

“I’m doing really well in this sport, but I’m still pretty doing it”: Gender performance among
Adolescent female athletes

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Abstract

Research on the gender performance of female athletes stemming from a sex role socialization theory perspective finds a conflict between being a girl or woman and being an athlete, which is not supported by most recent empirical research on female athletes, and fails to consider the ways in which female athletes construct their own gender performances. Drawing on West and Zimmerman's pivotal work on doing gender (1987), this research seeks to fill this gap. Drawing on fieldwork and qualitative interviews with members of a regional U-18 softball team and a high school varsity basketball team over the course of their season, I show that there are a variety of ways in which adolescent female athletes manage being a girl and being an athlete. Through their actions, the athletes I observed were redefining what it meant to be a girl by being an athlete at the same time. Sometimes, they separated their gendered performances into different contexts. Other times, gender was just not a salient performance. Most importantly, some of the athletes blended aspects of a normatively feminine gender performance with aspects of being an athlete to create a new gendered category of female athlete.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis will examine the gender performance of adolescent female athletes to determine how girls and young women manage the social position of female athlete. I used a different theoretical perspective in an effort to move beyond the notion that a conflict exists between being a girl and an athlete. The research in this thesis is located in a theory of gender called “Doing Gender (1987)” by West and Zimmerman. This theory states that individuals perform gendered behavior and it is this performance that creates gendered categories and gendered institutions. I observed actual behavior by adolescent female athletes to determine how they created or resisted gendered categories. My research findings suggest that adolescent female athletes are able to manage being a girl and an athlete in a variety of ways. Sometimes, they performed normative femininity and other times they did not. And more importantly, sometimes they blended aspects of normative femininity and aspects of an athlete to create a female athlete gender performance that valued gender less highly than categories such as athletic ability, camaraderie, and sense of humor.

This topic is a unique culmination of my life up until now. As a child I was routinely called a tomboy. I had short, boy-length hair, wore clothing from the boys’ section, played soccer and basketball instead of jump rope at recess, and almost exclusively had close male friends. Others (teachers, friends, relatives, strangers, etc) labeled me as pseudo-male for the way I looked and the activities in which I engaged. However, I remember never being confused about whether or not I was a girl or boy. I did not want to be a boy. I was a kid, who enjoyed participating in activities and wearing clothes associated with masculinity. I just thought those clothes were more comfortable and those activities were more fun.

Even as I attempted to change what it meant to be a girl through my actions as an eight-year-old, I learned that there were a lot of pressures to act normatively feminine. As such, once middle school started, it just became easier to grow out my hair and hang out with girls. Initially, I made these changes because I thought I was supposed to. I believed there was some determined way girls were required to act. It really was not that big of a deal to me. My hair got longer but I always kept it up in a ponytail, hidden from view. I exchanged my boys' clothes for the standard teenage girls' fashions because it was fun to shop with my friends. However, I kept playing sports. This was what mattered to me. I was a very serious athlete through out middle school and high school. I went from being called a tomboy to being called a jock. The term jock did not have a gendered meaning and my experience as an athlete did not either. My athletic body did not get in the way of my social performance and that social performance did not hamper my athletic pursuits. I definitely did not experience a conflict between being a girl and athlete. I do not remember having to manage or redefine what it meant to be a girl while being an athlete. It just did not occur to me.

Sophomore year of college a friend of mine gave me a bunch of her clothes because her shoulders were growing too big from swim practice and nothing fit her anymore. Sometimes this friend complained that her body was not "feminine enough." Other times, she talked about how much she liked having an athletic physique and how advantageous it was both socially and athletically. I began to wonder about whether or not there was a conflict between being a girl and an athlete. How do young women and girls navigate the two identities?

As I began to pursue this topic this same friend told me how the swim team always ordered pink t-shirts as a way of downplaying how masculine their bodies became over the season. I wondered if this was a common behavior among female athletes since I never

conducted my actions in that manner. This brought about the following research questions: How do adolescent female athletes manage being both girls and athletes? How do adolescent female athletes perform gender? When do they perform gender [or not]? Is it different in different contexts?

As it turns out, ordering pink t-shirts to appear more feminine, as my friend and her team did, is a well-documented phenomenon among female athletes. This behavior termed “apologetic defense” has been thoroughly researched from a sex role socialization theory standpoint¹. Most studies have found that women or girls who participate in sex-inappropriate sports engage in more apologetic behavior, behavior that emphasizes femininity to downplay masculinity. This suggests that there is a conflict between being a girl and being an athlete. However, the majority of studies that use qualitative and quantitative surveys to determine whether or not this conflict actually exists have found that the conflict is not internal for athletes but rather external. This is to say that women or girls who are actually participating in sports do not find themselves feeling conflicted about their identity. However, others, such as family members, boyfriends, coaches, etc, may be imposing the view that there is an innate conflict between being a girl and an athlete. Furthermore, the idea that a conflict even exists seems to be outdated and is located in the theory of gender called sex role socialization theory. According to Michael Kimmel, sex role theory states, “we acquire our gender identity through socialization, and afterwards are socialized to behave in masculine and feminine ways” (2008, 116). For the most part, gender sociologists have ruled out sex role socialization theory as sufficient for explaining the creation of gendered categories. For these reasons, I located this research in doing gender theory.

¹ I thoroughly explain “apologetic defense” in the Literature Review section.

More research about female athletes is vital at a time when equal opportunities for participation appears achieved but in fact, is not. Title IX, a federal law enacted in 1972 “that prohibits sex discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal financial assistance” (Lakowski 2005), has increased female athletic participation by 904% in high school and 456% in college according to the Women’s Sports Foundation. However, according to the same source, high school female athletes are only receiving 41% of participating opportunities and college female athletes are only receiving 43% of opportunities. This suggests that even though athletic opportunities appear to be ubiquitous compares to the past, female athletes have not yet achieved equality. As organizations like the Women’s Sports Foundation work towards more equality for female athletes, research on the benefits of sports participation for adolescent girls is crucial. While this thesis does not tackle any kind of health benefits for female athletes, it may be useful in contributing to broader notions of gender equality and how gendered categories are created and maintained. It reveals how adolescent female athletes redefine what it means to be a girl by incorporating an athletic identity.

To answer my research questions I conducted observations with two athletic teams over the course of their seasons. I conducted my first set of observations with a regional U-18 softball team during the summer of 2010. I also interviewed five members of this team. I conducted the next set of observations with a high school varsity basketball team during the 2010-2011-winter season. I attended games, tournaments, team dinners, a sleepover, and practices with both of these teams. During that time I watched what they did and said to each other, coaches, friends, parents, and me. I have organized this thesis into a traditional sociological research paper. The next chapter is a literature review of relevant research concerning female athletes and gender.

Chapter 3 explains my research methods and the following three chapters are the findings chapters.

In Chapter 4, I explain how the softball team separated their gender performance into two different contexts, one athletic and one social. I then show how in the social context they “did girl,” or performed a gender identity most associated with normative feminine (and heterosexual) behavior such as discussing boys, caring about their hair and clothing, gossiping, discussing sex, and more. Next, I show how in the athletic context the softball team “did athlete,” or performed an identity grounded in athleticism and unrelated to characteristics associated with femininity. This performance was focused, strong, aggressive, and competitive. In addition to “doing athlete” in the athletic context, the softball team also did not do girl. In chapter 4, I show how a specific part of doing athlete, is not doing girl.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss another method of gender performance utilized by the softball team. They continued the separation of contexts by identifying which things belonged in which context. For example, jewelry belongs in the social context while dirt belongs in the athletic context. Instead of limiting these things’ presence to their appropriate context, they blended them so that they could fit into a female athlete gender performance. I also show how some players on the softball team had earned enough status that they were able to do girl in the athletic context without blending or justification. I then explain how the basketball team did not engage in as complex or important status system and no one on the team did girl in the athletic context.

In Chapter 6, I show how the basketball team mocked doing girl in the athletic context and downplayed differences between boys and girls in the social contexts by routinely subverting gender norms. Then, I show how even though the basketball team did not consider being female

to be particularly important, their relationships with their coach, the athletic department, school administration, and the team's fans, were gendered.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I discuss the theoretical implications of my findings. Although at certain times and in certain contexts, I clearly observed a difference between behaving like a girl and behaving like an athlete, these performances were not mutually exclusive. In fact, it was very easy for most of the athletes to transition between doing girl and doing athlete. The fact that some of them did them at the same time suggests significant social fluidity. These teenagers were able to pick up and drop off performances according to what was most advantageous or worthwhile for them. As such, I argue that there was no conflict between being a girl and being an athlete even if there may have been differences between acting like a girl and acting like an athlete. To navigate these differences, the athletes I observed performed normative conceptions of femininity in appropriate contexts, usually the social context. In the athletic context, their gender performance was either not salient enough for me to notice it or, these athletes did not perform gender at all.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The goal of my research is to map the process of gender production for adolescent female athletes. I aim to move beyond the notion that a conflict exists between being a girl and an athlete and show how girls successfully manage being an athlete. As such, this thesis is located in a theory of gender called “doing gender” developed by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987). Doing gender theory states that gendered categories do not exist until and when individuals actively create them through performance. Within different social contexts, social actors have the option to perform gender differently or, according to some gender theorists, not perform gender at all. Empirically observing this theoretical possibility is difficult since existing gender categories almost ‘force’ us to see gender even when it may not be there.

Gender performance is subject to the categorization by others into one of two gendered categories, woman or man. West and Zimmerman do allow that it may be possible to perform non-normative conceptions of gender. However, while the saliency of gender performance may fluctuate depending on the context in which individuals are performing, this does not mean that they are ever not performing their gender. West and Zimmerman say it is impossible to not do gender because of the “social consequences of sex category membership: the allocation of power and resources not only in the domestic, economic and political domains but also in the broad arena of interpersonal relations” (145). It is important to notice the difference between the fluctuating saliency of gender allowed in doing gender theory and the possibility of not doing gender at all. When I use the term “salient” in relation to gender, I am referring to its visibility and importance as a social category, or when gender matters. In some situations, it is possible that even though gender is being performed, other performances or social categories may be more accessible or important such as age, race, class, or religion, for example. On the other

hand, when I argue that gender is not being done or performed, this may mean that the social actor is not performing gender and the audience is neither categorizing the performance nor accessing the gendered system in their assessment of the social actor in question. In this instance, gender does not matter and is not being done.

This is a relatively new definition for the origin and production of gendered categories. It stems from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Doing gender theory specifically focuses on micro-level interactions of social actors. Norman Denzin defines symbolic interactionism as a theory that “takes as a fundamental concern the relationship between individual conduct and forms of social organization.” Denzin continues, “This perspective asks how selves emerge out of social structure and social situations” (1969, 922). Additionally, according to Denzin, symbolic interactionism allows for social actors to understand the meaning of their actions and consciously perform them in a specific way so as to create meaning (923). Symbolic interactionism suggests that patterns of meaning created by micro-level interactions create the institutions in which those actions happen.

Doing gender theory’s basis in symbolic interactionism and focus on micro-level interactions makes it particularly valuable because it allows for individual agency to both resist or reproduce gendered systems. If doing gender theory is understood the way the authors intend, it offers a powerful reconciliation between structural and institutional perspectives and symbolic interactionism. Doing gender theory is context-specific and recognizes that gender is performed within social institutions. Micro-level interactions and performances create these institutions. Given that doing gender theory stems from a symbolic interactionist perspective, I believe that it allows for individuals to have some knowledge and control over their performance.

I also chose this theory because, rather than suggesting that our gender expression was conditioned and created for us by our teachers, parents, religious leaders, coaches and relatives, (Deutsch 2007, 107) doing gender theory forces us to look directly at exactly what people are achieving through their actions. The theory's focus is on how social actors go about the process of gender performance, rather than expecting them to fulfill any predetermined role expectations. Additionally, doing gender theory states that gendered categories (man and woman) do not exist until we create them. This is not to say that no one knows what it means to be a man or a woman until we watch it happen. Rather, the audience for which we perform our gender is very well versed in how gender has been created in the past, what constitutes normative gendered performances, and what may stray from the standard understanding of masculine and feminine (West and Zimmerman 1987, 127). Historically, studies of gendered performance have focused on singular types of masculinity and femininity - those of the dominant class. Gender varies across class and race in addition to time (Deutsch 2007, 107). Contemporary definitions of femininity and masculinity still possess vestigial qualities. Femininity and masculinity performed centuries ago is very different from that of 50 years ago and that is different from today. In this way, we can see that it may be possible to perform gender in such a way as to be advantageous to one's own cause. My research suggests that young female athletes are doing gender in a way that lets them be both "girls" and "athletes" even as these two roles might seemingly be in conflict. Whether or not this means that young female athletes are resisting the gendered order through their performance or expanding the definition for allowable femininities will be addressed later in this paper. Doing gender theory allows for the possibility of resistance among social actors.

Resistance is an important aspect of doing gender theory that should be further explained. According to Francine Deutsch, doing gender theory has been used in a variety of scholarly research to preserve the normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity (2007). She says this is an incorrect use of a very important development of gender theory. Deutsch explains that the language of *doing* “renders resistance invisible” (109). This is because “to do gender is to act with the possibility that one will be judged according to normative standards applied to one’s sex category-to be accountable to that sex category” (109). In this way, as originally conceived by West and Zimmerman, doing gender theory makes it difficult to see why individuals might resist performing normative conceptions of gender since they will be judged based on these normative conceptions no matter what they do. Instead, Deutsch aims to argue the saliency of gender varies greatly in different contexts and that sometimes, it may be entirely not salient and therefore no longer a significant social category (116). This seems to be the site of resistance. Moments in which gender is not employed by either the individual actor or the audience are actually moments in which gender is being “undone.” Deutsch wants to “reserve the phrase ‘doing gender’ to refer to social interactions that reproduce gender difference and use the phrase ‘undoing gender’ to refer to social interactions that reduce gender difference” (122). With this new term, Deutsch hopes to begin to dismantle the gendered system.

To begin this process, Deutsch proposes a shift in the research questions concerning gendered performance. These questions should focus on changing the gendered system rather than illuminating existing structural inequalities (114). The new research should focus on the five following areas:

- (1) when and how social interactions become less gendered, not just differently gendered;
- (2) the conditions under which gender is irrelevant in social interactions;
- (3) whether all gendered interactions reinforce inequality;
- (4) how the structural (institutional) and

interactional levels might work together to produce change; and (5) interaction as the site of change (Deutsch 2007, 114).

These questions frame the research conducted for this thesis. The context of girls' sports is one in which we may be able to answer some of these questions. Girls' sports may be a site at which gender is not a significant category or it might be a site at which the definition for femininity is so greatly expanded that using the term to describe the behavior might not even be helpful.

While this paper focuses primarily on the interactional level, I also aim to reveal how the girls were aware of the power systems relevant to their social positions. While many of the girls could not articulate what they could do to solve the problem of why male athletes earned more social benefits than they did, they were aware of the inequities. This helps to reveal the greater structure of gender inequality at the interactional level.

One way the basketball and softball players whom I studied seemed to recognize the structure of the gendered system was when discussing the presence or absence of a conflict for female athletes. Historical implications of the gendered contexts of sports are well documented and explained in the research looking at the relationship of gender identity and athletic participation for high-school girls. Researchers repeatedly clarify that sports are a context in which advantageous characteristics are those that are typically defined as masculine: aggressiveness, fortitude, competitiveness, toughness, and strength. In this way, sports are a suitable method for orienting boys to their gender role but not necessarily for girls (Greendorfer, 1983; Fine, 1987). In "The Arrangement Between the Sexes," Erving Goffman discusses how organized sports allow men to display their masculinity via such traits as "endurance, strength and competition" (1977; 322). The characteristics of successful athletes are in direct contrast to those required of standard femininity. As such, it would seem logical that there be a role conflict for female athletes. Sage and Loudermilk say that a role conflict exists when an individual

experiences or perceives an incompatibility of the qualities of one position with that of another (1979). With this definition, it is logical that female athletes may feel, or even actually experience some form of conflict. Doing gender theory allows for masculinities and femininities to be created by action and therefore results in an expanded definition that would be less likely to have irreconcilable differences.

Doing gender theory specifically positions itself against sex role socialization theory in its variation on how institutions are created and maintained. Talcott Parsons developed sex role socialization theory as a way of describing how individual actions have a function in society. Parsons identified a system in society in which there are two separate institutional structures: kinship and occupational system (1943). The kinship role values tenderness, compassion, and nurturing while the occupational system values competitiveness, rationality, and autonomy. It is not that the individual needs to fit into one of these roles but that different individuals in our society are socialized to fill those roles to maintain the system (Kimmel 2008, 94). Instead of proposing that individuals are conditioned to fulfill a specific position (or role) in society as a way of preserving institutions, doing gender theory says that institutions are created and maintained through individual action.

Michael Kimmel (2008) aptly summarizes the five main issues sociologists have taken up with sex role socialization over the past 60 years. It is for the following reasons that I have chosen to use doing gender theory instead of sex role socialization theory in my analysis of adolescent female athletes. Kimmel begins with the argument that using the term “role” minimizes the importance of gender by suggesting that it is a responsibility or position that be easily picked up and dropped when desired because it has little power in our lives (101). Next, Kimmel takes up the argument that sex role socialization theory only allows for singular

definitions of normative masculinity and femininity. The problem with this is that it fails to recognize that there are far more differences among men and among women than between the two groups. As such, too narrow definitions mean that any difference from normative conceptions of masculine or feminine are seen as aberrations or deviance thus suggesting that difference leads to inequality rather than the other way around (102).

The third challenge for sex role theory is that it creates two separate spheres for men and women rather than allowing for a relational way of thinking about gender. Kimmel argues that sociologists have repeatedly confirmed that men define their masculinity in opposition to femininity (102-103). While I did not find the opposite to be true for the girls I observed for this research, many of the girls did consider their gender in relation to boys. They found that being a girl was more important when boys were around. Kimmel's fourth dispute with role theory, the one that he considers to be the most important "is that it *depoliticizes gender*, making gender a set of individual attributes and not an aspect of social structure" (103). Kimmel means that focusing on the individual position of each social actor renders the power systems present in society invisible and suggests that men and women are "separate or different but equal." And finally, Kimmel takes up an issue with role theory's "inadequacy in comprehending the dynamics of change" (104). Because role theory ignores power dynamics, it does not account for social change. Kimmel argues that social change is not just about expanding definitions of gendered categories but also about redistributing power in society. To achieve this, a point of view that establishes power dynamics as integral to its analysis of gendered behavior is the only method to adequately understand social movements (104). There is not a body of research analyzing the gendered behavior of female athletes from a doing gender perspective. With this research I aim to begin to fill this gap.

Even though the majority of existing research on female athletes comes from a sex role socialization theory perspective, it is still important for this thesis to examine the body of research to better determine what questions need to be answered. Studies most likely to find some level of role conflict describe the “female athlete paradox.” This paradigm finds an implicit contradiction in the muscularity required of athletics and the thin yet curvaceous, delicate yet firm, body required for hegemonic femininity (Krane et al. 2004). However, the paradox seems to be most relevant to elite female athletes who are actually putting on significant amounts of muscle weight during training. The high school girls observed in this study, while serious athletes, were not at the elite level. The basketball girls lifted weights periodically during the winter season and the softball girls were never required to lift weights as a team. The female athlete paradox is irrelevant to my research because the teenage athletes I studied did not have defined muscular physiques. I am not aware of whether or not the athletes I studied were encouraged or discouraged to develop this kind of body. However, from my personal experience as an athlete in high school, I would guess that neither was addressed.

In general, despite the prevailing notion that female athletes should experience a conflict, the majority of studies have found this to not be true (Desertrain and Weiss, 1988; Goldberg and Chandler, 1991; Anthrop & Allison 1983). Desertrain used quantitative methods to determine that while female athletes were more likely to experience role conflict than non-athletes, there was not a significant relationship between gender role orientation and role-conflict (567). Krane et al. (2004) found that the women in her study did make distinctions between being athletic and being feminine. Even though the women experienced a certain degree of social marginality due to their athletic status, they were proud of their muscular and athletic bodies (315). Although they acknowledged that there is a distinct difference between normative femininity and

athleticism, their pride in their athletic physiques suggests a need for differentiating between an internal conflict and an external conflict. Anthrop and Allison (1983) define internal role conflict as self-perceptions of one's personal worth and external role conflict as pressures imposed on an individual by outside sources. Anthrop and Allison suggest this as a method for "understanding the different pressures with which female athletes must deal" (104). While this distinction is incredibly important for reconciling the true experiences of female athletes, separating the types of conflict still produces and reproduces gender differences. In order to reveal a much more important difference, I keep in mind the distinctions explained by Anthrop and Allison as I analyze my research from a doing gender perspective. This difference is one in which the structure of gender is problematic for female athletes. This is to say that girls are easily able to play sports if they choose to, but the socially constructed categories of "girl" and "athlete" are more in conflict than any female athlete I observed. As such, gender role theory does not work to explain how people actually behave but rather posits expectations of how they should behave. I will show how the athletes I observed were aware of these expectations but still acted in a way that redefined what it meant to be a girl by combining components of an athletic identity.

