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The Demons of Coed Intramural Sports

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The Demons of Coed Intramural Sports

Writing Process

The purpose of this assignment was to select a topic within the realms of gender issues, complete research in the library, and conduct personal research in the form of a survey or an interview. I knew I wanted to select a topic that was relative to me and my community. After talking to several of my peers, I realized there was a large controversy over the topic of gender specific rules in coed intramural sports. Thus, I decided to delve into the issue by undertaking it as my essay topic. Researching in the library and finding many scholarly sources as well as other sources from students at varying universities allowed me to form my opinion and mark my standpoint in the debate. My survey gave me deeper insight to the sentiment that the student body held towards the gender specific rules in their intramural sports. This permitted me to tailor my argument to specifically address the University of Dayton, or my immediate community. I created many drafts of my survey and received feedback from my peer-editing group to make sure I was asking the correct questions to receive answers that addressed the topic at hand. This may have been the hardest part of the research process, because sometimes it was difficult to ask a question without leading the respondent to give a specific answer. However, with the guidance of my peer editing group I developed a strong survey that produced lucrative results. It seemed that the student body was truly interested in the controversy of gender specific rules in coed intramural sports. After gathering my research, I began the drafting process. With the aid of my peer-editing group, feedback from my professor, Dr. Vorachek, and advice from the Write Place, I developed a piece that truly reflects my standpoint on this gender issue and calls for a change.

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The Demons of Coed Intramural Sports

From an early age, many children enjoy participating in sports. It is a fun way to release energy and compete with their peers. Children do not pay attention to gender when competing; they just go out and have a good time. So when did gender start to dictate the way males and females compete? Sports leagues for the youngest ages are coed and do not have any gender specific rules present. However, as age increases the more segregated sports programs become. Collegiate level coed intramural sports include many gender specific rules. These rules prevent athletes from fully enjoying the game, and they slow down the flow of play. Gender specific rules also engrain stereotypes of male and female capabilities into society, leaving no room for doubt, and thus corrupting the view of how men and women should be able to compete in coed intramural sports.

The University of Dayton is a prime subject to use when studying gender specific rules present in intramural sports. Dayton has a wide variety of intramural sports including volleyball, soccer, flag football, softball, battleship, Quidditch, ultimate Frisbee, and many more. There are several options for what sort of league a student can participate in. For instance, a student can choose between a recreational or competitive level of play, and they can chose to partake in either a coed or single gender league. However, coed leagues have many rules and modifications that specifically limit a certain gender. These gender specific rules typically limit males and

make the game easier for females. For example, when playing on a coed team for outdoor soccer, a female must touch the ball in the offensive half of the field before the ball can be scored, all free kicks must be taken by a female, and you can only play four males and four females at a time (UD RecPlex). Coed sand and indoor volleyball also have a number limit for males to females in play at a time (UD RecPlex). Their rule is that you can have up to three males and three females playing at a time; however, at no time can there be a higher number of males playing than females (UD RecPlex). Coed sand volleyball also has a specific section for “male restrictions” (UD RecPlex). This section describes that in recreational coed leagues no males can spike, and males can only tip if they give the ball an arc (UD RecPlex). These are only two examples of sports that have gender specific rules for the coed league. All of these rules suggest that the male gender is more athletic, or more likely to be successful, at sports than their female counterparts.

The students of the University of Dayton showed a lot of disapproval towards the gender specific rules present in coed leagues. I surveyed 50 students, all of whom were from the University of Dayton. Thirty-one females and nineteen males took my survey. Forty out of the fifty students that filled out my survey participated in intramural sports. More than half of the ten students who were not participating in intramural sports still provided their opinion on the gender specific rules that they were aware of. Out of the student population at Dayton interviewed, 76% participated in a coed intramural league, and there were several respondents that participated in both coed and single gender leagues. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents competed in the recreational league, while the remainder participated in the competitive league. Throughout my survey, many students brought up additional rules that are specifically restrictive of the male gender. For example, a respondent who played flag football said, “I don't agree with flag

football's rules that a girl touch down is worth more than a boy's." This makes a clear statement that the intramural rule makers believe females to be less competent at achieving a touchdown than their male counterpart in flag football. Similarly, in basketball the gender specific rules do not allow males to score from inside the paint. Thus, this creates the idea that male athletes are more likely to be better at basketball than female competitors. These are false assumptions, because a male may be just as new and inexperienced to the world of flag football or basketball as a female could be. Intramurals are an easy way to try new sports that one may not get a chance to try otherwise. By limiting a specific gender based on stereotypes, it takes away part of the fun aspect, and creates a more difficult atmosphere to learn a new sport. Also, gender specific rules teach incorrect rules to the participants. This is especially detrimental to a partaker that is completely new to the sport.

