AN EXAMINATION OF THE DISCOURSES PRESENT IN WOMEN’S TACKLE FOOTBALL AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GAME

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By
Mira Joanne Trebilcock
Regina, Saskatchewan
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Mira Joanne Trebilcock, candidate for the degree of Master of Science in Kinesiology & Health Studies, has presented a thesis titled, *An Examination of the Discourses Present in Women’s Tackle Football and Their Effects on the Development of the Game*, in an oral examination held on January 22, 2020. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

External Examiner: Dr. Amber Fletcher, Department of Sociology & Social Studies

Supervisor: Dr. Larena Hoeber, Faculty of Kinesiology & Health Studies

Committee Member: Dr. Claire Carter, Department of Women and Gender Studies

Committee Member: Dr. Brandy West-McMaster, Faculty of Kinesiology & Health Studies

Chair of Defense: Dr. Shadi Beshai, Department of Psychology
Abstract

Women’s football is gaining popularity in North America. There are currently twelve Canadian women’s teams, throughout six provinces. Unlike hockey, which sees a variance in rules between the women’s and men’s game, women’s football shares the same rules, regulations and equipment requirements as their male counterparts. Hypothetically, women’s football could become as popular as the men’s game but development remains slow. Fairclough, Mulderrig and Woldak’s (2011) systemic approach towards the relationship that exists between language and existing social structures, known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2012; 2013), was used to guide this qualitative study about discourses related to women’s football. Previous research has indicated that discourse has the potential to shape our thoughts, inform our beliefs, identities, and even our behaviour (Hall, 1988). Through nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with four athletes and five non-athletes (coaches and administrators) involved in the women’s game, I aimed to gain a better understanding of the ways in which we communicate in both written and spoken word (otherwise known as discourse) about women’s football to understand if there are overarching discourses either helping or hindering the development of the sport.

Reflections from a self-ethnography conducted during the 2018 Regina Riot pre-season, season and post-season also helped to illustrate specific instances and experiences where discourse directly impacted the way in which meaning is constructed and shared about women’s football. Data from participant transcripts and self-ethnographic reflections were analyzed using inductive and deductive content analysis to understand
what effects, if any, gendered discourses have on the development of women’s football in Canada.

Findings revealed three core themes: 1) an overarching sense of uncertainty surrounding women’s football, 2) that women’s football remains to be seen as an alternative version of football and 3) there exists potential for future development of the women’s game and the athletes who compete in the sport. The implications for these findings are discussed in the context of dominant gender ideology inherent in sport culture and how alternative discourses exist that reflect a greater overall cultural shift towards inclusivity.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Larena Hoeber, whose enthusiasm about diversity-related issues in sport and immense knowledge within the qualitative methods umbrella provided a great deal of motivation and insight into this naturalistic form of inquiry. Without her thoughtful guidance and kind support over the last five years, this thesis would not have been possible.

Thank you to my committee members, Brandy West-McMaster and Dr. Claire Carter, whose work in academia and in sport offered a unique lens to critically engage and explore a variety of intersecting ideologies inherent in sport. I sincerely appreciate you taking an interest in my research, asking challenging questions, encouraging constructive discussions and offering critical perspectives to improve my thesis. I would also like to thank my external reviewer, Dr. Amber Fletcher, for her fair review of this project and her critical work in bringing light to women’s contributions in various sectors where women have often been invincible.

I owe many thanks to the six women and three men who shared their experiences with me to make this project what it is, as well as all those involved with the Regina Riot Football Club. You have provided me and many women in our community, with outstanding opportunities to compete and grow together in a sport I never knew was available to me as a young girl. I am truly honoured to share these discourses and lived experiences in my thesis.

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Dedication

This study is wholeheartedly dedicated to the next generation of female athletes. May you have the opportunities to participate, compete and showcase your athletic abilities. May you receive the respect your athletic abilities deserve and not be afraid to use your voice, because as you will see through this research, the language we use matters and we have the ability to produce and reproduce new discourses every day.

I believe sport has a unique power to bridge the gaps that divide us. In 2000, at the Laureus World Sports Lifetime Achievement Awards, Nelson Mandela said, “Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where there was only despair.” By leveraging and embracing the power of sport to connect us we will realize we are much more alike than we are different. Gender should not matter, everyone plays the same game because they love the game. May this research serve as a vehicle of hope for all girls and women in sport.

To Meaghan, my family, friends, coaches and the incredible female athletes who I have had the opportunity to compete with and against over the last decade, thank you for supporting me and pushing me to continuously grow. To the accessible role models and leaders who shared their passion for sport on and off the field, I am forever grateful.
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1.1 Introduction

Canadian female athletes earned more than twice the number of medals of their male counterparts in the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics, 16 of the country’s 22 total medals to be exact (Cullen, 2016). This performance is historic on a number of levels, most notably demonstrating that women’s sports have made significant strides over the last few decades. Yet, core ideologies throughout sport culture continue to maintain the idea of sport as a male domain (Adams, Anderson, & McCormack, 2010; McDowell & Schaffner, 2011; Messner, 1988). This is particularly true for tackle football - a sport considered to be the epitome of masculinity (Berg, Migliaccio, & Anzini-Varesio, 2014; Packard, 2009). Fogel (2011) elaborates on this idea saying, “Football remains as one of the last male spaces in the sports coliseum. As such, the popularity of football rests largely on the glorification of male superiority” (p. 12). Tackle football or American gridiron football (hereafter referred to as football) is a full-contact sport that involves players using their bodies to block and tackle players to the ground to prevent the opposition from scoring points. With similar roots as rugby, football is played on a field. Contrarily, football players remain fully equipped compared to their rugby counterparts. The nature of the game requires players to display strength, physicality and aggression, all characteristics culturally associated with, and valued, in men, but not typically with women (Fogel, 2011; Koivula, 2001; Packard, 2009).

In July 2017 the third International Federation of American Football (IFAF) Women’s World Championship took place, which saw both Australian and Mexican women’s teams make their debut at the international level (Football Canada, n.d.). The emergence of more female teams and increasing participation rates across North America
reflect similar growth trends. In 2015 CNN reported that 3,000 girls and women played
tackle football in North America. That number increased to 4,000 in 2017 (Garcia, 2017).
Despite this recent growth and rise in popularity internationally, women’s football
continues to be perceived as inferior to men’s football. Women competing in football
strain the traditional constructions of masculinity, and challenge society’s acceptance of
equal opportunity in sport. Women’s sports and female athletes are often regulated
through the differentiation of rules between the men’s and women’s game. These rules
often present the women’s game as inferior to the men’s game. For example, women’s
hockey does not allow body checking and resulting infractions are penalized. In
professional tennis, men play five sets and women play three. By removing components
of a sports, it is perceived as “missing” something and thus, lesser.

While football, played by either gender, maintains the same rules, regulations and
equipment, conflicting perceptions and discourses surrounding the female athlete and the
traditions associated with football make the gridiron a paradoxical environment for
female football players. For instance, Packard (2009) commented that physical contact
and physical aggression associated to football remains a foundational component to
women’s love of the game. However, it is this same display of brute strength that too
often led those athletes to be stereotyped as “butch” or “gay” (Veri, 1999). The female
football player contests the assumptions that men’s bodies are capable of physical contact
while women’s bodies are weak and fragile. Additionally, when referencing a tackle
football player, it is inherently assumed the player is a man (Berg et al., 2014; Liechty,
Sveinson, Willfong & Evans, 2015). While heteronormativity is central to the
construction of Western sport cultures, these binary gender roles begin to lose their
traditional significance if women embody characteristics previously reserved for men, ultimately providing opportunities to construct new and varying discourses.

Discourse refers to the way a subject is talked about, the various assumptions associated with it, and the way that knowledge is generated about it (Fairclough, 2012; Hall, 1988; Veri, 1999). This research project explored the discourses that impact women’s football, such as the notion that female athletes are inferior to male athletes, or the perception that being female and an athlete are incompatible. Fairclough’s (2013) theory and method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) were used to guide this analysis of verbal and written discourse.

1.2 Significance of the Study

In February 2017, 111.3 million people tuned in to watch Super Bowl LI (Huddleston, 2017). This statistic is triple Canada’s entire population and demonstrates that football continues to be a significant and important sport in North American culture. Much of the research related to football has focussed primarily on men. The little research that does exist about women’s participation in the game focuses on masculine sporting ideals, body images of women in the sport, and identity development of players (Berg et al., 2014; Knapp, 2011; Liechty et al., 2015). The aforementioned research does suggest that women’s involvement is disrupting the heteronormative masculine nature of football, creating the potential for social change. However, it is important to first understand the present discourses being used by players, staff, and coaches to understand where the game currently stands. There are gaps that need to be filled regarding the acceptance and program development within women’s football and the female football players themselves, which this study aims to address.
Women’s participation in football contests the ideal of football being a sacred masculine domain, and in relation to sport-typing, it defies the idea of segregation of sport by gender. McDowell and Schaffner (2011) noted that discourses of masculinity and femininity serve as regulators in the gendering of sport, creating normative boundaries that discourage women’s access and acceptance into football. By completing tasks such as hitting - the physical contact associated with tackles - or the hand-eye coordination involved with catching a pass, female participants demonstrate they are capable players. Moreover, female players negate stereotyped expectations and antagonise related linguistic dimensions that construct football as a form of masculinity (McDowell & Schaffner, 2011; Meân & Kassing, 2008). Analysing the gendered discourses present in women’s football can help to bring awareness and understanding to the dominance of masculine hegemony and challenge inequitable gender relations that restrict women’s sport opportunities and undermine their athletic abilities.

Known as the great American pastime, football is a ritual that has become synonymous with American culture (Axelrod, 2001). In contrast, while football remains popular in Western Canada, it is not a staple within the Canadian culture to the extent of our Southern neighbours. The majority of studies regarding female football have been conducted in American contexts (e.g. Knapp, 2011; McDowell & Schaffner, 2011; Migliaccio & Berg, 2007; Packard, 2009). Few studies have examined female football in Canada, which is the area I wish to focus my research on. Much of the previous literature that explores the sociocultural elements of contact football leagues for women has focused on the Lingerie Football League, now referred to as the Legends Football League (LFL) (Knapp, 2015). While the LFL is able to garner a national audience, it requires the
players to be barely clothed – one major difference compared to the tackle football leagues I looked to study (Knapp, 2015). Khomutova and Channon (2015) further noted that despite the musculature and posturing in ways that signified a powerful sense of self, the LFL has operated in means that promote the male privilege. The male privilege in this instance is referring to the fact that the LFL is being produced “by men and for men” (Khomutova & Channon, 2015, p. 17). In grander terms, it is the social and economic advantages made available to men, simply because of their gender. While the league claims to promote narratives of empowerment for the female players, sexualizing the players through their uniform, promoting white hetero-femininity, and the mediated representations of these female athletes diminishes equality for female athletes’ actual athletic ability (Knapp, 2015). These notions present in the LFL work to maintain football as a male preserve, while maintaining male athletes’ more dominant and prominent image to the greater public.

Research related to other hypermasculine sports, like hockey, have accredited its inferior nature and stagnant growth of women’s versions of the sports to rule alterations (Theberge, 1997, 2000, 2003). By interviewing players, coaches, and administrative staff of various female football organizations across North America, who adopt the same rules, regulations, and attire as the professional male-counterpart teams, this research adds to the knowledge of discourses present in a hypermasculine sport whose sole difference between the men’s and women’s game is the gender of the participants. Theoretically, women’s football could become as popular and common as the men’s game, but it has not achieved this status. I explored some of the reasons of why it has not and what is preventing it from reaching that level of acceptance.
1.3 Women’s Football in North America

The Montreal Blitz were Canada’s first women’s football team and were founded in 2002 (Phillips, 2002). The Blitz played in the Independent Women’s Football League (IWFL), an American league established in 2000. The IWFL merged with the Women’s Football Alliance (WFA) and now plays host to 62 teams and is 1 of 3 American women’s football leagues in existence. The United States Women’s Football League (USWFL) comprise 9 teams and the Women’s National Football Conference (WNFC) saw its inaugural season unfold in 2019 with 20 teams, for a total of 91 women’s football teams in the United States (see Appendix A for Terminology). The Blitz unfortunately no longer compete in this league due to the increasing travel costs. These leagues are separate from the previously mentioned LFL, which originated in 2004 as the Lingerie Bowl, a pay-per-view halftime show during the National Football League’s (NFL) Super Bowl Game (Knapp, 2015). The annual bowl transitioned to a league in 2009, and currently consists of eight teams representing eight metropolitan areas of the United States (Legends Football League, n.d.).

The first Canadian women’s football league was established in 2004 in New Brunswick, called the New Brunswick Women’s Football League (NBWFL). By 2006, the league had grown to five teams from various locations in the Maritimes, including Halifax and St. John’s. This prompted a league name change to the Maritime Women’s Football League (MWFL). Currently, this league has four teams.

The Alberta Female Football League (AFFL) was created in 2010, with teams in Calgary, Edmonton, and Lethbridge. With women’s football growing in the Western provinces, a second female football league was formed in 2011 called the Western
Women’s Canadian Football League (Regina Riot, n.d). The league combined the
AFFL’s three teams, the two Manitoba teams (Manitoba Fearless and Winnipeg Nomads
Wolf Pack), and two Saskatchewan teams, the Regina Riot and the Saskatoon Valkyries.
The league has since grown to eight teams – with the addition of the Northern Anarchy
from Grande Prairie, Alberta. Yet, like many elite level women’s sports, programming
opportunities, lack of earning potential and lack of interest are major limiting factors
related to the league’s growth (Women’s Sport Foundation, 2009).

1.4 Researcher Position

Sports have always been an instrumental part of my life. I began participating in
organized sport at age five with figure skating, which eventually developed into a deep
passion for hockey. After moving eight hours away from home at age 14 to pursue
hockey at a higher level, I believed that I was just as much of an athlete as my male peers
who followed similar paths. Throughout university, I played for the women’s varsity
soccer and hockey teams, and even went on to play a few games for the Brampton
Thunder (now the Markham Thunder) of the now disbanded Canadian Women’s Hockey
League (CWHL).

Unable to pursue those sports at a professional level due a variety of reasons, I did
what most female athletes do - find a job and embark on a career. I continued to
participate in recreational women’s sport leagues in whatever city I was residing in at the
time, but they lacked the competitive nature that I had once experienced at the collegiate
level. In 2015 a colleague, who knew my competitive nature, informed me that Regina
had an elite women’s football team called the Regina Riot.
I immediately assumed he was referring to the LFL or Powderpuff football, a term in Canada often used to describe female flag football leagues. He assured me it was tackle football with rules just like the Canadian Football League (CFL). I had played such a variety of sports throughout my lifetime, including hypermasculine sports like hockey, which involved aggression, speed and strength, characteristics typically associated with males. I had never once thought that I could ever play or be allowed to play football. It was this thought provoking realization that led me to this particular research project. There are sports deemed appropriate for women, like gymnastics and tennis, however sports like football remain rather unexplored in regards to female participation. This research project examines the discourses produced by both female athletes, as well as male and female non-athletes, specifically coaches and administrative staff (those in direct contact with the players) that continue to impact women’s football and its overall development. Development, in this context, refers to the overall growth of the women’s game throughout Canada, through increased number of players, increased number of teams and improvement of the players themselves, hence increased skill level.

While this exploration will touch on aspects of popularity, fan support and marketing, the exploration is directed at more of the specific aspects of growth and evolution listed earlier. Through analysis of existing discourse, it is possible to identify if and how women’s football is constrained by gender-biased discrimination. Establishing these frameworks can help to create new and alternative discourses that begin to shift ideals of gender performance in relation to sport.
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins by reviewing discourse, more specifically the applicability of critical discourse analysis (CDA), in my research project. I move into an overview of five common discourses related to women competing in hypermasculine sports. I then discuss the relevant literature related to female athletes competing in hypermasculine sports, including women’s involvement in football.

2.1 Discourses

Discourse is a broad analytical category referring to a system of language that holds meaning and purpose (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). Originally termed by French philosopher, Michael Foucault, discourse was, “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them” (Weedon, 1987, p. 108).

Throughout this proposal the term ‘discourse’ will be used to describe how we communicate, in both written and spoken word. It is something that has the potential to shape our thoughts, inform our beliefs, identities, and even our behaviour (Hall, 1988).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views language as a form of social practice and focuses on the relationship between discourse and other social elements such as power, perpetuation of dominance, and social ideologies (Fairclough et al., 2011). The term “critical” when referring to CDA can be traced back to Marxist Critical Theory. Adopted in the 1970s CDA was used to describe a type of explanatory linguistics concerned with the relationship between language and social phenomena (Fairclough et al., 2011). To understand what effects, if any, gendered discourses have on the development of women’s football, Fairclough’s conceptualization of CDA will be used to
guide my analysis of textual discourse as well as both written and spoken communication.

CDA draws upon various linguistic and analytical techniques. One important concept of CDA is the idea of discourse as a means of deciphering meaning (Fairclough, 2013). When we think of football, we tend to think of the major leagues affiliated to the sport such as the National Football League (NFL), the Canadian Football League (CFL), or the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Moreover, we think of a football players as big, strong, aggressive athletes. Existing discourse about football, established through media coverage and school program offerings, have inherently shaped society’s knowledge of a football player to be synonymous with male and masculine attributes (Fairclough et al., 2011). The process of formulating these innate relationships and perceived notions about the athletes themselves is how, in essence, language is a form of social practice.

Important theoretical approaches to CDA research have helped to illustrate how discourse is a form of social action (Fairclough et al., 2011). Because discourse can be potentially socially influential, CDA can also help uncover issues concerning power in the social world. Fairclough (2011) elaborates, saying there exists a particular conceptualization of our world because, “In language, we do not simply name things but conceptualize things” (p. 558). Thus, the way in which we interpret and conceptualize discursive practices have helped to produce unequal power relations between men and women, social economic classes, and races to name a few examples. “Discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped,” that is to say, it helps in establishing, sustaining and reproducing meaning in our society (Fairclough, 2012, p. 353). For
instance, the phrase, “You throw like a girl!” is heard by many young children. It is one of the greatest insults a boy can receive about the pitch he just threw. By relating a male’s poor performance with a young female’s (supposed) natural, but inferior, performance the language used shapes our interpretation of how a female would throw.

