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FOCUS

## “BABES” & BOARDS

### Opportunities in New Millennium Sport?

Robert Rinehart

*The proliferation of action or extreme sports in recent years leads to a reassessment of fundamental, foundational questions regarding the nature of sport. One such question is Does the much-vaunted alternative ethos of action sports lead to a concomitant paradigm shift in fundamental attitudes toward race, class, or gender differences within these new sport forms? In this article, the focus is on advertising in slick, national skating magazines and more particularly on the gendered nature of advertising and how it reflects and promotes gender segmentation in markets. In examining such print advertising, several metathemes emerge: There are images that (a) reify the naturalized maleness of North American sport; (b) objectify girls and woman as a naturalized position; (c) objectify girls and woman in sexualized manners, so that they create misogynist views in their audiences; and (d) attempt to set up the brand advertisers as outlaws, as oppositional to mainstream sport culture.*

**Keywords:** *action sports; women; advertising*

... formal equality—for whatever sex, race or class—can prove chimerical when civic and political structures that permit such processes of equality already work in favor of the dominant group, and demonstrate that in fact the discourses of power assume relations of inequality at their very roots.

(Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'*, 1995, p. 1)

The term *babe*, in the early stages of the 21st century, is decidedly not politically correct. As used here, ironically, it is meant to highlight at least two directions mainstream sport—and currently, as emergent sport forms, alternative, action, or extreme sport—have taken in their articulation with female practitioners. First, the term *babes* infers that women are objects rather than subjects, objects of voyeuristic or scopophilic gazes (Brummett & Duncan, 1990; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Morse, 1983); and second, the term implies female athletes as infantilized adults within a male-dominated sport culture. In both cases, power is not within the women—who are either objects of usually male gazes or who are dependent on others for their sense of selfhood—but rather it is directed from a patriarchal hierarchy, where there are controllers, masters, and actors imposing their wishes on, respec-

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tively, the controlled, the subjects, and the acted on. Anyone who has ever been subservient understands that this is not an enviable position (e.g., Scott, 1985; Scott & Tria Kerkvliet, 1986).

Thus, to be a babe, in either sense, is not an honorific: It is decidedly a frustrating, energy-consuming, and humbling position in which to find oneself. Furthermore, although the appropriation of *babe*, much like the use of *girl* and *girlie*, may be meant by its users as empowering, there is still the incessant reminder for women "of [their] status as honorary children. . . . The dominant meanings of this term [girl] currently in circulation are only superficially laudatory" (Whelehan, 2000, p. 37). Furthermore, Beal (1996) points out that "females [play] a marginalized role in the subculture of skateboarding" (p. 215). Beal discusses the use of terminologies such as *skate betties* as "the name given to most females associated with skating. Skate Betties are female groupies whose intentions are . . . to meet cute guys and associate with an alternative crowd" (p. 215).

The term *babes*, then, as I use it, is meant ironically to provoke the reader to interrogate its sensibilities (and the circulations of meanings) in skating and alternative sport culture.

In this article, I intend to contrast and compare mainstream, dominant, hegemonic sport with alternative, so-called extreme or action sports. During this process, I examine the educational rationale for sport and discuss major ideologies of mainstream sport and why and how those might be opposed by alternative sports. Furthermore, I suggest a case where the new, postmodern sport forms—action and extreme sports—are an opportunity for the creation of fundamental change in the way postindustrial societies perceive sport.<sup>1</sup> I suggest that this is an opportunity for a paradigm shift in our thinking about what is sport, who might benefit from sport, and what sport means to North American society and that, as it is currently delivered, that opportunity is being lost.

Opportunity for change does not necessarily mean achievement of change: Co-optation by multinational corporations, electronic and print media groups, and sport administrators practically guarantees a status-quo, conservative, and hegemonic response to any attempted incursion by radical sports enthusiasts. Even if the so-called outsiders, dominated by male White youth, were to suddenly become more gender-enlightened, many societal structures might oppose their attempts at egalitarianism. And the spaces for female participation, although greater in numbers and perhaps even slightly better encouraged in extreme sports than in mainstream sports (see Kay, 1998), are still fraught with patriarchal dominance. Some of the manifestations of this dominance are underground and covert; other examples of such hierarchies are obvious and overt. To better understand this process of incorporation and co-optation of so-called radical sport, I will discuss several disquieting examples of both covert and overt sexism in alternative sport advertising.

The advertisements were gleaned from skating niche-market magazines (that is, in-line skating and skateboarding). The images are from *Box*,

*Slap, Big Brother, TransWorld SKATEboarding, and InLine: The Skate Magazine*, circa 1995 to 1997. Although these ads are certainly not the standard fare for most advertising in these specific magazines during this slice of time, ads like them can be easily found in many of the extant magazines.<sup>2</sup>

But before examining these advertisements, I will compare and contrast general attitudes and fundamental underpinnings of mainstream and alternative sport forms. The ethos of dominant sports is presumably well known, but an overview will help to underscore and contextualize significant differences between dominant sports participants and the practitioners of action sports.

#### NORTH AMERICAN MAINSTREAM SPORT: THE EDUCATIONAL MODEL

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In North America, an ideological rationale justifies sport: Sport teaches its participants values, skills, and lifelong lessons. However, also in North America, indeed, in most of the postindustrial world—mainstream, dominant sport is male. By mainstream,<sup>3</sup> I mean sports that have been embraced by spectators and participants alike—sports that are taught in the schools, that run through a patriarchal culture to such an extent that both terminology and attire deriving from those sports remain unremarkable to casual observers, that “the hegemony of a class [male] is largely maintained by its ability to execute its power over those living in the dominated classes in a nonconflicting manner” (Robidoux, 2001, p. 22). The very maleness of sport, of course, is paradoxical to this ideology of an educational, egalitarian model for sport.

In North America, mainstream and dominant sports include football, basketball, baseball, hockey, even soccer. Generally, those are the sports that people consider dominant, mainstream, highly engaging—the so-called real sports. They exist in contrast to more expressive sports like skating, diving, and gymnastics (see Lowe, 1977).