The gender specific rules are implemented to attempt to "level the playing field," but in reality they hinder and discriminate against both genders (Nijhawan 1). Avni Nijhawan, a journalist for UCLA's student newspaper, describes general dissatisfaction towards the gender specific rules at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her interviewees' sentiments towards these rules are very similar to those found at the University of Dayton. Nijhawan explained in her school's newspaper that the gender specific rules assumed that females were weaker and less skilled than males at sports (Nijhawan 1). However, she states, "such rules inherently insult skilled and athletic women, while at the same time disadvantage men who may in fact still be learning the game" (Nijhawan 1). The rules for intramural sports should be based around skill, not on a gender based stereotype. When the rules implemented are based on assumptions, they categorize people into groups that most of the time are not accurate. Thus, these rules then create a very unfair playing environment for the athletes. Upon surveying many Dayton students,

I found that they agreed with the claims made by Nijhawan. One of my respondents, when asked how they feel about the gender specific sports, said, “I hate all of them. They slow down the game, add confusion, and mess up strategic plays that would work in a normal game. And they are disgraceful because many of the girls are better than the guys, especially when they have more experience in the sport.” This clearly illustrates how students at Dayton feel about the gender specific rules. This particular respondent was a female who found an immense amount of frustration with the gender specific rules. Later in the survey, she stated, “I think the biggest difference in playing level is accounted for by variations in years of experience.” Therefore, this respondent is saying that she does not feel that the gender specific rules are just for coed sports. She believes that the rules limit males and females on the assumption that males are more athletic than females, and that this makes the game unfair. However, she argues that the gender of an athlete has nothing to do with their ability to compete; but rather, the skill a person has acquired through practice and experience makes them a stronger player. That being said, about 70% of the students polled ranked the gender specific rules as unfavorable.

Gender specific rules can destroy the confidence level of males and females alike. The rules implemented typically limit men and make the game easier for females. If a male is new to the sport, then he may have a much harder time in succeeding. This may turn him off of the sport and discourage him from continuing. On the other hand, a female may be better at the sport than most males. The gender specific rules would then let the female dominate the game, or they would cause her to be bored with the lack of competition. A female respondent, when asked to explain her rating of a 3 on the unfavorable end of the 1- 10 spectrum of gender specific rules, said, “I also don't like that they restrict the boys from shooting the basketball from inside the paint. It makes it seem as if they are saying boys are better at sports than girls, so they need to

make it easier on girls.” One can infer that this female was looking for a way to challenge her abilities in basketball. However, the overly strict gender specific rules limited the level of competition available to her, creating a less enjoyable environment. It seems as though she also took personal offense to the rules. Gender specific rules imply that female athletes are less capable of excelling at a sport than males are. Thus, this female felt that her ability to play basketball was being questioned. No participant should feel as though the rule makers believe they will not be good enough to play, especially not in intramural sports. Intramural sports are a way to learn a new sport and release energy during a study break. In no way should they create an environment that harms the confidence of collegiate athletes.

That being said, coed intramural sports should not promote stereotypes either. However, when gender specific rules are implemented in coed intramural sports that is exactly what happens. The promotion of stereotypes can specifically lead to a decrease in confidence levels, especially in female participants. Coed intramural sports without gender specific rules have been shown to boost confidence levels of male and female participants, and they reduce the belief in stereotypes. Adam Cohen (Texas Tech University), Nicole Melton (Texas Tech University), and John Welty Peachy (University of Illinois) conducted a study on the coed intramural sport of Quidditch. They showed that coed sports without gender specific rules have improved the confidence of many female participants when they compete in coed sports or just to try a new sport (Cohen, Melton, and Peachy 226-227). Quidditch was created as a coed sport, and the only rule that it implements in regards to gender is that a Quidditch team must be coed (Cohen, Melton, and Peachy 221). One Quidditch participant is quoted saying, "I never thought my girlfriend could be as good at a sport as me, maybe even better! So yes, this coed sport has changed my thinking” (Cohen, Melton, and Peachy 227). This clearly demonstrates that when