CDA is a systematic and explorative way to analyze underlying ideological structures surrounding women’s football and the athletes who compete in this traditionally male environment. Discourse, in the sense I investigated, refers to the way a particular topic, such as women’s football, is approached, contextualized, and the assumptions it holds. I explored the way knowledge is generated and how that knowledge fits with pre-constructed disciplines of that field. Knowing this information assists in determining the effect discourse has and the potential ways of improving, altering or shifting it in the future.

2.2 Gender Discourses in Sport

Previous research has identified some discourses affecting female athletes in a variety of sports. The discourses can come from the media, parents, coaches, the school system, and other forms of socializing agents. While the examples below are not the only examples of gendered discourse, they are some of the more prominent examples relevant to female football. Although the ideas addressed are also often interconnected, they will be discussed separately for the sake of clarity.

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1 This section was published in an edited book, Sport et société. (2020). Chapter 17: Les discours du genre et leur impact sure les femmes dans le sport.
2.2.1 The contradiction or paradox of the female athlete.

Sporting experiences are influenced by gender roles and expectations. Using Bandura’s (1971) social cognitive theory, it is possible to better understand socialization and especially the social construction of gender role differences. From a young age we are taught to understand gender in particular ways. For example, in a Western society, boys play with cars and girls play with Barbies. Our culture incorporates customary ideas and values that shape attitudes and actions that lead to gender stereotyping, an invisible regulator within the sport arena: rough-and-tumble symbols for boys, domestically-oriented symbols for girls (Hardin & Greer, 2009).

Sporting discourses often differentiate gender, place limitations on individuals’ athletic competence, and influence perceptions that associate the female athlete with being abnormal or unusual (Caudwell, 2002; Hardin & Greer, 2009; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004). Take for instance the term “female athlete.” People often refer to Serena Williams as one of the world’s greatest female athletes. When speaking about Tom Brady or Roger Federer we do not say the world’s best male athlete, we just say the world’s best athlete. The language used defines female athletes by their gender and rather than their accomplishments.

Feminist poststructuralism demonstrates how power relations are constructed and maintained by granting normality to the dominant group (Davies & Gannon, 2005). In a sport context, the theory draws attention to the social construction of gendered objectives (Butler, 1990; Caudwell, 2011). This concept argues that there is not a single category of “woman” or “man,” instead the construction of identities relies on the intersectionality of sex, race, class and sexuality. Traditional gender norms have embedded gendered beliefs
into cultural ideologies for centuries, and influenced the relationship between athletic participation and perceived masculinity and femininity (Caudwell, 2011). Hence, the paradoxical nature of being a female athlete serves as a barrier in recognizing females as legitimate athletes (Meân & Kassing, 2008).

When entering the sporting world, female athletes are expected to succeed athletically to prove themselves as legitimate competitors, and demonstrate that they belong in that sporting arena, all while still maintaining traditional notions of femininity (Krane et al., 2004). Females are tasked with balancing two separate identities: being an athlete, which requires them to displace their femininity during sport, and being female, which they are expected to return to afterward. Young (1980) suggests that, “girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys to develop these skills” (p. 152). While this sentiment was made over 30 years ago, it resonates in today’s society. For instance, Western culture places a strong emphasis on the ‘ideal’ feminine body as being thin and toned – a very difficult physique to maintain as an elite athlete in most sports (Krane, 2001; Meân & Kassing, 2008).

Feminist poststructuralism is a feminist lens established to look for silences represented by women and thus, it is very applicable in studying sport culture – a traditionally male domain (Caudwell, 2011). The theory rejects prior notions that attribute the source of women’s oppression to instances of inequality (liberalism), patriarchy (radicalism) or the interplay between capitalism and interrelationships of gender (socialism) (Caudwell, 2002; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Poststructural feminists theorize that power relations are fluid and unstable, continuously changing with the world
Poststructuralist theory draws on the work of Michael Foucault. His analysis of micro-physics in *Discipline and Punish* presupposes that the power excised on the body is used as a technique to regulate and discipline individual action (Foucault, 1975). “In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved of the dominant class but the overall effect of its strategic position” (p. 26).

This theory supposes then that power is transmitted in various ways, such as through language, which results in meaning being reproduced that continue to maintain these affiliated power relations (Caudwell, 2011; Foucault, 1975). Feminist poststructuralism focuses on the power of discourse and discursive practices and how they are used to marginalize women (Davies & Gannon, 2005). This lens can help glean insight into ways of destabilizing traditional relations, such as that of the female athlete paradox, to determine if discourse can be developed that moves beyond what is already known (Davies & Gannon, 2005).

Hilary Knight, a former member of the National Women’s Hockey League’s (NWHL) Boston Pride team in one of the many women who are deconstructing previous notions of femininity with her participation in *The Body Issue*, an edition of ESPN The Magazine that features dozens of athletes, men and women, in nude and semi-nude photographs. Photographs have been captured and featured for a variety of athletes including Serena Williams, Adrian Peterson, Chris Mosier, and even the Philadelphia Eagles Offensive Line. The premise of the Body Issue, established in 2009, is to showcase the world’s greatest athletes and their body composition - muscles, skin, features, and scars - that make them who they are (ESPN, 2019). The premise behind this
issue is that every athlete has a story and their bodies often tell those stories, be it the scars from serious injuries they have had to overcome or their extreme musculature that they had dedicated years to gain. The Body Issue features athletes of all genders, sexualities, abilities, ages, and race. Instead of being a means to emphasize the sexuality of one’s body, this platform is a celebration of the power athletes’ bodies possess and is helping to shape conversation about what female and male athletes look like. This is an especially unique opportunity to guide discourses about the expectations of female athletes participating in hypermasculine sports and have a visual representation of what it means to have a body that is perfect for one’s sport.

Knight would later use that photo to guide her mantra, *Dare to be Bold*, stating, “I’m going to show people that strong is beautiful and muscles are feminine” (Blades, 2015). From a young age male athletes are taught to do what it takes in sport to perform better (Weaving & Roberts, 2012), which includes becoming larger and more muscular. In contrast, many female athletes struggle with the perceptions of their bodies because they want to be muscular but not too muscular (Krane et al., 2004). Hilary Knight is one of the few female athletes to publicize her experiences of putting on muscle mass to fulfill the role of power forward on her hockey team. By presenting her strength as beauty and muscles as a feminine characteristic, Knight is contradicting stereotypes and constructing a new, acceptable image of what female athletes look like. Identifying alternative and new discourses can help to construct proactive rhetoric that deconstructs traditional framework of what it means to be a female athlete.
2.2.2 Gender-appropriate sports.

Hardin and Greer (2009) conducted a gender-typing of sport survey and revealed that there are acceptable margins to performing female athleticism, hence some sports are deemed to be more appropriate for women. Similar to gender-typed toys, sports have also historically been gendered. Participants in their study were asked to assess the gender-typing of 14 sports and categorize them based on the sports’ perceived aesthetics, speed, and risk. Sports like football and rugby involved inherent aggression, consequently increased risk based on the physical contact and are viewed as hypermasculine sports by both male and females in the study. Of the 14 sports listed, football was ranked the most (hyper) masculine and scored highest on perceived masculinity.

Sports considered to be feminine meet the narrow parameters by which a woman can display her athletic prowess and still maintain her elegance and grace, characteristics associated with cultural conceptions of being feminine. Examples of such sports include gymnastics, figure skating, and tennis. In addition, research conducted by Koivula (2001) illustrates a set of attributes used to categorize a sport as feminine, masculine, or gender neutral. Sports recognized as feminine, such as figure skating and gymnastics, score high on grace and beauty (Koivula, 2001). Sports perceived as masculine, such as football and rugby, involved contact and use force or heavy objects. These sports also score higher on competitiveness and aggressiveness. While the term gender-neutral should mean a combination of those aforementioned characteristics, research from Hardin and Greer (2009) did not reflect this. If a woman perceived herself as being able to participate in a sport traditionally considered masculine, they tended to see the sport as gender-neutral (opposed to masculine). Consequently, sports such as gymnastics and volleyball were
rated as feminine and traditionally appropriate for females (Hardin & Greer, 2009). This
in turn maintains a synonymous notion, that males participating in traditionally female
appropriate sports are stereotyped as more feminine. Gender-neutrality in sport is
certainly something I would hope to see more of in the future. The idea of gender-appropriate sports are a reflection of social construction of a person’s prescribed gender role (Koivula, 2001) and represent a very binary way of perceiving athletic participation.

The theoretical framework surrounding gender roles serves as an invisible
regulator towards appropriateness of participation in sport (Krane, 2001; Shaw & Slack,
2002). It remains ideologically contradictory for those women competing in sports that
showcase strength, speed, power, and aggression - qualities typically associated with
masculinity. Women competing in these hypermasculine sports often identified
themselves as “different” or “abnormal” from other women, when constructing their
athletic identities (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005; Krane et. al, 2004; Meän &
Kassing, 2008).

Identity is a cornerstone of belonging and a core desire of humankind, which
makes our identities very susceptible to discourse. MacKay and Dallaire’s (2012) study, a
group of female skateboarders managed to self-produce representations of female
skateboarders in their own way. Initially, the creation of their blog for female
skateboarders, Skirtboarders.com, can be seen as a way to challenge societal norms, by
providing a space to circulate alternative discourses of femininity. However, creating this
alternative discourse further emphasizes the fact they are female skateboarders
(skirtboarders) rather than just females who skateboard. Based on Bandura’s (1971)
notion of gender role construction, the gendering of an activity can be changed, with the
intention of changing the definition of gender-appropriate sports. It would be interesting to see if more varied depictions of men in figure skating and women in football could promote less binary categorization of sport and instead, descriptors like men’s football or women’s football would solely be used to indicate who is participating versus identifying that sport as different. Similar to the way women challenged the discourses present in MacKay and Dallaire’s (2012) study by creating their own sport and gender representation in relation to female skateboarders, the cultural construction of women’s football can also change with re(presentations) of gender-appropriateness.

2.2.3 Female frailty.

The relationship between sport and masculinity is what Berg et al. (2014) refer to as the “masculinity-sport nexus” (p. 177). This overarching model is guided by the premise that reproduction is women’s sole purpose. Sport is physical and can result in injuries and women might get hurt in sport. They are too frail to be hurt, or if they did get hurt, it might impact their chances of reproduction. This concept is also referred to as the frailty myth, because it depicts weakness as a part of women’s natural condition (Weaving & Roberts, 2012). The frailty myth suggested limitation was necessary to conserve as much energy as possible for reproduction, and refers back to Young’s (1980) theory that women are restrained from developing physically. It has been speculated that the idea of women being weaker than men and unable to handle the physicality of checking in hockey was a main reason for creating different regulations in the women’s hockey game (Weaving & Roberts, 2012).

While the frailty myth originated in the 19th century, an era very different from today, sport continues to be defined by masculine standards, which, in turn, continues to
naturalize male superiority in contact sports (Messner, 1988; Theberge, 2000).
Meanwhile, aggressiveness and physical contact challenge traditional notions of femininity. Migliaccio and Berg (2007) suggest that the reason for prohibiting body checking in women’s hockey is because, “the public is not ready to handle aggressive, powerful images of women” (p. 278).

Based on personal experience, I would agree that women are viewed as the ‘weaker’ sex and this idea is engrained into the subconscious at a very young age. Researchers have speculated that the frailty myth may have even influenced some young female hockey players to think that they are not capable of performing acts like body checking (Weaving & Roberts, 2012). Women’s sports are predominantly considered to be an inferior version of men’s sport because of the adoption of female-specific rules – rules that often seek to minimize harm, strain, or physical exertion for women (beyond what is necessary to maintain players’ safety). For instance, in lacrosse, women do not wear headgear (whereas men do). The belief is that is women wore headgear they would be more aggressive in the game, something that is continuing to be managed given the maintenance of different rules (Putukian, Lincoln, & Crisco, 2015). Similarly, female lacrosse players use different sticks that have a shallower pocket, facilitating limited contact in the game (Putukian et al., 2015). In many contact sports like hockey and lacrosse, the women’s game sees a limited version of body contact compared to the men’s because body checking is penalized (Weaving & Roberts, 2012).

The frailty myth is challenged when women participate in sports like football, which requires players (regardless of position) to engage (or at minimum understand the potential to engage) in aggressive physical contact to be successful at the game. Berg and
colleagues (2014) conducted a study that explored sport ethic of female professional tackle football players from two American teams. Sport ethic has been successively tied with masculinity and the sporting ideal of sacrificing one’s body for sport and the team. Moreover, the idea of playing through pain remains tied to males, despite women’s inclusion in sport. The researchers found that the female players adopted the same masculine sport ethic as their male counterparts, relentlessly sacrificing one’s body for the game.

Following interviews with 35 players, results from Berg et al. (2014) revealed that female football players approach the game with the same behavioural expectations as male football players. The participants adopted athletic ideals of playing with and/or through pain, furthermore normalized it as part of the game. This finding deconstructs the idea of female weakness, instead reinforces the idea of women’s bodies being capable and strong. Women in the study were also motivated to play through pain to prove that women, in general, were not weak. Moreover, through their actions they aimed preserve their opportunity and the opportunity for future generations to prove they could compete in a traditionally male game. Similar to Theberge’s (2000) findings, females define pain subjectively, and normalize it along with injuries as part of the game of football. Results from Berg and colleagues (2014) illustrate that men risk damaging their bodies to exhibit strength and establish their masculinity, where as women take the risk to disprove that assumption that women are weak. Women from the study were concerned that any individual weakness in the face of pain or an injury provided evidence that all women do not belong in a man’s game. Sacrificing one’s body for their team is a highly praised act, tied exclusively to masculinity (Berg et al., 2014; Fogel, 2011). It is commonly
understood for women to sacrifice their bodies for childbirth, but rarely is sacrifice synonymous with women on the gridiron. These new contexts and representations provide an area for new discourses to overwrite outdated commonalities.

Shannon Eastin experienced first-hand the repressive power of silence when she stepped on the football field as the first female National Football League (NFL) referee in 2012. Antunovic’s (2014) analysis of available online content (in the English language) related to “Shannon Eastin” and “first female NFL referee” reveal that the majority of articles published online by those mainstream media outlets celebrated the occasion. The problem is that the discourse that did not support this breakout move remained exclusively hidden on blogs and private websites where fans shared their opinions, unmonitored. Antunovic stated, “These conversations largely embraced Eastin as an individual but ignore structural barriers that women face in sports” (p. 46). Fan comments from Antunovic’s (2014) study revealed blatant sexism and gender stereotyping, with some discussing her looks, her undergarments and other explicit comments that reinforce the perception of women’s inferiority to men. Despite great attention, Eastin’s debut did not result in social change and those online independent blogs that offer a progressive dialogue remain invisible to the public, unless the reader knows where to look for them. Females are constantly involved in a balancing act to prove that their gendered identity trumps their athletic identity.

2.2.4 Sexualisation and sexuality in gender-inappropriate sport.

The female athletic body, especially that of a football player - her muscular body, her assertive movements, and forceful approach, openly defies the culturally constructed discipline of femininity. If a female athlete is perceived as masculine, her ‘feminine’
sexuality is also questioned (Krane, 2001; Veri, 1999). If a woman displays athletic superiority, her sexuality is immediately questioned – as if her physical attraction to others (sexuality) is related to her athletic prowess (Blinde & Taub, 1992). A competitive basketball player recalls her experience in sport, “If you’re good, if you’re a top athlete, you’re gay” (Adams et al., 2005, p. 22).

The relationship between athleticism and sexuality finds female athletes negotiating the physical and sexual meanings associated to their bodies. One way females contest this stigma is by hypersexualizing themselves, what Adams et al. (2005) refer to as the “apologetic defense” (p. 20). Female athletes try to minimize the critiques related to their athletic participation and avoid discrimination by exaggerating traditional notions of femininity outside of competition through behaviours such as; wearing makeup, having long hair, and emphasizing their heterosexuality (e.g., indicating that they have a boyfriend) (Adams et al., 2005). Fans too stigmatize female football players as “big, lesbian types,” despite displaying the same ideals of strength that fans adore about men’s football (Packard, 2009, p. 336). Women in Migliaccio and Berg’s (2007) study felt as though their power to resist traditional stereotypes of the feminine apologetic were limited when trying to publicize their sport.

Society’s acceptance of female athletes in a male-dominated sport is heavily dependent on the media (Antunovic, 2014, 2015; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; McDowell & Schaffner, 2011). As noted by Van Dijk (1985), discourse shapes what we know and how we think, and one way of enacting power is by controlling the context. The media-driven portrayal of female athletes who compete in traditionally masculine sport utilizes the apologetic defense to exaggerate their femininity. A player for a Northern Carolina
women’s tackle football team recalls the only way they could promote their team’s success was through sexualized portrayals of their players’ in the media. A short article was featured about the team, but it was accompanied by a proportionately larger photo where the players wore only their jerseys and high heels (Migliaccio & Berg, 2007). Presenting an appearance consistent with feminine ideals normalized the women of the gridiron and made it more acceptable to showcase their accomplishments as a team. While many Saskatchewan Roughrider articles are also featured in the local paper, they tend to be accompanied by an action shot from the most recent game.

Similarly, the July 2005 issue of *Sports Illustrated* featured Jennie Finch, a softball icon, American national champion, and Olympic gold medalist. She is posed in a scantily clad manner, wearing make-up, dressed in evening attire – as opposed to in her softball gear (Martin & McDonald, 2012). By framing Finch in a manner that exudes her femininity, it de-emphasizes her athletic body and legitimizes her accomplishments. Furthermore, Finch is posed in a way where her wedding ring is clearly visible, a function of herteronormativity (Martin & McDonald, 2012). Sadly, this is yet another of many examples where the media sought to highlight the sexuality of female athletes to make their performance and accomplishments more acceptable to society.

