

‘Every Body is a Rugby Body’ - The Effect Rugby has on Collegiate Women’s Body Image

Emma DuPont, Department of Anthropology, NDSU

Introduction

This research explored the connection between rugby and these women’s body image: questioning the ways rugby impacts how the players view their bodies or how their relationship with their bodies changed. Previous literature surrounding body image in rugby states a negative connection; that players are overly concerned with how they will be perceived by others and the stereotypes that will be placed upon them (2). My background research noted a large pressure for women in sports to conform to societal body standards and women who participate in contact sports such as rugby have a difficult time accepting their non-stereotypical bodies (1).

Methodology

The findings presented here come from 3 months of ethnographic research on the women’s rugby team at North Dakota State University

Participant Observation: I conducted 18 hours of participant observation at field 2 of the Johnson Soccer complex, the NDSU Union, player’s houses, and misc. sites around the Fargo/Moorhead area.

Semi-structured and Unstructured Interviews: I conducted and recorded 5 hours of semi and unstructured interviews with multiple members of the team.

Surveying: I documented the responses received from four player’s completion of an “Experiences in Rugby” survey which contained 9 short-answer form questions.

Thematic Analysis: Codes developed through repetitive readings of fieldnotes by observing key topics and patterns.

Results

In interviews with two senior rugby players, it was clear rugby profoundly changed the way they viewed their bodies:

- “There aren’t many times when I feel confident about my body but when I play rugby, that is the best that I feel. I feel the most attractive, the happiest, the most powerful, the most in-control.” - Lia, senior player
- “I see a lot of people who are very comfortable in their skin, maybe not all the time, but any body is a rugby body. You don’t need to be ridiculously lean and quick to play rugby and you don’t need to be ridiculously huge and unmovable to play rugby either. You can have every type of body and there would be a position for you.”- Katie, senior player
- She clarified that while she still does compare herself sometimes, the confidence of the girls on the team makes them so appealing to her and makes her think ‘why not me? There’s nothing holding me back from thinking that besides myself... On a rugby team, I feel so important. I know my body is important, I know that what I’m doing is important no matter what happens... I could gain or lose weight and still be an asset to the rugby team no matter what.’- Fieldnotes/Katie, senior player

Discussion

Following analysis of my data, I found a positive connection between playing rugby and body image; contradicting previous literature. Players expressed acceptance of their bodies. These women play rugby for themselves, not other people, and show very little concern for how others view their bodies or the stereotypes that may be attached to their participation in the sport.

Conclusion

Overall, playing rugby is seen to positively impact one’s view of their body. My research contributes to the limited knowledge of the inside perspective of female athletes in a male-dominated sport.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the NDSU women’s rugby team for allowing me to observe their fall season and Dr. Rubinstein for guiding me through this process.

References Cited:

- (1) Bolin, Anne, and Jane Granskog, eds. (2003) *Athletic Intruders: Ethnographic Research on Women, Culture, and Exercise*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- (2) Ezzell, Matthew B. *Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch: Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Women’s Rugby*. *Social Problems* 56, no. 1 (2009): 111–31. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2009.56.1.111>.