Managing Coed Soccer: Gender, Power, and Participation

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Soccer (also referred to as football) is considered the world’s most popular sport (Guttmann, 1993; Dunning, 1999; Mueller, Cantu & Vancamp, 1996; Economist, 2005). Across the globe, over 400 million men, women, and children watch and play soccer in over 200 countries (Jensen, 2011). Even in the United States, where the professional game is often marginalized, youth soccer record high participation rates for both boys and girls (Sabo, 2008). Although participation in soccer generally decreases with age at a higher rate relative to other team sports, the trend is slower among women (National Sporting Goods Association, 2011), which some scholars have referred to as the ‘feminization of soccer’ (Sugden, 1994; Andrews, 1997). Cultural milestones such as the institution of Title IX in 1972, the short-lived Women’s United Soccer Association (and now Women’s Professional Soccer), and the increased visibility of the Women’s World Cup have contributed to this phenomena.

While there is ample research on cultural discourses relating to class, gender and ideologies that are reproduced on and around the youth soccer field (Swanson, 2009), and likewise on forms of social capital, disciplined bodies, work ethic and middle-class family values are embodied therein (Andrews, 1997; Swanson, 2009), there is less research surrounding adult participation in soccer and the cultural representations it embodies. At the adult level, creation of coed soccer recreational soccer leagues are a relatively recent trend (Henry & Comeaux, 1999). In comparison to youth and even adolescent soccer leagues, among adult soccer players there is typically a larger imbalance in the number of men and women participating (National Sporting Goods Association, 2001). A Google search reports 11,400 results for “men adult soccer league’ and United States”; 4,500 results for “coed adult soccer league’ and United States”; and 2,100 results for “women adult soccer league’ and United States.” This simple query may reflect lower participation rates in soccer among adult women as opposed to adult men on a macro scale. On a micro scale, this is the case for the American City Soccer Association (ACSA) – an adult recreational soccer league located in a midsize southeastern town in the United States. ACSA is the case on which this study is focused.

To best understand the current state of coed adult recreational soccer and the state of ACSA, I will begin with the paper with a contextual background of adult recreational soccer on a national level and also specific to the league's 20-year history. Employing qualitative methodologies in the form of participant-observation, interviews with players, officials and key decision makers, and content analysis of rules, by laws, and membership records, I will explore the socio-cultural challenges of ‘managing’ coed soccer. In the tradition of Wachs (2002) and Henry and Comeaux (1999) I will deconstruct a widely accepted system of coed soccer. With a focus on gender, power relations, and barriers to participation, I will investigate underlying cultural themes such as identity, biopolitics, and performance. My study will follow Giardina and Newman (2011), who call for an era of physical cultural studies in which the researcher immerses herself in the field and collaborates with participants to produce a rich account filled with multiple voices and perspectives. As an adult female soccer player-researcher in the league, I will incorporate self-reflexivity (Carrington, 2009) in an effort to unearth the silent but powerful systems at work in this space of physicality. My project will attempt to understand why adult women are underrepresented in the adult league and assist sport managers of such leagues in increasing its female membership.