2.2.5 Maintenance of masculine hegemony.

The adherence to, and reproduction of, culturally established discourses related to being a female football player reflect the fundamental masculine nature of the sport (Clark, 2012; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004). By viewing female athletes as women who play sports, rather than accepting them as athletes, there exists a lack of approval for female athletes within society. This traditional pattern that asserts males
higher status and sheer dominance, also known as hegemonic masculinity, is an overarching concept embedded in sport, even more so in hypermasculine sports like football (Krane, 2001; McDowell & Schaffner, 2011; Meân & Kassing, 2008).

Hegemonic masculinity refers to traits that cultures ascribe to ‘real men,’ and serve to justify and perpetuate men’s dominance over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggest that hegemonic masculinity is, “the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women” (p. 884). Hegemonic masculinity is still used as a means to discredit females in the sporting world. Take for instance the fact men dominate leadership positons in sport, even within female teams as coaches, managers and administrators. Recently, a female beat reporter for the Carolina Panthers (NFL team) asked Cam Newton, quarterback for the team, about his receivers and their routes. Newton responded first by saying, “it’s funny to hear a female talk about routes. Like, it’s funny” (Hamblin, 2017). These types of comments illustrate that Newton believes that only men can call plays or talk football – not to mention the belief that females could actually play the sport. Attention was drawn to Cam’s reaction because it happened on camera, where it was viewable to the greater public. Yet, this type of language occurs constantly in the sporting arena on and off camera and impacts what people perceive about women in sport. This display of hegemonic masculinity further discredits the female’s role as sports reporter and maintains the idea that only men should be talking about sports.

The media has a powerful influence and subsequently impact on viewers when presenting discourses surrounding football, female athletes, and more specifically
women’s football. MacKay and Dallaire (2012) shed light on the empowering, as well as silencing capabilities of the media in shaping discourses:

   Discourse links the exercise of power to the acceptance of certain truths about sportswomen (and sportsmen) as gendered bodies. The reception of particular statements about female and male athletes establishes truths about who and what they are, in the same way that the absence of discursive recognition of women in sports makes them invisible. (p. 172)

Consequently, a lack of coverage of sporting accomplishments by women maintain the ideal that sports are exclusively for, and about, men. Cooky, Messner and Hextrum (2013) note the amount of coverage of women’s sport on television has actually declined over the last fifteen years. In their 10-year longitudinal study Cooky et al. (2013) found far less sexist humour about women. However, in that same study, women were increasingly absent from any broadcast alluding to Veri’s (1999) argument that suggests; the absence and/or silence is in itself an element of discourse.

   A common theme throughout many studies on female athletics is gender equity. Gender equity as outlined by Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), now U Sports, assumes that in order to be equal (eventually) not everyone can be treated the same (CIS, 2011). Equity aims to provide everyone with what they need to be successful; at times, this means historically disadvantaged teams, specifically women’s teams, need more resources to support their success (Hoeber, 2008). To further understand the issue of equity and marginalization embedded in sports that privilege males over females, I turn to discourses of conditional equality. Participants’ discourses of gender equity in Canadian university athletics from Hoeber’s study expressed that inequality was natural, and the
allocation of resources, although imbalanced and preferential to men, was normal. A total of ten (six males and four females) of the seventeen athletes from Hoeber’s (2008) study supported the idea of conditional equality. One female hockey player defended the provision of different levels of funding to the men and women’s hockey team saying, “…So it’s just a matter of treating each team according to what you know they need to be able to function” (p. 67). Provided the popularity, revenue-generating ability and history of men’s sports, participants felt it acceptable that men’s sports teams deserved more benefits (Hoeber, 2008). Men’s privileged past within sport have provided them with fewer disadvantages than female teams and athletes, thus their experience influences the precedence of conditional equality, maintaining the idea that inequality is acceptable.

There also exists a problematic tendency to translate “gender” to mean woman. Hall (1988) states, “the conflict between gender and culture exists only in the realm of femininity because masculinity is culture” (p. 333). Academia, educational courses, and conferences with the label “gender and sport” are often considered to be a women’s only issue (Hoeber, 2008). Similarly, gender equity is often seen as solely a women’s concern because equity in sport targets those groups who have typically been underprivileged, with women being one of those many groups. When male coaches and athletes of Hoeber’s (2008) study say gender equity “isn’t a huge issue with me,” or they are “not perceiving it to be a major problem,” (p. 68) it illustrates their distant experience with it. Since gender equity did not directly affect them, they were not able to associate themselves with the issue at hand. Although unintentional, their discourse reflects narrow-minded sentiments and reinforces notions that support women are solely responsible for their lack of support and success. A greater understanding of gender
equity within sport and throughout sporting organizations is necessary to disassemble inherent discourse that supports inequality as being the status quo and sees it as solely women’s responsibility.

2.3 Women’s Involvement in Hypermasculine Sports

Because sport is gendered, there are cultural beliefs associated with men and women who participate in them. The gendering of sports leads certain sports to be linked to masculinities and others to femininities (Hardin & Greer, 2009). Sports that showcase strength, speed, power and aggression (all qualities inherently associated to masculinity) such as hockey, rugby, and football are what Hardin and Greer (2009) classify as hypermasculine sports. The (female) hypermasculine sports listed above have all experienced significant growth in the last decade, illustrating a shift in societal gender relations. Yet, each of these sports faces unique obstacles in relation to complete acceptance and notability of the game in Canada.

2.3.1 Women’s hockey.

Body checking is commonly understood as one of the defining features in the game of hockey. Yet, it is not part of women’s hockey. While the lack of body checking clearly defines the women’s game, it also constructs women’s hockey as “different” (Theberge, 1997).

After interviewing 24 female ice hockey players between the ages of 14 and 18, whose experiences ranged from recreational (house league) to provincial level of competition, many of the players expressed that they wished to play by men’s hockey rules (Theberge, 2003). Although only one third of the players had experienced playing boys’ hockey in their careers, players’ expressed similar sentiments, that the men’s
version of the sport was generally accepted as “real hockey” (Theberge, 2003). Female athletes who play an alternative version of sport often face the dilemma that positions them as weaker or unable to take the physicality. One of the participants, Jenna, says, “It kind of makes me mad in a way because it’s always the stereotype [that] we can’t handle it [the contact] and stuff like that, but we can” (Theberge, 2003, p. 508). Interestingly, women and men played hockey by the same rules in the early 1900s (Weaving & Roberts, 2012). However, the postwar era saw the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Sport Federation (IFs) push women toward aesthetic sports that display women’s grace, such as tennis and gymnastics - sports where the interpretation of the female athlete aligns with images of beauty (Weaving & Roberts, 2012).

The reinforcement of masculinity and femininity as social ideals propelled the establishment of male and female versions of the sport, which constituted adapted, so-called “gender-appropriate” rules. Officials removed body checking from women’s hockey in 1990, following the Women’s Ice Hockey World Championships (WIHWC) (Theberge, 2000). It was said the rule change was an attempt to increase the competitive level of women’s hockey because female players in other countries did not have the size and mass of the typical North American women’s hockey player. The prohibition of body checking was also believed to be a way to reduce the risk of injury (Theberge, 1997). It has been almost thirty years since the rule change, and despite the development of women’s hockey worldwide, along with the advancement of women’s participation and increased skill, the rule still stands (Theberge, 2003; Weaving & Roberts, 2012). Hence,
the ideological construction of women’s hockey remains inferior in relation to the men’s game (Theberge, 1997; Weaving & Roberts, 2012).

2.3.2 Women’s football.

By establishing themselves as football players, women challenge sexist barriers and restrictive notions about physical appearance, strength, power and even tolerance to pain and injury. The following studies discussed in this section illustrate that the mere act of women participating in football is not enough to challenge attitudes and stereotypes constructed by institutionalized gender norms. Institutions are created and maintained through discourse and my work explores the impact of those gendered discourses specific to women’s football, a sport that unlike hockey, is not a staple of the Canadian culture (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015; McDowell & Schaffner, 2011).

Men’s football has been a highly-researched topic in multiple disciplines including sport management, sociology, health studies, and psychology. Yet, women’s football, as a newer conceptualization, is understudied. This area of study is particularly relevant to the academic world given the importance of football in the construction and maintenance of cultural ideologies concerning gender and sexuality (Fogel, 2011; Martin & McDonald, 2012).

To date, the majority of literature on women’s football has focused on structured gender relations surrounding females’ participation in the sport (Knapp, 2011, 2014; Miglicaccio & Berg, 2007). With very few opportunities to play football as young girls, researchers want to know what has encouraged women to play football (Knapp, 2011). In turn, this led to the exploration of female players’ identity development and maintenance as football players (Knapp, 2014). Female athletes’ bodies are constantly negotiating
discourses between traditional standards of beauty, body size, and femininity. Literature about body maintenance and performance (American Sociological Association, 2012; Liechty et al., 2015) contests the assumption that men’s bodies are capable of competing in football while women’s are weak and fragile. Other factors associated with hegemonic masculinity throughout the women’s game, such as heterosexuality and maintenance of gender norms, have also been studied in the past (Fogel, 2011; Knapp 2015; Packard, 2009).

In 2011, McDowell and Schaffner conducted research guided by critical discourse analysis (CDA) on how gendered discourses undermine most women’s acceptance into American football. The project was based on the discourses transcribed from a reality TV show called *The Gender Bowl*, which featured a full contact football game between one all-male team and one all-female team. The study revealed two prominent discourses of gender relations. One reflected conservative gender relations, where male players generally defaulted to gender stereotypes that marginalize women and maintain women’s exclusion from football such as,

“When I saw the women – I was disappointed because I wanted to play – and nothing against the women or anything like that, but I wanted to play a real football game. You know?... There are two absolutes. You know. Women cannot write their names in the snow and they can’t play football with men” (p. 554).

The second was an opposing discourse of egalitarian gender relations, which aims to minimize disparities between men and women. Some women contested the masculine-centered discourse by adopting masculine linguistic practices themselves. For example, some of the women made the following comments: “I like cracking heads you know?
<laughs> That’s what I like,” another said, “You don’t think we’re for real. I’ll smack you down to the ground. You know, I’ll take them on. I’m not afraid” (p. 559). This scenario pits two genders against one another, rather than focusing on existing discourses within female football itself, not to mention how using reality TV, which emphasizes drama to attract viewers, is not a completely realistic situation.

Prior literature focuses on the overarching ideology of empowerment through participation in this sport. Despite women’s involvement, they continue to face stereotypes and gendered discourse associated to playing a hypermasculine sport. As noted by Van Dijk (1985), discourse shapes what we know and how we think, and one way of enacting power is by controlling the context. My work explored discourses that exist in women’s football, as well as the impact they have on the players themselves and on the overall development of the game.

2.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine discourses associated with women’s football. The project examined two key areas of interest with respect to women’s football. The questions are:

1. What gendered discourses are present in organized women’s football?
2. What effects, if any, do these discourses have on the development of women’s football?

The first aim is to explore what gendered discourses are present throughout women’s football, from both the players and the coaches’ perspectives. The second aim is to examine what effects, if any, this discourse has on the development of the women’s game. Based on previous research related to critical discourse analysis (CDA), we know
social language is embedded into everything (Fairclough et al., 2011). My research offers the opportunity to consider women’s disadvantages in sport and the discourse that serves to reinforce these notions. The methodology of this research will be discussed in the following section.
CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I explain the methodology that was used for my research project. The chapter begins with reasoning for the use of qualitative methods, followed by a detailed explanation of the research design, including information about participants, recruitment strategy and data collection methods. I also discuss ethics involved and the procedure used, followed by a description of data analysis. Then, I outline how trustworthiness was met in referencing factors originally noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Marshall and Rossman (2006) and Tracy (2010).

3.1 Qualitative Research

This research project was conducted using qualitative research methods, which allowed for a broad approach to understanding and exploring social phenomena, by examining issues and tendencies of human behaviour (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative research is said to be, “pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in lived experiences” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 2). This approach was applicable to this particular study because it focused on context. I was trying to capture language and imagery to better understand the values and perceptions that underlie and influence behaviour towards women’s football. Much of the previous research regarding women’s football has also taken a qualitative approach (e.g., Berg et al., 2014; Fogel, 2011; Knapp, 2011, 2014; Liechty et al., 2015; Migliaccio & Berg, 2007). However, little is known about gender-based discourses in the women’s game, given its masculine nature.

3.2 Research Design

Two data collection methods were used to capture the individual lived experiences of the participants, uncover underlying ideologies and better understand
context and meaning of the data. The primary method of data collection used was in-depth semi-structured interviews. Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggested that these kinds of interviews reflect an interest in understanding lived experiences and their associated meaning. To complement the interviews and obtain knowledge of what goes on outside of the interview setting, I leaned on my background as a football player to conduct a self-ethnography. As Alvesson (2003) explained, self-ethnographies are intended to, “draw attention to one’s own cultural context, not the researcher themselves” (p. 175). By conducting a self-ethnographic study about women’s football, I can remain as part of the study without putting my own experiences as the central focus. Instead, it’s more about what is going on around me.

My participation as a female football player is part of my identity; it is something I would have engaged in regardless of this research project. Hence, my pre-existing acceptance and comfortability in the team setting offered access to empirical material for research purposes. Additionally, it provided me with insider insight to the discourses experienced. While it is known that gender-based discourses exist in sport, there had been little done in relation to women’s football. It was thought that an analysis of in-depth interviews, along with analysis of language, communication and text used in relation to women’s football would help reveal patterns and themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

3.3 Participant Recruitment and Selection

This study involved nine participants, subdivided into categories of athletes and non-athletes (e.g., coaches, managers). A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was used in this study to ensure the greatest potential for a diverse collection of feedback (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). To qualify as a participant, the
individual was required to either play in, coach or manage a Canadian female-only tackle football team at some point during the 2017-2018 year. This was to ensure that the information was both current and relevant to the women’s game. The team with which the participants were affiliated had to have been Canadian (IWFL, MWFL or WWCFL). Interviewing individuals involved with different teams, who occupy various roles, at different organizational levels within female football organizations across Canada, allowed for a broad examination of the discourses present.

Participants identified by the researcher were sent a recruitment email and encouraged to forward the recruitment letter to participants who they believed would be interested in and eligible for the study (see Appendix B). Interested participants responded to the researcher’s recruitment email or contacted the researcher via the University of Regina email address provided. It should be noted that some of the participants also held roles in men’s football organizations. I originally thought this to be an important detail to take into consideration, as these individuals can offer interesting comparisons and insights.

The sample included four (4) athletes – those who are impacted by the discourses imposed on them, and five (5) non-athletes (see Table 1). It should be noted that 2 of the non-athletes had just recently transitioned into non-athlete roles that season (2017-2018) and had previously fulfilled the role of athlete, offering insight from both perspectives. This sample of athletes and non-athletes allowed differential experiences to be represented, and to detect if discourses vary between those who compete as athletes, and those who do not.
3.3.1 Participants.

The following is a table of participant demographics (see Table 1) that will provide an overview of each individual participant.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Highest Level of Competition</th>
<th>Position Held in Football (2017-2018)</th>
<th>Previous Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kyla</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Defensive end – WWCFL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Offensive line – WWCFL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJM</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>Quarterback &amp; Safety – WWCFL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Running back - MWFL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Board of Directors</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Treasurer - WWCFL team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Receiver and running back with team in WWCFL (3 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Coordinator - National</td>
<td>Coach – WWCFL team Receivers Coach – high school team Coordinator - Team Canada 2017</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luc</td>
<td>Coach &amp; founder</td>
<td>Positional Coach - National</td>
<td>Positional coach - Team Canada 2017 Coach/founder – local girls’ minor football program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cody</td>
<td>Offensive Coordinator</td>
<td>Coordinator at National Level</td>
<td>NCCP Coordinator – Provincial Football Alliance Coordinator – Team Canada 2017 Women’s Worlds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsay</td>
<td>Special Teams Coordinator &amp; Receivers Coach</td>
<td>Former Player - National</td>
<td>Coordinator &amp; positional coach – WWCFL team Coordinator &amp; positional coach – local high school team</td>
<td>Receiver with team in WWCFL (7 years)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4 Data Collection

Since I was focusing on a group within society at a particular point in time, a case study strategy was used to explore the discourses during the specified women’s football season (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The case study combined a detailed examination of accounts of the players and coaches involved with women’s tackle football in Canada in 2017 and 2018, with self-ethnographic accounts recorded throughout the 2018 year. The interviews began in March 2018 and the last one was conducted in September of 2018. Similarly, the self-ethnography occurred from April to the end of June of 2018. All data was collected during the 2018 football pre-season (March-April), during season (April-June) and post-season (July-September). Data was collected using two methods: one-on-one, in-depth interviews and a self-ethnography.

3.4.1 Interviews.

Interviews are commonly used “to capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 55). In this study, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with nine (9) participants were conducted to capture their lived experiences. Willing and able participants were contacted to schedule an interview time and location. Five of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and the other 4 interviews were conducted over the telephone due to geographical constraints (i.e., some participants resided outside of the province). Participants unable to complete a face-to-face interview were offered the option to conduct the interview over the telephone or Zoom, an encrypted video conferencing platform. All participants who required these long-distance accommodations chose to do a phone interview.
Participants who expressed a desire to participate received a corresponding email one week prior to their scheduled interview with questions (different for athletes vs. non-athletes, see Appendix C), as well as the consent form (see Appendix D). The consent form outlined information about the research being conducted and their rights as participants. Participants had the opportunity to address any questions or concerns with myself, the researcher, prior to the interview. Participants conducting the interview over the phone were required to submit a scanned copy of the signed consent form prior to beginning the interview.

The participant questionnaires included open-ended questions to help gain an in-depth understanding of the discourses present within and surrounding football, the discourses experienced or heard and the participant’s interpretations. Participants were asked to describe their sporting background, as well as their background in football. They were asked to elaborate on their experiences as members of a women’s football team and the perceptions associated with that. Participants were also asked to elaborate of what they believed the state on women’s football to be in the short term and long term. Some participants shared their hopes and desires for where they anticipated the sport would be and others shared various strategies they thought would help the women’s game evolve. The interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and all interviews were audio recorded using the TapeACall App for the purpose of being able to transcribe and analyse the conversation.

