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CHELSEA LITCHFIELD AND RYLEE A. DIONIGI

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# Rituals in Australian Women's Veteran's Field Hockey

Chelsea Litchfield, Charles Sturt University, Australia  
Rylee A. Dionigi, Charles Sturt University, Australia

*Abstract: The emergence of Masters and Veteran's sports over the last three decades has provided a platform for women to participate in sport as they age. Although Masters and Veteran's sporting events can be highly competitive, these events are typically framed in participatory discourses which emphasise fun and friendship on and off the field. This study examined the experiences of women (aged 45 years and over) competing in a State Veteran's Hockey tournament in New South Wales, Australia. In-depth interviews and field observations were undertaken at both the hockey fields and the tournament's championship dinner. Ritual was a key theme to emerge from data analysis. This notion of ritual had two broad and interacting dimensions: recurrence and cultural norms. The tournament itself was a special event that these women planned for and returned to year after year. The championship dinner was a recurring highlight of the tournament that always included a dress-up theme, alcohol consumption and dancing. Other off the field cultural norms included practical jokes, comedic team mascots and uniforms, and ensuring alcohol was available at the grounds. Overall, these rituals in women's veteran's hockey allowed for team bonding, social connections, enjoyment and feelings of empowerment that extended beyond just playing the sport. Focusing on the stories and lived experiences of older sportswomen offers alternative meanings of ageing, sport and gender.*

*Keywords: Alcohol, Cultural Norms, Event, Gender, Sport*

## Introduction

The emergence of Masters and Veteran's sports across the developed world over the past 30 plus years has provided space for women to participate in sport as they age. The women's 'Vet's' field hockey movement in Australia is one example of this trend. While age 35 qualifies one as a 'Vet' hockey player, there are teams in the over-50s competition that have women aged in their 60s and 70s. Given that field hockey is a popular sport for girls in Australia, and one of the only mixed gendered sports that has more women than men participants (Hockey Census 2007), there has been a rise in the number of women playing at the Vet's level. This increase is because women are continuing with their sport of hockey as they age or new players are starting to play the game at an older age.

Despite the growing interest in Veteran's hockey, middle-aged and older sportswomen (i.e., aged 45 years and over) generally remain the minority among their age-matched peers because participation in sport typically declines as one ages (Weir, Baker, and Horton 2010). Given this trend, our study focusses on the experiences of women who have become or remained involved in hockey in later life to understand the barriers they face, how they overcome them and what they gain from participating in women-only sporting events. Sharing the stories of older sportswomen may help encourage other women to maintain regular levels of physical, mental and social activity; which are key ingredients to healthy aging (Chodzko-Zajko, Schwinge, and Park 2009). While there are many psychological, physical and sociological factors that influence sport participation in later life, the purpose of this paper is to examine the 'off the field' experiences of women (aged 45 years and over) competing in a State Veteran's Hockey tournament in New South Wales, Australia. In particular, we are interested in the extent to which their experiences and practices in Vet's hockey resist, reproduce and/or transcend socio-cultural constructions of gender, femininity, aging, and team sport culture.

In Western cultures, women were not expected to play sport or be vigorously active, especially as they got older (Hayles 2005; Vertinsky 1995, 2002). Traditional notions of gender position women as caregivers and/or housewives, while dominant discourses of femininity in the

past have defined women (particularly older women) as relatively weak, passive, and incompetent (Hargreaves 1994; Vertinsky 1995; Young 1990). Moreover, dominant discourses of *aging as a state of decline* position older people as frail, lonely, and dependent on others (O'Brien Cousins and Vertinsky 1999; Wearing 1995).

Sporting events were traditionally promoted to and organized for young people, especially males, and based on a model of *performance and power* which emphasizes masculinity, competition, strength, aggression, youthfulness, and team bonding (Coakley 2007). Although women's Vet's hockey events can also be highly competitive, these 'women-only' tournaments, like Masters and Disability sport and the 'Gay Games', are typically framed in participatory discourses which emphasize fun and friendship both on and off the field (Coakley 2007; Dionigi 2008). In other words, *pleasure and participation* discourses are typically used to describe, legitimate, and promote women's ongoing involvement in sport. Thus, today we see women, of varying ages, not only competing in sport, but spending days away from their families to enjoy major tournaments. Nevertheless, research on middle-aged and older women in sport is rare, particularly from the perspectives of women themselves.

## Theoretical Frame

To understand how middle-aged and older women experience such 'women-only' sporting events, and to examine the extent to which their practices resist, reproduce and/or transcend constructions of gender, femininity, aging, and team sport culture, our study adopts qualitative methods within a post-structural framework. From this standpoint we argue that personal and cultural practices and understandings of sport, femininity, aging, and gender are linked to power relations in society (Shaw 2001, 2006; Wearing 1995, 1998). That is, we see women as active agents involved in the (re)construction of their identities and social worlds, as well as being influenced by socio-cultural norms and practices. In particular, we use Turner's (1969; 1974) concepts of ritual and 'communitas' to interpret our findings on the women's 'off the field' practices.