In her attempt to explain why girls might be experiencing measurable amounts of role conflict, Desertrain (1988) offers a number of resolutions that female athletes might be successfully employing to manage possible conflict. She says, "these resolutions include the athlete removing herself from social situations demanding feminine role behavior, bringing her athletic orientation to her social role, becoming an apologetic or dropping out of sport" (580). Those girls who have dropped out of sport due to perceived or experienced conflict do pose a problem for this research. I am unable to study this conflict in an athletic setting because these

girls are no longer participating. It is arguable that a significant conflict may be present but it is less apparent because the athletes I am studying have managed to negotiate the problem. The girls who have not managed to do the same are no longer members of the athletic teams I am studying. The other resolution of “removing herself from social situations demanding feminine role behavior” suggests that there is no way to reconcile femininity and athleticism; instead, a girl is required to choose between the two identities. My research did not find any girls who completely removed themselves from social situations requiring femininity either intentionally or unintentionally. Every participant engaged in both feminine and athletic behavior at some point or another. On the other hand, bringing athleticism to one’s social role may be a positive method of reconciling athleticism and femininity. Adams et al. (2005) cite this type of resolution in their explanation of the re-appropriation of the term “tomboy.” Some girls have decided to use the term “as a way to resist both the ‘girly girl’ image and the ‘dyke’ image. Tomboys can play sports, have a boyfriend or not, resist girly markers like makeup and ribbons, skirt questions about sexual identity, and still find acceptance with their peers” (29). Although use of the term tomboy for post-pubescent girls is by no means universal, this seems to be a valuable resolution that many of the basketball and softball players may have employed in their social lives even if they did not refer to themselves as tomboys.

Apologetic defense is a commonly documented response to role conflict. The first scholar to document apologetic behavior is Felshin (1974). Since then, the concept, also termed, ‘compensatory acts,’ ‘stigma management,’ and ‘identity/impression management,’ has been documented extensively (cited in Davis-Delano 2009). One scholar defines the concept as an emphasis on feminine activity to ‘apologize’ for athletic involvement (Davis-Delano et al 2009, 131). Davis-Delano documents the phenomena through a qualitative and quantitative

questionnaire administered to 40 student-athletes at Division II and III colleges and universities.

She summarizes the existing types of apologetic behavior discussed by other scholars on the topic:

Scholars have discussed a wide range of apologetic behaviors, including: participating in feminine sports, advocating conservative gender ideas, emphasizing the superiority of male athletes, downplaying athleticism, highlighting participating in feminine activities, emphasizing femininity in appearance, wearing sexy clothing, minimizing muscular development or display, emphasizing small size and fitness, moving in feminine ways, including players who are heterosexual and fit feminine beauty ideals while excluding women who do not fit these criteria, avoiding association with lesbian or masculine females, putting down masculine or lesbian females, concealing lesbianism/bisexuality, associating with boyfriends, arranging to be seen with men, avoiding being seen with women in public, avoiding physical contact with women in public, avoiding talk about lesbianism (132).

Just as the qualitative research before them, Davis-Delano et al. found that “female athletes participating in sports that have a greater association with particular aspects of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. muscularity) and lesbianism may engage in more apologetic behavior” (145).

In the extensive summary of the strengths and weaknesses of existing research on the apologetic defense, Davis-Delano et al. acknowledge the belief that gender identities are more a performance than “internal cognitive commitments” (135). They acknowledge this in their recognition that some female athletes may be inclined to apologize for their position and others may not. Additionally, the authors astutely acknowledge that they over-simplify definitions of femininity and masculinity for comparative purposes. They contend that there are dominant notions of gender norms of which the majority of individuals are aware and it is these notions with which they are working. Research examining apologetic behavior of female athletes that expands definitions of masculinity and femininity may prove the apologetic paradigm less useful than originally considered. A more flexible definition of gender could result in less perceived internal conflict that presumably causes the apologetic defense.

Other researchers view apologetic defense in both positive and negative ways. Desertrain explains that, “social learning theorists would contend that if the female athlete is adjusting to her athletic role by using one of these role conflict resolutions, she has conformed to the societal definition that sport is only gender appropriate for males” (1988, 580). In this vein, from a doing gender standpoint, if apologetic defense is viewed as a performance, it helps to maintain the gendered system of inequality and uphold existing notions of normative femininity. On the other hand, Davis-Delano et al. suggest that apologetic behavior can be viewed as “a form of economic and cultural capital” (2009, 132). Apologetic behavior may function to allow for greater female participation in sport because it acts as a useful tool for the negotiation of two positions. While female athletes who do use apologetic defense as a form of capital might not actually experience any conflict, using it may prove practical in making sports appear more acceptable to families, potential boyfriends, and others (132). This is a form of cultural capital because it is a learned skill applied at appropriate times in advantageous ways. It allows female athletes to successfully exist in and outside of the athletic setting. Additionally, if girls are employing the apologetic technique, or any of the other conflict resolution techniques mentioned by Desertrain, the use of these performances probably helps to reduce the amount of perceived conflict for female athletes. Whether or not the apologetic defense maintains the gendered order, this practice may encourage more girls to participate in sports and begin the process of dismantling the gendered system more slowly (Desertrain 1988, 577).

A very powerful contradiction to apologetic defense is a study done by Nancy Malcom. In *Constructing Female Athleticism: A Study of Girls' Recreational Softball* (2003), Malcom found that apologetic defense was not an attempt to over-compensate for athletic participation but rather an attempt to appear older. Malcom spent three years in a role as a participant-

observer coaching recreational softball teams of various age groups. Malcom documented the most amount of behavior characterized as apologetic from the girls aged 12 to 13. She saw a much less enthusiastic display of feminine behavior from the older girls she observed (1387). Malcolm explained this difference as a method for younger girls to appear older, a quality they equated with increased femininity and achieved through behavior typically termed apologetic. This study suggests a need for more nuanced investigations of overlapping characteristics of individuals. While this study specifically points to age as a locus at which we must examine gender performance of female athletes (Malcom 2003, 1401), this could also be extended to race and class.

In *Women Without Class* (2003), Julie Bettie explains how the idea of performance is relevant to more than just gender. Bettie revealed how female students may perform a different version of class or race at school or at home. Some Mexican-American girls performed the “prep” identity at school but had working-class families. The “prep” identity was White and middle/upper-middle class. Even without the proper cultural capital, these girls were able to pick up and drop class-based or race-based performances with relative fluidity. This finding is useful for my study because it suggests that adolescent social actors have control over their performances. They may act differently in different contexts, as I found with the softball team I observed.

The multi-racial self is also evident in *Shades of White* (2002) by Pamela Perry. White students who went to a school with a majority of Black or non-white students were able to conceive of their Whiteness as something they could change with varying tastes in music, clothing, or culture. Students were again able to pick up various forms of style and culture that indicated identity with one race or another. Bettie and Perry’s works are important in the value of

their critique of the class-based performances of high school girls. Bettie explains that you cannot isolate an identifying category such as class or gender when analyzing one's performance. Rather, you must look at the intersection of class, race, gender and other identifying factors for a more complete analysis. Bettie says that the "various gestures of class performance never exist outside of race and gender meanings (191). Bettie and Perry's strategic approach to research in the high school revealed this important contribution to performance theory because she did not just observe action, she also listened to the accounts of the performers. I also attempt to offer my research subjects' perspective in this study. I did this by asking them why they did certain things and by finding out what they considered to be important and interesting.

Research on gender production in schools has been a valuable tool for the formation of both the theoretical perspective and methodological plan for my research. In *School Talk* (1995), Donna Eder uses the interpretive approach as the primary theoretical framework to understand how middle school students' daily practices construct culture (7). The interpretive approach to understand this culture modifies previous frameworks that placed more power and influence with parents rather than the developing agency of children to perform and speak as they see fit. This is not to say that children are not influenced by the greater social systems but rather that they exist within these systems and build on their social knowledge as they continue to interact with others (200). The interpretive approach seems particularly valuable because it allows for resistance and social change. Just as gender is a performance according to doing gender theory, understanding peer culture through the interpretive approach allows for a consideration of culture as a performance as well. This suggests a need for understanding the peer culture of our subjects. In conjunction with her explanation of the interpretive approach, Eder defines peer culture with Cosaro in their work, *Children's Peer Cultures* (1990). Peer culture is defined as,

“a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interactions with peers” (197). Understanding the peer cultures of the softball and basketball team was valuable in determining what was most important to the girls. While both groups were athletes from Eastern Massachusetts, the teams varied in socioeconomic status and race, which may be significant contributing factors for their gender performance. Additionally, what they discussed and how they approached the game were markedly different. In addition to being able to discern what was important to the team, learning about the groups’ peer culture enabled me to integrate more successfully and earn their respect and acceptance as an outsider. This gave me richer data as well as a better understanding of those data. In this way, using my knowledge of the teams’ peer culture, I was able to use the interpretive approach to my advantage in the analysis of my data.

Barrie Thorne aptly explains in *Gender Play* (1993), that keeping in mind the tenets of the interpretive approach helps the researcher to learn about the subjects, from the subjects, in a more productive way. Through my participant observation with the softball and basketball teams, I worked towards developing a strong enough rapport with the girls that I could understand what they were doing from their perspective rather than solely projecting my academic analysis on the situation. During her research in two elementary schools, Barrie Thorne observed how children both constructed gendered boundaries creating an oppositional dichotomy. She also saw performances that effectively neutralized the system and challenged the importance of gender as a socially significant category (158). Thorne spends a chapter explaining the instances of the term “crossing.” Thorne defines crossing as “the process through which a girl or a boy may seek access to groups and activities of the other gender” (121). Crossing is a valuable concept to examine among children because, as Thorne states, it reveals

the possibility of deconstructing the dichotomous gendered system (133). Thorne does not suggest that the girls in her research were passing as boys but that they were expanding the definition for what kinds of activities and manners of acting in which girls were able to participate. I also did not find that the athletes I studied wanted to be boys or to be considered boys. Rather, they wanted less restrictions on how a girl is “supposed to act” and they did not want to have their gender be the most salient social category related to them.

To build on this idea of crossing, in *Dude, You're a Fag* (2005), C.J. Pascoe describes female masculinity as a method of deconstructing the divergent gendered categories. The girls Pascoe cites as being described or describing themselves as masculine, were not crossing as much in their activities as in their actual gender performance. Pascoe's aim in her explanation of female masculinity is to show that routines traditionally associated with masculinity can be performed by both men and women. Mimi Schippers calls this practice “gender maneuvering.” Gender maneuvering is an interactional routine for performing aspects of the other gender and your own gender in such a way as to breakdown the power systems understood by both groups to be natural (Best 2003). The girls in Pascoe's study engaged in a variety of behaviors typically associated with men, such as clothing style, manner of walking, sexual practices, and control over social situations (2005, 116). This behavior enabled the girls in her study to resist the rigid gendered categories. Some of the girls, namely the Basketball Girls, earned social status from this kind of behavior, while the Gay/Straight Alliance Girls (GSA) had a more political agenda and were not granted more social status for their masculine gender performance.

For girls, with a masculine gender performance usually comes the assumption of a homosexual sexual orientation. Not all of the girls from either of Pascoe's groups identified as lesbian even though many other students associated female masculinity with lesbianism. The

relationship of masculine behavior to sports many times subjects young girls to stereotypes of lesbianism. While many athletes do identify as lesbian or bisexual, many do not, and negotiating this stereotype was routinely discussed among my participants. While other studies have suggested that the process of negotiating the lesbian stereotype produces apologetic behavior, I will argue in later chapters that many girls are not “apologizing” for their participation nor is the behavior documented as such necessarily a defensive mechanism. Additionally, even though many lesbians have found a comfortable place in athletics, this is not to say that all of them perform masculine behavior. Gender performance is not always related to sexual identity. However, just as it is important to consider the intersectionality of class and race with gender, so too should sexuality be considered in a complete analysis of gender performance.

In my consideration of how young female athletes produce or do not produce their femininity, a useful model of comparison that has been thoroughly researched, is masculinity production in sports and in schools. Michael Kimmel explains the overall difference in gender production for boys and girls,

In general, boys tend to acquire masculinity as much by avoiding anything feminine as by imitating men directly. By contrast, girls’ activities and identities seem to be more directly modeled on imitation than on repudiation or avoidance of masculinity (2008, 142).

Boys have the option of refuting femininity because of the power associated with this performance. Less value is placed on qualities associated with femininity (nurturing, gentle, caring) than those associated with masculinity (powerful, assertive, dominant). Additionally, within the context of sports, masculine qualities are valued and feminine qualities are inhibitive. In this context, it would seem naturally advantageous for men to disassociate themselves with anything feminine. Traditionally, sports are an arena in which boys learn to become men. In *With the Boys* (1987), Gary Fine shows how Little League Baseball is an important site in which

preadolescent boys learn from their coaches, parents, and peers that accessing masculine behavior is advantageous to them. Fine also alludes to Kimmel's point about separation from the other gender in his explanation of the behavior. Fine says,

...[the boys] select from among the repertoire of behaviors that they perceive that men (particularly media men and other role models) display. They select those behaviors that are congruent with their own needs for independence and separation from the world of girls and younger children. They must show themselves not to be a part of these protected classes (185).

The girls on the softball and basketball teams also used performances from female athletes in the media as a way of expressing what they thought was the best negotiation of athleticism and femininity. I expand on this idea in later chapters. Just as boys attempt to distance themselves from anything feminine or younger in their attempt to achieve masculinity, girls in sports must many times do the same thing. Discourse about what was appropriately feminine and appropriately aged on the softball field was ubiquitous. However, while there was an attempt by the athletes to distance themselves from femininity during sports, this attempt was not constant and femininity was routinely accessed in a variety of ways.

Another method in sports through which boys present their manhood is through downplaying injuries (Malcom 2006, 498). Fine found that the Little League boys responded with "studied stoicism" (1987, 48). As Malcom confirmed in her study (2006) and seemed to be the case for the athletes I observed, female athletes learn that part of being an athlete is "toughing out" injuries and that this is a learned characteristic for young girls. Additionally, the girls most likely to align themselves with these practices are the ones who most closely align themselves with the athletic identity. This is additional evidence for Kimmel's point that girls do not necessarily try to separate themselves from masculine behavior in their attempt to appear

feminine. The problem lies in the fact that athletic behavior, such as playing through injuries, is most closely associated with masculinity instead of femininity.

The effort to distance one's body, identity, and reputation from femininity as a method of masculinity performance in schools is aptly described by Pascoe in *Dude, You're a Fag*. The "fag discourse" is that around which Pascoe frames her analysis of masculinity production in schools. It is her intent to demonstrate how homophobia is central to the making of adolescent masculinity (Pascoe 2005, 330). Leanne Dalley-Trim also found homophobic rhetoric as a method for masculinity (and by extension heterosexuality) production among boys in schools (2007). Dalley-Trim thoroughly summarizes the literature citing how boys go about avoiding the homophobic rhetoric such as fag. She cites Nayak and Kehily's term, "macho posturing" (cited in Dalley-Trim 2007, 203) as a body-language performance in which boys engage in order to ensure heterosexuality.

Pascoe says that it is important that we do not just stop the analysis at the use of the word "fag" and calling it homophobic, but calls for a more deep understanding of the word as having "as much to do with the failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or an anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with sexual identity" (330). This is a useful model of comparison because it confirms the method Kimmel suggests in which gender is produced for men: off of others. Pascoe states that girls do not use homophobic rhetoric to enhance their own femininity in the same way, while I would argue that this is mostly true, the word "dyke" has been used with similar intentions (Adams et al 2005, 22). The softball girls I observed did subtly distance themselves from the term because it meant a masculine gender performance. However, "dyke" is not used nearly to the same extent as "fag" and is

employed by both girls and boys. This leaves a gap for determining how female athletes do in fact produce their gender.

I aim to begin to fill this gap with the research presented in the following chapters by specifically using doing gender theory to reveal the processes adolescent female athletes use in their daily practices to construct a female athlete identity. Additionally, I will examine practices traditionally considered to be apologetic behavior and offer an alternative explanation for their presence in the gender performance of adolescent female athletes. Through mapping the gender performance of two teams of adolescent female athletes, I will offer an alternative definition for performances once deemed apologetic and aim to illuminate situations in which interactions are less gendered and sites of social change.

Chapter 3: Methods

I used a combination of participant-observation and interviews to answer my research questions. The first group I studied during the summer of 2010 was a regional under-18 (U18) softball team based out of Eastern Massachusetts called “MassFire”². I chose the MassFire for a number of reasons. First, I had very easy access to this team. I first made contact with the Linda during the fall of 2009 for a class project. I had considered trying out for the varsity team at “Hill University” and became casually acquainted with Linda through a few team meetings and work out sessions. I emailed Linda to see if she knew of any teams that practice at or near the Hill University campus that might allow me to observe them. She graciously offered her team as an option. For the class project, I spent a couple of weeks at off-season practices observing the team and developed a relationship with many of them. Even though I have not incorporated any of the data from that project into this paper, knowing the names and faces of the players on the MassFire at the beginning of the summer made for much easier note taking and assimilation with the team. Second, as I mentioned, the MassFire practiced on Hill facilities, which I was able to access on foot. I also thought my experience with the game of softball would make for my integration into the team much easier. I was able to help out at practice and could keep up with the players’ conversations. And lastly, the MassFire was a good fit for this research because softball is traditionally considered a “dykey” and “gender inappropriate” sport. I make this judgment call based on academic research (Holland and Andre 1994, 398; Davis-Delano et al 2009) and the opinions and near constant comments and jokes from my friends through out high school about the “true nature” of girls who play softball.

² All team names and research participant names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

I also conducted observations with a local high school girls' varsity basketball team called the "Lions" during their 2010-2011-winter season. I chose to enter "Easton" for a few reasons. First, I wanted to enter a site that would offer a more ethnically and racially diverse team. Easton has large enclaves of various immigrant populations; some have been settled for a long time (Portuguese, Italian, Irish) and others are relatively new (Haitian-Creole, Brazilian, Cape Verdean). Second, Easton High School was accessible by bus. Originally, I had planned to conduct observations with the school's soccer team for timing purposes. The fall season meant I could conduct observations and interviews first semester and spend winter break and the spring semester analyzing and writing. I sent a cold email to the team's coach and he was very receptive. I went to a few practices to meet the players and let them know I might be around for the season. Unfortunately, complications with the IRB and the school's lawyers postponed research until late November when the soccer season was already over. As such, I started working the Easton High's athletic director who was very supportive of my research and helped me switch to the basketball team. Even though I was sort of "stuck" with the basketball team, this was not problematic. I knew enough about basketball from my short stint on the JV squad my freshman year of high school to keep up. Also, basketball offers a compelling comparison to softball. Just as softball is widely considered a "dyke" sport, basketball has also been found to be "gender inappropriate" for girls in studies among high school students (Holland and Andre 1994, 398). Two sports with this classification were useful models for comparison.

The MassFire was comprised of 13 girls from suburban towns outside of Boston and southern New Hampshire. Linda, the head coach whom I mentioned earlier, was a Caucasian woman in her mid-thirties from Pennsylvania who works at Hill University and was the coach of the Varsity Softball team at Hill. Additionally, Caitlin, whom everyone referred to as "Gills"

because her last name is Gilmore, acted as a volunteer assistant coach sporadically throughout the summer. Gills, Armenian and in her early twenties, was a recent graduate from Hill. The players on MassFire were aged 16 – 18 years old. One player was 16 and entering the 11th grade, five players were 17 and entering the 12th grade and seven players were 18 (or turned 18 during the course of the research) and were entering their freshman year of college. All players self-identified as Caucasian and came from a middle-class to lower-middle class background. I determined socio-economic status by parents' occupation and Linda's perception based on familiarity with the family's lifestyle and place of residence.

In early June, I began attending all practices and tournaments. Practices were usually held once a week on the Hill University softball field and tournaments were nearly every weekend from mid-June to mid-August. Tournaments could last from Thursday through Sunday depending on seeding and success in the brackets. It was most common for the team to play from Friday to Sunday. Practices usually took place on Wednesday afternoons and lasted about two hours. At practices, I would sit with the players as they put on their cleats participating in conversation or observing their interaction. During actual practice, I would either sit on a bucket watching or help Linda by catching balls so that all players could participate in the drill. I took notes in a small notebook but found this to be incredibly distracting for the players. To remedy this, I mostly just committed important details to memory or scribbled key words when no one was looking. After practice, I immediately wrote up detailed field notes describing what the players wore to practice, what they said to each other and to me, what kinds of things they did during practice, and how they interacted with each other.

For games, I would many times ask for rides from parents of the players and engage in small talk with the players and their families in the car on the way to and from the playing fields.

Games were primarily in Central and Eastern Massachusetts though there was one tournament in Pennsylvania. At games, I would stretch with the team so I could better listen to their conversation. I would help Linda with warm-ups and during the actual play of the game I sat on the bench with the team sometimes “doing the book³.” As I did at practice, I took minimal notes in a small notebook and then typed up detailed field notes when I got home. Many of the tournaments began as early as eight in the morning and could go as late as six at night so I needed to take more notes than I did at practice so as not to forget anything. I would often run to my car or the bathroom to scribble more information without the players noticing.

I also interviewed five of the players on the MassFire. For the most part, I chose particular players on the team of varying status levels so that I could get a better sense of the ways gender performance varied across hierarchical social group status and age. The interviews were held in study rooms of the Hill University Library. I had a list of questions I wanted to ask but also let the conversation flow in the direction the players seemed to want (See Appendix A for a list of interview questions). Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. I recorded and transcribed the interviews for accuracy.

Observation methods were similar for the basketball team. However, my level of access with the team was markedly different. I was not personally familiar with the coach and did not enter on his permission but rather the athletic director’s. Additionally, I did not know any of the Lions players’ names before entering the field and the team roster was not even set until a few weeks into the season. This made for slower integration but also allowed for a more removed position on which I will elaborate later in this chapter.

³ “Doing the book,” meant keeping track of hits, plays, and runs during the game in a special softball scorebook.

