

Blocked Out; Athletic Voices and WNBA Uniform Politics

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Blocked out: Athlete voice and WNBA uniform politics in 2016

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Abstract (brief): WNBA uniform politics in 2016 coalesced around three distinct voices: corporate sponsor logos, sanctioned pro-LGBTQ demonstration, and an unsanctioned Black Lives Matter player protest. We argue that uniform politics reveal a cautious, commercially linked, single-issue approach to social engagement in the WNBA.

Keywords: WNBA, uniforms, rhetoric, protest, commercialism, intersectionality, voice

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Introduction

Debates over WNBA uniforms have functioned as a rhetorical battleground for core tensions within the league since its inception. In 2016, familiar and emergent tensions arose: in April the WNBA signed its first league-wide jersey sponsorship contract, in June it lauded its teams for honoring LGBTQ victims of the Pulse nightclub shooting with special warm up t-shirts, but in July it punished players who manipulated their pre-game gear to protest police violence against African-Americans. This chapter considers these uniform decisions as one overarching context: which voices are elevated or disciplined on the rhetorical terrain of WNBA team garb? How are player bodies and uniforms part of sport rhetoric more broadly?

The summer of 2016 witnessed a culmination of athlete activism motivated by police shootings of unarmed Black citizens. As Bryant (2018) and others have demonstrated, extreme episodes of police violence and the attendant social uproar motivated athlete activism not seen since the 1960s. In 2012 NBA megastar LeBron James organized his Miami Heat teammates to take a team photo with hoodie sweatshirts to express solidarity with protests over the killing of Trayvon Martin, in 2014, players from the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL) wore T-shirts quoting police shooting victim Eric Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," for their pre-game warm-up, and also in 2014, several St. Louis Rams players entered their stadium for a game versus the Dallas Cowboys with their arms in the "hands up don't shoot" position associated with police shooting victim Michael Brown's last actions. WNBA players contributed their own voices in the summer of 2016 to these protests;

indeed, one month after the events discussed here, San Francisco 49er quarterback Colin Kaepernick began his highly scrutinized practice of kneeling during the national anthem. ^[ii]

We organize our analysis around corporate (or managerial) voice, sanctioned political voice, and unsanctioned protest. In our discussion of these three instances of uniform politics, we engage scholarship of neoliberal rhetoric, commercialization of feminist principles, and intersectional protest solidarity. Analysis suggests that the WNBA league office embraces corporate voice readily, struggles to act intersectionally regarding topics impacting its players, and that players may be able to adopt solidarity tactics to construct “weak publics” to persuade their league’s central office. We conclude with implications for future activism in sport.

Sport Dress as Politics

The main statement this collection is that sport clothing is political; in the context of women’s sport, inevitably, it is gendered. Using an infamous uniform rule as an example, Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) changed its rule in 1999 in preparation for the 2000 Sydney Olympics. The rule defined the uniform requirement for athletes in women’s events to wear in great details: “[t]he top must fit closely to the body... with deep cutaway armholes on the back, upper chest and stomach ... The briefs should be...a close fit and be cut on an upward angle towards the top of the leg. The side width must be maximum 7 cm” (Corelett, 2017, p. 7). However, it did not impose such refined measurement for fit, cut, and dimensions onto those in men’s events (Weaving, 2012). The sex-segregated rules indicated that the requirement might have little to do with athletic performance, safety, and fairness, but rather with how bodies were gendered. There is very little disagreement that this 1999 FIVB uniform rule, and the later minor revisions, is about (hetero-) sexualization of female athletic bodies (Brooks, 2001; Corelett, 2017; Weaving, 2012). Messner (1988) described that along with popularization of women’s

sport and increasing visibility of female athleticism, the female athletic body “has become a contested ideological terrain” (p. 197). The sex-segregated and sexualized sport uniform codes^[iii] function to (re)frame female sporting, and muscular, bodies with normative heterosexual feminine images; hegemonic masculinity reclaims its victory against the challenge of female athleticism.

