about 40-50% lesbian, depending on the

year. The number of lesbians has not decreased noticeably over time on the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team. It has remained the same. It is only the appearance of homosexuality that I see has changed. That is, the members of the team today are less vocal about their homosexuality.

The discrepancy between these percentages highlights the fact that women's rugby may not be as 'lesbian' as some people might expect, especially at the collegiate level. In responses to her survey, Broad found that the homosexuality and lesbianism associated with the sport was a source of appeal for older, women's club players. Collegiate women responding to her survey listed this much less often when citing reasons for why the sport appealed to them, and why they first joined rugby. However, the stereotype remains for all women's rugby players.

Muscular, Masculine Women

Women's rugby has a particularly 'masculinizing' image because of its physicality. It is the only full-contact sport for women. Like any other sport, rugby requires athleticism, speed, finesse, agility, and strength. In certain positions, especially among the 'forwards' (positions in rugby), physical strength is key in order to win what are called 'rucks' and 'mauls', in which members of opposing teams push against each other to win possession of the ball. Strength, along with skill, makes for a successful forward. For 'backs' (another position in rugby), speed is important, as these positions involve more fast runs and breakaways through open space with the ball.

To me, Molly Baade, a Bryn Mawr-Haverford rugby alum, is the perfect example of the rugby culture that I entered into freshman year. She was loud and unapologetic on and off the field. As one of the seniors my freshman year, I had a lot of respect for her. She was a very skilled player, and also a source of encouragement for other players.

Baade agrees that rugby is a masculinizing sport. Its roughness and physicality lead many people at first to compare it to American football. Like football, rugby players tackle one another. However, in rugby there is no protection or padding used except the required mouthguard. That information causes some people unfamiliar with rugby to think of rugby players as aggressive, stupid, and even crazy to play such a rough sport with so little protection.

Baade agrees that contact sports have traditionally been the domain of males. She considers the sport to be ‘an entirely masculine sport’ because of how it is thought of and perceived by the public. By playing the sport, women shock spectators by doing what is considered to be masculine. But, she argues, through the sport they are also able to ‘empower’ themselves.

“The idea of collegiate women slamming and tackling each other to the ground and wrenching the ball out of each others hands while getting stepped on by the full weight of a woman wearing metal cleats is perhaps daunting to spectators, but for the players it is one of the most empowering visions we know.”

Rugby creates a sense of freedom and independence for women like Baade, who describes feeling able to reject the ideal of being a quiet, passive female in ways that had not been available to her before. On the field, women can form their own version of femininity in an accepting environment, then later translate it to the rest of society. Through rugby, Baade challenges the societal norm for females:

“In society, men have most of the power and women who make it to the top need to be feminine, have families, and be able to balance being a mother, a housewife, and a professional in the work world.

At Bryn Mawr, it's as if we're throwing all of that shit right back in everyone's faces. Women are in charge and we're NOT feminine. In fact, many Mawrters are gay and don't need men to make them happy. We're challenging gender constructions just like rugby players challenge every other institution."

Rugby players challenge many aspects of society including feminine/masculine boundaries, sexuality ideals, and the ideal body type. Rugby culture promotes what Laura Chase calls a 'transgressive' approach to gender norms. Baade agrees with this view of women's rugby as occupying a transgressive space.

"Ruggers at Bryn Mawr and Haverford are *not* typical college women. Through socials, songs and beer, through our glorification of violence and pain, through our muddy Sharpee tattooed bodies, through our fat kid body image and love of food, and especially through...our perpetuation of the big dyke stereotype, rugby players are anything but what society says typical college women should be like."

Here Baade describes the ways in which members of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford women's rugby team

step outside of traditional gender boundaries. She especially focuses on the ways in which the women's bodies are displayed. A 'glorification' of violence and pain, a 'love of food', and a 'fat kid' body image are all rejections of the traditional feminine body.

Large and/or muscular female body types are not acceptable or desirable in society. On the rugby pitch, large women are valued for their strength. Off it, they are not. Fasting and Scraton write that female athletes experience this conflict when expected female body ideals

clash with the “muscle, active physicality, aggression and competition, attributes traditionally associated with both masculinity and sport” (Fasting and Scraton 1997: 2). As these authors suggest, the physical nature of sport, and in particular, rugby, are strongly associated with masculinity. By crossing these boundaries and playing a ‘masculine’ sport, female rugby players draw associations of masculinity onto themselves.

P. David Howe suggests that the uniforms that women’s rugby players wear contribute to the muscular and masculine stereotype. Typically, women’s teams wear men’s uniforms. The uniforms are cut to fit men’s bodies, and as a result are unflattering on women. Howe writes that this only adds to the perception of women’s rugby players as muscular and unfeminine. One woman on the team from Wales that Howe studies points out the unflattering effect of the uniforms on the public’s perception of the women as masculine:

“There are some really attractive women out here when we get cleaned up. The use of uniforms cut for men certainly doesn’t do the image of the sport any good. We look like a bunch of dykes.” (Howe 2003: 235)

The uniforms certainly do not create the image of the muscular and therefore ‘masculine’ female rugby player, but exaggerate it, and contribute to its perpetuation. Some women argue that men’s style uniforms, with their boxy shapes, emphasizes larger body types and furthers this image of large rugby women.

Conclusion:

Both men’s and women’s rugby is associated with partying hard, beer, hyper-sexuality, and violence. For some, these aspects of the sport are a part of the appeal to play rugby. In this chapter, I have described the existing rugby culture, including rituals and traditions that

contribute to the formation of a common rugby culture. In addition, I discuss stereotypes associated with rugby.

A characteristic of women's rugby that I consider to be unique from men's rugby is the strong association with homosexuality. Women's rugby, in particular, has been a sport traditionally associated with homosexuality and lesbianism, including the stereotype of the 'big butch lesbian dyke' rugby player. In summary, women's rugby is known for its open acceptance of different sexualities and gender expression. These associations have contributed to the marginalization of women's rugby.

Chapter Four: Practice as a ‘Rookie’

I’m an asshole.

(She’s an asshole, what an asshole.)

I’m an asshole.

(She’s the world’s biggest asshole.)

A-S-S-H-O-L-E!

A-S-S-H-O-L-E! (-chorus from “Asshole” by Dennis Leary, original lyrics are “He’s an asshole.”)

For me, this Dennis Leary song will always stir up images of rugby. The ‘Titans’ sang and shouted this song before almost every practice, games, and even at the after-game socials. The ‘Titans’ were the nickname of two of the seniors on the team, LB and Baade. Sometimes, they simply went by ‘Asshole’. To me, a freshman rookie, they seemed impossibly loud, blonde, and tall.