The Lions basketball team consisted of approximately 12 players⁴. On the Varsity squad, four players were Black/African American coming from countries such as Cape Verde and Haiti. One player was Brazilian and the rest of the team was Caucasian with ancestry from Portugal, Italy, and Ireland. Many of the girls told me they spoke different languages such as Portuguese, Italian, or Haitian-Creole at home with parents or grandparents.

I observed the Lions from early December until the end of February when their season ended. My course load and winter break, during which my dorm closed, meant that I was not able to attend as consistently as I was able to with the MassFire. Most practices lasted anywhere from a minimum of two hours to more than four hours on the weekends. During practice, I would sit on the gym floor as close to the team as possible. When players were waiting on the sidelines to join a drill I would try to stand next to them to hear their conversation or engage in conversation if possible. Coach Connors' serious practices did not allow for much side conversation. I would usually only speak to the players if they spoke to me first to avoid getting anyone in trouble with the coach. I also rode the bus to games with the team, sat on the team bench, and attended a team dinner.

I began observations at a time of high tensions for the girls' basketball team. The coach of 18 years had been told at the beginning of the previous season that he would have to reapply for his contract to be renewed. Other candidates would also be applying for the head varsity coach position. Local newspapers cited the athletic director's recommendation that the coach's contract would not be renewed due to his condescending and inappropriate behavior towards players on the court. These same newspaper articles quote some Lions players saying how much

⁴ A few players are included in the data who were initially on Varsity and thus signed consent forms before they were moved down to the Junior Varsity squad (and in one case moved back up to Varsity due to one player quitting).

they will miss their old coach and how they felt like his intense yelling was motivational rather than discouraging. As such, it seemed like the players and parents were not the ones complaining about the coach, just the administration.

Robin Connors took the position as head coach of the Lions basketball team. Coach Connors, as all the players and myself called him, was a 32-year-old Black man who had coaching experience at small local Division III basketball programs and experience as a head coach of a prestigious Jesuit private high school in the nearby city. Initially, my relationship with Coach Connors was very professional and less valuable than was my relationship with Linda. Linda was very willing to clue me in as to what was going on with the team off the field. Without Linda, I would have had significantly less knowledge of the players' families and other less-discussed information. For example, Linda revealed to me some of the interactions she had with the players and parents about playing time. I was perceptive enough to know that these issues were present but I was not aware of how they were being handled. On the other hand, the players on the Lions many times felt like they never really knew what was going on with Coach Connors and I felt the same. However, as the season progressed, he and I developed a stronger relationship. Coach Connors began to trust me with some of his concerns about the team. Coach Connors seemed to have a lot to prove and told me that he felt like the team was starting from scratch with skills and had a lot to teach them. As such, he ran very serious practices during which "goofing around" was not allowed. Later in the season, Coach Connors revealed to me that he had had difficulty with researchers observing his team in the past but found that I was an agreeable presence and eventually gave me much more access to the team than I was initially granted.

To earn Coach Connor's respect I aimed to be as easy to work with as possible. I tried to let him know when I would be able to make it to games and practices. I never interrupted a drill or meeting and never had the bus for away games wait for me. I respected Coach Connor's wish that I stay out of the locker room on game days but about half-way into the season, he started inviting me in citing my commitment to the team as fair reason for my access into the private locker room. Just as I asked players how the game went for them, I asked Coach Connor's his opinion as well. I also feel that I may have been a comforting presence for Coach Connors in that I understood some of the troubles he was having as a new coach from my experience in high school with a new coach. I was polite and friendly with everyone and I believe this helped in my efforts to become closer to the team. The Lions were also coached by Coach J, the father of one of the players on JV. Coach J is not a significant presence in my field notes. Coach O, the JV coach and assistant Varsity coach has a much larger presence in my research. She was a 24-year-old Caucasian woman from Easton who played on the Lions under the recently fired coach when she was in high school. Coach O had a relationship with many of the players on the Lions through family friends, neighbors, and coaching town league basketball teams on which many players participated.

At both research sites I engaged in similar observation methods. For the majority of practices or games I would try to show up early to catch players before they started warming up so I could hear what they had to say that may be unrelated to softball or basketball. During this time I would usually ask players how they were, how their day or weekend went, or anything else specific that seemed relevant. Since I was not able to attend as regularly for basketball, I was always sure to ask players about the previous day's practice or game. During conversations I listened for who controlled the flow of discussion, who participated, and what was discussed.

If something I found particularly interesting or relevant to my research came up, I would try to extend the conversation. This practice was sometimes successful and other times not. I was once able to engage three softball players in a long conversation about the differences between male and female athletes after one player made a generalized statement. I simply asked her what she meant and then asked the other players if they agreed and the conversation flowed freely. Another time, I tried to get the team to discuss Title IX and whether or not they thought cheerleading was a sport by bringing up an article I read in the news. Unfortunately, no one took my bait and the conversation completely died making for a slightly awkward few moments.

I felt more experienced when I was at basketball research due to the skills I gained through my observations with the softball team. I became aware of this through my response to players who would ask me what I was writing in my notebook. This was a common occurrence at softball and I usually told them I could not say or made up something innocuous like, "I wrote down that Heather made a good catch." This never sparked conversation and usually made the players uncomfortable. On the other hand, when this would happen at basketball, I would reply, "What do you want me to write down?" The players knew I was writing about gender so many times they would tell me something related to that. They even once asked me what I thought the difference was between male and female athletes and I was able to turn the question back towards them. In addition to writing down whatever the players told me to write down, I took note of when they tried to get my attention. I determined these moments as very important to what the players cared about. On the basketball team it was common for players to ask me to watch them make a great play while on the softball team it was more likely that players would come up to me to tell me a funny story.

I used the methods of Lofland et al. (2006) to determine “topic” patterns. Topic patterns were common subjects about which the teams talked or themes around which their behavior clustered. For example, I found many moments in my field notes in which the players discussed their uniform, so this became a topic. I then looked for notes on how the players actually wore their uniforms and whether or not this aligned with their discussion. Anything that came up repeatedly became a code because I determined these topics to be important to my research subjects. Other topics that I determined important enough to warrant a code usually had something to do with gender or athletics. I also looked for conflicting ideas. For example, one player told me she cries in school as a way to get what she wants, from there I looked at other moments of crying in my fields notes and what those moments meant to the participants.

I coded softball data before I began research with the basketball team and thus used the coding method from softball with the basketball data when possible. For softball I used the following codes or “topics”: “boys,” “sex,” “positioning” or “status,” “teamwork,” “clothing,” “girl,” “Susan” for moments related to me, “combination,” “pain” or “injury,” and “athlete.” For basketball I used the aforementioned codes in addition to “coach relationship,” “gender role subversion,” “gender role mocking,” “expected norms.” After coding for topics, I developed outlines for each findings chapter that could tell a story about the process of gender production using the meaning and frequency of the topics.

My status as a researcher was much more salient during my time with the basketball team than the softball team. This was due to a number of factors. First, I felt like I stood out more at basketball practices. I was not able to get as close proximity-wise to the team and usually had to sit in a chair or on the ground near the sideline. I never helped out in drills and did not have a role on the bench during games. I also dressed very differently from the basketball players. At

practice, the basketball players all wore baggy athletic shorts and sleeveless practice jerseys. I usually wore multiple layers of sweatpants, sweatshirts, and snow boots so that I stayed warm in the freezing gym and during my long waits outside for buses in the brutal New England winter. At games, I was required to dress-up, as is custom for basketball coaches. This made me stand out even more from the players who were all wearing bright warm-ups or uniforms⁵. On the other hand, during the softball season I wore a team t-shirt that said “MassFire” with matching athletic shorts and softball cleats. During softball, I always knew where I was supposed to be and what to do; this was not always the case at basketball.

In some ways, these differences were detrimental to my research in that I may have learned less information from the basketball team skewing my data. On the other hand, my slightly removed position might also allow for a clearer picture of gender production away from my influential presence as an older, college student. A number of factors contributed to my stronger relationship with the softball team than the basketball team. As I mentioned earlier, my relationship with Linda and Coach Connors varied greatly, making for a difference in access. And more importantly, the structure of the two sports made the practice of observing very different.

The structure of the sport of softball itself is one in which I could have close contact for extended periods of time with various players. During the games at least one player and many times up to four players were sitting on the bench with me as they were not playing or only hitting. While the MassFire was up to bat, the entire team was on the bench with me. Secondly, the purpose of the summer tournament season for teams at the level of the MassFire is to help players get recruited for college softball.

⁵ I will elaborate on how my clothing influenced gendered behavior in Chapter 6.

To that end, actually winning games, while important and definitely more fun, was not the ultimate goal of the team or the leagues. Most of the games were organized so that as many players could be on the batting line-up as possible⁶. With less attention and focus on winning, the players were not required to focus on the game and their teammates. And finally, Linda was a very hands-off coach. She wanted her players to focus and taught them great tools and skills to be excellent softball players, but she was not controlling of their behavior. None of the players on MassFire ever seemed nervous to speak during a game or practice and I felt free to engage the players in conversation at appropriate times.

During basketball research I had less opportunity to engage the players in conversation due to the structure of their practices. Basketball is a constantly moving sport and this was how Coach Connors ran his practices. If players were not in the drill they were either trying to catch their breath, get a drink of water, nurse an injury, or attempting to pay attention so they would not be yelled at for doing a drill incorrectly when it was their turn. Also, because I was able to attend practice and games less often during the basketball season and because I routinely wore gendered, more adult clothing, as I mentioned earlier, the team consistently saw me as an “other.” They would look towards me after a particularly salacious sex joke, crass comment about defecating, or a curse word, to see if I was shocked or about to tattle.

While I feel I really became a seamlessly integrated part of the softball team with a certain job at games and practices, I was very much an outsider observing during basketball games for the majority of the season. Both positions had their advantages and disadvantages in helping me to answer my research questions. In my analysis of the softball data I found that I

⁶ Some leagues also had a rule that when the game timer went off two hours after the start of the game, whoever was in the lead, won. This was called “drop dead.” It was very unlikely that a game lasted all seven innings and I never saw the team particularly upset about losing. Neither the tournaments nor the team emphasized winning over recruitment and player development.

was more able to closely identify with the team due to my close position with them. This sometimes made it difficult to describe their behavior without passing judgment. However, developing such strong bonds with the players enabled me to obtain more rich data. As for the basketball team, my data was less rich because the players were less likely to confide in me or have private conversations near me. My removed position enabled me to take a more neutral stance on their behavior in my analysis. In the following chapters I do my best to both understand the player's behavior and step back from it in an attempt to thoroughly and properly analyze their gender performances.

*Chapter 4: Separating Gender Performances**Introduction*

In this chapter, I will present the findings of my observations and interviews showing how the softball players on the MassFire used two different spheres, athletic and social, to be both a girl and an athlete. To start, I will discuss the differing contexts in which the softball players told me they perform gender. According to the players on MassFire, they act differently in a social context than they do in an athletic context. The social context is more closely aligned with a traditionally feminine, or “girly”, gender performance. On the other hand, the athletic context, while physically smaller because it was limited to the softball field, offered a space for the softball players to worry less about acting like a girl so just be an athlete. I call these two different performances “doing girl” and “doing athlete,” respectively. Through out this paper I will aim to define and develop the meaning of these performances from the perspective of the players.

After explaining the contexts, I will then show evidence for the themes around which much of my observations and interviews focused. First, the softball players’ dialogue about the way they wanted to or how others should perform gender revealed a desire to not be gendered too far to either end of the spectrum. I repeatedly heard the players mock, ridicule, and disparage players on other teams and sometimes their own, who either appeared too feminine or too masculine. Second, the discourse around the color pink is a useful paradigm for how the players on MassFire differentiated between the ways an athlete acts and a girl acts. The color pink had a loaded meaning for the players and most of them were not only unwilling to wear it themselves, they disparaged players and teams that did wear the color. In the next chapter, I will show evidence for how the relationship between appearance of clothes, hair, and other superficial

qualities and the practical function of these same ideas, revealed the difference between girly, manly, and athletic. A negotiation of these concepts enabled the players on the MassFire to be both a girl and an athlete at the same time.

Contexts: Social and Athletic

Before entering the field I assumed that the contemporary adolescent female athlete did not even think about her gender in relation to sports. This assumption was partially based on my own experience as an athlete in high school. Also, in a post-Title IX era⁷ many young female athletes do not even realize that playing sports is a novel concept. The sheer ubiquity of opportunities for young girls to play sports suggested to me that there was no reason for gender to be accomplished differently on the athletic field than in the classroom or at the mall. I was right in that Title IX was not on the minds of the softball players. I once tried to bring it up with the team to discuss some current events⁸. None of the players knew about Title IX, nor cared to listen to me explain it. However, even though they did not consider their gender to be politicized in relation to sports, it was a carefully considered practice on the softball field. It became clear that the players had separated two spheres, one athletic and one social. In these two spheres, they performed gender differently. While the existence of two spheres would initially suggest conflict, I will later explain how this separation was a useful tool for the players to negotiate and manage their gender performance.

⁷ By post-Title IX I mean chronologically later rather than suggesting that Title IX is no longer relevant or important in the lives of young female athletes.

⁸ During the time of my research cheerleading was up for consideration as an official sport by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The debate was in relation to whether or not it was legal for Quinnipiac University to abolish a women's volleyball team in favor of a cheerleading squad to comply with Title IX regulations stipulating that men and women must have equal athletic opportunities and resources.

I learned that the softball players considered at least two contexts for their gender performance when I asked girls when they care about being a girl and when they do not care about it. More often than not, responses to when they *did* care about being a girl referred to “prom,” “hair,” or “dressing up and going out.” Amanda replied to my question by saying:

I dunno. Shopping is fun. I like that. Just like girl stuff. Getting ready for prom. That’s fun. Doing stuff like that. I don’t walk outside and be like, oh, I’m a girl today. [laughs] just kinda know. Getting dressed in the morning is fun. Getting to pick out stuff that I don’t really think guys think too much about what they’re going to wear. Trying to look your best for certain things. I really like matching things. Like what hair you’re going to wear with what clothes you’re going to wear with what your make-up is going to be.

Even though I asked Amanda when she *cared* about being a girl, she really told me what kinds of things she *does* that are girly. Amanda’s articulation of what she likes about being a girl and how that manifests in her everyday life is an important part of how culture has made gender production invisible. Caring about her hair and outfit every day is part of Amanda’s peer culture and even though she says she does not walk outside and know she’s a girl, before she walked outside she put on a coordinating outfit and makeup to prepare for the day. This process was generally invisible to Amanda before I asked her about it.

In addition to Amanda’s response, Britney, Gaby, and Katie all mentioned that they care about being a girl when they look like girls. Katie’s response was very matter of fact “Well, everyday... being girl matters especially when you want to get dressed up go to parties. It’s like, even though I’m an athlete... I can still get dressed up... I have that... versatility? For lack of a better word.” It became clear through responses similar to these that the girls are most likely to perform gender in ways that for them carries the meaning of “girly” such as dressing up for parties, proms, social gatherings with members of the opposite sex, and at school. The social context seems to be more implicitly gendered than the athletic one. It is in these situations, the social context, that the players on MassFire performed girl because it was fun. I learned how the

players on MassFire defined being a girl through what they did in the social context and what they disapproved of in the athletic context. However, it is important to note, that just because these girls were girly sometimes, they had the “versatility” to also be athletic other times, and they relished in this fluidity.

As I mentioned earlier, “doing girl” meant getting dressed for prom, talking about, kissing, liking and dating boys, caring about your clothes and appearance, taking part in “drama⁹” and sometimes, being bitchy. According to the players, a bitch was a girl, not an athlete. Both the softball and basketball teams told me they did not like bitchy opponents but respected gracious and talented players. On more than one occasion, the MassFire players criticized themselves for being bitchy. An excerpt from my field notes:

The girl pitching for the other team has bright bleached-blond hair. Megan is saying that she has such an angry face and that she just looks so unhappy. They make fun of her hair and then Lynn gets very picky and says that if you look at the back you can see how fried it is. She says it’s ok to straighten your hair but when it looks like that you know something is wrong. In response to Lynn’s comments Heather says, “we’re bitches.” Britney says, “We pick everyone apart.” Becky says, “I said she was skinny!”

The players acknowledged that they were being bitchy while they were commenting on hair and appearance. Because they said these are the things they care about when they are acting like girls, I would classify being bitchy as “doing girl.” I will further expand on the meaning of “bitch” for the players on the MassFire and the Lions in the following chapter during my section on status. “Doing girl” held a variety of meanings for the players as mentioned earlier. Examples of these meanings are frequently accessed in this chapter in an attempt to show how “doing girl” is part of the social context and “doing athlete” is part of the athletic context.

⁹ “Drama” is the term used by teenage girls when referring to the histrionic happenings in their lives and that of friends. Examples of “drama” include: fights among friends over boys and gossip within friend groups.

The girls I interviewed did not necessarily think about being a girl until and when they had to differentiate themselves from boys; they many times saw gender as being relational. This is perhaps evidence that gender does not exist until and when it is actively created, as West and Zimmerman have suggested (1987). It would make sense that this creation happens at hetero-normative coupling events like proms. It also was not that the girls did not “do girl” unless they were trying to differentiate themselves from boys, they were just most aware of their performance at this time. On the softball field, where there are only girls (aside from the umpires), gender is not relational and according to the players on MassFire, is less important. Sarah astutely pointed out that in the social world of high school there is a significant difference between boys and girls. This difference is most apparent to Sarah because of the activities in which she and her friends to choose to participate. For Sarah, being on a girls’ athletic team is part of being a girl. Sarah also mentioned dating as an important locus for gender performance:

SG: So when do you not care about being a girl? When do you just not think about it?

Sarah: When I play sports. We’re all competitive, so it’s just... [trails off]

SG: So when you’re not playing sports do you feel like you’re more aware that you’re a girl?

Sarah: Yeah, cause like at school you feel more like you’re a girl or whatever.

SG: Why?

Sarah: I dunno. Cause then because of relationships and everything else.

Sarah was not quite able to articulate what she meant by relationships and why gender differences at school are more acute but she did reveal that the social context is one in which gender is a salient social category and athletics are one in which gender is much less important to its participants. For this reason, it is important to understand the different contexts and how they relate to the gender performances discussed later in this chapter.

The athletic context was one in which the girls were active, exercising, and focusing on playing the sport. By nature of this behavior, there was far less interaction or conversation for

actual observation. When I asked some of the players what it means to them to be an athlete they used words such as dedication, commitment, physical and mental effort, competition, skill, honor, and pride. For Gaby, athletics are a space where she does not have to worry about acting like a girl because she can be herself and does not have to worry about impressing guys, like girls do when in a social context. She said:

I feel like girls... everyone tries to impress a guy in a different way. You can try and impress guys in sports and show them how good you are. But then when it's girls everyone always has to look pretty, everyone always gets dressed up and tries to impress a guy. Say Cosmo, all girls read Cosmo, "How to get a guy!" They all do that. I feel like people are just different. I feel like if you play sports you can just be yourself. Cause you have no one there to impress. You know what I mean?

I argue that Gaby's freedom to just be herself is "doing athlete." She many times expressed her contempt for how girls "have to act" or all of the "drama" associated with girls. Statements like the one above suggest to me that the athletic context offers a respite. I will further explain the idea that athletics offer a more flexible arena for gender performance in the conclusions section. In the following section, I give specific examples for how the players on MassFire "do athlete." They ignore injuries, work hard, sweat, get dirty, and most importantly, they do not "do girl."

The players on the MassFire had the ability to transition between athletic and social contexts relatively easily. They could be talking to me about what kinds of tattoos they want on their belly one moment to realizing they are up to bat and hitting a double helping their team score a run. I once observed Carina, a sophomore on the Lions' basketball team, transition from girl to athlete in the blink of an eye. She was standing bent over with her hands on her knees looking at the ball during a practice drill when a boy walked by whom she recognized. Carina stood up straight, stuck out her rear end a little, tilted her head, winked, and blew him a kiss. He

returned the gesture and she coquettishly smiled back at him. The boy kept walking and Carina resumed her ready position with her arms out towards the ball, eyes focused, and knees bent.

When discussing athletes, the players on MassFire more routinely accessed whether or not she was a hard worker, a team player, or just plain any good. When I asked Amanda if she would mind if a butch girl was on her team she replied:

Um... I don't think I'd mind. My softball coach in high school before my one last year was a lesbian and she had the short hair with the frosted tips. She was awful but that wasn't because she was a lesbian... On my high school team we had some girls that were "dykey"¹⁰ and I don't know it's not really, I'm not going to get mad at them for fitting in with the stereotype because it's the same as getting mad at someone for not fitting in with the stereotype. You know? I don't know... so if they're good at softball, who cares?

Even though many of the girls said that skill was the most important, this was not always the case. What did seem important in the athletic context was a negotiation of not being too girly or too manly. The athletic context was one in which gender had the option to be undone because on the field it is not a useful social category. The players were not performing normative femininity but they were performing an athletic identity appropriate to female athletes. According to Francine Deutsch's definition of undoing gender (2007), the softball field could be a site of resistance to the long-standing system of normative gender production. The goal of this research is to determine whether the players on the MassFire were performing a different kind of femininity: one that is more athletic, competitive and willing to get dirty but also aware of appearance and clothing *or* if the players on MassFire are in fact using the social space of the softball field to stop performing gender entirely and perform an un-gendered social identity, that of "athlete." Deutsch maintains that gender is always being performed but that in some contexts,

¹⁰ It is important to understand how the players I observed used the term "dyke." The softball team used the term fairly often. In general, they tried to not use it in front of Lynn, the one "out" player on the team, however they many times slipped up. This suggests that they understood it was offensive to lesbians. However, in general, when they did use the term, they were referring to a masculine gender performance rather than a gay sexual orientation. I expand on this concept more later in this chapter.

its salience is so obsolete it is not even accessed by the audience and therefore not used as a social category. Therefore, the MassFire reproduced gender systems by “doing girl” in the social context and negotiated gender by “doing athlete” in the athletic context. The following themes show how the players on the MassFire separated the social and athletic context using a variety of markers so that they could be both a girl and an athlete.