Furthermore, the gender politics of the uniform is about more than the dichotomy of wo/men. This hierarchy of femininities produced through (hetero-)sexualized uniform is coded with racialized ideology. The uniform codes define acceptable expression of femininity -- remaining heteronormatively attractive – during a sporting event, and at the same time they exclude, and sometimes penalize, other types of femininity. For example, in the case of beach volleyball, the revealing natures of the required uniform for women marginalizes those femininities expressed and experienced through modesty clothing (Benn & Dagkas, 2012; Nakamura, 2002; Weaving, 2012). Combining with the Western liberal imagination of (women’s) sport as utopic space of freedom, liberation, and celebration, the marginalized femininities are marked as primitive, oppressive, and potentially harmful (Hamzeh, 2015; Lakhami, 2008). This intersection of gender and race in sporting uniform and uniform codes may be observed through one of the most debated sport apparel in women’s sport in the past decade, hijab. Hijab, a type of veils that some Muslim women and girls use to cover their head, has become the target of many international sport authorities (FIFA for soccer/football, and FIBA for basketball). The one justification cited by both FIFA and FIBA for the hijab ban was health concerns, that the ban was for the safety and well-being of players (Ahmed, 2017; Ayub, 2011). The health claim was later debunked by activists, and both the organizations have changed their rulings on headgear to allow hijab and other religious headdress in their games. Nevertheless,

their framing of an Islamic headscarf was telling of the racialized narratives around Muslim girls and women and their expressions of femininities: this piece of cloth, and therefore the Islamic/non-White femininity expressed through it, the woman constructed underneath it, could be a health hazard, a danger to the herself and other around her.

While uniforms often are the sites where authoritarian power and hegemonic ideologies operate, athletes have also used them as platforms for their political activism. For example, the hijab ban, and thus its underlying assumption that Muslim women are void of agency were countered by Muslim girls and women participate in all levels of sport while wearing their headdresses (Agergaard, 2016; Ahmed, 2017; Hamzeh, 2015; Lakhani, 2008). Boykoff (2017) documented another athlete activism via clothing: Damien Hooper, an Australian boxer, wore a t-shirt featuring the Aboriginal flag when entering his bout at the 2012 London Olympics. This action elicited backlash from the Olympic officials, stating the t-shirt violating the Olympic Charter which forbids any kinds of “demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda” (p.174). Hooper later was chastised by the Australian Olympic Committee, and agreed not to wear the t-shirt again. Burdsey and Gorman (2015) further explored athletes’ “oppositional agency” (p.584) in the sporting space through their discussion about a demonstration by athletes in English football in 2012. Some high-profile footballers of all ethnicities refuse to wear the sponsored warm-up t-shirts featuring the name a prominent anti-racist organization, Kick It Out. This boycott, according to the players involved, was to demand more serious responses to the racism^[iv] in British football by the Association. Burdsey argued

There is no doubt that there is some form of public sphere for speaking out against racial discrimination in [sport]; but it is a bounded space subject to certain codes and parameters.... could the players have gone

further?...Theoretically, yes... Would their clubs and/or agents have allowed them to do it? No. Would most players have taken the risk to do that? No. So perhaps, this was their only option, at this time, in this place, in this sport (p. 584, emphasis in the text).

Precisely, it is the limitation of athletes' agency, boundaries of athletes' options to wear and not to wear that we address in this chapter.

WNBA Uniform Politics, April-July 2016

The 2016 WNBA season witnessed three distinct episodes of what we call uniform politics. In this section we present key details of each instance, with attention to the ideological dimensions of voice, sanction, and league discipline.

April 2016: Economic Vulnerability & Corporate Voice in the WNBA

The financial status of the WNBA has been a constant source of tension and uncertainty from its inception - both materially and discursively. Launched with massive backing from the NBA, the league's finances have been characterized as unfairly subsidized, allowing it to snuff out the rival American Basketball League (1996-98) through superior television contracts, and yet also dubious since four of the original eight WNBA teams folded in the first decade, two more shut down by 2009, and at least five relocations have occurred.^[v] Economic footing has been far from stable in literal and rhetorical ways.

This instability has led to several financial innovations in the league. In 2002, the Connecticut Sun, formerly the Orlando Magic, became the first team in the league to not reside under a NBA team umbrella. The franchise relied, instead, on revenue from the Connecticut Mohegan Sun casino, associated with the Mohegan nation of Native Americans. In 2006 the Chicago Sky joined the league as a team in an NBA city but unaffiliated with the men's team

there. And in 2008 the Seattle Storm remained in the city when the Sonics moved to Oklahoma City.^[vi]