But there are also forms of sport that typically privilege male-dominant parameters of physical fitness. The maleness, the ability of a preponderance of males to defeat many females in these sports, although it may be biologically driven, is also culturally constructed. What if, for example, the fundamental goal of football was to exhibit grace, agility, and balance rather than to overpower another player in seeking to score a touchdown? In this case, the well-known NFL films’ sequences of a Lynn Swan or a Jerry Rice catching a ball, sometimes put to music and slowed to demonstrate the incredible dynamic balance and symmetry of the act of catching a football, would not be marginalized but might be seen as key elements of successful football.

The degree of equality of the sexes in sport is an interesting question.<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, American psychosocial theoreticians analyzed why it might be important for young girls as well as young boys to have positive experiences in sport, games, and play situations: What were some of the possible outcomes of sport participation? Susan Greendorfer, for example,

examined children's socialization into (and through) sport (Greendorfer & Ewing, 1981) and looked at positive and negative results of organized sport (Greendorfer, 1987). In her review of the literature of the psychosocial correlates of organized sport, Greendorfer (1987) cautioned that education, not sport participation, probably gains participants greater upward mobility, that moral development in athletes is more immature than in nonathletes (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984), and that the influence of sport climate, parents, coaches, and peers significantly affects either positively or negatively the outcomes of the sport experience. Sport climate is key to the success or failure of youth participation in sport: Process-oriented youth sport settings are more effective in facilitating perseverance, joy of achievement, and life-long participation than product, ends-oriented youth sport settings.

In this sense, then, sport is neither wonderful nor evil: It is neutral. Those who implement sport—parents, coaches, peers—largely determine one's attitude toward sport. As Shakespeare wrote, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Clearly, Greendorfer's research—and many others' since—on organized sport outcomes suggests that the organized sport experience may be positive or negative, gender-neutral or sexist, relatively color-blind or blatantly racist: In short, the quality and result of participation reflects many of the values and much of the ethos of the larger society within which the youth sport takes place (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962).

But if some of the ideologies for outcomes for organized sport—that participation may allow young athletes the opportunities to learn perseverance, dedication, how to work together, persistence, how to overcome disappointment—are good for boys, then, most thinking goes, they should be equally good for girls. As John Gorman (1994) said,

We've lost sight of the educational basis of our sport in America. Sport—and sport practices—originally began as an opportunity for youngsters—boy youngsters—to learn values and affect. Now, rather than being process-oriented, sport is primarily goal-directed. Winning is all that matters. And girls have been excluded from the mix. (April 23, 1994, personal communication).

Of course, we see more and more examples of the possible negative aspects wrought in male-oriented, organized sport—and the visible examples, from professional sports, abound: "Boomer Esiason walks off the job after he loses his job as Cardinals quarterback . . . Robert Horry, former Suns forward . . . mistakes the face of his then-coach, Danny Ainge, for a laundry hamper" (Shappell, 1997, p. C1) and "Rage, racism, sex, alcohol, possible lawsuits and felony charges: We touched 'em all, baby" regarding the Detroit Pistons-Indiana Pacers' NBA brawl (McCallum, 2004, p. 44). Kevin Johnson was quoted as saying "Athletes are people, and we reflect society. . . . Our biggest influences used to be the church, family and our peers. . . . Now it's music and television" (cited in Cohn, 1997, p. C12). Professional athletes, thus, may serve as models for youth sport participants. So there is another

aspect to the educational orientation of American sport: Modeling behaviors may empower and impel (male) young people toward physical activity.

Interestingly, in light of this athletes-reflect-society thesis, typical gender expectations remain pretty skewed: In this same 1997 *Arizona Republic* special issue detailing today's athlete, writer Jeff Metcalfe (1997) tried to avoid mainstream controversy by indicating that "unsportsmanship conduct from women still shocks us . . . [and this] double standard [is one] only the most ardent feminist would buck" (1997, p. C13). Yet, at the same time, many of the quotes in the piece nostalgically seek a return to higher, (presumably naturalized and stereotypically feminine) standards: "Maybe, just maybe, as women's pro-team sports emerge, they can clear a path to the civility that often is the road less traveled by the men" (1997, p. C13).

The simple fact that most North American (indeed, world) organized sports are separated based on sex is intriguing. Why is it that boys and girls, men and women, do sport separately? Is it just the way it is? Is it because of essential biological differences, so that weight, height, body composition, and strength, power, and speed components, which generally privilege males, are inherent to superior functioning within most sports?

That cannot be: There are clearly sports in which females' bodies and body types gain the advantage: One example is long-distance swimming, an ultramarathon event in cold water, where a higher percentage adipose tissue provides less resistance in the water, greater resources for energy consumption, and more insulation against the cold. Another example is where implements might even the playing field, and visual acuity and steadiness are key factors. In the Olympics, for example, some shooting events (trap and skeet) are coed: Males and females compete alongside one another, with females likely to gain the advantage over their male competition.

Physical and physiological measures of skilled sport and fitness—before fitness became health-related—typically used to include agility, balance, coordination (grace), and cardiovascular and muscular endurance (stamina). But most of the sports that are mainstream and dominant privilege such fitness parameters as strength, speed, and power. These are parameters where a majority of mature males have a decided advantage over a majority of mature females, and when these criteria are the most important factors in a given sport, most males have a similar advantage over most females. This is just to say that sport is dominantly male, that it is socially constructed, and that the hierarchies within dominant forms of North American sport are skewed toward reproducing and thus reifying a cultural myth of male physical superiority.

Of course, there are other (less notable) mainstream sports—sports like figure skating, synchronized swimming, even golf—where fine motor skills—grace and agility and balance—are key elements. But these sports are not nearly as celebrated, not nearly so dominant, as football, baseball, basketball, or hockey. They are relegated to second-class categories like Olympic sport, minor sport, country club sport, or, at some apparently neo-Marxist universities, the nonrevenue sports. The words are important,

because they betray attitudes toward the various sports: Some are clearly more important than others.

Similarly, the discourses surrounding women and men athletes are differentially charged. In a study replicating a previous study (Duncan, Messner, Williams, & Jensen, 1989), Duncan, Messner, and Aycock (1994) discovered that sports commentators' descriptions of male and female athletes, although less overtly stereotypical than 5 years previous, still tended to undercut the females' athletic ability. They discussed four examples of Foucauldian-type structuring absences in the commentators' praise of men and absence of praise of women in the 1993 NCAA Men's and Women's Basketball Final Four. The discussion of men's errors, for example, "served to create an impression that men's errors were unavoidable, caused by factors other than their incompetence," although "the absence of such accounts in the women's games constructed an impression that women's errors were due to their own unmitigated incompetence" (p. 7).