males and females participate in coed sports, especially those without the gender specific rules, they find a deeper respect for the opposite gender. They also discover that the stereotypes they were raised on in regards to sports are not true. Cohen, Melton, and Peachy found that, “Specifically, allowing males and females to compete together on the playing field gives the athletes the chance to learn more about each other. This may reduce negative stereotyping (e.g. girls are not athletic) and enhance the possibility for affective ties to form” (Cohen, Melton, and Peachy 223). This truly shows that the gender specific rules are created based on stereotypes that are far from correct. Therefore, the gender specific rules further the distance between equality of the genders. For example, one of the respondents to my survey question “What is a gender specific rule you disagree with?” said, “For instance, in soccer, when a free kick is won, a girl MUST take it if it is in the attacking half. No girl on our team wanted to take the kick, they all wanted to get in the middle and try and score. Everyone on both teams was okay with a male taking the free kick, but it wasn't allowed. This takes away from the gameplay.” This person was a male and participated in both coed and single gender sports. Thus, he is fully aware of the differences in game play. He acknowledges that these rules are incredibly unfair to both genders because it prevents them from competing in the sport as they normally would in a single gender league. Also, this gender specific rule completely changes the way that the game is played. For instance, the females are consistently marked more than males are throughout the game. When a female is specifically targeted and marked to prevent her from touching the ball, it makes it incredibly difficult for her to effectively play the game. Thus, this gender specific rule that was implemented to make the games more fair for females actually limits their ability to touch the ball and participate in the game. Therefore, the rule creates the counter-effect of what it intended.

When a rule is not effective it needs to be modified or eliminated. The easiest way to make the game more fair for all participants would be to eliminate this rule.

There was some variance in the responses I received to my survey in regards to the rules. The most common argument in favor of the gender specific rules said that they leveled the playing field between males and females and allowed everyone the same amount of playing time. One female respondent even said, “I don't think it's sexist, guys are just by fact stronger than girls, so these rules help to even the playing field.” This particular respondent enjoys having the gender specific rules. Her way of thinking aligns with the idea that there are two types of bodies and strengths: male and female. However, “The fiction of definable, consistent, and meaningful gender/sex differences is maintained through the practices of individuals, the rules and hierarchies of institutions, and dominant symbols and belief systems” (Messner 2002). Society continues to further the stereotype that keeps male and female peoples segregated into two very distinct categories as seen in this respondent’s comment. But, the ability of either sex is not black or white. There is a lot of variance, and most of the time, in regards to sports, skill is developed through experience and not natural ability due to gender. Paul Steinbach, the senior editor for *Athletic Business* magazine, compared many variations of gender specific rules in coed leagues at several colleges. He demonstrated that there is a large variation in rules because gender is not an accurate aspect of game play to limit in order to create a fair game (Steinbach). Therefore, if there is no scientific background for the gender specific rules, then they should not be implemented in coed leagues.

Gender is not the determinant for an athlete thriving in their sport. For an athlete to excel in a sport, they must have practice and experience. A female may have more experience than a male in a sport; therefore, they may be more skilled or vice-versa. Earlier this month a Spanish

soccer league wanted to demonstrate that women can be just as good, if not better, players than men (AllSportsNews). To do this, they disguised a woman, Brenda Prez, as a man and had her play in an all men's league (AllSportsNews). Throughout the video of the game the men can be seen with jaw-dropped expressions at the ability of the player (AllSportsNews). The opposing team's coach even instructs his players to mark her (AllSportsNews). Prez reveals her true identity about halfway into the game on a free kick that she scores (AllSportsNews). After taking off her mask, the men become even more shocked at the fact that this incredibly talented soccer player is a woman (AllSportsNews). Prez's team won the game due to her scoring several goals and setting up plays that resulted in other players scoring as well (AllSportsNews). This video clip perfectly demonstrates that gender is not the determining factor in skill. While there are men who are better than some women, there is also a great deal of women who are better than men. Prez completely discredits the stereotype that women are inferior athletes to men. By continuing to implement gender specific rules, we truly limit the flow of the intramural game and prevent athletes from reaching their full potential. With 57% of the survey respondents participating in a coed soccer league and most of the participants writing displeased remarks about the gender specific rules, it is time for a change. The persistence of these rules implies that the University of Dayton and any other institution implementing gender specific, coed rules promotes sexist and stereotypical views of the male and female gender.

