GRIDIRON GODDESSES:
THE SPORT AND SPECTACLE OF LINGERIE FOOTBALL

A Thesis in
Media Studies
by
Amirah M. Heath

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The thesis of Amirah M. Heath was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Michelle Rodino-Colocino  
Assistant Professor of Communications  
Thesis Advisor

Russell Frank  
Associate Professor of Communications

Marie Hardin  
Professor of Communications  
Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Research

*Signatures on file in the Graduate School
Abstract

While women have made strides toward integrating the predominantly male sports industry, there is still a long way to go before they can enjoy the same power and legitimacy as men on and off the field. Despite the many victories of the feminist movement, including the passage of Title IX, patriarchal relations still permeate professional sports in the U.S. This thesis looks at the promotional media of the Lingerie Football League (LFL) (2009-2012) to reveal some of the material and symbolic forms of oppression against women in sports that contribute to the perception of women’s sports as second-rate. Promotional media that I study in this analysis include media representations of the league in promotional content on television (MTV2), online (Lflus.com, Mtv2.com, and Playboy.com), and in print (Playboy magazine). I also analyze the league’s uniform, team names, and logos.

The results indicate that the promotional discourse created and endorsed by the LFL, at once blatantly sexually objectified the athletes who participated in this form of “fantasy football” and also demanded that teammates play the game as an aggressive contact sport requiring strength, physical conditioning, and risk of injury. Thus, contradictions in promotional media for the LFL pointed to ambivalence about women’s roles and capabilities in the sports industry. The LFL’s promotional campaign demonstrated how the league and its players embraced women’s athleticism in tackle football and simultaneously neutralized such athleticism as a threat to men’s domination of sports and to men’s domination of society in general. I conclude by arguing that the LFL’s latest rebranding efforts, that include ostensibly moving away from lingerie and embracing “performance wear” amounts to nominal change. Even as the “Legends Football League,” the new LFL still requires players to play in bras and panties with insufficient protective padding.
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a woman full of humility, spirit, and enchanted grace.
CHAPTER 1: Kickoff: An Introduction

As a student of both women’s studies and media studies, I have always been fascinated by learning and writing about how issues at the core of women’s experiences are influenced by and represented in the media. Particularly, I am interested in how representations of women in the media correspond and contradict with their experiences in society. Prior research in both academic fields points to the link between representation and power (Hall, 1997; Mulvey, 1975). This research reveals that representations of women (and men) in the media are imbued with cultural codes of patriarchy, male power, and masculinities. Thus, representations often present women as powerless or reveal ambivalence – especially in areas such as sports. Recognizing these trends, I was immediately drawn to the former Lingerie Football League (LFL), which first formed in 2009, as the subject of this thesis. The controversial women’s sports league – which paired the hard-hitting sport of American football with lingerie – provides an interesting catalyst for integrating and applying my interest in sports with my knowledge of women and media, in order to explore the relationship between representation and power. The league rebranded itself as the Legends Football League in 2013, perhaps in an attempt to answer critics, perhaps in an attempt to create further publicity or both. I stopped collecting data in 2012, however, to begin writing this thesis. These changes merit some reflection in the conclusion of my analysis, but they are not the focal point of the following analysis. Instead, I focus on the LFL from 2009-2012, during which time the League clearly appears to me as signaling a decidedly sexist moment in sports history.
My initial impression of the LFL was that the sports league was blatantly sexist; and openly, unapologetically driven by cultural politics (including patriarchy) and commercialism. This notion was supported by the portrayal of lingerie football as a legitimate sport, the use of sexualization (of the league’s female athletes) as a promotional strategy, and the celebration of the LFL as an arrival for women’s sports – “a rarity…– a women’s professional league that is actually growing” (Watcher, 2010). I wanted to look at how despite claims about the LFL as an “empowering experience,” the portrayal of the LFL as an opportunity for serious female athletes served as no more than “entertainment under the guise of sport” (Mills, 2012; LaVoii, 2012). In the wake of Title IX, not only did the reality of the Lingerie Football League dismiss the progress made by women in traditional sports, but also complicated future progress by representing itself as post-feminist in an effort to present sexual objectification as empowering and acceptable.

Background

Women’s participation in sports reflects a long history of gender-based discrimination and division. While women have made strides toward integrating the predominantly male sports industry, biased cultural politics have prevented them from gaining the same recognition, representation, power, and legitimacy as men on and off the field. As prior research on gender and sport history reveals (Burstyn, 1999), at the crux of sport lays the inherent goal of maintaining the industry as a masculine training ground. Thus, as sport has emerged as the quintessential boy’s club, women have been pushed away from the institutional core of sport and into the margins. Consequently, women experience employment and participation-based discrimination as athletes, coaches, managers, and decision-makers in sports. Thus, it is not
surprising that media represent women in sports and women’s sports as inferior to men and men’s sports.

Nevertheless, women still seek fair play. For example, there have been significant increases in the number of women as participants in sports since the passing of Title IX (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011). Title IX is a civil rights law that prohibits sex discrimination at educational institutions receiving federal funding. Under Title IX, schools receiving federal funding are required by law to provide evidence that male and female students are provided proportionate opportunities to be represented in sports, in programs, and in allocation of resources (i.e., facilities, supplies, publicity, funding, etc.). The residual benefits of Title IX on education programs and activities are evident in the professional realm of sports, where women are represented in greater numbers today than ever before.

Male-dominated sports, including tackle football, have, consequently, experienced growth in women’s participation (Migliaccio & Berg, 2007). Regarding tackle football, while the number of female participants (ages 7+) remains low compared to participation rates for males, women and girls have demonstrated a consistent interest in the sport over the past two decades. Since 1993, the percentage of women as participants has fluctuated between 8.2% and 13.8% (“Percentage of Women to Total Participants,” 2011). At its lowest in 1999, the number of female participants in tackle football was 712,000 (“Total Female Participation,” 2011). At its highest in 2006, this number reached a peak of 1,627,000 (“Total Female Participation,” 2011). As of 2011, 1,095,000 women and girls were represented as participants in the sport (“Total Female Participation,” 2011). Yet, the industry has been slow to respond to this interest by creating governing organizations, leagues, or teams to foster women’s inclusion.
According to sports reporter Jane McManus (2011), one reason for the hesitation is the stigma associated with women’s participation in a male sport. Football is not only dominated from top to bottom by males, but also fosters a hostile playing environment, including aggressive contact and violent tackles. Thus, McManus questions whether women would “be welcome or comfortable” in the NFL. Furthermore, introducing women to football requires adjustments at all levels of the sport. As stated by McManus (2011), summarizing the opinions of Andrew Brandt (former vice president for the Green Bay Packers):

the decision to bring in a woman at any position would extend from the scouting and coaching staffs, where it usually resides, to include marketing, public relations and sponsorship. There might be teams that would reject any potential disruption, but perhaps not all.

Therefore, women must overcome a number of external pressures to participate in football.

Fortunately for fans of women’s sports, several independent sports organizations have formed with the goal of providing spaces for the inclusion of women and girls. Regarding tackle football, examples of independent sports organizations for women include the Independent Women’s Football League (IWFL). The IWFL was founded in 2000 with the primary goal of providing an opportunity for women interested in playing tackle football to play in a safe and supportive environment. According the Mission of the IWFL, in addition to offering women the right to play, “The IWFL also allows women and men alike the opportunity to coach, manage, and even own a sports team” (“Mission,” 2011). The league is organized as a non-profit organization promoting “progressive entertainment” and keeping “player safety, community service, honesty, and integrity in mind” (“Mission,” 2011). Today, the IWFL is comprised of 32
regular teams (that follow the traditional rules of American football) and a number of Sixxes. Sixxes, or six-person football teams, are “a scaled down version of the game designed to allow teams with small rosters an opportunity to compete at a high level” (“Six-man Football,” 2011). Together, the IWFL represents three countries including the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Another example is the WFA (Women’s Football Alliance), created in 2009 to “create the highest level of football for women in North America” (“About the WFA,” 2011). Toward this goal, in 2011 the league officially began to promote itself as an umbrella organization for teams across leagues in order to undo the “[fragmentation] of the highest talent pool and [separation of] the resources required to move the sport forward” (“WFA History,” 2011). In doing so, the league has grown to include 63 teams representing cities across the United States. Today, The WFA is on its way to becoming to women’s football what the National Football League (NFL) is for men’s, although the league has yet to reach comparable success.

The IWFL and WFA support Hargreaves’ (1994) argument that sports functions via “a constitutive, creative process, and presents an optimistic vision of the potential of women to transcend practical and symbolic forms of oppression in sports” (p. 36). However, the corporate structure, material construction, and separation of these groups from the mainstream further reinforce notions of women’s sports as second-rate. By relegating women to a separate and unequal category of “women’s sports,” they are kept from gaining respect as true athletes.

Thus, compared to the IWFL, WFA, and other professional football organizations (i.e., the Arena Football League), the NFL remains uncontested as the most recognized and reputable organization for American football in the country. Originally founded as the American Professional Football Conference in 1920, the organization formally became the NFL in 1922.
Since then, what began as 18 franchises has grown into a league of 32 teams representing destinations across the United States. Currently, of all governing sports organizations, the NFL is regarded as the most attended domestic sports league in the world with an average of 66,690 spectators per game (2010-2011) (Harris, 2011). As of 2012, the total number of fans attending NFL games was 19 million (“NFL Fan Market Summary,” 2012). The total number of fans viewing NFL games on TV was even greater at 146 million (“NFL Fan Market Summary,” 2012). With viewing audiences exceeding 152 million, the national championship game for the NFL, the Super Bowl, continually sets all-time television viewing records in America year to year (Bauder, 2012). In addition to sell-out crowds, the league’s profitability is also supplemented by advertising revenues. During the annual Super Bowl alone, the average cost of a 30-second advertisement has increased from $3 million in 2011, to $3.5 million in 2012, to an estimated $3.8 million in 2013 (Dicker, 2012). This does not include monies from sponsorships, endorsements, or other revenue streams. Compared to players in other leagues, including women in the IWFL and WFA (who pay to play), NFL players receive an average salary of $1.9 million, with the median salary among players being $770,000 (“The Average NFL Player,” 2011).

A New Terrain: Lingerie Football

Specializing in a new variant of tackle football, the Lingerie Football League (LFL) attempted to avoid the challenges faced by other professional women’s leagues and gain status by catering promotion to male sports enthusiasts. Unlike competing leagues, which take a traditional approach to football, the LFL’s initial strategic approach was differentiated through the sexualization of its players – who wore a uniform that consisted of bra, panties, and partial garters, and signed a contract that binds them to the possibility of “accidental nudity” – and the
use of non-traditional rules for playing style more closely aligned with arena-style football. The league’s marketing strategy was further complete with sexy, feminized team names.

For officials of the LFL, the league represented true competition for the NFL. In fact, prior to the start of the 2011 season, the League announced, “the third season of LFL football starting this fall could see a move in games being played on Sunday afternoons vs. Friday nights, should the NFL suspend or delay the start of its season” (Wendel, 2011). For critics, the LFL’s potential was no greater than other short-lived sports gimmicks, such as the XFL founded in 2000 by Vince McMahon (Watcher, 2010).

Introduced in 2009, the LFL traded in contradictions. While the sport was clearly exploitative of women as sexual objects, the LFL promoted itself as a serious sport that demanded that teammates play the game as an aggressive contact sport, requiring strength, physical conditioning, and risk of injury. The way the league sexually exploited its players also contributed to how the league was positioned as a serious sport for serious athletes and as a visual spectacle for (heterosexual) men’s sexual pleasure. Media content that promoted the LFL promised “fantasy football redefined with lingerie” (as Playboy put it in its special 2011 LFL issue), while players contended that the LFL empowered women to play a “man’s sport” through their hard work and dedication (Gaxiola, 2011). Thus, the LFL provides an interesting case for this study because of such contradictory promotional claims.

By conducting a textual analysis of the LFL that attends to the post-feminist claims of its promotional discourse from 2009-2012, I examine forms of discrimination against women embedded in mediated representations of the league and in the league’s presentation of itself through team names, logos, and, above all, its physically revealing and even dangerous lingerie.
uniforms. Putting these levels of analysis together, my main argument is that such contradictions point to ambivalence about women’s roles and abilities in the sports industry. The LFL’s promotional campaign from 2009-2012 demonstrated how the league and its players embraced women’s athleticism in tackle football and simultaneously neutralized such athleticism as a threat to men’s domination of sports and to men’s domination of society in general. This latter form of domination is known as “patriarchy” and demands a certain kind of cultural performance from men, one in which men exhibit strength, control, domination, and the sexual conquest of women.

Arguably, the LFL’s promotional campaign from 2009-2012 pointed to the fortitude of patriarchal ideology. Rooted in the sexual exploitation of women, the league not only reinforced the masculine order in sports, but also forced women to play an active role in their own objectification. Thus, the league contributed to continuing notions of women’s sports as subpar to men’s. Additionally, the lack of resources and recognition paid to the LFL (and other women’s leagues), despite a history of involvement in tackle football over a decade long, suggested that there is more to the equation than the mere will to play.