When things are arranged hierarchically or differentially (with the National Basketball Association [NBA] consistently gaining, for example, more column inches on the sports page than the Women's National Basketball Association [WNBA] on any given weekend<sup>5</sup>), they tend to become naturalized. We learn to take the order of things as natural or a given and leave that order unexamined. We—women and men alike, socialized into the same society—protest that men playing in the Final Four are more talented, so more deserving of praise, or that the men's game is more a real sport, so deserving of more column inches in the newspaper. And this tautological insistence tends to reinforce the stereotypes, to reify the naturalization. When this kind of hierarchical imbalance occurs to women, particularly in something that is not seen as a stereotypically women's field, few male or even female voices protest.

But watch when men's sports are threatened: Even women like Camille Paglia (1996), perhaps steeped in the patriarchal mythos, cry that sports have become unfair: "Title IX," she writes, "has become a license for vandalism" of men's programs, at least as enacted by "cowardly and self-serving university administrators who are scapegoating men's athletics instead of fighting for principle against intrusive Washington bureaucrats" (1996, p. 11A). Of course, she is missing the point that a policy of dividing and conquering is the strategy for maintaining the status quo in sports programming.

The point is that men's and women's sports—and boy's and girl's sports at the public school level—are contested terrain. And in most cases, the males have the resources, and the females have been granted second-class status. Historically, females have been relegated to cheerleaders and sideline encouragers; the men are the performers. Laurel Davis (1997) discusses a variety of readings of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue: She suggests that a positive strategy "to subvert gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual inequality" might begin with the "abolish[ment of] the gender ideals of masculinity and femininity altogether" (p. 121).

Men, until very recently (and still in much more numbers), have had opportunities to continue professionally in sport; for women participants, educationally based sport was an end in and of itself. Such seemingly meaningless issues as scheduling time for gym use for practices or for games (prime times have historically been allotted to males, for the reason that there is more interest in their games), locker room facilities, practice and game uniforms, equipment, and access to better- or less-trained trainers: All of these historically have been cited as Title IX infractions.

But for the most part, in mainstream sport, male attributes of physicality have become privileged, so that they seem to be natural, seem to be givens. Thus, North American sport can be said to be fundamentally male. But, functionalists and right-wing backlash sports commentators might cry, why the fuss?<sup>6</sup> If males were to apply the law of reversibility (turn the sexes around and see how it would feel to really be in that situation), how frustrating it might be, how many barriers there would be to participation, and males will start to understand the issue better.

The answer, of course, is because sport, a pervasive facet of modern-day, consumer society, is not naturally male. It has only been framed that way. The ideological positives that are supposed to accrue from an educational model of sport participation (and sometimes even do) such as self-confidence, eye-hand coordination, grace under pressure, affiliation with others, cooperation, putting competition in perspective should accrue to everyone, not just to males and not just to elite, privileged males in privileged sports like football, basketball, and baseball. So a constellation of stratifications—layers of privilege sitting one on top of the other—exist in contemporary sport: class, race, age, ableness of body, sexual orientation, ethnicity, sport choice, gender.

In North America, at least, the social construction of sports that privilege male dominance, then, has become naturalized, unquestioned, and ultimately accepted. It is a model based on an ideology that generally believes that sport is a positive force in socializing and educating mostly male youth, and it serves to reinforce the impression of male dominance both within and outside of sport venues.

#### EXTREME SPORT: PARADIGM SHIFT OR MIRROR?

Hopefully, this very brief introduction to facets central to the model of mainstream sport in North America is relatively familiar to most. I recounted it to serve as a framing device, to introduce the relatively new phenomenon<sup>7</sup> known as extreme (now termed *action*) sport. Some proponents of alternative sports—in this case, extreme sports—claim that theirs is a different model, a paradigmatic shift, one in which mature females and mature males might see equal opportunities for participation, exposure, monies, respect, and individual and group growth within and through sports. Others see the product of extreme sports as different from the product of mainstream sports but suggest that, like most everything in culture, extreme sports influence and are influenced by the larger culture: Thus, despite their



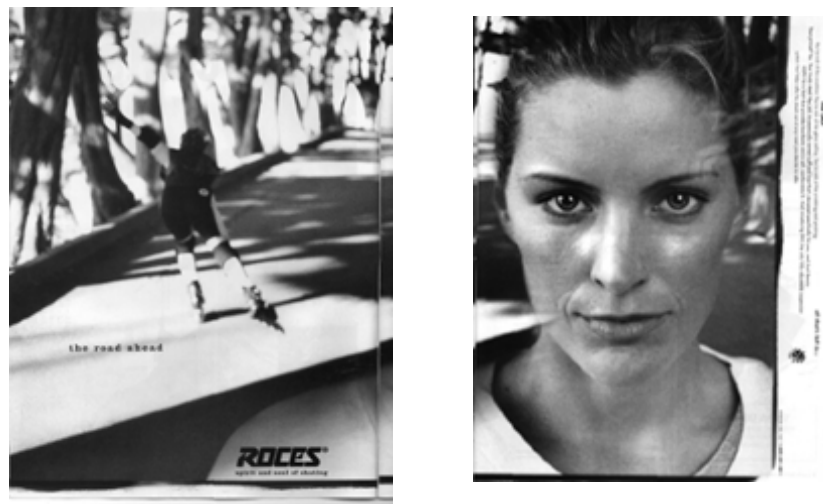
oppositional roots, they daily serve as a mirror of society. Thus, in this view, as a whole, extreme sports will suffer from similar problems as mainstream sport has. I think which way it goes will largely be determined by who controls extreme sport. Agency of the actors within action sports is key. However, during the initial contestations for power and agency within these alternative sports, it is interesting to note how extreme sports are presenting themselves.