Uniforms became another opportunity for revenue generation. The WNBA is the first of the “big four” American professional sports to allow corporate sponsors space on jerseys for logos.^[vii] The WNBA’s trajectory related to uniform sponsorship started innocuously enough: at the league’s launch in 1997 they announced Champion as the exclusive designer, and in 2003 moved into a new contract with Reebok.^[viii] In 2007 the league signed a new contract with Adidas for uniform rights and unveiled a more dramatic redesign of shape and fabric. Logos first appeared on WNBA jerseys in 2009 – individual teams were allowed to sign sponsor deals that included uniform space and Phoenix broke ground first with a contract that put LifeLock, an internet identity theft protection firm, on the front in the space where typically a team name would sit. The team’s “mercury” logo and wording moved lower down and onto the back. The Los Angeles Sparks adopted a uniform logo sponsor the next season and by 2013 half of the league’s twelve teams had sponsor logos on the front of their jersey. Since then at least twenty companies have had their logo on WNBA jerseys across the twelve teams.¹

Despite this creeping commercial presence, it was still newsworthy when the WNBA signed a league-wide exclusive deal with one sponsor in April of 2016. President Lisa Borders announced that Verizon Wireless had signed an agreement that placed their logo on the front of all team jerseys. The value of the deal has not been publicly reported, but the next largest contract signed with the league was a \$222 million deal in 2011 that only impacted ten of twelve teams;^[ix] it stands to reason that the comprehensive Verizon deal was bigger. Also at this time, the league also allowed teams to retire the traditional white home jersey, allowing them to design

¹ Gilligan, Rachel. The Evolution of the WNBA Jersey. Published April 18, 2018 at <https://herosports.com/wnba/the-evolution-of-the-wnba-jersey-ruru>. Accessed June 13, 2018.

two jerseys such that team colors and sponsor logo colors would effectively be displayed all the time. As the 2016 season began, ten of the twelve WNBA franchises already had “Verizon” on the front of their jerseys instead of their city or state. ^[x] From a visual perspective, the league had become wholly corporatized.

June 2016: #ORLANDO UNITED and Sanctioned Political Discourse in the WNBA

Like many other women’s sports pioneers, voices have asked – or demanded – of WNBA players, coaches and executives what the league “means for women’s sport.” In the overwhelming number of cases, WNBA representatives have positioned league in the safe waters of liberal feminism, trumpeting claims like “equality” for women athletes, pushing a strong “girl power” message, and taking on established “women’s issues” like breast cancer awareness.

This is not to downplay the importance of the WNBA and its ability to raise visibility and funds for basic issues related to gender equity and the WNBA is far from unique in taking this careful approach. It remains vital, however, to bracket our discussion of sport and “politics” when it remains safely within the confines of status quo interests.

At times WNBA players have adopted what we might call oppositional stances and challenged the league’s careful market-driven politics. Oppositional politics describes stances or ideas that have established oppositions, supported financially and/or ideologically by major institutions and populations (see Cooper, Macauley & Rodriguez). When WNBA players have collectively advocated for higher salary structure or health benefits, for instance, they risk opposing the individualism at the heart of American capitalism, the “dog eat dog” ethos of competition. When they have used their off-season contracts in places like Israel, Italy, Russia or China to make clear how difficult it is to make a living on American professional basketball, they incur backlash of not being “grateful” for the “opportunity” to play sports for a career.

Since its inauguration, the WNBA has promoted itself on the “good (white, heteronormative) American women” image (Wearden & Creedon; MacDonald, 2000, 2002, 2008). While many lesbian players live their lives openly away from media attention, LGBTQ communities were the silenced players and fandom in the WNBA “progressive” political marketing platforms. In 2005, this carefully crafted heteronormative liberal feminist celebration was challenged by the coming out of Sheryl Swoopes, an American basketball and WNBA legend. However, the impacts of Swoopes was minimized by the league’s rather disinterested stance. The then WNBA president, Donna Orender, framed Swoopes’ sexuality as a “lifestyle choice” (Hirsley) and redirected the media attention back to Swoopes (merely) as a player that entertained. Nevertheless, WNBA’s disinterest in LGBT politics was again shaken in 2013 by the arrival of Brittany Griner. An exceptional basketball talent that has generated a great amount of media interest since her college career, Griner purposefully uses her media space to speak up about issues around LGBT youth. Her popularity, and arguably in combination with the growing “athletic pink dollar” (Jones & LeBlanc, 121), motivated the WNBA to put out the first marketing initiative acknowledging LGBT communities in May 2014 (Associated Press).