One question this thesis raises, then, is what does the LFL as a business and as a cultural formation—specifically, as a sport—reveal about the state of patriarchy? To address this question, my research objective is to look at representations of the LFL in promotional media to identify cultural patterns. I also consider the league as an example of post-feminist media culture, as exhibiting what Rosalind Gill (2007) calls a “postfeminist sensibility.” It seems that as an example of post-feminist media culture, the LFL constituted a new regime, one in which feminism was at once advocated and dismissed. I am interested in focusing on promotional media to gain an understanding of the role that culture and society plays in determining
representations of women. My purpose is to explore what representations of the league suggested about the state of women’s power in sports, and in society in general.
Chapter Outline

In the current chapter I have provided a brief overview of the sports industry, including mention of the history of women in sports. I have also provided a context for the present study by introducing the LFL as a contemporary football league for women. In the next chapter (Chapter Two), I will expand on this introduction by conducting a review of literature. This literature review focuses on explaining the commercialization and politicization of sports; describing the process of gender-marking; defining ambivalence; and discussing the application of post-feminism as a frame for analyzing the LFL as an example of popular culture. The literature chosen provides the groundwork for understanding the connections between sports, society, and culture which lead to the development of phenomenon like the LFL. This chapter is followed by Chapter Three, which outlines the methodological approach chosen for this study: textual analysis. In Chapter Four, I provide a full introduction to the LFL, including its founding, business structure, and rules and regulations. In Chapter Five, I evaluate the extent to which the LFL demonstrates cultural ambivalence towards female athletes. This chapter includes critiques of the LFL as a business, lingerie football as a sport, and media representations of the league and sport. The purpose of these analyses is to explain how the league bred contradictions and tensions, namely, how the league devalued and disempowered women in sport through sexually objectifying its athletes on the one hand, and by constructing them as strong, capable, athletic women on the other. The final chapter, Chapter Six, builds on the findings of Chapter Five to explain how the LFL demonstrated and deviated from Rosalind Gill’s concept of “postfeminist sensibility.” This chapter also discusses the rebranding of the LFL into the Legends Football League, and makes proposals for future research on this and related topics.
CHAPTER 2: Instant Replay: Literature Review

As prior research suggests, a well-rounded approach to studying sports begins with the acknowledgement of the system of power-relationships between the sports industry and other organizations including “media, industry, government, public education, and recreation” (Burstyn, 1999, p.3). Therefore, this chapter focuses on the commercialization and politicization of sports in order to provide a basis for understanding the cultural significance of the Lingerie Football League. This chapter also explains the processes of gender-marking and raising ambivalence, and sets-up the case for examining the LFL as an example of post-feminist media culture.

The Politicization and Commercialization of Sports

The more central to culture sports become, the more sports are influenced by commercial and political pressures. Power is created and conserved by those who control the factors of production, regulating points of access and defining the behavioral and performance expectations of others (Miller, 2002). In sports, as in society, it is clear that the industry (including labor, capital, physical resources, information, and entrepreneurial opportunities) is powered by men. Thus, men also dictate opportunities and expectations for women. Lingerie football provides a contemporary example of this. As I will discuss later, as a business, the LFL was governed largely by men, making them the primary decision-makers for the women’s league.
According to Messner (2002), a significant concentration of power and privilege is located at the center of sport. The center “serves as a symbolic reference point by the biggest, wealthiest, and most visible sports programs and athletes” (Messner, 2002, p. xviii). Therefore, institutions and individuals at the center of sport maintain control over how the industry is organized. The hyper-masculine orientation of the sports industry today shows that despite the promotion of sports as inclusive, sports organizations remain steeped in homophobic and misogynistic ideology (Messner, 2002). Hence, for those invested in the present patriarchal system (team owners, coaches, promoters, and perhaps even for fans), the gradual integration of women into sports appears as a serious encroachment on the rights of men and as a violation of the institutional core of sport.

For women, however, movement into sports “represents a genuine quest for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition” (Messner, 2002, p. 66). Although symbolically defiant, women’s participation in sports is driven by personal motivation. This idea is reflected in the attitudes of LFL players who expressed, among other things, a strong desire to participate, even despite obvious objectification. “I’d wear a tutu if it meant I got to play football,” said one player (Watcher, 2010).

Still, as women assert themselves as powerful and capable athletes, the sports industry has countered in different ways. While women are no longer barred from participation, men maintain power and privilege by assuming control over women’s sports – especially as the earning potential of women’s sports has grown (Messner, 2002). According to Acosta and Carpenter (2012), although Title IX significantly improved participation opportunities for female athletes, women’s roles as coaches, assistant coaches, administrators, athletic trainers, and sports information directors has since declined. As of 2012, 43% of women’s intercollegiate athletic
teams were led by a female coach (Acosta and Carpenter, 2012). This number is significantly lower than coaching figures pre-Title IX, when women held more than 90% of head coaching jobs for women’s sports (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Of athletic directors, athletic trainers, and sports information directors, women represent 20%, 31%, and 10% respectively (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012).\(^1\) Thus, it can be argued that even as women make gains in sports, men have replaced women in the most powerful decision-making roles. Feminist scholars refer to this as one part of the process of the social containment of women (Kane & Snyder, 1989). By assuming ownership over women’s sports, men maintain control over how women’s sports are defined, organized, and represented to the public. This historical shift was evident in the structural hierarchy of the LFL, which was dominated at all levels by men, and was also reflected in the league’s promotional agenda.

Commercialization is also a contributing factor in how women’s sports are represented to the public. Within sports media, it is clear that the men’s sports are regarded as more valuable than women’s. Evidence for this includes the volume of coverage of men’s sports versus women’s sports on sports networks, differences in the cost of advertising during programming featuring men’s sports versus women’s sports, and differences in the earning potential, sponsorships, and endorsements offered to male athletes compared to female athletes. Thus, one concern that has resulted from the increasing commercialization of sports is that popular sports will increasingly dominate the industry, forcing smaller, less popular sports out of the market (Agatep, 1998). As a result, the industry will become smaller and more elitist (McAllister, 1998). Regarding football, the focus on male athletes and the attention paid to the NFL has eclipsed women’s gains in football, exiling the discussion or promotion of women’s brand of tackle

\(^1\) Assistant coaches are one position that is slightly female-dominated (at 57%).
football from the mainstream. Meanwhile, the NFL remains the ultimate model of professional football in the United States, and arguably, the world.

A second concern resulting from the commercialization of sports is that as commercial pressures increase, the interests of athletes will become second to the demands of advertisers (Agatep, 1998; McAllister, 1998). According to McAllister, “sponsors have an agenda-setting power, as they may choose which cultural and social paradigms exist, and which do not, through their selective funding” (p. 359). Therefore, advertisers have the ability to control the landscape for sports, including what the mass public is exposed to. The LFL responded to this control by creating a promotional campaign that attended to the requirements of sponsors. In an attempt to reverse mainstream trends regarding the popularity and value assigned to women’s sports, the league used sexualization as a way of driving commercial earnings, leading to tensions about whether lingerie football could be considered an authentic sport and whether the women who played were qualified athletes.

**Feminizing (Women’s) Sports**

Feminizing sports, such as through the use of sexualization, has long been a strategy used in the sports industry to boost the appeal of women’s athletics. However, as noted, this strategy has also lead to strain. Gender is commonly used to organize, sort, and differentiate men’s and women’s sports. It has also been used to justify bias in terms of which sports are appropriate for whom (Methany, 1965), which uniforms are appropriate for which group (Barnard, 2002; Craik, 2005), and what team names, logos, and other symbols best represent each group (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001). For women (and minority groups) more often than for (white) men, the use of gender (and other polarizing social concepts) has led to trivialization, objectification, and even
offense (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001). The latter is discussed at length as a consequence of each of process.

**Designating sports as “masculine” and “feminine.”** The first way that sports are coded with gender is by designating which sports are appropriate for women and men. Historically, sports appropriate for either sex have mirrored gender values found in society. Thus, sports appropriate for men typically stress independence, competitiveness, power, and aggression. Alternatively, sports appropriate for women stress teamwork, cooperation, and self-control. According to Metheny’s (1965) gender typology of sport, by sorting sports into categories based on gender, gender stratification in society is reinforced. Furthermore, by socializing males and females to select sports that align with social gender roles, neutral activities become inscribed as masculine or feminine (Daddario, 1998). Although, gender is an arbitrary concept and there is no legitimate argument for the separation of sports into gender-based categories.

Football is one sport that is considered culturally appropriate for men, but not for women. In the sport, men use their bodies as weapons in order to capture the most land (gain yardage) and succeed in their conquest (invading the other team’s goal line), emphasizing a drive for power and territoriality (Jirousek, 1996). Hence, football reflects the cultural values found in society by functioning as “endlessly renewed symbol of masculinity” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 833). The sport also “reflect[s] the sexual … priorities of the American **power structure**” (Michael Real, 1982, as quoted in Duncan and Hasbrook, 2002). These priorities include the preservation of patriarchy, which holds men as the center of all social relations. Priorities also include social isolation from women (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990). As a result, football is preserved as “for men.”
Conversely, women remain underrepresented as participants in football. They are also absent from research and critiques of the sport, in spite of documentation of women as participants since as early as 1941 and records of organized leagues for women as far back as 1965 (Christensen et al., 2001). This absence suggests that women continue to face practical and symbolic forms of oppression in football. Although the presence of women, in roles ranging from passive spectator to active participant, evidences their interest in the sport and helps destabilize the notion of football as an exclusive boys club, the failure of the industry to acknowledge them points to the overwhelming opposition against them. Thus, if it seems that the LFL offered to empower women in some ways, a tradeoff was evident in the promotional strategy employed by the league: any empowerment women enjoyed as LFL players came at the expense of their sexual exploitation and their expectation as low-waged workers as I will explain below.

**Uniforms.** The second way that sports are made feminine is through uniforms. Sports uniforms generally follow cultural trends for appropriate clothing (Schreier, 1989; Barnard, 2002; Craik, 2005). One reason for this is that as a culture gender-specific clothing communicates that women and men adhere to appropriate codes of femininity and masculinity (Schreier, 1989). According to Schreier (1989), “we seek assurance that womanly instincts supersede athletic aspirations as we scrutinize women’s appearances for tangible signs of femininity” (p. 92). Therefore, between sports for men and women, uniform differentiation helps to resolve or lessen stigma or unrest.

Similarly, Barnard (2002) suggests that the progress made by women in sports has called for a cultural shift in the way the lines are drawn and boundaries defined regarding dress and behavior in sports. Since the industry can no longer simply ignore women’s desires to be
included, the industry now polices women against further masculine impersonation by promoting a feminine persona. The justification for the LFL uniform shared in this logic and put it in overdrive. According to the league’s Chairman, “you can’t market a 330lb woman as well as you can a model” (LaVoi, 2011). So, the league openly used sex appeal as a promotional strategy to bring attention the sport, suggesting that women’s sports are otherwise unmarketable, or unappealing to predominantly male sports audiences.

Despite these cultural pressures, Craik (2005) argues that the most important purpose of sports uniforms is to provide protection to the body. However, trends in women’s uniforms reveal a bias toward fashion over function. Compared to men’s uniforms, women’s uniforms tend to favor greater exposure of the body and tighter fit. According to Netter (2008), among traditional sports, two “of the most glaring examples of uniform discrepancy, with men and women wearing strikingly different uniforms to play the same sport,” are beach volleyball and gymnastics (p. 1). In volleyball and gymnastics, women are subject to regulation uniforms that critics argue are sexually biased and lead to increased sexualization of female athletes. This was also apparent in the LFL. Compared to traditional football uniforms (for men and women), the LFL uniform bared a stark contrast. Modeled after lingerie, the uniform covered very little area of the body. The lack of standard equipment further made lingerie football athletes’ bodies more prone to disrobing and injury. It is not an exaggeration to argue that the lingerie uniform mocked LFL athletes by calling into question the legitimacy of game as a serious, contact sport.

However, because uniform guidelines are established by the governing federations for each sport, they are difficult to change. For players who speak out against or reject the uniform policies in place, the penalties can be severe. In the LFL for example, contracted explicitly stated that players “knowingly and voluntarily agrees to provide Player’s services hereunder and has no
objection to providing services involving Player’s accidental nudity” (“Lingerie League Gets Litigious,” 2009). Penalties for failing to comply with the uniform policy included fines, suspension, and/or expulsion. Players who declined to accept contract policies disqualified themselves from participation in the league. According to Cantelon (2008), the need for such penalties indicates that uniform policies do more than ensure uniformity. Uniforms also demonstrate a “relentless drive to “sell particular images of female sport to the media” (p. 15).

Additionally, it is important to recognize that the LFL’s uniform may not register as a problem, even for feminists. For example, Melody Drach of the National Organization for Women argues that it is “up to the athletes to define their needs and speak up if they aren’t working” (Netter, 2008). Or, as Marj Snyder of the Women’s Sports Foundation put it, “if the female athletes wearing skimpier uniforms than their male counterparts don’t feel exploited, then it’s not a problem (Netter, 2008, p. 2). This idea is problematic for feminist sports critics, especially those in opposition of post-feminist philosophy. One characteristic of post-feminist sensibility is the internalization of patriarchal ideology. Thus, by applying critiques of post-feminism to the LFL, I argue that claims of empowerment made by LFL athletes are problematized by the internalization of patriarchal ideas about sport and women’s bodies, which athletes argued as personal choice.

**Team Names and Logos.** The third way that sports are marked for women is through team names and logos. Team names and logos are central to group identity and communicate core attributes such as strength, power, and skill (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001; Messner, 2002). As a central element of group identity, team names represent more than a label. Instead, culture, context, and common use of language embed team names with a range of possible meanings and
interpretations (Smith, 1997; Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001). These meanings are then limited and supported by the visual content of logos (Smith, 1997).

For most organizations, team names serve to represent the group in the most positive light. However, this is not always the case for team names referring to or representing ethnic minorities and women (Messner et al., 1993; Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001; Messner, 2002). According to prior research, team names are informed by social and cultural cues (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001; Messner, 2002). Since sports have always been open to and privileged white men, team names referring to this group are usually represented, “as universal, both verbally and in on-screen graphic logos” (Messner et al., 1993, p. 126). However, for minorities, names almost always include a lexical or visual marker (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001; Messner et al., 1993; Messner, 2002; Smith, 1997). Examples of lexical markers include the Negro leagues (1920-1960) and All-American Girls Baseball League (1943-1954), compared to Major League Baseball, first a white men’s and now an all men’s league. Examples of visual markers include the highly contested use of Native American titles and symbols in sports team names. Take for example, the NFL’s Washington Redskins. The term Redskins is a pejorative term used to describe Native Americans. Racial offense is heightened by the incorporation of images of Natives in the design of the Redskins logo and in the choice of Mascot (Chief Zee, unofficial). By using the term Redskins and the likeness of Natives, the Washington franchise shows cultural insensitivity towards American Indians by presenting a caricature of the group.