Although ESPN and other media sources first promoted the term *extreme* and now have proliferated the term *action* sports, many of the participants used to cringe when someone called their activity sport, much less extreme sport. Over time, though, that opposition to sports rhetoric has been undercut, so that *extreme* and *action* have to some extent become naturalized. With the more commodified extreme sports—like snowboarding and skateboarding—there appears to be less and less participant opposition to the term *sport* than before (e.g., Kleinman, 2003). In other words, aligning themselves with *sport* in addition to *lifestyle* has opened up a whole new market for business venturers and entrepreneurs. Interestingly, ESPN had promoted a whole range of physical activity programming for their various cable enterprises so that lumberjack and other work-related contests, sports aerobics, world's strongest man contests, and cheerleading competitions are now an early-morning staple for ESPN (e.g., Rinehart, 2003). The tie-in, for ESPN to maximize its sport-eager audiences, is always to bring such competitions back to (a) physical skills and (b) a competitive format.

Despite this recent trend toward incorporating mainstream sport and sport audience values into the X-Games, some of the values attached to the first incarnations of extreme sport were decidedly in contrast—in opposition—to mainstream sport values: Arlo Eisenberg, who really has grown up with in-line skating (Rollerblading), even today prefers to term his activity a lifestyle as opposed to a sport. In the early days, competition per se was eschewed within many of the activities, with a large preference for big tricks over the concept of defeating someone else. Skateboarders bonded together (often against in-liners for space at skating parks, or railing against them in skating magazines), and other subcultures—like windsurfing and snowboarding—within the extreme phenomenon similarly are tightly knit and exclusive kinds of groups (see Beal, 1995; Borden, 2001; Humphreys, 2003; Wheaton, 2003).

And, very much like mainstream sport before it was mainstream, the values of extreme sport began to be incorporated and usurped by mainstream values. ESPN and other media corporations introduced the Extreme Games (now the X-Games) in 1995. Slick niche magazines extolling sports (ranging from board sports like snowboarding, skateboarding, surfing, windsurfing, and wakeboarding to biking and climbing) cropped up and captured hard-core and occasional enthusiasts' imagination and began to change the values and ethos of the activities.

Where do girls and women fit in with these extreme sports? Typically, as in mainstream sport, female's extreme participation rates and



**Figure 1: Roces Advertisement, 1997.**

opportunities vary sport by sport. Attitudes toward women likewise vary: But, unlike organized sport, where governmental legislation like Title IX (at least in the United States) has somewhat guaranteed sport possibilities, in action sport, for the most part moderated by private concerns,<sup>8</sup> there are no gender equity laws. Extreme sport is not educationally based; thus, it is not dependent on the public school setting, where government surveillance regimes can impose a degree of egalitarianism for women.

Joanne Kay (1998) has made a compelling argument that opportunities and access for women may be greater in extreme sports because the sports are mostly individual, because they are relatively new (and thus more liable to self-definition), and because the fundamental source of comparison between participants is a willingness to risk, rather than, for example, brute strength. If women are willing to be high risk-takers, says Kay, they will be more readily accepted by the subculture.

A few companies aligned with skating have attempted to reflect this attitude: The Roces ad (see Figure 1), for example, shows a woman staring straight into the camera, with a skater freely swinging down a tree-lined lane next to her. Because of her juxtaposition with the long shot of the skater, she is presumably an athlete, not a model, although she is exceedingly reflective of current standards of beauty. In fact, she may be the skater herself. The copy reads: "You're sick of the overtime. You're sick of the glass ceiling. You're sick of the prodding and pinching. Your prince? You. Your trusty steed—the LAX. Anatomically correct cuff and liner that's designed specifically for you" (Roces, 1997, pp. 6-7).

This ambivalent message is, on the surface, quite liberating for female skaters. But, is not the company suggesting that the woman remain dependent, but rather than be dependent on a man or a relationship to a coworker or a relationship with another human being, she should become dependent

on this multinational corporations' product, dependent on her status as a consumer. The apparent liberation, the apparent self-reliance for this woman skater, appears to be a bit of a misnomer: After all, isn't the model (and, by extension, the female consumer) merely substituting one needy relationship for another but this time with a company and its product? Nevertheless, for many and without further reflection, this ad represents a move—however mixed the message—toward female empowerment.

Roces and Kay present one argument: the argument that extreme sport may provide a fertile ground for societal change, for more egalitarian acceptance of women within what Coakley (2004) terms the *power and performance* model of North American sport, which is dominant within spectatorial sport. This possibility for change, for boarding sports, as exemplars of pleasure and participation sports (Coakley, 2004), to facilitate change within the dominant power and performance spectatorial sports, is one argument, and I hope female empowerment and inclusion is the way extreme sport opportunities fall out.

But I wish to propose a less positive possibility—perhaps only as a warning—that extreme sports, despite their differentness from mainstream sports, will most likely follow the model of mainstream sports. I believe we are seeing evidence right now of encroachment by media that reinforces mainstream values (such as male dominance in sport; women as passive, adoring observers of men; women as dependent on men; females intended as sexual objects for the gaze of mostly males).

The media, after all, are intent on selling themselves: A negative story often creates more interest than a positive story. And creation of interest—Dennis Rodman's antics, Canadian snowboarder Ross Rebagliati's loss then regaining of the gold medal for maybe violating the International Olympic Committee's (IOC's) drug policy (for marijuana use) at the Nagano Games—is what brings in audience and potential consumers of products that sustain media. Thus, media, by definition, will rarely take a marginal position or stance. They exist to self-perpetuate, and education or enlightenment of their publics with marginalized positionings do not provide a direct relationship with self-perpetuation. Proffering female participation in sport—which is culturally defined as male—is still a marginal stance. Great strides have been made—there were two professional women's basketball leagues (before that, there were others that failed financially), and there is increased opportunity for educationally based participation in sport for women—but, women athletes are still marginalized and relativized with regard to their male counterparts.

What sells and passes for women's sport, even in the 2000s, are scantily clad women playing beach volleyball, the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, and women whose capabilities are somehow undercut and dependent on males. Davis (1997) writes that

Coverage of female athletes often differs from coverage of male athletes. When the popular media cover women in sport, they often focus on the athlete's

appearance. . . . Unlike the coverage of male athletes, coverage of female athletes often portrays them as emotional. . . . And, unlike the photographs of male athletes, photographs of female athletes often feature inactive glamorous poses or show the athletes in settings unrelated to athletics. . . . Photographers often picture male athletes in ways that signify dominance or superiority, while picturing women athletes in ways that signify submissiveness or inferiority. (pp. 141-142)

There are exceptions. As Kay (1998) rightly says: "It is easier for women to overcome gendered assumptions about risk-taking than gendered assumptions about physical strength" (quoted from presentation). So, extreme athletes may find that their risk-taking capacity allows them easier access into positions of power, assuming that the terms of gendered participation (in Coakley's power and performance model) are disallowed.