I started a little bit later than the rest of the rookies that fall. I joined only a week before the first game, and about a month after practices had already started. Because of that, I stood out at those first practices as the ‘newbie’. My first memory is of showing up to practice and having the Titans come over in full force. They questioned me closely, interrogating me something like this:

“What is your name?”

“Micaela.”

“You look like your 12. You must be a freshman.”

“Um, yes.”

“Have you ever played sports before?”

“Yes, swimming, soccer. And I’m sort of playing on the frisbee team right now.”

I was promptly told that ‘I was hot’, nicknamed ‘Mic’ because ‘Micaela’ has too many syllables to yell out on a rugby pitch, and I was informed that LB would be my partner for the day, to show me how ‘to play a real sport’ since Frisbee did *not* count as a real sport. The team soon learned that I went to Haverford, and it became part of a joke among certain players. At the time, there was only one other Haverford player. I was referred to as the ‘straight rookie’.

I came almost by accident to the rugby field, on a whim really. I had never seen rugby before but I was bored with Ultimate Frisbee and I wanted to try something new.

At the first practice I attended I was expected to do everything, including tackle, and compete in a rugby drill in which two uneven teams compete against each other. The point of this drill is to learn to take advantage of the overload, and to practice situations in which you are outnumbered.

All rookies during practice drills were commonly referred to as ‘rookie’. Oftentimes we were made to come out and do drills first so that the coach and the older players could watch us closely and to correct us if we were doing anything wrong.

Being a Rookie

There was a strong team hierarchy divided by year, beginning with seniors at the top, juniors, sophomores, and then rookies. This team hierarchy was pervasive: at practice, off the field around campus, at team dinners, and at the socials. It was important to the team culture that rookies knew their ‘place’, and important for team bonding. For example, the seniors were the

only ones allowed to lead warm-ups at practice and to lead any songs. Rookies were made fun of, but it was good-natured. Everyone knew that rookies were the future team. The group of rookies that I was a part of usually enjoyed the type of camaraderie that being a rookie created.

Being a rookie is a short experience. The rookies who began in the fall were no longer strictly 'rookies' in the spring. They were still at the bottom of the team hierarchy, but they were expected to help teach the new rookies in the spring. Rugby is a sport with a relatively short learning curve. That is, you can learn enough about rugby in a relatively short period of time that you can jump quickly into your first game.

The duties of a rookie during games are important. In rugby, there are usually two matches. The first one, the A side match, is the match that 'counts'. The results to this match are recorded, and it is full length and played by the usual rules. The second match, the B side match, is a scrimmage designed to be an opportunity for rookies to get in and play, for players to try out new positions, and to simply give everyone the chance to play more rugby. It is usually shorter in length, and the environment is more relaxed.

During the A side match rookies serve as touch-judges: they run alongside the edges of the field with a flag to help the referee by showing where the ball went out of bounds. They bring water to the players on the field when there are any breaks in play (halftime, injury, etc.) They are also ball fetchers. This is especially important at our home field at the Bryn Mawr Graduate School of Social Work, where the ball is frequently kicked over a chain link fence that borders the field. Another important role they play is to cheer on their teammates. Of course, depending on how many returning players are available to play, rookies may play A side matches too. That was true for me during my first semester playing rugby. Because of previous injuries the team

was low on players going into a game. After yet another injury, I went in for the team, even though as a rookie, and especially as a late-starting rookie, I had very little experience in an actual game. Prior to that game, I had played only one 15 minute period in a very short B side match.

As rookies, we were encouraged to not complain, and to simply do what the team needed us to do. There was also a general attitude of 'learn by doing'. We were told at practice over and over that the only real way to learn how to play rugby was by playing in a game.

Nicknaming is another common rugby ritual. All rookies were given nicknames my freshman year. These were either shortened abbreviations of their names, like mine, last names, or names related to their appearance or 'personality' traits. For example, some rugby nicknames were Case, Mic (me), Baby-Eater, and Fugly, among others. We were generally called by these nicknames when not referred to as simply 'rookie'.

Rookies also had to participate in certain 'rookie games' or traditions. These took place at practice, dinner, and socials. 'The rookie game' was a favorite of the seniors at the time, and this game was tradition that a senior would do it to her favorite rookies. The rookie game was also strictly kept a secret from all rookies who hadn't participated in it yet.

The 'rookie game' occurred during team dinners in the 'rugby room', a room at the Erdman Dining Hall that the team had reserved to eat all together after practice. The rookie game was 'performed' in front of the entire team. It involved blindfolding rookies and having them point (entertaining for all the other players watching) to an imaginary 'woman' and various parts of her body. Lots of sexual humor was involved. I found it embarrassing, but I also looked up to

the senior, my friend, who did it to me at the time, and probably would have done pretty much anything that she asked me to.

Another rookie game that was important at the time happened at the socials. It only happened once a semester, and so large groups of freshman rookies would do it at a time. This game involved a lot of drinking and nakedness (almost a hallmark of the rugby team at that time). Older players would pile on many layers of clothing, since they knew what was coming, and then lead a round of 'Rugby Questions', a game similar to 'Never Have I Ever'. Only older players were allowed to ask questions, and if a question were answered 'yes', the person would have to remove an article of clothing. Often, questions were targeted at specific rookies who still had a good deal of clothing on, until the rookies were all clothing-less. Then the 'losers' of the game, (all the rookies), were made to streak across campus. The night usually ended with skinny-dipping in the fountains in the Cloisters and Taft gardens, another well-established rugby tradition at the time.

In addition, the activities during "Hell Week" at Bryn Mawr are important for rugby freshman. During this week, which occurs at the beginning of the spring semester, all freshmen are 'helled' by upperclassmen, a tradition that is generally led by the sophomores. The high point for rugby freshman happens at dinner on the first night of Hell Week. It is a secret tradition for the rugby freshman to steal as many salad tongs as they can at Erdman dining hall. The Erdman student workers not only expect this, but are told to prevent them from stealing any tongs, by force if necessary. (Also a tradition.) They guard the salad bar with spatulas and large metal spoons. The chaos that ensues from a group of dining center workers and a swarm of rugby rookies wrestling over salad tongs usually entertains the students eating dinner at that time.

Upperclassmen know to come early for dinner if they want to eat any salad that night! Hell Week also includes many other ‘tasks’ that the sophomores assign to the freshman, but this is the one assignment that the Rugby freshman perform all together.