The WNBA Pride platform opens a door for the WNBA to safely engaging with issues that might not be considered as “(heteronormative) family-oriented.” The expanded political stance made its mark after a national tragedy in June 2016. On June 12th, a terrorist attack stroke in Orlando’s Pulse, a gay nightclub, where 49 people were killed and 53 wounded. This fact that this was the deadliest mass shooting by a single shooter in the contemporary US history shook the nation (Shapiro). The WNBA and its players soon jumped on the efforts to support victims, survivors, and their families through individual activism[xi], and league coordinated campaigns. All eight teams played on June 24th wore warm-up t-shirts with rainbow colors and

“#ORLANDO UNITED” printed in the front[xii] which were auctioned off after the games to raise funds for the One Orlando Fund (Feinerg & Kay). On June 26th, the WNBA president, Lisa Border joined by NBA commissioner, marched in New York City’s pride parade to solidify their support for #ORLANDO UNITED activism and LGBT communities (Raferty).

Even though the welcoming supports for sexual minority, and victims and survivors of a terrorist attack and gun violence, there is a glaring oversight/omission in the WNBA’s narrative. The night of June 12th, the Pulse was hosting a “Latin Night,” and as the result, majority of the victims were Latinx. However, in the WNBA’s grieving words for the tragedy and publicized efforts, the conventional framing of “color-blindness” continue. Experiences of racial minorities at the intersections of sexuality (and gender) are still silenced[xiii].

July 2016: Black Lives Matter and Unsanctioned Player Protest

Less than one month after the pride t-shirt tribute, the league faced an unsanctioned Black Lives Matter protest from several teams and many marquee players.^[xiv] On July 9, prior to a game against the Dallas Wings, the four captains of the defending league champion Minnesota Lynx held a special press conference to explain that the Lynx would warm up in specially designed t-shirts focused on the recent spate of police-citizen violence. The shirt fronts stated, “Change Starts With Us—Justice and Accountability” while the back of the shirts included the names Philadro Castille, Alton Sterling, the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” and the Dallas Police Department shield.

The protest was widely reported as an extension of the Black Lives Matter movement. Indeed the players included this phrase in their shirts, as well as listing two men recently killed in police violence: on July 5 Sterling, an African-American, was shot and killed by police in Baton Rouge, LA; on July 6 Castile, also African-American, was killed by a police officer in

Minneapolis, MN. The players also attempted to extend the “us” of the problem to include preventing random attacks on law enforcement officers, such as the July 7 tragedy when a lone gunman, an African American military veteran, opened fire during a peaceful Black Lives Matter rally in Dallas, TX, killing five police officers. Careful reading of the shirt indicates the players’ desire to speak to the whole spate of senseless deaths. The inclusion of the police logo reinforced this goal, as did their concluding statement that “Racial profiling is a problem. Senseless violence is a problem. The divide is way too big between our community and those who have vowed to protect and serve us.”² In sum, the initial salvo of this player protest seemed carefully planned, designed, and executed.

A significant element to the WNBA racial justice protest is the star status of its key players. The Lynx captains alone presented a formidable set of voices: guard Lindsay Whalen is a Minnesota native and WNBA career leader in games won, forward Maya Moore is a UConn graduate and former league MVP who is often described as the best female player in the world, Simeone Augustus is a Baton Rouge native, former LSU star, and former league rookie of the year, and forward Rebekkah Brunson is the WNBA career leader in rebounds. Only Whalen is white, and Brunson and Augustus are openly lesbian. The women have 17 league titles, seven Olympic medals, and five World Championships titles among them. This was a powerful expression by veteran, respected, world-class talented players.

The protest quickly expanded. In the following days, six other WNBA teams wore black warm-up shirts of some kind. Notably, On July 13, the New York Liberty entered for their pregame warm up wearing black t-shirts with “#BlackLivesMatter” and “#Dallas5” on the front, and a blank hashtag (#_____) on the back, which they explained represented tragic deaths

² Gibbs, Lindsay. The WNBA has found its voice. Published July 25, 2018 on <https://thinkprogress.org/wnba-activism-past-present-future-2ffed59163aa/> . Accessed June 13, 2018

that are yet to come. Marquee New York players such as former league MVP Tina Charles spoke eloquently about the motivations behind the players' actions, including teammates who had lost family members to police violence.^[xv] The league had never experienced such a prolonged, broad, oppositional player demonstration.

The league responded with a crackdown. Initial warnings to players that they were not allowed to alter their uniforms were ineffective. On July 20, players on the New York Liberty, Indiana Fever, and Phoenix Mercury responded by wearing plain black Adidas t-shirts (the league uniform sponsor was Adidas) during warmups.^[xvi] On July 21 the WNBA levied fines on those players - \$500 per player and \$5000 per team. This authoritarian response was not well-received. Four teams (Seattle, New York, Indiana, and Washington) enacted media blackouts, refusing to speak after games until the fines were rescinded. Mega-star Seattle Storm guard Sue Bird, who is white, posted a photo of her entire team in plain black t-shirts in a July 22 tweet, writing that “‘There comes a time when silence is betrayal’ – MLK” with hashtags #WewillNOTbesilenced and #Blacklivesmatter. The post received over 9,500 retweets and 12,000 likes. On July 23 the league announced that the fines were being lifted.

