

Women's Rugby and Identity

By: Jessie Garth

Adviser: Eileen Findlay

Spring 2008

General University Honors

“Who are you?”

This question can be asked many ways – innocently, accusingly or perceptively, to name a few. How does one answer? Many would respond with their name, which is an easy and accurate label and response to this question and would appease most askers. Now imagine, however, that you are looking in a mirror and asking this question of yourself. How would you answer?

The question of identity is one that is felt by everyone throughout his or her lifetime. A person can be defined by his or her name, profession, gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, favorite food, fetish, favorite sports team, and the list goes on. Identity is not something to be taken lightly. Human beings love categories and labels, especially when it comes to understanding other human beings. Your identity is how other people perceive you and ultimately how they will think of you and interact with you.

During my time at American University (AU), I’ve been a member of the American University Women’s Rugby Football Club (AUWRFC). I have often used this as my identity when differentiating myself from my peers. I am a rugby player. I also identify as White, middle-class, queer, and vertically challenged.

As a member of the AUWRFC, I have been exposed to many different types of people who must work together to achieve the common goal of winning rugby games. These people have all had different identities – many of them even self-identified in ways that were different than how they were perceived by their teammates. My ultimate question in doing this project was, what is the identity of the AUWRFC?

It was very difficult to do research for this project. There is a limited amount of scholarship available regarding rugby and even less regarding female rugby. In researching rugby in general, I looked to John Nauright and Timothy J. L. Chandler who focus on male rugby and masculinity.<sup>1</sup>

To focus on female rugby, I looked to research that was about women's sports teams and female athletes. Susan K. Cahn has done extensive research on female athletes and their relationship to gender.<sup>2</sup> Cahn provided me with a framework in which women are seen as breaking social norms by participating in a "purely masculine," sport such as rugby.<sup>3</sup>

Elizabeth Wheatley discusses women's participation in rugby as an act of cultural resistance. She writes that by playing rugby, women are "disrupting socially dictated gender prescriptions."<sup>4</sup> I found this to be very useful in my research. Susan Birrell and Nancy Theberge elaborate on this topic by writing that participation in rugby is a form of feminist resistance against male hegemony.<sup>5</sup>

Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young wrote an article in which they discuss the creation of identity in sport subcultures. While they don't discuss female rugby specifically, they discuss the processes of "Presocialization," "Selection and Recruitment," "Socialization," and finally, "Acceptance/Ostracism," in the context of

---

<sup>1</sup> Nauright, John, and Timothy J. L. Chandler. *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*. Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Cahn, Susan K. *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Cahn, 218.

<sup>4</sup> Wheatley, Elizabeth. "Subcultural Subversions: Comparing Discourses on Sexuality in Men's and Women's Rugby Songs." *Women, Sport and Culture*. Edited by Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetic Publishing, 1994, 207.

<sup>5</sup> Birrell, Susan and Nancy Theberge. "Feminist Resistance and Transformation in Sport." *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetic Publishing, 1994.

rugby teams.<sup>6</sup> This information gave me insight into the processes why which team members are accepted onto the team.

To research this topic, I chose to perform in-person interviews with my teammates. I conducted these interviews like a conversation and encouraged the participants to speak candidly. They were, of course, influenced by the fact that I am one of their teammates and am in a position of authority as a captain. In addition, the players I interviewed were all aware of my own identity as a lesbian on the team. I also had to take into consideration that the players that were willing to talk to me were all comfortable discussing the topic of this paper. A few players that I asked to interview declined based on the fact that they weren't comfortable discussing identity.

In researching how members have helped shaped the identity of the AUWRFC, it was necessary to start at the beginning of their rugby careers. After some preliminary demographic questions, I asked my interviewees why they decided to play rugby at AU in the first place.

One of my teammates had played in high school, so continuing rugby at the collegiate level was natural for her.

One of my teammates was attracted by the fact that the rugby team advertises itself as a sport in which, "no experience is necessary." It is still uncommon for both women and men to play rugby in the United States before they have reached the college level, so this advertisement is meant to assure prospective players that they are not alone in their inexperience. From my time on the AUWRFC, I found that most players had never even seen a rugby ball before they joined the team.

---

<sup>6</sup> Donnelly, Peter and Kevin Young. "The Construction and Confirmation of Identity in Sport Subcultures." *Contemporary Issues in Sociology of Sport*. Eds. Andrew Yiannakis and Merrill J. Melnick. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2001.