These rookie traditions made the rookies of my year feel connected to the team. Before every game, the rookies would get together in secret and do some arts and crafts project to create something to cheer on our teammates. We called our secret meetings ‘Rookie Pride Meetings’. The seniors referred to us as “Amy’s Rookie Sweatshop”. Amy was the rookie in whose room we usually met in, since she lived in Brecon, the dorm right next to our practice field. The things that we made were chosen because they had special connections to rugby. For example, some things we made were spandex shorts created out of the craziest and brightest patterns of fabric that we could find, horned toad hats for the seniors, posters and banners for each senior for home games, and a giant papier mache horned toad piñata that we filled with candy. It became our mascot for a few games before we finally brought it to a social and broke it open.

Team Identifying Traditions

Team traditions served to unify the team that and create a collective team identity and culture. Team traditions reinforced team hierarchy and strengthened bonds between teammates.

“Shooting the boot” is a tradition done by any player after scoring their first “try”(a score in rugby). At the social that night, the player would chug a beer out of a cleat used that day during the game. Usually, they would drink out of a forward “boot”, since forward cleats are bigger (and hold more beer), while teammates cheer them on.

Songs, sometimes rugby songs, sometimes not (such as the ‘Asshole’ song,) were a staple of rugby practice. One song the team often used to begin the warm-up for practices and games was comprised of two parts. One the seniors sang, and the rest of the team responded to. The chorus went like this:

“How’s your mother?”

“All right.”

“How’s your father?”

“Out of sight.”

“How’s your sister?”

“Too tight.”

“When was the last time?”

“Last night.”

“When’s the next time?”

“Tonight.”

“Is everybody happy?”

“You bet your ass we are!”

‘Fat Kids’ and Being Big on the Rugby Pitch

A ‘fat kid’ image is something that is virtually gone from the rugby team today, whereas in previous years has been an identity that was loudly embraced and even encouraged among the team. Team members would often talk about how they ‘liked to eat’ and would come back to the rugby table from the hot line in the cafeteria with heaping plates full of food and in particular lots of meat. Molly Baade ’05 remembers the rugby team as a group in which pressures of body

image and weight were rejected. She and other members of the team would often refer to themselves as ‘fat kids’, even to non-rugby players.

Memories I have of winter pre-season sessions freshman year include the first ‘practice’ of the spring season. I came in my sneakers and full workout gear, expecting a run and gym workout session. We threw the ball around a bit in the snow (probably about 20 minutes), then did one drill in which many of us fell in the icy melting snow. Then the seniors decided that it was too cold, and called it a day. We all piled into two cars and headed to the nearby Wendy’s. There the rookies were treated to ‘story-time’, when the seniors would tell stories about their experiences on the rugby team as rookies and underclassmen. We frequented Wendy’s often that winter before the season started.

Kerstin, a recent alumni and current player on the Philly Women’s team said that what she liked about the rugby team was the rules that it broke regarding how women were supposed to act, including their attitudes towards food and eating. She recalls one memory of sitting through an athletic association meeting with the rugby team while digging through buckets of greasy Kentucky Fried Chicken listening to a dietician speak about the dangers of exercise bulimia and over-dieting among female athletes.

In “Kicking Stereotypes Into Touch: An Ethnographic Account of Women’s Rugby” author P. David Howe gives an account of a female rugby “prop” (a forward position in rugby) who played for a very successful club team in Wales. She recalls to Howe that “because [she is] a prop, people outside the club will struggle to see the value of [her] being as big and strong as [she is. Her] size and strength that in part is related to it is one of the major reasons that [she has] played for Wales. On the pitch [she is] valued for [her] physique...off it [she is] not” (Howe

2003: 231). Many female rugby players feel as if their size and strength are viewed negatively by their peers, in particular their male peers. This Wales women's rugby team encourages these women to reject society's ideals of body weight and body types, and to take pride in their physical strength. For many of my own teammates, the 'rejection' of body weight is a liberating experience.

Lesbians and Sexuality on the Team

In my view, women's rugby should not be associated with being lesbian, fat, big, or loud. It should be a sport in which participants are respected for their athleticism, tenacity, and fierce determination on the field. But oftentimes, women rugby players are stereotyped, and commonly thought of as 'big dykes'.

Howe argues in his essay that "no other sport can be any more "masculinizing" than women's rugby, and as a result, the women who choose to participate in it are often confronted with many of the social stereotypes that accompany much of homophobia" (Howe 2003: 235). Howe writes that women's rugby challenges concepts of gender and femininity through its 'active physicality, aggression, and competition', attributes that have been traditionally associated with masculinity, and as a result, draw stereotypes of homosexuality and lesbians.

As a freshman, I was surprised by the amount of lesbian jokes, humor, and general acceptance towards different sexualities on the team. Teammates joked during warm-up and even in the middle of drills about their sexuality and being gay. A few weeks after I joined, I asked an older player on the team if there were any straight members on the team. She simply

laughed in response and told me that it just seemed as if more members of the team were lesbian because these women were so vocal about their homosexuality.

All sexuality, not just homosexuality, was constantly talked about within the rugby team culture. One sprinting game that the team did at the end of practice, called ‘Questions’, was a team favorite. It was played by starting with all teammates on one end of the field, lined up horizontally across the width of the field. Each member of the team would take turns asking ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. Good questions were sexual or involved drugs or alcohol, and the dirtier the better. If you answered ‘yes’, you had to sprint 10 yards up the field. A ‘no’ meant you didn’t go anywhere. The coach at the time played too, and it was a competition to see which team-member could make it all the way across the field first. In fact, many members of the team took pride in winning frequently at this game. They would also take turns calling out specific questions that would pinpoint a certain member of the team, and if the story was particularly good, make them re-tell it.

“Socials”, or the after-game rugby parties, are also a key place where sexuality is publicly displayed. The Bryn Mawr-Haverford socials are strongly linked with homosexuality. Lyrics to rugby songs are changed to ‘she’ instead of ‘he’, orienting the song into a woman on woman perspective, not a heterosexual male-female situation. There are also many lyrics that directly refer to lesbians and homosexuality. Men’s song lyrics frequently involve sexual humor including jokes on penises, oral or anal sex (with men), and even rape.

In contrast, the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team’s lyrics involve sexual humor frequently centered on lesbians, ‘coming out’, and cunnilingus. For example, in one song, the singer leading the stanza expresses a desire to be a clean rugby jersey. The rest of the team asks why, and she

responds because then she'd be able to "come out of the closet." In another popular song parodied off the song "12 days of Christmas", the present on the eleventh day is 'Eleven Leaping Lesbians'. These lyrics illustrate the close connection between the Bryn Mawr team with lesbianism. (Not all teams are as "lesbian". These teams usually find these lyrics to be humorous. They are not a part of their own song repertoire.)