3.4.2 Self-ethnography.

There are two commonly used approaches to the study of oneself as a member of a research setting: an autoethnography and self-ethnography. Ellis (2004) characterizes
an autoethnography as a reflection and inquiry of very personal incidents, such as death, disease and abuse. Additionally, autoethnography places the researcher as the central focus of the study and that was not my intention. Instead, my participation in the setting – a female football team – is prioritized and my position as a researcher in the study is a secondary focus for the purpose of fully experiencing the phenomenon. Alvesson (2003) explained self-ethnography as a research method whereby “the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a ‘natural access’, is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants” (p. 174). My participation as a fourth year player on the Regina Riot is paramount to my reflection and experiences as a female football player. Football is part of my identity and I would have participated on the team and competed regardless of the research project. This sentiment was central to my decision to pursue self-ethnography as the idea behind this data collection method, which is further explained by Alvesson (2003), as a way “to utilize the position one is in also for other, secondary purposes, i.e. doing research on the setting of which one is part of” (p. 175).

There is a growing body of research that relies on self-studies within the sport and leisure field, however few studies have examined the experiences associated within the sport management context (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). Anderson and Austin (2012) point out, “sport and leisure are highly gendered in contemporary societies” (p. 138). This makes gender a particular focus, especially for female researchers because “they invoke complex and nuanced personal experiences to gain deeper insights into social construction of feminine subjectivity, typically critiquing popular culture portrayals of femininity” (p. 138). Thus, by reflecting on the researcher’s
personal lived experiences as a female football player could help to examine discourses and experiences associated with women’s football.

Self-studies are believed to enhance the authenticity of the study by acknowledging the personal voice of the researcher (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). This is an important element of qualitative research known as reflexivity - the ability to acknowledge, incorporate and reflect on one’s background and experiences (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). My ability to critically reflect on my experiences contributed to the knowledge regarding discourses within and surrounding women’s football, moreover how these discourses impact the players and the overall development of what is considered to be a hypermasculine game.

The use of self in the exploration of the discourses present in women’s football provides a critical analysis of the lived experiences of a self-identified female football player. While I reflect on my individual athletic identity and lived experiences in Section 3.7 of this chapter, I feel it important to discuss my positionality of being an ethnographic researcher within this section as it relates to the research process of a self-ethnography. I recognize that adopting the role of an ethnographic researcher is characterized by either being an insider or an outsider (Sarver Coombs & Osborne, 2018). Each role affords the researcher various advantages and disadvantages yet, it is this fluidity that necessitates critical reflection. In conducting research within a female football team, my goal was to be thoughtful about how my identity shaped the dissemination and interpretation of data. As a veteran player on the Regina Riot, I have a great advantage in already being a part of the team culture and being familiar with the values and symbols that are contextually bound within the Riot. Because of this shared understanding of a common set of symbols
and interaction within the phenomenon of women’s football, I am what Sarver Coombs and Osborne (2018) refer to as an insider.

While Sarver Coombs and Osborne’s status as double outsiders informed participants’ willingness to share their insights to help make sense of the researcher’s observation, I believe my status as an insider was a critical factor in allowing me to gain access to information that otherwise wouldn’t have been accessible to an outsider. The high level rapport and trust between myself and the participants extended beyond research; we were teammates. This relationship is deeply woven in shared experiences and trust to in one another on and off the field. Furthermore, as a way to avoid any conflicts related to power, as a result of perceived differences of status, I tried to avoid selecting first year players who might feel intimidated. If anything, I tried to select participants who had competed for more years than myself.

Furthermore, I felt that my role as a female-researcher to be advantageous in this instance. As a female football player, I found myself in the unique position of having experienced gendered-discourses in other hypermasculine sports and being able to relate to those involved in this study. I had journeyed with the team and the other players and felt this personal experience would help to foster new discussions, generate grander perspectives and deepen analysis of data.

Admittedly, my position as a female football player and researcher who has previously experienced gendered-discourses in sports certainly has led me to more perceptive to gender stereotyping. Yet, the opportunity to compete in this traditionally male arena, in a sport that is so newly accessible to women, has helped me to be open and authentic. While I am aware of this limitation, I worked throughout each interview to be a
better listener and more inquisitive. I tried to show deep interest in participants’ experiences and asked thoughtful questions that could not be answered with a yes or a no response, to adequately capture and represent those experiences in the results.

Following the criteria identified by Alvesson (2003) for self-ethnography, I collected data throughout the 2018 Regina Riot football pre-season and season in which I was taking part in as a player. This provided me natural access to the setting and ensured I was on equal terms with other participants. Following attendance at some of these events, I noted my experiences on paper, in a journal or electronically. As part of the reflexive process, I also documented critical incidents that happened in my past, as an athlete, that provided additional insight into my experiences as football player. For example, during the first scrimmage of the season I noted the difficulty new players were having in understanding the terminology being used and the resulting disappointment of our coach. I reflected:

While I get the intensity wasn’t there, this was the first time we all did that warm up and he (coach) lacked clarity and explanation. It was a terrible way to lead 10 nervous new players into a game. I’ve been new to a sport before and like many women’s sports where you pay-to-play, the last thing you want is someone barking down your throat, telling you that you don’t care. (Reflection from April 22, 2018)

3.5 Research Procedure

3.5.1 Ethics.

Prior to researching human participants, there were ethical considerations that had to be addressed. I submitted an ethics application to the University of Regina Research Ethics Board. The application included information describing my research methods, the
procedures, as well as risks and benefits associated with the study. Recognizing that participant consent is an essential component of this study, participants were emailed a consent form approximately one week prior to the scheduled interview. The consent form outlined the actions taken to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. This included sending the participants the transcribed interviews to consent to what was recorded and addressing the participant with pseudonyms (see Table 1) and general descriptors in the findings section of the analysis. After answering any of their questions regarding the study and agreeing to participate, participants were asked to sign the consent form prior to the interview (see Appendix D). Only those participants who provided signed consent were eligible to participate in this study.

3.5.2 Procedure

Recruitment of participants for this study began after obtaining ethics approval on February 27, 2018 (see Appendix E). This research project utilized both purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Recruitment for the one-on-one in-depth interviews occurred via my University of Regina email account. Participants who suggested other potentially suitable participants provided contact information for them and in most cases made some type of introductory contact. While I originally intended to interview 12 participants, three potential participants did not follow through with their intent to be participate. It was also determined that no new information was being presented after nine thorough interviews, thus it was not necessary to recruit additional participants at that time. The interviews took place at a location of the participant’s choice (such as home, work or a public space like a coffee shop). The first interview was conducted on March 25, 2018 and the last interview took place on September 24, 2018.
As previously mentioned, participants were also emailed a copy of the questions that would be asked in the interview prior to scheduled interview time (see Appendix C). It was hoped that this preparatory time would help the participants intentionally think about their answers and experiences. The tailored questionnaire varied slightly for athletes and non-athletes to ensure that their roles, responsibilities and experiences could be more accurately reflected in the questions and in the answers they provided. Questions focused on the context of discourse in women’s football. Additionally, participants were asked to discuss how they became interested in the sport, what their initial reaction to the sport was, was there any one that disapproved their participation and the impact playing has had on their outlook of football.

Once ethics approval was received, I was also able to begin the self-ethnography portion of the study. As Alvesson (2003) pointed out, the self-ethnography was to be used “as an alternative or a complement to other ways of doing research” (p. 188). It was thought that this data collection method would help facilitate the production of rich empirical discourses in an environment in which the researcher is already immersed. The interviews provided great insight into specific questions and larger frameworks within football; however, the critical reflections from the experiences and instances recorded in the self-ethnography provided greater context in relation to specific instances or examples related to the development of women’s football. I was only able to capture these moments because of my status as a player, an insider to the topic being investigated. This helped avoid what Alvesson refers to as the “problem of the other” (p.189) which refers to establishing my role, as a player, as different than the other players and coaches involved. Instead, the research involves our experiences as a whole.
Following the criteria identified by Alvesson (2003) and later utilized by Hoeber and Kerwin (2013) for self-ethnography, I collected data during the 2018 Regina Riot football pre-season and season. The pre-season began in March 2018 and season extended to the end of June 2018. Pre-season involves two to three practices a week at various locations throughout the city of Regina and Moose Jaw, ranging from one and a half to three hours in duration. During season, we had five practices a week, each lasting roughly two hours with an additional hour film session, twice weekly (one for positional time and one for special teams). During season we were also scheduled to have one game a week beginning on April 29, 2019. Games are roughly two to three hours in length and players arrive two hours early. Events also included happenings related to football, but those may have occurred outside of scheduled team hours (i.e., meetings, social media postings, occurrences, etc.). These were all events that I would have otherwise been in attendance at regardless of my position as a researcher, but because of my status as a player on the team.

Not every event resulted in a recording, especially during the pre-season. Documentation became more frequent during season (mid April to June). I documented what I saw, heard, general observations and what I encountered. I also tried to include how the experiences made me feel or a brief self-reflection on that event. As part of the reflective process, I documented major happenings involving the Regina Riot that occurred outside of practice time (e.g., stolen jerseys), social media posts that related to various aspects of the team and displayed significant discourses. These personal reflections provided me with new perspectives and also forced me to frequently remind myself of my positionality as a researcher. I would often try to keep dressing room
comradery to a minimum and try to remain neutral if a football related debate was going on. However, as a female who grew up playing on many male teams, I certainly appreciated the female team environment as someone who has regularly experienced hegemonic masculinity – even if that means not having the same access to field or facilities.

The combination of nine interviews and the self-ethnographic reflections is the basis of the analysis and discussion in helping understand the discourses involved in women’s football. The next section will discuss how, or if, these discourses impact the evolution of women’s football and increased development of its players.

3.6 Data Analysis

The analysis process involved three main phases: preparation, organization and analysis of results. The preparation phase consisted of collecting the data, which entailed conducting the interviews and transcribing the audio recordings verbatim, into a Word document. Then following the seven analytic procedures outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2006), I was able bring the data into manageable pieces to eventually “bring meaning and insight to the words and acts of the participants in the study” (p. 156). Utilizing deductive content analysis, an initial examination of raw data included organizing transcripts into an excel document, breaking down the interview sentence by sentence, whereby all the content was reviewed. After an initial interpretation of all nine interviews, it was apparent that not all discourses related to previously existing discourses and would need to be coded accordingly. Using inductive content analysis the AD (pink) code was created to represent alternative discourses, in which only limited knowledge existed of these new or different discourses. A combination of inductive and deductive
content analysis helped to formulate an appropriate and pertinent coding scheme that was used to categorize the data.

Each sentence was labelled with one, or multiple of the six codes listed in Figure 1 and each code had a corresponding color. The color-coding scheme helped to visually identify frequently mentioned ideas, collections of ideas and note repetitions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IN</td>
<td>General points to note (yellow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ND</td>
<td>No difference between men and women's football discourses (orange)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA</td>
<td>Discourses surrounding the female athlete (blue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WF</td>
<td>Discourses specific to women's football (purple)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD</td>
<td>Alternative/varying discourses (pink)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Other - doesn't mention anything noteworthy/pertinent (gray)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** Coding legend for content analysis of participant transcripts (original in colour)

In addition to the coding, comments were added (see Figure 2, page 48) to most of the sentences that alluded to initial idea or interpretations of the discourse, if it aligned with previous discourses or how it might have differed from other discourses noted. Coding each sentence helped to capture smaller, singular ideas yet, counting the numbers of each code present throughout the entire interview then across interviews provided greater insight into the larger sub-themes present within each transcript. In comparing and contrasting these numbers with the eight other transcripts, all-encompassing themes became apparent across the all nine interviews.
In exploring the discourses in the sentences coded as AD and the associated notes, patterns were emerging surrounding the discourses being used. It became clear that there were many more lines coded for AD than any other code. Subsequently, the comments clearly noted repetitions of alternative discourses, which was more than the code for traditional gendered discourses about female athletes (FA – blue) and even gendered discourses that I expected to hear within the atmosphere of the gridiron (WF – purple). It was through exploration of the alternative discourses in each interview that I was able to draw on overarching themes about the discourse and the subthemes within those ideas. The alternative discourses primarily related to ideas of ‘uncertainty.’ In multiple interviews it was also noticeable that discourses about the female athlete and women’s football were often inter-related or mentioned together. The frequently mentioned categories represented by this coding scheme are reported in the next chapter and serve as the main themes/findings of this study.

For the data analysis process of the self-ethnography, I subscribed to what Anderson (2006) proposed as analytic self-ethnography, which places the self of the researcher within the social context. The purpose of the analytic self-ethnography is to

**Figure 2.** Example of transcript analysis (original in colour)
document personal experiences while also providing an insider perspective. Additionally, Anderson (2006) described analytic self-ethnography with five key features:

- The researcher is a complete member of the social world being studied;
- The researcher demonstrates reflectivity; the awareness of their reciprocal influence on their environment, the setting, and the informants involved, etc.
- The researcher is visible within the description of accounts;
- The researcher engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self; and,
- The researcher demonstrates a commitment to developing theoretical understanding of the broader social phenomena being studied. (p. 378)

Since football is a relatively newer option for women and one that contests gendered stereotypes in sport, it was my goal to share these experiences and discourses to increase awareness and shed light onto what language and conceptualizations might be hindering or helping the development of women’s football.

The over 55 entries and reflections in the journal from pre-season and in-season data collection were re-read with the idea of drawing on similarities, reflecting on significant discourses noticed and pinpointing any differences to the participant interview findings. For instance, the qualitative interview data revealed alternative discourses that suggested uncertainty rather than negativity surrounding the women’s game. In reviewing reflections from the self-ethnography, I found that to be a common occurrence and perception of both the players’ exposure to the game and knowledge of its availability. The experiences noted in the reflection illustrated how this uncertainty translated onto the field for women trying a new sport. Despite the athletic careers of a few of the participants in hockey and basketball, these individuals never thought football to be an
option for them. Moreover, this lack of knowledge of the game proved to be a key
difference between a women’s elite team and a men’s elite team. Keeping in mind the
purpose of the research, I focused on experiences or happenings that highlighted the
gendered discourses in women’s football and how they impacted the development of it.
Many of the participants referred to instances in their interviews where women’s football
required greater support from organization bodies to achieve growth. The reflections and
accounts from the self-ethnography reveal these types of initiatives from local champions
and provincial governing bodies, as they work to promote women’s football and create
greater opportunities for girls and women in the sport.

3.7 Place of the Researcher

At the time the research was being conducted, I had been a player for the Regina
Riot Football Club for four seasons. I had forged close friendships with teammates and
coaches. Despite the team’s nine-year existence, many people in Regina are still surprised
to learn a women’s football team exists in the city, let alone an entire league - the
Western Women’s Canadian Football League (WWCFL).

My experience as a female football player led me to this particular research
project. Throughout my adolescence, I participated in every sport, from hockey to rugby,
soccer to tennis but it never once crossed my mind that I could even try football. While I
am fortunate to still have this opportunity, this notion that female participation is not yet
the norm in this sport demonstrated to me, that it is an area that has potential for
development and improvement within our society. Prior to football, I had played and
coached women’s hockey. During this time it was made evident to me that the women’s
game would never grow in popularity and legitimacy like the men’s game due to the
omission of intentional body contact. Yet, women’s football abides by the same rules and regulations, moreover utilizes the same equipment as the men’s game. This ignited my curiosity as to why then, the women’s game doesn’t have the same acceptance or potential for growth as the men’s game. Furthermore, I questioned whether the physicality of the sport impacted how women who compete are perceived, both in terms of their femininity and sexuality?

I had numerous assumptions about this research project such as, people having a negative perception about the sport and being less accepting of the athletes who compete. These thoughts were based on occurrences I had experienced growing up playing sports deemed to be inherently masculine. I am aware of the dichotomy that exists, as a female football player and researcher, consequently how this influences the research process. Reflecting on the idea of belonging noted by Sarver Coombs and Osborne (2018), I believe my presence as an ‘insider’ in football helped to foster fluid engagement between researchers and participants. Rather than digging up facts the interviews felt like casual conversations and the self-ethnography represented these instances were I was truly immersed in all that was happening around me. I was part of the struggled and triumphs during seasons, I travelled with the team and was ultimately a part of the journey.

In continuously critically reflecting on my own experiences throughout the research process, I recognized my role as a researcher was not fixed or clear-cut. Instead it was multidimensional and overlapping depending on various social and spatial factors. For instance, as a fourth year player it’s inherent that first or second year players do look up to you, not as a researcher, but a veteran on the team. These factors could further influence how and what other players might communicate around me. However, as an
insider-researcher who is already a member of a women’s football team, I benefited from easy access to participants and data. Other women found comfort in describing their experiences to someone who has experienced playing similar sports, and who can relate to their experiences in something only a few hundred of people in our city have been a part of. I believed my connection to my teammates, coaches and reputation in the league was beneficial to gaining trust, comfort and respect with the participants and allowed access to information that might not have been accessible to an outsider.

3.8 Trustworthiness

Like quantitative research uses validity and reliability, qualitative research incorporates strategies to reinforce trustworthiness. Marshall and Rossman (2006) referred to authors who outlined elements of trustworthiness and these elements were used as a guide when referencing the trustworthiness of my research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They argued that the following features should be included in qualitative research in order for trustworthiness to be met: credibility, transferability, dependability and sincerity. Below, I address each of these elements in respect to my research project.

3.8.1 Credibility.

Credibility of findings and conclusions is often dependent on the information sources themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement and persistent observation with participants can help to ensure credibility. My role as a teammate on the Regina Riot proved to be beneficial in this case, as it enabled an almost automatic trusting relationship that had been built over a period of multiple years. Additionally, given that I was a player on the team, I was required to attend the same practices, events and games as my teammates. This allowed us to draw on similar experiences, share an
understanding of broader contexts and structures, such as how the Western Women’s Canadian Football League (WWCFL) operates and how every team shares similar growing pains, with players having very little football knowledge. With two-hour practices, two to three times per week from February to March and then three-hour practices, four times per week from April to June, I was consistently present in the social phenomenon being studied. This schedule allowed me to be present and decipher elements that were relevant to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Another technique used to achieve credibility was triangulation. Triangulation involved the use of multiple data sources to build and justify common themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, discourses noted in the interviews in addition to self-ethnographic accounts were used to decipher common themes in women’s football and how they pertain to the development of the game. Triangulation was also apparent in the diversity of participants. Despite the small sample size, participants occupied various roles such as; players, coaches and coordinators, in different parts of Canada, including; Saskatchewan, Alberta, Ontario and the Maritimes.