“You’re playing a sport, don’t be a girl”: When being a girl doesn’t matter.

Before I entered the research field I made the assumption that being a girl mattered less on the softball field. In many ways, this was correct. Players on the MassFire confirmed with me that they cared less about being a girl when involved in the athletic context. While this was not true across the board as far as actual behavior, for the most part, the softball players *said* they cared less about being a girl while in the athletic context (on the softball field, basketball court, ice rink, etc). Katie’s answer to this question aptly articulates the general consensus of all of the players I interviewed about this idea:

When do I not care about being a girl? Um... sometimes when you’re on the field or on the court or whatever. It doesn’t even matter. It’s not about being a girl or being a boy. It’s about being... It’s like being an athlete. It doesn’t have to be like, oh I play softball so I’m such a girl athlete or I play field hockey, I’m wearing a skirt right now but I’m gonna’ go tackle you or [garbled]... or like...when you’re on the field it’s sort of... it doesn’t matter. You can do whatever you want.

Katie reveals the flexibility the softball field offers her for her gender performance. Or possibly, the flexibility it offers her to not act like a girl for at least a short amount of time. She does not have to worry about her clothes or her aggressiveness; she can do whatever is the right thing to do as an athlete. All of the interviewees expressed resistance to the limitations that may be placed on them while playing sports because of their gender. Amanda specifically alludes to this

in her response, “When I’m playing sports and I get hit by something. I don’t know. It’s like the thing like, where oh, you’re a girl, you should be crying about this. But I’m trying to push through that and be like I’m not going to succumb to that...[trails off].” Interestingly, Amanda previously mentioned in her interview that she likes that girls can cry and get out of things easily. It seems that she is able to use being a girl to her advantage in social contexts but in an athletic context she has to perform a different identity because performing girl is detrimental. She has to “push through” so that she can be the best athlete she can for herself and team. Amanda has separated the athletic context from the social context and performed her gender differently in each one to her advantage.

In addition to not thinking about acting like a girl or being a girl, it seemed like the players did not want to even be considered a girl in the athletic context. For example, at a night game at the end of the season Britney was up to bat and an inside pitch came too close to her for comfort and she dramatically fell to the ground on her rear-end to dodge the pitch. Everyone from our bench saw this and laughed. Lynn called out loud enough for everyone on the field and watching the game to hear, “Drama Queen!” A battle of words ensued in which Britney yelled back that she twisted her foot to get out of the way and lost balance. Lynn continued the commentary about the overly dramatic reaction, so Britney responds, “Watch and see if I ever block another ball for you!” This incited sounds of “ohhhs” and “ahhhs” from the parents’ section above the dugout. Britney was so offended to be labeled “girl” while on the field she threatened to not work hard for her pitcher (Lynn).

At another particularly hot game in mid-August, Gaby was getting very uncomfortable in between innings and only had a moment to get her batting gloves off and get her things for center field. She started whining in a high-pitched voice and stomped her foot as if beginning to have a

temper-tantrum because it was so hot. Lynn offered her a cold-compress for the back of her neck. After Lynn let the cold towel sit on Gaby's neck just for a second, Gaby straightened up, got her glove, and yelled at herself that she was being such a drama queen and needed to stop. Gaby sprinted out to center field and did not complain the rest of the game. It seemed that in a moment of weakness Gaby lost her athletic-self and was "doing girl." When she was able to come to her senses and realize what was necessary for her team, she snapped out of it and went right back to "doing athlete." She even chastised herself for acting like a girl in the athletic context.

In addition to self-regulation, players on the MassFire also made comments about their opponents' gender performance. In the hotel room at one long tournament the team and I got into a conversation about the movie, *A League of Their Own*. Katie had just shown me some scrapes on her thighs from sliding earlier in the day. I brought up the scene in the aforementioned movie in which a female baseball player slides into third base to beat the tag while wearing the league issued skirted uniform. A shot of a grizzly abrasion on the back of her thigh revealed the absurdity of wearing a skirt to play baseball (or softball). In response to this, Katie says she once played a team from an inner-city school that wore skirts. Amanda quickly replied, "That's disgusting" in reference to the skirts. Katie finished the topic's discussion with, "We beat them like thirty to zero." Here, a feminine gender performance in the athletic context was defeated literally (we beat them) and figuratively (that's disgusting).

Then again, even though the players on MassFire told me being a girl on the softball field did not matter, sometimes it did. In the interview with Amanda we discussed what she is looking for in a college softball team. She mentioned that the softball team at one small, liberal arts school in New England was very masculine looking and lesbian and she just was not comfortable

being on a team with so many players like that. On the other hand, she also once told me during a game that she was invited to try out for a particularly good (and “cocky”) team that seemed to be the rival team to MassFire and she said that she did not like that team “because they all [had] disgusting died hair and [wore] too much make-up.” From these comments, Amanda shows how she plans to “do athlete” and how she wants those around her to perform it correctly as well. In this way, gender mattered in that an athlete cannot be “too” masculine or “too” feminine, both gender performances are problematic on the field.

As I mentioned earlier, being bitchy is a girl performance and was a common reason cited for why players on MassFire might not like an opponent. None of the players on MassFire ever said they would dislike an opponent for being competitive or working hard, as a good athlete should. Nevertheless, at one tournament, this was not the case. As the MassFire was walking towards the field for their first game of the day we saw another team running sprints before their game. In response to this, players on the MassFire started saying to each other in perturbed voices, “Doing sprints isn’t going to win you the game.” I would of course argue that running before the game could be incredibly advantageous to that team but the competitive spirit affected the players’ supposed support for the athletic character they told me they appreciated.

Claire was especially sensitive to femininely gendered bodies on the softball field. Given that Claire had high status, her opinion was always heeded and probably absorbed by the other players. From my field notes:

A girl comes up to bat with her uniform tied in a knot in the back to make it tighter. (The way girls do on the beach or guys do when they are pretending to be girls.) I ask Claire about it and she gets angry – she says, “It’s such a chick thing – you’re playing a sport, don’t be a girl. Audrey’s pants are falling down [Audrey hears this from 3rd and thinks she is making fun of her].” Claire is really saying that Audrey is just being an athlete while this girl is being a girl when she shouldn’t be. When she is facing us Claire says, “Eww! Look at her shorts, she is so skinny.” The girl’s shorts are rolled up incredibly high so that we can see her sliding shorts and skinny thighs.

Claire's comment, "You're playing a sport, don't be a girl," would suggest conflict between being a girl and being athlete. However, I will argue, that being an athlete was not a gendered identity; it was a negotiated identity. The players on MassFire still did things that would suggest that they could be both girls and athletes. I will address these compromises in the following chapter. Claire's point reveals that even if girls can play sports (and technically be girls) they should not act like girls while they are doing it. The athletic arena is not a place to perform femininity, or gender at all.

Heather, another high-status player, corroborated this point in her response to her fight with Becky. In between tournament games we were sitting in a shaded grassy area chatting before warm-ups when Becky and Heather started fighting:

Becky and Heather are continually playing/arguing. Becky actually gets sort of angry with Heather and they start physically fighting. They push each other's heads down and seem to be attempting to mimic wrestling. They stop when Becky pulls Heather's hair [possibly accidentally, though I'm not sure]. Heather calls her a girl and says that pulling hair is a "girl move." She then gets angry that she has to redo her hair and stops the fighting.

Clearly, pulling hair is what I would call a "cheap shot" and according to Heather, is not acceptable in fair fighting. While I'm not sure that Heather would have policed Becky's behavior had she thrown a cheap shot that could be categorized as a "boy move" (e.g. a punch to the groin), but she was most definitely suggesting that girls do not or should not fight like girls. Whether or not they fight like boys is unclear. Interestingly, this cannot be extended to softball. Not only do they not play softball like "chicks" but they also do not play like men.

When a player on the other team looks even remotely masculine she is typically judged, heckled, and disparaged. One such player, on a team that was beating the MassFire, was playing first base. She was the tallest on either of the teams (she was approximately six feet tall) and had

broad shoulders and an athletic build. In response to her I hear Claire say repeatedly, “That girl looks like a man, seriously.” What confused me was that this girl was tall and athletic-looking. She did not look all that different from players on the MassFire. She had her hair in a ponytail with ribbons and was wearing some make-up. When I later asked Linda about why the girls hated this player so much she also expressed confusion since most of the players in college are even bigger. In interviews I also asked what would make you “hate on¹¹” another player as they did with this first baseman and none of the girls mentioned a masculine appearance. When I brought it up specifically they said it was probably just jealousy that she is so tall and therefore able to help her team to win. From this response, it seems that looking like a girl hurts your team because it makes you less athletic and does not do anything for you socially in the athletic context. Whereas looking like a man does help your team, but hurts you socially. This suggests some conflicting ideas. The responses to my interview question about when they do not care about being a girl suggests that the athletic context is a space to redefine what it means to be a girl. Conversely, the constant threat of being shamed for acting “too girly” or “too masculine” suggest strict limitations that put us back into sex role theory. What I really think is happening here is a complicated negotiation of a new less-gendered identity.

Another common criticism from the MassFire concerned hair. The “dyke braid” or “DB” is a long ponytail tied in a single braid that hangs down a player’s back. Any time a player had her hair like this some of the players on the team would off-handedly say this to me or another player. Also, Heather was once braiding Becky’s hair before a game and Becky momentarily

¹¹ This is a term the players on MassFire repeatedly used with each other and among their friends. It is a contemporary slang term meaning to mock or criticize.

thought Heather might be giving her a DB but Heather and the rest of the team assured her that she was doing no such thing.

The DB was a new concept to me so I decided to ask friends and other athletes my age and in high school about the DB and it seems that the hairstyle only has a lesbian connotation in softball¹². When I asked the girls on my club soccer team what they thought about the concept they all told me that soccer players who wore their hair in that manner intimidated them because they looked so intense. Many players on my club soccer team did wear a DB during games and practices. While the actual meaning of the DB is not universal, none of the players on the MassFire ever wore one for fear of being labeled a “dyke.” In this context, the “dyke” label is less about sexual orientation and more about gender performance. A “dyke” presentation is not appropriately athletic because it is more masculine than desirable. Lynn’s gender performance and sexual orientation was significant evidence for this.

Lynn, a middle-status player who was “outed” to me as a lesbian by the rest of the team before she mentioned a girlfriend directly to me, was also not approving of opponents who looked masculine. The shortstop on a team against which we repeatedly competed sported a short crew cut sometimes wearing a backwards baseball hat. From my field notes: “The girls repeatedly discuss the gender of this player and Lynn says, ‘I just call her dude’ and repeatedly refers to her in male terms and seems the most angry that she looks like a guy.” Lynn was the only out lesbian on the MassFire but she was the least likely person to be labeled dyke. Lynn’s gender performance was constantly girl; even in the athletic context Lynn’s performance was consistent. After Lynn injured her ankle trying to make a play, she half-heartedly ran the bases

¹² Also, the DB was possibly even less universal than I originally thought after I learned about it from the MassFire. Other softball players I spoke to wore their hair in this manner not knowing its greater implications. Katie told me she called it the “Lara Croft Tomb Braider” because it reminded her of the character’s hair style.

one more time before sitting out the rest of the game with her foot elevated and a near-constant chatter reminding us she was in fact seriously injured. Lynn's girliness on and off the field was unique to the team. Megan, also a pitcher like Lynn had a relatively girly gender performance in the athletic context but this was not consistent. While Megan paid a significant amount of attention to her hair, having her mother carefully braid it before each game, she frequently ignored injuries and pain to keep playing and owned up to her mistakes on the softball field in order to correct them and improve for future contests. On the other hand, when Megan accidentally knocked over a bowl of chips at the team sleepover she tried to force Sarah to clean it up and convince the team it was Sarah's fault in an effort to put Sarah in her low-status position. This is evidence that Megan acted differently in the opposing contexts.

Britney showed the widest range of gender performance across the social and athletic contexts. Britney both told me and behaved as if gender mattered less on the softball field. When Britney played catcher I saw her repeatedly dive hard into the dirt to help her team. She would violently throw her helmet off in an effort to get a better view of the ball and then put the dust-covered helmet back on her sweaty head creating a sticky mixture on her forehead every play without hesitation. On the other hand, one day when the team was walking across a grass field after practice towards the parking lot, Audrey found a dead snake in the ground and reported this to the team. Britney screamed in a high-pitched voice and ran in the opposite direction.

The variations of "doing athlete" and "doing girl" for Lynn, Megan, and Britney further clarify the separation of the athletic and social contexts. In the following section, I will show how one color, pink, is not part of "doing athlete" because it represents "doing girl."

Pink: A Loaded Color

The color pink carried a significant meaning for the players on MassFire. The color's presence in the social context and absence in the athletic context created its loaded meaning. Pink was not the only color that held a meaning for the team. Black has the effect of intimidating opponents and making yourself look more serious and competitive. I heard both Linda, the MassFire coach, and the players say that they were going to "go ninja" for tryouts or a game. "Going ninja," meant wearing all black. On the other hand, even though many of the girls wore pink socially, I never saw a single one of them wear pink as part of an athletic outfit aside from breast cancer research awareness.

The team's discourse on the color pink made it clear that "doing girl" was unacceptable behavior on the softball field. The MassFire players did not like or wear the color pink in the athletic context because it was, for them, one way of "doing girl." Britney was particularly passionate about the color pink and is therefore a useful example in illustrating its varied meaning. From my field notes:

Britney is drinking pink Gatorade so I strike up a conversation about it. She says she only bought it because it was pink and that she loves everything pink but when she was little she was like me and hated everything pink. I asked her if she was a Red Sox fan and likes those pink t-shirts and she says she refuses to buy those because they are a disgrace to the sport. She says they would be called the "Pink Sox" if we buy shirts like that.

Britney many times expressed love for pink in the social context and an extreme distaste it in the athletic context. For example, at a game against the Eliminators, all of the opposing players had a small brightly colored handkerchief in their back pocket. In my field notes I wrote, "Britney is especially offended by the girl who has a pink one sticking out and she says it if was any color other than pink it would be ok. 'A normal color like white or black would be good.'" Britney is

only comfortable with the gendered implications of pink while in the social context. When I asked her about her affinity for the color in her interview the conversation went like this:

SG: Do you want to talk about how much you like the color pink?

Britney: I love the color pink. Pink is my favorite color. Everything in my room is pink.

SG: But I've heard you say that you hate pink on the softball field.

Britney: Hate it. Can't stand it.

SG: Why?

Britney: My one gripe with Jennie Finch is that she uses a pink glove. Because I think pink is a girly color and it takes away from the athlete in you. If you do pink unless, well once my mom started going through her breast cancer stuff I always had pink on my uniform. Until now I don't actually have anything, I should probably get on that. I used to use a pink hockey stick once in a while. It always had, "Mom," written on it.

It is important to notice the implications of Britney's comment, "...pink is a girly color and it takes away from the athlete in you." Using the color pink during sports was not acceptable because it specifically gendered you in a negative and disadvantageous way. Britney once came to a conclusion about when pink is acceptable on the field that contradicts her statement during the interview. From my field notes:

Audrey and Britney discuss the rules for wearing pink. Britney says that it would never be ok in Massachusetts and that it must be ok in New Jersey¹³ and Audrey says she doesn't really think that's true. Britney says that Jennie Finch wore pink but because she was so good it didn't matter. They agreed that if you're so good you can't say anything, then wearing pink doesn't matter because you can't say anything. Later Britney says she wants a pink bracelet so she can have a tan line. Others agree. (The pink bracelets were from showcasing¹⁴ the previous day, Katie has one on.)

While it was possible for athletes like Jennie Finch to not be judged based on her association with the color, other athletes were not granted the same privilege. The conversation between

¹³ Britney suggested this reasoning because the opposing team had pink uniforms and were from New Jersey.

¹⁴ Showcasing is when rising-seniors in high school register for a clinic-style practice session in which college coaches receive a resume and other relevant information about players as they watch them perform basic softball drills and skills such as fielding, hitting, and base running. This is one of the ways softball players are recruited for college teams. Every player on the MassFire attended at least one showcase session during the summer.

Britney and Audrey revealed that there are instances in which “doing girl” on the softball field is acceptable. Evidently, these situations are ones in which a player has a significant amount of status. As far as softball players go, Jennie Finch, the most recognizable name in softball, has the most status in the world, and thus has the most flexibility in her gender performance. Status is a significant indicator of gender performance for the players on MassFire. This is a topic that will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

Players who have not earned high status, such as a third baseman on the Spark who was wearing pink, non-athletic sunglasses during a game, are not granted the same flexibility as Jennie Finch. The third baseman missed an easy pop up and the girls on the bench with me laughed at her. When she came out the next inning wearing the glasses again Sammy leaned over to Becky and said, “I thought she learned her lesson.” The girl’s lack of athletic skill was partially attributed to her association with the color pink. In addition to the attack on her athletic abilities, the third baseman’s social sensibilities were also in question because she dared to wear pink while attempting to “do athlete.” Even though Sammy critiqued pink in the athletic context in this instance, I once heard her compliment a former MassFire player’s pink shoelaces. Sammy may have felt that in this situation, a casual practice during the week for a team of which this girl was not technically a part, pink laces on a friend were cute and not a cause for concern. It is possible that Sammy felt like she was in a social context here rather than athletic and approved of the color choice. The Lions basketball team also had no problem with the color pink in the athletic context. I will discuss their response to its presence in Chapter 5.

In addition to the color pink, other indications of femininity were shunned in the athletic context. Not every player on the MassFire embraced the sparkly headbands, a hair adornment which I will discuss in full detail in the following chapter. The headbands were not unanimously

embraced due to that fact that the sparkle carried a meaning for them with which they did not want to associate themselves during athletics. Gaby was once complaining that her pants were falling down so I jokingly suggested that she get a sparkly belt. She turned to me and in a sassy voice said, "I don't do sparkle." I pointed out that Britney had just mentioned to the team that the sparkly headbands they all ordered would arrive in the mail the next day. Gaby responded by saying that her mom insisted on paying for it even though she told her she would not wear it. The loaded meaning of sparkly things was created through Gaby's refusal to wear the sparkles in the athletic context and her mother's encouragement of its purchase.

Pink carries a meaning with both its presence and its absence. Its presence is able to signify more than just gender but also a myriad of sentiments and feelings. In the 1970s the football coach at the University of Iowa chose to have the visiting team's locker room painted in pink. During the 2005 renovations of the athletic facilities at the University, the pink hue was extended to every surface of the space from the pink carpet to the pink urinals. Coach Hayden Fry's reasoning was to, "weaken and debilitate opposing football players" (Pappano 2009). While some say that Fry could not find another color, others say that his background in psychology influenced his decision to have the locker room painted pink. He is quoted as having said, "he wanted to capitalize on the 'passive' connotation of pink, the color of 'sissies' and little girls' bedrooms" (Buzuvis 2007, 2). At the University of Iowa and on the MassFire, pink is not appropriate for personal use during athletic contests.

While pink was an indicator of femininity and a lack of athletic ability, dirt and sweat were indicators of the presence of athletic ability. At a particularly hot practice one afternoon, the players repeatedly expressed how sweaty they were not as a way of suggesting that they did not want to be at practice but as a way of expressing their hard work and commitment to the

team and sport. Nearly every player on the team told me how hot she felt. I would usually ask players how they were that day just to start conversations and most of them responded, “Sweaty,” on this particular day. In my field notes from the practice I detail an example of the value of dirt and sweat:

Audrey dives for a ball and lands in the very dry/dusty field. She yells, “Sweat AND Dirt!” Everyone laughs about this. The dirt has caked onto her limbs where there was sweat. Mention of this continues throughout practice. Linda points out how dirty she is a few times and Audrey continually draws attention to it saying, things like I’m so dirty or, “I don’t know if I will be accepted into my house” because her father doesn’t like dirt. Linda not only points out the sweat/dirt combo on Audrey but she tells her it’s “awesome.” After Linda says this I hear Gaby say that her ankles are also covered.

Although there were instances in which the girls would complain about the sweat this was usually in social contexts rather than athletic. When they wanted to be seen as an athlete, they would never complain about the quantity of sweat. When Claire once joked with Gaby that she does not sweat Gaby got very defensive shouting back, “I do too sweat!” Not sweating might negatively affect one’s athletic status. Sweating and talking about it was another way in which the players on MassFire “did athlete.”

Another way in which the girls specifically did not perform a girl identity while playing softball was about “getting dirty¹⁵.” Diving for softballs on the field was an important indicator of both skill and commitment to the team. Claire dove the most consistently and successfully impressing fellow teammates, opposing coaches, and recruiters. She would routinely dive for balls that were clearly foul sometimes just to look intense and other times to go the extra mile for her team. After her dives she would stand up and leave the dirt on her uniform as a sign of her effort and resolve.

¹⁵ This is a term used by the MassFire and every softball coach I have ever had. If a hard grounder would roll passed an infielder but was not out of reach Linda would typically yell, “Get dirty!” This meant that the player should have dove for the ball in a greater effort to knock it down and keep the ball in the infield.