While rugby songs are predominantly sung at rugby socials for fun, for female rugby players they take on an added significance. They are an opportunity for women to poke fun at sexuality and assert themselves through crude sexual humor that would not be acceptable in any other environment. The lyrics are a way for the women to make fun of notions of masculinity and male, heterosexual dominance.

There is one popular rugby song that I have heard sung "both ways", that is, by both men and women. The lyrics are very different between the two versions. I'll call the first the 'masculinized version'. It is one that I have heard at socials in which both the men's and women's rugby team was present.

In this hyper-masculinized version, females are the object of crude sexual humor and at times, degradation. One male team called this song the 'Rugby Queen' song, and during it called for a female volunteer to play the role of the 'rugby queen'. As a female, I found it offensive to witness as the 'volunteer' was touched sexually by more than one of the males present, and later goaded into exposing her body.

Here are a few stanzas of the lyrics of the first version.

“Masculinized” Version

I put my hand upon her knee
ya ho, ya ho
I put my hand upon her knee
ya ho, ya ho
I put my hand upon her knee,
she said hey ruggger you're kiddin' me

I put my hand upon her tit
ya ho ya
I put my hand upon her tit
ya ho ya
I put my hand upon her tit
she said, "hey ruggger, you're getting it"

I put my hand upon her twat
ya ho, ya ho
I put my hand upon her twat
ya ho, ya ho
I put my hand upon her twat,
she said hey ruggger you hit the spot

I put my dick into her mouth
yo ho, yo ho,
I put my dick into her mouth
yo ho, yo ho,
I put my dick into her mouth,
She said mmm, mhmh, mhmh...

I put her in a wooden box
ya ho, ya ho
I put her in a wooden box
ya ho, ya ho
I put her in a wooden box,
from havin' too many ruggger's cocks

I dig her up every now and then
ya ho, ya ho
I dig her up every now and then
ya ho, ya ho
I dig her up every now and then,
she did me before she'll do me again

The next few stanzas are from a version of the song that I have heard sung often by women rugby players at social, and a particular favorite of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team. The

specific lyrics that I picked are important because they can be contrasted to their counterpart lyrics in the stanzas above. The version begins in a similar way as the first one, with a few important differences. First, it is sung in first person from the perspective of the woman in the first version of the song. But in this second version, the woman is no longer simply a passive subject, but also is able to claim sexual agency in the song. Second, I have also heard versions in which both ‘characters’ in the song are female (a lesbian version), but this is the more common version of the song.

Here are the stanzas that I think are relevant to contrast to the first song:

“Feminized Version”

(It begins in a similar way to the first one.)

He put his hand upon my clit
ya ho, ya ho
He put his hand upon my clit
ya ho, ya ho
He put his hand upon my clit,
I said hey rugger, that’s it

He put his hand upon my tit
ya ho ya ho
He put his hand upon my tit
ya ho ya
He put his hand upon my tit
I said, "hey rugger, get back to my clit"

And then he came into my mouth,
yo ho, yo ho,
And then he came into my mouth,
yo ho, yo ho,
And then he came into my mouth,
I said (pause to drink beer and loudly spit it out, shout “eeew”)

They dig me up every now and then
ya ho, ya ho
They dig me up every now and then
ya ho, ya ho
They dig me up every now and then
I fucked you once, I’ll fuck you again.

And now I'm burning down in hell

ya ho, ya ho

And now I'm burning down in hell

ya ho, ya ho

And now I'm burning down in hell

I'm fucking the devil and fucking him well

Steven P. Schacht in his ethnographic account of a college male rugby teams in Utah and Missouri "Misogyny on and off the "Pitch": The Gendered World of Male Rugby Players", describes the importance of rugby songs in reinforcing masculinity and 'masculine superiority'. Schacht understands the rugby social as a socially constructed space in which male rugby players assert their dominance over women and homosexuals, through derogatory song lyrics and gestures (Schacht 1996: 560).

The second version of the song, however, reclaims female sexual agency through new lyrics. The woman in the first version is a passive recipient, but in the second version, the woman tells the male what to do, yelling, "Hey Rugger, get back to my clit!"

In another stanza, the women rugby players performing the song, spit out beer onto the ground. They are displaying a refusal to perform oral sex on a male, and rejecting male sexuality. Further, the last two stanzas as well reflect an independence from males in the song. In a humorous context, she is rejecting the superiority of masculinity that is shown in the first song. In conclusion, through sexual humor, the female singers are able to display a sexual agency usually only reserved for men.

Conclusion:

In her ethnography, Laura Chase uses the term ‘transgressive space’ to describe the social environment created by and around the women’s rugby teams in the Midwest. The women in the study, she writes, through their rejection of mainstream societal ideals for women and what it means to be feminine, created a ‘transgressive’ space on their own terms on the rugby pitch. The concept of transgression extends to anything the team did that crossed mainstream societal norms. She focuses on the concepts of larger body size, sexuality, and physical dominance. Many of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford alumni have similarly voiced these aspects as important in the construction of a rugby space.

Bryn Mawr-Haverford alumni, as well as the older generation of ruggers, have been especially vocal about the importance of the rejection of the feminine norm to their rugby experience. The women in Chase’s study, as well as the seniors my freshman year and rugby alumni are consistently very enthusiastic about their liking for an environment that was accepting and encouraging of all body types and an independent female sexual agency.

Especially in the past, women’s rugby at Bryn Mawr was seen as constructing an alternative environment where characteristics not typically associated with women were socially acceptable, and even encouraged to be present. Many of the alumni of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford Rugby team saw this alternative and transgressive environment as a major attraction for joining the team, and an aspect of their college experience that they found to be extremely liberating.

Chapter Five: Current and Changing Culture of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford Women's Rugby Team

Introduction:

In this section, I examine the current 'culture' of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford women's rugby team, and what I view as changes to the 'rugby culture' and team identity that are currently occurring at Bryn Mawr. I argue that the rugby team is undergoing a transition towards a more 'mainstream' image that is being promoted by current team-members, and resisted by others.

The rugby team has already moved towards a more mainstream image than it has held in previous years, and seems to be continuing further down this trend. Costs of this change have already resulted in a reduction of traditional transgressive rugby culture and rituals. I project that the feeling of a close rugby 'community' shared among rugby players would also continue to decrease, but remains present for now within the Bryn Mawr team culture. However, benefits of a more 'mainstream' image include a smoother relationship with the rest of the student body population and administration, potentially more funding and support.

Why do Female Ruggers Play?

When I asked current and former players the following question "Why do you play rugby?", I received a wide variety of responses. At first, my question even seemed to confuse some of the players. They told me that they would have expected the question from disapproving relatives or curious classmates, but not from a fellow rugby player.

Every single one of the Horned Toads alumni that I talked to could vividly remember their first game. They became excited, and a few of them even thanked me for letting them ‘relive’ their memories.