But the heightening acceptance of female and male risk-taking as overcoming the dominant societal message of "What is sport?" is simply not there in a public trained to focus on biological difference as a metamessage. If dominant sport is conceived as male, it appears sadly inevitable that any forms of oppositional sport that are co-opted by commercial interests will follow a similar path. The change will occur and has already occurred: More women and girls are involved actively in sport. But some of the same barriers, coded in covert messages to youth, are cropping up in the media.

In most cases, the media, corporate sponsors, and sport administrators have begun to take over a variety of extreme sports. There are now national and international bodies and federations that control the direction and, to some extent, the image for the sports: Among them are the International Triathlon Union; the International Ski Federation, which the IOC turned to when they decided to include snowboarding; and the International Snowboard Federation, which was established by snowboarders themselves. The directions extreme and action sports take will be determined in the next 10 years by power struggles between and among organizers, entrepreneurs, corporate sponsors, a few athletes (for credibility and establishment of authenticity), and mostly by the media.

#### IMAGES OF POSTMODERN SPORT: REPLICATIONS OR OPPORTUNITIES?

The media have created many often conflicting and indeterminate messages. After all, they seek to insinuate themselves into each and every citizen's psyche, to the extent that they may be heard and their messages read and reread by a relatively heterogeneous populace. Because of this and because of a free enterprise system that celebrates the ideology of individual freedom (and creativity), many images are drummed into audiences daily (e.g., Fiske, 1987, 1989). In print media, advertising photographs tell stories: That is, at a single glance, the reader has learned to expect a compact, creative, sometimes provocative stance that will attempt to coerce her or him sympathetically to the view of the photographer and, by extension, to the product being marketed. No advertising image is naïve. Some are more or

less effective, but their intent is singularly clear: Bring in new audience, create more consumers (generally, of product or lifestyle).

The following advertising images and words are meant to illustrate the outer ranges of possibilities in circulation circa 1996 within the skateboarding and in-line skating subcultures. Some of these images may be offensive and disturbing; they are certainly visually arresting, as effective advertising usually is. They are not presented for prurient purposes but rather to demonstrate the range of images and texts that exist in two extreme sports. Additionally, I believe one of their purposes is to offend: To run counter to dominant culture, of course, one typically confronts that culture and that culture's prized symbols. A discussion of the offensive nature of the images is appropriate. The major difference here is that the resistance, if one could call it that, has been generated by advertising executives and marketing teams, not necessarily by the skaters themselves. And the companies, like many companies in business, seek to create identification between consumer and product or image or both. Thus, the ads sometimes attempt to reflect an outlaw image, or a bad-boy kind of clubbishness, which easily align with the ethos of the power and performance mainstream North American sports.

The ads certainly are not altogether typical—other images and signs from other magazines appear to be somewhat gender-neutral. But these images far outnumber the type of ambivalent images such as seen in the Roces ad. There are also ads that might be deemed X-rated. I agree with Kay (1998) that there is progress; there may be greater spaces in extreme sport than in mainstream sport for women and girls to become active. But there is another side that undercuts some of the progressive ideas and images, and that is the side I will now discuss.

If the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue reinforces stereotypes of females as subservient to males (as objects, not subjects; as adoring, dependent, infantilized creatures [see Daddario, 1992; Davis, 1997]), then the following images go a step further: Designed for a normatively adolescent audience, the subthemes of these images illustrate several metathemes. I have ordered them this way: There are images that (a) play on gender stereotypes and the maleness of sport itself, (b) push toward the objectification of girls and women as a naturalized stance, (c) pander to a sexual-object view of women that is both misogynist and matrophobic, and (d) attempt to set up the advertisers as members of a resistant, oppositional, or outlaw subculture.<sup>9</sup> Many of the advertisements, of course, illustrate more than one metatheme.

Some of the more prominent aspects of these images and texts follow. This is done in broad strokes, as the images themselves bear pondering by each reader; the discussion is a beginning foray into the overt and covert effects of some of this advertising. As well, I do discuss what I am positioned to take as a relatively dominant reading of the messages: Fiske (1987, 1989, 1996) has demonstrated that there are not only dominant readings of media messages but also a variety of resistant and oppositional readings.<sup>10</sup> Yet I

**CLASS OF '96**

"Tested and approved by our finest students."








**GIANT**  
SKATEBOARDS

MAJOR DISTRIBUTORS OF: NEW DEAL SKATEBOARD PRODUCTS - ELEMENT - MAD ORICE SKATEBOARDS - ZOO YORK SKATEBOARDS - GOLDEN  
 STATE WHEEL COMPANY - COMPANY E CLOTHING - 411 VIDEO MAGAZINE - INDEPENDENT TRUCKS - THUNDER TRUCKS - VENTURE TRUCKS - GUN  
 WIND TRUCKS - ORION TRUCKS - STANDARD TRUCKS - SMOKEY BEARINGS - H&B BEARINGS - JWF BEARINGS - BUCK SHOT HARDWARE - JESSE  
 GRIP TAPE - SKICE GOLF - FR STR SKATE WRENCH - UNSTOCK

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**Figure 2: Giant Skateboard Advertisement, 1996.**

agree with Whelehan (2000) when she states that “a definable thread runs through the language of culture, politics and the mass media that is quite simply antifeminist and antiequality” (p. 3). I believe the images herein reflect that thread that runs through youth skating culture.

Dominant readings of the first three images reinforce the male domain of sport, the constructed and naturalized maleness of sport and activity. The first, “The Class of ‘96” (see Figure 2) shows 18 children in a variety of poses: fishing, wearing boxing gloves, flying toy airplanes, patriotically saluting the American flag, holding skis, shooting marbles, dressed in a 1940’s leather football helmet, looking into a microscope—in short, for the most part doing things, not sitting passively but nostalgically reconstructed actively, in sepia tones indicating some sort of better past. But, every single one of these images is of a boy, doing stereotypically active boy things. In 1996, there are no active girls? Males are seen stereotypically, as doers; females are absented altogether.