According to prior research, this strategy for determining team names leads to the development of a name-based hierarchy in sports (Messner, et al., 1993; Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001). As Eitzen and Baca Zinn (2001) argue, between men and women, language is manipulated to place them “within a system of differentiation and stratification” (p. 125). Thus
through the use of language, team names are placed into a hierarchy in which men’s sports are considered dominant and women’s subordinate. Therefore, the use of gender-markers serves to “de-athleticize” women’s sports by presenting them second-rate (Messner et al., 1993; Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001).

Some common gender-markers referenced by Eitzen and Baca Zinn’s (2001) study included the use of physical markers (*belle*); terms such as *girl or gal*; feminine suffixes (*ette, esse*); labels such as *lady or woman*; male names with female modifiers; or double gender markers, among other markers. In the LFL, although few team names exactly mirrored the language outlined in the previous research, gender-marking was evident with team names like Minnesota Valkyrie and Philadelphia Passion. As I will discuss later, drawing on the research of Smith (1997), such team name designations in the LFL can be determined as both feminine and sexual.

**Ambivalence**

Ambivalence describes the multitude of competing attitudes toward women as participants in sports. It explains how media representations of sports women sway between portrayals of women as courageous and strong, and portrayals of women as vulnerable and weak (Duncan & Hasbrook, 2002). These attitudes are revealed in various ways, including through an imbalance of coverage between men’s and women’s sports, contradictory sports commentary, and promotional media that represents women in sports in ways that contradict (Bernstein, 2002; Duncan & Hasbrook, 2002; Messner, 2002). According to Duncan and Hasbrook (2002), ambivalence about women in sports ultimately leads to a symbolic denial of power for women in the industry. Bernstein (2002) further argues that ambivalence toward female athletes neutralizes their strength and credibility as athletes by framing them in roles that undermine their
athleticism. For example, “ambivalence arises every time a female athlete is framed as a sexual being or is in fact covered by the media not for her sport performance but because she is attractive and conveys sex appeal” (p. 425).

Thus, a case can be made that the LFL communicated ambivalence toward female athletes. First, although the league touted women’s empowerment as its primary objective in press materials, predominantly male audiences were expected to view lingerie football players as sexy, attractive women first, and highly skilled, competitive athletes second. Second, the use of a promotional campaign built off the slogan “True Fantasy Football” belittled lingerie football as a sport that appealed primarily to the sexual curiosities of men. Third, limited media coverage of the LFL, outside of sports-centered networks and publications, questioned the validity of lingerie football as an authentic sport. Finally, competing narratives (in commentary and in promotional media) that presented the female athletes of the lingerie football league as strong, athletic women and as beautiful, naïve models also contributed to the air of ambivalence surrounding the LFL. Take, for example, Mooney’s (2010) description of an LFL athlete:

The quarterback tucks the ball to her ribs and squares her shoulders with the oncoming defender. A quick juke to the left sends the Chicago players flying by, a blur of orange jersey and blond hair. Dixon looks back down the field. A muscular 33-year-old born and raised in Miami, she always dreamed of playing full-contact football in front of a television audience.

And she's doing it at last. In a skintight teal bikini made of satin and lace. With a bright number 12 on her butt and nothing at all on her toned legs and midriff.
This description provides a written example of ambivalence by combining competing and contradictory messages about female athletes within the same statement. On the one hand, the description focuses on the athlete as skillful and in control. On the other hand, the description describes the athlete as an attractive woman who may be harnessing her sexual power.

**Media Culture and Post-Feminism**

Ultimately, the ambivalence the LFL communicated about female athletes also located the sport as an instance of post-feminist media culture. Before defining “post-feminism” it is important to acknowledge that critiques of post-feminist media culture are complicated by the lack of consensus among researchers about how the concept of post-feminism is best defined. According to Gill (2007), contested definitions of postfeminism generally understand post-feminism as an epistemological perspective, historical shift, or reaction to feminism (p. 148). However, as Gill (2007) suggests, feminism may best be understood as an amalgamation of these – as a “sensibility.” A “post-feminist sensibility” includes features commonly located in most post-feminist discourse. These include the following:

- the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of makeover paradigm; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill, 2007, p. 149).

Elements of post-feminist sensibility can be widely found in media and cultural products (Gill 2007; McRobbie, 2004). As McRobbie (2004) argues, popular culture has been an effective
vehicle for the promotion of post-feminism by “appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and
even well-intended response to feminism” (p. 255). By these accounts, the LFL represented a
product of popular culture representing post-feminist sensibility. As supported by discourses in
the promotional media featuring the league, the LFL provided a contemporary example of what
McRobbie (2004) refers to as “double entanglement” (p. 255). As a professional football league
for women, the LFL doubly embraced liberal values regarding individual choice and
empowerment on one hand. But on the other, through its promotion of female sexuality it also
supported patriarchal values regarding gender and sports. By presenting athletes as centerfold
models, the LFL debased women as credible athletes and reinforced the notion of sports as no
place for women (Holste, 2000). My analysis applies post-feminist sensibility to the LFL,
focusing on the shift from objectification to subjectification; individualism choice and
empowerment; a marked sexualization of culture; and the commodification of difference. The
analysis also looks at notions of “female success” as a basis for ambivalence in the wake of post-
feminism.

Despite the strong use of sexualization as a promotional strategy, the LFL was
commodified as an example of female success. The representation of women as empowered and
capable athletes in a masculine sport like football was considered an achievement. However,
success in this context can be seen as acknowledging feminism only to dismiss it. According to
McRobbie (2004), popular media and other institutions represent themselves as “modern and
abreast with change” (p. 257). In doing so, they present feminist politics as obsolete. Yet, these
same institutions deny women representation and power in other ways. According to Messner
(2002), the result of this process is confusion on behalf of female athletes in terms of
reproductive and resistant agency. This tension between reproductive and resistant agency is
evident in the LFL. While lingerie football does allow women to be represented as football players (resistant), their true legitimacy as athletes is undercut by the condition of hyper-sexualization (reproductive).

The sexualization of women’s bodies in the LFL closely mirrored the sexualization of culture. As a cultural product it was clear that the LFL borrows from what McNair (2002) refers to as “striptease culture” in order to promote women’s sports. Proof of striptease culture in the LFL was most readily apparent in the league’s sexually provocative lingerie uniform. This uniform allowed LFL athletes to be coded sexually, even in the context of sports as athletes. This uniform, mixed with the league’s recipe for determining suggestive team names, was a part of the overall commercial strategy to appeal to male audiences. The sexualization of women’s bodies was legitimated as a commercial strategy in the media, which “has become a key site for defining codes of sexual conduct” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 258). Popular media dictates what conduct is appropriate and what conduct is not appropriate for men and women. Evidence of such difference in sexual conduct may be found in comparing the LFL and NFL. While elements of both uniforms are arguably erotic and sexualized, it is apparent that what is sexually appropriate for men is starkly differently that what is appropriate for men. Men’s NFL uniforms offer physical protection and outline their physiques as strong and bulky; the opposite is true of LFL’s uniforms, as I will discuss below.

From their uniforms to their Playboy spreads, LFL players are presented in ways that suggest they accept and internalize the male gaze. Gill (2007) argues that the shift from objectivity to subjectivity by women in the media is born out of a new disciplinary regime in which the male gaze is internalized (p. 152). In the LFL, proof of the internalization of the male gaze was located in the apparent exercise of personal choice on behalf of players to be
represented as highly sexed football players. This again represents an opportunity to acknowledge feminism only to dismiss it. By taking an active role in their own sexualization, lingerie football players made the self-conscious decision to enact an exaggerated form of sexuality as if to communicate power and control over their own bodies; thus suggesting that there was nothing exploitative about the LFL. Perhaps lingerie footballers, “see no contradiction between projecting an aesthetic ideal of heterosexual femininity and athletic habitus of physical strength, power, and competence” (Messner, 2002, p. 103). I argue that it was the failure of lingerie football players to note the important contradiction between the two that contributed to continued ambivalence about lingerie football as a sport and the LFL as a legitimate league. Despite the appearance of freewill, a marker of post-feminist sensibility, it is clear that these women were a part of the very political discourses they presented themselves as against or had surpassed.

In agreement with Gill (2007) what makes the LFL “distinctively post-feminist, rather than pre-feminist or anti-feminist, is precisely this entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (p. 161). In the league, feminism was established as strong, athletic women participating in a culturally masculine contact sport. In promotional media, they were represented as exhibiting their own brand of girl power. However, the buy-in by LFL athletes to a hyper-sexualized media culture weakened their claims of liberation. On the one hand, they were promoted as trailblazing and progressive. On the other hand, they adopted normative values regarding femininity, sexuality, and women’s bodies.
CHAPTER 3: Game Plan: Methodology

The primary methodology applied in this thesis is textual analysis. As a methodology, textual analysis allows for a qualitative approach to understanding the LFL that I find useful because it allows for nuanced analysis that is attentive to ambivalence. According to prior research, unlike quantitative methods, which claims results are fixed, textual analysis yields a number of readings, and recognizes that none is singularly valid or correct (Fürsich, 2009; McKee, 2001). As a woman and a feminist, my understanding of the LFL as a business and cultural product is informed by my understanding that sports are influenced by society. Additionally, in sports men and women are treated differently in ways that reinforce social gender relations. Consequently, my reading of the cultural processes that impact the LFL foregrounds critiques of men as the primary commercial, social, and political benefactors of the women’s professional football league.

A second reason for choosing textual analysis as the primary methodology for this research is that it allows “every cultural practice or product to be read as text… [acknowledging] the autonomy of cultural practices or objects as signifiers in their own right, independent of the intentions of the authors and producers or reception of the audience” (Fürsich, 2009, p.240). Thus, this method provides a practical guide for producing an informed reading of the LFL that does not depend on the intentions of team owners, players, media content-makers, or on fans’ reactions.
My analysis is also guided by feminist perspectives including feminist sports criticism and the concept of post-feminist sensibility. The goal of feminist sports criticism is to explore processes in the culture of sports that contribute to the appearance of sports as a natural environment – an environment in which men should be privileged and women disempowered (Daddario, 1998; Dunbar, 2000; Messner et al, 2000). By applying feminist sports criticism to the LFL, my goal is to investigate the systems of bias that contribute to the way the league and its athletes are presented in the media. According to Theberge (1981), the sports industry is a “fundamentally sexist institution that is male dominated and masculine in orientation” (p. 342). Therefore, as a business and cultural formation, the LFL too was powered by men. This masculine influence determined how and explained why female athletes were presented as sexually available, and thus, non-threatening.

Considering the LFL as a cultural product exhibiting post-feminist sensibility, critiques of post-feminism are applied to the league’s promotional discourse, including uniform, team names, logos, as well as media representations of the league on promotional websites and in magazine content. By applying critiques of post-feminism, the purpose of my analysis is to reveal how women are symbolically denied power in sports. The goal of combining both types of critique is to reveal the ambivalent discourse surrounding the league as a model of female success.

Procedure

I begin my analysis by evaluating the LFL as a business. As a part of this critique, I look at the overall organization of the league. The primary factor I consider is how the league was commercially organized – including who controlled the LFL. My goal in looking at the commercial and structural organization of the LFL was to determine the who and how behind the league’s operational decisions. I focus specifically on how uniform and team name designations
were influenced by cultural politics. This analysis supports what Messner (2000) refers to as the “level of structural context.” According to Messner (2000), structural context defines the organizational regime that “constrains and enables…interactions” (p. 88). Thus, by critiquing the LFL as a business, and by analyzing the league’s uniform, team names, and logos, I will explain the cultural significance of the LFL, and answer the question: How did the LFL provide a structural context in which female athletes were at once empowered by choice and limited by cultural pressures to appear feminine and sexy? While the presence of women in football contests normative gender expectations it is invariably constrained by those same requirements as exemplified by the LFL.

To analyze the uniform, I draw on prior research to evaluate the practicality and functionality of lingerie as football uniform. My critique is also directed by the Women’s Sports Foundation’s (WSF) position on appropriate sports uniforms for women. The WSF is an organization on the frontier of activism for women in sports. Since 1974, when the organization was founded, the WSF has sought to contribute to the development of athletics by leading research efforts, and providing education and financial resources for women and girls. The foundation position on appropriate uniforms outlines the following criteria for appropriate uniforms:

2. Medical and safety concerns.
3. Differences in body type.
4. Issues related to respect for the individual and/or the reality or public perception of inappropriate marketing exploitation.
I measure the uniform against each criterion in order to arrive at a conclusion about the true purpose of the league’s decision to implement a lingerie uniform. By comparing the non-traditional lingerie uniform to classic football uniforms, I will also show how LFL uniforms performed ambivalence about women’s athleticism.

To analyze team names, I consider the findings of Eitzen and Baca Zinn (2001) and Messner (2000), which found that team names for women are often informed by cultural cues and serve to challenge women as serious athletes. For each of the LFL’s 12 team names, I first consider the denotation of the team name and then the connotation. I then consider what meaning is the most salient given the context of lingerie football. To test the validity of my conclusions, I consult team logos to determine which meaning is reinforced by visual content. Some of the questions I use to guide my analysis of team names include:

- What is the meaning of the team name? Denotative? Connotative?
- Is the team name informed by cues? Cultural? Regional?
- How is the team name supported by the logo?

By considering these, among other questions, my intent is to identify multiple conflicting meanings rooted in each team name in order to highlight ambivalence. I also identify patterns and themes among team names that contribute to representations and perceptions of the league. In all, 13 team names and logos (1 league and 12 teams) were analyzed.

I then look at how the league is packaged and distributed to the public via the media using examples found on television (MTV2), online (Lflus.com, Mtv2.com, and Playboy.com), and in print (Playboy magazine). Each media channel and website provides a platform for the public to interact with the LFL. Each media platform, furthermore, targets an audience, and
therefore, communicates a specific brand identity intended for that audience. To analyze each media property, I focus on content including layout, video content, and written descriptions of the LFL. I intend for my critiques to underscore ambivalent messages about the LFL.

Limitations

As noted early on, this research is limited by my own lens as a feminist researcher. Although my analysis of the Lingerie Football League is informed by prior research and provides justification for the conclusions reached, my textual analysis is also subjective. Thus, other researchers, with different backgrounds and experiences than my own, draw other conclusions. Therefore, results are not generalizable.