Some rugby players that I asked admitted that they started playing for social reasons--for example, a friend or girlfriend played rugby. Others had played a sport in high school and wanted to be part of a team in college. The team website claims that “Rugby at Bryn Mawr is an exceptional sport because the vast majority of the players have never played rugby before entering college; in fact, many people have never played a team sport before joining the Horned Toads.”

(<http://www.brynmawr.edu/athletics/intercollegiate/rugby/>) This is only the first year that I have played with any teammates who have played rugby before coming to college.

Why Play Rugby?

Being on the Horned toads rugby team carries more meaning than just being on any club team. The team is known on campus as a team for forming very close relationships among its members, being full of confident leaders on campus, and for being composed of strong women. Negatively, the team is also associated with being lesbian, inter-team dating, and being loud and rowdy at the after-game socials.

With all of these associations, it is somewhat difficult to single out any one motivation for being part of the team. Some team-members are originally attracted to the team because of the social aspects associated with the rugby team, while the negative associations also deter some women from joining.

In Laura Chase’s ethnography on women’s collegiate rugby teams in Missouri and Iowa, she examines her teammates’ motivations for playing rugby. Through interviews, she discovered

that the most common reason for why players love the game is the relationships that they form with their teammates. Many of the women even compare their relationships to familial or other close kinship ties.

One player in her study, Alex, describes rugby as “more of a family. You just feel a sort of kinship. We are like a brotherhood. Accepting and a loving community and it’s family. Once you are in the family it’s like your own and you are never out of the family.” (Chase 2002: 117) Jennifer Cohen, an alumni of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team, felt the same way. She recalls her relationships with her teammates as the best aspect of playing rugby. “We really became friends and protected each other.” (Cohen: 2008) She describes her teammates as “rough and tough, yet loyal...on the field, everyone was always really tough and concentrating, and doing their best. Off the field, the support we gave each other in all areas of life was incredible.”

Looking back on my own time on the team, relationships with my teammates are also one of the first reasons that come to mind when asked why I continued to play rugby. A few of my teammates I count among my closest friends.

Lesbians/Transgression:

Chase presents an image of rugby that aggressively pushes against gender expectations. She argues that rugby is a transgressive sport in which women assert their independence:

“...rugby is a very female-friendly place and you are going to be around women who have already broken out of traditional female boundaries. They are already masculine or more masculine than most women are.” (Chase 2002: 107)

Sexuality is an important part of rugby culture. Brooke, a player on the Missouri team that Chase studies, even goes as far to suggest that sexuality is something that brings players closer together. Brooke explains the importance of sexuality as something that is known to most players before they pick up the sport. It serves as an attraction to women to play the sport, as well as serve as a common ground that the women can understand.

“I think sexuality is something that kind of brings us all together. Women’s rugby doesn’t have a straight girl reputation among club teams. Women who come and play with us realize that right off the bat and so it’s something that draws us together...People know what’s going on and you expect to run into straight girl and lesbians and bisexuals and I think it is very much an accepted part of the game” (Chase 2002: 110).

I would agree with that with the older culture of the team. Now, however, I feel that while the team is still an accepting environment for lesbians, it is not the focus that it once was. Like Brooke’s team above, there are straight, lesbian, and bisexual women on the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team. What has changed is that now there is much less of an emphasis on sexuality as a central part of the team’s identity.

Interestingly, Chase also reported that some new members of the team felt uncomfortable because of the strong emphasis on sexuality. This is something that I can relate to coming in freshman year. Chase describes one player who felt uncomfortable with

“the emphasis on sexuality. She felt left out because of her heterosexuality: “There was one season when I was a little bit uncomfortable because that (sexuality) was emphasized a lot more than just rugby and I sort of felt left out” (Chase 2002: 113).

Now that sexuality is not as emphasized during practice, or socials, its importance to the team culture has diminished. I no longer feel uncomfortable with the sexuality of team-members, both because I have gotten more accustomed to sexual references and jokes during team interactions, and because the intensity of sexual humor has also decreased.

Style of Leadership at Practice:

The atmosphere at practice is decidedly more heterosexual than it has been in previous years. There is much less overt sexual talk or lesbian jokes. There is also less visible demonstrations of affection between couples both within the team, and between team-members and their girlfriends who come to watch matches.

Reasons for this change include the change in coaching as well as a change in the composition of the team. By this, I do not mean to imply that this is because there are more straight women on the team now than in previous years. Some players feel less comfortable within the current team in publicly displaying their homosexuality than in previous years.

Change in coaching from the previous coaches Alyssa and Molly did not elicit any strong opinions on any changes to the team. But the change of coaching to the current coach, Ron, did. Moving the coaching from a former player and open lesbian to an older, male, and experienced coach, however, did change the dynamics on the field.

Practice with the rugby team has always been a very social event. At any given time, there are team-members chatting during warm-up, drills, and even when a new play or drill is being explained. Alumni Mel Rohall contrasts practice on the Bryn Mawr team with her current older women's club team. "There was less of an emphasis on fitness...due to fewer practices and a coach who attend[ed] fewer practices...There was also more standing at those practices." (Rohall 2008) A few players have told me that they play rugby because they don't want to play a 'real' or 'serious' sport, and that is certainly noticeable from the dynamics at practice. The amount of talking and joking around during practice would never be allowed on any other (full-

varsity) sport. On the rugby team, it reflects the more laid back attitude that many team-members have towards the sport, and the importance they place on the social aspects of the sport in addition to the actual game.

Changes in Team Dynamics: A 'Straighter' Team?

Team dynamics normally change from year to year. In brief, the team has recently become less marginalized and less overtly homosexual. The team has also to an extent become perceived by some players as 'straighter' or 'less lesbian'. One alumnus, Anna¹, that I talked to in particular did not like the recent changes to the team and its dynamics. Reasons she cited specifically were simply changing team dynamics over the years because of who was on the teams (individuals), but also the change in coaching.

She admits that she “never took playing on the team that seriously, I mean, it’s not like it’s varsity or anything, and part of the reason that I started playing was because practices were only 3 times a week”, but nevertheless, after joining became a committed member of the team. Having played a variety of sports in high school, she missed the social aspect of being on a sports team, as well as the competition. But academics came first, and so she decided on playing on the rugby team since the practices were only three times a week. Nevertheless, she “loved the team, and had so much fun playing on it, it was part of my overall Bryn Mawr experience, being a part of the, you know, big, proud, lesbian culture at Bryn Mawr.”