Using only male models for this ad, of course, is a specific trope: the assumptions are that only males will read the magazine, only males are skaters, only males are interested in skating products—or, in this case, only males can aspire to be professionally sponsored as professional skaters by a variety of corporate sponsors. At the beginning of a sport such as skating, which emphasizes risk (Kay, 1998), it would appear that opportunities for professionalization are not egalitarian.

The second, an ad for Pleasure Tools (1995; see Figure 3; Babes-Boards, 2004) is really a cartoon, apparently intended as a caricature. The amply endowed, sexualized, and prominently displayed redheaded woman straddles a wrench; the ad itself is for in-line wheels, variously named Lip Service, Po' Boy, and Joy Ride, with caricatures of scantily clad women reminiscent of the art work on World War II bombers etched into the sides of the wheels. This both serves to objectify the model as available plaything and reaffirm male dominance within and through sport-related items with a seamlessly nostalgic cultural trope: Wasn't it a more sensible and controlled world when females knew their place as flesh-tools for male use?

The third advertisement firmly establishes the connection between male-dominance and sport as a theme. To some degree, it is self-explanatory: "We've Got the Competition by the Balls" (see Figure 4; Babes-Boards, 2004) is ostensibly a straightforward ad for street hockey balls. Sexualizing skateboard and in-line skating equipment for the sake of selling more product is one thing, but this ad clearly ties in to a male-dominant, female-submissive model that, unchallenged, assumes and thereby reinforces the naturalized maleness of these new sport forms.

Because the sports themselves are not any longer primarily considered lifestyle choices, as Rollerblader Arlo Eisenberg and others have claimed, but now have morphed into sports—and seek to be dominant sports, which are assumed as dominantly by and for males, thus male—aligning them with a dominantly male ethos and using a play on the very word *balls*, apparently seems an appropriate tack for (mostly male) marketing departments.

The next group of images primarily demonstrates an objectification of females as a naturalized stance: Models are juxtaposed with text that normally would be seen as offensive because the models are not real people but rather objects, things, or trophies to be paraded and consumed by males. In these advertisements, the male gaze is a form of symbolic consumption, and in these, the strategies, rhetoric, and practice of consumption of objectified female (or the uncomfortable aversion from it, denoting untouchable status<sup>11</sup>) only serves to distance young boys and men from genuine relationships with girls and women.

Though the previous grouping—the distancing promoted by exclusionary practices that assume a male domain for sport—clearly promotes the objectification of females, the next group of advertisements have as their metatheme the overt objectification of girls or women within sporting venues as a naturalized and taken-for-granted stance. Of course, this

metatheme ties in with the previous theme: that of the assumed maleness of sport. If sport is assumed to be male, then male privilege is assumed to extend to seeing females as personal objects that may be manipulated at will and that, when thus objectified, serve at the whim of the more powerful subject, the male. Within sport settings, this worldview results in unevenness of resource allocations, lessened expectations by and for girls and women and an attitude that questioning will only result in a powerful, swift, and punitive backlash. However, there is also an alignment within these ads with the third metatheme of pandering to a sexualized objectification of females supplied for the (dominantly) male gaze. Thus, the objectification of females (the second metatheme) slides into the sexual objectification of females (the third metatheme) within and through sport advertising.

The first image of this group is titled "Label Whore Clothing Co." (1996; see Figure 5; Babes-Boards, 2004). In this ad, the model is dressed in pink, her upper body open to the camera gaze, her lower torso cast away from the viewer. Her skin tones and outlined body are visible—and her eyes look elsewhere, so the timid male gazer may consume without guilt. She is objectified, placed into a context in which her own gaze is seen as suggestively submissive. Moreover, the placement of the tight-fitting dress stretched across the model's buttocks is also meant suggestively, to incite sexual appreciation for the sexualized body of the female offered for male consumption.

It must be pointed out that "Label Whore" was a relatively nonpejorative term within youth culture at the time of this ad: Among a variety of vernacular meanings, to be a whore was to be deeply involved in something, and the connotation was not necessarily even covertly sexual (e.g., "You are a skating whore!"), but of course the double meaning is always operatively embedded within the name of the company. The name itself also, incidentally, aligns insider consumers with outsiders, a strategy that advertisers use as well (see the fourth metatheme within this discussion).

The next ad is for Skin Protective Devices (1996; see Figure 6). Boldly announcing "Some skin is worth saving," the model is suggestively gazing back this time, dressed in bra and short shorts.

Is this an ad for women or girl skaters to identify with the model, as in "My skin is worth saving! I should wear Skin pads"? Likely not. The bold gaze of the model back at the spectator suggests this is for a male audience, yet the text confuses the issue. Nevertheless, the objectification of woman is naturalized, and the sexualization of the model, it is assumed, only serves to reify the stance that women like being sexual objects. Of course, problematic within that stance is that women wish to have a certain amount of control over the issue of who is sexualizing them. If they are active participants, with a chosen other, and the sexual objectification is mutual, then that is quite a different option than becoming the object of multiple voyeuristic (male) gazes as devices for sexual arousal (e.g., Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Messner, 2002; Nelson, 1994). So, objectification, in this ad, elides into sexual objectification.





Figure 6: Skin Advertisement, 1996.

In this metatheme category, the first advertisement places two women, dressed in clear space helmets, fragile white and metallic clothes, boots, and strappings in a pose suggestive of handmaidens, leaning next to a relatively

disinterested male. The male is consuming what appears to be a beer, labeled "Cosmic," with hundreds of Colt 45 cans stacked behind. Obscurely, but also suggestively, the words *Deep Space 69* are written above this pose for Cosmic Apparel (1996; Figure 7; Babes-Boards, 2004). In this ad, woman is portrayed as sexualized alien and other, man as serious and deserving; woman as servant, man as served; woman as object, man as subject.

The next ad is one of the most overt demonstrations of a pandering to a sexual-object view of women: The black and white, low-tech photo of the reclining, naked woman who is the object of the male gaze is printed in grainy shades of gray (see Figure 8; Babes-Boards, 2004). Clearly, the audience for this is the voyeuristic adolescent male: The staging of such a photograph is reminiscent of surreptitious pornography, shot quickly and from a distance, as the audience imagines sexual acts. The model's face is recognizable; her body, however, is printed over with product names for pads, bearings, skates, wheels, and methods of payment—except for key sexualized zones, which are, again, available for the male gaze. This is ostensibly an ad for a distributorship (Inline Inc., 1996), but again, the adolescent male gaze is drawn to it primarily because of the nudity and the availability of mature women as potential sexual objects.