The infielders had a team cheer they yelled at the start of each game. It was very simple: all five players in the infield would go over to first base. They stood around the base and grabbed a handful of dirt. Next, they would put their hands into the center and throw the dirt firmly to the ground as they shouted in unison, "Dirt!" This mantra set the tone for the how the players on the MassFire wanted to act for the rest of the game. They were willing to get as dirty as necessary to win.

The color pink, sweat, and dirt were all ways in which the players on the MassFire used relevant aspects of their life to "do girl" and to "do athlete." Their use of the concepts begins to reveal the negotiated process involved in their gender performance. This chapter showed evidence for how the players on the MassFire were able to be both girls and athletes by separating the two and performing the different identities in different contexts. The next chapter will go into detail on how the players were able to be both girls and athletes at the same time.

*Chapter 5: Blending Performances and Other Methods of Gender Production**Introduction*

In the previous chapter, I discussed how players on the MassFire separated two different gendered performances into different contexts. In this chapter, I will discuss another method of gender performance exhibited by the players on MassFire. This method continued the separation I discussed in Chapter 4, but also involved a blending of the two spheres in their clothing and hair accessory choices. In order to explain this process of blending, I will first show how something that is valued for its appearance, or “looks,” as the MassFire said, was an aspect of doing girl. Conversely, I will show how hair or clothing articles valued for their function or “reason”, articles that had a specific rationale for their use, were aspects of doing athlete. The team specifically used the word “reason,” but I will use the word function as it better fits their definition. Some items just looked good, others had a specific function and still others cleverly combined, or “blended,” both aspects.

I define “blending” as the practice of combining a component of doing athlete with a component of doing girl. As such, appropriating a pretty accessory to be also useful or taking a practical tool and making it also look good, are examples of blending. Both high and low status team members on the MassFire engaged in both doing athlete and blending. However, I only saw high status players do girl on the softball field. In this chapter, I will explain how status was achieved, maintained, and used on the MassFire. I will also show how the Lions basketball team did not use status in the same way. Even though the Lions’ coach, Coach Connors, tried to encourage and create status by establishing a team hierarchy, the team did not subscribe to this practice. In addition to status being much less salient on the Lions, the players did not engage in

doing girl or blending in the athletic context to the extent the MassFire did. These findings suggest that high status and no status system allow for gender performance flexibility.

“Looks” vs. “Function”: Doing Girl vs. Doing Athlete

I learned early on that the players on MassFire had a lot to say about what they wore on the softball field. Whether they were complaining or praising, every player on the team told me what she thought about her uniform, her opponents’ uniform, or the various hair accessories and adornments softball players wore. This section is most relevant to the softball team because they were allowed to wear hair accessories and some jewelry during games and practices according to league rules and their coach, Linda’s, permission. I do not offer many similar examples of doing girl from the basketball team because basketball is a much more active contact sport than softball. This meant that players were not permitted, in practice or during games, to wear any kind of jewelry. Also, basketball players cannot play with a loose-fitting headband because they run constantly, unlike softball players, who are much more static while on the field. I do not think this was the only reason I did not witness the basketball team doing girl, but it is important to take into consideration.

Additionally, I have learned from my own experience as a player and from spending the summer with the MassFire that softball culture is one in which players braid their hair and wear adornments, such as ribbons and headbands, regularly. Watching one softball college World Series game on ESPN shows numerous players with necklaces, bracelets, hair accessories, and make-up. Britney told me that she thinks she and her teammates engage in this behavior because, “that’s what college players do and we want to be college softball players.”

Even though wearing jewelry, braiding hair, and adding other adornments to one's uniform are common among softball players, many players on the MassFire did not engage in this behavior because there was no reason to do so, it was not functional. I heard two reasons for looking nice. One was for the benefit of boys. When the MassFire discussed showering before games or wearing make-up, some players would say it did not make sense to do so because, "it's not like there [were] any boys around." On the other hand, Amanda told me that she likes to wear a very small amount of make-up, make sure her hair is in place, and have her uniform perfectly tucked for the same reason she gets dressed up for the SATs. She said, "I like when you dress nice, you succeed." Amanda adapted a functional reason for putting effort into her appearance and it was not based on gender. I will offer more examples of this practice later in this chapter.

Amanda was a unique case in that she did care about how she looked during softball and was content expressing that. Most other players routinely *justified* why they were wearing make-up or jewelry at practices or games. For example, at one early morning Lions' practice, Coach O suggested to Lillian that she wipe underneath her eye because she had smudged make-up. Lillian did so without saying anything and then Coach O said, "I don't even know why you're wearing make-up for practice." Lillian quickly retorted back that she put it on last night and did not take it off. Instances in which jewelry or make-up were present in the athletic context were usually residual from the social context were commonplace on the softball team. Makeup and jewelry were components of doing girl. They were appearance enhancers but did not have a function on the athletic field. Other items that were only valued for the way they looked were hair ribbons or anything pink. A couple of players on the MassFire routinely wore ribbons tied in bows in

their ponytails or braids to games or practices. These adornments had no purpose other than “looking good.”

In summary, some aspects of the female athlete are more related to their appearance or “looks.” These components stemmed from doing girl in the social context. Other aspects of the female athlete were more related to their function. These components were grounded in athletics and practicality. Here, the separation of performances is still salient. In the following sections of this chapter, I will expand on more examples of these separations but then show how the softball team “blended” in an effort to redefine what it means to be a girl by also being an athlete.

Sparkly Headbands: How Female-Athletes Do Girl



Figure 1: Jenny Finch with teammate wearing sparkly headbands.

One appearance practice that every member of the MassFire engaged in at least once was wearing the sparkly headband. Sparkly headbands were a constant reminder that even though these players were competitive athletes, they were also girls and many of them were very girly. Figure 1 shows Jennie Finch and a teammate wearing the sparkly headbands that Jennie Finch has manufactured and very successfully branded and sold to thousands of softball players. The headband is about one inch wide with a stretchy black material connecting the two ends of a sparkling band at the back underneath the ponytail. Even though every single player on the team purchased one for \$11, most of them immediately complained about how they did not stay on their head. Sammy said

that she would “rather pre-wrap¹⁶.” Another player commented that she hates the headbands because they always fall off but they “look really good.” Amanda once switched out of her sparkly headband into a nude plastic one. When I asked her why she switched she said that she “can’t pitch in the sparkly headband because it falls off but at first-base [she] doesn’t run around a lot so it stays in place.”

Wearing the sparkly headbands seemed to be a way for the players on MassFire to perform girl. Even as they were standing in the hot sun sweating and diving in the dirt, they could remind everyone watching that they were girls and they were acting like girls even as they were playing softball. However, not everyone chose to wear the headband because in many ways it was a hindrance to being a great player.

The day the sparkly headbands came in the mail also happened to be the day that Sarah’s father, a professional photographer, took the team photo. Every girl put on her sparkly headband and proudly posed for the picture. This photo is now the homepage of the MassFire website to which prospective players and coaches may go for more information about the team and its players. Immediately following the picture, nearly every girl took off her headband for the actual game. It seemed as if the girls wanted to look their best for the picture but chose to forgo appearance enhancement for the actual game. Many of them put on a different type of headband to keep their hair back after removing the sparkly headband.

Players on the Lions also performed girl for the camera by dressing up for pictures but later reverting back to something more practical and comfortable. At practice one day, Maddie

¹⁶ Pre-wrap is stretchy, gauze-like material used under plaster casts or medical tape so that the skin is protected. Many female (and some male) athletes use the material to keep their hair back. It is useful in that the texture of the material has enough friction to keep even the finest hair in place while not being uncomfortably tight. Pre-wrap used to just come in nude but is now marketed specifically to female athletes in a variety of bright colors that are often matched to uniforms.

complained that her calves were abnormally fat. Her teammates tried to convince her that they were just muscular from basketball. To lighten the mood, I made a joke that maybe she wore high-heels a lot and her calves grew very large from that. Maddie did not pick up on my sarcasm and she and Lillian both scoffed at my comment. Maddie said she does not even own high heels. This sparked a conversation between Danielle, Maddie, and Lillian about how for prom last year they wore high heels for pictures but changed into flip flops or Uggs for the majority of prom. Lillian said to me, “I would only wear them for pictures and then take them off as soon as I get there.” According to these players, just like the sparkly headband, high heels look good, but they are not really very functional for standing and dancing for an entire evening.

The Uniform: Function is More Important than Looks

The uniform was another aspect of the discourse about looks and function. The uniform was a relatively easy way for the players to look like athletes. As soon as they put it on, it was fairly clear that they were softball players due to the style of the clothing and the image of a softball centered on the shirt. Danielle, a senior on the Lions, expressed how important clothes are for athletes when she told me why she did not like her elementary school. While we were waiting for the Varsity game to start at an all-girls’ Catholic school, Danielle kept mentioning that she used to go to Catholic school. She brought it up a number of times so I asked her whether or not she liked it. She said she actually liked it a lot except “the one thing she couldn’t handle was the uniforms.” I asked her why and she said, “Wearing a jumper during gym class was really hard.” When I raised the question of whether or not they were allowed to change before gym she said that her school was “one of those schools that thought girls shouldn’t be allowed to play sports.” Clearly, clothing during sports is important enough that it indicates

whether or not women can even play. Having the proper clothing is paramount to girls enjoying and successfully playing sports.

Even though uniforms were an important indicator of athletic status, there were a number of ways to wear their uniform that were less about doing athlete and more about doing girl. On the MassFire, when low status players on the team did not have their uniform shirt properly tucked in, a high status player would usually tell her to correct the mistake. The most blatant form of policing of gendered appearance of a lower status teammate was at the first game at a large East Coast softball tournament at which the majority of college softball coaches recruit. In my field notes I wrote, “As the girls are standing around getting ready Sarah goes to roll her pants. Claire immediately yells at her and says, ‘Sarah don’t roll your pants¹⁷!’” The girls routinely discussed how rolling their softball pants looked “unprofessional and sloppy.” Amanda said she never rolled her pants at softball games because there were “no boys around to impress anyway.” Rolling pants to make them shorter is not always strictly functional. Amanda’s comment suggests that rolling shorts was mostly for the benefit of boys; it is part of doing girl. It makes your shorts shorter so that you can see more leg, skin, and sometimes, they are rolled so short, you can see butt. Interestingly, at the team sleepover, I noticed that Heather rolled her shorts a couple of times but no one said anything. It was an all-girls sleepover, so no boys to impress, but since we were in the social context, pants-rolling was ok, whereas this was not the case in the athletic context.

¹⁷ Pants-rolling is ubiquitous among the girls with whom I’ve interacted. It is commonly done with sweatpants or athletic shorts for a variety of reasons. Many times, athletic clothing is made for men and the crotch of these pants or shorts either hangs down too low or the waistband is situated too high for comfortable exercise. Also, the elastic waistband can easily stretch out and rolling the pants once can make them snug enough to not fall down. Additionally, most relevant to this interaction, rolling pants is a way to make shorts shorter to avoid pants getting muddy, wet, or tripping an athlete up as she runs.

Conversely, even though the uniform could be made to focus on appearance, in general, it was a functional piece of equipment for the players. I asked the players on MassFire why none of them, other than Sarah, chose to wear sliding kneepads. They all surrounded around me and told me that with pants, they really were not necessary. Heather then explained, as others nodded in agreement, how before games she would put her long softball socks on first, then her softball pants and roll the two together in such a way so that there was a little padding over her knee cap. This technique was invisible to my eye but most of the players on the team seemed to use it. By and large, softball uniforms are about function rather than appearance¹⁸. There is a reason for every aspect of the attire: the entire leg is covered to protect against scrapes from sliding and dividing, the pants are tight and stretchy for easier running, and the MassFire and many other teams, wore sleeveless uniforms so that they were cooler during the hot summer months and their arms could rotate freely.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Claire did not see the value in anything that “doesn’t do anything” on the softball field. She routinely wrapped a piece of pre-wrap around her upper forearm of her throwing arm before practices and games. At one game, some of teammates noticed her armband and told Claire that it looked really cool and they wanted to do it too. Claire firmly retorted that “it’s not for looks” and she does it because her arm hurts. Here, Claire refused to allow something she wore for a reason be adapted to something that was merely for its “looks.” In the same vein, Carina from the Lions refused to value looks over function for the season opener.

¹⁸ I specifically say softball because some women’s uniforms do not seem to be exclusively about function such as cheerleading uniforms which usually need special underwear since the skirts can be so short and fly up during stunts or volleyball uniforms, which are notoriously short, tight spandex and are similar underwear.

At practice before their first game, many of the Black players on the Lions were corn rowing each other's hair. Tasheka, or Tash, as everyone called her, was doing Carina's hair. Coach Connors called a meeting before Tash could finish but they continued a little in the locker room before he started speaking. During this time, lots of other players, Black and White, were watching Tash braid. They were all telling Carina that it looked "fresh" or really good. Carina said that it was too bad that she was going to wear a sweatband during the game tomorrow and you would not really be able to see it. The players surrounding her all yelled in unison, "So don't wear it!" Carina yelled back, "I'm not not going to wear my sweatband!" Carina did not seem to think it was worth showing off her hairstyle by forgoing a sweatband that kept her hair and sweat from getting in her face during the game. Maintaining an athletic identity by focusing on function was very important to many of the athletes I observed. Another method that enabled them to manage being a girl and an athlete was "blending."

"You're like, 'OK. I'm doing really well in this sport but I'm still pretty doing it.'": Blending Girly and Athletic

The headband was used for looks, a reason, or blended. Amanda and Lynn maintained that the sparkly headband was "pretty." Sammy and many other team members used pre-wrap instead to keep their hair in place. And finally, Heather negotiated the dilemma with the sparkly headband being mostly for "looks" with an ingenious solution. A passage from my field notes details the event:

Heather's mom brings her the sparkly headband but it has been modified. She cut the sparkly part and glued it to a regular plastic headband that stays put better. She puts this on and asks Claire specifically if it looks good. Claire says it does. Amanda especially, but also most other girls, are jealous of Heather's idea and they all say they are going to go home and do the same. Heather says they should. There seems to be disagreement about what to do with the black under part of the headband that says "dream believe."

The girls joke about having a headband party (at which they would make these headbands that stay in better than the other).

It is important to note that Heather, Amanda, and Claire are all high status players. These three girls are all unofficial captains and therefore set the tone of the team in many ways.

Heather specifically sought out Claire's approval and Amanda especially complemented Heather's crafty idea. The rest of the team followed suggesting they all do the same thing. The team engaged in a negotiation of what would be the best way to get both looks and function from the headband. Without Heather's modification, the headband was generally used for looks since it was not terribly practical. Heather wore this headband for the duration of the season at a variety of positions including very active ones like shortstop and even catcher.

Some of the players on MassFire were even able to negotiate jewelry to be both aesthetically pleasing and functional. "Phiten" is a necklace brand for athletes that many of the high status players (and eventually low status players) wore during games. They sort of resemble Croakies my parents wear when they play tennis to keep their glasses in place. These necklaces complied with league rules because if they were gently tugged the clasp would come undone unlike a regular necklace. When I asked Claire, Lynn, and Heather why they even bothered with a necklace for games they said, "It's technically supposed to give the wearer energy and power, but really, it's just cool." These necklaces subtly combine function (the "power and energy") with looks ("it's just cool") so that the female athlete can be comfortable on the field.

The MassFire also preferred their black uniform because it was the perfect combination of looks and function. They liked the black uniform better than the red because it fit them better, it was a sweat-wicking material that kept them cool in the hot sun, it did not reveal sweat marks, and it looked good with both their black and white pants. The team felt the same way about

belts. Whenever other teams had belts the MassFire always complimented how they looked saying they wanted to get some as a team. While team belts never materialized, many players got them to keep their pants from falling down (the universal function for belts), but it was important to the team that the belts completed the uniform ensemble nicely.

As for the basketball team I saw much less blending. One instance of blending was from Carrie, a White player on the team. She always wore very tall softball style socks with her basketball clothes. Some other players did this but never as high and never as consistently as Carrie. At the very end of the season, I finally asked Carrie why she wore her socks in such a way. She told me that she started wearing them in seventh grade because she hated getting floor burns. She said she did not wear them once and then pulled down her sock to show me a scar. Carrie continued to say that she also likes to wear anklets and the socks are good to cover those up. All of the reasons Carrie gave were for the socks' function rather than looks. When I continued the conversation by mentioning that she always matched, she said she likes to match her socks to the rest of her practice clothing because it would be weird to be wearing green socks with orange shorts and a red shirt. Carrie used the socks because of their function but liked that she was able to enhance her appearance as well.

Aside from Carrie's socks, the basketball team hardly blended. In fact, there were hardly any indicators of caring about looks while on the court for the basketball team. Before one practice Coach O pointed out to Raquel that her turquoise nail polish did not match her red practice clothes. Raquel looked at her nails unemotionally, looked back at Coach O, shrugged her shoulders and said, "Whatever." Raquel clearly did not care that her nails did not match her uniform and I never saw her paint them a color that did match. When players would ask about her nail polish she usually just shrugged it off. I think it just was not that big of a deal to her and

she just painted her nails because she liked it. Raquel's nail polish was a rare indicator of "doing girl" for the basketball team and even that seems to have little to do with gender performance. However, this was not the case for the softball team. Many of those players did use appearance-focused adornments. In the next section, I will explain how the girls who engaged in this behavior usually had high status.

"Jennie Finch wore pink but she's so good it doesn't matter": Status and the privilege of "doing girl."

As part of my observation methods with the MassFire I decided I would try to map the status of each player in relation to the rest of the team to determine whether or not gendered behavior varied based on status level. I determined status level by figuring out who had power on the team. In this context, power meant: being able to get people to listen to you speak, having your suggestions taken seriously, being respected by the team and not constantly mocked, and overall, just having friends on the team. In this section, I will show how players earned, maintained, and granted status. Then, I will show evidence for only high-status players doing girl on the athletic field or policing gendered behavior more often. After reviewing the status of MassFire, I will bring in evidence from the Lions to show how this team placed less value on status and did not do girl in the athletic context nor the social context.

On the MassFire, status could be earned a couple of different ways. First and foremost, age granted a player more status than someone else younger. For Sarah, her age was the constant, tangible reason for why she had the lowest status on the team. Teammates would shout, "She's a junior! That's why she messed up!" Sarah was the only team member who was 16 and going into her junior year of high school. This was a fact Sarah was never allowed to forget. Heather told Sarah she could not order dessert at the restaurant because, "Only Juniors

order dessert.” Or, in between two tournament games Katie ordered Sarah to sit in the way back of the van with me. After Sarah obliged without putting up a fight, Katie said, “Yesss, seniority.” I was also able to earn status from my age. I was 21 during the summer I spent with the MassFire. Apparently, this was *the* age to be. Gaby repeatedly told me that, “I was 21 so I could drink and do *everything*.”

Players also earned status by being good at softball. Even though Sarah had tremendous difficulty gaining any kind of social status on the team, when I asked players about her in their interviews they all told me, “Sarah is very good and you can’t take that away from her. But...” The following sentence would usually be something about her personality, how she tries too hard, or something else less tangible than her age. Gaby, Claire, and Sammy all earned their status by being the best on the team. Lynn once told Gaby she did not even have to worry about technique when trying to complete a tricky drill because she was so fast, technique did not matter. Sammy constantly earned status for her skill. Sammy was known for her power hitting. I heard hyperbolic stories of Sammy hitting homeruns to neighboring playing fields. When she was up to bat the team would discuss how good she was or tell more stories about some of her most amazing hits. Gaby also earned compliments about her skill. When she would steal bases her teammates would be awed by her speed and agility and tell her so after she’d come in from scoring a run. Claire earned her status after she would manage to catch little pop-ups that were seemingly impossible to grab. However, being good was not a consistent way to earn status. I once pointed out to Heather that Sarah was hitting really well that day and she said, “Yeah, but she’s still a brat.” On the other hand, Amanda told me, “I think even Sarah earned a lot of respect, at least from me, because at the beginning, I was like oh my god, you’re a bratty kid, I

can't stand you... But then she's been playing a really good shortstop and that takes away from a lot of the annoying stuff."

"Personality" or just being a good friend or fun to be around usually earned players the most status. Becky once told the team a story about an opponent calling Sammy a bitch. Becky could not believe that anyone would call her that because Sammy is "the nicest person in the world." Even though Sammy was really talented, she was very humble, and sometimes, even diminutive about her skill. The mother of a teammate told Sammy congratulations for earning softball player of the year in the local paper, a sought after title. Sammy responded with, "Oh! Thank you so much! That's so nice of you to say! Was there a picture? Did I look ok?" This was one of the few instances in which I saw what I would term as apologetic behavior. Instead of focusing on the athletic achievement, Sammy asked about how she looked in the paper. However, Sammy's purpose may have also been status maintenance. Even if she is good, she does not want to be too full of herself. Linda, the coach, many times told me she thought the team was not terribly fond of Melissa because Melissa thought she was the best on the team but did not always bother to show up to practice. Sammy, on the other hand, never boasted about her skills.

I learned that personality and being a good friend were very important status indicators during the interviews. I asked each interviewee what it meant to be a good teammate or who they respected most on the team. Britney told me that she most respected Amanda because she was there for everyone and stepped up to a leadership role this season. Amanda told me that working hard was the most important thing. She said that players like Katie who tend to make mistakes are hard to be angry at for too long because, "she's so nice and works really hard." Aubrey also had high status even though she was one of the lesser-skilled players. Many players

mentioned her in their interviews saying how much they appreciated her friendship. Aubrey routinely had multiple teammates asking if she wanted to be their partner for warm-ups. By the end of the season, she was hanging out with many different groups of her teammates outside of practice.