Rituals and symbolic behavior are spaces in which social transformation may emerge and affect social practice (Driver 1991; Gergen 1991; Turner 1969). Communitas can refer to feelings of equality and a generic bond among participants of rituals that appears where social structure (i.e., an arrangement of hierarchical positions or power) does not (Turner 1969, 94-97, 125-130). In this sense, we use Turner's concepts of ritual and communitas to argue against structural functionalism and in favour of human knowledge as lived experience because we are interested in the meanings that these women attach to their experiences and how these meanings shape and are shaped by social structures. The following section provides a review of research on women-only team sports and sporting sub-cultures as sites for ritual and communitas, as well as highlights gaps in knowledge.

## Review of Literature

Sporting competitions involving only women have been interpreted as sites of resistance and empowerment because of the opportunities they provide for women to experience their bodies in strong and powerful ways through 'non-traditional female activities' and create a sense of community within a context free from male domination (Blinde, Taub and Han 1994; Castelnovo and Guthrie 1998; Henderson et al. 1996; Theberge 1986; Shaw 2001, 2006; Wiley, Shaw, and Havitz 2000). Some women-only sporting cultures have been found to emphasize social support, care, safety, a sense of belonging, friendships, enjoyment, and celebration, as well as the rejection of the overemphasis on competition, winning-at-all-costs, elitism, and domination over others (Birrell and Richter 1987; Birrell and Theberge 1994; Griffin 1998;

Henderson and Bialeschki 1994; Heuser 2005; Hillier 2005; Krane 2001; Lenskyj 2003; Symons 2002, 2004; Theberge 1987, 1991, 1995, 1997, 2000).

In 1995, Theberge examined the construction of community in an elite-level Canadian women's ice hockey team and found that it was "grounded in members' shared identity as hockey players and their commitment to the sport" (389). This common passion for hockey united women from diverse social backgrounds and locations. Theberge (1997, 2000) also showed how women's team sport practices can simultaneously reinforce and resist the values embedded in mainstream sports culture through the negotiation of tensions inherent in discourses of sport, gender, femininity, and masculinity. More recently, Litchfield (2012) investigated the experiences of Australian women field hockey players and found that these women engaged in sport in a space that was safe, affirming, and offered a sense of community within their team environment. In this study, the participants from the women-only club (in a three case study sample) experienced a heightened sense of empowerment, identity, and resistance to gender constructions, when compared to the mixed-gendered hockey clubs.

However, none of the abovementioned studies have focused on the specific processes of team bonding nor the 'off the field' rituals associated with middle-aged and older women's team sports. By rituals, we mean recurring events and practices, team customs and cultural norms associated with team sports (Driver 1991). Rituals such as these are a significant part of team sport participation because they are the underlying processes which allow for the feelings of community, social support, friendships, and inclusiveness, indicated in the above studies, to emerge. On the other hand, rituals can also create an exclusive culture and the subordination of others, as is commonly observed in men's team sport (discussed below). Therefore, as Driver (1991) explained, "[r]ituals are capable of excluding as well as capable of producing social gifts such as order, transformation, and community" (McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan 2009, 21). A sense of community, also known as 'communitas' (Turner 1974, 83), "involves the feeling of acceptance and the accepting of others, often regardless of social status or background" (McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan 2009, 21). A hallmark of communitas is that it typically emerges in contexts where individuals are able to step out of their everyday lives and into a world where connection to others develops spontaneously and temporarily (Turner 1969; 1974). Traditional sites for community, such as churches and neighborhoods, are now being replaced by contexts such as sport and leisure, where feelings of community are created through symbolic play (Gergen 1991; Turner 1974).

Lyons and Dionigi (2007) examined meanings of community as they developed among older adults participating in Masters sports to show how these feelings of community are not necessarily episodic or fleeting, rather they can provide older people with sustained connections. McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan (2009) found that women golfers "appeared to achieve communitas with like-minded women who were connected by their willingness to engage as men do in gendered golf rituals" (31). Through their examination of women golfer's opinions of ritual-based behavior in golf, McGinnis, Gentry and McQuillan also found that these women:

...embraced the sport and challenged masculine rituals or provided alternative women-inclusive rituals. They recognized the importance of golf for their personal enjoyment and/or professional lives and refused to be excluded based on gender. (2009, 25)

Examining the extent to which women Vet hockey players simultaneously embrace and challenge team sport rituals and/or develop "alternative women-inclusive rituals" that build a sense of identity and community could extend the work done in this area of study.