Sexual objectification is the next category; although clearly there is overlap between these categories, the images and text in the next three ads demonstrate a clear sense of self-reflexiveness on the part of the advertisers: In an attempt to justify ads they presumably normally wouldn't show, the copy next to these ads undercuts the images. As an aside, many of these companies advertise in other skating magazines, and their ads are toned down quite a bit. So there is a conflation of the sexual-object view of women (metatheme number 3) with the attempt to set up the advertisers, the brand, as oppositional and representative of outlaw subculture.

The first image consists of two ads. The skateboard magazine *Big Brother* juxtaposed two seemingly disparate advertisements on the same page: The Tasty (n.d.) ad with a teenaged girl in braces clinging to a pink-hearted skateboard, standing shyly and averting her gaze in front of a wall with pink and purple hearts, is next to a Thieves (n.d.) ad for clothing (see Figure 9) that shows a grown young woman, topless and supine, gazing directly, suggestively, at the camera.

Above the logo for Thieves is written "Pornography sells image, Quality sells clothes." The jarring juxtaposition of a seminude woman next to a young innocent is arresting to the eye, but it also poses a troubling possibility (in this magazine) of the infantilization of female skateboarders and the overt sexualization of underage females for male consumption.

"Hardline—Reach-Fa-Ya-Tool" (1995) is an ad that blatantly sexualizes woman for a male skater's benefit (see Figure 10; Babes-Boards, 2004). In this ad, a woman is reaching into the front of a laughing male's pants, her hand buried up to the wrist, with the words "Reach-Fa-Ya-Tool" written above. They are seemingly having a very good time, and the female model is smiling too. Presumably, the slightly erotic nature of the ad will promote an



Figure 9: Thieves and Tasty Advertisements, no date.

alignment of values that demonstrates the servile nature of woman as help-mate, even in public sexuality, although also demonstrating the outside the norms status of skaters who align with the company Hardline.

A slightly different reading of this ad might be more ambiguous: The one part of the ad that undercuts the woman as object, man as subject, and lends an uncertainty to this reading is the scar on the elbow of the woman. Is she a skater? Does she participate in skating? Unfortunately, the ad does not privilege her by name, as it does the "Skater Paul Beeman." So once again, the sexuality of the situation is for the benefit of the male model and, by extension, for the male audience. Her gaze implies woman's desire; his suggests man's understood acceptance of her desire. The ad serves to simultaneously reinforce the maleness of sport and the sexual subservience of woman as object.

Finally, the last image is overtly sexist, and it is meant to be shocking. The copy, however, above and below the nearly naked model and the suggestive, phonetic company name, celebrates two things: the self-reflexive, postmodernist nature of the sales pitch and the desperately oppositional nature of this company (see Figure 11; Babes-Boards, 2004). (Forget that the company, the magazine, and most companies and magazines determining this skating subculture are easily run by mostly White males in their 40s.) Here's the copy that is ironic regarding sales:

It has come to our attention that to be "hardcore" or "cutting edge" in this new highly competitive "street wear" industry, we should consider using nude or

half nude Strippers/Porn Stars. Well, we couldn't get either so, we got Julie, a Penthouse Pet of the Year, and now we feel extremely confident about our sales going up due to it. (Fuct, 1997, p. 25)

And here is the copy that indicates that this company really is striving to be oppositional (protesting perhaps too much):

Sinking To All New Lows

For all your sexual, perverted, sexist, racist, purist, anarchist, separatist, blasphemous, nihilist needs. (Fuct, 1997, p. 25)

The images overtly and covertly undercut the value of female participation, which creates an atmosphere detrimental to women's full participation and acceptance into the sports.

Donna Dennis-Vano (1995), writing about women's participation in ESPN's first Extreme Games in 1995, pointed out that

the women of aggressive skating . . . could blossom and receive long overdue recognition. As a group we are very underexposed, and it's tough to inspire other women to partake in a sport when all they see are male skaters. . . . [Unfortunately,] we still didn't get the prize money we were promised, nor the primetime coverage. . . . If we had worn skimpy clothes, something a little sexier, maybe along the lines of what women volleyball players wear, would we have been televised? Probably. (p. 29)

The issue, undercut by an incessant parade of mediated messages quite to the contrary, is fair access, respect, and fair treatment for female athletes.

#### UNSUPERVISED PLAY: DISCOVERY OR *LORD OF THE FLIES*?

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There are many advantages to children playing without adult supervision: Some might learn independence, problem-solving, and some may feel greater empowerment and control of their environment (e.g., Rinehart & Grenfell, 2002). This element of the play culture is positive and persuasive: In this scenario, children should be left alone to work things out, to grow strong, independent of adult interference. And certainly, in sport, we've seen lots of problems with adult supervision in age-group programs: A win-at-all-costs philosophy, an overemphasis on results rather than on skill development, a disregard for the health of one's body, and so on.

In extreme sport, children and adolescents have been cast into a situation where adult supervision is largely absent. There are peers and adults, of course, socializing them about extreme sports: Fellow practitioners are the peers; corporate, media, and administrative executives serve as the primary adult models. And they dictate the flavor of many of the skaters' experiences. Many young extremists and action sport aficionados are, to some degree, unprepared for this freedom, although they are neither criminal (as some city councils might have it, criminalizing skating in downtown areas, for

example) nor delinquents: They are kids practicing something they love. Somewhat surprisingly, they devote, without adults pushing them, countless hours perfecting tricks—just for the satisfaction of accomplishment and the thrill of the rush.

But they also are prone to the media: The images within this article have become naturalized givens, reflections of an oppositional subculture that is adult influenced. Larry Flynt, by the way, was the publisher of *Thrasher*, one of the skateboarding magazines shown in this article. The images don't necessarily offend (nudity, after all, should perhaps be less offensive than say, murder), but the subtle messages that relegate females to second-class citizen status, which help to create lifelong negative attitudes toward a whole class of human beings, should be offensive to most.