However, as discussed, one of the strengths of using qualitative research methods is the opportunity to develop an in-depth analysis of the subject otherwise constrained by the rigidity of quantitative methods. Qualitative research methods also yield results that are not fixed, but instead enable multiple readings of the text. This analysis, then, represents one reading. The purpose of this research, however, is not to stand alone, but is instead to contribute to the current body of knowledge and inspire future research on the topic of women in sports.
Chapter 4: Interception: Introducing the Lingerie Football League

The Lingerie Football League (LFL) focused on promoting the sport by “blending action, impact, and beauty” (“LFL 101,” 2012). The league’s stated goal was to employ women as football players without alienating predominantly male sports audience. In this way, the LFL promised to become the “ultimate fan-driven live sports phenomenon” (“LFL 101,” 2012). To achieve these strategic objectives, the league relied on the adage sex sells, using a sexually charged marketing approach that sexually objectified women to pique (heterosexual) men’s interest in lingerie football as a trendy, on-the-rise sport.

Inventing Lingerie Football

The sport of lingerie football was developed by Mitchell Mortaza of Horizon Productions (a multimedia entertainment company). While attending the National Football League’s (NFL) Super Bowl XXXVII in 2003, Mortaza noticed how uninterested fans would leave the stands during halftime to use the restroom and tend to other needs. Mortaza believed that “some people might prefer a raunchier option” (Watcher, 2010). And so, in 2004, the Lingerie Bowl debuted.

The first Lingerie Bowl game was played on February 1, 2004 at Los Angeles Coliseum and was scheduled to overlap with the halftime show of Super Bowl XXXVIII. The game featured the Los Angeles Dream and New York Euphoria teams, each including seven models coached and captained by professional athletes. The bowl game also featured celebrity hosts and a musical performance. Interested fans were able to purchase tickets to watch the game live in
Los Angeles Coliseum. At-home audiences could also tune into the sport by paying a fee of $19.95 per viewing to watch the sport on Pay-Per-View or to stream the live broadcast online. For the first broadcast of the bowl game, promoters anticipated as many as “40 million TV viewers and 50 million people online” (Kiley, 2003). However, there is no reliable data that details the final attendance and broadcast figures.

For the next two years (2005-2006), the bowl game experienced moderate success. Beginning in 2007, however, advertiser support declined because of a variety of decency concerns. Before the first bowl game, in 2004, Dodge withdrew its sponsorship (Bond, 2004). PartyPoker.com replaced Dodge. In 2009, leading up the last bowl game, issues with the venue lead to a last-minute cancellation. The 2009 bowl game was scheduled to be played at Caliente Resorts, a nudist vacation spot in Florida. As a “luxury clothing optional resort,” Caliente’s policies state that “you are free to wear whatever you, the individual, feel most comfortable in” (“Frequently Asked Questions,” 2010). For the game, the LFL wanted the resort to impose a “clothing mandate” (Nipps, 2009). However, Caliente refused to require clothing (Nipps, 2009).

One fear of broadcasters was that the likelihood of nudity in the audience, coupled with the incident of accidental nudity on the field, would compromise Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policies regarding decency. The FCC defines indecency as “language or material that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory organs or activities” (Obscene, Indecent and Profane Broadcasts, 2012). Additionally, the FCC prohibits programming including content that meets the definition of indecency from being broadcast between the hours of 6-10 p.m. Therefore, given the primetime broadcast of the Lingerie Bowl,
owners decided that the bowl game would not take place that year. According to a statement from the LFL’s media director Stephen McMillen:

> The league will not place our fans, players, staff nor partners in a less-than-comfortable environment that would ultimately jeopardize the mainstream perception and reputation of the brand that so many have worked diligently over these past five years to build (Cooper, 2009).

Because of the prevalence of nudity, given the venue and the nature of the sport, and the subsequent financial risks of broadcasting the game live, owners decided that the bowl game would not take place that year.

Building on what the LFL’s owners and spokespeople deemed a “success,” the concept was reintroduced in the fall of 2009 as a league extension known as the Lingerie Football League. The inaugural season of the LFL featured 10 teams continuing the tradition of playing seven-on-seven full-contact tackle football wearing helmets, pads, and, most significantly, lingerie.

To Mortaza, the idea to turn the Lingerie Bowl into a full league was a no-brainer and a smart opportunity from a business perspective. Mortaza believed that of all the factors contributing to the non-success of women’s sports, the factor carrying the most blame was the failure of women’s sports organization to develop marketing strategies that catered to the overwhelmingly male audience for sports. Comparing women’s sports to men’s sports, women’s sports are in a gradual state of decline amid struggles for popularity, sponsorship support, and media coverage. According to Mortaza, the reason why women’s sports continue to fail is because they needed, “some kind of marketing hook” (“Women and Sports Expert,” 2011). The
LFL had “found the niche that can make that happen” (“Minnesota Valkyrie,” 2011). By combining sport and sex the league hoped to pull in athletes and fans in a reciprocally beneficial arrangement. Mortaza described this strategy as a “cross between Maxim and the NFL” (Echeverria, 2009). Mortaza further credited this unique strategy in helping the league to achieve sell-out crowds and record television ratings, although such data are not verifiable (Seidman, 2011).

**Game Rules**

As noted, the LFL was organized differently than other leagues from both an operational and functional perspective. Below, I outline the league’s recruitment strategy, uniform policy, season timeline, and game rules.

**Recruitment.** To recruit eligible players, the Lingerie Football League hosted a series of open tryouts each year. During the off-season, from March until August, each team hosted one local event. Interested women were welcome to attend the event(s) of their choice. If selected for participation in the league, athletes would play for the team at whose tryout they were selected. All women over the age of 18 were eligible to attend tryouts.

The complete schedule for tryouts was posted to the LFL website. A posting for the 2011 tryouts posted to the website read:

Dress attire is cute gym wear (sports bra & shorts) with sneakers or cleats if surface is grass. Please bring a photo to leave behind – Arrive no later than 30 minutes prior to start time to warm-up.
Ladies will be tested through a series of football drill that will include passing, catching, running, speed, hand/eye coordination, quickness, aggression and instinct. (“2011 Open Tryout,” 2011)

Thus, right up front, the league informed hopeful athletes that the league looks for a combination of beauty and athleticism as criteria for participation. This led to ambivalence about the league’s true business goals. As a sport, the primary criteria for participation should have been based on athleticism. However, in the league beauty was a deciding criterion. Thus, it is extremely likely that well-qualified athletes may have been denied participation in the sport due to size, weight, shape, and other appearance-based factors.

**Uniform.** The standardized uniform for the league consisted of a bra, panties, garter, cropped jersey, shoes, and numerals (placed in large text on the left breast and right buttock, and in smaller text on the left and right shoulders) (*Figure 1*). Standard equipment included a helmet (hockey-style, with visor), shoulder pads, knee pads, and elbow pads. Supplemental equipment, such as neck rolls, braces, sweat bands, and underwear, was banned from being worn.

This policy differs dramatically from that of other full-contact football leagues, which require full coverage and protection and do not place strict limitations on supplemental support.
Rules of the Game. LFL games were played on fields that were 50 yards long and 30 yards wide, with eight-yard end zones. To score, athletes could complete a touchdown (six points), complete a conversion run or pass from the one-yard line (one point), complete a conversion run or pass from the three-yard line (two points), or score a safety (two points). Every four downs, teams were expected to complete two passing plays and two rushing plays. The offense consisted of seven players on the field (one quarterback, two running backs, one down-linewoman, and three wide receivers). Offensive linewomen were unable to punt or attempt field goals. The defense was also comprised of seven players on the field (two down-linewomen, one linebacker, two cornerbacks, and two safeties). In addition to these players, each team roster also included six inactive players. The length of each game was 34 minutes. Each half was 17-minutes long. Halves were separated by a 12-minute halftime. In the event of a tie, the game was extended for eight-minute sudden-death overtime.
**Season.** The LFL was divided into two conferences – the Eastern Conference and the Western Conference. Each conference hosted six teams. Each team competed in four games over the course of the league’s regular twenty-eight week (including two bye weeks) season. The season usually began in late August and ended in late January (running in tandem with the NFL season). At the end of the season, the two highest-ranked teams from each conference competed in the conference playoff for the title of Eastern or Western Conference Champions. Conference championship teams then advanced to the league championship game, the repurposed Lingerie Bowl (held annually in Las Vegas). During the off-season, the best players from each conference were also invited to participate in the annual LFL All-Fantasy game (a similar concept to the NBA’s annual All-Star game).

**Business Failures**

Despite press releases that promoted the league as a thriving sports venture, evidence pointed to several failures in the LFL as a business model. Taking a look at one typically upbeat, boilerplate (and quite dubious) press release:

Lingerie Football League (or LFL) broadcast nationally on MTV Networks’ MTV2 channel has become US' fastest growing pro sports league (as per BusinessWeek), having drawn sell-out crowds, record internet traffic, aggressive expansion both domestic with (5) expansion markets introduced in 2011 and international with LFL Canada premiering in 2012, LFL Australia (2013) and LFL Europe (2014) (DeHaven, 2012).

This report certainly makes it seem as if the LFL is a popular sport that generates revenue with ease. However, other evidence puts these claims into question.
Though press releases and other promotional material produced by LFL markets the league as a commercial success, noted business failures have affected the league throughout its run. For example, the claim for the LFL as the fastest growing league appeared 2011, the same year that the league traded down from its professional status to become an amateur organization. The movement from professional to amateur status pointed to problems with the LFL as a business. By downgrading the league’s status, the LFL rid itself of responsibility to the league’s female athletes to provide a salary and health insurance benefits. Prior to the start of the 2011 season, players were compensated for their work with the LFL. As pre-2011 contracts stated:

     Players shall be entitled to receive the following as full and complete compensation:

Fixed Fee:

ACTIVE ROSTER PLAYERS: Event winning team (16 Members – 2 coaches and 14 Players) shall split (20%) Twenty Percent of gross ticket sales while losing team (16 Members – 2 coaches and 14 Players) shall split (10%) ten percent of gross ticket sales per Event. Said fee shall be paid within (5) business days of Producer receiving ticket sales revenues from ticketing agent and/or arena/stadium (“Lingerie League Gets Litigious,” 2009).

Under this agreement, only members of the active roster were eligible to receive a percentage of the sales-based commission. While teams took home a total of 30% of gate proceeds, the league’s owners profited 70%. Players were not paid for participation at any additional promotional events or guest bookings as members of the LFL, although their attendance was required. As if the previous arrangement did not seem exploitative enough, under the new “pay to play, amateur status” players were required to pay the league a $45 participation fee (Schmidt,
Again the league’s owner responded optimistically by arguing that the new fee was a small price to pay in exchange for the benefits LFL athletes gained through their participation in the sport. As Mortaza argued, “The prestige involved with the LFL is second to none. You are flown everywhere. You play at major arenas and stadiums. You are featured on national news” (Zigman, 2012). Mortaza would not publicly admit that players routinely raised money for their own air and bus travel, equipment, and high school field reservations (Chandler, 2011).

The LFL’s struggling financial condition was underscored by the league’s Media Director, Jennifer Colter, who released a statement addressing its viability. It seemed that Colter placed blame with the athletes for the league’s policy changes. As Colter argued, “the former culture under our pay model cultivated a type of player that ultimately had a negative impact both on and off the field-impacting their respective teams and the league” (Chandler, 2011). Thus, Colter implicitly blamed players for the LFL’s revenue problems. Furthermore, Colter insisted that changes in the policy were a response to the “complaints from some of the players in the LFL” and that the move reflected a genuine quest to level the playing field between the league and its competitors (Chandler, 2011). However, it seems unlikely that the LFL would adjust its policies to reflect other women’s leagues because the LFL has long prided itself on its unique business model.

Clearly, the rational explanation for changes to the league’s policy was financial failure. As admitted by Media Director Jennifer Colter, “There seems to be a perception that the league is making hundreds of millions of dollars at this point. The actual truth is that while that league is profitable, which is a huge accomplishment in sports today, it barely generates enough revenues to produce a season” (Chandler, 2011). Therefore, despite claims of profitability and success, the league was in financial ruin.
Evidence also challenges the LFL’s own claims about its “aggressive expansion.” Although the LFL did add new teams and expand into new markets during its four-year run, the LFL also lost teams and were denied expansion at the same rate. For example, over the first two seasons of the LFL, the league saw the operations of five teams suspended. These teams included the Dallas Desire, Denver Dream, Miami Caliente, New York Majesty and San Diego Seduction. As of the 2011 season, only five of the league’s 12 original teams had remained with the LFL. These teams included the Chicago Bliss, Philadelphia Passion, Los Angeles Temptation, and Seattle Mist. Other teams either became defunct or moved to other leagues. Additionally, the LFL faced rejection in its quest for domestic expansion. For example, in 2012, the league was barred from playing games at the Family Arena in St. Charles, MO. According to the County Executive, allowing the LFL to play games at the county-owned area “just wasn’t a good fit and didn’t make sense from a business or public relations standpoint” for the family entertainment venue (“St. Charles,” 2012). Expansion efforts were also abandoned in Oklahoma City, OK in 2010.

The league’s decision to delay the start of the 2011 season, cancel the 2012 season, and adjust the timeline for the 2013 season also hinted at unsuccessful business management. Well-managed and successful sports organizations do not regularly suspend operations.

Criticism

The LFL also faced criticism by feminist proponents of women’s sports. The majority of criticism focused on the obvious sexism at play in the league, most recognizably in the league’s lingerie uniform. Despite “players clad in youth-league-size shoulder pads, lightweight helmets, and knee pads,” supporters commented that, “lingerie football is no pillow fight” (Watcher, 2010). However, as supporters of women’s rights argued, therein lay the problem. The LFL
formula extolled the power of its female athletes while simultaneously minimizing that power by forcing them to play a contact sport in a uniform that was sexually objectifying and physically limiting. This signature blend of sport and sex led to ambivalence about how the sport should be labeled and ambiguity about the league’s intentions. While, objectification is evident in other women’s sports (and in men’s sports too), the LFL’s overt use of sexualization is outstanding.