Once status was earned it also had to be maintained. Sometimes, this would mean putting someone else in a lower position than you. Becky, also a low-status player, would routinely put Sarah in a lower position by pointing out any minute mistakes or asking others what they thought of Sarah's actions. Gaby once mentioned it was drizzling and Sarah responded, "I already said I felt a drop!" Gaby did not respond but Becky pointed out, "Gaby, did you hear Sarah try to one up you?" When Sarah would try to sit next to me on the bench, other players would get angry and say that it was their seat first and force her to get up and sit on the ground instead. Sarah understood, on some level, that she had low status on the team. When I asked her about all the jokes at her expense, she said that she was the youngest and it is all in good fun. She said it will be different next year when she is not the youngest. Sarah maintained that age was the reason for why everyone gave her such a hard time. Even though many of the girls cited other reasons, age was less personal and Sarah was willing to maintain this as the reason for her low status. Between two games Britney, Claire, Gaby, and I went to a sub shop across the street from the field for lunch. Sarah went separately to the same place with her parents. Britney invited Sarah over to sit with our group so she would not be with her parents while we were having fun sitting together in an effort to be nice to Sarah, for a change. However, to maintain Sarah's lower status, Britney pulled up a highchair for Sarah to sit in as a way of confirming her younger age. Sarah cooperatively sat in the highchair, figuratively suggesting that she was the baby of the group.

There were also more formal ways of granting status. These were the “pen game” and the “shit card.” The pen game was a game usually played in the social context. In this game, the girls throw a pen to someone and then secretly ask that girl a question. Amanda’s example was, “Who paints their nails the most.” Then, the girl who received the pen would choose someone as her answer but the chosen girl would not know the question to which she was the answer. The game proceeds with more questions and choosing people to fit the answers until the first person receives the pen back in her lap. Amanda conceded that her explanatory example was a lame question but could not think of anything better. Most of the questions were sexual in nature and many of them were very crass and outlandish. Once the game was over the girls would go in order saying what the question was and whom they chose. Sometimes, the team granted, maintained, or took away status from players through this game. For example, if the question was particularly weird and no one person would actually be an appropriate answer, the pen would go to Claire or Gaby because their status could handle it. For example, “Most likely to make a sex tape with an animal” would go to one of them. They were a safe choice. Claire and Gaby would not be offended and did not mind being the butt of a team joke. Claire and Gaby had high status and taking one for the team in the way only maintained their “coolness.” No one actually thought either of them would do this. On the other hand, for questions that might actually be detrimental to one’s status they were thrown to Sarah. She received, “Least likely to shower.” Lynn earned a lot of status during the pen game because she was always the answer to questions about who is the most experienced, who has kissed the most people, or who was the youngest when she had her first kiss.

Another formal method of granting status was the “shit card.” This was a figurative card handed to players after making a particularly witty comment at the expense of another. It could

also be awarded to someone for making an impressive play in the field. The players on MassFire told me “doing something shitty,” when shitty means good, was reason for receiving this card. Once the card was given, it remained in that person’s possession until it was awarded to another. I earned the shit card once for making a joke at Linda’s expense. I also earned the shit card for asking Becky if she even liked softball after she spent 20 minutes straight complaining about it to everyone sitting on the bench. I earned the shit card in this particular instance because the rest of the team and I were annoyed with Becky’s tirade about hating softball and my scathing comment left her in silence. Claire earned the shit card when she dove head first to catch a bunt before it hit the ground. What was important about the shit card was that it was only awarded for doing athlete, or not doing girl¹⁹.

The card that was awarded for doing girl was the “love card.” It was much less universally granted. Only Heather possessed this card during the season because she was the only one in love at the time. Heather had a boyfriend of many years with whom she had, in my opinion, what seemed like a very healthy and functional relationship. Many of the girls admired the duration of their relationship and told Heather that her boyfriend looked like Leonardo DiCaprio, which contributed to Heather’s already high status.

Players on MassFire respected high status players and heeded their advice. High status players were also able to do girl on the softball field. Britney, Lynn, and Heather wore ribbons

¹⁹ Cursing was an interesting aspect of the peer culture of both the MassFire and the Lions. Both teams cursed extensively but sometimes thought I might tattle on them for doing so. After I repeatedly told them that cursing did not offend me and I had no reason to tell anyone, they became more comfortable and the cursing flowed even more freely. In the case of the MassFire, cursing might have been one method of not doing girl in the social context. Between two tournament games late in the season I was in the car with a large group of the MassFire, the team was cursing up a storm and Britney joked, “We’re ladies we don’t curse.” She then corrected herself and said, “No! I mean: We’re ladies, we don’t fucking curse.” Clearly, Britney was mocking the idea that girls should not curse by cursing anyway. The basketball team never made any such explicit claims about cursing but they used the language in the social context often. Further research about the use of cursing related to gender and peer culture may produce interesting findings. The fact that the “shit card” was only given out for not doing girl or doing athlete may be related to cursing being a component of those two performances but not of doing girl.

and the sparkly headband nearly every game while none of the other players did this. Sammy also wore a lot of makeup during games that to my eyes appeared freshly applied. As I mentioned earlier, other players would tell me that they only had makeup on because they did not wash their face before going to sleep the previous night. I never heard Sammy justify her makeup for this reason. The comments from players who did try to justify why they were wearing makeup in the athletic context defended it in a way that suggested to me that they just “didn’t care enough” to deal with it. Wearing make-up is girly because it takes a lot of time to apply and only enhances one’s appearance. Also, washing it off at night is additional time and effort spent on your appearance. As such, while Sammy may have been doing girl by wearing make-up to games and practices without justifying it, the players who wore make-up in the social context and then did not remove it for the athletic context, were not performing girl.

Another indicator that status allowed a girl more flexible gender performance was related to the discourse around the word “bitch.” Mostly, this word was used in the social context when players on the Lions and MassFire would describe other girls they did not like. Amanda called the team of players who wore a lot of makeup and only cared about winning as a “bunch of bitches.” During halftime at an away game, the Lions crossed paths with their opponents on the way to the locker room. Some words were exchanged between the two teams. I heard the opponent say, “The Lions suck.” After we all got into the locker room Carina kept saying, “Was it the girl who missed like five free throws? Because she can’t say anything! She sucks. Just tell them to look at the scoreboard!” The Lions were winning this particular game handily and Carina did not think that an opponent was allowed to be bitchy if she was not any good. She needed status to act like a bitch. Conversely, the best player on this particular team was actually very nice. She worked hard and encouraged her teammates. After the Lions beat this team 82-

50, Lillian, Maddie, and Danielle went up to the girl they admired and told her to “keep her head up.” They said she was, “the best and actually nice.” Earning status gives you the right to be a bitch, but being a good sport is much better.

I briefly discussed Jennie Finch in the previous chapter in the section about the color pink. In the example I presented, Aubrey and Britney discussed how status gives one the privilege to wear pink even on the softball field. “Britney says that Jennie Finch wore pink but because she was so good it didn’t matter. They agreed that if you’re so good you can’t say anything, then wearing pink doesn’t matter because you can’t saying anything.” Jennie Finch has the most status of any softball player. She is one of the most talented, definitely the most famous, and she is routinely in the media. The players on MassFire had a lot of respect for her. They purchased her sparkly headbands and they told me that they were very sad the day she retired that summer. Britney said she got teary-eyed during the last game that was aired on ESPN the previous night. Despite all of this, they did not wear pink on the field the way Jennie did because they did not have the caliber of status that she maintains.

Status was salient and important on the MassFire. However, on the Lions, the team had a much less visible hierarchy. This was especially interesting because Coach Connors tried to establish a very formal hierarchy based on skill and age but the team did not subscribe to the system. At the beginning of the season Coach Connors explained to the team that they were to vote for two captains and then there would be “council members” for each position group. He said, “If there is a problem on the team you should go to your council member and then to the captain and then to the coach... the point of this is to find out where the communication went wrong and make the team more of a unit.” This system never really materialized though there were two captains, Lillian and Maddie. Coach Connors also regularly referred to a player’s

grade in high school. He would say things like, “You’re a senior! You should have made that shot!” He routinely ran a drill in which a member of each grade would have to score a free throw or the entire team ran. He also called Raquel “Rookie” for the entire season. Raquel was originally the only freshman on varsity before Emma joined the team and she earned this nickname very early on. For the most part, her teammates called her Raquel and Coach Connors called her Rookie.

I further learned that the Lions did not subscribe to the status hierarchy when Maddie and Dawn performed a skit for me. In the skit, Dawn acted as Coach Connors (because she was also Black, so this was appropriate, according to Dawn) and Maddie played herself. Maddie motioned toward a wall as if she was shooting and missing a lay up. Dawn, acting as Coach Connors, starts screaming at Maddie about her being a senior and that seniors should not miss layups. All of the girls watching the skit laughed and nodded at its accuracy. Maddie then said to me that she did not understand why Coach Connors was always calling out seniors for making mistakes but then says that they are a team and they are one unit that needs to work together.

The players on MassFire did see a status difference in being on Junior Varsity (JV) versus being on Varsity²⁰. Coach Connors constantly highlighted the difference between these

²⁰ Like many schools, Easton High School had girls’ Freshmen, JV, and Varsity basketball teams. The Freshmen team was of course, all freshmen. They practiced separately and I almost never saw those players or their coach. From my understanding of high school sports, the point of a Freshmen team is so that girls are not cut their first year playing basketball. The JV squad is essentially a training team to get ready for Varsity. While most players on JV will never see any playing time on Varsity, some of them will make the team next year or might be brought up to Varsity later in the season due to injuries or enormous improvement. The JV squad is made up of sophomores and juniors at Easton High. Most high schools, and some states, have a rule that seniors are not permitted to be on JV. JV games take place before Varsity games and the JV team practices on the smaller end of the basketball gym. Sometimes, the JV games were cut short due to timing issues so that the Varsity game could start on time. Varsity is the team that matters. They are working towards an end of the season tournament. They are the best players in all four grades and they practice the most. The quality of the basketball program at each high school is dependent on its Varsity squad and these games are written up in local newspapers for the benefit of the community. Being on Varsity as a freshman earns that player lots of respect and earning a Varsity letter all four years is also considered impressive. While some players do not mind being on JV or the Freshmen team, in general, the goal is to make Varsity.

two teams during practice and in team meetings. He never made any comments that girls might not be able to complete a skill or technique; it was always “Varsity should be able to do this, JV players might not.” At the beginning of the season Tash, because of her poor attitude and slowness, was not automatically put on the Varsity squad. For one day of practice she was with the JV team. When she saw me at practice that day she said to me, “Miss²¹, I’m not supposed to be here. I’m just helping out.” Tash was embarrassed that she was on JV and tried to downplay that to me. She and a few other players who were temporarily on JV kept peaking out behind the dividing curtain to see what was going on at Varsity practice. I heard Tash repeatedly say that she should be “over there.” After Nicole found out that she would be on JV for at least the first half of the season she could not help but cry in the locker room after hearing the bad news. Another player in a similar situation told the team, I am glad I am at least partially on Varsity. There was a big difference between JV and Varsity, but within the Varsity squad, the players were not likely to put someone else into a lower status or use someone’s lower grade and age as a reason for their failure. There was a much less salient status system on the Lions than on the MassFire.

The Lions: Not Doing Girl

In addition to not engaging in status making, the Lions did not do girl on the basketball court. First off, as I mentioned earlier, basketball players are not allowed to wear any kind of hair accessory or adornment because there is much more contact than in softball. But, this did

²¹ No one else on the team ever called me, “Miss.” Tash did for the first two weeks of the season before she learned my name. It took Tash a little longer than the others to learn that I was not an authority figure nor a spy for their Coach. I think she called me Miss at first thinking this was appropriate.

not seem to be the only way that they just did not engage in doing girl. In the way that the MassFire rejected the color pink on the court, the Lions were not nearly as offended by its presence. The color only came up three times during the duration of my observation with the team. The first time, Danielle mentioned that their uniforms looked kind of pink because they were reversible and the red showed through to the white side making it look a little pink. She and others were unhappy about this mostly because their school colors were red, white, and blue, not pink. This was only mentioned once and never complained about again. The second time, Kristina had a red and clear Gatorade on the bench. I suggested that she mix them but it might turn pink. She mixed them and it did turn pink but she did not care, it tasted really good. And the final time pink was an issue was at the last conference game of the season. We walked into the gymnasium while the other team was shooting around with a pink ball. I was standing next to Carina and she started talking about how much she hates the ball. She said it was too light. I asked her if she hated it because it was light or because it was pink and she immediately responded that it was just too light. She did not comment on or disparage the color pink. Lillian later told me that the other team was using the pink ball because today was their breast cancer awareness day. She said teams usually tell their opponents so they can both prepare by wearing pink. Lillian said she and everyone on the team owns pink laces for just such occasions. She would have worn them had she known, but she did not. No one on the Lions cared about the color pink being in the athletic context.

The only instance in which I saw the team doing girl was during the JV game at another school. The Varsity squad was sitting on the bleachers watching the game before theirs started a little later. Dawn, Tash, and Carina started going up to various boys around the gym trying to find out if they had girlfriends so they could get their phone numbers for other teammates. The

players of the Lions who were not a part of this interaction at all were the freshmen and two sophomores who were much less ingratiated with other members of the team. This is similar to doing girl on the MassFire: the higher status girls engaged in doing girl more than lower status. However, in my opinion, this behavior did not seem normatively feminine. Lions were going up to boys they thought were cute and asking them out. They were being confident, sexual, and aggressive. Even though they may have been a little boy-crazy, they were approaching the situation in a non-normatively feminine manner.

The only player on the Lions who did do girl on the court was Nicole. Nicole tried out for Varsity and was maybe going to play on both teams but ended up just being on JV. She told me she was girly and acted like it. I watched her during her JV games fairly closely and I noticed that she seemed more worried about her hair than the game. It many times interrupted her playing abilities. She would leave a little bang hanging out and this always got her face. She would be brushing it out of her eyes instead of using her arms to defend. She would also always need to put it back up into a ponytail when she came off the bench keeping her from high-fiving her teammates.

Nicole also wore kneepads. While on some teams, everyone wore kneepads; Nicole was the only player on either JV or Varsity for the Lions who wore them. Dawn once asked why she wore them and Nicole said, "So I don't break my knees!" Dawn did not really understand why this would be a concern and felt too awkward to keep asking Nicole while she wore the kneepads. While Dawn asked Nicole about this, Nicole kept complaining about the bruises on her legs and saying how much she hated the way they looked. I would argue that Nicole wore the kneepads to protect her knees from looking bad. This was not a universal concern for players on the Lions. Towards the end of the season, Lillian sat next to me with her legs stretched out.

Her knees were entirely purple and green. I asked where she got those bruises she calmly responded, “Probably basketball.” It may have been Nicole’s gender performance that ultimately landed her on JV instead of Varsity because the performance interfered with her ability to adequately execute required skills.

In this chapter, I gave evidence for how the players on MassFire reconciled the differences between girly and athletic by combining aspects of both to work better for them. Then, I discussed how status on the MassFire granted certain privileges for gender performance but was not as important to the Lions. In the next chapter, in addition to showing how the Lions responded to doing girl on the court, I will show how even though they did not consider their gender to be particularly important, it complicated their relationship with Coach Connors and they were not able to escape a gendered relationship with the athletic department administration and the school’s fans.

*Chapter 6: How the Lions Devalued Gender**Introduction*

In the previous chapters, I detailed how the female athletes I observed *did* perform gender by doing girl. In this chapter I will show how the basketball team *did not* do gender. In Chapters 4 and 5, I showed the MassFire's two different methods of gender performance. In the social context, the MassFire's gender performance was very normative, they did girl. In the athletic context, the MassFire exhibited much more of a range of gender performance. Sometimes they did not do gender at all, sometimes they specifically avoided one form of gendered behavior (doing girl), and other times they blended performances. The Lions basketball team exhibited much different behavior. In Chapter 5, I explained that the Lions did not engage in a strict or complex status system as the MassFire did and therefore my finding with the MassFire that high-status girls perform girl in the athletic context with little repercussions was unfounded with the Lions. However, whether or not the Lions engaged in status making behavior, they did not intentionally do girl in the athletic context at all and they hardly did girl in the social context.

In this chapter, I will show how the Lions responded to doing girl in the athletic context by mocking its presence. In this way, they highlighted doing girl as "other." They also engaged in "othering" doing girl while in the social context. I saw very few instances in which anyone on the Lions performed normatively feminine behavior without suggesting that it was in some way different or abnormal from how they typically act. They highlighted my femininity as something foreign and unexpected. When they performed girl, it was for entertainment value rather than a serious gender performance. Furthermore, in the social context, not only were the Lions mocking doing girl, they routinely subverted expected gender norms. I believe that the Lions did not consider their gender to be particularly important in their day-to-day activities but it

complicated their relationship with their male coach and they could not escape gendered relationships with the high school's athletic department, administration, and the team's fans.

“He said, ‘Don’t pirouette! Did you hear that!’”: Not Doing Girl in the Athletic Context and Mocking its Performance

For the MassFire, part of doing athlete meant not doing girl. The Lions also did not do girl when they did athlete, but being an athlete did not necessarily mean not doing girl. It seemed like the MassFire consciously avoided acting like a girl while the Lions just did not engage in that kind of behavior. It was so uncommon to see doing girl in the athletic context for the Lions that when it did happen, they could not help but laugh.

I mentioned in the previous chapter that the MassFire had more opportunity than the Lions to do girl because they were allowed to wear jewelry and the softball culture includes appearance-enhancing adornments like ribbons, braids, and make-up. When I began observations with the Lions I was not sure if the players would have the opportunity to do girl while in the athletic context. In addition to not being allowed to wear any kind of jewelry and adornment due to league rules and sport culture, Coach Connors ran strict practices that inhibited “being goofy,” chatting, or milling around.

The Lions had very little leeway in what they did do while on the court. It was mostly limited to characteristics associated with being an athlete. They had to work hard, run fast, be aggressive and strong, pay attention, and not make mistakes. While I do not know whether or not the Lions would have acted “more like girls” had they been given more freedom on the court

to do so, I did see accidental moments of doing girl. These were usually²² inadvertent body movements that appeared feminine to their teammates or the fans.

Dawn jokingly did girl in the athletic context when the Lions were discussing which uniform they were going to wear for the season. Coach Connors did not care about their choice and left it up to the team to decide. Some team members wanted the old uniforms. These uniforms, according to Lillian and others, had larger armholes that were more comfortable and included separate jerseys and shorts for home and away games. Conversely, the new uniforms were a nicer material with slightly smaller armholes but were just one set of jersey and shorts that were reversible. As the girls were arguing the pros and cons of each uniform, Dawn pulled up her shorts so that they were very short, revealing the compression shorts she wore underneath her long, baggy basketball shorts and said that she likes short shorts. Maddie yells at her, dismissing her comment as ridiculous, “We know Dawn, we saw your short booty shorts on the first day of try outs.” Maddie pulled her shorts up to mimic Dawn. Both girls laughed at the ridiculousness of wearing such short shorts.

Maddie told me later in the season that she “hates when her knees show.” She, and the majority of the Lions wore very baggy long basketball shorts at practice. The only players who wore noticeably short shorts were on JV or the Freshman team²³. Varsity players never wore

²² I say usually because there was Nicole on JV who I believe intentionally acted girly on the court. She told me she was very girly in general but on the court she did not change her performance. In the previous chapter I mentioned her constant fussing with her hair and tying her uniform behind her back to make it tighter. Although Nicole’s gender performance is interesting, she was on JV for the majority of the season and was very different from the players I observed on Varsity. Additionally, she seemed irrelevant to the Varsity team in that I never heard them comment on her gender performance, skills, or anything else. For these reasons, I leave her out of my analysis of gendered performance in the athletic context for the Lions.

²³ I do not know why this was true. The JV team and the Varsity team were not terribly different in age so that probably was not the reason. It is possible that the JV players were less experienced basketball players, had been to less skill-building camps, or played on fewer recreational basketball teams and were thus unaware or unconcerned by basketball girl culture of wearing very baggy shorts. Female college basketball players all wear their shorts similar to the way the Varsity players wore theirs.

shorts that were shorter than three-quarters down their thigh. There was a stark contrast among short length and tightness in the gymnasium during afternoon practices. The Varsity basketball girls had on their baggy shorts that rivaled the boys' team in length and looseness. The JV basketball squad had more of a mixture of baggy and tight and the cheerleaders and track runners using the indoor track that circled the basketball courts wore tiny shorts nearly indistinguishable from underwear. To me this indicated that short shorts were not uncommon among female athletes at this school but they were not part of the gender performance for the Varsity Lions basketball players. Dawn, and the rest of her team, were well aware of this.

Dawn intentionally did girl in the athletic context as a way to make a joke during a relatively tense conversation. She knew the other players would shoot her idea down but pointed out the option because its ridiculousness would be something about which the entire team could agree, even if they disagreed about which uniforms they would ultimately choose. Future moments of doing girl on the court were all inadvertent.

For example, early in the season Coach Connors was going over a basketball move called a "J-cut." A J-cut is a curved run that allows the defender to get to where the ball handler is going faster than if she ran in a straight line. It is a very effective move when done correctly but can be difficult to remember in the heat of the game. Coach Connors was teaching Michaela how to correctly execute the J-cut. Michaela always ran with a little spring her step. I think this was because she was a volleyball player and could jump higher than any player I saw all season. She always seemed to bounce around the court. Michaela ran the J-cut per Coach Connors' request and he yelled, "Don't pirouette, that's too many steps." Tash bursts out laughing at this comment repeating the words a few times so that others could hear as she continues to laugh and heckle Michaela for looking like a girl on the basketball court. She turns to others saying, "He

said ‘Don’t pirouette!’” Looking for responses from others she continued, “Did you hear that?!” Pirouetting, or ballet, is a normatively feminine sport and movement. In this interaction, Coach Connors asserted that he did not want those on his team to look like girls while they played basketball. Tash saw the hilarity in her friend looking like a girl on the court given her natural athleticism.