Most of the research (and media coverage) on communitas in sport, such as team bonding, sporting sub-cultures, 'off the field' antics and alcohol consumption is about male athletes in professional sports (see Curry 1991; Gough and Edwards 1998). Theberge (1995) explained that the significance of men's team sport runs deeper than the pleasure of camaraderie, shared experiences, and 'acting silly together'. Rather, "[t]he subculture of men's sport is also one of the

most important bases for the reproduction of masculine hegemony” (Theberge 1995, 389). In other words, most of these male experiences and bonding processes involve a culture that subjugates women, women’s experiences, and women’s sporting achievements. Anderson (2005) explained that “...the social world created around men’s power, physicality, and performance in sport subverts respect for women, whom are not viewed as worthy participants in the sporting terrain” (35). Therefore, given the complex relationship of gender and sport, it is not surprising that research regarding female bonding rituals in a similar way to men in sport is rare.

Nevertheless, observational evidence suggests that women who play Vet’s hockey engage in team bonding rituals, through activities such as the consumption of alcohol and ‘dressing up’ in costumes at tournaments (Dionigi 2008; Litchfield 2012). These observations make it important to examine the extent to which these women’s ‘off the field’ practices resist, reproduce, and/or transcend constructions of team sport culture typically associated with youth and men. Through combining insights from the ritual and *communitas* aspects of team sports with insights from post-structural theories in sport, this study will examine women’s lived experiences of Vet’s hockey.

**Methods**

*Participants and Data Collection*

This study is part of a larger research project in which all participants were recruited from the 2011 New South Wales Women’s Veteran’s Hockey Championships held in Bathurst, Australia. There were approximately 1,200 women across 112 teams from 32 clubs participating in this event over four days. We interviewed 25 women hockey players (aged 47 - 73 years) once each for 30-60 minutes on-site at the tournament using the interview guide approach (see Patton 2002). The interviews were audio recorded and the topics included: the role and meaning of sports participation in their lives; the barriers they have negotiated over time to maintain participation in sport and; their experiences at the current event. Most of the participants interviewed were white, English speaking and middle-class, while one of the women identified as Indigenous Australian. Typical case (or purposive) sampling (see Patton 2002) was based on age (over 45 years), team (a range of teams) and gender (female) so that we gained responses from a variety of women. Refer to Table 1 for participant characteristics.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

No.	Name	Age	Team	Sexual Orientation	Marital Status	Education	Current employment	Started playing Veteran’s
1	Sally	53	Bathurst 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Diploma	Full-time	44 years
2	Carmen	67	Tamworth 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Completed high school	Retired	41 years
3	Shane	64	Tumit 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Completed high school	Part-time	37 years
4	Anna	67	Illawara 50s	Other	Married	Completed high school	Volunteer	41 years
5	Alison	66	Illawara 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor Degree	Retired	39 years
6	Sophie	60	Illawara 50s	Other	Divorced	Bachelor Degree	Retired	35 years
7	Jacqui	66	Illawara	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor	Retired	39 years

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			50s			Degree		
8	Narelle	63	Illawara 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor Degree	Retired	37 years
9	Zara	73	Newcastle 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Completed high school	Retired	35 years
10	Trish	60	Newcastle 45s	Heterosexual	Married	Non-university tertiary qualification	Retired	55 years
11	Monique	59	Newcastle 50s	Heterosexual	De-facto	Bachelor Degree	Retired	45 years
12	Claire	56	Dubbo 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor Degree	Full-time	45 years
13	Cate	70	Dubbo 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Completed high school	Full-time	43 years
14	Sarah	50	North Shore 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Non-university tertiary qualification	Part-time	37 years
15	Jane	51	Armidale 50s	Heterosexual	Divorced	Bachelor Degree	Full-time	36 years
16	Kelly	59	Tumit 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Non-university tertiary qualification	Part-time	45 years
17	Rachel	54	Tumit 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor Degree	Full-time	35 years
18	Carrie	47	Eastern Districts 45s	Lesbian	De-facto	Masters	Full-time	35 years
19	Donna	49	Bathurst 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Non-university tertiary qualification	Full-time	35 years
20	Amy	52	Bathurst 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor Degree	Full-time	35 years
21	Prue	61	Illawarra 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Non-university tertiary qualification	Part-time	35 years
22	Lucy	57	Parkes 50s	Heterosexual	De-facto	Completed Year 9	Full-time	36 years
23	Marlene	55	Parkes 45s	Heterosexual	Married	Completed high school	Part-time	35 years
24	Loraine	56	Tamworth 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor Degree	Full-time	35 years
25	Kim	65	Tamworth 50s	Heterosexual	Married	Completed high school	Retired	37 years

Field observations also took place over the four days of competition at both the hockey fields and the tournament's Championship dinner. Participant interactions, conversations, and

actions were left to unfold naturally, with the women generally being uninterrupted and unaware of the researcher's presence (Adler and Adler 1998).