The LFL relies heavily on sex as its primary promotional hook, to sell the sport to audiences, undermining the competitiveness and authenticity of the sport. According to Dr. Nicole Lavoi of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport, lingerie football “undermines the real athletic achievements of professional female athletes and makes a caricature of them by making people think that sport is only interesting when you market the sex appeal of women’s bodies” (“Women and Sports Expert,” 2011). This problematizes the issue of popularizing women’s sports.

As argued by critics, in spite of claims for the LFL as a successful league that granted women an opportunity to participate in a male-dominated sport and to receive increased visibility in the media as athletes, the league also forced women into participation under the condition of exploitation. Although the league’s owner denied that the league objectified women, he did admit that sex appeal is a part of the league’s marketing formula. According to Mortaza, sex appeal is used “to sell the product, to bring media attention to it, to bring in curious fans but unless it was a real sport and we were serious about the athletics it wouldn’t have shelf life” (Davidson, 2012). (This latter denial is confronted with the rebrand of the LFL after only four years of operation.) Yet, as Kane (2011) argues, “sex sells sex, not women’s sports.” While, the use of sexual objectification is attention-grabbing, it also undermined the true athleticism of female athletes. Therefore, in the LFL, this type of strategy led to ambiguity in defining lingerie
football as serious sport or as sexual spectacle. Although, the LFL met the criteria established by common definitions of sport, which argue that “sports are institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by participants motivated by internal and external rewards” (Coakley, 2007, p. 6). The seriousness of the sport was overshadowed by its use of promotional spectacle.

Still, the LFL was presented to women as at least a chance to get involved in a sport otherwise closed off to them as athletes. With “few other alternatives if they want to continue to compete at a high level in women’s sport,” participation in the LFL was looked at as a rare opportunity for athletic women (Russell, 2012). As expressed by Los Angeles Temptation player Monique Gaxiola:

I appreciate the LFL for giving me the opportunity to showcase my football skills because I’ve been an athlete my entire life… We have proven that we can play a man’s sport as long as you work hard and stay dedicated (Gaxiola, 2011).

Thus, LFL athletes showed great appreciation for the mere opportunity to play a sport they loved and to prove themselves as credible athletes.

As feminist critics have argued, the LFL presented a troubling dilemma for female athletes. As part of the league’s promotional agenda, participation in the league was sold as one of two equally unattractive choices (to play football in lingerie or to not play football at all). Thus, the decision to participate in the LFL was positioned as a catch 22. However, as feminist critics argued, at least one additional alternative was always available to athletes. One option was to participate in other women’s leagues. A second option was to speak out against being objectified and reject the terms of the LFL contract. Despite the pressure to choose either or, LFL
athletes did not need to settle for being presented as sexual beings. It quite possible for a sport to survive, as many leagues do, fully integrating both.
CHAPTER 5: Cultural Ambivalence and the Lingerie Football League

This textual analysis includes critiques of the Lingerie Football League as a business (including the hierarchy of the organization and the contract athletes sign), elements of the LFL’s play structure (including uniform, team names, and logos), and media representations of the LFL on television (MTV2), online (Lflus.com, Mtv2.com, and Playboy.com), and in print (Playboy magazine). These aspects are analyzed to identify examples of cultural ambivalence toward women as athletes, especially in the traditionally male sport of football.

The Business of Lingerie Football

The political economy of sports organizations has a large impact on how sports are produced and marketed to audiences. It is also a significant factor in how the sports industry is sustained and transformed through the distribution of wealth and power. As discussed, men assume dominant control over women’s sports. The implications of this are numerous. First, male control over women’s sports reinforces the notion that men are more qualified. Second, it further skews the distribution of wealth and power in sports in favor of men. Third, the control over women’s sports by men impacts how women’s sport and female athletes are represented.

A look at the LFL’s structural hierarchy reveals that men have been favored in the distribution of wealth and power. Within the organization, men assumed the majority of ownership, management, and coaching positions. This is similar to the structure of most sports, where men typically assume the most authority and control. Women, on the other hand, were
assigned fewer and less significant positions. Furthermore, despite the centrality of athletes to sports, LFL athletes were represented at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy. This structure supports Acker’s (1990) argument that while organizational structures are often considered gender neutral, there is an obvious link between assumptions about gender and privilege and positionality in sports. Thus, in sports, where ideas about men’s bodies and masculinity are valorized, men typically dominate at all levels.

A survey of general managers, coaches, and assistant coaches reveals that these positions were all held by men. Unlike Mortaza, however, many of these men have a history of involvement in sport. For example, Hanford Dixon, head coach for the Cleveland Crush, has worked as a former NFL athlete (Cleveland Browns) and a sports analyst for CBS Cleveland. Gilbert Brown, head coach for the Greenbay Chill, also worked as an NFL athlete (Green Bay Packers) and is currently an owner of a racetrack named the Milwaukee Mile. While women are absent from coaching and management positions, the assumption here is that men are better qualified to serve in these positions than women because of past experience in sports. However, while past experience may better qualify an individual to coach a sport, the same may not hold true for management roles. This is because the responsibilities of a general manager usually have little to do with specific knowledge about sports, and more with basic business functions (i.e. marketing, sales, and operations). Yet, this justification continues to be used as a means of disqualifying women from sports. This justification also supports the findings of Messner (2002), which argued that because men have more opportunities to become involved and remain involved in sports over their developmental lifetime, they are more qualified to play, coach, and manage sports than women. As a result, the gender order in sports is upheld.
Other staff for the LFL included those employed by the league’s internal media network, LFL 360°. The staff of LFL 360° was made up of writers, editors, correspondents, photographers, and other contributors. At the time this research was collected, 10 people contributed to the network’s general content. Only one was a woman. Eileen Sears was a contributor for the Western Conference. In a visual representation of the staff on the LFL 360° website, she was placed at the bottom (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. LFL 360° Staff](image)

At first glance, this placement appears to be justified by the fact that the staff was pictured in rank order with managing editor/director Pat Murphy pictured at the top, followed by national staff, then local staff. However, for no obvious reason, four men (also regional contributors)
were pictured above Eileen. Eileen preceded only the STOB (Sports Tears in Our Beers) Crew, which was a group of three men responsible for Midwest contributions. Prior to the promotion of Pat Murphy to the position of managing editor/director, staff included 18 people. Six of them were women. This reflected a ratio of 2:1, or two men to every one woman represented. The visual representation of this staff also depicted women at the bottom (with the exception of Lauren Gardner) (Figure 3). Gardner was pictured at the top. This may be due to the fact that her role was national in scope. Compared to Gardner, the remaining women held less significant roles at LFL 360°. Four of them, all pictured together at the very bottom, held the generic title of “Contributor” (a role not assigned to any men).
Figure 3. LFL 360° Former Staff.
The radio network for the network was also dominated by men. Titled “8th Man Radio,” there were no female contributors to the radio network. Instead, radio content was controlled by a team of six men (Figure 4).

![LFL 8th Man Radio Staff](image)

*Figure 4. LFL 8th Man Radio Staff*

That few women were represented on the staff of LFL 360° suggested that women had little influence on how the league was represented. It further suggested that a premium was placed on the viewpoints of men, from whose perspective most news and all radio content was produced. It may have also suggested that men were more qualified than women to discuss and comment on women’s performance in football. This idea was also reflected in the placement of women in positions of lower-rank. By placing women at the literal and symbolic bottom, the league signaled that women were not important, or least not as important as men, to the overall success of the LFL. Thus, the structural hierarchy discredited the league’s claim of presenting women as capable and empowered. While they were offered opportunities to perform on the
field as athletes, they were not as welcomed to demonstrate their abilities as members of the league’s structural core.

The LFL Uniform

Uniforms are an important component of team sports. In addition to serving the functional purposes of protecting athletes bodies from injury and organizing groups as a cohesive unit, uniform also serve cultural functions such as communicating gender and status. Given the physically competitive environment of most team sports, functionality is normally prioritized, followed by cultural values. The lingerie uniform at use in the LFL, however, seemed to place a premium on patriarchal cultural values, with functionality taking a back seat. I argue that this led to ambivalence regarding the authenticity of lingerie football as a sport.

The tug-of-war between function and culture is noticeable right away in the LFL uniform. It seems that while patriarchal values about women and desirability dictated the lingerie-esque design of the uniform, functional properties of the uniform were included only as an addendum, with the addition of sub-standard helmets and minimal padding. Compared to traditional football uniform policies, which require head-to-toe coverage, the uniform policy in place in the LFL compromised the protection of athletes’ bodies by forcing them to play a contact sport in a uniform that restricted performance by heightening the risk of injury and increased exploitation by exposing a large area of the body.

Traditional football uniforms include a standard combination of equipment and apparel that safeguard athletes against injury. Equipment includes helmets and padding (shoulder, chest, hip, thigh, and knee). Helmets are perhaps the most important piece of equipment. Made of durable and light-weight plastic material, football helmets also include jaw pads and face masks
(made up of metal bars across the open area) to protect against concussions and other serious head injuries that commonly result from participation in football. For additional protection of the head and face, many leagues also mandate visors and mouth guards, to guard the eyes, mouth, and teeth. Shoulder, chest, hip, thigh, and knee pads, like helmets are also made of a combination sturdy plastic material and foam. Padding is designed to absorb the shock of violent contact, characteristic of tackle football. For more protection, players are encouraged to supplement standard equipment with additional protective padding, flak jackets, wristbands, and other defensive gear.

Apparel includes jerseys, pants, stockings, and shoes. This basic attire helps audiences to identify the sport as football. Between teams, apparel is distinguished through differences in color scheme and team logos. Jerseys are designed with aerodynamic, lightweight fabrics, and incorporate team name, logo, sponsor information, and other appropriate insignia. Jerseys are fitted to cover all protective equipment and remain tucked in during play. Numerals are an important requirement on jerseys. Numerals act as player identification numbers and appear in several places including on the front-center and back-center of jerseys (large type), and left shoulder and right shoulder (small type). Many teams also include small numerals on the backs of helmets and on pants. Football pants are form-fitting, crop-style pants made with pockets and Velcro to secure padding. Knee-high stockings cover the remaining part of the leg. Footwear is cleats.

The uniform requirements of the LFL were noticeably different. While the uniform did include standard equipment such as helmets and pads, the grade of the equipment used in the league was not up to the standard required for a contact sport like tackle football. In the LFL, a hockey-style helmet replaced the style of helmet used in tradition football. Not only is this style
of helmet smaller and lighter, but it is also absent of many of the components of standard football helmets. The streamline design of the hockey-style helmet, while durable, limited protection of the heads and faces of LFL athletes. Arguably the transparent visor of the hockey-style helmet, compared to the face cage found on traditional football helmets, points to the league’s obsession with feminine beauty. By replacing the cage with a visor, audiences were able to see the athletes’ faces throughout the game (Figure 5). The less bulky helmet also indicates the importance of maintaining a feminine style in the design of the league.

![Figure 5. LFL helmet and face visor.](image)

Required pads were also simplified. In the LFL, padding was limited to shoulder pads, knee pads, and elbow pads. No padding was required or available for the chest, hips, or thighs. The absence of padding for these areas of the body increased the likelihood of serious, irreparable injury to athletes. Limited padding was also implicated in the performance of players who, arguably, were restricted from playing to their full potential because of the risks association with making violent tackles and taking hard hits.

The oversized jersey typical of football was also substituted in the LFL – by a cropped jersey, secured over shoulder pads by spandex. Pants were substituted by panties. Player
identification numbers remained, but were strategically placed on the left breast (of the bra) and right buttock (of the panties). Uniforms were complete with matching garters, which athletes wore around their thigh and/or neck. Arguably, the minimalist design of LFL uniform apparel contributed to the sexual exploitation of female athletes by presenting the body as on display. That padding was limited in order to accommodate the style of the uniform also suggests that more important that facilitating a sports environment focused on athletes, the LFL was focused on selling a very specialized product: the sexualized woman.

The idea that the league’s primary product was women and not sport was also reinforced by the inclusion of a nudity clause in the league’s athletic contract. According to the contract:

**NUDITY:** Player has been advised and hereby acknowledges that Player’s participation in the Event and the related practice sessions and Player’s services and performance hereunder may involve accidental nudity. In light of the foregoing, Player knowingly and voluntarily agrees to provide Player’s services hereunder and has no objection to proving services involving Player’s accidental nudity (“Lingerie League Gets Litigious,” 2009).

The nudity clause also cleared the league of liability related to incidents of accidental nudity during broadcasts of the sport. According to the league’s owner, this type of policy is standard across leagues. As explained by Mortaza, “the league and the network has to be protected in that instance because it is a live broadcast and you don't have the opportunity to edit it so legally you have to have that in your contracts”(Zigman, 2012).

Despite the risks of injury and exploitation, athletes were also discouraged from supplementing uniforms with any additional protective equipment or apparel. As stated in an early version of the LFL contract:
Player shall wear wardrobe provided by Producer. In light of foregoing, said wardrobe material shall be “non-see through” material. Player shall not wear any additional garments under wardrobe provided by Producer without prior written consent from Producer. Should player violate this clause, Player shall be fined a total sum of Five Hundred Dollars ($550.00) per occurrence ("Lingerie League Gets Litigious," 2009).

Such policies, according to Cantelon (2008), are promoted as necessary to the integrity of sport but actually represent an underlying patriarchal agenda at play in sports to present female athletes as sexual objects performing for the benefit of male audiences. As explained by a former LFL player, the uniform policy, including the nudity clause, was put in place because owners “did not want women wearing bras or underwear, since that would inhibit instances where players were exposed when uniforms were ripped off or pulled down during play” ("Lingerie League Gets Litigious," 2009) (Figure 6). Such policies also indicate that uniforms are not unanimously agreed upon by athletes, despite their signed contracts that imply agreement to all rules. Policies reinforced by strict penalties point to forced complicity. Arguably, the LFL uniform and contract policies regarding the uniform obligated the female players to toe the line with the sexually objectifying LFL brand.

