**Why Female Boxers have to Fight outside the Ring: Sport & Gender**

**Why Female Boxers are Having to Fight Outside of the Ring**

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Case Study

Olympic Female Boxing Controversy

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The International Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) have found themselves at the centre of a controversy, only months away from the first boxing match to take place in London at the 2012 Games. The controversy lies on a proposal that would require female fighters to wear skirts when they step into the Olympic ring to compete. The final decision will be made in January 2012. It is unclear how much support the IABA might garner as a result of a decision, but it is clear that Team GB remain very much opposed to the proposal.

The IABA rationale for the ban is that it the wearing of skirts would help the women to stand out from the men. It is fair, however, to side with detractors who might state that there are already significant markers that allow the two genders to be differentiated clearly!

Generally, other sports do not require female athletes to wear skirts. The question to be posed might be why boxing has been affected in a way that most others sports have not. Perhaps one might surmise that the application of a uniform policy involving skirts might constitute a way of ‘softening’ the image of female participants in what is historically viewed as a masculine sport.

The protests from coach and athletes do appear to claim some parallels to the uniform changes that affected beach volleyball (in a bid to boost television ratings and – thus – sponsorship and future media rights sales).

**Masculinity in Sport**

An interesting area of debate within the realm of sport sociology rests with the concept of the genderisation of sport; or, more simply put, the practice of deigning a particular sport more ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ than another. Typically, ‘male’ sports are those that are considered to possess heavy contact and a level of violence or aggression. Boxing is one of the best examples of such genderisation. Other examples include american football, rugby, wrestling, and mixed martial arts, although the gender landscape seems to be slowly changing in many of these sports. Traditionally ‘female’ sports are those that encapsulate an attractive aesthetic and that reinforce the perceived femininity of the athlete. Examples include cheerleading, gymnastics and synchronised swimming (again, the landscape is slowly changing in some of these sports).

The crux of the debate rests with the concept that many females – or males – are denied the right to compete in the sport that they love because the sport is viewed as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’, and only that particularly gender will find opportunities for participation open to them. Further problems arise when both genders are technically offered the opportunity to participate, but societal disapproval prevents many (of one gender) from participating.

The objections to the wearing of skirts in female boxing centre very much of the concept of genderisation of the sport. Women have made significant strides in the sport by increasing grassroots participation, and by competing in the Olympic Games for the first time, as a sport, in 2012. However, such strides are bolstered significantly by the ability of the federation and athletes to counter the traditional view that the sport is only for males. Changing the view of society – that the sport is also appropriate for females – opens the doors to many more female participants as it removes societal disapproval of any female athletes that do decide to compete. However, one might argue that the wearing of skirts might detract from such a goal, viewing the move as one that seeks to ‘genderise’ the sport in some way.

**The Case of Volleyball**

In 1999, the Federation Internationale de Volleyball changed uniform regulations for female beach volleyball athletes. The new regulations required athletes of both genders to wear swim suits, which could be attributed to the history of the sport as a beach sport. However, immediate controversy arose with the maximum size requirements of bikini bottoms (no more than 6 cm of cloth at the hip").

Many athletes commented that they were used to training in similar swim wear, that the rule changes made sense (particularly if events were held in the heat), and that the bikinis offered a great range of motion and were as functional as they were alluring. Positive comments were swiftly countered by other female athletes and supporters of the sport, who felt that the bikinis, particularly with their size restrictions, encouraged the sexual exploitation of female athletes (the ‘sexploitation’ of athletes), and that it discouraged

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many females from taking up the sport. Additionally, the hand signals made by female athletes (a tactical cornerstone of the game) required (or enabled) television cameras to focus heavily on the derriere of the athletes in order to capture these tactical exchanges. This led to further comments of sexualisation and a feeling that elite players were being appreciated more for their physical attributes than for their athletic skill.

**Team GB Position on Boxing**

The Team GB coach, David Alloway, stood firmly by his athletes, saying that although he felt that athletes would conform out of necessity, if required to, they would nevertheless be uncomfortable with the regulation. Alloway is personally against the proposal. *'They are boxers and they want to wear boxing kit. Some of the (female) boxers would possibly say, "I'll wear what they tell me to wear if they are the rules", but most would say we have earned the right to be boxers and we want to go as boxers, not female boxers.'*

The danger in applying a new uniform rule that causes discomfort amongst competitors is that it may detract from performance. To compete at an elite level requires great focus, the ability to perform under pressure, and often in boxing, the ability to psychologically affect the opposition by ‘psyching them out’ before a fight. It would arguably be hard to achieve such a mental state if one steps into the ring in an outfit that causes them discomfort, and that they feel is in some way disrespectful.

It appears that the new regulation has been trialled ahead of the Olympic Games, with female boxers adopting the new rules in the European Championships in late 2011. It is possible that the ruling will also be trialled at the boxing trial event at the ExCel Centre in London in early 2012.

**Discussion**

* Will the wearing of skirts add value, in your view, to the sport?
* Do you agree or disagree with the proposed ruling?
* Why do you feel that any sport should be viewed as ‘masculine; or ‘feminine’?
* If both genders have both the will, and the physiological capability, to compete in a sport (as is actually the case in all sports), why do you think that elements of society still attempt to discourage one gender from participating in a particular sport?

Do you feel that it should be the athletes’ choice as to whether this ruling is adopted, or do you feel that it is the right

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* of the federation to impose any necessary rule changes?
* What do you think, ultimately, is the reason for the proposed ruling?
* How do you feel negative gender stereotypes in sport can be countered?

**More Information**

* Schmalz, D.L., Kerstetter, D.L. (2006) Girlie Girls and Manly Men: Children’s Stigma Consciousness of Gender in Sports and Physical Activities. Journal of Leisure Research. Vol 38, No 4.
* Weaving, C. (2010). Philosophical perspectives on gender in sport and phyiscal activity. Taylor & Francis.

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