### *Data Analysis*

The transcribed verbatim interview data and observational field notes were thematically analysed. In thematic analysis, "the analyst looks for themes which are present in the whole set of interviews and creates a framework of these for making comparisons and contrasts between the different respondents [transcripts]" (Gomm 2004, 189). Initially, each transcript and field note was coded and tentative themes were drawn out, such as team bonding, competitiveness, entitlement, fun and friendship, alcohol and support. Codes were then compared and contrasted across the whole data set and combined into raw data themes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). From these initial descriptive categories, higher order themes (more refined concepts) were developed and agreed amongst the authors to best represent the 'off the field' experiences of the women at this event. The women's meanings and observed practices were then interpreted within the context of broader social discourses of sport, aging, gender, and femininity, as well as notions of ritual and *communitas*.

Therefore, this study takes an interpretive approach to analysis because we were interested in "understanding people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it" (Taylor and Bogdan 1998, 7) and then examining these meanings within a post-structural framework using Turner's (1969; 1974) concepts of ritual and *communitas*. A strength of this interpretive approach is that we can provide rich descriptions of the sporting sub-culture in which we are investigating (Geertz 1973). A limitation of focussing on a niche group of female athletes, however, is that our findings are not generalizable to all women's sports. Nevertheless, qualitative research recognizes that there is always another way to interpret the lives and stories of the people being studied (Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

### **Findings**

'Ritual' was a key theme to emerge from data analysis focusing on the women's lived experiences at this event. This notion of ritual had two broad and interacting dimensions – recurrence and cultural norms. The tournament itself, and the Championship dinner, were recurring special events that these women planned for and returned to year after year. Individual teams had rituals that carried over from one tournament to another, such as team mascots and warm-up routines. Other 'off the field' cultural norms, that were common across all teams, were related to apparel, initiation, practical jokes, and alcohol. Each theme is described separately below, however it is acknowledged that these themes are interacting and at times overlapping due to the complex nature of Vet's rituals.

#### *Recurrence*

##### **The event, Sustained Friendships, and Community: 'Once a Vet, always a Vet'**

The NSW Women's Veteran's Hockey Championships was a yearly event, and for many participants it took a significant amount of planning. However, despite the organisation and sacrifices made by many of the women, they travelled to the event on a yearly basis. Most of the women described their annual trip away with fellow participants as a concrete fixture on the calendar. Players explained the normalcy of attending the tournament every year with their teammates:



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Yeah we call it our winter season trip... we have a trip away every year... I think it's just the enjoyment of it all, it's looking forward to the, all the different women and talking to them... (Sally 53 years)

Oh I love it...I've been coming away with these girls for about 14 years and I just, it's always fun and it's always friendly and it's always, supportive... I just come every year. (Kelly 59 years)

There was also a strong sense of support among these women and a common phrase expressed by them was 'once a Vet, always a Vet'. Players could come and go, but were always welcome and would always be supported by the Vet's community. As Jane explained, "... it's a really good support network...it's just there for you when required." The Indigenous participant (and the oldest player at the Games), Zara, explained the support she received since joining the Vet's culture some three decades earlier:

My team here, well I played with the 35s and 40s. Now I'm in the 50s and I wouldn't leave them, they are excellent, they are good players, they encourage you and they're caring and they're ... all like big sisters.... (Zara 73 years)

An overriding discovery was that the participants came from a wide variety of occupations, socio-economic backgrounds, sexualities, and family structures. However, these differences appeared irrelevant once the women came together at the hockey tournament due to their shared passion for the sport and their common interest in having fun and making friends. Marlene (55 years) said:

Even in the NSW team last year I played with, from solicitors to a lot of teachers and even [women from] lower socioeconomic [backgrounds]... We stay together and that's good... everyone is included [in] the team ...

In addition, many of the participants discussed the friendship and support received by all of their teammates on the field and more significantly, off the field:

Well, it's mainly the friendship and the camaraderie and the support that you get for life, you know?...And then part of coming is to sit down and have a chat and talk about everything else that's happening in your life. And you talk about your worries and woes sometimes. (Monique 59 years)

Oh, this world, that's what I said before, is just absolute fun, enjoyment, pleasure... come away with a group of women that have like-minds, you know? And we all talk about our family and we're very supportive of one another, you know? And if something happens to one of us, well, we'll help one another and that's the great world that it is, you know? I wish the whole world was like it. (Trish 60 years)

The like-mindedness of these women helped to create an inclusive community that was not episodic or fleeting, but sustained across these women's mid to later lives. Another recurring event within the Veteran's tournament that helped build this collective identity, culture of fun, and commitment to hockey was the Championship dinner.