**3.8.2 Transferability.**

Transferability, often discussed as generalizability, refers to the process by which results of the present study can be applied to other similar situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While transferability is most relevant to qualitative research methods such as this case study, Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain how the generalizability of these specific findings – discourses in women’s football – would be problematic to apply to discourses in women’s basketball. However, the theoretical parameters from this research, such as the analysis of the semi-structured interviews and self-ethnography can
certainly be generalized for new research. Additionally, the findings of this research can certainly tie into the existing body of literature on gendered discourses in hyper-masculine sports and gender ideology.

Moreover, the self-ethnography provided an opportunity to explore aspects of women’s football in a deeper and more sustained manner. Player and coaches perceptions about the game prior to getting involved and then during season highlight their change in attitude and knowledge about women’s football as an option for females. Furthermore, it’s the coach’s reactions that were extremely telling about the physical capabilities of the players and the misconceptions previously held. The analysis drew upon personal experiences and perceptions to inform broader social understanding and the socio-cultural context in which we live. Anderson (2006) clearly states the definitive feature of an analytic ethnography, saying “this value-added quality of not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization” (p. 388).

3.8.3 Dependability.

Dependability establishes the researcher’s findings as consistent and repeatable (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Upon beginning data collection, I wanted to ensure that if other researchers were to look over the data, they would arrive at similar conclusions. Hence, the need to develop and follow a systematic process to data collection and interpretation. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured to provide guidance and consistency. Similarly, the self-ethnographic reflections were completed almost nightly during season to ensure consistency but also, the repetition allowed me to practice and improve what was being noticed, recorded and reflected.
Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the use of an “auditor” who examines and oversees the process by which research is being conducted to help maintain dependability. While I didn’t have an auditor, I engaged in frequent meetings about this research project with my advisor, especially during the analysis process. This discussion and sharing of ideas proved to generate a more methodical way to analyze the breadth of discourse. I had originally tried looking to narrow mindedly at individual sentences but the grander coding scheme provided a way to systematically analyze overarching themes and subthemes. This helped to confirm the accuracy of the findings and to ensure the findings were supported by the data collected. This offered valuable insight of ideas, concepts and discourse patterns that otherwise could have been overlooked.

3.8.4 Sincerity.

The use of the term sincerity in qualitative research refers to the researcher’s honesty about their background, biases and other factors that might play a role during data collection and interpretation (Tracy, 2010). In being honest and vulnerable through self-reflexivity in this chapter and throughout the study, I was able to acknowledge my motivations and shortcoming for the study. I tried practicing being introspective, assessing my own biases or pre-conceptions, especially in reflecting on the self-ethnographic accounts to ensure that I was aware of my frame of mind. While I admit, it was not perfect all the time, with more practice I became better at authentically stating my presence or influence within the research context and balancing personal accounts with claims or statements made from the data. As another way to practice sincerity, Tracy (2010) states the importance of transparency. I remained transparent throughout the study, stating the context, my level of participation and immersion on the women’s
football team. Additionally, participants were made aware of my background, 
participation and role as a player and researcher. This transparency presented challenges 
at times, especially when something was said or conveyed at practice or during a game. 
My instinct as a player was to react and state my, sometimes strong, opinions but my role 
as researcher reminded me to stop and listen. This proved to be a very valuable practice 
both in interviews and in my career to actively take in discourses and opinions of others. 
When personal or private information was shared that I thought would benefit the study 
but could be considered controversial, I approached the individual and asked for 
permission to include it in the self-ethnographic account. Participant names were changed 
in all instances to ensure confidentiality.
CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the discourses present in women’s tackle football in an effort to better understand what effects, if any, they have on the development of the women’s game. Discourse analysis was selected to provide a greater understanding of prominent gendered discourses in the women’s game. It was expected that language patterns in naturally occurring conversations, repetition of topics, and ways of speaking about something would reveal gender ideologies imbedded in women’s football and carry meaning for the female athletes competing in the sport (Fairclough, 2013; Fairclough et al., 2011). Interestingly, participant transcripts and analysis of personal experience revealed different discourses than originally anticipated.

In this chapter, I present the key findings of this study. Data analysis of interview transcripts and the reflections of the self-ethnography supported three major themes: (a) an overarching sense of uncertainty, (b) an alternative version of football, and (c) a potential for future development of women’s football and its players. The first theme looks at coaches’, players’, and the public’s perception of the women’s game, with ambiguity being more prominent than negativity, as previously suspected. In the second theme, the impact of gender ideology is discussed as women’s football is often unintentionally referred to as an “alternative” or “other” form of football. Finally, the third theme explores how the discourses influence development of the game, with a discussion of what development looks like at present, given the overwhelming reliance on the men’s game at the amateur levels. Participant examples, quotations and personal reflections are used to illustrate each theme described in this chapter.
4.2 Overarching Sense of Uncertainty

As the participants in this study recounted their experiences, it was apparent that football remained a male-dominated sport. Women’s leagues and women’s involvement in the sport appeared to be relatively unknown. Yet, discourses associated to the sport and the female players themselves did not carry any apparent negative connotations. Instead, discourses expressed general curiosity and ambiguity, which could potentially be a reflection of political correctness or changes in attitudes of the typical sporting arena. Discourses demonstrated ambiguity about becoming a female football player and how to coach women in football. Where negative discourses often create preventative barriers, these types of discourses suggested cautious optimism and some level of acceptance in regards to women’s participation in contact sports, as well as increased involvement from elite coaches, and greater support from the public.

4.2.1 Becoming a female football player.

Compared to other team sports women’s football, at the elite level, is unique in that there are very few players who have football-related experience when they join a team. For women and girls, there are few opportunities to try out football. Unlike sports like basketball or ice hockey, football for girls is rarely offered in the school system (either as a competitive sport or taught as part of physical education programming), or in youth community sport programs. In one of my first reflections following a pre-season camp, I noted the difference between a first year female and male player of an elite program in my journal:

The lack of knowledge about sport and terminology related to it was very evident today because 9 out of 10 times, our rookies are legitimately first-year players of
the sport. If you were to look at the Regina Thunder, the term ‘rookie’ refers to a first year player on the team, but many players have at least played for a year of the sport. Doing drills like Hitch-Stock-Fade don’t work when you do not know what any of those words mean. No wonder it was a disaster.

While the majority of players interviewed in this study had played elite – provincial, collegiate or national – levels of a sport, most had never played football competitively growing up. Many players, like Laura, had transitioned to football as a way to remain competitive upon completion of their main sport. She explained:

I was intrigued and particularly, being at that time in my mid-twenties and having played competitive sports the majority of my life and now, not having that at all, rec [recreational] hockey at best. It was intriguing to have the opportunity to play something competitive again, that was more than – that I wouldn’t be the only one taking it competitively. The league was competitive and everybody playing was competitive. It was more than a recreational league.

Further, she reflected that football was an avenue to challenge herself at a sport that was primarily played by men: “So that was really intriguing and just being football is kind of a sport that you never really think that has opportunities for women. The last time I played football, you know, was elementary school [at recess].”

Other players from across Canada described similar experiences regarding the lack of knowledge that women’s leagues existed. As an athlete with previous playing experience in organized high school and provincial level football in Alberta, AJM discussed the same uncertainty surrounding the establishment of a women’s league:
For me it was a little bit different because I always wanted to continue playing but with my lifestyle choice, I thought I would be giving it up forever, because I had no clue a women’s league even existed. It was my friend [who] saw a banner for the local women’s football team sitting across the bridge and she wrote down the phone number. I called them up and told them about my situation and they were all good with me playing.

Some players were excited about the establishment of a league as it gave them an organized, competitive opportunity to stay involved in sport. Yet, for some like Kyla, a rugby player, she recalled her apprehension to the idea of joining:

I think it was more unknown. I knew it was so brand new that I didn’t believe it was a legitimate league. I thought it kind of more for fun and just knowing rugby was established and it already had its grounds set, I was kind of jumping into something unknown.

Becky had a great deal of experience competing at provincial and national levels in two hypermasculine sports, boxing and hockey. Her hesitation stemmed from the idea of having to meet new people and start something new, as she believed athletes generally do not start a competitive team sport in their twenties. She explained:

I just didn’t think it was an option for me, I thought I was too old to start. I didn’t think they would invest time in me. Meeting a whole bunch of new people, new females that you don’t know, that’s extremely intimidating, right?

It is noteworthy that many of the participants had heard of women’s football by word of mouth, from a friend or colleague. This was certainly the case for myself five years ago. I was working 60 kilometers away from Regina and heard about the local
women’s team from a colleague. Similarly, none of the athletes in this study intentionally sought out the opportunity to play and most, despite being involved in various sports in their respective communities, did not know football was available to them. Becky explained how, on two different occasions, she learned about the sport:

Becky: She [Jessica] was the only girl I knew and it was from boxing, I coached her boxing.

Interviewer: Oh, I didn’t know that. That is super cool.

Becky: Actually, Mel [a former player] – she had seen me at Sportchek and she was like “Hey, do you play football?” And I’m like, “no.” “Do you want to?” “don’t really have time.” Isn’t that [series of events] weird?

Interviewer: It’s ironic that everything comes up at that time. You just happened to be a little more curious [about football] and it was mentioned [again] and then…

Becky: And I started dating Adam and he is obviously into football [he is a kicker for a semi-pro team in Ottawa and CFL free agent]. So we would always play around and play catch and he would say, “you can catch and you can throw. You catch my kicks. Like, this is awesome – why don’t you play?” You know what maybe…maybe I should give it a shot.

Participants also discussed how their uncertainty surrounding women’s football was clouded by misconceptions about the athletes who were involved. Jessica and Mel were two athletic individuals - their invitation might have been perceived differently than the invitation to join that Kyla had received:
Kyla: I was playing rugby and I was hanging out with a bunch of girls that played Riot\textsuperscript{2} and they invited me out to play and I said, “Absolutely not!” That rugby was the only sport I was going to play from there on out.

Interviewer: So when you said they had first asked you and you said, “no not a chance” – why was that your initial impression?

Kyla: I guess being naïve and kind of thinking that being a defensive lineman was a step-down in my athletic ability because I didn’t really know too much about it. I thought kind of that just the bigger girls played on the line, that it didn’t take as much finesse and athleticism. But then I found out, once you’re on the line it takes an unreal amount of athleticism – you have to be fast off the line, you have to be strong, you have to have all the abilities, being able to read the ball, be able to react and I absolutely underestimated it. As soon as I found out the challenge of it, I was hooked.

Even the few participants in the study who had previously played organized football shared hesitancies about transitioning to the women’s game. AJM described her experience of just wanting to play football but admitted, “I had no clue what it was going to be like, to be honest.” While AJM reported no difference between the men’s and women’s side of the game, in terms of the physicality involved and the strategic components, the reality of joining a women’s team at its inception after playing boys’ high school football took convincing for Sarah. She remembered her first impressions of

\textsuperscript{2} The Regina Riot are Regina’s only elite-level women’s tackle football program. Established in 2011, the Riot have been members of the Western Women’s Canadian Football League (WWCFL) since the league’s inception.
the team. It took her mom first encouraging her, and then ultimately convincing her to try it. Sarah recalled:

I don’t know, I guess I didn’t really know what to expect what I saw for the first time. I was like, “oh my goodness”. But then there was people who really wanted to learn and that motivated me to be like “no, we are going to get our stuff together and we are going to learn from each other and it’s going to be fun!” And it was fun!

Interviewer: Good for you. That’s a huge undertaking.

Sarah (laughing): Thank you. At the time I didn’t know, I was just mad all the time. I was like, “what are all these people doing, like why are we even doing this right now?” But no, they showed up to practice and wanted to learn. What else could I ask for or want as a teammate, so yeah.

Lindsay shared a similar experience to Sarah when she joined a women’s team in its inaugural season. Based on the few people she knew who played women’s football she expected it to be more competitive than it initially was. Instead, she was surprised to learn that many players on the team had joined out of curiosity and some had never even played a sport before. She stated:

So here’s an opportunity where none of us have done tackle football so a lot of people came to the sport initially as their first real competitive sport. Which was kind of surprising to me because then you had the very opposite end, in a few cases.

Lindsay acknowledged, after eight years of growth, that this trend is no longer a
commonality, “not that we wouldn’t take somebody for whom it’s their first ever [sport], but that’s the rarity now as opposed to a norm.”

From these findings, one might argue that perhaps the uncertainty associated to the sport was a reflection of the lack of opportunity for women in football or lack of encouragement to participate growing up. The physical nature of football and the hegemonic norms shaped by our patriarchal society meant football was rarely advertised as a sport available to girls or women, nor did societal constructions surrounding femininity invite the opportunity for girls to easily enter male-dominated environment. Yet, this situation appears to be changing for women wanting to play football.

Within the last couple of years, governing bodies of the sport in Canada and local champions started football programs and teams for girls, encouraging their participation and making the sport available to all players, regardless of gender. For instance, on May 6, 2018 following our game in Winnipeg, the Regina Riot had a team breakfast scheduled with the Moosomin Generals, a girls’ football team for girls in grades 7 to 11. It was the first time I had learned of a girls’ team that existed and I was equally as shocked that it existed in rural Saskatchewan, where the population was even smaller than Regina. I reflected:

It was truly amazing to talk with these young girls who had four, five and even six years of football experience at the age of 14. They knew their positions and were proud to say they liked hitting and playing against the boys. It made me think, if a girls’ team could be formed in Moosomin, SK – where else are we able to start these types of programs?
The team hosted a Question and Answer session following breakfast that allowed us to share positive discourses to players and their families about our experience in football and our experiences as female football players. Parents acknowledged that for the longest time, it was tough just getting other teams to take the Generals seriously. I thought it was significant for the players on the Riot to see they have a direct and meaningful impact on other communities, athletes and parents. Whether it is attending university or playing on a sports team, when someone can envision herself in the future, it fosters vision and drive to achieve a goal. So for instance, when young female athletes see women, just like them who are competing, they serve as role models. Younger players can aspire to be like a specific player or play for a specific team. Just like a young man would aspire to be like Tom Brady, and play in the National Football League (NFL), young girls can aspire to be like Sami Grisafe and play for teams like the Chicago Force or the Regina Riot.

The cautious optimism expressed in both the interviews of this study and the self-ethnography portion reflect larger cultural shifts in society that aim to positively engage women in sport at multiple organizational levels. Recently, Thorpe, Toffeletti and Bruce (2017) suggested the synthesis between multiple feminist perspectives to best understand what Alana Blanchard’s social media conveyed in contemporary culture. As a professional surfer and model, Blanchard’s current discourses through social media are perfect examples of the changing operations of gender relations as a female athlete. As a surfer, Blanchard displays traditionally male characteristics such as being bold, fearless and strong – traits she believes are necessary to be successful in the sport. Yet, she simultaneously fulfills the role of a model for surf-wear, blending together two
previously opposing binary roles that sees her see her fearlessness mesh with her class and elegance.

More and more women are becoming involved in sport in multiple ways, sometimes challenging gender norms (Thorpe et al., 2017), sometimes recreating gender norms (MacKay & Dallaire, 2012), sometimes reinforcing gender norms and sometimes both. Changing or using alternative discourses helps to challenge long-held culture understandings of gender relations and promotes thinking outside existing gender binaries that see something as either strictly masculine or feminine, instead blending the two roles or characteristics.

4.2.2 Knowing football is an option.

Knapp’s (2011) findings revealed that women joined football for three reasons; the love of the game, wanting to pave the way for future generations and then simply just wanting to hit something. However, many of the players explained that previous opportunities only encouraged their participation in alternate forms of the game, like the powder puff game in high school or touch football, because it was more common for women. One woman even recalls the football coach redirecting her to the girl’s basketball team. Yet, in this study, it was not the structural barrier that limited women’s opportunities, it was the awareness that the sport was available to them. The participants’ comments in this study shed light on the idea that awareness of availability was the first barrier to women’s initial participation. Despite participating in sports like lacrosse, soccer, and basketball Lindsay confessed that football was not one she thought she could play:
If anything it [football] was the one thing that my brother did that I didn’t do, right. So there was always that element of curiosity. Like he played and it was the one where I ‘couldn’t’ quote, couldn’t. And you know, that made that curiosity of gee, “what’s it really like?” I can talk to the guys about it but I’ve never done it myself.

Interestingly, the majority of participants in this study acknowledged the lack of encouragement and availability for women to participate in football at a young age. Even from a coach’s perspective Luc explained, “So, I think it’s just a different experience that they [women] haven’t maybe had the opportunity to be a part of before.”

This same sentiment was echoed in adulthood. AJM said, “I think there are more challenges, like I said it’s not as well known. It’s harder to get women out because they don’t know about the sport.” While this may not be a surprising finding since the establishment of women’s football is relatively new, the fact that women’s participation in football at the younger ages was not necessarily common or encouraged may also explain players’ and coaches’ unfamiliarity with the technical aspects of the game.

Being a teacher at a middle school, Sarah was a huge advocate for starting football at younger ages for females rather than only having adult female leagues available. One of the main hindrances is this preconceived notion, she says “it’s the stigma that boys are going to do it,” but instead everyone should be encouraged. She acknowledged the need for a positive, empowering outlet for females, “I see it all the time and we just need to be like you know what, this is positive, a positive thing, a positive image.” Contradictory to the female athlete paradox explained by Meân and Kassing (2008), participating in a sport that is contrary to prescribed gender roles can be
viewed as positive rather than abnormal. As a high school teacher, Luc echoed similar sentiments about youth female football programming:

Well, I just think it’s worth people’s time, like it does amazing things for people. It was overwhelming at the end of the spring season when these girls are sitting there in their equipment crying because it was over. They did things that they weren’t even sure they were capable of. They did things that they never ever dreamed they could do.

