



“I Deserve Everything”: The Role of Confidence in 21st Century Women’s Sports

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Introduction

Professional sport is one of the most highly consumed entertainment products in the world, making it both an accessible and unstable foundation for engaging in activism and championing sociopolitical change. Throughout its history, the foundation of heteropatriarchal white supremacy that sports is built on has been challenged, renegotiated, and reinforced. According to American sportswriter Dave Zirin, “sports is a contested space” (Jhally 2012) and this inevitably manifests in some of the most defining moments in struggles for racial integration, gay liberation, and gender equity. Sports and, perhaps more crucially, athletes become representatives of a unique platform of assimilation and resistance, of segregation, integration, and celebration on a global scale.

Professional sports has historically always centered white bodies as being worthy of success and accolades. White privilege speaks more to an individual experience, while white supremacy "encompasses economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources and power between white people and people of color" (DiAngelo 2018, 56). Thus, while both white supremacy and white privilege are pervasive in professional sports globally, white supremacy is used here to allude to a more systemic exclusion, erasure, and violation of black and brown bodies in sports.

The notion of a “female athlete” remains a contested embodiment within a contested domain, continually being policed, fleshed out, destroyed, and reconstructed to denote what is considered both a female body and an athletic body. “Female” is often used to refer to someone whose anatomical sex is aligned with perceived scientific boundaries of femaleness, while woman more closely relates to a person’s recognized gender identity. However, as Judith Butler (6) argues and as is true of intersex runner Caster Semenya, the distinction between sex and gender is both reductive and more malleable than is understood. The separation, in its inaccuracy and incompleteness, further serves to reinforce trans-exclusionary binaries in sport. Being female is about biology, mentality, history, and society all at once, while also potentially being void of any

number of those categories. So, if one “becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir 1973, 301) in much the same way that one becomes an athlete, then the identity of female athlete remains fluid and heterogeneous, a multitude of experiences and positionalities that cannot be monolithically constricted to a single manifestation. In this paper, the definition of a female athlete will be a person who identifies as a woman and is professionally employed in playing some type of sport, bearing in mind that this does not encapsulate the true nuances of femaleness or womanness that exists both within and outside of the sports world.

The manifestation and evolution of women’s professional sports around the world, as well as its ever-growing popularity, is perhaps one of the most distinct phenomena that represents the relationship between sports and activism. Because sports has been historically fashioned as a male and masculine-dominated culture, with phallogocentrism being consubstantial to dominant notions of strength, speed, and physical resilience, women’s fight to be included and recognized as professional athletes on the same level as their male counterparts remains an endeavor of social justice (Lemmon 2019, 238). In fact, existing as a professional female athlete in itself destabilizes heteropatriarchal notions of the strength, physical prowess, and intellectual discipline that is instrumental in sports.

When it comes to intersections of race and sexuality, professional women’s sports does more than simply push for gender equity; it helps to address and dismantle symbolic annihilation. Symbolic annihilation, coined by researchers George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1976, refers to the impact that lack of representation can have on the psyche, making people feel invisible and non-existent. By publicly embodying multiple marginalized identities in sports, women of color and/or queer women attempt to provide much-needed representation, while also subverting the stereotypes associated with these politicized identities. For Jennifer Doyle, while these “diverse figures” are exemplified and placed on a pedestal, the communities that reflect those identities and need that representation are often “dis-remembered” (422). Because the oxymoronic embodiment of “the female athlete cannot measure human capacity” (Doyle 2013, 421), these women are cauterized from the people they represent, dehumanized, and shaped as figurines to

be scrutinized. Thus, for female athletes to truly come to voice themselves and simultaneously give voice to issues of importance, they have to be much more intentional in taking control of their identities and their politics. In seeking to employ feminist tools that do not produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion, decisive and unapologetic confidence becomes that much more impactful.