She categorizes herself as a player from the ‘older’ culture of the team—what she describes as a loud, lesbian culture. Anna declares her favorite aspects of rugby to be its “self-organization, or lack thereof, (laughs), the fact that we can all joke around at practice, and play

¹ Name has been changed.

around...” She especially enjoyed the popular game at practice of ‘Questions’ in which teammates would publicly reveal “embarrassing, sometimes hilarious secrets to everyone, including the coach”, as well as the ‘hazing-like’ games that were played either at practice or during team dinners, in which older players singled out the ‘rookies’.

She believes that “Rugby is not supposed to be a serious sport, in my opinion, it’s about getting out there on the field, and having fun.” She felt that the game for her was changing, as too many people on the team increasingly cared a little bit too much about winning. “I know that we all want to win, but I just didn’t like that. It made it too serious, and less fun.”

The team culture changed too much for her liking. It became less of what she perceived as lesbian friendly. The team dynamics were too straight and less about being wild and crazy, even on the field. “We’re all lesbians, well most of us, and [the new coach and the current team-members] don’t get that. And now I wouldn’t feel 100% comfortable talking or joking around like we did before, especially anything really homosexual”.

Now playing for another, older women’s club team, she contrasts the two environments. She feels that she possesses much more independence and autonomy now than when she was on the Bryn Mawr team, and feels more comfortable expressing her sexuality and being an open lesbian on the team.

She emphasizes the importance of a lesbian culture to her as important for her rugby experience. “It’s a fact,” she says, “many women rugby players are lesbians. And I’ll be honest, I want that in my team-an environment that makes us feel more comfortable for who we are. It’s

part of what makes rugby unique, is that there's such a strong lesbian presence...and that's important to me."

Change in Coaching Leadership

One of the most important changes that occurred after the change of coaches was a move towards building the team. The current coach, Ron, has brought coaching stability and made long-term goals for the team more realistic. This includes establishing a closer relationship with the athletic department. Previously, it was common to hear players and even the coach, trash-talking the athletic department, and the athletic director. Many of the older players were very angry about the differences in funding or treatment that the rugby team received compared to full-varsity sports. A lyric that still comes up at socials, (but increasingly less so as the players for whom this has meaning for graduate) derides the athletic director:

If I were the marrying kind
And I thank the lord I'm not sir
The kind of rigger that I would wed
Would be (insert the name of the current Athletic Director here)

'Cause then I'd fuck the rugby team,
and you'd fuck the rugby team.
We'd be alright in the middle of the night,
Fucking the rugby team together.

As shown by these lyrics, the relationship between the athletic department and the rugby team in previous years has been shaky. Michele Taft Morris, a Bryn Mawr alum of 1992, recalls

a similarly negative relationship between the Athletic Department and the rugby team during her years playing at Bryn Mawr:

“There was no relationship between the Athletic Department and the rugby team at all. It was a club sport and received no funding from the Athletic Department whatsoever. There was no opportunity to earn gym credit for playing rugby at that time. We were considered pariahs in a way, and if a rugby player also played a varsity sport she had to keep her participation in rugby hidden-it was frowned upon by the Athletic Department at the time.”

Morris cites the lack of funding and awarding of physical education as indicators that the athletic department at Bryn Mawr did not consider women’s rugby a legitimate sport. Not allowing for the awarding of physical education credit especially underlined for many of the alumni the lack of support for rugby. To these alumni, it was tangible evidence of the attitudes that the administration and the rest of the student population had towards rugby. Some rugby players even felt, (in Morris words), like ‘pariahs’ and ‘renegades’ in their identities as rugby athletes. In addition, Morris highlights that rugby players who played other varsity sports in addition to rugby had to keep their participation hidden. Other alumni agreed that other varsity sport coaches in the past ‘hated’ the rugby team for ‘stealing’ or ‘injuring’ their athletes. Alum Rachel Feeney agrees with this portrayal of the athletic department’s past relationship with the rugby team. She states that although the team was allowed during her time to reserve space for indoor practices in the gym, she felt the athletic department viewed rugby negatively. It was seen as “mostly as a threat...sweeping away athletes from other teams.”

The team has changed coaches frequently in recent years. For example, the seniors of 2005 had played with 3 different head coaches during their time on the team. One of these coaches was an alumni of only a few years, and had played with the seniors on the team. This at

times left the seniors with conflicted feelings. Some of them felt as if they had to listen to their coach, while others felt as if they were better leaders than she was. They found it hard to treat her like a coach since they also remembered her as a player. At times, rugby had difficulty gaining respect from the athletic department. Having an older coach with previous rugby coaching experience and who wasn't a recent alumni of the team, was seen as helping to present a more legitimate image of the team. One alumni, surprised to hear about the coaching change, responded with the exclamation "Oh, now you have a real coach! That is awesome. Now you'll be able to get more funding."

The team has improved due to the changes in coaching. The current coach is able to be more committed to the team, and more reliable than other past coaches have been. For example, the previous coach missed many practices and some games because of work commitments. By contrast, the current coach is rarely absent from practices or games, and has greatly improved relations with the athletic department at Bryn Mawr.

The current coach has also improved the skill level of the team overall--whereas the previous coach mainly focused on the forwards of the team, the current coach works on both groups of rugby positions-'forwards' and 'backs'. The previous team used the forwards as the focus of ball play. Back plays, although the team had them, were rarely used in a game. The coach would say because the skill of the backs was not up to the plays, but focusing on the forwards was detrimental to the overall skill level of the team. The team now plays much more cohesively as a team. The increase in skill level I think can be measured by the team's recent success. In the past two years, the Horned Toads have become very competitive in their divisions. This past fall, the team won first place in the Regional Championships, then went on to

place third in the National Championships for Division III. As a result the team will move up to Division II next fall.

Embracing Rugby: Changing Ways in which Identity is Expressed

Women's rugby players, author Kendal Broad argues, assert an identity as 'strong, sexual women.' They promote this identity not only within the context of the women's rugby community, but also in the public sphere. However, the ways in which this identity is displayed by members of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team to the public is changing.

One way that this is occurring is the decrease in wearing team jackets in public. Wearing team jackets around campus and off-campus is a public display of rugby team identity, one that openly proclaims "rigger" and everything that is associated with that label. Assistant Coach and alum Trisha Hall recalls that the rugby team was "respected (and maybe a little feared, in a healthy way)"; they became easily identifiable as rugby players when they "wore [their] jackets around with a lot of pride on campus." Freshman year, as well, ruggers could be easily identified around campus by the fact that many members of the team regularly wore their jackets all over campus. In the past few years, however, the jackets have been worn much less often, and not by any of the Haverford players, who in general prefer to distance themselves more than the Bryn Mawr players from the stigma of the lesbian image of rugby. My freshman year, I was told by an older player that you could distinguish the straight rugby players from the 'big lesbians' on the team by who wore their jackets all the time, and who only wore them on cold game days before the match.