### **The Championship Dinner**

The formal dinner organized for the Veteran's championships was an event attended by most participants. It was organized by the host teams and always included a dress-up theme related to the host town. The dinner in 2011 had a 'car racing' theme and those who dressed up chose

police officer outfits, car racing suits and skimpy 'heterosexy' outfits such as 'pit girl' costumes (see Image 1 below). Dancing to music, role playing (such as pretending to do a strip tease) and drinking large amounts of alcohol were common at the dinner.



Image 1: The 4 Ex-Angels on the dance floor at the Championship dinner

Some of the anecdotal information from the dinner in 2011 and past dinners at other Vet's tournaments is included below:

Dancing all night, non-stop. Dressing up in a theme, you know when you go to the dinner.... But that's not going to change. You meet some great people, just the most amazing people. They don't have to be millionaires, they don't have to be paupers, it's just the most amazing people you meet. (Rachel 54 years)

So we got the long black [dress] t-shirts...And then each of us decorated... I might've had the red lettering or something and so I added red embellishment and whatever. And I found red and black eyelashes. Well, looking at the photos afterwards I said...I look like a transvestite [laughs]. (Amy 52 years)

As outlined above, dressing up provided a fun theme to the Championship dinner, and there were different extents to which participants employed costume wearing. The dinner, and to a greater extent the Veteran's tournament, provided a space for the women to engage in activities that they do not have the opportunity to do during their work or home lives. Carmen explained that "...it helps to do fun things [that] you wouldn't get a chance to do at home..." (67 years).

Another practice that was considered 'abnormal' in their daily lives was the amount of alcohol consumption at the dinner. Women were observed drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, often to the extent of intoxication. These 'drunk' women were engaging in practices that would be considered provocative in most social settings, such as pretending to undress on the dance floor, while other women (seated at their dinner tables), cheered and whistled. In addition, several participants chose not to 'wait in line' to purchase alcohol at the dinner, and preferred to 'smuggle' in their own alcohol, often including several bottles of wine or spirits in their handbags. In particular, some of them women used 'hip flasks' to store their alcohol spirits.

### Team Rituals

Another noticeable practice that occurred at the hockey tournament was the celebration and continuation of individual team traditions, such as team warm-up rituals, mascots and embroidered jerseys. However, none of these rituals were out of the ordinary for most of the participants, rather there was an acceptance that these practices were part of the culture that bonds teams together, as explained below:

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... there's a lot of ceremony and traditions, there's a lot of rules and things that they do which help the whole bond of a whole lot of teams... They can muck up, they can drink, they can wear silly costumes and they can just be themselves, and nobody looks at somebody who's wearing an alligator on their head and goes, 'you're a dickhead'. No, they just think, 'oh yeah cool'. (Carrie 47 years)

One particular team engaged in a warm-up ritual before every match. This ritual did not include hitting a hockey ball or running, it involved a celebrated dance to the 'Nutbush' for all other teams to see (see Image 2 below).



Image 2: Dancing to the 'Nutbush' was a warm-up ritual for this team

Another team brought along mannequin mascots to each Veteran's tournament. Players explained that at the previous tournament the mascot was a lone female mannequin dressed up in the team's colors, and in 2011, a male mannequin was added. Players also explained that at the next tournament, they will add a child mannequin to the mascots.

Another particular team engaged in a tradition where each player had a jersey with the team colors on it, and one of the sleeves were embroidered each year (see Image 3 below).



Image 3: Embroidery on the sleeves of team hockey jerseys to remember each event

This embroidery included the year of the veteran's hockey tournament and a short description of the highlights. For example, for one participant, the years 2004 and 2007 were remembered by the phrases 'Bloody hard work' and 'More bloody hard work', respectively and for 2008 '3rd gear' was embroidered next to it. This latter phrase referred to a member of her team driving the

bus all the way to the tournament in 3<sup>rd</sup> gear without realizing it, and this is how players in her team remember, laugh, and reminisce about that tournament. Other 'off the field' cultural norms (that were common across all teams) associated with apparel, initiation, practical jokes, and the 'Vets Pact' are presented below.

### *Cultural Norms*

#### **Apparel**

The most common apparel for women at the tournament included team uniforms. Team tracksuits were worn with pride by all of the women when they were not playing a game. Even the managers and coaches wore their team uniform over the duration of the event. Identifiable gaudy team apparel, such as outlandish hats, oversized glasses, fairy wings, and brightly colored scarves were worn by many women on and off the hockey field. Therefore, dressing up was not limited to the Championship dinner – it was evident across the entire event. Some of the players described how 'dressing up' created a fun and united culture:

Yeah it's just fun, it's fun to be able to just dress and wear what you like and like one of our team members made us all these scarves just so our team just all had a scarf, so it all just keeps you together. (Lorraine 56 years)

Oh we usually have some sensational fancy dress. One night we were playing...at 6:00 at night. It was freezing and we were playing a fairly good team, but our focus was totally on our fancy dress... 'come on, let's get home, we've got to get back to [making] our fancy dress'... (Carrie 47 years)