4.2.3 Involvement from elite coaches.

The ambiguity surrounding women’s football creates an interesting dynamic in terms of recruiting players, but also in recruiting the elite coaches needed to continue developing players to grow the sport. Playing experience is a near-requisite to successful coaching; however most women in this era have not grown up playing football, let alone coaching it. Burton’s extensive research on issues of gender in a leadership context elaborates on the underrepresentation of women in sport organizations in her multi-level review of scholarship. Burton (2015) acknowledges that gender is fundamentally embedded in organizational practices at the structural levels, as well as at an individual level. Moreover, the interconnectedness of gender and power influence the experience of women in sport organizations. For instance, Burton elaborated on Ely and Padavic’s (2007) findings that leadership stereotypes created external to sport organizations will still operate at the organizational level to influence women’s experiences in leadership. Burton’s prior work explained that men are viewed as natural leaders in sport because leadership in sport is perceived to require more stereotypical masculine ideals. Behaviours, actions and associations to masculinity such as power, influence, and
dominance are more often perceived to be superior to behaviours more often associated with women (i.e. nurturing, caring and understanding). Hence, the fundamental role gender plays in organizational and social processes. Her review of scholastic work demonstrated that discourses regarding the selection of leaders in sport organization further supported gendered images associated with corporate, heroic leadership roles often filled by men. These dominant discursive practices continue to marginalize women in leadership positions in sport and perpetuate sport as a gendered space. Since football has been such a male dominated industry for so long, this underrepresentation of women at the leadership level is magnified (Antunovic, 2014).

Many of the male coaches in this study did not originally seek out coaching opportunities in the women’s game. When introduced to the idea of coaching women’s football, they shared similar feelings of uncertainty as those players who were new to the game. Many coaches were unaware that women’s leagues and teams existed, moreover what that would look like given women’s lack of previous participation in football. Some coaches even expressed insecurity in regards to coaching a team of women, despite having decades of previous football coaching experience. Similar to how adult and children are coached differently, many coaches believe coaching males and females also requires a different approach. Ultimately, it would be best to just coach according to the individual athlete and assume gender neutrality. Amidon (2016) from Hockey USA elaborates on this idea, suggesting that there are different communication strategies she has found that help relate to and motivate female athletes. The premise of coaching – or the idea of helping someone learn and empowering them to achieve their potential –
should be independent of gender. Luc alludes to the differences he’s noticed in coaching females in his interview. He stated:

Like sometimes the boys they just do it because A) their coach told them too or B) they feel they understand it fully and sometimes I find that’s not the case. With the girls at least, they know what their… their assignments are but they want to know why they are doing it and they, you know, there’s a lot more explanation.

While he admits there are differences, wanting to know the reason behind their instruction is not necessarily a negative trait and could even be beneficial to coaches, challenging them to re-evaluate their methodology. Where coaching men’s teams is often based off the foundation of respect, Amidon (2016) explains that with women, a coach’s effectiveness is generated through their ability to relate to the players. This relational part suits this idea of greater explanation as opposed to a drill sergeant, who is dictating instructions. Ultimately, there likely are men who would respond better to this relational approach and women who respond to the direct, orderly approach. Every athlete is different and just because men have typically ‘just done something because’ does not mean it was understood as beneficial. Moving forward, athletes of either gender would benefit from gender-neutral coaching.

As a U Sports athlete nearing the end of his playing career with no plans to leave eastern Canada, Eric recalls being approached by the local female team as a way to get involved in the community. Admittedly, it was a great fit for him at the time but, it certainly was not something he sought out:
I'm not sure that I was ever inspired to coach with women's football specifically. I think I've always been inspired to coach and I don't see a difference in coaching women's or men's when it comes to my level of enjoyment or giving back.

Sarah shared a similar recollection of how some of the coaches on their MWFL team came to be involved:

Umm… It was hard in the beginning to get coaches in general. [Imitating coaches’ impressions when asked] “Like what is going on. Women’s football? Like they have never played…ever. So this is going to be super basic and what not?” But we had a lot of coaches who had played either high school or university who were like “you know what” - quite a few that I knew - they were like “I’ll come help out and coach, see what’s going on and see what we can get going, yeah.”

Touted as ‘elite’ football teams, women’s amateur teams hope to recruit coaches from more advanced levels of competition, with a breadth of knowledge and experiences. Yet, in the founding years, Lindsay admitted that while they were grateful for the coaching staff they had, some coaches were in no way experts, experienced or concerned about advancement of the team or its players. She elaborated, “My first year the coaching staff we had was – I’ll say thrown together, generously – and came out of volunteers because you know it was somebody’s partner, somebody’s brother, so and so.”

During her first few practices Lindsay remembered Tim, one of the coaches, asking her to show the other receivers how to run a post (route) and different route combinations. Like many players, this was interpreted as a very backwards approach because she had never played tackle football. Lindsay expected the coaches to teach her
and provide her with guidance about how to do things, because they were supposed to be the experts. Yet, some of the coaches were just trying to be supportive and fill the roles so there could be a team, even though they likely did not have the training or experience expected to coach at an elite level.

Upon first hearing this from Lindsay, I thought it was interesting that there were few, if any, women as coaches at the team’s inception. However, in reflecting about prior literature (Burton, 2015; Hoeber, 2008; Khomutova & Channon, 2015) in regards to the inception of female programs and equitable opportunity, it also makes a great deal of sense that this was the case for the Riot. Like the many players and coaches in Hoeber’s (2008) study, gender equity for athletes often carries multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. In some cases, there was a desire for equitable opportunities, resources, and support, but some female athletes were willing to accept compromises or less than their men counterparts, as long as they have a team (Hoeber, 2008). When women’s football was new, to the city and the athletes themselves, men would likely be the only ones with experience, at least playing experience to be able to “coach” players. But, in Lindsay’s interview she made it clear that while the coaches might have been males, many of the experienced touch female football players were relied on for their experience, unofficially, like a player-coach.

While the coaching experience of the head coach has improved immensely for each of the WWCFL teams, AJM admitted that finding coordinators and positional coaches remains a challenge for their team in Alberta - a sentiment that is resonated among women’s teams throughout Saskatchewan. With participants expressing conflicting views about this, provincial and national governing bodies have directed
coaches looking to gain more experience at higher levels to the women’s game. This was Luc’s introduction to women’s football:

Well, initially I had applied for some positions on the Team Sask men’s side, and wasn’t successful as a coach. And I was, I guess, relentless and trying to obtain, you know a position on one of the elite teams in the province. And they [Football Saskatchewan] approached me about how I would feel about doing the Team Sask for the Women’s Nationals as an Assistant Coach. And it came along and I was a D-Line and Special Teams coach and I was, you know, just happy to have that opportunity.

Interestingly, when coaches did commit to assist on the women’s side of the game, many expressed uncertainty in relation to the level of competition and even the physicality involved of those athletes participating in the sport. Sarah recalled a very similar experience with one of their newer coaches who had coached many years at the high school and junior levels:

Yeah, actually we did have a coach and you know, he didn’t know what to expect. But somehow his name got out to us and at the first practice he was like, “Oh my goodness.” He had coached his son and stuff before and this was, I want to say 10 years ago. And I don’t know if his wife talked him into it or if he was just looking for something to do, but we were like alright. [He said] “I didn’t know what to expect what was going on here.” He said, “you are all actually hitting somebody!” It was just funny because he was like, “I can’t wait to come back.” We were like, “Alright, perfect.”
The comment, “you are all actually hitting somebody,” suggests that the coach questioned the fundamentals of the sport or the physicality of the players when the game was played by the opposite gender. While these notions could stem from the female frailty myth discussed by Weaving and Roberts (2012), that ideation was short lived when coaches actually witnessed women hitting and tackling each other. Even those who had coached female players on male teams and female teams in other sports were uncertain about how to conceptualize women playing football. Luc explained:

Ok, so when they asked me to do the Team Sask, I knew Football Sask ran a great program and that wasn’t any issue. I was a little bit nervous coaching girls for whatever reason. I had coached girls throughout my high school coaching experience in individual sports like track and field. I did have some experience coaching girls’ hockey so I did have you know, a little bit of knowledge. But as far as the football went I wasn’t sure what to expect and so going in, I relied on a lot of my colleagues who had experience coaching women’s football before.

Eric had very similar thoughts and said, “I was a little blind coming in. I didn't follow any women’s football league so I'm not sure I had a ton [experience].” It appeared as though the uncertainty was a result of lack of knowledge of coaching women, not of the sport itself. Through my experience as a multi-sport athlete, I have often noticed women’s hesitancy to try a sport they are unfamiliar with. Similarly, males tend to have a diverse athletic background and while that statement may have been a very broad generalization, I would agree with Eric. From what I witness in gym classes and over my career as an athlete, I think men are less hesitant to try new sports because of that engrained idea that the sporting arena is a male space. They also tend to remain competitive despite their
(lack-of) experience in a foreign sport. The Regina Riot had a practice where coaches wanted to incorporate multiple sports to foster team building. There was a station for basketball, floor hockey, and flag football. Some of the women refused to play certain sports because they felt so uncomfortable. There was also a noticeable difference in confidence and comfort. Women who displayed confidence in basketball, leading their team, setting up plays and even taunting the other players in good fun, quickly turned very quiet when they were asked to switch to floor hockey, a sport they had never played (observation from April 10, 2018).

I would speculate that it is this same hesitation that coaches feared about coaching women in a sport that remains relatively unexplored by females. Their lack of knowledge about women’s physicality and simple inexperience coaching females would also be an added dynamic. In a recent article about coaches’ discursive practices, de Haan and Knoppers (2019) note that coaching knowledge is generative. Coaches draw on their personal experiences of being coached to inform their current coaching practice. However, whether it is realized or not, these experiences are gendered. Since football has been a predominantly male sport, the points of reference and sources of knowledge from male coaches are often male-centered. An example of how this source of knowledge impacts coaching and the dominant discourses that frame female athletes happened during one of our practices. I recall noting this instance after practice one night:

On another play, one of the new defensive rookies caught an interception – Great right? No. She didn’t know to run up field. She actually didn’t know what to do. One of our [new] coaches got so angry and started yelling at her because she celebrated instead of running for the end-zone.
This coach had played upwards of 20 years of football and been coaching for several more; based on his experiences he assumed someone would know to run, and where to run upon intercepting a pass. But, this was not the case. This rookie had never been in that situation and she had never been told what to do. While it may seem obvious to this coach, he had not yet conceptualized that some of these players literally have never played, even more so, some had never even watched football.

As the vast majority of football coaches are male and they themselves have probably been coached by males, it is not surprising their construct of a football player is associated with men. The framing of men as the norm reaffirms the idea of traditional gendered discourses about women being different and would consequently require ‘different’ coaching (Demers & Kerr, 2018). Cody recounted his first introduction to the sport, surfing through football websites and stumbling across the Women’s World Championship. He shared his initial impressions when tuning in:

This is kind of interesting and you know, at the time as an Ontario person not knowing women were actively playing football – I was interested to see ok, what does this look like. I remember watching it for a bit. So I had that. I knew that it was just football, like any other football would be.

Whether it was anecdotal evidence or familiar narratives, many former football coaches anticipated that women’s football would be like coaching a brand new sport. In reflecting upon this sentiment, this perception can be attributed to prior literature that suggests male and female athletes require different coaching approaches and to the societal belief that men and women are fundamentally different (e.g., ‘Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus’ idea). While there are inherent athletic differences between males and females
that have to do with innate characteristics determined by genetics and hormones, coaching style should be determined by personal experience as opposed to gender. In this particular study, coaches were delighted to learn that coaching women’s football and the athletes competing was just like coaching any other (male) football player. Luc even said:

>When I first went to Team Sask, I didn’t know what to expect and when I got there, like I said, “you ladies were competitive, you ladies were skilled, you were committed.” And I really appreciated that part about it.

Even in coaching the younger minor football levels, Luc recalled:

> I mean, the one thing that I was pleasantly surprised about was the competitiveness of it. The girls are just as competitive as the boys, I think the physical play – which was something I was drawn to as a coach and a player at one time…

During the Question and Answer period with the Moosomin Generals, we learned that a member of the Riot had grown up playing boys football in Moosomin, prior to the inception of the Generals. She shared a particular experience that echoes sentiments Luc had. She said when she would take off her helmet, people would be very surprised to realize that she was female because she was good (observational note, May 6, 2018).

In the 2018 season, all of the Riot coaches brought an extensive background of playing and coaching experience from various levels, from minor football to the professional level. Only one of the thirteen coaches was female. Halfway through the Riot’s defensive film session one of the coaches asked returning players and coaches why they are involved with the team and one of the coach’s answers stood out to me. He said:
I am a manager at work. I work in IT and I haven’t worked with or managed a lot of females so I felt like this was a good way to practice these skills. Plus, when I looked at who could benefit more – like who needs more coaching, females in football have been left out. I wanted to be part of the solution and benefit those who want it – and trust me, now I can say I would much prefer coaching you girls than guys (observational field note, April 17, 2018).

This coach had played Junior football and U Sports football. He also had over ten years of experience as a coach and defensive coordinator at the minor and junior levels of the game. He was approached by a colleague to apply to be the Riot’s Defensive Coordinator. He hadn’t sought out the position. Yet, it was very insightful to hear him acknowledge the reason behind his participation.

That evening, other male coaches also spoke about their involvement throughout the defensive meetings. One coach expressed how he hoped his involvement would encourage his daughter to play. Men and fathers have had this incredible opportunity to compete in a sport that has clearly made an impact on their lives and now their discourse reflects their desire to not only have their daughters be able to participate, but for them to have opportunities to compete at elite levels within football. In reflecting on the variety of reasons why these experienced and equally competitive coaches were getting involved in a relatively new program, it was clear that once they became involved with the Riot there was an intentional effort to remain with this team. Since I have started we have had the same core group of coaches, while some have changed positions – from positional coach to coordinator to head coach, the general make-up has remained consistent. This

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3 U Sports is the national sport governing body of university sport in Canada, comprising of 56 universities and four regional conferences under a national brand.
demonstrates that there is an intentional effort and desire to stay involved in the women’s program. Moreover, because a handful of the Riot coaches had come from the Regina Thunder, where their coaching staff continues to be 100% volunteer, the Riot did not have to ‘fight’ to get coaches. The idea of volunteerism and coaching the next generations of players was engrained in the football culture of the city, so the idea of competing with paid positions was not discussed, as that could certainly have been a barrier.

Based on the coach’s initial interpretations of women’s football and hesitancies surrounding coaching women, it is clear there needs to be a greater focus on educating coaches that football is the same game, regardless of gender playing. Moreover, a particular emphasis should be placed on incorporating women’s football into coaching clinic videos so that it becomes recognizable. As a long-time football player, Cody elaborated about this idea perfectly:

I think for a long time in Ontario, for myself as somebody who is heavily involved in football and had no idea women were playing in other parts of the country, I think just making people aware that it is a sport and it’s an option that people are taking and that we should be doing more to provide those types of opportunities – I think that’s a start.

Lindsay went even one step further, touching on another important aspect of development, she said:

I would love to see, like I said, a full (female) coaching staff, whether it’s in RMF or a high school team but of women, because then seeing that development in our coaches would be awesome. And then to see a like a high school aged (female)
team, basically our own (the Riot’s) farm team to allow that development to happen. Can you imagine that you don’t have to start your first day of practice saying, “what is a corner back?” and “What is a safety?”

While the prior comments certainly convey potential for growth and optimism surrounding women’s football, there are contrasting reflections related to coaching the women’s game that can be interpreted as being inferior to the men’s game. Eric suggests there are more opportunities for coaches in the women’s game, saying:

Since there are less coaches coaching women’s football than men’s in our country your chances, your opportunities to be a provincial level coach, maybe to be a coordinator or head coach – if you haven’t accomplished that in your men’s coaching – to be on the national coaching staff. Your chances are much higher in women’s football than in men’s, there is less competition.

Lindsay pointed out that the approach to selecting coaches is also doing a disservice to women’s football. Hiring coaches with little experience coaching the game downplays the legitimacy of the team, the sport and impacts the athletes who are looking to develop. Lindsay said:

Not going to lie, watching what happened at worlds I’m kind of like… [hesitant – stuttered] I’m glad that we have women coaching and I’m glad we have women coaching in Canada but I think we do ourselves a disservice if we haven’t shown that they’ve climbed the ladder in the same way and they haven’t done the proper courses and experience work necessary.

Despite the elaborate coaching application process advertised for the Women’s World Championship coaching staff in 2017, spots were not assigned based on credentials and
qualifications. Instead, awarded on preferences of the Head Coach. Moreover, a few of the players were injured during their season and couldn’t participate in the tournament, but Football Canada promoted them to coaches despite the lack of certification and coaching experience. The players felt that the female coaches de-legitimized their roles as players because they possessed the same experience and credentials.

While participants never made mention of any fitting solutions, I believe there is a great opportunity at hand. I spoke with a handful of coaches throughout the season and many of them became coaches because they had a coach that made an impactful difference on their lives and served as somewhat of a mentor. A structured mentorship program for female individuals, particularly players, looking to get into coaching would help generate interest, but also provide additional guidance in such a masculine environment. Many participants mentioned the need for female coaches, but this initiative would target the lack of experience and provide the additional support required to get more women involved.

To build a credible sport, coaching credentials, expectations and certification needs to be consistent. In order to continue seeing growth in the sport and growth in women’s leadership roles, it will be critical that National and Provincial sporting bodies not only provide equitable opportunities for women to assume leadership positions, but ensure they receive the experience, programs and certification credentials.

4.3. An Alternative Version of Football

The one prominent gendered discourse throughout the research was the association of women’s football to an alternate version of football. Weaving and Roberts (2012) note that the inferiority of sports, like women’s hockey and its players, was and
continues to be attributed to the lack of physicality in comparison to their male counterparts. Discourses are constructed and enacted based on these categorical rule differentiations.