Rugby players, love to assert their identity as a rugby player by purchasing rugby tee shirts, with numerous sayings such as:

Give Blood, Play Rugby

80 Minutes, 15 Positions, No Protection
Rugby: Like Explaining Sex to a Virgin
Support Your Local Hooker, Play Rugby

These sayings, and many more, are common among t-shirts and other rugby paraphernalia sold at rugby tournaments and worn by players on the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team. Further, I see the t-shirts as less stigmatizing than the jackets because of the humor present in the slogans. They embrace the physicality of the game as well as the sexual culture of rugby in a humorous way that makes these transgressive aspects less threatening.

Body Culture Now in Rugby:

In previous years there was more of an emphasis on the importance and a celebration of larger body types in rugby that is no longer as obvious on the current team. The team today is smaller overall, and being bigger is no longer a serious goal, or celebrated to the same extent. The 'fat kid' image of the past is no longer a part of the team culture.

In addition, it was much more common to publicly display the body in ways that are much less common now. For example, in the past it was common to decorate arms, legs, and other parts of the body with writing and pictures drawn on with permanent markers. Baade especially draws attention to the drawing on the body. She describes an image of "muddy Sharpee tattooed bodies" to illustrate an example of how rugby players publicly display their identity as part of 'rugby culture' at Bryn Mawr. These 'tattoos' are not a normal form of body display. This type of very public display of the body is demonstrative of the past culture that emphasized a separation from traditional body ideals.

Many rugby players claim that they gain weight during every season. Often I will hear players talk, some with concern, about how they are getting bigger and bulkier because of the addition of muscle and fat.

One recent alum, Sara, ran winter track in between the fall and spring seasons of rugby. She felt constantly under pressure to maintain a low weight by her track coaches. She said that she liked the way her body looked at a lower weight, but hated the scrutiny that other runners and even her coach made of even a small amount of weight gain. Runners need a lean physique to be successful in their sport. Rugby players can definitely benefit from a more muscular body, but even may benefit sometimes from weight gain. Some players argue that weight gain may make the player bulkier and harder to tackle. But players no longer actively try to gain weight, and gained weight is not viewed as positively as it has been in the past.

Another current member of the team, Becky, constantly talks about weight gain. She complains about gaining weight during the season and becoming 'fat'. Body weight and shape is a constant concern to her. She keeps track of her weight, and how much she feels that she needs to lose. Lisa, another winter track runner, is also preoccupied with body weight and excess fat. As a track runner, she wants to maintain a low weight. She speaks and thinks about weight frequently at the gym, at the field, and at team dinners.

Mainstreaming Image, Diminishing Rugby Culture

Michele Taft Morris '92, argues that part of the strength and closeness of the rugby team culture was derived from feeling different and isolation from the rest of the student population.

“In some respects we were admired for playing a non-traditional sport, seen as renegades in a way. And in other aspects we were ostracized, both by varsity athletes and non-athletic students. We tended to stick pretty close together as a result.”

Michele argues that the rugby team felt marginalized by the reactions of other students. This feeling contributed to the close bonds that the rugby team shared. Conversely, she believes the marginalized status of rugby team culture was also perpetuated by the rugby team. She believes that the “community at large expected us to behave a certain way, and almost in compliance, we did. Being on the rugby team was a green light for bad behavior.” Michele sees the alternative identity of the women’s rugby team at Bryn Mawr as (at least in part) a reaction to the perceptions and expectations of the rest of the student population.

Kendal Broad writes that women’s rugby players manage the gendered stigma attached to women’s rugby, including associations with masculinity and lesbianism, by openly embracing it. She views female rugby players as being labeled as “masculine, aggressive, violent, lesbian, and not quite female because they do not subscribe to traditional gender norms. However, they do not face this stigma with shame and denial.” (Broad 1993: 80) Instead, Broad writes, they not only acknowledge it, but *embrace* it.

Similarly, Michele Morris argues that other students viewed the rugby team as transgressive. She believes that team-members reacted to this stigma by embracing an alternative identity. Being on the rugby team gave the players an ‘excuse’ to embrace identities as the “socially deviant, alternative, nontraditional” athletes and individuals. I suggest that the process of becoming more mainstream decreases this ‘pressure’ on female rugby players to act transgressively.

Less Singing at Socials: Indicator of an overall trend

Other aspects of the past ‘rugby culture’ are not being met with as much enthusiasm either. Team socials in the past few years have been increasingly subdued and low-key. There is less singing, and there is also less rowdiness and drunkenness overall.

Outsiders unfamiliar with rugby and its traditions may not understand the significance of rugby songs to the culture of rugby. They are an important aspect of the rugby social. In addition, they also play a highly visible role in the public display of the transgressive aspects of rugby. Public display of the transgressive aspects associated with rugby culture are arguably even more apparent at the rugby social than during actual matches.

During the game, women publicly display aggression and violence, through tackling and other physical contact during the rugby match. However, Chase and Broad emphasize that during the rugby social these and more transgressive displays also occur, and that more importantly, occur in public space.

For example, the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team’s socials usually occur in a dormitory lounge or even outside. In this way, the team’s social transgresses into public space, and involves outside students or other passerbys with no connection to rugby.

This intrusion into public space has been contested, especially in the past few years. Some players want to keep socials quieter, or indoors, in order to prevent from offending other students with song lyrics. Every year, a few students complain to the rugby team about noise, offensive song lyrics, or what they see as an invasion of public space—outside on the lawns, or in dormitory lounges.

Participation in recent socials has decreased. Socials in the past two years especially have had a low turnout—I believe this is because of a feeling of being uncomfortable with the traditions of the rugby social, including the singing of rugby songs. There are even requests not to sing—

younger players coming to the socials have complained about the songs and how they present a negative image of rugby to the rest of the student body.

Is the Team Losing its Rugby Traditions?

The question remains: if the traditional rugby culture of the Bryn Mawr Haverford team is being lost, or at least being changed, will the rugby team's traditions also be lost? Already this year, there has been less interest in sustaining certain aspects of rugby 'tradition'. Socials are more subdued, there is much less nudity, streaking, and skinny-dipping occur.

None of the 'rookie games' I have described in the previous chapter performed my freshman and sophomore years have been continued in the past two years. Even the rugby staple of stealing the salad tongs was a topic of hot debate this year, and almost did not occur. Opponents to continuing the tradition included two seniors including a captain of the team, and a few other upperclass juniors. They felt the tradition was 'damaging' to the rugby team, and would only contribute to an already negative image of the rugby team on campus and in the eyes of the Athletic Department administration. The tradition did continue, but only after a lot of arguing over what other team-mates considered a trivial matter. The fact that there was a debate shows the changing dynamic of the rugby team, and a placement of value on how other students and administration view the rugby team.