The nearly month-long demonstration was unprecedented.^[xvii] Seven of the twelve league teams were directly involved, with super star players directly involved. Many other players expressed support in media interviews or through social media. Reaction was mixed, of course, with four Minnesota police officers walking off the job at a Lynx game and the Minneapolis police chief expressing disgust with the protest, but the league office was also roundly criticized for imposing monetary fines on the players. The break for the 2016 Summer Olympics took the pressure off, and August brought the NFL and Colin Kaepernick's kneeling into the hot glare of publicity.

Discussion & Implications

Many conclusions can be drawn from the tumultuous WNBA summer of 2016. We focus on three themes that flow from the case studies presented above and may have lasting implications for uniform politics in women's sport.

Corporate Voice and Neo-Liberal Rhetoric in Sport

The league-wide sponsorship deal indicates the valued place of corporate voice in women's sport. Many will defend the reliance on corporate support due to the financial instability of the league. We should note, however, the strong role sponsor logos (and priorities) play in much more well-funded leagues via stadium naming, advertising, and sponsored events or spaces such as timeout entertainment, concession areas, kids entertainment space, etc. Sport fans, particularly in the United States, should be prepared for this logo takeover to expand - we may someday see the Tostitos Diamondbacks playing the Costco Mariners inside Amazon Field. In many ways, we may already be there!

Corporate voice is studied in many fields, but here we assess it as part of neo-liberal rhetoric that emphasizes freedom, choice, and individuality while effacing the entrenched systematic imbalances that elevate an elite few. Newman traces neoliberal discourse in the context of NASCAR racing, tracing how that sport league aligns its fans with political ideologies in which "the government's 'role' is to facilitate 'economic growth', [with] a strong 'belief' in trickle-down economics, American egalitarianism and meritocracy (although usually stated more concisely in terms of the 'American dream' and 'hard work'), and the seemingly natural 'place' of corporate capitalism in American society," (Newman, p. 294). While car racing is particularly tied to sponsors, logos, and corporate identities, all for-profit sport leagues engage the neoliberal beast. Childers (2008) argues that competitive poker tournaments echo these values of choice,

individualism, risk, and competition that favor neoliberal global capitalist logic. Even if the WNBA is not making millions, it is implicated in processes that favor this financial system. By placing one company's name on every singler jersey in its league, the WNBA visually demonstrates its allegiance to corporate interests on at least a significant, if not dominant, level than its players and coaches. When a social issue violently intersects with its players, such as the trend of police shootings in 2014-16, the league may be less attuned to these voices than how the issue impacts Verizon or other sponsors' bottom line.

A counter view is that women's sport leagues or associations have learned that a strategic engagement with progressive "women's issues" can benefit their bottom line. Roy and Graeff (2003) discuss the WNBA directly for its corporate partnerships to support breast cancer education. Irwin et al (2003) found positive results when women's sport events or leagues engage in cause-related marketing (CRM) such as health, charities, and education. Funk et al (2003) extend prior research showing "support for women's opportunity in sport" and "players as role models" as a significant motivating factor for women's sports fans. In 2016 we saw the WNBA take a more bold step in resisting anti-LGBTQ violence, but also reacting more punitively when players demonstrated leadership and social advocacy skills related to racial justice. Still, one year after the Black Lives Matter protests and fines, WNBA president Lisa Borders spoke of the league "finding our voice" when it came to protests and current events.^[xviii] In 2017 the league's all-star game occurred in Seattle, whose team is owned by an all-female and openly lesbian ownership team who has charted a new path through the world of sport finance.^[xix] The week of the all-star game the Storm held a public rally with Planned Parenthood, bringing perhaps the most divisive social issue directly into the league's orbit.

Scholars and fans are wise to remain skeptical of corporate-sponsored activism, however, no matter how genuine it seems. Indeed, for the 2018 season the WNBA launched a brand-new ad with the seemingly edgy tagline “take a seat, take a stand”.^[xx] This phrase was meant to draw in fans and ticket holders (those “sitting” in the seats) by linking the league with various contemporary social and protest topics. In the ad we see footage from the January 2017 Women’s March, rainbow flags or signs for LGBTQ acceptance, interspersed with action shots and key players interacting with fans or teammates. Phrases such as “we stand for her” and “we stand for us” highlight gender solidarity across the league. The ad closes with a rapid succession of organizations to which WNBA proceeds will be donated. These organizations include Planned Parenthood, GLSEN, and several breast cancer charities.