Vet's jumpers/jerseys were also an important part of the culture. A colored Veteran's jersey was an earned commodity and what many women were aiming to achieve through their continued participation in hockey. Jerseys were used to represent and celebrate age and length of time in as a Vet. All 50-year-old women were presented with a gold jersey, all 60-year-old women with a green jersey and all 70-year-old with a maroon jersey. Some of the players explained the importance of this tradition:

These jumpers are important. They are... really important because the whole thing is getting older and still being able to be out there and participate at some level, yeah and maintain a level of fitness, body and mind really, yeah. (Jane 51 years)

Oh I suppose when I got my gold jumper for being 50 that was an event that I said I was really, really proud of and I look forward to receiving my green jumper when I turn 60. (Kelly 59 years)

#### **Initiation**

Participants explained that there were initiation rituals of which new Veteran's players or 'Vets virgins' would follow. Such activities included having to wear unusual outfits both on the field and off the field, such as fairy dresses and tiaras. This initiation ritual was observed across women from a range of different hockey teams and was essentially a celebration to welcome new women into the culture and family of Veteran's hockey.

If you're a first time player... we'll think of something really silly for them to wear just to show that they're the virgin ...so they get targeted to wear the fairy dresses and different colours and stuff so that they stand out and everyone knows that they're the

virgin... a bit of fun just to sort of...make them feel a bit welcome into the teams... (Sally 53 years)

...I was a virgin when I come to Maitland, they dressed me up as something... Every year we have new virgins and then they fit into the team... they can't wait to get into the over 35s because they've heard we have so much fun! (Zara 73 years)

### **Practical Jokes**

Practical jokes were another ritual practiced within teams and between teams. While such jokes were usually quite harmless in nature, they provided another example of women participating in activities outside of their 'normal' daily lives. A few of these practical jokes within teams included:

Glad wrap on the toilet seat and lid down [laughing]... Iceblocks and your cereal sprinkled in your bed. [Laughing] Yeah. Bit childish. Yeah... It's fun... We've done things like hung people's washing on the plants on the way up [to our rooms at the hotel]. (Shane 64 years)

The above woman recognized that what they were doing may be considered as 'childish', yet it is an example of women 'acting silly together'. Another participant explained the types of practical jokes played on women from other teams:

The ACT had... a bear and the bear [was] kidnapped and [held] ransom... we've had photos of the bear... duck taped to a car, you know, and then little notes around, you had to go and find where it is... (Rachel 54 years)

Donna explained that playing practical jokes on her teammates and others at the hockey tournament is completely out of her everyday character and role at work:

I think I could honestly say that people who know me in work have seen another side to me. This is a side that I just love and it has always been me from a young age, but at work I just haven't got time... (Donna 49 years)

Given that many of these women were aware that they were acting in ways that they would not otherwise act outside of the Vet's hockey culture, such as dressing up, acting foolish, and drinking alcohol, there was an understanding among these women (that we have termed the Vet's Pact), as explained below.

### **'What Happens on Tour Stays on Tour' – Alcohol and the Vet's Pact**

Alcohol was widely available for sale, not only at the Championship dinner, but also at the hockey grounds. Many of the women brought along their own alcohol to consume after matches and during breaks between matches. A common expression particularly related to alcohol consumption at this event was 'what happens on tour stays on tour':

...yes it is a weekend away and it's just like the men's sporting trips. What, what happens away, stays away... (Kelly 59 years)

A few drinks and all the funny things that go on, whoever you're rooming with...What goes on tour stay on tour...It's just all fun...Oh, you hear some funny things, yeah, all the jokes and different things that happen. (Cate 70 years)

It's a girls' weekend, this is a girls' weekend away. And you know, what stays on tour, what happens on tour stays on tour... Yeah that's really what it is. (Rachel 54 years)

One particular team at the tournament had a jersey made up with a particular quote on it, which read 'my drinking team has got a hockey problem' (see Image 4 below).



Image 4: "My drinking team has a hockey problem" was embroidered on their blue jersey

Despite the presence and consumption of alcohol, a supportive, inclusive, and enjoyable community of compatible women, from a variety of socio-economic and professional backgrounds, was experienced. This collective identity manifested through recurring rituals and accepted team bonding cultural norms, including alcohol, as summarized below:

...you probably drink more...more alcohol than you normally drink, but it's always in this safe environment where there is always somebody who will look after [you], nobody's ever left alone and that's another lovely thing with hockey...But it's certainly fun and for a lot of the women I know, this is such a big event in their lives. They've left their kids, they've left their grandkids, they've left their husbands, and they are out to have an excellent time and it really is their holiday. (Carrie 47 years)

## Discussion

Overall, the rituals in women's Veteran's hockey were a foundation for lasting friendships, unwavering support, and enjoyment that extended beyond just playing the sport. The following discussion explains how the 'off the field' cultural practices and rituals at the NSW Veteran's Hockey tournament simultaneously resisted, reproduced, and transcended constructions of sport, gender, femininity, and aging, as well as contributed to feelings of empowerment, identity, and *communitas* among the women.