Figure 6. Accidental nudity in the LFL.
It is apparent that the LFL brand relied heavily on a singular body ideal, or single body type in determining the beauty of its players. For women in the US, this standard includes flat stomachs, long legs, smooth skin, long hair, and large breasts. Needless to say, these qualities do not come naturally for many women. Yet, the LFL uniform privileges this ideal. Such uniform requirements highlight the notion that what is most important to the LFL brand is not sport, but beauty and sexuality. According to Brabazon (2006), scanty uniforms for female athletes draw “the critical gaze to uniquely feminine shapes like the hips and abdomen” (p. 75). Thus, the revealing quality of the lingerie uniform pressures women to work excessively to achieve a perfect body in order to fit the uniform. As Brabazon (2006) argues, “the desire once more is to make the body fit the frock, rather than the frock fit the body” (p. 75).

In the LFL, the idea of fit was very important in order to “sell the product, to bring media attention to it, [and] to bring in curious fans” (Davidson, 2012). Therefore, women who did not fit into the league’s promotional agenda (in terms of appearance) were immediately disqualified from participation, regardless of athletic ability. Thus, the argument can be made that the LFL sent an ambivalent message regarding its product and its athletes to audiences. More than a sports league, the LFL presented itself as a form of specialized adult entertainment.

Team Names

Team Names for the LFL were determined by the franchise owner or by the submission of votes. These names followed cues established by the context of the league – a “lingerie” football league “for women.” Using these cues, it is unsurprising that in analyzing the assigned team names, a non-traditional pattern of gender marking emerges. Compared to conventional naming formulas, explicit gender markers such as feminine suffixes (-ette, -esse), physical markers (belle), or gendered language (girl, woman, lady) are not present. However, the use of
terms such as “lingerie” and descriptors such as “bliss” appear to act in the place of these standard markers, implying associations with gender.

In the league’s overall name, the Lingerie Football League, the term “lingerie” rouses an immediate association to women. Although the etymology of the word is French, referring to undergarments (irrespective of gender), the popular cultural definition of the term refers explicitly to intimate apparel for women. Thus, feminine meanings and associations surface. The implications of these feminine meanings and associations are reflected in audiences’ response to the LFL. These responses include challenges to the definition of the LFL as sport, as well as questions regarding the knowledge and ability of LFL athletes. The use of “lingerie” as it relates to LFL athletes also implies the inclusion of a certain type of woman. Cultural associations between “lingerie” and women evoke ideologies of the singular body ideal for women – thin, taut, proportionate bodies. It also calls to mind other characteristics associated with femininity including cosmetic flawlessness, longer hair, and heterosexuality. This idea is supported by typical portrayals of women in lingerie magazines. It is also reinforced by understandings of the differences between lingerie (sexual) and everyday use underwear (modest). Lingerie is eroticized through the use of sheer, delicate fabrics (lace, chiffon, silk), close-fitting materials (spandex, leather), risqué design (thong underwear, negligee, baby doll), girlhood accoutrements (bows, ruffles, ribbons). As such it is usually connected to romantic, personal, and pornographic settings. Consequently, these meanings are transferred to the LFL and its athletes signifying gender. Combined with the concept of a football league, “lingerie” is intentionally dissonant. The sport of football carries associations with power, aggression, masculinity, and force. Lingerie carries associations with sensuality, passivity, and femininity. Taken together, then, the LFL positions itself as a highly-sexualized, “powder-puff” version of football in which players wear
little and agree to being stripped naked (by each other) during play. As a result, women’s athletic abilities are compromised by an emphasis on physicality and overt sexuality.

Gender is also coded into the team names of the league’s franchises. Taken out the context of the league, many team names do not imply gender. However, the teams names also do not define characteristics usually associated with football either. Take for example the names of the Chicago and Baltimore franchises, which are Bliss and Charm respectively. Both names communicate delicacy and pleasantry. Bliss is defined as “complete happiness,” while charm is defined as “physical grace or attraction” (“Bliss,” 2012). Neither of these captures the essence of football, which is often considered a hard and rough sport. Compared to NFL team names for teams representing the same locations, these names also do not communicate as strong an identity. In the NFL the teams representing Chicago and Baltimore are the Bears and Ravens. Both bears and ravens are large-bodied, powerful animals, recognized in nature for their strength. This supports the findings of previous researchers who argued that team names for women’s teams serve as sites of discrimination by promoting stereotypes and creating bias (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001; Messner, 2002; Smith 1997). A more explicit example of gender differentials between the LFL and NFL can be seen in the name for the teams representing Minnesota. The names Viking (NFL) and Valkyrie (LFL) come from the same origin. However, Valkyrie is defined as, “any of the maidens of Odin who choose the heroes to be slain in battle” (“Valkyrie,” 2012). Here, while the NFL team name reflects no specific gender, the LFL team name is differentiated through the use of gendered language. Such a strategy works to reinforce gender stratification by placing women in an inferior position as compared to men, even in the context of a single-gendered league.
Whereas NFL names communicate power and skill, LFL names communicate meekness and cheer. Although both leagues use team names that rely on geography, weather, and other common formulas, the names chosen for the LFL do not measure up to those in the NFL, and are generally incongruent with ideas about football. The use of names such as Breeze and Mist do not align with the masculine orientation of sport. Instead, names like these communicate the obvious disconnect between lingerie football and traditional football, except where gender is recognized. Where gender is recognized, such names become logical because of their associations to what is feminine. Thus, team names in the LFL arguably serve to “define women and their place” in football (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 2001). Consequently, lingerie football is marginalized in the larger context of sports.

Gender can also be found in other connotations LFL team names carry. This is because it appears that each team name follows a theme that intentionally enhances associations between the league and what is feminine. Considered independently of associations with the league, team names such as Bliss (Chicago) and Charm (Baltimore) communicate positive emotional states. However, when considered dependently, the same names take on new meaning. For example, Passion (Philadelphia) is defined as an “intense, driving, or over mastering feeling or conviction,” such as the will to win (“Passion,” 2012). In the context of the league it may take on a secondary definition, “ardent affection; sexual desire” (“Passion,” 2012). Likewise, the primary definition of Temptation (Los Angeles) is, “the state of being tempted especially to evil” (Merriam-Webster, 2012). In the context of the LFL, it may also take on the definition of being “a cause or occasion of enticement,” especially of the sexual nature (“Temptation,” 2012). Stronger names such as Crush (Cleveland) also lose some of their clout in affiliation with the LFL. While crush could define the process of, “[squeezing] or [forcing] by pressure so as to alter
or destroy,” it can equally be defined in context as an overwhelming feeling of adoration for a person of interest.

Taken in the context of geography, notions of gender are at once challenged and upheld. Take, for example, the Philadelphia Passion. The name Passion may have either represented the team as belonging to “The City of Brotherly Love” or to women as passionate beings or the subjects of passionate feelings. This trend is also apparent in the names of the Baltimore Charm (“Charm City”), and Las Vegas Sin (“Sin City”). Other team names, such as Tampa Breeze, Seattle Mist, and Green Bay Chill, link teams to weather typical of the city’s locale, and in this way, liken their female players to natural phenomena (i.e., LFL players are associated with “mother nature”).

**Logos**

Team names are enhanced by the visual content of a logo. Through the use of logos, the lexical content of team names is narrowed to strict definitions and intentional meanings, promoting the league’s affinity with feminine sexuality.

**Typeface.** Each logo was similar in terms of representing the team name front and center. Where logos differed was in the style of font and other formatting chosen. The majority of logos, presented team names in heavy-weight, bold, capitalized text. This style of typeface is commonly associated with a masculine persona and communicates bravado and strength. The other three logos featured team names in light-weight, serifed, sentence-case text. This style of typeface is commonly associated with a feminine persona and communicates gracefulness and poise. In each case, the style of typeface used reflects Lewis and Walker’s (1989) idea of “typographical
allusion.” Typographical allusion refers to the ability of a typeface to transcend the linguistic definition of the physical text to provide additional layers of meaning.

**Imagery.** For each logo, images supported the lexical content of the team name and contribute to emphasis on femininity in the league. Four logos (Lingerie Football League, Las Vegas Sin, Los Angeles Temptation, and Tampa Breeze) featured silhouettes. Although cast in shadow, it is clear that each silhouette was that of a woman’s body. This is evident by the shape of the body, including curves as the hips and breasts. The smooth outline of the body may have also indicated that the model was nude, wearing little clothing or wearing clothing so tight that it cannot be distinguished from the natural frame. This type of silhouette is similar to those used in signage for gentleman’s clubs and in pornography. Thus, through the use of such depictions, LFL logos reinforced the league’s obsession with the female body and increased associations with ideal beauty.

Feminine associations are also conjured through the use of symbolism in team logos. Two logos that incorporated symbolism include the Orlando Fantasy and Philadelphia Passion. The Orlando Fantasy logo incorporated wings as an element of design. In the logo, two large white wings were placed on either side of the team name. Wings are a popular symbol in sports, typically representing speed or agility in performance. In the Orlando Fantasy logo, however, it seems that the use of wings served a different symbolic purpose. In the context of the LFL, and in the context of the name Fantasy, the wings appear to have signified an angelic, soft, or ethereal quality. This reading supports the definition of fantasy as imaginative or whimsical. In the context of football, this reading is dissonant. Fragility and delicacy, as signified by the use of wings is not a desired trait in footballers. Illustrated in white, and given the backdrop of lingerie
football, the wings are also reminiscent of the Victoria Secret Angels campaign, which pairs runway models with angel wings to model lingerie.

The logo for the Philadelphia Passion incorporated a heart symbol. In the logo, the symbol is made-up by two overlapping footballs and doubles as the “o” in Passion. The use of the heart symbol may have alluded to the team’s affiliation with the City of Philadelphia, which is also known as the “City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection.” In the context of lingerie football, the heart may also have signified love, lust, or compassion. Each of these is an emotional state commonly associated with women or that represents the relationship between women and men. Love and lust in particular, are also commonly associated with sex or romance. Taken in the context of the LFL, the heart shape created by the football may have also represented breast or buttocks, a nod to the celebrated T&A (Tits and Ass) aspect of the league.

**Media Representations of the LFL**

**MTV2.** MTV2 served as the Lingerie Football League’s exclusive broadcast partner for what would become the final two seasons of the sport. A Viacom Media Network, MTV2 is branded as a “top destination for pre-mainstream entertainment” and provides 24-hour access to programming targeted to young male viewers (“MTV2-Viacom,” 2012). The network logo features the image of a two-headed dog accompanied by the tagline, “man’s best friend.” Currently, the cable network is available in 77 million homes (“MTV2-Viacom,” 2012). Additionally, Mtv2.com, the network’s companion domain, reaches 253 global unique visitors monthly (“Mtv2.com,” 2013).

The commercial relationship between MTV2 and the LFL began during the 2010 season. During the season, the LFL teamed up with MTV2 to broadcast the league’s regular season
games. The result was a television series titled, “The LFL Presents: Friday Night Football.” The series premiered on Friday, September 3, 2010 at 8:30 P.M. The series was picked up for a second season in 2011 (airing in the 10:00 P.M. time slot). During the second season, MTV2 also received the rights to broadcast the Lingerie Bowl, the league’s annual championship game.

The relationship between the sports league and the cable network seemed highly synergistic. For MTV2, the relationship provided new and innovative entertainment content and access to a new fan base. For the LFL, the relationship promised increased media visibility. However, a closer look at the arrangement between the two businesses suggests that although synergistic, the partnership was not an unqualified success for its brand and its female players. The relationship, I argue, may have boosted uncertainly about the future direction of the league and its authenticity as a professional sports brand. In analyzing content online at MTV2.com, I found several examples of ambivalence toward female athletes. These examples represent the four general forms of ambivalence outlined by Duncan and Hasbrook (1988), which include (1) quantitatively limited coverage of women’s sports, (2) incongruities between narrative and visual depictions, (3) “micro ambivalence,” and (4) “macro ambivalence” (p. 14).

The first indication of ambivalence is evident in the description of the Lingerie Football League posted on the series homepage. The description of the league, published in 2011 reads:

Fantasy finally becomes reality when the *Lingerie Football League* returns to MTV2 LIVE every Friday night this fall. The 2011/2012 season will be bigger than ever with a beefed up schedule, five new teams and for the first time, LIVE coverage of the Lingerie Bowl.
The Lingerie Football League is anything but powder-puff. This is women's professional
tackle football with 12 teams fighting for a shot to play in the Lingerie Bowl. Don't be
fooled by the long hair and sexy uniforms, these players are former college athletes who
train hard, tackle harder and play to the whistle.

The 2011/2012 LFL Season kicks off **Friday, August 26th** and continues through the
Conference Finals on 1/29/12 and the Lingerie Bowl in Las Vegas, February 5th 2012.

**Catch the games on MTV2 Friday nights at 10PM EST.**

The above description heralds the marriage of sport and sex in the LFL as fantasy finally
becoming reality, as if to suggest that this is a union men have long awaited. It goes on to
celebrate the LFL as a serious sport by calling the league, “bigger than ever” and “anything but
powder-puff.” Attention is then refocused to the “long hair and sexy uniforms” players wear.
Then, back to the physicality of the sport by describing athletes as players who, “train hard” and
“play to the whistle.” The ebb and flow of statements praising the sport as competitive with
statements highlighting players’ appearance signals ambivalence. By blending sports-centered
and appearance-centered statements equally, the sexist subculture of the LFL is called to the
forefront. This leads to ambiguity about how the league should be perceived.

**Limited Coverage.** The contract between the LFL and MTV2 for broadcast rights was, in
some ways, a win-win because of the increased visibility MTV2 brought to the league and the
new audience the LFL promised MTV2. Yet, the contract, paradoxically, limited coverage of the
sport. I argue that this limitation contributed to ambivalence around the commercial viability of
the LFL. It further contributed to ambivalence about women’s roles as professional athletes
because of the contradictions between the aims of the LFL and MTV2 (as a non-sports network).
First of all, MTV2 is not a sports network. Although the audience provided by MTV2 overlaps with the league’s targeted demographic of males aged 12-34 years, the network does not boast sports-minded audiences tuning in for sports-centered programming. Instead, the MTV2 audience seeks lifestyle content (“MTV2-Viacom,” 2012). Second, the timeslots for both seasons of “Friday Night Football” fell during what is commonly referred to as a dead period in television. In television jargon, primetime on Friday is known as the “Friday Night Death Slot,” due to industry perceptions that audiences are out enjoying leisure activity and are not tuned in to TV (Goodman, 2007). Third, despite the fact that the relationship between the league and MTV2 lasted two seasons, full episodes of “Friday Night Football” end at season one on MTV2.com. Of regular season one games, only games 3-19 (out of 20) are available to view online. A playoff special, aptly titled, Leather & Lace is also available. A second playoff highlight program is unavailable.