The impact that losing rugby team culture and traditions will have on team identity and culture are not wholly positive or negative. In some ways, they would help the rugby team become more assimilated into the broader college community. Rugby has a reputation for its partying and sexuality. That could decrease, and as a result rugby would be viewed as a more legitimate sport. On the other hand, the alternative

identity is what attracts some players to the sport. A more mainstream sport could perhaps attract less players.

However, the extent to which this trend will continue to occur is something that can only be speculated. Is it possible for women's rugby, a traditionally socially deviant and alternative sport, to completely shed its traditional image and be just like any other club sport?

Rugby culture is strongly embedded within women's rugby. Thus, rugby may be heading in the direction of professionalization and marginalization, but there will continue to be a strong resistance to this process.

Rugby Community:

Rugby players feel an affinity for other rugby players, regardless of where they have played before. In her interviews of rugby players from the Midwest, Laura Chase received responses that showed that a feeling of comraderie was shared among rugby players that they had never met before. This creates a sense of an extended 'rugby community'. Players also perceive this rugby community with rugby players across regional, age-based, and gender lines.

Rugby teams hosting another team for a match will generally give the other team food and drink, especially if they have traveled far. They will also social together if possible. The home team will usually provide the food and beer for the social. In the case of the teams that Laura Chase studied, often the teams had to travel large distances to play other teams. She found that the teams were still well provided for. "Teams are always offered a place to stay and are provided food and drink following the match and even the next morning" (Chase 2002: 115).

Last spring, the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team traveled to Poughkeepsie, New York to participate in the annual Seven Sisters tournament. It was hosted that year by Vassar College.

The team did not have enough funds to pay for hotel and food costs, so the Vassar team offered instead to house the players amongst their own team-member's apartments and dormitories.

I was amazed at how friendly and welcoming the other team was. Knowing that we were their competition, and that they would soon be playing us in the first match of the tournament, they were great hosts. The girls that I stayed with even cooked us a delicious breakfast of eggs, bacon, and homefries. The easy talk at the breakfast table was pleasant. We joked with their team about our team and fundraising ideas. They showed us their new idea for a recruiting poster with their pictures and asked for our opinions.

Laura Chase also extends her study to include examples of a national rugby community. She writes about an experience that Kylie, a member of the Missouri rugby team from her study has with a rugby team from California. Kylie suggests from her experiences that there is a 'national or even international rugby community'. She describes a business trip that took her to San Francisco. While there she

“called the rugby team and they took me out Friday and Saturday night when I was there. And it was just really neat to know that I had people willing to come pick me up at my hotel and take me out... in a way it is a big support system, we're all there for each other.” (Chase 2002: 115)

Being a part of the rugby 'community' is also an important aspect of the game on the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team. Interactions between opposing teams at the after-game social are an important way in which bonds are forged and connections are made between opposing teams. If this tradition continues to decline, like it already has at Bryn Mawr, the rugby 'community' bond will weaken and begin to fade. As described earlier, because of certain restrictions from the athletic department and party policy at Bryn Mawr, the team usually does not social with other

teams. The only team that Bryn Mawr will reliably social with after games is the Swarthmore College women's rugby team.

Bonds between rugby players on opposing teams contribute to a broader rugby 'community' that older alumni especially attest to and share. A Bryn Mawr alum, Devani, describes the close feeling of camaraderie that arises from a shared 'rugby culture':

“Rugby culture means a camaraderie among players that non-players don't understand. It is a very small community and it doesn't matter where you played; any rugby team would welcome you once they know you have played before.”

Devani first began playing after going to a game to cheer on a hallmate who played rugby. At the time, the field was at Haverford, across from the bookstore. She found her way over to the field and immediately 'fell in love' with rugby. One of the things that drew Devani to the sport was the appeal of “being part of such a close knit team and knowing that, as a player, you are part of [a] larger rugby community.” She loved the fact that the players were such good friends. Some of her best memories of her rugby experience were hanging out on Saturdays with the team. In the quote above, Devani describes the feeling that many rugby players, including Bryn Mawr-Haverford alums, feel towards other rugby players, regardless of where they have played previously. However, younger players may not necessarily understand or feel this connection to the larger rugby community because they have not experienced these type of bonds.

Thus, if the rugby culture is further professionalized, it will also affect the extent to which players perceive a 'rugby community', if it will even continue to exist. Rugby 'community' in part thrives off its marginalized status as the driving force that brings rugby players from different teams together off the shared bond of the sport of rugby.

Conclusion

The 'rugby culture' of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team is undergoing a transition towards a more 'mainstream' image and identity. This 'mainstreaming' process is being promoted by some, and resisted by others. I use an example of one rugby tradition, the stealing of the salad tongs during Hell Week, to show how long-established rugby rituals and traditions are currently being questioned by players. The issue of an appropriate 'image' is important to establish and maintain to certain members of the current team, whereas in the past, team-members took pride in an alternative, 'badass' image. In addition, I have observed shifting identities and attitudes towards sexuality, body image, and other types of transgressive behavior in the ways that they are displayed by members of the team. The extent to which these changes will continue remains to be seen. However, I see these changes as irreversible and part of a broader, national trend to professionalize collegiate women's rugby, and the desire to be perceived as a serious athletic sport.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that the traditional loud, lesbian rugby culture on the Bryn Mawr-Haverford team has recently been changing. First, the team's identity on campus is becoming more mainstream. Second, the team has been less aggressive in proclaiming its 'rugby' identity to other students on campus. I see this as part of a larger trend in women's rugby that is leading collegiate rugby away from its traditionally stigmatized identity and towards a more mainstream, 'legitimate' image.

Collegiate women's rugby players are no longer coming into the sport with the same expectations or desire for an alternative rugby culture. Advocates of a more professionalized women's rugby want to see the sport become more legitimate in the eyes of the broader American public and college sports administration. One way that proponents of this change aim to do this is by switching the organization of collegiate women's rugby from its current club organization into a NCAA varsity sport.

I suggest the diminishing presence and expression of a transgressive rugby culture at Bryn Mawr is a result of this increased concern to be perceived as a 'legitimate' sport. Players worry that certain transgressive traditions and rituals, especially those that intrude on public space, would intrude on rugby's ability to be accepted on the college campus, as well as be taken as a serious varsity-level sport by the athletic administration and student body.

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Additional Online Resources:

<http://www.dartmouthrugby.com/index.php>

<http://www.ncaa.org/wps/portal>

<http://www.usarugby.org/>