However, football maintains the same rules regardless of gender. Yet, football has always been advertised as a male sport. Only recently have regional developmental football leagues been established for females. This contributes to the perception that females’ participation in football is unusual. This differentiation also implies the sport varies from what is perceived as (American) men’s football, resulting in associations to other, usually non-contact, versions of football such as touch or flag football. Participants commented on how this implication downplays the level of the athletes competing and the physicality that the sport entails. When asked about perceptions about the sport and the players who compete, Becky admits: “So the girls are not princesses.” When she shared the news with her family their initial reaction was to be very supportive because they thought she was referring to a recreational version of football. They said:

“Oh that’s good. Get that cardio in.” Becky said when they attended the teams’ first game, her family could not believe the caliber. They were like, “we cannot believe that these were women out there –like, that’s insane. You guys were hitting and throwing good balls and running plays.” Like, they were in awe. It was crazy.

Peoples perception and even other females’ perceptions continue to perpetuate the notion of women as athletically inferior to men, similar to what Migliaccio and Berg (2007)

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*In 2018, the Regina Victoria’s competed in a provincial girls’ league with teams from Melville, Moosomin and Yorkton.*
noted over a decade ago. Ultimately, these opinions, ideals and notions result in a constant struggle to legitimize the women’s game.

4.3.1 Differentiation of women’s football.

Historically, in the North American context, football was accessible to men only. Hence, women’s participation is not the norm and requires the identifier “women’s” to differentiate it. Minichino (2009) explains the foundation of different rules in sport is based on gender expectation, especially for sports presumed to be for men, like hockey, lacrosse and in this case football. She explains, “The athletes playing in the women’s game are always first described by their gender and are constrained by all the cultural ideas that go along with it” (p. 12). There is football and then there is women’s football. Like most women’s sports, the gender qualifier itself reinforces a stereotype of female inferiority. The problem is not that women’s sport exists, but that it is structured as a discrete category of men’s sport. By maintaining the masculine status quo, these sports continue to exclude participants who do not properly fit (Minichino, 2009).

When participants and their peers were introduced to the idea of women’s football, the first instinct was to associate it with various versions of the game, including the Legends Football League (LFL), flag football and touch football. Laura joined the local women’s tackle football team two years after the team’s inception. She described how women’s football was perceived at that time:

So, I think the only women’s tackle football at that time that they had heard of was the LFL. So there was initially that association then. Once there is clarity from that, it was like, well is this just like a rec league or it can’t be very good. Things like that. So yeah, I would say back in 2013 there was definitely, I would
say more stigma and stuff. Even now just in Regina, [there are fewer assumptions] with the Riot being more well known in things.

Lindsay’s experience was similar:

The stuff that [people] immediately – and I’m sure you’ll hear it lots – it was the same year as the lingerie [football] came out. “Oh so you mean….” [implying she would be wearing the league’s apparel which was similar to a bikini bathing suit]. And I was like “Not at all!” Right, any moment of that confusion people who knew me were like, “Are you kidding, you are doing what?” “No, no, no, no – the real football, the real kind, with the whole pads and all the clothes”. And everybody calmed back down and were like, “That makes sense.”

Prior to the WWCFL or MWFL, the Lingerie Football League, later renamed the Legends Football League (LFL) in 2013, had been the only form of football publicly broadcast by sports media involving females’ participation. Following the 2013 season, the league disbanded, yet the Saskatoon Sirens and Regina Rage (two teams in the LFL) still remained at the forefront of people’s minds when finding a point of reference for women’s football. Because the LFL was publicly broadcasted across North America, it was a very common misunderstanding experienced by players and coaches presently involved with women’s football. Questions about what the sport entails (i.e., tackle, lingerie, etc.) were more out of curiosity simply because of the prior connection with the LFL.

When players told their family and friends they weregoing to play football, another common misconception was to infer that meant a non-contact form of football, like flag or touch football. Women’s touch leagues existed in Regina and flag football
leagues existed in Saskatoon, but rarely did participants encounter people who interpreted football to mean the tackle game commonly watched on television and played by men. Becky recalled the conversation with her family and curiosity surrounding women’s football:

I’m going to play football this year. “Oh, like flag football?” “No, like football.”
“A women’s team?” “Yes.” “Do you wear equipment?” “Yes, we wear equipment.” “And it’s full tackle?” “Yes, like there are rules, there’s refs, there is tackling, there are practices, there is commitment and there is travel.” “What are you talking about?”

Becky confirmed that they had no idea women’s tackle football existed, let alone in Regina. They assumed she was joining a flag or touch football team, which also implied she was playing recreationally as a way to participate in physical activity and socialize. Sarah, who despite having previously played boys’ football, shared the same experience with friends when she stated she was playing women’s football. People asked her if it was still tackle and if the women had ‘normal’ rules, inquiring if they followed more commonly known CFL or NFL regulations. When asked about the challenges facing women’s football she referenced this contextual barrier:

Just the conception that it’s like a man’s sport I guess, that it [we] should just be lingerie football or just flag or just touch. Something that’s not traditionally a women’s sport, I guess – I don’t really know.

Having had no experience with women’s football prior to the 2017 Women’s World Championship, Cody brought a very unique background to the women’s game.

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5 In the summer of 2019, the Regina Adult Flag Football League (AFFL) added a Women’s Division for the first time ever. Eight teams were registered for this first season.
When asked how he thought the sports differed he was very direct and stated, “I think most of the variation happened away from the field. I look at the games and it is the same game. It is not… There’s not really much to add to that.” As someone very familiar with the sport, having been a former U Sports player, coach and NCCP Coordinator this statement speaks volumes for the quality of women’s football. Despite such reassurance, women’s football is still not interpreted as the ‘normal’ version of football. From these findings one might argue that women’s football is considered an alternative version of football – even inferior, despite the lack of modified rules to make it more culturally acceptable.

4.3.2 Implications of ‘othering’.

The participants provided insight into the ramifications of viewing women’s football as an alternative version of the sport and acknowledged that this perception certainly made it more difficult to legitimize the game. Participants commented on how viewing women’s football as secondary often led to the comparison of women and men, which led to downplaying the physicality of the athletes competing in the game. All these factors are critical components to growing acceptance of the game, as well as having it be considered equal or on-par with the North American version of football. Laura explained:

Most recently, like two weeks ago is, “Oh, you play women’s football, that’s really cool – is it full contact? Is it the same rules? Is it the same number of players on the field?” So just the basics of what football is, is always questioned. Interviewer: Really? People just assume that it’s not, because it’s …
Yeah. It just assumes that it has to be altered or that has to be some kind of exception or that there has to be something different about it to make, or maybe like less physical or less mean of a sport in order for it to be female sports.

When introducing the idea of women’s football to her peers, AJM felt the need to use the men’s game as a point of reference to provide context. She explained:

My friends will say, “Oh you’re just – you know, it’s not the same as what guys play there.” Their first reaction is going straight to – “is it a lingerie league?” And it’s like “no, it all the equipment, full contact, just like the boys play – no different…so”.

Kyla felt that it was this perception that made it difficult for the public to take women’s tackle teams seriously, especially when the league was first introduced seven years ago:

So it was a really big uphill battle trying to legitimize yourself playing in the WWCFL when everybody still thought that the LFL was the only football that the women could play and that was the only legitimate one and that was a joke – essentially.

From a post-structural feminist perspective and my own reflection, the LFL is unfortunately an organization built entirely on the exploitation of female athletes and the reaffirmation of hegemonic masculinity (Knapp, 2015). Any football player knows getting tackled on AstroTurf is not pleasant. Let alone when competing in the bikinis that the LFL calls ‘uniforms’. Then there is the sexual nature of the names of the LFL teams, such as the Chicago Bliss or the Los Angeles Temptation. Despite being a league that claims to be highly profitable, there have been several controversies surrounding the league’s support for health coverage. Unfortunately, the LFL does not respect its athletes.
and furthermore, Knapp (2015) concluded that the level of sexual objectification of the women in the LFL was comparable to soft porn.

Many female tackle football players were noticeably disheartened at their affiliation to the LFL. This does not stem from a sense of an inferior game. On the contrary, I would argue that myself and other participants respect the athletic ability of the players in the LFL, as they are incredibly gifted athletes. Furthermore, some women would even portray their involvement in the LFL as empowering. The defensiveness and almost resentment from the tackle football players stems from constantly trying to establish an association for women’s tackle football, what the game entails and what its players even look like. It makes it very difficult to shift society’s paradigms when the LFL is constantly being used as a reference point for women’s football, despite all the work that has been done to advance the game over the last ten years.

While she acknowledged her supportive network of family and friends, Kyla alluded that her friends often shared attitudes of shock and displeasure when she first said she competed in football. Later she learned that the reaction was based on the belief that women’s football remained associated with this previously discussed version of arena football that saw women half clothed:

And people still to this day, even after the [personal] accomplishments - playing for Team Saskatchewan and winning multiple championships with the Riot and playing for Team Canada - people to this day still like to make jokes and say… “Oh the LFL,” “oh the LFL” or “Oh, you guys are in lingerie.” Even though it’s not funny, because you work your butt off…
In explaining her participation in women’s football, Lindsay tried to differentiate the LFL and women’s football by explaining her participation in the “real” sport, making reference to the similar equipment and uniforms as the men. The overt apprehensions to players’ participation in the LFL is reassuring in a sense, as it contradicts previous notions that would endorse the hypersexualization of female athletes. It would be opportunistic to think these sentiments of resentment towards the LFL organization would manifest into more support for opportunities within tackle football and for the women that posses that desire to play. After all, it’s this desire to play - even more so – to win, as noted through my reflections on the 2017-2018 Riot season, that are changing the idea of who a football player is. Women just want the same thing generations of male football players have dreamed of and had.

Like many others sports that see women’s and men’s leagues, women’s football and the athletes are often compared to their male counterparts, with an emphasis on confirming their athletic inferiority. Sarah stated, “[People immediately think the players are] Not as fast, not as strong, not as whatever. Compared to a male – maybe not but in their own league.” Sarah makes a great point. When females are compared within their own leagues, it helps to generate respect for their athletic abilities as opposed to comparing their accomplishment against men’s. Further, Kyla noted, “I’m not trying to be a male football player, I’m trying to be a female football player.”

Some of the athletes commented on the unfairness of these comparisons given the differences in the development of the sport for men and for women. Kyla indicated:

… we were never afforded the opportunity to start it when we were young. You ask any male professional football player what age they started playing at, it
would be 3, 4, 5 years old and they grew up playing it their whole lives. So they were able to train and prepare for that sport their whole lives when all these unreal female athletes are coming in at 19, 20 years old and completely re-vamping their lives and becoming a Team Canada athlete that late in life, I think is unreal and is completely … they are not getting the credit that they deserve for completely changing their lives at that stage of their life.

The timing of women’s football, in terms of their season, was both an opportunity and way of isolating the sport. It’s opportunistic in the sense that the women’s seasons across Canada do not conflict with male seasons, which means a majority of experienced coaches are available to participate. If the women’s season was in the fall, during the same time as the men’s football season, Eric explained the dilemma that would present:

Yeah, they’re [the WWCFL and MWCFL] both spring seasons which …which is interesting. It allows a lot of us coaches to take that on because in the fall … coaches would be competing with all the other types of football coaching opportunities there are.

In reference to competing, I interpret that to mean that the women’s team would have a difficult time finding coaches because they are less desirable team to coach in comparison to the men’s teams. There might be multiple reasons for this, but for those coaches who hope to grow in their coaching role, coaching a less known women’s program certainly would not hold as much credibility and would therefore be a secondary choice.

There was a direct example of this preferential disposition during the 2018 season. Despite this ‘ideal’ timing, the Riot season was in conflict with spring football sessions
for men’s provincial teams, which inevitably still took precedence over the female teams’ schedule. In my field notes I recorded that our game times were shifted on two separate occasions during the 2018 season to accommodate both the boys U16 try-outs and the Roughriders (a CFL team). Since we are using the professional team’s field, the change seemed appropriate for them. But it remains curious how the extension of a U16 practice trumped our game.

Despite the stereotypes the participants alluded to and the continual substandard consideration they faced, the athlete participants in this study never expressed feeling conflicted over occupying two separate roles - being an athlete and a female. Prior to our Conference Semi-final game, before leaving the house, I recalled feeling calm and confident. It was the first time all season that I wasn’t completely focussed on work and really embraced the week of practice to focus on the game ahead. Having to juggle a career, a relationship, school and football is demanding, but each of those aspects is interdependent on one another and sometimes mutually exclusive. I had never thought of my participation as occupying two separate roles, for me the intersection has always been evident. My passion for opportunities in sport drove my career, similarly I had the opportunity to coincide my desire to learn with sport. It is these discourses and this version of femininity that can help to destabilize the social binary constructions that view women’s football as alternative and the athletes’ accomplishments as inferior.

4.4 Impact on the Development of Women’s Football

When prompted to discuss the future of women’s football, participants’ discourses can be described as cautiously optimistic regarding anticipated growth of the women’s game. While their discourses reflect general confidence in the overall advancement of the
game, participants certainly acknowledged the challenges that exist and barriers that need to be overcome to progress the sport on a larger scale. Participants expressed various strategies they believed would help to develop the game in a Canadian context. Evidently, there was an overall cultural shift globally in discourses to be more inclusive and to incorporate more organizational support, but there still remains a reliance on the men’s game to garner the support needed for women’s football.

4.4.1 Cultural shift and inclusivity.

It was commonly reported that people encouraged and/or supported women’s participation in tackle football. Very few participants encountered negativity about their involvement in such a historically masculine sport. Discourses reflected that women’s participation was treated with less suspicion and criticism than expected and instead, more curiosity. Lindsay discussed how her involvement in tackle football actually contradicted gender ideologies surrounding the apologetic defense and masculine hegemony. Based on the social construction of sport, specifically a sport like rugby, where sport participation requires its players to demonstrate masculine traits such as aggression, strength and power, female participants are often labelled with masculine traits. Female apologetic behaviour in sport exists to combat these masculine stereotypes. It refers to the way female athletes’ contest the idea of performing what society would consider to be a masculine activity. It is also a sign of female athletes’ “apologizing” for participating in sport by overemphasizing their femininity through clothing, appearance, even self-expression (Adams et al., 2005). These findings closely align to Hardy’s (2015) findings in studying apologetic behaviour within Canadian women’s rugby. Hardy
concluded that the women in her study demonstrated no apologetic behaviour and portrayed women’s rugby in Canada as a safe place for lesbians and heterosexual women.

There were numerous examples of published discourses that celebrated women’s athleticism and accomplishments in football and furthermore, worked to destabilize hegemonic construction of the female athlete. On June 19, 2018, the week leading up to the championship game, there was a conversation in our defensive chat that demonstrated discourses that see the athletes embracing the physical nature of the game and their desire to compete. The defensive coordinator posted this comment: “Thoughts on live tackling for scout period? I would suspect each player to get maybe 5-10 tackles extra in a week?”

Going live refers to tackling to the ground. Normally, during ‘team period’ in practice at the end of season the team would run a ‘thud’ tempo, which means you wrap up the player, but do not take them to the ground. This is done to prevent injuries and keep those with existing injuries playing less physical. However, when coaches want the defence to improve tackling during the games, it is hard to do that without practicing during the week, hence this proposition. Players answered the following:

Player 1: Thumbs up emoji

Player 2: I don’t think defence ever has an issue with going live in scout period. It’s a question for offence.

Player 3: I would really appreciate live scout but player 2 has a good point.

Player 4: Offence will never go for it. Chance of getting banged up are too high.

Offensive Coordinate: Player 4, wanna play RB (running back) in the live scout?

Defensive Coordinator: We could make for just outside the box plays.

Player 5: Love this idea!
Player 4: I don’t think defence would ever turn down that opportunity… lol that is what we live for.

This certainly contradicts previous notions of the female frailty myth. The example also presents new ways to conceptualize how females speak about their capabilities and physicality. Other instances where these discourses emerged were in the local newspaper, Rob Vanstone from the Regina Leader-Post published four articles about the Riot during the 2018 season. The Regina Riot was also featured on the news on multiple channels, including Global News, CTV Regina, Estevan Mercury and 620 CKRM radio. Even Chris O’Leary, senior writer for the CFL, published an article in 2019 about “Women’s Tackle Football Aiming to Level to Playing Field”.

Sport is an arena where masculine hegemony is constructed and reconstructed, furthermore dominant forms of masculinity are celebrated. However, Lindsay recalls that society’s general tolerance for acceptance has made the sporting arena a lot more accessible for women. She said:

I think that the change over now is the support, and it comes with a lot of movement’s right. Just reading this week - Lebron James and Kobe Bryant talking about how positive they would be about a female on the bench because the sport isn’t about male or female, it’s about how do you get the ball in the hoop – right.

As a former player and current coach of the game, Lindsay expressed that the change in messaging happened at a much quicker pace than say for instance the acceptance of women’s hockey or the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA). She attributed this acceptance to a shifting of societal norms in relation to gender expectations. She said:
I think it’s the timing when women’s football sort of - has come out globally, if you will. That that initial ‘sex sells’ the LFL’s the only one that will be successful to – you’ve got a guy like Jason [new coach for the Riot] saying, “I want my kid to do this, I want my little girl to do this thing. I did football, it was great. I want my young daughter to experience this same wonderful sport the way I did.”

With a population who have more real-life experiences with a wider array of sports than previous generations, it would be a mistake to conclude that women’s involvement in all sports is seen as acceptable. However, like Lindsay, several participants in this study reflected on how girls and women’s involvement in contact sports was more acceptable as a whole in society, lending to the overall more open-minded feedback surrounding women’s football.

Even in present day, people carry expectations in relation to gender and sport. Knowing we all carry this preconceptions, it’s interesting to explore how participants believed, another contact sport deemed to be hyper-masculine in nature, would evolve. When asked about the growth of women’s football, Eric focused on this aspect of acceptance:

…it seems that sport and physical sport is more accessible and acceptable in our society than ever before, from the women’s perspective. I think if you go back, I don’t know how many years, not many women athletes were playing … rugby, hockey, definitely [not] football. Now, it’s accepted. Now it’s a part of pride. You see young athletes at the middle school and high school level, being like “WOW, I can play football.” To see those kind of comments, and you see them a lot on social media ‘cause it’s easier to express yourself and be recognized you know,
outside of your or your school, but we see those more and more. I think we are seeing more people being aware that’s it’s a possibility and more people sharing the fact that they are proud to be part of it.