In William Golding's (1997) *Lord of the Flies*, a group of boys find themselves stranded on an island with no adults anywhere. As anyone who has read the novel knows, the vision Golding paints is not a positive one: The gaggle of boys breaks up into two groups, one that represents civilization, the other representing, perhaps, the "spark of wildness . . . [and] the forces of anarchy" (Golding cited in Epstein, 1997, p. 206). In this seemingly Eden-like environment, the boys, who are influenced by normative British society, transcend into darkness, greed, power struggles, and ultimately murder. Golding's own critique of the book characterizes the story's

moral [being] that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system however apparently logical or respectable . . . where adult life appears, dignified and capable, [it is] in reality enmeshed in the same evil as the symbolic life of the children on the island. (Golding cited in Epstein, 1997, p. 204)

Similarly, in some of extreme sport culture, like skateboarding and aggressive in-line skating,<sup>12</sup> adolescents and preadolescents have been cast on their own. These usually young boys are influenced mostly by each other. But they are also influenced, similarly to tobacco-marketers' approach, by marketing that skews reality, which piques the interest, and whose aim is to produce lifelong consumers of the product. The adult influence, in skating, is not coming from parents, coaches, or other responsible adults but rather in the guise of identification with an outlaw culture, from multinational corporations and large conglomerate media firms. And the impression made on young kids is dramatic, attitude-altering, and a mirror of what's gone on before—and what, unless change and interventions occur, will continue to occur in action sports.

## NOTES

1. See Rinehart (2004) for a more in-depth analysis of why these sports might be considered postmodern.
2. While presenting a variation of this article at the University of the Pacific in 2001, I was challenged by an audience member as to his dismay that I was unfairly characterizing skating magazines, skaters, and the subculture of skating itself by using

old data. Certainly, the forms of patriarchal hegemony evolve into new and more subtle forms over time and because of societal challenges; however, a quick check of current magazine ads in skating magazines will confirm many of the points I make within this article. One of the major reasons I took on the alternative scene as a focus of my research interests is because of its emergent nature: Much of the given nature of mainstream sports is not present when something new is emerging, and it makes a more obvious case when biases are out in the open at the beginning of new cultural forms. So, too, with extreme sports, as they have morphed from extreme to X to action based on, to a large degree, public acceptance—dominant and mainstream public acceptance.

3. This practical definition of *mainstream* in terms of sport hopefully does not run counter to Raymond Williams's (1977) way of defining the dominant: He contrasts it with, in fact creates interdependencies between, the dominant and the residual and the emergent. Williams also points out that none of these three categories is static. In the same way, the dominant, residual, and emergent in sport structures are continually reestablishing themselves and the degree to which they hold sway of sport culture.
4. The question itself, of course, is begged by the notion of differences that Whelehan (2000) points out as deriving from "Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). In *The Whole Woman* (1999), Greer laments the all-too-hasty transition from calls to liberation to the language of equality" (p. 13). The sense of control of one's own life, as opposed to asking for permission to join something, makes all the difference in the world.
5. In a sociology of sport class exercise, students compare column inches for gendered sport and the totals of coverage for males range (in 2004) from 7 to 9 times more than for females.
6. See Kusz (2003) for a good discussion of the coalescence of action sports, White privilege, and popular culture incitement to a reinstatement of White-male-as-victim.
7. Indeed, in sport-time, *extreme* as a term that denotes most of the activities ESPN has embraced within their Extreme or X-Games is quite short. The first Extreme Games was broadcast in summer of 1995. It is interesting to note how quickly societal acceptance of extreme sports has occurred, whereas, as a comparison, there is still a great deal of resistance to gender equity after the 1972 introduction of the Title IX Amendment. I would propose that much of the ethos in existence within so-called extreme sport has been deliberately aligned to mainstream values (and thus easily accepted), whereas the fight for gender equity is a genuinely transformational, oppositional, and seditiously insurgent social act. But still, Title IX does not reach into local governments.
8. Of course, local governments (townships, cities, and counties in the United States) have debated the wisdom of incorporation in their own ways: Skating on public thoroughfares has been deemed by most to be antithetical to community values, so local governments have seen fit to build skate parks, usually run by the local recreation and park districts, under the aegis of the local government. By building such parks, of course, the hope is to control and marginalize the activities. Building such parks and providing sponsorship of them also works to incorporate oppositional behaviors of youth into licit and sanctioned activities.
9. In the postmodern sportscape, irony and parody complicate understandings of some of the ad campaigns. For example, Arlo Eisenberg of Senate clothing "thought it would be funny to print 'Destroy All Girls' on the laundry tags sewed into Senate clothes. . . . [said Eisenberg] 'It was just a joke . . . [but] the people in our market get turned on by controversy. It makes them want the product twice as bad'" (Cooper, 1997, p. 17). The point I am trying to make here is that the primary object of the ad campaigns—the demographic of 12- to 34-year-old males (quite a range of ages!)—may not be aware of the ironic or parodic elements and may in fact learn misogynist attitudes from powerful ad campaigns such as these.

10. If one interrogates the notion of dominant readings vis-à-vis standpoint epistemology, one realizes that the concept of dominant readings is fundamentally based on a scientific, statistical model, where numbers of roughly agreeing individuals, taken collectively, establish dominance. However, dominance has come to mean power and control and is not always based on numerical superiority; the case of South African apartheid rule demonstrates a numerical disadvantage, yet a hegemonic, dominant case for White elitism. One's standpoint epistemology, however, tends to problematize such theorizing: An *n* of one still has the ability (and perhaps responsibility) to put forth her viewpoint, to make his voice heard. Thus, coming from a position of individually laden standpoint, and assuming dominant readings, is perhaps always a fallacious argument. Thus, I have participant- and scholar-checked these images with others (from lectures, from a variety of readings to various groups) to get their readings of the key issues involved in the advertisements. However, having said that, the critiques of the ads insist on multiple readings of them, so the dominant portion of the reading is undercut already.
11. This untouchable status parallels the Madonna-whore dialectic where a female is seen as dramatically revered or wholly consumable.
12. Adventure racing is one of perhaps many exceptions where there is "a different kind of sexism . . . obviously because it is not adolescent culture, where women are seen as 'mandatory' equipment in obligatory mixed teams" (Kay, 1999, personal communication).

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