However, the ad does not show any of the 2016 Black Lives Matter protests. The one image of a full roster of players locking arms during an anthem also shows them standing (not kneeling, as the Fever did), looking up, and wearing pink breast cancer ribbon t-shirts. While breast cancer is a serious health concern across all communities of women, it has been domesticated into the panoply of mainstream social causes to the extent that the NFL has a pink uniform weekend.^[xxi] The pink ribbon is a far cry, in 2018, from the tensions of Black Lives Matter. Additionally, none of the organizations that flash by at the final credits are recognizable as Black Lives Matter activists. The ad wants us to FEEL like the league is on board with racial justice activism, but the official links remain in the safer realms of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Joy, Victory, and Commercialization of Affects

In this era of commodity feminism (Banet-Weiser 2012), the market place has become a major activist space, and market appeal a key indication of the political value. Women’s sport and female sporting bodies also become prime real estates to promote social causes and this

market value for political activism in turn increase the market value of female athleticism (Funk et al; Irwin et al). Particularly, this promotion of women's sport and its associated causes is often conveyed through emotional storytelling. Although one can argue that the sport, games, and sporting bodies are the main products, it is through producing and circulating feelings, such as, unity against the rivals and celebrations of overcoming adversaries, professional sport claims the significant space in our imagining of civil identity (Whitson). The WNBA, a relatively young league entering in the already crowded North American sporting landscape, is fluent in this emotional storytelling. Tracing back to its launch in 1997, the WNBA announced itself with victorious homecoming stories of American women professional basketball athletes. The storyline of these women finally came home to their families from their long journey in other continents even slipped into a mainstream movie, *Love and Basketball*. This celebratory narrative imprints onto the WNBA athletic bodies, and continues to circulate and accumulate "affective value" (Ahmed 2004, p. 11).

Considering emotions as a form of affective values, we see that an emotion does not simply emerge within and be experienced by people. Emotions circulate, exchange, accumulate, and affect. Affect describes the capacity to move and be moved (Deleuze & Guattari). An emotion affects, because it has the capacity to orient; and therefore, the "value" of an emotion is evaluated on its effectiveness and efficiency to move others toward and/or away (Ahmed). Yet, we should be careful not to consider the affective value as universal and immanent. The celebratory and joyful feelings are not by themselves "positive." In men's sport, lasting curses of defeats sometimes become legendary. It unifies communities behinds teams' Sisyphean pursuits for glories. In this case, what is "positively" affective that moves the fans toward solidarity is not happiness nor victories; rather tragic gloom and angering frustration. Nevertheless, being an icon

of fruitless efforts is a luxury that most women's sports and athletes do not share. In the so-called postfeminist era, (white, normative) female athleticism has been circulated in the US collective consciousness as landmarks of progression. For example, Nike opened up a new market in women's sport and physical activity pursuits by pressing the narrative of (white heterosexual middle-class) super woman who can do it and have it all (Capon & Helstein; Lafrance). Through the constant articulation, this joyful and/or victorious feelings become a key positive affect value for women's sport, ones that it needs to produce and evoke in order to move others toward it.

Being able to wield positive affects is crucial for a for-profit organization such as the WNBA. Its survival relies upon turning the toward-ness into commercial profits (Liao). To accumulate value, to turn affects into capitals, the process of making that emotion will have to be erased (Ahmed). The often-brutal struggles before declaring the breakthrough will have to become a side note so that the joyful victory can take the center stage. In the case of the WNBA, this erasure is observed in its hesitation to take on more confrontational social critiques. The 2014 WNBA Pride rode on the coattails of popularity of Brittney Griner and of social momentum that eventually led to 2015 US supreme court legalizing same-sex marriages. The WNBA's self-congratulate narrative for being the first mainstream professional sport league that offers a social progressive platform focusing on LGBT communities omits its long history of marginalizing lesbian athletes' and LGBT fandoms' experiences (Muller). We argue, this framing LGBT communities as protagonists of the WNBA's new storyline enables the open stance with #OrlandoUnited in June 2016. Supporting LGBT communities was no longer a position evoking "negative" affects that orientates away-ness. It was not a confrontational tale of discrimination, but a heroic story about overcoming hate against LGBT communities.