The other players that I interviewed were attracted to the AUWRFC either by meeting current players and taking a liking to them, or by being strongly encouraged by current players to join.

In general, before meeting members of the AUWRFC and becoming members themselves, it is uncommon for people to associate notions of sexuality and gender with the sport. The one exception that I found during my interviews was in the case of a player who had visited AU to stay as a prospective student. Her hosts had been rugby players and also heavily involved in AU Queers and Allies. This player stated that these two organizations “were linked in my mind. I thought they were really cool and that there were also probably some gay people on the team.”<sup>7</sup> Since she identified as a bisexual at that time, this player was attracted by the idea that rugby was associated with “gay people.”

After discussing why these players had decided to join the AUWRFC in the first place, it seemed pertinent to ask why they had decided to stay on the team. This question was important because there are always players who decide not to return after their rookie seasons, but these interviewed players had all returned for one reason or another.

There were two main factors that kept people on the team. The first was the sport itself and the culture of the sport:

“After our first game against GW [George Washington University] we had a social at the Garfield house. I did a keg stand, and I remember rugby songs and being like, ‘What the fuck? This is awesome!’”<sup>8</sup>

“I completely and utterly fell in love with [rugby]. I mean, I broke my wrist in my very first game, but I really loved the sport for what it was.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “AP.” 22 February 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “AS.” 21 February 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “AP.” 22 February 2008.

“I like to hit people.”<sup>10</sup>

“The fact that it’s an aggressive sport. You know, I played soccer and I wanted there to be more contact. Now I can tell my brother that I play a more tough sport than he does... football.”<sup>11</sup>

The second factor that influenced players to return to the AUWRFC were their teammates:

“I really fell in love with the team. I really just thought it was a great group of people. Everybody seemed really fun and really interesting and it just seemed like everyone really looked out for each other and took care of each other. I thought that the sport itself and the team were things that I wanted to be a part of.”<sup>12</sup>

“I made friends and it was the first place I really connected with people [at AU].”<sup>13</sup>

“I liked the community. The girls that I met were the most open and friendly that I had met [at AU] and genuinely seemed interested in getting to know me. I had such a great time that semester that I decided I want to invest back in it. Then for me it was about recruiting and involving more girls in a community that I loved.”<sup>14</sup>

In my experience as a member of the AUWRFC, I can state that these strong feelings of connection, loyalty, and devotion to teammates and the sport of rugby itself are very common. If players do not fall in love with the sport, they are unlikely to tolerate or appreciate the bruises and pain that are a byproduct.

In many cases, however, it is not just the sport that players fall in love with. The AUWRFC has always been a context in which strong relationships form, both romantic and otherwise. This has been true in my experience as well as for the people that I interviewed for my research.

---

<sup>10</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “ES.” 27 February 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “SP.” 20 February 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “AP.” 22 February 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “KH.” 27 February 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “CM.” 20 February 2008.

All players are known as rookies during their first season playing with the AUWRFC, regardless of whether or not they have played rugby before. Rookies are treated differently than veteran players in many ways. At the general level, rookies are brand new players who must be taught how to play the sport. Rookies are the future of the team and veteran players must work to make the sport and the team attractive so that rookies remain on the team.

Rookies are also kept at a distance from the team in some ways. The degree to which rookies are treated as separate has varied over the years. In my early experience, there was a strong spoken rule on the team to not involve the rookies in any “Team Drama.” This term was originally meant to keep rookies from having to worry about team administrative concerns such as transportation issues, money issues, and executive board decisions. Eventually this came to mean that rookies should also be excluded from knowing about “drama” that was related to inter-team dating, though this is never explicitly stated. As one graduated player put it,

“People are always like, don’t tell the rookies anything about drama...drama about the team, administrative stuff, but what people are really saying, which no one will admit, is don’t tell anyone about all the inter-team dating that’s going on.”<sup>15</sup>

There has not always been dating between players on the AUWRFC. The team was founded in 1996,<sup>16</sup> and inter-team dating only became a common practice within the last 4 years.<sup>17</sup> One player who joined the team in the spring of 2004 said,

“When I was [first] on the team, the only openly out woman was [A], who was in my rookie class with me. Not that there weren’t speculations about other people

---

<sup>15</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “CM.” 20 February 2008.

<sup>16</sup> “History.” AU Women’s Rugby. <http://www.auwrfc.org>. Accessed 1 March 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “CM.” 20 February 2008.

on the team...I guess there was another out girl who was dating [A] and that's why she joined the team..."