The gendered gap in confidence, a theory which implied that women in the workplace have less confidence than men on average, has been dismissed because of lack of sustained evidence to its validity (Zhao et al. 2005, 1270). However, new research shows that women are less likely to publicly display self-confidence due to the potential “backlash effect” that could impact their promotional opportunities and their professional relationships with colleagues and superiors (Lindeman et al. 2018, 222). Laura Guillen stated in the Harvard Business Review that “While self-confidence is gender-neutral, the consequences of appearing self-confident are not,” implying that women who explicitly show self-confidence are often received negatively and seen as less likable. In sports, women are seen as “excessive in physicality and temperament” (Doyle 2013, 420) and are pathologised and ostracized for it. However, female athletes are increasingly choosing to forgo the gendered pro-social (concern for others) requirement that often accompanies self-confidence and self-promotion, utilizing public displays of confidence in their abilities and achievements as an activist tool. Through the examination of US Olympic gymnast Simone Biles and USWNT player Megan Rapinoe, I will argue that public displays of confidence by female athletes are a central tool of activism within women’s sports, serving to queer the phallogocentric foundations of sports and renegotiate what it means to embody the identity of both a woman and a professional athlete.

Sparkly Gymnast Sticks the Landing and Sticks it to Her Doubters

In October 2019, during an interview after winning her fifth all-round world title, U.S Olympic gymnast Simone Biles said: “I’m the best gymnast there is” (Armour 2019). While part of a larger statement that she made about double standards of confidence in sports and also

factually true (Roenigk 2019), this statement caused controversy with many media outlets labeling her as arrogant or questioning her credentials. This comes as no surprise considering that female athletes have to contend with being viewed as women before being seen as athletes (Trolan 2013, 216), which is an attempt to enforce and police femininity. This is an issue that is continually exacerbated by the coverage of women's sports in the media.

In women's sports, the degree to which athletes conform to societal expectations of femininity often precedes their athletic ability and their success (Trolan 2013, 218). This becomes especially true when race and, in particular, blackness intersect with the element of gender, in which the racialised construction of black women often positions them outside dominant and accepted boundaries of womanhood (Douglas 2002). Black women have historically been seen as less than human, as savages with unquenchable sexual desire or as objects on which sexual desire can be placed without consequence (Bennett 2018, 168). At the same time, gender segregation in sports dislocates black women even further because the black body has always been presented as "athleticism itself" (Doyle 2013, 420), with historical attributions of speed and strength to black bodies, but the female body's capacity for athleticism continues to be exiled. For those women like Simone Biles, who reject white-washing and being made racially palatable, who embody black femininity and feminine blackness, displaying confidence in one's sporting ability and "sparkle" becomes a method of resistance.

During racial integration in various team sports, white supremacy was maintained by ensuring that leadership and power were limited to white players and never allocated to athletes of color, whether that be a captainship or simply commentators dismissing any cerebral aspects displayed by athletes of color (Jhally 2012). By participating in the solo sport of gymnastics, which has historically been dominated by white Eastern European athletes, Simone Biles prevents herself from being portrayed as simply a cog in a larger team machine. She succeeded in adopting an independent confidence that allowed her to construct a sense of personhood in her athletic embodiment that was not at the mercy of white teammates. In excelling as a soloist, and in displaying confidence in the intellectual discipline that it takes to achieve her physical

recognition, Biles has reclaimed and taken ownership of what it means to a self-sufficient black female body in professional sports.

At the age of 22, Simone Biles is the most decorated gymnast of all time, but her youth and small stature often lead to her being referred to as “girl” or a “little woman” and only being called by her first name. This is a common theme in women’s sports, with athletes being infantilized (Fink 2015, 334) by the media, regardless of how old the athlete actually is, how long they have partaken in professional sports, or how much success they have accumulated. Infantilization is a mode of re-establishing dominance. This tactic, portraying female athletes as small and unimportant, strategically re-centers male supremacy in sports. This becomes particularly complex for black female athletes, as black girls are generally “adultified” (Epstein 4) and viewed societally as less innocent than white girls of the same age. For Simone Biles, this creates a unique positionality where her race and gender interact with her professional athleticism, deeming her as too young to be respectable in terms of her success, but simultaneously not youthful enough to be an inspired prodigy of achievement. However, Biles expresses confidence in her current success of having more gold medals than her age (Bevan), reconciling this contested space of racialized youth as another platform for renegotiating norms of intersecting embodiment. As with both race and age being contested identities, sexuality is also integral in the scope of women’s sports in the United States.