We further argue that WNBA's victorious storytelling as positive affect values is about the its "family-oriented" identity, particularly the coded heteronormativity and whiteness (McDonald 2002). When commenting on photography, Susan Sontag (2004) asserts, "the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked" (p. 33). Linking the affect of witnessing pains to that of hyper-sexualization, it is easy to see why emotions evoked by confronting the painful reality of systematic unjust against minority social groups (such as Black Lives Matter) are rejected from the WNBA, a family-friendly space. This avoidance of struggles and failure, this celebration of succeeding (within the system), turns the WNBA away from discussing complexities in "defeats" and critiques of unjust social structures. Continuously investing in the positive affective value of joys, of victories, the WNBA slowly orients itself, its athletes and its audience toward the normativity, and unfortunately away from its potential for political impacts.

It is not our intention to disagree with the WNBA's tendency to rely on the emotional storytelling of victorious overcoming, or even the celebratory narrative heavily embedded in women's sport in general. Rather, we want to consider potentials and limitations of commodifying feminist politics. For a young league such as the WNBA, the risk to reframe positive/negative affects is high. Any expectation that the WNBA would spearhead radical changes in (feminist) politics, that it would full heartedly embark a journey that may evoke frustration, sadness, dismay, or even anger is rather unreasonable. However, because the WNBA continuously impresses the capacity to orient towardness onto its athletes, these athletic bodies can become and have become (heroic) subjects of "failure" (Halberstam). Their defeat would still be witness; their anger could still be "positive." Emotions as a form of affective value means that the value of an emotion is not universal, nor given; it is through the process of recognition,

exchange, and accumulation that an emotion has a value, and yet, this value is never stable. In July 2016, WNBA athletes confronted the league and the public about racial injustice. Their somber black warm-up shirts were sharp contrast with those in rainbow colors designed wore just a month ago. When they “failed” to tell the media about their games during media blackouts, they disrupted the WNBA’s storytelling. They brought struggles and solemnness into the stadiums, and queered WNBA’s victorious storylines.

Intersectionality and Solidarity in Sport Activism

The 2016 Black Lives Matter protest by WNBA players can be considered the first truly intersectional political demonstration in the league’s history. Intersectionality is the fundamental awareness that we each experience multiple powerful vectors of identity that do not operate sequentially but multiplicatively and in complex, overlapping ways (Crenshaw). Status quo institutions, such as a large for-profit sports league invested in American ideology, may resist an intersectional view of reality to serve its own interests. In this case, it has been argued that the WNBA prefers to see its players (and sometimes coaches) as women only, singly, exclusively, and not as the white, black, brown women that they also are (in addition to lesbian, international, disabled, etc.). Banet-Weiser (1999) first argued that the WNBA packaging of black women as domestic, maternal and gender-first worked to mitigate threat of the unruly black male bodies in the NBA. McDonald (2000, 2002, 2008) extends this argument with analyses noting how sexuality is disciplined through racial codes such that black lesbian players remain far less visible and white heterosexuality is still the preferred subjectivity. In effect, black WNBA women were not supported in expressing their blackness as much as their woman-ness.

In the summer of 2016 we saw black WNBA players directly foregrounding their race. They spoke as black female basketball players, refusing to shelve their race behind their sex or

gender. This occurred in several ways – Washington Mystics veteran starter Ivory Latta spoke to reporters about her nephew is not allowed out of the house after a certain hour;^[xxiii] Cappie Pondexter, a veteran guard for the Chicago Sky, told an August 2016 workshop on reducing gun violence how she'd lost three family members under the age of 23 to gunfire.^[xxiiii] These Black players shared deaths in their family from white cops, fears for other Black men in their lives, or even direct experiences with law enforcement that focus on their identity as Black Americans..

We also saw a much higher level of racial solidarity in the WNBA than in the men's professional leagues. The initial statement was made by a multi-racial group of Minnesota Lynx players that included a prominent white player (and presumably knowledge or support from their white coach). Super star white players like Sue Bird took active roles. The entire Indiana Fever roster knelt in their final playoff game that September. In men's professional sport we have seen single digit numbers of white NFL players showing support, one lesser-known MLB player, and white NBA players (often international players) only as part of group/team demonstrations.

We might argue, from standpoint theory, that female athletes who experience regular disrespect and marginalization are more are more attuned to other structural, persistent systems of injustice (Hartsock). One year after the protests, while her city hosted the league All-Star game, Seattle Storm guard Sue Bird was asked about the after-effects of the protest. She replied:

“We're still trying to prove ourselves and get things moving in the right direction. So I do think it's innate within us to have that fighting mentality, to speak up on things that we see happening,” Bird said. “And then at the same time, the makeup of our league, it's a melting point. You're exposed to things, you see your things, and you bring in your own story to it, and it lends to a certain type of activism. It just naturally fits.”