A key finding from this study was that, on one hand, the women's 'off the field' antics were comparable to team bonding rituals often associated in the literature (and media) with males and youth (Curry 1991; Gough and Edwards 1998), especially regarding the excessive consumption of alcohol. This finding has the potential to reproduce cultural norms typically associated with team sports (such as acting silly together, playing jokes on other teams, drinking alcohol between games, and partying at night). That is, their rituals reinforce the notion that it is acceptable to act this way in a team sport context, regardless of age or gender, which has the potential to create exclusive sub-cultures (McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan 2009).

On the other hand, our findings revealed that when women engage in these rituals at sporting events, they do it differently than youth and males and they do it for different reasons. For instance, male team bonding in sport (specifically when it involves the consumption of alcohol)

often entails the objectification and subordination of women (Curry 1991; Gough and Edwards 1998; Theberge 1995). Alternatively, the team bonding and cultural rituals observed in this study were not about the subordination of men, or the rebelliousness of youth, rather they appeared to be about empowering older women in an inclusive manner. To an extent, the women were objectifying themselves by dressing up to symbolize a 'Vet's virgin' or a 'sexy' car racing 'pit girl' and engaging in sexualized practices at the Championship dinner (e.g., a mock strip tease), which can empower females in women-only contexts. As explained by McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan (2009, p. 31), and supported by Henderson (1990) and Wilson (1988) "[t]he freedom of women-only leisure unmonitored by men is relatively rare in leisure activities". So, perhaps when women have the opportunity to be in such a context they tend to act out of the ordinary and be silly together, as was evident in our study. At the same time, these acts of heightened femininity are common among females who participate in mainstream (traditionally male) sports, such as field hockey (Litchfield 2012), ice hockey (Theberge 2000), football (Hillier 2005) and body building (Guthrie and Castelnovo 1992), because women's participation in these activities can result in them being labelled masculine or 'butch' (Sartore and Cunningham 2009). Further research on women's sport participation in the absence of the 'male gaze' is necessary to examine the complexities, meanings, and practices associated with women-only sporting events.

By showing that middle-aged and older women can engage in such team sport bonding rituals and experience the 'communitas' that is typically associated with male-bonding (Curry 1991; McGinnis, Gentry and McQuillan 2009), our findings present a challenge to the traditional 'subjects' (i.e., young males) of these practices. The women in our study achieved a sense of communitas from the shared ritual-like experiences associated with playing hockey, being a Vet, and having fun away from their everyday lives with women from varying social backgrounds and professions. Similarly, McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan's research on female golfers found their participation in golfing rituals provided them with a sense of unity and acceptance, regardless of social status (2009, 21). Also, Theberge (1995) explained that the most significant aspect of team membership for elite female ice hockey players was that it offered a context for shared identity that united women from diverse social backgrounds and locations.

Communitas typically emerges in contexts where individuals are not in their everyday surroundings and can step into a world where they are seen as 'equals' and feel connected with others spontaneously (and usually only temporarily; Turner 1974). The Vet's tournament provided a safe environment for women to join a world where they were momentarily free from their responsibilities as a wife, mother or employee; however the sense of community that manifested among these Vet's was not temporary. The feelings of community and equality expressed by the women appeared grounded in the social time they had with each other, their passion for hockey, and their ongoing 'sisterly' support for one another, a finding which is similar to other studies of women in sport (see Heuser 2005 and Theberge 2000). In particular, our findings of 'Once a Vet, always a Vet' and the 'Vet's Pact' highlighted that feelings of team membership, shared identity, and camaraderie created sustained connections that supported these women across their mid-later lives. Likewise, Lyons and Dionigi (2007) argued that feelings of community that develop among older athletes can be everlasting because of their shared sporting interest, an understanding of themselves as comrades in continued activity and mutual feelings of having a relevant life purpose. McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan (2009) found that women golfers experienced communitas with a compatible group of women who were joined by their willingness to practice golf rituals. The women in our study appeared to achieve communitas with like-minded women who were connected by their willingness to dress-up, drink alcohol, play jokes on each other and play hockey, despite their age, social backgrounds or gender.