**Incongruent Narrative and Visual Portrayals.** Ambivalence is also produced by mismatched narrative and visual coverage of “Friday Night Football.” From the 17 available episodes, I chose “Game 19 – Philadelphia vs. Tampa Breeze” as a representative sample because, as a conference final, the game featured two of the league’s strongest teams and some of the league’s strongest athletes competing for the title of Conference Champions. Therefore, I felt it would be interesting to see how these athletes were represented and discussed as the best the league has to offer.

The episode opens with a commercial advertising LFL playoff weekend and includes details for upcoming broadcasts of a preview of the LFL conference finals and two live playoff matchup games. In the commercial, a montage of visuals of live-action scenes from LFL games is interspersed with visuals of LFL athletes casually posing, dressing, and gazing wantonly into
the camera. These visuals are accompanied by a narrative male voice-over that describes the upcoming playoff weekend as “epic” and filled with “action,” explaining how teams that “dominated” over the season will “square up for one final showdown” to be “crowned queens of the gridiron.” While the audio message leads with a powerful tone, the visual message downplays its force. This incongruity between the visual and the narrative raises some ambiguity about whether LFL athletes should be perceived as models or as serious athletic professionals.

A second example of narrative/visual incongruity is found in the opening credits of the broadcast. In the opening credits, the lyrics to the theme song are declared powerfully against a backdrop of varying images. Lyrics describe “Friday Night Football” as a high-energy experience during which the “lights and the cameras are flashing,” and fans are “on their feet” ready for “action.” The lyrics also describe the competiveness of the women as “thunder and lightning” and full of “high-speed chasing, racing” and “smashing.” These lyrics are juxtaposed with visuals of exploding fireworks, excited fans, live-action shots, and shots of LFL athletes behind the scenes. The scenes of fireworks and celebratory fanfare are congruent with the action of the lyrics. However, the visuals of players off-field are not. Depictions of players in the opening credits show them as concerned with their appearance (wearing full make-up, posing seductively, etc.). Depictions also show women as compartmentalized body parts (i.e. extreme close ups of the breasts, abdomen, and/ or buttocks). These kinds of visuals undercut the seriousness of the LFL as sport and raises ambiguity about whether LFL athletes should be viewed as models or athletes.

A third example is provided by visuals in the lower third throughout the broadcast. The lower third is the area located at the bottom of the screen where graphics and captions are usually shown during television broadcasts. During LFL broadcasts, two different types of captions are
used in the lower third. In the first case, when a player is called out by announcers, the caption in the lower third illustrates the player’s stats from the current season (as is typical in sports broadcasts). In the second case, the caption in the lower third details other information including host team, position(s) played, hometown, age, weight, and height (atypical of sports broadcasts). In either case, information about the player is supplemented by a digital graphic of the player. In the digital image, the player is shown acting out a series of poses, including mimicking football poses (i.e. flexing muscles, squatting). This combination of visuals and text both represents and mocks the women as serious professionals.

**Micro Ambivalence.** Micro ambivalence describes how positive and negative messages are combined within the commentary of one announcer to cast doubt upon the legitimacy of a player’s athletic skill (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988). This type of ambivalence was especially apparent in commentary during Game 19 between the Tampa Breeze and Philadelphia Passion. Throughout the broadcast, the commentary of play-by-play announcer Sean Salisbury reflected competing ideas about LFL athletes. On one hand, Salisbury celebrated the athletes, highlighting their rushing and passing statistics. Salisbury regularly refers to the women as “disciplined” and “athletic.” On one occasion, he also refers to Tampa Breeze player KK Matheny as a “fireball.” On the other hand, Salisbury also discusses the athletes using sexist language. Early on Salisbury defends Tampa Breeze player Denesha Crawford against critics, but does so by stating, “The girl can play and she’s a leader.” Later in the broadcast, Salisbury also highlights an unsuccessful block against Saige Steinmetz, also of the Tampa Breeze, by stating, “Hello. Don’t try to block me. Who’s your momma, not your daddy?” Each of these examples contributes to ambivalence by overemphasizing gender and women as sex objects. By referring to Crawford as a “girl” and
clarifying Steinmetz as a “momma” (not a daddy), Salisbury also minimizes each athlete’s authority as an empowered athlete. This occurs repeatedly throughout the broadcast.

**Macro Ambivalence.** Macro ambivalence describes how positive and negative messages are combined between commentators within a single sports broadcast (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988). Between Salisbury and co-commentator Tom Dore, competing messages are exchanged on multiple occasions. On one occasion in particular, Dore poses the question, “When we say tough tackle, how often do I say Liz Gorman?” To which Salisbury responds, “Her instinct. She’s 5’5 and plays like she’s 6ft.” While Dore credits Gorman as a powerful athlete, Salisbury minimizes Gorman’s performance by mentioning her physical stature. It may seem that by stating that “She’s 5’5 and plays like she’s 6ft.” is intended as a compliment to the player. However, it also suggests that her performance is a failed attempt at passing as one of the guys. She may play big, but she’s still just a small woman. Therefore, this exchange provides one example of how statements are shared between commentators that contribute to ambivalent messages about female athletes in the LFL. That commentators constantly need to mention the gender, size, and appearance of LFL athletes signals ambiguity about how to accept and respond to women on the field.

In these ways, the LFL lacks recognition and power as an authentic sporting event (Duncan & Hasbrook, 2002). While MTV2 gained from this arrangement, by fulfilling its obligation to produce entertainment programming, the LFL lost by asking audiences and critics to question the true intentions of the sports league and the very legitimacy of its female athletes.

**Playboy.** Ambivalent media representations of the Lingerie Football League also extended to its promotion in pornographic magazines such as *Playboy*. *Playboy*, published by
American Media, Inc., and thanks to Editor-In-Chief and founder Hugh M. Hefner, is a popular magazine delivering what it calls “lifestyle” content targeted to men. According to the most recent media kit for the publication, published in 2012:

PLAYBOY magazine, an American icon, plays an integral role in modern culture. The unique combination of award-winning journalism, humor, short fiction, interviews, lifestyle service information and beautiful women has made PLAYBOY a favorite among readers and the media for generations. More than a magazine, PLAYBOY is a lifestyle, an aspiration, a state of mind and a platform of ideas shared by great thinkers and regular guys alike. (Playboy Media Kit, 2012)

As a “legendary brand,” Playboy successfully profits from the sexualization of culture by featuring women as the key subjects of its provocative images in order to reach 1+ million readers each month (Playboy, 2012). 79% of these readers are men (Playboy Media Kit, 2012). Online, Playboy reaches an even larger audience of over five million visitors per month (“Playboy.com,” 2013).

The issue of Playboy featuring the LFL was published in February 2011. For the issue, which carried a football theme (in honor of the Super Bowl, played annually in the same month), the LFL was featured as the subject of the cover story. Additionally, LFL athletes were featured as cover models and included as the subjects of a series of photographs following a sport motif. Athletes were also featured online, at Playboy.com, in supplemental content available only by subscription. Through these representations, Playboy demonstrates two forms of sexualization noted by Gill (2007): (1) the erotic presentation of women; (2) the use of pleasure-seeking
vocabulary. It becomes clear through the analysis of these representations that, as an “American icon,” the “state of mind” Playboy expresses is marked by patriarchal values.

**Playboy Magazine**. In all, 10 players (one from each then-current team) were selected to participate in the issue, which also included the publication’s annual *The Year in Sex* review. Players chosen included: Mikayla Wingle (Tampa Breeze), Nadia Larysa (Chicago Bliss); Stephanie Noel (Los Angeles Temptation); Tisha Marie (Dallas Desire), Stephanie Rollis (Baltimore Charm), Tanyka Renee (Philadelphia Passion); Ashley Helmsatter (Miami Caliente), Vanessa Sanchez (San Diego Seduction); Chelsie Jorgensen (Seattle Mist); and Jeannette McCoy (Orlando Fantasy)

![Playboy Magazine Cover (Feb. 2011)](image)

*Figure 7. Playboy Magazine Cover (Feb. 2011)*

On the cover, a single image of three LFL athletes (Marie, Rollis, and Wingle) is chosen to represent the group (*Figure 7*). As is typical of magazine cover photography, the main image is large enough that it covers the entire page, including parts of the masthead and selling line.
Still, there is no mistake that the publication is *Playboy* and that its main marketing point is “Entertainment for Men.” With this marketing objective in mind, the main cover line, which invites readers to “Hit the Showers with the Lingerie Football League: The Sexiest Show on Turf” makes sense. This is also reinforced through other, smaller cover lines surrounding the main image including “The Year in Sex” and “The Demise of the Hollywood Tough Guy.”

In the photograph, each model is positioned in a coquettish pose to attract the attention of the assumed heterosexual male reader. The model on the right is posed with her backside to the reader, looking over her shoulder. She appears smiling, slightly bent over, with one hand on her hip. The model on the left is posed facing the camera head-on. While she does not appear to be smiling, she indicates that she welcomes the attention of the male reader by the way she pulls down the strap of her tank with one hand, and tugs at her shorts with the other. The model in the center is posed on her knees, legs spread apart, pinning a football to the ground. She leans into the camera, exposing her cleavage. All three poses, suggest to the reader that that the women in the photo are sexually available.

In addition to the suggestive posing, all three models are dressed in identical outfits. With the exception of accessories (football socks, football gloves, and cleats) and a props (an LFL football), however, there is no indication that these uniforms are for sport. There is also no indication that the women pictured are athletes. Instead, the “uniform” worn by the women in the cover photo appears to represent only a costuming decision made to follow the overall theme of the issue. Each woman wears a low-cut, midriff-baring white tank top, black short shorts, tall socks, and cleats. Each woman’s cleavage, bottom, arms, back, abdomen, and legs are exposed. These are areas of the body commonly recognized as sexy or appealing to men. In addition, the style of shorts worn in the photograph bare resemblance to the Cheeky style of panties made
popular by women’s lingerie brand, Victoria’s Secret. The Victoria’s Secret Panty Style Guide describes this style as “A little panty with lots of cheek peek” and “The perfect pick for when a little reveal is all you want.” The term cheek in reference to the bottom is also emblematic of youth or childishness, both indicative of forms of sexualization of women (Gill, 2007). Thus, by wearing this style of shorts on the cover of the men’s magazine, LFL athletes present themselves as both sexy and full of girlish innocence; traits that, in women, are culturally considered to be pleasing to men.

This combination of pose and costume is also extended on the inside pages of the magazine. Throughout the full-color spread, LFL athletes are pictured on the field, in the locker room, and in the shower. In many scenes, athletes are pictured individually. In others, players are shown together; engaging in actions that insinuate girl-on-girl sex, playing out a popular fantasy of heterosexual men.

*Playboy.com.* Online, at Playboy.com, the synergy between the LFL and Playboy Enterprises is further capitalized on by offering additional LFL-Playboy content not available in the magazine (*Figure 8*). Additional content was offered at three price levels. For free, readers could log onto Playboy.com to view three additional photos and one video of LFL athletes dressed in their official sport uniforms. For signing up with the site (by providing a confirmed email address), readers could also see nude versions of the same content. For a subscription fee of $19.95, readers could be granted full access to all Playboy content, including content featuring the LFL, as member of site’s cyber club. Differences in the content offering at each price level reveal ideas about the value placed on women’s bodies. It can be implied from these differences that a woman’s body is more valuable and attention-worthy to men when nude, than when clothed.
On the website, content was promoted to viewers as “Fantasy Football: Redefined with Lingerie” (“Fantasy Football,” 2012). A detailed description on the site also described LFL athletes, stating:

They may put the skin in pigskin, but the powerhouse women of the Lingerie Football League are dead serious about their sport. Take a peek inside the locker room of the best-looking football players in the country, then meet them inside the Cyber Club for even more sex appeal of the smash-mouth variety! (“Fantasy Football,” 2012).
This description calls attention to the latent contradictions found in the relationship between the LFL and Playboy. On one hand, the description calls out the players as “dead serious” and as “powerhouse women.” On the other hand, the description highlights their physical appeal and invites readers to “peek inside the locker room.” By combining two ambivalent messages in the same passage, the credibility of lingerie footballers as serious is undermined. Furthermore, power is given to male readers by allowing them to “peek” at the women in their private space. The word peek implies that this surveillance is furtive, and is also indicative of voyeurism. Notions of voyeurism are heightened by the women’s awareness that they are being watched, as portrayed in each depiction. Thus, readers are not being invited to view the women athletes as active competitors in sports, but as beautiful models masquerading as football players.

Between the clothed and nude versions of the landing pages, I expected the only difference between content to be whether the bodies of the athletes were covered or exposed. However, there were more marked differences than the presence or absence of clothing. While the three photos were comparable, with models kept in similar poses and against the same backdrops (Figure 9), the video content communicated an entirely different tone with respect to the league.
In the open version of the video, athletes practice an active voice by discussing their thoughts, ideas, and opinions about being female athletes and their involvement with lingerie football. Among other things, players express an enjoyment over the opportunity to be involved in a sport otherwise closed off to them, even despite the requirement of wearing a lingerie uniform. One player even describes some of the benefits of participating in the sport, including building relationships with other women, and increased visibility to the capabilities of athletic women. Alternatively, in the nude version of the video, these voices are silenced. Instead, a montage of photos and videos play against a musical score. Thus, it seems that in the nude version of the video, not only are the women stripped of their clothes, but they are also symbolically stripped of their agency. This representation suggests that women are to be seen and not heard. An assumption here may also be that the self-expression of women is an interruption to the fantasy simulated by the opportunity for men to view their bodies and to create their own narratives. Clearly, by partnering with the pornographic magazine, the league

Figure 9. Contrast between nude and clothed LFL/Playboy content.
and its athletes contributed to ambivalence about the LFL and about female athletes in general. This type of representation complements post-feminism by both promising and undercutting women’s power to construct themselves, and it reassigns that power back men (who develop their own sexual fantasies).
CHAPTER 6: Touch Downs (Conclusions)

The purpose of this research was to examine the cultural politics behind the development and promotion of the now defunct Lingerie Football League (LFL). While the LFL provided an opportunity for women to participate in football, the promotional strategy used to market the league presented sport as the pretext for what was, in reality, entertainment spectacle. I argued that the result of this conflict between the assumed purposes of the LFL (to provide an athletic opportunity to women and to advance the progress of women in sports) and the league’s blatant commercial intentions (to generate interest in the LFL as mainstream entertainment in order to gain a profit) led to ambiguity about the validity of women as athletes and their power to change the culture of sexism prevalent in the sports industry, and in society in general.