Purple-Haired Lesbian Goddess Won’t be Silenced

In the summer of 2019, soccer player Megan Rapinoe co-captained the US Women’s National Team to their second consecutive, and fourth overall, World Cup title in France. The entire US Women’s National Team (USWNT) roster’s confident demeanour and unwillingness to temper their behaviour opened them up to constant criticism throughout the tournament. Alexi Lalas described the team as having “embraced this arrogance and brashness of almost a bully-esque type of stance” (FOX Sports 2019), simply for the fact that they were goal-hungry and celebratory during matches. After the tournament, during the ticker-tape parade in New York

City, Rapinoe was filmed by a teammate saying, “I deserve everything” and that, along with her shock of lavender hair and unwaveringly loud political stances, made her a contentious figure in the media in the months to follow.

Megan Rapinoe’s confidence in her abilities and her right to own space in women’s soccer is unquestionable, but it is also not just limited to her professional life. As an out lesbian, she does not shy away from displaying her sexuality to the world, whether it be championing LGBTQ+ rights or simply showing affection for her girlfriend on social media. Furthermore, she continually emphasizes the LGBTQ+-affirmative space that women’s soccer holds, by categorically stating that “you can’t win a championship without gays on your team” (Church 2019) and calling for more effort to eradicate homophobia in professional sports across the gender divide. As an additional facet of her sexuality, Rapinoe also resists assimilation to the norm of feminine beauty that is often used as branding in sports media (Lobpries 2018, 5), opting for a more androgynous gender expression that inherently rejects male sexualization. By embodying the political positionality of queer, Rapinoe utilizes the radical potential imbued in queerness (Cohen 2019, 143) both as a justification for being confident in the first place and to fuel her confidence in how her identity, career, and activism intertwine and integrate into her public life.

Rapinoe, who is thirty-four years old, has had her age spotlighted in conjunction with every achievement she has earned this year, from World Cup Golden Boot Winner (awarded to the player who scores the most goals during the tournament) to FIFA Player of the Year. Rather than being infantilized, her age is often used to express surprise at her overwhelming success, which has been called out by comedian Leslie Jones as “ageist” (Thomas 2019). While Jones is not a professional sports commentator, she is an avid supporter of the USWNT and a prominent voice against ageism, particularly in terms of women. Though age is a consideration in most sports journalism, making Rapinoe’s age a focal point (Thomas 2019), as seen by a graphic under her Golden Boot achievement that read “Oldest player to win...” is a double standard that is starkly missing from coverage of men’s soccer. However, the media obsession with her age barely bothers Rapinoe, who maintains conviction in the maturity that her years of experience on the

national team has helped bring to her game and her contributions on the pitch (Thomas 2019). In showing self-assurance about her age, not as a challenge to be overcome, but as a natural and beneficial aspect in the evolution of her professional career, Rapinoe's confidence subverts notions of women's age being an inverse determinant of their worth or their success.

Sports has historically been a global institution that is pervasive in preserving whiteness and promoting white supremacy (Jhally 2012). Thus, Megan Rapinoe's existence as a queer woman on the world stage cannot negate the role that racial privilege affords her in her activism and the way she chooses to use her platform. She was the first white professional athlete to kneel in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick in 2016 and still does not participate in the singing of the national anthem before matches. However, despite kneeling becoming ultimately banned by the US Soccer Federation, the professional consequences that Rapinoe has faced compared to that of Kaepernick were minimal and her career continues to flourish because of the protection and oversight that her whiteness affords her. Whiteness has remained central to the work that Rapinoe has been able to do, both in her public stance against her own federation for equal pay and in her viewpoint as an activist overall, something that she acknowledged in a recent acceptance speech: "I'm not going to act like my whiteness has nothing to do with me standing before you now" (Glamour 2019). White privilege undoubtedly fuels her confidence, but, in a more nuanced way, Rapinoe uses her racial identity to further her activism. She harnesses the power that is allocated to her by systems that privilege whiteness in a continued attempt to renegotiate the discriminatory consequences of racial identity in relation to public displays of confidence in women's sports and in larger societal contexts.