This player went on to state,

"Then [A] started dating another girl [on the team] and I think their relationship make it ok to be out on the team and to be in a relationship on the team. I think it's remarkable how many people who were with me on the team during that first year who self-identified as straight started dating women within a year."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to this first team relationship, the fall of 2004 also brought a rookie class that contained players who already self-identified as lesbian or bisexual. It was the combination of these two occurrences that led to an increase in the number of players who began to date females and who began to date one another after the fall of 2004. Initially, relationships between players were tightly guarded secrets. Casual encounters were somewhat more well known on the team.

These relationships were kept quiet for several reasons. The AUWRFC is a tight-knit group. This fact is what leads many players to fall in love in the first place, but it can also be an extremely destructive atmosphere for a relationship. Many players' best friends are other players, they live with players, and they go to class with other players. It is almost impossible to keep a secret with a group that is so close. When there is a juicy piece of gossip or when something happens to a player, the team will most likely be aware of it within 24 hours. It is difficult to maintain a relationship when your moves are being monitored by your teammates. For this reason, many players try to keep their relationships away from the "public eye" of the rest of the team.

---

<sup>18</sup>

Garth, Jessie. Interview with "CM." 20 February 2008.



A player involved in a relationship during the Spring 2005 through Spring 2007 seasons was clear about her fears: “You always want to be like, I’m not in this drama...to be a part of the drama is something that I was always afraid of.”<sup>19</sup>

Since this first group, however, there has been much more openness from players. A player that joined the team in the fall of 2005 stated,

“When I started, I didn’t know people were together. It was the sort of thing that everyone assumed happened. Since then, it’s obviously changed... it just seems like people are more comfortable with people knowing about relationships. It just seems like everyone is in their business, all the time.”<sup>20</sup>

Relationships add to the “drama” that exists on the team. Drama is highly looked down upon by players, especially if they are not involved in it. The AUWRFC is, after all, a rugby team, and drama regarding who is dating whom is hardly something that should be thought about, let alone discussed, at practice or at games. The more open players are about their lives, however, the more this information is always lying beneath the surface of a seemingly uneventful scenario.

It is best summed up by statements like the following: “Rugby is supposed to be about the game, and about getting to know each other outside of who you love.”<sup>21</sup> One of the most serious social transgressions a player can commit is to allow personal drama to come onto the pitch (field), especially during a game. Allowing this to happen during practice is still an issue, but it slightly less looked down upon.

It is an unspoken and implicit expectation that players accept the responsibility of keeping their problems away from the game when they enter into a relationship. Though

---

<sup>19</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “CM.” 20 February 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “KH.” 27 February 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “KH.” 27 February 2008.

this is expected of anyone in a relationship, not just when the relationship involves two players, inter-team relationships can cause the most damage to the team as a whole.

When I asked current and former players whether or not relationships ever affect play on the pitch, I received slightly differing answers.

“No. I think it rarely does. Which is fascinating. There are intense relationships that are happening and you would never know watching them play. I think people really put it aside...because above everything, it’s a sports team, and people do have a certain commitment to the sport that they’re playing. I think it’s also not tolerated. When people lose their cool and everyone knows there’s something personal behind it...it’s very not cool to do that. There’s a strict standard there to leaving everything off the field.”<sup>22</sup>

“For me...I’ve always had this attitude because it seems like what’s right or I don’t know if, like, rookie season it was a big thing, like, you leave your shit at home. It doesn’t come on the field because nothing matters in rugby... I think for the most part, people try the best they can, but some people inevitably can’t help themselves or they don’t have that same mentality like it belongs at home.”<sup>23</sup>

“I feel like it could happen a lot more, definitely, especially with all the drama that goes on, on our team. I guess we keep it to a minimum even though it does happen. I think most people will say that it shouldn’t affect the game while acknowledging the fact that it does. I think that some people will try to pretend it doesn’t, but I think those people are perpetuating it affecting the game.”<sup>24</sup>

“Of course it affects the team. There were times when I was mad at [her girlfriend] and I would drop every pass she threw me during practice. It would look like she was throwing the ball too hard, but really I was just trying to frustrate her.”<sup>25</sup>

Allowing personal drama to influence the rugby team may largely be a matter of personality and personal team morality, but it cannot be denied that when a player allows her personal feelings to harm the team, there will be repercussions for her. There will be pressure socially from her teammates to learn to deal with her issues outside of game situations and there will be pressure from the team leadership to learn to play despite

---

<sup>22</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “CM.” 20 February 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “KH.” 27 February 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “SP.” 20 February 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “LB.” 15 March 2008.

personal feelings. If personal feelings become too extreme and team leadership is able to detect this tension, that player could face losing playing time.