Dawn accidentally looked like a girl on the court while taking free throws at a game in December. She missed the first and bent down to wipe her hands on the ground. She was probably trying to dry off the sweat with a little dirt from the floor, not an uncommon move. However, Dawn bent over in such a way that she stuck out her butt and arched her back. The players on the bench with me started laughing pointing out what Dawn had done. Asking out loud to no one in particular, “Why did she bend over like that?”

The next day at a team dinner held in one of the classrooms at the high school, the girls brought up the awkward movement to Dawn again saying how weird it was. Dawn did not get why it was a big deal saying that everyone in school was asking her about it too. This seemingly insignificant movement warranted a sustained response from the Lions’ fans and the rest of the team. I would characterize Dawn’s movement as doing girl because she also contorted her body into the same position when she was intentionally doing girl for a video camera or to entertain the team in the social context. I discuss Dawn doing girl in the social context in the following section.

Dawn had some trouble managing girly behavior in the athletic context. Dawn took a liking to the youngest and smallest player on the team, Emma. Emma was a very quiet, pretty, non-aggressive freshman on the team. She looked very young, possibly just having begun puberty that year (she told the team she got her first period in February). Despite never speaking

up in large groups, Emma seemed to be well liked by the team. My field notes from one particular game show how Dawn's behavior towards Emma was very femininely gendered:

Dawn says she wants to adopt Emma. I ask why and say that Emma never talks. Dawn says I know but she's such a frail little girl I just want to take care of her. Raquel hears this and looks at Dawn like she's crazy and Dawn gets defensive about it saying that everyone should feel like that and it makes sense. Raquel asserts that [Dawn's comments and desire to mother a teammate are] weird and how would she feel if someone said that [about her].

This interaction reveals a few important ideas. First, even though Raquel is a freshman and Dawn a senior, Dawn's gender performance does not dictate what is appropriate. This confirms my explanation in Chapter 5 that status was not really that important for the Lions. Raquel hardly passed judgment on other players all season but immediately derided Dawn for these comments suggesting that it did not just "make sense" to want to feel that way about a fellow teammate. Dawn made comments like this about Emma all season. I saw her come up behind Emma and envelop her in a large hug saying things such as she wanted to keep Emma in her pocket or mother her. Emma always looked uncomfortable when Dawn touched her and sometimes tried to question Dawn's behavior. Though for the most part, it was Raquel or other team members who problematized this performance by mocking Dawn for acting this way.

Raquel was better at recognizing when her body movements were construed as doing girl and was more graceful at handling the mocking that ensued than Dawn. At one practice, the team was running a drill that involved loudly yelling the name of the teammate from whom you want the ball. Raquel sprinted down to the end of the court and yelled, "Lillian!" in a high-pitched voice. She waved her hands about dramatically and shook her hands and fingers the way cheerleaders do. After Raquel shot her layup she and the rest of the team burst out laughing about how she called for the ball. Lillian and others mimicked her high-pitched voice by

shouting it across the gym to each other. Raquel laughed as well, shocked by what she had done, and participated in mimicking of her overtly girly behavior.

At the last game I observed, the Lions engaged in the most expansive and blatant mocking of doing girl in the athletic context. Similar to most away games, the Varsity team and I sat in the bleachers during the JV game. Tara, a player on JV, was having trouble getting around the opposing defense but finally managed to break through with a slick behind the back move. She blew right by an opposing player and Tash yelled out, "She tore you up!" This was both a way of congratulating Tara but also trash talking the opposing player. The opposing player shouts back to Tash, "You don't think I didn't know that?! Thanks for sharing!" The player throws her hand out in a gesture of "don't talk to me" towards Tash as she finishes this statement. The opposing coach pulls the player out of the game for her actions and the Lions Varsity players pounce on what she said. They repeated over and over again, "Thanks for sharing!" They exaggerate the girl's tone by making their voices more high-pitched and nasally. They also mock her hand movement by overstressing the motion by flipping their hand down emphatically, similar to how gay men are stereotyped. The mocking continued for the rest of the time I was with the team that night. Hours later I would hear random exclamations in high-pitched voices of, "Thanks for sharing!" While Tash's comments may have incited the entire thing, it merely expressed her opinion on the athletic prowess of her friend Tara and the athletic ineptitude of an opponent. The opposing player took it personally, something girls do but athletes do not, as I learned from the Lions. As such, the Lions mocked the player doing girl in the athletic context.

In the athletic context, the MassFire and the Lions had a lot of similarities. Both teams did not perform girl and made fun of other teams, or themselves, who did perform girl in the

athletic context. However, the nature of this mocking was different. The MassFire seemed uncomfortable during moments in which they were either being called a girl or caught themselves acting like girls in the athletic context because they did not want to be seen as less athletic. On the other hand, the Lions did not like a girl gender performance in the athletic context because it was out of place and ridiculous. The Lions seemed less concerned about how it might affect how others view them or what the girly gender performance meant. In the next section I will discuss how the Lions responded to doing girl in the social context.

Doing Girl in the Social Context: “I shit whenever I want”: Subverting gender norms and “othering” femininity

My simplified explanation for the topic of this research for those I met during my observations was usually something like, “I’m writing about what it means to be a girl and an athlete and whether or not those two things conflict.” Many times, this made people think about the differences between male and female athletes. The players on the Lions understood that my paper was exclusively about them because I never claimed to know anything extra about boys or male athletes. They asked me a few times about the differences between boys and girls or between male and female athletes. The first time was before a practice when I had managed to arrive 30 minutes early. The team was excited to talk to me without Coach Connors nearby. As soon as I sat down, to my excitement, Danielle asked me, “What do you think the difference is between male and female athletes?” I of course asked her what she thought instead of answering the question myself and she told me:

“... girls are more emotional.” She explains this by saying that they know some of the guys on the basketball team will fight or argue during practice but after it doesn’t matter and they’re friends. Maddie says that if Dawn were to hit her during practice she wouldn’t ever talk to her again. This suggests a big difference. But then Carina says that if she were to argue with Maddie during basketball afterwards she would still ask for a

ride home “because it’s basketball.” Dawn seems to be more with Carina and says she doesn’t really get confrontational and wouldn’t be angry when the others keep trying to say that a player from last year would try to get into fights with her on the court.

Maddie and Danielle initially point out a huge difference between male and female athletes.

They suggest that female athletes cannot separate the social context from the athletic context but Carina and Dawn disagree. Carina suggests that being aggressive and angry during games is part

of the game and not something that should spill over into the social context. The team does not come to a consensus on which is true. My removed position from the team prohibited me from

hearing too much internal team gossip about animosities or fights, but I heard support for both sides of the argument from a few situations. Tash once mentioned to Coach O and me that she thought Carina might be angry with her for a comment made during the game the previous night.

Tash snapped at Carina for taking a shot instead of passing the ball to Tash, who is in the shooting position on the team. I never saw this anger materialize and cannot vouch for its validity. However, if it was true that Carina was angry, then according to her assertion

mentioned earlier, she was doing girl on the court. On the other hand, the starting line-up included two freshmen while three seniors did not start. I never heard the seniors complain about this. Many players were unhappy with their playing time but they did not take it out on

their teammates. The Lions understood that a teammate may be more skilled and it was not her fault she was going into the game. This is an example of doing athlete rather than doing girl.

Whether or not the players on the Lions engaged in the behavior, they all agreed that girls get angry on the court and let it spill over into the social context while boys and good athletes do not.

Maddie took an opposing stance from Danielle about the differences between boys and girls in the social context before a home game one day. I was talking with Maddie and Danielle when Danielle reveals that she needs to poop but cannot go yet because there are other girls in

the bathroom. Danielle turned directly towards me and said, “This is something you can put in your paper. Girls have to wait for the bathroom to be empty to shit, boys just go whenever.”

Maddie says very straightforward, “I shit whenever I want.”

In the previous examples, the players on the Lions use boys or male athletes as a comparison for how girls or female athletes can also act. Neither example suggests that the girls and boys are exactly the same, but that they can act the same if they want to. Female athletes can be aggressive and competitive during a game but forget about it later just like boys and they can be crass and immodest in the social context, like boys.

I saw more instances in which the Lions acted in ways that I did not consider to be normatively feminine than in ways I would consider doing girl. This behavior was part of their daily activity. The boys’ and the girls’ teams usually practiced one after the other. The first week of practice the boys were practicing in the 4:30 slot and the girls at 6:30. The girls’ teams, both Varsity and JV, would wait in the hallway between the gym and the locker rooms for the boys to exit the gym. As the boys’ ran through the hallway the girls would slap them on the butt. When the girls practiced first and the boys second, I never saw the reverse happen as the girls ran out the hallway passed the boys’ team. The basketball girls also heckled boys lifting weights or running in the hallways.

Lillian’s attitude toward her boyfriend also subverted gender norms. She routinely suggested that she had more power in the relationship than he and it seemed like he was more taken with her than she with him. After an early season practice I was waiting for a bus when Maddie pulled over in her car with Carina, Josephina, and Lillian inside to give me a ride home. Lillian pulled out a card from her boyfriend and read the entire message on the inside to us. On the front it said, “Happy three months, baby,” and “I love my short girlfriend.” The letter

detailed her boyfriend, Anthony's, heartfelt and genuine feelings about her. Anthony said he's "wanted to meet her forever and that he was glad she asked him to help her learn how to play goalie" for the soccer team. He said he felt like they "clicked right away when they first hung out." He complements nearly everything about her and says he "only wrote half of what he is feeling." He includes things about she is "pretty," "smart," and how his "family loves her." He tells her how she "makes him so happy and he hopes that he is doing the same for her." After Lillian finished reading the letter the others in the car making "awing" noises and clap a little. Carina then asks Lillian if she is going to write a card back to him. Lillian laughs and says, "No. I'll draw him a smiley face and write I love you above it." Lillian tells us there is a whole stack of letters like this in her room.

Even though it was clear Lillian liked her boyfriend a lot, she did not cater to him. She said that she "wore the pants" in the relationship suggesting that she had more power in the relationship. Lillian mentioned never shaving her legs specifically for his benefit and farting in front of him without concern. While many girls on the team had boyfriends, and one girl had a girlfriend, these companions were not central to their conversation topics. Boyfriends and girlfriends were fun, but basketball was more important. At a Sunday morning practice early in the season when tryouts were just ending, the team was sitting in the weight room making posters for their lockers. I noticed that one girl was missing. I quickly learned that she had quit the team. The reason: "She decided her boyfriend was more important than basketball." They clearly disapproved of this decision and then proceeded to say how he was "the ugliest guy they have ever seen." Not only is basketball more important than boyfriends, or at least not a mutually exclusive activity, independence is also important. Both Danielle and Lillian were adamant that they did not want their boyfriends following them to college in the Fall.

Lillian was an especially interesting case because of her status in the school and on the team. Lillian was the best player on the team: She was the only player being recruited for college basketball and near the end of the season she scored her 1000th point, an impressive milestone for a high school basketball player. She was also nominated and ended up winning homecoming queen in the fall. Before the game at which she was expected to win her 1000th point, I asked her if this was more important than winning homecoming queen. She nodded calmly and said, "Much more." She then told me she only wanted homecoming queen so she could have a crown and get her picture in the yearbook more. She did not seem to care about what being homecoming queen meant as much as what scoring 1000 points meant. Scoring 1000 points put Lillian in Easton High history as an excellent athlete. There is a homecoming queen every year but Lillian is only the 5th student, male or female, to reach 1000 points.

Homecoming queen is a gendered position. It symbolizes being the "best" girl. This could mean the most popular girl, most well liked girl, prettiest girl, or anything else. For whatever reason Lillian won, her gender was very important to that title. Lillian liked the recognition, but it did not mean anything to her. In this case, being great at sports was more important than being great at being a girl because being a girl just was not that important.

Carina and Maddie performed a skit during the team dinner that subverted gender norms by switching masculine and feminine behavior:

Maddie and Carina do a little "prom" skit to some song. Maddie says she is the guy and she stands on one side of the room and Carina on the other. They are both looking at each other bashfully as they slowly move closer to each other across the room. They come together and grab hands and start slowly dancing. Then Carina (who is playing the girl) starts gyrating her hips towards Maddie as if mimicking sex and the skit is over as they both burst out laughing. Tash says, "That's not how you approach a girl!" She doesn't show us how.

Although Carina initially started out doing girl in the skit by slowly walking towards her partner keeping her head slightly angled down in modesty and walking with a strut in her hips, she quickly transitioned to a normatively masculine movement of thrusting her groin into a girl's pelvis as is common at school dances. I think Tash asserted that the performance was wrong because the gendered behavior was switched.

In addition to not doing girl in the social context, the Lions "othered" a girl gender performance. By "other" I mean that a girl gender performance was both highlighted as deviant and unnecessary. Doing girl was something that other girls did or the team did for entertainment. Danielle told me that many other girls wear very revealing dresses to prom but her mother would never let her do that. Other girls were following their boyfriends to college but none of the players on the Lions wanted to do that.

The Lions made a particular point of highlighting my femininity as atypical of both my gender performance and that of any person. As the season progressed and I figured out that Coach Connors did not need me to help out at practice in any way, I started wearing whatever clothes I had on for class that day to practice rather than athletic clothing. As a college student in the northeast, I wear a pretty strict uniform of jeans, sweaters, scarves, and flat boots. While I consider this fairly casual, the Lions saw this as dressing up. The first day I wore clothes like this to practice in December the team asked me, "Who you [sic] trying to impress?" They did not believe that this was a normal outfit since they typically wore jeans and Ugg boots or sneakers, or even sweatpants. When I was required to dress up for games as is custom with basketball coaches, the team was always certain to point out how dressy I was. I would wear black dress slacks, low work-style heels and a sweater. Sometimes they would give me suggestions about my hair or comment on my heels but it always solicited a response about how

“Susan’s getting dressed!” The team never commented when I wore large sweatpants, multiple layers of sweatshirts, and snow boots to practice; an outfit I thought looked more ridiculous than jeans.

Dawn’s feminine gender performances were also highlighted moments of deviance. I use the word performances because Dawn did not do girl as a regular part of her gender performance. She “put on” a feminine performance for the benefit of friends, teammates, or a camera. In short, Dawn’s girl gender performance was always a show rather than behavior. Dawn performed girl for the cameraman documenting the team’s season for their end of year banquet. While the other players would make silly faces or yell out their graduation year, Dawn would bend down with her butt sticking out, chest pushed forward, her hands on her knees, and lips pursed together in a kiss as she looked coquettishly into the camera. The team would also try to get Dawn to do girly things for me. Before getting on the bus for a game as the team and I were milling about the area outside the gym, Danielle got Dawn to do her “catwalk” for me. Dawn got up and made a big fuss getting everyone to move out of the way. She put a song on her iPod and then got into her ready position. Dawn focused her eyes, jutted out her hip, and strutted down a make-believe runway sashaying her hips side to side. Danielle stood at the end of the make-believe runway acting as a photographer taking pictures with her cell phone. Dawn struck a pose for Danielle putting one hand on her hip, turning to profile, and looking into the camera, and winking. The team watched on in amusement as Dawn performed girl for our benefit. Even though Dawn was the only one on the team who would have actually done this performance, she had to get into character. She needed music and space to act like a girl. It was a deviance from how she normally acted. Dawn never strutted like that without thinking about it. She typically walked with her feet shuffling on the floor and her shoulders kind of hunched over.

Dawn did not do girl without “othering” its performance as something special, different, and dramatic.

Maddie mocked the tendency for girls to get into catty fights with their friends over insignificant issues by joking with Emma that they were in a fight. Maddie told us that at lunch that day about six players on the Lions had been sitting together. Emma got up and left saying that they were not doing anything and she was going to go sit with other friends. Maddie’s body language suggested that this was a girl gender performance. She pretended to be very offended by Emma’s actions giving her the cold shoulder and shaking her head and hands as if she was having an attitude about it. Everyone knew Maddie was joking, including Emma, the team laughed about it as if only ridiculous girls would respond in that method. As I mentioned earlier, getting angry about petty things on the court is something only girls do. It is also a girl gender performance in the social context. This fake fight was another way of mocking doing girl in the social context. Some apologetic defense theorists might argue that this behavior was one example of a resolution for finding a conflict in being a girl and an athlete because it appears that the Lions have removed themselves from any situations requiring femininity (Desertrain 1988, 580). However, I do not believe this is the case. While the Lions did not do girl, they were not manly either. They all wore their hair down during the school day and wore girls’ jeans with a casual sweater or sweatshirt. They were all interested in wearing dresses to prom or semi-formal and did not consciously avoid social situations involving femininity.

The players on the Lions mocked doing girl in the athletic context. In the social context they did not perform it, they “othered” it, and then subverted normative gendered behavior. I believe that the players on the Lions just did not consider their gender to be particularly important. While they did see differences between boys and girls, the Lions acted however they

wanted regardless of expectations or norms. Unfortunately, they were unable to avoid being considered girls by the athletic department and their fans, and their gender made their relationship with Coach Connors more complicated.

“You can’t play that aggressively against girls and call it lady-like”: Coach Connors, the Athletic Department, the Fans, and the Lions

Being a girl just was not that important to the players on the Lions. However, throughout the season what seemed to be important was whether or not they were being treated like athletes or ladies. As I mentioned in my Methods section, the Lions coach of many years was not rehired for the 2010-2011 season. Danielle told me the athletic director told the team that he was fired because he did not treat his players like “ladies.” After Danielle told me this I asked her and the rest of the team if they wanted to be treated like ladies or athletes. They all responded: “athletes.” I asked if they thought their new coach, Coach Connors, treated them like ladies or athletes, they responded: “athletes.”

I agreed with the Lions’ answer that Coach Connors treated them like athletes. Coach Connors never made any kind of comment suggesting that girls might not be able to execute a certain skill or technique because of their gender. It was exclusively: Varsity players can do this and JV might not or seniors should be able to execute that and freshmen can make that mistake. Occasionally, Coach Connors and I had conversations about the team’s skills and progress. He never mentioned that girls were less athletic than boys, just different. He always encouraged the team to shoot from their legs to get enough power behind their shots rather than suggesting that girls just do not shoot as well as boys. He called the players by their given names or gender-neutral nicknames. And when I mentioned that I would like to have access to the locker room because that might be a space with more feminine behavior he said, “Oh, not these girls.” Coach

Connors only used a feminine identifier for the Lions players once. He yelled at Carina, “Run faster than that, young lady.” In my opinion, Coach Connors’ comment highlighted his authority over Carina more than her gender. The comment was characteristic of the way he conducted himself with the Lions. He was consistently encouraging the team to be more aggressive, work harder, and run faster and never encouraged nor required femininity.

Coach Connors encouraged the team’s tendency to become particularly pugnacious after a close loss or a game against a rival team. At the end of a very tense home game against long-time rival, Woodbridge, a fight broke out at the end of the game. A Woodbridge mother taunted Carina while she was on the court, Carina talked back and Kristina had to calm her down. Danielle was given a technical foul and the referee instructed Coach Connors to pull Lillian out of the game for unsportsmanlike-like conduct before he gave her a technical foul as well. At the end of the game the teams lined up to slap each other five. I went through the line saying, “Good game,” and as I reached the end of the line a fight between broke out around me. I scuttled back to the bench to avoid a black eye but also to hear what the Lions had to say about what was going on. Lillian told me “some of the girls on the other team were saying immature things in the line so [she] went back into the pack and started throwing some elbows because [she] wasn’t going to back down.” The locker room was a heated scene. Players were yelling about how they needed to beat Woodbridge and that Woodbridge had it coming to them. Coach Connors walks in and hears all of this talk and says, “I applaud your anger and aggressiveness” but he wanted to see more of that earlier in the game.

To encourage this aggressiveness Coach Connors would sometimes participate in the practice drills. One such drill entailed Coach Connors slapping the ball out of the players’ hands to work on “going up strong.” All of the players on the Lions could successfully score a layup

with no defense or pressure, a skill they probably mastered by middle school. However, Coach Connors wanted to work on the proper technique to keep the ball in your hands even as you were being defended. This meant that he raised his hands up above his head to defend and then slapped down and hard to hit the ball out of the Lions' hands. Usually, he hit the ball and it rolled out of the players' hands. Sometimes, the players successfully avoided his hands or held on tight enough and were able to shoot their layup. And other times, he missed the ball and hit the Lions on the arms. Most of the players did not mind. They complained that their arms hurt a little but for the most part seemed to understand the intention of the drill. While this drill encouraged the players to be more physical in games and practice it did not seem gendered to me because it was not full contact.

Coach Connor's participation in full contact drills with the team revealed the gendered nature of his relationship. During these drills Coach Connors would play just as any basketball



Figure 2: Female basketball players "boxing out."

player, male or female, should play during the game. He would "box out," or use his butt, back and arms to keep a player from rebounding the ball, against the players on the team. I once saw him doing this against Raquel. For the most part she tried to keep up with his speed and intensity but when he got too close, she would make uncomfortable faces and sort of back away while other players looked on in similar discomfort. In figure 2 you can see female players boxing out. In my example, Coach Connors would be the girl in white in front and Raquel would be the player in light blue. I am not arguing that Coach Connor's behavior was sexual in any way. He was encouraging his players to be more aggressive and athletic by demonstration. Unfortunately, the coach and player relationship was

complicated by their different genders because although Coach Connors' actions were appropriate for a coach, they were not appropriate for an adult man and teenage girls. Although Coach Connors did his best to ignore the gender of his players, the Lions were unable to ignore the gender of their coach.