Perhaps nothing is more reflective of the self-assurance that Megan Rapinoe embodies than her now (in)famous goal-celebration stance. The cool, almost serene, open-armed pose is ironic in how self-contained and calm it is, while still gaining equal shares of euphoric support and confrontational dismissal, with claims that Rapinoe loves herself "too much" (Wallace 2019). Wallace goes on to sum up the poignancy of the pose, saying, "In one gesture, the 34-year-old midfielder acknowledged her own greatness, embraced the audience, honored her team and

celebrated the joy of being at the center of a women's sports team paving the way for gender parity in attention, respect and maybe even pay". By taking up space while remaining collected, tranquil, and open, Rapinoe's action did more than display the dominance of her team on the world stage; it inspired and encouraged women to ditch demure behavior in favor of owning their space without fear. In this way, the pose serves as a perfect amalgamation of how Rapinoe has utilized and nurtured her confidence as a player, woman, and activist to resist dominant notions of female embodiment and cultivate new modes of becoming.

Conclusion

Sports is not remotely apolitical and is instead necessarily and inherently political. In fact, Dave Zirin argued that "sports forces people to confront issues and ideas that they would otherwise be mentally segregated from" (Jhally 2012), positioning sports as a catalyst for social and political revolution. This is especially true of women's sports which, in its very existence, serves to destabilize and renegotiate the racist heteropatriarchal basis of professional sports. In asserting confidence in their talents and success, in being unafraid to demand the financial compensation they deserve, female athletes transcend social limitations in their gender performance and physical embodiment.

Flaunting one's self-assurance has always been central to the personas of professional male athletes, from Muhammed Ali calling himself pretty to Zlatan Ibrahimovic commenting on how perfect he is. The escalation from confidence into arrogance is not just accepted as normal in men's sports but embraced and encouraged. However, public displays of confidence by women are generally received negatively in professional spaces, affecting likability and even career development (Lindeman et al. 2018, 224). Intentionally choosing to be unapologetically confident in one's talent, success, and identity can pose a professional risk for female athletes, while also exposing them to personal harassment. As such, displaying self-confidence in women's sports is embedded with more widespread intention and consequence, serving to reconfigure societal understandings of gender discrimination in sport and female embodiment more ubiquitously.

“The athletic figure is queer: it is elemental, fleshy, and intersubjective” (Doyle 426) and, when feminized or womanized even slightly, this figure’s potential for queerness increases exponentially. The female athlete engaging in women’s sports navigates exclusionary ideals of strength and speed, simultaneously enfeebling and augmenting the historical phallogocentric foundation of sports. When self-esteem and conviction are forbidden on the basis of gender identity, when their gender exiles them in sports, confident female athletes shift societal paradigms. In a context where women are expected to remain meek and submissive, female athletes fight gender itself by dauntlessly showing confidence like the men they are not.

The confidence that Simone Biles and Megan Rapinoe display is situated in being uncompromising in the way that they want to take up space. Their very existence in a landscape that has been built to continually deny them access for being black, for being lesbian, for being women, for not being those things “correctly” enough, simultaneously reshapes female embodiment and athlete embodiment. Theirs is not a reclamation of confidence, but a refusal to surrender the confidence in the first place. Their words and actions are provocative and poignant, but not confrontational. Both women initiate a challenge in the serenity of their confidence for those who dare to doubt their careers or dismiss their activism while inviting others to join their efforts. Amidst a community of other female athletes and their growing base of support around the world, Simone Biles and Megan Rapinoe publicly challenge the status quo of docile women by displaying confidence in both their intersecting identities and their ever-expanding accomplishments.

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