Inter-team dating does not always have negative results. Relationships on the AUWRFC have also greatly contributed to culture of the team as an open, welcoming environment. It is still uncommon for people who join the team to have identified with an alternative sexuality before coming to college. There are always exceptions to this rule, and there are usually one or two very “out” players in every rookie class. However, an impressive number of these players will have an experience of some sort with a female during their time on the AUWRFC. Why does this happen? What is it about being a member of the AUWRFC that influences members to explore their sexualities?

The open atmosphere of the AUWRFC is an ongoing process. The basis of this phenomenon is the nature of the players themselves. Overall, members of the AUWRFC have chosen to attend AU, a very liberal university. It stands to reason that they would be open to new ideas regarding sexuality and gender. It is no secret that AU is one of the most GLBT friendly campuses in the nation.

Rugby itself is not a terribly popular sport in the United States, though rugby programs are being created and growing every day. Rugby is still a sport that exists on the fringes, a full contact sport in which the players do not wear protection other than a mouthguard. Because of its limited popularity, the average American does not know the rules of rugby and when exposed to the sport for the first time, it may seem as though the game is chaotic. In reality, rugby is perhaps best described as, “elegant violence.” The rules are actually quite complex and while contact is necessary, it is also controlled.

Perhaps one of the most amazing things about rugby is that female rugby is played exactly the same way as male rugby. There is absolutely no difference in the rules, ball size, game length, or amount of contact allowed. This is special because other contact sports are usually limited when it comes to female players. Females are not raised to engage in contact sports. It is now acceptable in our society for female children to be athletes, but they are not taught from a young age to tackle and engage in contact the way their male counterparts are.

Because of this fact, there is a certain amount of breaking of societal norms that occurs just by stepping onto a rugby pitch as a female. You have taken it upon yourself to learn that it is ok to cause another person physical pain and to accept physical pain for the love of the game. You are, in effect, telling society that their ideas about the fragility of females are wrong – and you’re going to prove it. Every single female rugby player is behaving in this way, regardless of her sexuality, and regardless of whether this is a conscious choice or not. For some players, it is.

“We play a sport that is generally thought of as something that men should do and women should not...girls aren’t supposed to like getting dirty, getting a black eye, getting bruised, breaking their bones and stuff like that for sports... In society it’s not a traditional female role to do what we do on the field.”<sup>26</sup>

While I don’t believe that playing rugby will automatically make a female more likely to have feelings for another female, I do believe that playing rugby speaks to the fact that she is not afraid of breaking societal norms.

Another influence on the process that has made the AUWRFC more open is simply the existence of “out” members of the team, whether they are out as lesbians, queer, bisexual, or simply out as being in relationships with other females. After the

---

<sup>26</sup>

Garth, Jessie. Interview with “KH.” 27 February 2008.

initial groundbreakers started to identify openly, it became much more common for people to come out or to at least experiment. As one graduated player stated, “I think that to a certain extent, if I had not been exposed to such a strong gay culture, there’s a much greater chance that I would have never dated a woman.”<sup>27</sup> This sentiment is not uncommon.

Even for players that were not initially comfortable with the idea of homosexuality or bisexuality will often learn to accept these ideas. One such player said, “I hadn’t been exposed to anything like that at all before rugby...and I wasn’t really comfortable. However, once you get to know someone, you find that it’s just another aspect of their personality.”<sup>28</sup> This player, who identifies as straight, dated a fellow member of the team.

Not all players are able to become completely comfortable, however. There have been instances of clear tensions between the “gay” players and the “straight” players. However, the tension was not usually over sexuality. In general, I found that disputes and disagreements were based on exclusion. Some of these feelings were so intense that players chose to quit the team.

“I think that some of those [reasons people quit] were a discomfort with homosexuality, but I think a lot of it was a sense of exclusion...and feeling like they couldn’t be part of something so central to this team. I think it’s that that drove people away more than homosexuality...a sense that there is something you can never be a part of.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to driving some players away, this tension also led to some tensions on the team. In one instance, a straight player accused several of her teammates of being part

---

<sup>27</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “CM.” 20 February 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “ES.” 27 February 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Garth, Jessie. Interview with “CM.” 20 February 2008.

of a “Lesbian Mafia.” This incident was largely due to the fact that at that time, the leadership of the team consisted largely of lesbian players and this player felt excluded both from the group itself and from being in a leadership position. Eventually this incident blew over, but this player and the players she accused are no longer friends.