Society has constructed the idea that males are typically stronger athletes than females. However, this is not accurate nor is it supported in scientific research. This idea was created through years of subtly promoting stereotypes that are highly inaccurate in short phrases athletes jokingly make towards one another. A study done by Faye Linda Wachs, an Associate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Psychology and Sociology at California State Polytechnic

University, Pomona, found conclusions that coincided with the stereotypical view discredited by Brenda Prez. Wachs found in her research that “Despite a reduction in talent across both genders, interpretation of play revealed that expectation of male competence and female failure colored interpretation” (541). This demonstrates that there is a preconceived notion that males will excel as athletes while females are expected to struggle. Wachs researched the stereotypical views that were held about male and female athletes in coed softball. She found that many of the comments that teammates say to each other are subtle hints at the issue that divides gender based on sex (Wachs). Wachs argues that these simple comments, such as, “you throw like a girl,” “she got lucky,” and “she’s a natural,” all discredit the ability of females to compete against males (Wachs 536-538). She explains that these basic comments create the stereotypes that the gender specific rules try to compensate for. Wachs also argues that “The problem with gendered expectations is that they are the backdrop against which individuals are given an opportunity to perform” (543). Therefore, a circuitous, vicious cycle of stereotypes and biased gender specific rules manifests in coed sports. Both the stereotypes and the gender specific rules fuel each other, preventing males and females the equal and nondiscriminatory opportunity of competing against each other and furthering their skill.

Males are typically believed to be more passionate about their respective sport. Therefore, it is believed that men will aggress more quickly in a game, especially when it is a close match. Dawn E. Stephens studied the factors that contributed to the likelihood of females and males to aggress while playing a sport. Overall she showed in her data that men were more likely to aggress than females were (Stephens 71-72). However, a similarity she found was that women and men who had more experience in their sport both had an increased tendency to become aggressive while in play (Stephens 72). Therefore, Stephens showed that the aggressive

tendency is not gender related, but based on skill level and the length an athlete had participated in the sport with their team. Thus, it is incorrect to implement gender specific rules on the grounds that they are there for the protection of female athletes from male athletes. One respondent in my survey, when asked to comment on her appreciation for gender specific rules said, “They’re out in place to make the teams more fair and equal for both genders so I guess keep it.” However, based on Stephens’s findings this is not a valid reason to implement the rules. If anything, extra rules should be implemented to even the playing field between skill levels; however, even these would be unjust and unnecessary.

Another respondent in my survey, when he was asked why he disagreed with the gender specific rules, commented, “In reality, it inhibits gameplay and it feels cumbersome when both genders are actively involved in the gameplay anyways.” He is one of the many University of Dayton students that possess this sentiment. Many others responded in a similar manner saying that “the rules are too strict,” “they are the main reason they receive penalties,” and “they are sexist and unfair.” If the majority of the student body participating in intramurals feels this way about the gender specific rules implemented in coed sports, then why are the rules still in place? Intramural sports are a fun way for students to take a break from their studies. They are an easy way to form relationships through good-spirited competition and team comradery. However, the gender specific rules create a tension between the two genders as they are forced to struggle to remember all of the picayune gender specific rules. Recreational leagues of intramurals are supposed to be less competitive and more relaxing than competitive leagues. About 67% of my survey respondents participated in a recreational league. The gender specific rules add a completely different dimension of competition to the game. This competition is not between two teams, but between the male and female players of each team. Therefore, this limits the ability to

build teamwork, exacerbates frustration between the two genders, and further implements stereotypes of male and female athletic abilities. Another survey respondent commented, “Because I think in today's society, especially with our school's Marianist values of equality, we should treat boys and girls the same in intramural sports.” She clearly exemplifies the strife many students feel when they compete in coed leagues. If equality is a core value of the Marianist beliefs, then the University of Dayton should practice it in all aspects. This includes intramural sports. Without the alteration of these rules, students may stop participating in coed intramural sports. This could lead to a decrease in the feeling of community among the students and negatively impact the university's most prided value.

Coed intramural sports need a large modification to their gender specific rules, if they are not done away with completely. Coed sports are a great way for men and women to learn to work together in a team setting and learn respect for the opposite gender. By limiting males and females, we not only limit their ability to grow as an athlete, but we also encourage the manifestation of stereotypes. Equality is achieved when we acknowledge the discrepancy formed between males and females through gender specific rules in coed sports and abolish them. Only then will a man be able to compete with a woman without the fear of having his masculinity questioned. Only then will a woman be able to compete with a man without having to prove her worth every second. It is truly quite simple: remove the gender specific rules in coed intramural sports and foster a more equal and welcoming environment for all.

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