The media often misrepresent women by casting them in roles that reify patriarchal ideas about womanhood and femininity. Media representations of women present them as idealized, sexualized, or trivialized; especially against the overpowering discourse created by representations of men as domineering and physically powerful. In sports, while women are more formidable competitors than before, portrayals of female athletes as passive subjects and as sexual exhibitionists are a sign that the industry continues to view women as a threat to the patriarchal fortitude of the industry. Representations of the LFL in promotional media, including on television (MTV2), online (Lflus.com, Mtv2.com, and Playboy.com), and in print (Playboy magazine), reinforced this bias. Consistently, the LFL was depicted as the league that put the “skin in pigskin” (as the New York Daily News described it in 2008) and its athletes as “football femme fatales” (Au, 2012).
Still, promotional materials for the LFL presented the league’s female athletes as empowered by their participation in the sport, despite the use of sexualized representations to sell the sport to audiences. Players described the decision to participate in the league as a display of individualism and free choice. Regardless of the obvious influences of culture and politics on the development and promotion of the LFL, athletes further expressed feelings of control and liberation as women at the vanguard of the movement towards equality in sports.

Such attitudes are characteristic of Gill’s (2007) post-feminist sensibility that explains how women internalize cultural ideas about sexuality and desirability, personalizing them and enacting them as free will. This outlook is also symptomatic of what McRobbie (2004) describes as the double entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist politics. On the one hand, LFL athletes embraced feminist politics by offering themselves as a model of female success in the face of industry opposition. On the other hand, LFL athletes rejected feminist politics by projecting a liberated, individual view of the self that was okay with playing with her sexuality if it meant more power.

While the LFL was publicized as a real chance for women to demonstrate their power and authority in the sports industry, it is impossible to ignore the control over lingerie football (as a business and as a cultural formation) by men. The hierarchy of control in the LFL mirrored the pyramid-like hierarchy of control in society. In the league, athletes made up the structural base, representing the largest group, sharing the smallest allocation of wealth and power. Conversely, owners made up the apex, sharing the largest allocation of wealth and power among the smallest peer group. As voluntary participants in the sport, players had some control in constructing their own representation as athletes. However, as the owners, producers, and coveted audience of the women’s sport, men’s stake in producing these representations was more
significant. All the same, women were expected to view involvement in the LFL as progressive and empowering. This reflected a cultural shift to a new post-feminist sensibility.

In the LFL, the prevailing culture of hegemonic masculinity in sports was masked by a promotional discourse that located women at the forefront. By presenting itself as a post-feminist cultural product, the LFL avoided directly confronting the male-centered tenets imbedded in the league. The LFL embraced a brand of in-your-face sexualization so exaggerated audiences may have looked beyond it, ignoring the obvious social, cultural, and political influences that drove the sport. Producers touted lingerie football as a sport suiting the liberated interests of the freethinking modern woman. Yet, as the promotional discourse produced by the LFL showed, liberation is a manufactured expression validated by mass-produced misrepresentations of female athletes that depict them as satisfied, willful participants in their own objectification. In the LFL, women appeared as active agents and sex objects in a voyeuristic sport that co-opts elements of hyper-masculine ideology. However, as the financial failures of the LFL and as the latest incarnation of the LFL – the Legends Football League – suggest, the LFL’s exploitation of its female players is not without blowback. Although slow to respond to external pressure, the LFL specifically and perhaps the wider sports industry are not impervious to feminist criticism.

Discussion

One goal of this research was to look at how the LFL echoed a post-feminist sensibility, engaging both feminist and antifeminist ideas that led to ambivalence about lingerie football and its athletes. Outright, the development of a sport that forced its athletes to play wearing little more than lingerie signaled how culture has gradually become sexualized. That the sport was targeted specifically to women as athletes, also underscored the notion that women, more than men, are prone to being represented as sexual beings. In the LFL, this sexualization showed itself
in many forms, including in the organization of the LFL (business structure, uniforms, team names, and logos) and in promotional media featuring LFL athletes.

The presentation of women as sexual beings was most readily apparent in the league’s marquee lingerie uniform. Sexy and revealing, the LFL uniform pointed to a patriarchal fascination with women’s bodies. By putting on the uniform, lingerie football players enacted a certain type of femininity, one designed to meet the narrow standards of feminine beauty determined by patriarchal tenets. Promotional claims for the LFL insisted that the audacity to play a violent sport, like tackle football, dressed only in lingerie, highlighted the resolve of LFL athletes. Furthermore, as argued by owners and players, the lingerie aspect of the league carried only limited appeal. While the lingerie uniform may have initially drawn in viewers, what compelled audiences to attend the sport live and to tune in to LFL games on television and online was the demonstrated athleticism of the women on the field. This claim was supported by Taira Turley (former linebacker for the Miami Caliente) who acknowledged that the initial intent of LFL fans “is to come to our games and see girls in tiny outfits rolling around on the field.” But, as she continued, this intent changed “once the ball is kicked off… they see the intensity… it becomes to them a true football game. They look beyond the beauty and lingerie” (Turley, 2010). Despite this claim, it is apparent that the lingerie uniform called attention to the bodies of the league’s female athletes in a way that distracted from the sport, especially considering the bonus of “accidental” nudity. There is no evidence supporting ideas that the intentions of fans changed once exposed to the sport (or once fans were exposed to the exposed athletes of the sport). On the contrary, it seemed that LFL audiences were more interested in the T and A (Tits and Ass) aspects of the league, than the X’s and O’s.
With the majority of attention focused on the lingerie uniform, the league’s female athletes also opened themselves up to criticism from fans and the media. Although validated as attractive through selection to participate in the “fantasy” league, once inside the league, LFL athletes were held under a strict disciplinary regime to maintain a certain size, weight, shape, and overall appearance to fit a very sexy uniform that they agreed – in their contracts – to have stripped from them during play. Under the duress of constant surveillance, LFL athletes were pressured into complicity to normative standards of femininity, including keeping up a slender, cosmetically flawless, and well-groomed appearance. If this requirement was not met, athletes risked not only criticism, but also suspension or expulsion from the league. As boasted by the league’s founder, “It doesn’t hurt to be beautiful – that’s a part of the criteria. You’re not going to see 250-lb bruisers out there I can tell you that much” (Sakmari, 2009)

This obsession with sexualizing women’s athletic bodies also extended to representations of the LFL in the media. As indicated by content found on Lflus.com, MTV2, Mtv2.com, Playboy.com, and in *Playboy* magazine, LFL athletes were consistently coded as sexually available. Whether through headlines describing the LFL as “True Fantasy Football” (as Mtv2.com described it) or through picturing players insinuating girl-on-girl sex (as depicted in *Playboy*), athletes were regularly offered up to predominantly male audiences for consumption. Rarely were LFL athletes represented as serious competitors. They were also rarely included or mentioned in mainstream sports media. The exclusion of the LFL from sports media nullified claims by the LFL of success as a sport. Instead, through the media discussed, it seems the LFL was more popular as a form of male entertainment.

Despite biased portrayals and rejection from sports media, LFL athletes still discussed about their experiences in the league as an exercise of control. Through their participation in the
LFL, athletes described themselves as role models for young girls aspiring to become athletes. As echoed by the Los Angeles Temptation’s Monique Gaxiola “Many young girls and women look up to us as role models which is one of the greatest feelings” (Gaxiola, 2011). This shared expression is reflective of the group dynamic characteristic of feminism. However, what LFL athletes did not acknowledge was that by participating in a sport that required them to present themselves as sexually available, they were sending a direct message to audiences about the value of women and women’s sports: that women’s sports are only marketable when you sell sex appeal. Thus, it seems that LFL players accepted objectification as a condition of their inclusion in the male dominated sport of football. Furthermore, despite claims of empowerment, the adult genre of the LFL’s brand of entertainment separated them from the very young women and girls they claimed to reach.

As a new representation of athletic women, the LFL constituted an example of the undoing of feminism by rejecting the “binary opposition between femininity and feminism” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 256). By combining sport and sex appeal, the league trademarked its own unique brand of feminine power, which in reality, did more to degrade and confuse images of female athletes than uphold them as powerful. Player Natalie Jahnke (Los Angeles Temptation) captured the contradictory promise of sexiness and empowerment when she said:

Empowering women in a feminine fashion is sexy. It allows women to be just that themselves, and not have to comply with societies classifications of what it means to empower.
We can be tough, athletic and still be feminine. I would like to see a continuation of this trend in all sports. Just because you can throw like a guy doesn’t mean you should be treated like one (Jahnke, 2013).

This quote provides an example of what feminists might call a new emboldened, yet failed identity (McRobbie, 2004, p. 256). Jahnke casts off feminist ideas by endorsing the “iconic normalization of pornography” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 259) but views her work in the LFL as evidence of female empowerment. Despite claims of empowerment and freedom as an athlete, Jahnke comes across as complicit in her own objectification. Arguably, the LFL contracted this type of complicity by establishing penalties for those who dissented, thus policing women to behave in ways consistent with the LFL brand.

Thus, it becomes clear how the LFL showed ambivalence about women as athletes and also constituted a post-feminist sensibility. As a tackle football league for women, recognized as the fastest growing sport in the nation, the LFL signaled that at least one of the goals of feminism had been met (Watcher, 2010). At last, women were being recognized as credible athletes – and in a predominately male sport, no less. However, the obvious sexism at play in the development, organization, and promotion of the league critically weakened any argument for the league as a legitimate response to feminism. Still, owners of the league and the league’s female athletes declared that participation in the LFL allowed women to express the full extent of their liberation and to celebrate their sexuality. All the same, constant surveillance by and the need for feedback from male sports audiences pointed to the chronic nature of the feminist struggle.

The LFL visibly embraced patriarchal values regarding womanhood and femininity. In the league, the sexualization of female athletes was marketed as a site of empowerment on the
one hand and as male entertainment on the other. A closer look at the LFL, however, revealed that competing discourses activated in the LFL revealed more of a power struggle than a cooperative environment. The LFL catered to a heterosexual male fantasy of sexualized women, specifically, of sexualized female athletes, right down the "services" the players provided by signing on to their "accidental nudity." By internalizing normative ideas about femininity and sexuality, LFL athletes were careful not to disrupt the status quo. And so, despite the LFL’s claims of progress, the LFL and its athletes have helped reproduce the sports industry as a hyper-masculine, misogynist, and homosocial, heteronormative environment.

After four years, the decision to rebrand the league from the Lingerie Football League to the Legends Football League in 2013 may indicate that the promotional strategy once at play in the LFL had reached a dead end. As a part of the rebranding strategy, “Performance wear replaces all lingerie aspects of uniform; New design of logos removing any sexy female figures; Redesign of shoulder pads to increase protection and Brand tagline shifts from ‘True Fantasy Football’ to ‘Women of the Gridiron’” (“LFL Re-Brands,” 2013). A successful business model is unlikely to make significant changes to its brand. Therefore, the changes made to the LFL’s corporate image signals failure at some level. Arguably, the LFL’s changes may evidence a response to feminist criticism and to other negative publicity that has followed the sport since its early days as a bowl game. It may also represent a response to legal issues (charged against the league by former athletes). Changes might also signal a change in direction by the league in order to poise itself for future growth.

Although touted by promoters as a promising step in the right direction for women’s sports, however, these changes have been nominal at best. For example, although the league vowed to remove all “lingerie aspects” of the uniform, the new “performance wear” uniform is
not a significant departure from the old (Figure 10). This indicates the league is still resistant to criticism. Despite claims of making changes to honor women’s bodies and to empower female athletes, the LFL is still faithful to its sexist underpinnings. Instead of effecting substantial change, it seems that the LFL is merely repackaging an old product and selling it back to audiences in new way. As slight as these changes are, however, they are still relevant as evidence of the state of sports in our patriarchal culture and a testament to the stability and fragility of such a culture.

Figure 10. Legends Football League.
References


About the WFA. (2011). Retrieved from Women’s Football Alliance http://www.wfafootball.net/about.html


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### APPENDIX A

**Team Names Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Arena</th>
<th>Joined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eastern Conference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland Crush</td>
<td>Cleveland, OH</td>
<td>Quicken Loans Arena</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore Charm</td>
<td>Baltimore, MD</td>
<td>1st Mariner Arena</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tampa Breeze</td>
<td>Tampa, FL</td>
<td>St Pete Times Forum</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto Triumph</td>
<td>Toronto, Canada</td>
<td>Ricoh Coliseum</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando Fantasy</td>
<td>Orlando, FL</td>
<td>Citrus Bowl</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Western Conference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle Mist</td>
<td>Seattle, WA</td>
<td>Showare Center</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota Valkyrie</td>
<td>Minneapolis, MN</td>
<td>Target Center</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Bay Chill</td>
<td>Green Bay, WI</td>
<td>Resch Center</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Temptation</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>Citizens Business Bank Arena</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas Sin</td>
<td>Las Vegas, NV</td>
<td>Orleans Arena</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team</td>
<td>City, State</td>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Bliss</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>Toyota Park</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Former Teams</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miami Caliente</td>
<td>Miami, FL</td>
<td>Bank Atlantic Center</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego Seduction</td>
<td>San Diego, CA</td>
<td>San Diego Sports Arena</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver Dream</td>
<td>Denver, CO</td>
<td>Dick's Sporting Goods Park</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas Desire</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>Quiktrip Park</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Majesty</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
<td>Sovereign Center</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

LFL Logos