In recent years, there has been much less of a separation between the “gay” players and the “straight” players. I believe this is attributed to an increase in the degree of tolerance and acceptance that is on the AUWRFC. After the “Lesbian Mafia” incident, players have also been more careful to avoid cliquing. Overall, I can state with confidence that the level of acceptance on the team is remarkable at this point in time, with players largely respecting each other’s sexualities. Team members that are unable to do this inevitably leave the team due to their own discomfort. While this is unfortunate, it would be detrimental both to that individual player and the team as a whole for the player to remain.

This environment of tolerance and acceptance has been recently illustrated by a proposal from some team members to change the name of the team. The team was founded in the spring of 1996 as the American University Women’s Rugby Football Club. At the time of the founding, this name accurately reflected the members of the team. However, the current proposal to change the name of the club stems from the fact that not all current members do identify as women.

The controversy over the club name is a question of identity. The team name, while it may seem incidental to some, defines the entire team. The team players that are requesting a name change are doing so because this label, the AUWRFC, excludes members of the team who do not identify as women.

There is no rule that states that members of the AUWRFC must be women. In fact, the AUWRFC's constitution states, "Membership shall be open to any female American University student."<sup>30</sup> Players that are proposing a name change are not challenging this rule, since this is a fair standard for an athletic team. They are suggesting a change to the "American University Female Rugby Football Club" or another alternative that removes sex and gender from the club name entirely.

For a name change to take effect, the proposal must be submitted to the entire team and pass by a 2/3 majority. At the time of this writing, the vote has not yet been taken. The issue received much discussion from the team, with many people highly supporting the change and many disputing it. However, the fact that team members felt comfortable bringing the subject to the vote before their teammates is a testament to the open environment that has come to characterize the AUWRFC.

From my research, I was able to reach an important conclusion: The AUWRFC doesn't have a static identity. Over my years as a team member and through interviewing my teammates, it is easy to determine that there have been many changes and that there will continue to be changes. From a team that was 100% heterosexual to a team that is now comprised of people who do not even identify as women, the identity of the AUWRFC has changed greatly. I have been proud to see this growth over the years and the team's ability to adapt and overcome initial resistance to change.

There has been a change in attitudes over the years as more and more team members began to identify as alternative sexualities and a reasonable comfort was reached among the team. This comfort has allowed players to come out when they feel it is necessary and to explore different ideas of sexuality as they choose.

---

<sup>30</sup> AUWRFC Constitution.

This change has been due to the change in individual team members, and the influx of new team members will continue to have an affect. It is my hope that the atmosphere of, at the very least, tolerance, and at the very most, acceptance, will continue into the future. While I agree with players who believe that sexuality should not be an issue at all because we are simply a sports team, I believe it is naïve to think that sexuality will not continue to play a role in the relationships that form on this team. Team members must be willing to learn to love each other and to work together to reach the common goal of being successful rugby players – and sexuality really has very little to do with this as long as it is not a problem.

The culture of women's rugby allows for people who are willing and able to break social norms. From being able to tackle a person to the ground using nothing but your own body to being willing to stand side by side with a teammate who refuses to use gendered pronouns – you will have a place on the AUWRFC. I have been proud to see this growth over the years and the team's ability to adapt and overcome initial resistance to change.

## Bibliography



AUWRFC Constitution.

Birrell, Susan and Nancy Theberge. "Feminist Resistance and Transformation in Sport."

*Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetic Publishing, 1994.

Cahn, Susan K. *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century*

*Women's Sport*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1994.

Garth, Jessie. Interview with "AP." 22 February 2008.

Garth, Jessie. Interview with "AS." 21 February 2008.

Garth, Jessie. Interview with "CM." 20 February 2008.

Garth, Jessie. Interview with "ES." 27 February 2008.

Garth, Jessie. Interview with "KH." 27 February 2008.

Garth, Jessie. Interview with "LB." 15 March 2008.

Garth, Jessie. Interview with "SP." 20 February 2008.

"History." AU Women's Rugby. <http://www.auwrfc.org>. Accessed 1 March 2008.

Nauright, John, and Timothy J. L. Chandler. *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*.

Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996.

Wheatley, Elizabeth. "Subcultural Subversions: Comparing Discourses on Sexuality in

Men's and Women's Rugby Songs." *Women, Sport and Culture*. Edited by Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetic Publishing, 1994.