

**THE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY
(Kuring-gai Campus)**

**'IT WASN'T ME IT WAS MY SOCCER
BOOTS!'**

**Women, Sport and Identity: An Exploration of
Identity through Amateur Women's Soccer**

by

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**Submitted in fulfillment of
Master of Arts (Sports Studies)
2007**



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I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to all the people who have assisted me in this study. This includes sincere thanks to my university supervisors with whom I was blessed, Dr Carmel Foley and Professor Kristine Toohey; their guidance and support helped me to stay inspired and keep thinking and moving forward even when it appeared that I had ground to a halt. I am also indebted to my friends and family for their ongoing support. I would particularly like to thank my mother Colleen and aunts Maureen and Patricia who as educated women elders in my family generously gave their time, intellect and life experience to invaluable discussion about this study. To James Harrison, my fellow researcher, thanks for wonderful discussions, good tips and sometimes a tough word or two. Thank you also to the football club, administrators and coaches. Naturally, this study would not have been possible without the generous contributions of the women who participated in the study. I am eternally grateful to them for sharing their feelings and lived experiences with me. I have savoured their stories and will always hold the essence of this experience in my heart – thank you.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the experiences of women who have chosen to participate in amateur football (known in Australia as soccer). It investigates and interprets effects of individual experiences and perceptions of sport for women amateur football players on their identities.

The present research proposes that women's exposure to sporting experience as players has an influence on their identities both within and outside the sporting arena. The arguments for this position are explored using local narrative which details the nature of women's experiences of sports and their ever-changing identities. To understand these experiences it is important to locate them within a foundation of historical context which traces the history of football, the involvement of women in sports, the development of women's football in significant countries and the journey of the game of women's football in Australia. With this information about the historical journey of women's sport and football it is simpler to examine the current effect of the sport on identity.

Theories of identity, gender and sports are analysed. The theoretical perspective taken in this thesis builds on feminist ideologies and an interactionist approach to understanding women and their experiences. Analysis is undertaken using sport as a site of self-discovery and identity building best understood through investigation of women's individual experiences.

This thesis uses qualitative research with in-depth interviews, participant observation and reflexivity to investigate the research proposition. Interviews with thirteen amateur women football players were undertaken to investigate their thoughts, feelings and perceptions, and consequently information was collected about sporting experiences, perceptions and effects on identity. This was combined with participant observation to assist in giving context and clarity to the exploration. Finally, reflexivity was engaged to provide an added measure of triangulation to the study.

The thesis analyses the data as it relates to the experiences of identity change and

transference between the identity domains of leisure, work and family. The findings demonstrate that the experience of sports participation as a player provides women with access to testing their established identities, practising additional identity traits in a challenging and often new environment and, once having done so, transferring aspects of their new-found identities to other areas of their lives. It found that sports participation clearly influences the development, shaping and sustaining of identity for women in a range of identity domains.

The findings demonstrated that the act of playing football brings with it a broad range of impacts upon each woman's identity. Often the women expressed their appreciation of the opportunity to practise and apply the self-awareness, connections, sense of team, confidence, capability, aggression, sense of agency and fun they had adopted in the sporting arena to other areas of their lives.

The study revealed that the women valued highly the friendships and connections they established and felt constrained by the organisation of the sport which most often gave priority to skill level and winning above the maintenance of these connections. The women attempted to address this inadequacy through voicing their needs and resisting the sports organisation. Methods of resistance included verbally expressing their discomfort to sports administrators and coaches, refusing to be parted from their established team and, when placed in a 'new' team, being reluctant to bond with new team members. The women used resistance and the example of the competitive success of a team which sustained its connections to influence the team organisers to re-evaluate team construction. Once this was achieved, organisers gave credence to the importance of established connections when allocating players to teams in subsequent years.

The study reveals that the experience of playing soccer is shared with others. However, each team member has her own unique experience. The exploration of these experiences unearthed a range of realities, emotions and perceptions that influenced each player's identity and confirmed the value of sport for women and the need for an alternative approach when considering women's sport.

This thesis makes a contribution to knowledge in the field of sports studies with its exploration of women's experiences and the recommendations of approaches to sports for

women. This approach is informed by consultation with its sporting participants. This understanding can be used to assess and inform future sports policy development and practice. Principally this thesis seeks to acknowledge and legitimise the sports experiences of women and the effect these experiences have on their identities in the domains of leisure, work and family. In doing so it provides a better understanding of the relationship between identity, gender and sport.