

Quidditch: ‘Spelling’ Out Gender in Sport

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First published on Engaging Sports on October 5, 2017

(<https://thesocietypages.org/engagingsports/2017/10/05/quidditch-spelling-out-gender-in-sport/>)

To a legion of Harry Potter fans, quidditch is a magical sport involving flying wizards and witches, fierce competition, friendship, and fun. Following this spirit, a modified version of the game (minus magic) emerged at a U.S. college in 2005 and is now practiced in more than 25 countries on 6 continents. In its real-life version, quidditch is a 7v7 mixed contact sport with elements from rugby, dodgeball, and tag. True to its origins, it features terminology such as “bludgers” (dodgeballs), “quaffles” (deflated volleyballs), and “snitches” (humans draped in yellow clothing with a tennis ball hanging from a belt), along with the mandatory rule of running with a broom between one’s legs at all times ([learn more about quidditch’s gameplay here](#)).

The International Quidditch Association (also [real](#)) [is responsible for the governance](#) of the sport, with the unusual mission of “improving gender education across all sports *and communities, promoting equality and diversity, and fostering a love of reading across all ages*”. *If the association between sport and literature may sound odd, even more so is the commitment to gender “literacy” and its implications for the regulation of the game.* Relatedly, the sport introduces a groundbreaking approach to team composition; in accordance with its “Gender Maximum Rule”, each team is allowed to have a maximum of four players from the same gender in active play on the field at the same time.

In order to fully appreciate what makes quidditch’s norms particularly thought-provoking, we have to keep in mind that sex segregation is a central and largely unquestioned feature in the organisation of mainstream sport. Resting on late Victorian notions of biological determinism, athletes (and all human beings) are assumed to fit, by nature, into opposite and mutually attracted categories of “female” and “male” (i.e., sex). These apparently natural differences are [underpinned by the cultural](#) system of gender (the socially constructed ideals of men as masculine, and women as feminine) that dictates the appropriateness of certain behaviours, and even sports, for each. Thus, sports that either affirm the dominant versions of physically superior, stoic masculinity (football, rugby), or of a more [passive, lithe femininity](#) (gymnastics, synchronized swimming) [are selectively](#) (yet not equally) promoted and celebrated.

Some challenges to this “gender order” have taken place in recent decades— for example, men playing netball or women playing soccer—but at large, sport remains a site that steadfastly reinforces the sexual binary, often privileges narrow versions of gender and (hetero) sexuality, and systematically excludes [all those who fail or refuse to conform](#). The historical link between gender and sport, sadly, cannot be magically swept away by the flick of a wand. But could it be subject to a transformation spell? By this logic, and unlike other sports, the classification of team members in quidditch

is not based on (supposedly pre-existing) biological grounds, but on gender self-identification as male, female, or “*other*”.

*Now take a few seconds to visualize the champion team of the Quidditch World Cup 2018 (yes, real). Do you fear that it might comprise seven men, half of them “claiming” to be women for the mere purpose of winning? If so, you share our very own immediate and deeply ingrained assumptions. First, that victory is all that matters in sport, downplaying other potential values such as camaraderie, diversity, inclusion, and ultimately, ethics. Second, that males are inherently better than females at quidditch—even if we have never watched a match. And third, that people do in fact neatly fall into binary sex categories relevant for the practice of quidditch—or any other sport. By introducing the Gender Maximum Rule, which a priori may seem like another case of *positive* action and gender quotas, the quidditch community proclaims that any aspect of sex, gender and/or sexuality cannot be taken for granted or societally determined. This leads us to question the common understanding of what constitutes an opposite and the attachment to binary categories, embracing instead the idea that human biology, desire, social behaviour, and even sport performance are all overlapping, variable and fluid.*

As fair and liberating as this may sound, it cannot be ignored, for example, that women’s and men’s world records in several sporting events are separated by persistent gaps (elite men’s running times are about 10% faster than women’s, with even larger **differences in jumping** and throwing). But is athletic performance simply a product of physical difference? What about other factors such as emotional, financial and political support? Coaching, discipline, and mental toughness? What about decades of marginalization, stigmatization, and neglect that have prevented women from fully engaging in sports, particularly in those traditionally associated with men? And how does biology help to explain the even greater gender gap in terms of sport governance, where men hold a startling 93% of leadership roles?

Against this **background**, the legislatively mandated equality established by quidditch’s Gender Maximum Rule may serve as a useful means of promoting gender equity, at least for now. As per the “self-identified” gender policy, which may appear as odd as the game it regulates, it might actually reflect more sensitivity and progressive thinking from the code than most of its centenarian counterparts. By challenging the notion of biological reductionism and associated dualism, the analogous assumptions about gender and even sexuality lose their anchor. If sex is actually overlapping and fluid, what does it mean to be male/female? masculine/feminine? hetero/homosexual? And ultimately, what does it mean to be an athlete? Looking forward, however, as quidditch becomes more popular, and potentially more competitive, it will be interesting to examine the impact this may have not only on team composition, but the ethos of the sport itself. For us “muggles” (non-magical people), seeing is believing...

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Photo by Kersten Williams