The players' hashtag "we will NOT be silenced" did not exclude non-Black players standing in solidarity. It encompassed allied players who desired to express their support and their connections to the troubling issues of violence, race, and policing.

An alternative framework to understand how athletes, particularly lower-status athletes like women in team sports, can express political voice is through public sphere theory. In this case, we saw elite professional women basketball players constituting a "counterpublic" to contest public debates. The notion of a counterpublic builds upon Felski (1989) and Fraser's (1993) elucidation of oppositional publics and has had a feminist valence since its proposal (see Brouwer p. 89). Communities that are once marginalized from official, formal decision-making bodies but mobilize to express their voice into or towards this dominant public. If we consider the WNBA league office - staffed by administrators, lawyers, corporate relation strategists, etc. - as the dominant space that decides what political voice is sanctioned within the league (such as the #OrlandoUnited t-shirt demonstration), what we saw from the Lynx, Liberty, Mercury, Mystic, Fever and Storm players (as well as other individual players on their social media platforms) might be considered a counterpublic mobilized to assert an oppositional view and influence decision making.

Counterpublics are not guaranteed success, much less full victory, in their efforts of course. In Brouwer's study on ACT-UP activists engaging with Congressional hearings amid the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, the "success" was to bring the topic into public discussion and "revitalize public discourse" about the topic (Brouwer, p. 89). The WNBA players of 2016 achieved a similar result, and perhaps more; the pressure from teammates, media and fans seemed to be a key factor in the central league office dropping the fines, and by 2017 league preside Lisa Borders is aligning the league's voice and identity with the players. The 2018 league promotional campaign (see above) suggest that this alignment is still cautious and calculated, but

for a relatively disempowered group the female players of the WNBA asserted themselves successfully within the discourse of race, justice, and sport.

It also seems that the racial solidarity demonstrated in the WNBA, again at higher levels than we've seen in any of the dominant men's leagues in the United States, contributed to the success of this counterpublic move. White players, and super star white players to boot, were involved from the get go. Comments from players recognized the higher impact of the police violence issue in Black communities, but, and perhaps this was due to the anti-LGBTQ shooting at Pulse one month prior, non-Black players seemed to understand that bias and gun violence impacted them all. The effect of this solidarity, from a rhetorical or argument perspective, can be profound; it is materially more difficult to dismiss a topic as "just a race issue" when racial solidarity is demonstrated.

Conclusions

It seems likely that uniforms and athlete apparel in the WNBA will remain a battlefield of symbolic and material power relations. The league is still fighting for economic stability and respect from sport fans and media outlets. At the same time, its players seem bolder than ever to push their league into new ground when it comes to the nexus of sport, protest, and politics. What role will uniform politics play in this drama?

Sponsor voice is likely to remain prominently displayed, openly embraced, and rarely questioned as the league continues to explore creative funding options for its franchises. We are not likely to see city or state names reclaim their front-of-the-jersey status anytime soon. It may be, however, that the WNBA explores sponsorship relationships with companies that are more comfortable, or more aligned, with political stances. In this way the WNBA may move from "stealth feminism" (Heywood & Dworkin) to "stealth social justice" terrain. Observers (and

fans) are wise to recall that politics under the banner of corporate profit remains, at the final whistle, corporate profit. We should also be cautious about the celebration of progressions and the post-feminist narratives incorporated into the WNBA's rhetoric. The victorious emotions employed in the WNBA's marketing platforms continuously package minority politics into assimilated normativity. While it makes female muscularity and athleticism "appealing", it deters the attention from social structures and silences sounds of struggling (of its athletes and fans) against the injustice. The limits of neoliberal politics for equitable social change are clear in the WNBA's maneuvers for sustainability.

We hold slightly higher hopes for athlete voice, solidarity, and counterpublic rhetoric. Athletes' mere physical non-/presences in the stadiums, in media, can evoke emotions and produce storylines that are not planned according to corporate interests. LeBron James standing with Hillary Clinton, Colin Kaepernick kneeling, and the L.A. Sparks not present during the national anthem -- there are indications that athletes can and know how to utilize their bodies to fail the process of commodification and a-politicization of their athleticism. Their disruption demonstrates solidarity across race, sexuality, nation, and serves to strengthen moments of athlete voice in the hyper-commercialized, highly commodified, resolutely escapist realm of sport and sport media.

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