Therefore, the practices of the women in this study resisted norms and expectations commonly associated with women, particularly white, middle-class older Western women, which allowed for feelings of collective empowerment and identity management. A common argument emerging from the study of women in non-traditional female sports, such as football, rugby,

marital arts, and ice hockey, is that women's very participation in these activities means "that they are asserting their own identity [by] showing themselves to be strong and independent" (Harris 2001, 28). That is, the women in our study were resisting stereotypes of aging as a state of decline, frailty, and loneliness, as well as notions of femininity (which have positioned women as passive and weak) by showing their independence, ability, and engagement in life (O'Brien Cousins and Vertinsky 1999; Wearing 1995). They were also resisting past constructions of gender that have claimed a woman's place is in the home (Hargreaves 1994; Vertinsky 1995; Young 1990). Women's resistance to dominant aging discourses, traditional notions of femininity, and gender roles through sports participation has been found in research conducted by Dionigi 2010, Hillier 2005, Litchfield and Dionigi 2012, McGuinness, Gentry, and McQuillan 2009, and Theberge 2000. For example, Dionigi (2010) found that older female Masters athletes said they were not doing what their husbands and friends expected of them by playing sport in later life. These older women said they were expected to take up a cooking course or join a knitting club, for example.

Although women's participation in sport can be viewed as exemplifying resistance to traditional images of femininity, stereotypes of aging, or gender-appropriate roles, this does not necessarily indicate intentional resistance on the part of the participant (Dionigi 2010; Shaw 2001; Theberge 2000). For example, Theberge (1997, 2000) explored women's participation in elite ice hockey and revealed that while the players had an extremely positive experience there was little recognition of the politics of gender amongst the women and their involvement did not seem to be a conscious attempt to bring about change. The same could be said for the women in our study, who were out to have fun and did not seem acutely aware that what they were doing has the potential to disrupt or change dominant discourses or social practices. Also similar to Theberge's (2000) research, the women from our study showed how women's team sport practices can simultaneously resist and reproduce constructions of sport, gender, femininity, and aging. For instance, Theberge (1997, 2000) showed how women's team sport practices can simultaneously reinforce and resist the values embedded in mainstream sports culture through the negotiation of tensions inherent in discourses of sport, gender, femininity, and masculinity.

The women in our study were resisting aging and gender norms, reproducing and embracing some discourses and practices typically associated with male team sport rituals (such as consuming alcohol and acting foolish together) and femininity (such as hyper-sexual acts and costumes) and rejecting others (such as domination over others), as well as creating their own women-inclusive rituals that built a collective sense of identity and community. In this sense, women were mobilizing and challenging the conflicting discourses and practices associated with team sports (in part) as expressions of their collective identity. Moreover, their practices also have the potential to establish alternative understandings of what it means to be a middle-aged or older woman and possibly transcend traditional constructions of sport, gender, femininity, and aging in Western cultures. Therefore, our findings highlight the potential of sporting sub-cultures as sites for ritual and *communitas* in which social transformation may emerge and affect social practice (Driver 1991, Gergen 1991; Turner 1969).

## Conclusion

This study focused on the shared 'off the field' experiences that unite Australian women field hockey players and define them as a member of the Vet's community. Particular attention was given to the importance of these women's commitment and identity as hockey players and to the place of gender, femininity, alcohol, and aging in the construction of a supportive community. The discussion used concepts of ritual, *communitas*, resistance and empowerment to describe and interpret these phenomena and compared the results of this study with related work on the subculture of men's and women's team sport. Understanding how women experience sport is important, not only because it can encourage participation, but also because it can contribute to



gender and sociological theories in sport and help more women enjoy the benefits of involvement in sport. Our study showed that focusing on the stories and practices of older sportswomen in team settings offers alternative meanings to the dominant ways of knowing (and 'doing') aging, sport, and gender. The more examples we find of women disrupting 'taken for granted' assumptions about them, the greater potential for more women to transcend boundaries placed upon them and participate in sport as they age.

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Image 3: Embroidery on the sleeves of team hockey jerseys to remember each event

Image 4: "My drinking team has a hockey problem" was embroidered on their blue jersey

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr. Chelsea Litchfield:** Chelsea Litchfield is a lecturer with the School of Human Movement Studies at Charles Sturt University. Chelsea teaches in the areas of sport sociology, sports media and sport ethics, and her research interests lie in sport and gender, sport and sexuality and the relationship between sport and media. Chelsea holds a Bachelor of Applied Science - Physical Education (Honours) degree, and a PhD in sport sociology through Victoria University. Her thesis explores the culture of and finding safe and affirming spaces in women's team sports in Melbourne.

**Dr. Rylee A. Dionigi:** Rylee Dionigi is a senior lecturer and associate head of the School of Human Movement Studies at Charles Sturt University, Australia. She has published in the fields of sport sociology, aging and physical activity, exercise psychology and leisure studies. Dr. Dionigi has expertise in qualitative research methods and extensive knowledge on the older athlete. Her book, *Competing for life: Older people, sport and ageing* (2008), is the first published research monograph to present extensive empirical qualitative data on the personal and cultural meanings of competitive sports participation in later life.



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