I learned that the Lions were uncomfortable with this behavior near the end of the season when speaking with Maddie, Lillian, and Danielle about their old coach. Their relationship with their former coach was also gendered. Lillian said, "I really saw him as a father figure. He's my Black Father, I have a White Father and a Black one." Maddie also agreed with this characterization of her relationship with their former coach. Lillian told me a story about the previous summer. She and Maddie really wanted ice cream but did not have a way to get there. They called their former coach and he drove across town to pick them up and bring them to an ice cream shop. This suggested to them that he cared about them a lot, something they did not feel from Coach Connors.

Danielle stepped into the conversation and told me, "He was fired because he 'doesn't treat us like ladies.'" She then said, "Does this coach treat us like ladies? I don't think so!" I asked her what it meant to be treated like a lady and she said, "You can't play that aggressively against girls and call it lady-like." Unfortunately the team had to begin their warm-ups so I was not able to continue the conversation. I am not sure the Lions knew exactly how they wanted to be treated by their coach. They liked their daughter-father relationship with their previous coach but did not like *how* their relationship with Coach Connors was gendered. It was not that they did not want to be treated like girls at all, because clearly they liked being treated like daughters by their former coach. Their relationship with Coach Connors was gendered in a way that was not advantageous to the players. In the same way that Amanda from the MassFire liked that girls

could get out of things by crying, the Lions liked being treated like daughters by their male coach in addition to being treated like athletes. In this way, the Lions took the best of being a girl and the best of being an athlete and applied that to how they wanted to be treated by their coach. Coach Connors did not adapt the way he treated the team to their gender in anyway and the Lions did not like this. They wanted to be treated like athletes, which is different from being treated like a girl, but they did not want their coach to forget that they were girls because there were some aspects of being an athlete that were particularly important to the team as girls.

I believe that in Coach Connors' attempt to not treat his players like girls, because that may have been part of the reason for why his predecessor was fired, he ignored many aspects that the Lions considered to be an important parts of being on a team. First, he did not care about senior day²⁴. While many of the players cried and hugged after the ceremony, Coach Connors hung back and did not participate. After some pressuring from the team, he did put all of the seniors in the starting line-up, but he told me that he was nervous about the decision guessing that it would lose them the game.

During that same game, Lillian scored her 1000th point. After Lillian made the basket, time was called and the entire team ran to Lillian to hoist her in the air as the fans cheered. The other coaches stood and clapped while Coach Connors kept his head down and walked away "to let the girls have their moment." Lillian later told me that Coach Connors never congratulated her. Something their previous coach definitely would have done, because fathers congratulate their daughters on jobs well done. Being part of the team and caring about moments like that and senior day were very important to the Lions. Coach Connors routinely had meetings with

²⁴ Senior day is always the last home game of the season. The younger players on the team decorate the locker room and gym. There is a ceremony in which all of the seniors receive flowers and take pictures with their family members in front of the fans. It is a way of honoring the seniors' last day playing at their school.

individual players on the team and the comments that hurt the players most were when he would say things like, “You don’t care about your team” or “You must hate basketball.” When he told Maddie this she began to cry and came up to me during practice that day with a very defeated look to tell me what he said²⁵. Being part of the team mattered to Maddie immensely and Coach Connors’ comment only solidified her distaste for his methods. From personal experience, I would argue that for some female athletes, just caring about the team and the sport are as important if not more, than being skilled. Coach Connors’ comments may have come from a perspective that valued skill more highly than these things.

Another moment in which I believe Coach Connors forgot that his team was made up of girls was when he told Emma that she looked just like a player on the opposing team. After he made this comment, Emma’s faced contorted into pure disgust and rage. The rest of the Lions interrupted Coach Connors, something the never did, to yell that Emma was “way prettier” than that other girl and “how could he say that?” Coach Connors tried to save himself by saying that both Emma and the other girl had long black hair but the Lions would not have it²⁶. It seemed that Coach Connors did not realize how offended a teenage girl might be by being compared to someone she considered ugly. I do not believe this was Coach Connors being mean but a misunderstanding of what is important to female athletes. As Amanda said, she wants to be doing really well at a sport, but still be pretty doing it. It seems that the Lions agreed with this

²⁵ Interestingly, I feel that these comments were uncharacteristically off base for Coach Connors. Many times after Coach Connors would leave the locker room the players would say that they had to forget about him and win for themselves, as a team. They told me that the only reason they were playing for him was because they loved basketball and their team too much to quit. In general, he seemed to understand the complex situation he walked into at Easton High School and that he may have trouble ingratiating himself with the team.

²⁶ I later saw the girl to which Coach Connors was referring. I figured it out because she was the only White player on a team of all Black girls. She was actually quite unattractive and looked nothing like Emma. Even their hair, the trait he claimed was similar, was very different.

sentiment. This interaction further confirmed that he was an adult male and they were young girls.

In addition to their gendered relationship with Coach Connors, the Lions also clearly had problems with the athletic department. When Danielle told me “they said he doesn’t treat us like ladies” she was referring to the athletic director and the school’s administration. The Lions felt like their former coach did treat them like athletes. In an interview with a local paper, Lillian said, “[He’s] loud but he’s awesome. I love how he coaches and he just brings out the best in all of us as players and as people. I just don’t think they understand his yelling is motivating, it means he cares and wants us to do better.” While according to the same newspaper article, the athletic department saw the yelling as an inappropriate way to treat female players, the players saw it as him treating them like athletes. The Lions did not want to be treated like ladies, most of the time. It may have been that the Lions were trying to blend athlete and girl in the way that they wanted to be treated like “female athletes.” However, the athletic department did not necessarily agree with this method and some coaches did not realize this was important.

The relationship between the Lions and the Easton High fans was also gendered. This is true of most girls’ athletic teams and their fans. At my high school in New Jersey, boys’ game were stuffed to capacity with parents, students, community members, and faculty, while on the other hand, the girls’ games were usually sparsely populated. In her interview, Sarah from MassFire told me that the biggest difference between male and female athletes is that the boys get so many more fans at their games and she does not understand why. The same was true for Easton High. I was never able to attend a boys’ game because they were always at the same time as the girls’ games, but we did get back to the high school before the boys’ game ended a few

times. Even the parking lot was packed with throngs of people milling outside. A sight I never saw for a girls' game.

The Lions were finally able to draw a large crowd for the senior day game. This was partially due to senior day, more parents made the time to come to this game. However, the primary reason the stands were packed was because Lillian was going to score her 1000th point. I asked Danielle why there was an extra set of bleachers and she said that a lot of people were coming to see Lillian. There were many new fans in the bleachers with posters supporting Lillian or whiteboards counting down the points until 1000. The gym was louder and more full than I have ever seen. I asked Maddie if she thought the fans might leave after Lillian scored her 1000th point and she said, "Probably. Whatever, our fans suck anyway." Many people did leave after Lillian scored the 1000th point even though there was still a whole quarter and a half left of the game. It took an extraordinary athletic achievement to draw fans to their games. While the boys' team had fans for every mundane game, the girls were only able to do so when a player reached a milestone that was impressive for both boys and girls. At Easton High, girls' athletic events were less valued in the community than boys' events.

In summary, for the most part, the Lions did not consider their gender to be particularly important. It was not an important part of their athletic pursuits or even their social pursuits. When a Woodbridge player told Carina that "your boys just lost to ours." Carina responded, "I don't care if the boys lost. That has nothing to do with me." Carina was not considering her loss in relation to her gender or the gender of anyone else. The Lions hardly performed girl and made fun of its presence in the athletic context. They attempted to diminish the differences between boys and girls with their behavior but were unable to escape being treated like girls by their fans and administration. However, even though the Lions wanted to be considered athletes,

it was their gender that ultimately caused them to have a difficult relationship with their coach.

In this way, while gender was not being done, it was not completely irrelevant.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis examined gender production among adolescent female athletes from the perspective of doing gender theory in order to answer the following research questions: How do adolescent female athletes manage being both girls and athletes? How do adolescent female athletes perform gender? When do they perform gender? Is it different in different contexts? Previous research located in sex role socialization theory has offered answers for these questions however there is little research stemming from a doing gender theory perspective. The question about whether or not there is a conflict is outdated and located in inadequate gender theory because the theory assumes such narrow, static, and inflexible definitions of masculinity and femininity that essentially ensure the existence of a conflict. As such, the ultimate goal of this thesis is to use doing gender theory to examine the gender performance of adolescent female athletes to begin to map the process of how these social actors manage being a girl and an athlete. While I found a few different methods of gender performance among the athletes I studied, possibly the most important was “blending.” In this performance, the softball team I observed combined aspects of doing girl and doing athlete to create a new category of female athlete. In this category, they could comfortably be both girls and athletes without worrying about either. They could “do really well at a sport, but still be pretty doing it.” This was just one successful method that the athletes I observed employed to manage being a girl and athlete.

Following Francine Deutsch’s (2007) suggestion that researchers use doing gender theory to “illuminate the possibility of change” rather than “simply documenting the persistence of inequality” (114), I focused my efforts on allowing for the possibility of resistance and non-normative performance. Doing gender theory asserts that gendered categories do not exist until and when they are actively created (West & Zimmerman 1987). By allowing for resistance and

understanding that individuals create gendered categories allowed me to view the actions of the adolescent female athletes I studied as important and possible moments of social change. In that vein, I used Deutsch's definitions of doing and undoing gender. "Doing gender" refers to social interactions that reproduce gender difference and "undoing gender" refers to social interactions that reduce gender difference (Deutsch 2007, 122). I observed moments in which the gendered system was being created and maintained but I also found moments in which gender was less relevant and differences between how boys and girls should act were less pronounced. I believe these findings contribute to the new body of research that values individual agency and social interaction as possible sites of social change.

First, it is important that I connect the concepts I used throughout this thesis to the terms in the relevant literature. "Doing girl," the process of performing normative conceptions of femininity is one example of "doing gender." Doing girl maintains the dominant gendered system in which girls or women care about activities, ideas, items, and sentiments that are less valued in society and result in less power for the individual and women and girls collectively. The MassFire did girl in the social context. They cared about boys, prom, make-up, gossip, drama, clothes, hair, etc. The MassFire considered their gender to be more relevant and noticeable in the social context because of the presence of boys. Much of the gender performance in the social context was for the benefit of boys. However, this is not to say that the MassFire was completely powerless in the social context as they subconsciously went about maintaining an unequal gendered system. They chose to act this way in the social context and enjoyed it. In contrast to other research, doing girl was not apologetic behavior. None of the players on MassFire seemed embarrassed or ashamed of their athletic status. Doing girl was neither an overemphasis of their femininity nor a method for hiding their athleticism. I believe

that for the MassFire, doing girl was a way for the players to enjoy their sexuality and gender in a context in which it was already advantageous and expected for them to act in such a way.

While doing girl is a clear example of doing gender, the practice of “blending” athlete and girl, primarily practiced by the MassFire, may be an example of undoing gender or revising what it means to be a girl in an athletic context. The existing gendered system was not reproduced because the MassFire created a new gendered category, that of “female athlete.” The female athlete is strong, competitive, aggressive, and willing to get dirty, and she is also pretty, professional-looking, caring of her teammates, and interested in camaraderie. Amanda aptly articulated this in her interview; she can be “doing really well at a sport but still be pretty doing it.” In this way, while the MassFire sometimes separated their gender performances suggesting that although the two identities, girl and athlete, could be performed by a female body, they were mutually exclusive performances. However, blending suggested that these performances are not mutually exclusive. The players on the MassFire were able to adapt their performance according to the context so that they could successfully be girls and athletes. This ability to fluidly transition from doing girl to doing athlete is similar to what Bettie (2003) and Perry (2002) found in their research on race and classed based gender performances in schools²⁷.

I do not believe that blending is a form of apologetic behavior. First, I disagree with the use of the term “apologetic.” It suggests that female athletes are sorry about, embarrassed by, or aware of the inappropriateness of playing sports. The MassFire did not employ blending or

²⁷ I use the term “race and class based gender performance” because that is what Bettie and Perry used in their books. By this they argue that class and race also influence gendered performances. Working-class Mexican-American girls performed girl differently than middle-class Caucasian girls. Gender performances are not exclusive of other social categories. In Bettie and Perry’s research, some of the students they observed picked up different gender performances based on their context. While some performed a lower-class status at school, they actually came from more economically stable family situations. Unfortunately, my research study was not adequately able to document these differences.

doing girl as methods for hiding their athleticism. Rather, blending may function as a form of cultural capital, just as Davis-Delano et al. suggest that apologetic behavior may be a form of cultural capital (2009, 132). While apologetic behavior makes it “ok” for girls to play sports because they are able to maintain a feminine gender performance, blending allows for female athletes to create their own gendered category in which there is no need to justify girls playing sports because being an athlete and being a girl are not that different anyway. In this more flexible gendered category, femininity is neither required nor entirely advantageous. Gaby told me that playing sports gave her the opportunity to just “be herself” away from the pressures of the social context in which she has to worry about impressing boys. This may be due to the fact that to be a female athlete, she does not have to do girl, unless she wants to. As such, blending may be a form of cultural capital because it is a broad and flexible gender performance that values the best aspects of doing girl and doing athlete. The black uniform that the MassFire preferred to wear was one aspect of blending that combined aesthetic importance (important in doing girl) with functional significance (important in doing athlete) in order to succeed in the athletic context. It is a form of cultural capital for a female athlete to see the value in both appearance and function.

Blending was a careful negotiation of athlete and girl. In many ways, it offered the MassFire a more desirable gender performance. Blending may be closely related to how some girls have appropriated the term “tomboy” to mean a girl who is neither “girly” nor “dykey” but athletic (Adams et al 2005, 29). However, blending renders obsolete the need for the word “boy” to describe a girl who is not necessarily girly. The term tomboy is problematic because it suggests that unless a girl is normatively feminine, she is masculine. Blending allows for a girl to be neither masculine nor feminine, but less gendered.

For the MassFire, doing athlete is not an example of undoing gender. Doing athlete still maintains the gendered system because it suggests that acting like a girl is mutually exclusive from acting like an athlete. An important aspect of doing athlete was not doing girl. As such, for the MassFire, just as doing girl maintained the gendered system, doing athlete did as well. However, moments in which the MassFire did athlete were still moments in which gender was less important. Doing athlete was a complicated negotiation of not being too gendered. I gave multiple examples for how the players did not want to be seen as too manly or too girly. For the MassFire, doing athlete is a performance that places less value on gender. In this way, even though doing athlete specifically avoided a normatively feminine behavior and maintained the differences between girls and boys, it still valued gender less than athletic ability, work ethic and camaraderie, etc.

I am also able to make some preliminary conclusions about the effects of status on gender performance. Although I cannot definitely say status *causes* doing girl, it is important to note that when status was relevant, doing girl was salient. This is an important contribution to Nancy Malcom's study on apologetic behavior and age (2003). Just as the younger girls in Malcom's study employed apologetic defense to appear older, the older girls, those with higher status on the MassFire, did girl more often. Further research into status among adolescent peer groups may assist in making further claims in the role of normative femininity and status. Without a strict status system on the Lions it is possible that the players did not feel a strong need to prove their femininity. Without the status system the Lions engaged in gendered behavior markedly different from that of the MassFire.

The Lions offer a different perspective because they did not engage in doing girl at all and did not consciously avoid it. As such, the Lions were undoing gender in both the social

context and the athletic context. In the social context the Lions diminished the differences between boys and girls, thereby devaluing the importance of their gender. They did not maintain the normative conceptions of appropriate behavior for those with a female body. Instead, they behaved as they pleased acting crass, dominant, aggressive, and sexual as they saw fit. They seldom engaged in doing girl but for the most part “othered” its performance as something unnecessary and unexpected. The social context was a site of social change for the Lions because they resisted expected behavior norms. In the athletic context, the Lions saw gender as being so irrelevant meaning its presence was hilariously out of place. In this way, for the Lions, the athletic context was less gendered.

I do not think there is a conflict between being a girl and athlete for either the MassFire or the Lions, but for different reasons. First, the MassFire made being a girl and being an athlete linked identities. Female athletes could choose from a wide range of characteristics, depending on the context, and could be aggressive, competitive, pretty, or caring whenever they wanted. Sometimes they would separate these characteristics and other times they would join them. Conversely, the Lions’ behavior suggests a lack of conflict between being a girl and an athlete because gender is just less important in all contexts. For the Lions, being a girl was neither a hindrance nor a benefit to being a good athlete. It was irrelevant.

Although this research found significant moments in which gender was less important and thus could be sites of resistance and social change, there were important limitations. First, I intended to analyze gender with attention to class and race. I was unable to make any substantial conclusions based on these factors for a few reasons. First, although I had a good sense of the general social class of each team and some individual players on the teams, I did not have definitive information about the class status of the players. With the information I did know, I

did not find any substantial differences in performance. Second, I originally intended to study the Easton High Soccer team to counteract this problem. The soccer team is much more racially/ethnically and socio-economically diverse because the city of Easton offers numerous free or subsidized options to player recreational soccer outside of the school. However, basketball is a “pay to play” situation in the town. The families of the Lions must have valued basketball enough that paying for clinics or recreational teams was incorporated into the tight family budget. Observing the basketball team meant a less varied population sample²⁸. I did not see any differences due to race or class in the small sample that I did have. Additional research that specifically examines the gender performance of adolescent female athletes according to race and class would be important for future research topics.

Another limitation of this research was the lack of attention to sexuality as an aspect of gender performance. I do acknowledge that “doing girl” specifically focuses on heterosexual sex, but some of my research participants were out lesbians with girlfriends and sex lives. There was only one out lesbian on each team making it difficult to make substantial conclusions about gender performance based solely on these two girls. Additionally, according to IRB guidelines, I am not permitted to ask minors about their sexual orientation. I was aware of the orientation of the players on my team because they told me openly. As such, I was not able to pursue conversations deeply about sexual orientation unless the participants did this, which they did not.

²⁸ It is important to note that softball (or baseball) and basketball traditionally draw from certain socio-economic and ethnic communities. According to the 2006-2007 NBA Racial and Gender Report Card, 75% of the NBA is African American with the lowest percentage in the previous decade being 73% in 2004-2005 (Lapchick 2007). The same author published the 2008 Racial and Gender Report Card for Major League Baseball and found that the league is consistently 58-60% White/Caucasian and only 8.2% Black in 2008 (Lapchik 2008). These statistics suggest that basketball traditionally draws from the African American community and baseball from the White/Caucasian community. Linda, the MassFire coach, also told me that she found softball to “still be a very working class sport.” The classed and raced nature of the two sports may have influenced the behavior of girls on each team, regardless of their own race or socio-economic status. However, I did not find any substantial performance differences based on these factors.

While they mentioned their girlfriends in conversation, they did not talk about their sexuality in relation to their gender with me. While it may be difficult to accomplish with adolescents, research examining gender performance of female athletes that focuses on sexuality from a doing gender perspective may also be useful.

This research also revealed other topics that may be interesting for further research. First, the use of the term “bitch.” Preliminary conclusions about the term suggest that it is both related to doing girl and status. Examining how girls use it within single-sex groups may prove useful for how girls interpret its meaning when men use it to refer to women. Additionally, a similar project to mine that studies normatively feminine sports such as cheerleading, gymnastics, ballet, volleyball, or ice skating may produce interesting results about gender performance. Sports that require femininity as a component of judging or performance may not be less gendered but may still offer a another method for being both athletic and girly.

From a practical point of view, my research contributes to the ongoing conversation about girls’ place in the athletic arena. Some sports researchers advocate for co-ed athletics (McDonagh & Pappano) because the physiological differences between men and women are not that great or important. Segregating men and women to different teams and sports and then creating different rules for womens’ sports creates the differences rather than responds to them. Although I see significant merit in this argument, my research suggests that there is a place for girls-only sports. The athletic context, a context free of boys and the pressure to impress boys by looking good, offered the athletes in my study the opportunity to perform their gender to their own expectations and norms. In this way, a new gendered category was created (female athlete) and the gendered system was resisted.

Additionally, although the girls I observed either had not heard of or cared to learn about Title IX, it was clear that there had been a change in consciousness related to girls' participation in sports. First, there were enough opportunities for young women to participate that the teenage girls I studied did not realize that this was not always the case. Secondly, the girls did complain about the different value placed on boys' and girls' sports. Both teams noticed that more members of the community and school showed up for boys' games²⁹. And they complained. Complaining must mean that equality is expected, even if not achieved. Opponents of Title IX argue that men are losing out because athletic department funding is already tight and more of it is being allocated to girls' sports when girls are not even interested in participating (Cooky 2009). However, as Cooky suggests, perhaps it is not that girls do not want to play, but it is the structure of the institution of sports that results in girls' disinterest or inability to access necessary resources. My research suggests that perhaps it is not that girls are not interested because they are aware that society values their participation less than that of their male counterparts.

This research also adds to the dialogue about the benefits of sports for adolescent girls. The girls I studied were not just physically active, strong, able to work as a team, and goal-oriented, they were agents of social change subconsciously working towards a less gendered world. Girls' athletics may be sites of social change. I witnessed the creation and maintenance of a new gendered category and situations that were not just differently gendered, but less gendered. This research ultimately corroborates Michael Messner's essential conclusion that through participating in athletics, girls and women may be challenging the foundations upon which gender inequality is based (2002).

²⁹ This finding is also corroborated by academic research (Shakib and Dunbar 2002).

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