In her interview, Lindsay made a very important connection related to opportunity. She brings into perspective that some of the men she coaches with have kids and have expressed they want their daughters to have similar opportunities they did and experience the same fulfillment through sport as they did. She suggested that a change in society’s mentality, to be more equitable and inclusive, has reshaped the perception of what is available to women in sport.

Women on the gridiron have the potential to push the boundaries of the patriarchal ideology of sport. Similar to Hardy’s (2015) conclusions, this changing ideology is also a push for equality and shift in cultural conceptions of what is feminine and what is feminine in relation to sport.

4.4.2 The role of sports media.

Referred to by Kane and Maxwell (2011) as one of the most powerful institutions in U.S. culture, sport media generally reproduces gendered relations of power, values, and ideologies in its coverage. MacKay and Dallaire (2009) suggest that: discourse links the exercise of power to the acceptance of certain truths about sportswomen (and sportsmen) as gendered bodies. The repetition of particular statements about female and male athletes establishes truths about who and what they are, in the same way. (p. 26)

Further, the way sport is marketed and advertised impact who participates and watches, especially at young ages. Laura explained:
So, I think just the publicity that young female’s can play that young. Then also particularly in your tackle sports, so with organizations like RMF and Football Sask, branding that that this is a female sport too and making that inclusive to females, which doesn’t particularly mean a female stream – inclusivity with females and males at that age. If that can happen, I think that will help grow.

Willson and colleagues’ (2017) research dives into the development of the Australian Football League Women (AFLW). A similar version to tackle football, this form of Australian football is a contact sport played between two teams on an oval shaped field. The game involves a combination of tackle football, rugby and even handball, but players to do not wear protective equipment like they would in football. Willson et al. (2017) acknowledge the growth in female participation in this Australian version of football was in part due to the Australian Football League (AFL) embracing social and cultural change at both the grassroots and elite levels. The AFL played a critical role in recommending the establishment of a national professional women’s league. They also led the initiative that saw the amendment of the league’s ‘Female Participation Regulation, which had excluded girls aged 12 and over from participating on mixed teams. Furthermore, the AFL changed their marketing strategies knowing sport media is a powerful influencers of both athletes and fans. The grassroots initiative, Auskick, was marketed as an initiative to attract both male and female young players into the sport (Willson et al., 2017).

Despite the increase in popularity of women’s football in Canada, specifically Saskatchewan, participants’ responses indicated that the general public do not have an accurate understanding of what the sport and its players look like. As Cooky et al.’s
(2013) points out, in sports where the women’s equivalent exists like basketball, the Women’s National Basketball League (WNBA) received sparse coverage compared to the National Basketball League (NBA) on both the network news and SportsCentre. Moreover, 70 of the 78 main coverage stories appeared in the ticker that scrolls on the side of the screen. For the NBA there were 153 main stories and 120 stories that appeared on the ticker – that’s a difference of 195 stories (p. 12). As one of the main sources of sports information, this differential depiction highlights males’ exclusive access. It also does not present a visual for women to be able to relate to or see themselves in. Similarly, the dominant image of football in media is men’s football, which enhances the belief that football is a man’s sport. Sarah explained that football is not typically viewed as a traditional women’s sport; women’s participation, “just takes away from the manliness of the sport.” Not able to pinpoint what that meant, Sarah brought up our society’s reliance on gender dichotomy. The athletes struggle to gain recognition for their actual athletic abilities because they are categorized and/or limited by gender roles. She says, “It’s just a stereotype that girls are girls and boys are boys I guess.”

However, women’s football challenges the binary conceptualization of gender that says women are to act feminine and males are to act masculine (Butler, 1990). Being a female football player does not fit the perceived role of femininity because athletes are ‘performing’ characteristics perceived to be masculine, such as strength and aggression. When one’s performance differs from their prescribed gender role than one’s sexual identity is often questioned, also referred to as the lesbian stigma in female sport. This association, between female masculinity and lesbianism, is a representation of Butler’s obligatory frame of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Participants recalled instances of this
stigma, where people assumed that the women had to be the ‘big, butch’ type to play football. Kyla stated:

But another thing you just hear randomly saying, and I think people jest and make jokes about it, they say that the team is more or less - it’s a lesbian sport because it’s more brute force, it’s aggressive – it’s I guess you need quote unquote ‘testosterone’ to be able to do the sport. I mean of course, yes there absolutely are lesbians, gays and transgenders in the league but that’s not what drives the sport.

The lesbian stigma is often associated with women’s sport, especially contact sports like football and rugby. The female rugby players from Hardy’s (2015) research also encountered the lesbian stigma, yet were comfortable enough that they did not feel the need to engage in behaviors to alter this belief. She also noted that the characteristics needed to play rugby involve toughness, aggression and physicality, are the same features require for football that ultimately enhance the stigma due to the linkage between female masculinity and homosexuality.

Findings from Cooky et al.’s (2013) longitudinal study demonstrate the continual challenges faced with actual media coverage time. Despite the tremendous increase in participation of girls and women in elite levels of sport, the quality of coverage perpetuates the marginalization of women’s sport. In 2009, Cooky et al. reported that ESPN’s SportsCentre devoted 2.7% of its ticket time to women’s sport. The overall lack of coverage and type of coverage provide to women’s sport conveys a message to audiences that sport continues to be for and about men. One player’s analogy provided insight into the challenges that continue to plague female sports in general, not just football. She said:
For me, the only point and it’s re-iterating a point that we already made, it’s just when we talked about the chicken and the egg argument… does there need to be an investment and support in women’s athletics or does women’s athletics need to garner more of an audience before it gets an investment in and support to grow? For me, whole-heartedly there needs to be an investment and support from organizations and the media in order to cement female athletics as a whole, not just football, as a legitimate thing and something that will attract whatever audience you need.

Willson et al. (2017) talk about the shifting societal representation of femininity and femaleness, as well as the culturally inscribed representations of female athletes in marketing the AFL. In aligning the ideal female image to represent gender inclusion and culturally diversity, the AFL is helping to change the description and even visual perception of the female athlete.

Traditional pink and blue gender signifiers have been replaced with girls dressed in red and boys in black guernseys…The girl in the background is in an ‘active’ pose kicking the ball forward whilst the boy holds a more receptive pose of receiving the ball. (p. 11)

It is these outward narratives that help evolve the attitudes, discourses and messaging surrounding women in sport more quickly than they would have in the past.

**4.4.3 Organizational support for women’s football.**

Despite finding discourses that support the notion that society is more accepting of females participating in physical sports and learning of leagues like the MWFL that have existed for over fourteen years, the question remains – how come there has not been
more development and public support for women’s football? The WWCFL has had eight teams for years, if there was a significant growth in the game, even just locally I would expect the teams to be far more competitive. For the last couple of years, it has really been Saskatoon and the Riot who compete for first place. Now in 2019, the Manitoba Fearless team has joined that race, but teams like Grand Prairie continue to get beaten by over 60 points every game. Development, as it is referred to in this study, would mean closer scores because the skill of the athletes is increasing, but it also might look like increased number of teams and players.

Given the complexities associated with equitable opportunity in minor and amateur sports, solutions are not always straightforward. Most local sport organizations are associated with the Provincial Sport Organization (PSO) and through them, the National Sporting Organization (NSO). According to Sask Sport Inc. the purpose of PSOs is to foster, develop, promote and regulate the playing and officiating of their sport (Sask Sport Inc., 2007). The PSO is also responsible for the overall development of its sport from the grassroots programming to high performance levels.

The development and support of women’s football from PSOs varies within Canada. In Saskatchewan, opportunities for women and girls to play touch football in female leagues has existed for numerous years. It takes the commitment from a local champion to change that impression and standard. Eric attested to the local support he experienced:

What’s happening locally here, where I am currently residing and coaching, I think you’re seeing a little nucleus of sport, of community champions building

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6 Sask Sport Inc. strives to ensure Saskatchewan residents of all ages can participate in the sport of their choice at their own ability level.
them at a young level and hopefully that means more people are playing the sport at the end.

Luc reiterates the sentiment shared with the PSOs, who were highly supportive of his endeavours. He said “girls just wanted to play and we gave them an avenue to do that.” More grassroots programming has been introduced, with a specific focus on getting females involved in the game at both the flag and tackle levels. In August 2018 the local football governing body - Regina Minor Football (RMF) - started the Victoria’s, Regina’s first all-girls minor tackle football team for players in grades 7 to 12. Additionally, Football Saskatchewan introduced Girls High School Flag Football Leagues in Regina in 2019, for girls in grade 9 to 12. In the province of Saskatchewan there is also the opportunity to play women’s tackle football for either the Regina Riot or the Saskatoon Valkyries. These teams are highly supported by Sask Sport and Football Saskatchewan.

Having a sport nucleus is essential to having the support to begin a female football team or even an entire program. Luc began a female minor football academy in March of 2018, but admitted his reasons for starting a girls’ program may have initially been self-serving:

I don’t like it when people do things ahead of me like I want to be involved, I want to be on the cutting edge, I want to be there because I think that’s important because it challenges you as a coach, it challenges you as a program to provide these opportunities and be a leader and a trailblazer in these kinds of things.

Regardless of his motives, Luc’s passion and drive to continue growing the girls’ game was undeniable and he certainly encouraged others to realize the need to provide these opportunities:
Take a chance and realize that this is important, not just for our own kids – which I don’t have a daughter playing. My daughter was quite upset that I didn’t start this like 10 years ago but… I mean she’s not a very big player but she plays physical but getting back to the point, I mean you just need people to give those opportunities.

Prior to coaching the Canadian National team, Cody had been a football coach and in Ontario that inherently meant men’s football. Cody shed light into the challenges of inclusivity from a province that did not even have a female program or team at the time this interview was conducted:

Having had the experience of working with female athletes that wanted to play football and were playing football at a very high level, the next thought that crosses your mind when you are on the plane ride home to Ontario is that, well there must be women in Ontario that are looking to have these experiences. This is not a uniquely Saskatchewan phenomenon. But at the same time feeling like – but there is nothing there and how frustrating that must be for somebody who would want to play but doesn’t have the access and the opportunity.

Beyond the cultural shifts that are increasingly engaging female athletes, inclusivity and accessibility in a sport is heavily dependent on sport governing bodies. Provinces like Ontario are just beginning their female programs. On March 30, 2019 the Ontario Football Alliance held its first ever Women's Combine at Guelph University and Safe Contact Clinic for women only. Throughout the study, I learned that Ontario actually has one women’s tackle football team; the Mississauga MIFA All-Stars, but considering the province is fourteen times the size of Saskatchewan, it is surprising there
has not been more development. One participant who served as part of the PSO further reflected on the need for involvement:

I think for a long time in Ontario, for myself as somebody who is heavily involved in football and [I] had no idea women were playing in other parts of the country. I think just making people aware that it is a sport and it’s an option that people are taking and that we should be doing more to provide those types of opportunities – I think that’s a start.

After coaching with the women’s national team he quickly learned the lengths some of the players from his province would go to in order to play. He noted:

How do you get to a National program if you don’t have any club teams? Well, there were women from Windsor who were participating in the American League, playing for Detroit. We had another player who was, she travelled to Chicago to play with that team. It was amazing the length that some of the players were going to, to find these opportunities because we [men] just take it for granted. As a male athlete growing up you play high school, maybe you go on to play in university.

There’s all kinds of club teams. It certainly didn’t occur to me that there is a limitation. It didn’t cross your mind that – it didn’t cross my mind at least that as a young person growing up, that this was an issue or problem until you meet somebody who’s had to travel to Chicago to play the sport that you know, you just played everyday and took it for granted.

It did not occur to this participant that others may not have these opportunities that have always been so available to him. He acknowledged how frustrating that must be for players who want to play but do not have access to the opportunity. After seeing a few
recent tweets advocating for women’s involvement in football, Cody was asked to elaborate on how that process had gone:

But certainly now, being involved with the Provincial Sport Organization (PSO) I have a lot more access and I have an opportunity to say, “well if we want to have a women’s team at the next National Championship it’s just a matter of us doing that.” We can actually go ahead. We have identified an issue that there is not enough women involved in football across the various levels and now in my current role at the PSO, it’s like well ok – what are you going to do this week to make it a little bit better?

While Cody acknowledged that it is only a start and more needs to be done, some other PSOs have taken a completely opposite stance in regards to growth of the women’s game. Kyla shared a story from a Montreal player who played for Team Quebec during the 2017 National Championships. She said:

… we get a lot of support from Football Saskatchewan but I know, even just going out to Quebec, Football Quebec doesn’t even recognize their team [Montreal Blitz] as an actual team. The Montreal Blitz has to wear their own uniforms because [Team] Quebec won’t give them their uniforms because they don’t recognize them as a legitimate team.

The Montreal Blitz are the only female football team in Quebec. Their team was established in 2001 and used to compete as the only Canadian team in the Independent Women’s Football League (IWFL) in the United States. They were forced to leave the league due to financial and travel constraints in 2016 and currently compete in the
Women’s Football Alliance (WFA). The team is currently being run as a non-profit and they do not receive support from their PSO.

4.5 The Future of Women’s Football

Women’s desire to compete on the gridiron is another example of women fighting to gain access to resources, opportunities, and experiences in sport that they have previously been denied. While the future of women’s football is filled with hope, discourses reflect various hurdles that will need to be overcome to achieve both growth and development. There remains an obvious dependence on the men’s game and its’ players, and the cautious optimism expressed places a large focus on grassroots initiatives and female leadership to achieve development in the women’s game within the next decade.

4.5.1 Dependence on men’s football.

The interconnectedness of women’s football with the men’s programs presents both opportunities and hindrances when trying to gain growth and credibility. This especially became apparent when the Regina Riot’s jerseys were stolen on June 10, 2018 and the team had to find alternative options. The Regina Thunder, Regina’s junior football club for men aged 18-22, shared their resources, publicly posting on social media: “Unwritten rule. When your sister’s bike gets stolen, you lend her yours. Same goes for jerseys. Wear them proud, Riot! Bring that cup home.” Although an extremely appreciated and kind gesture, upon reflection of this quote from my field notes, this situation made a few things very apparent to me.

Firstly, the 30-year history and tradition of the Thunder means they have greater advantages than other elite, but newer, football teams in the city like the Riot. They have
a clubhouse, preferred field bookings, a fan support base and multiple sets of jerseys and ultimately, this type of inherent support that the Riot have not yet garnered. In fact, in addition to fundraising for three years, the Riot had to sell their old jerseys the year before to be able to invest in new ones. Secondly, engrained in that post is the idea that males are our protectors. While we certainly appreciate and value the opportunity to wear their jerseys, it comes with a feeling of inferiority. This alludes to Hoeber’s (2008) findings indicative of hegemonic power within sport and the athletes who compete, in that inequities based on gender are considered as part of the natural order of sport.

Many participants in this study still expressed the need to utilize men’s football as a fundamental strategy to growing the women’s game. Participants referenced the important role that well established football programs, typically led by and for males, could have. Participants suggested utilizing the men’s game to garner support and promote the female game, similar to the National Football League (NFL) had promoted females’ involvement in the game as players, coaches and administrative staff in leadership positions through initiatives, like The NFL Women’s Summit, held in conjunction with the Super Bowl.

Whether it is that women’s involvement in football has gained recognition on a global stage or shifting societal norms, Sarah commented on the critical role a local champion plays in introducing the women’s game in a community with no history of the sport. She argues the establishment of the MWFL would not have happened if not for one man. Through his prior involvement in local football he was able to change people’s attitudes who otherwise would have been harder to convince of the need for women’s football. She explained:
The guy’s name is Jerry, and he is the godfather of football here and his wife wanted to give it a try. Jerry had coached forever and he had two boys that played so he was like, “you know what we will set up a team and see what happens.” So yeah. I don’t know if he did it for his wife or for women in general because he knew there were a few of us who might want to do something someday, but I’m so thankful for him. Without him, we wouldn’t have anything.

Upwards of establishment, these leaders bring connections within their minor football associations and knowledge of process. Their word certainly means more as opposed to an outsider in the sport. Furthermore, they have the necessary connections and reputation to acquire the vast amount of supplies necessary to begin a program, including items such as; rental equipment, field space and even transportation. As a high school coach Luc had access to fields, buses and equipment, amenities that otherwise would not be available. Yet, he established an important point - that by making the sport more affordable it was also more attractive to parents and players, which in turn could help propel interest and growth of the game.

As previously noted, many participants recognized the potential for growth in the women’s game but often attributed the process or the role of men’s football organizations in that growth. For instance, Luc disclosed his advantageous standpoint to starting a female program as a result of his previous experience and involvement in the men’s side of the game:

I mean not everybody would be in that same position as I’m in. Then of course my football background and my football experience also is far reaching too; I know a lot of people, I’ve coached for a long time, I’ve coached in different
aspects of football, not only in the rural but also in the cities and I’ve, you know, I’ve relied on some of those colleagues to kind of bounce ideas off of and rural areas, it’s pretty small communities and word travels pretty fast.

When asked about the growth of women’s football in five years, Becky said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if it wasn’t ran more like the Canadian Football League”. While she is optimistic, her perception of what the female game could be is influenced by the surrounding male leagues. She said:

   It’s gonna be big and regardless if it’s going to be as big as the CFL – maybe not – but I feel like there’s really going to be a lot more travel and a lot more like publicity and a lot more – it’s going to be “a thing”, a legit thing. I think for sure.

AJM expressed similar sentiments concerning aspirations for growth and the need to garner more support through advertising and sponsorship. Furthermore, suggesting how the male programs could significantly impact this aspect:

   Like the league could sit there and help with advertising [of the WWCFL] at CFL level games, where at half time there could be something going on or something on the jumbo tron stating this league exists and you know…

Unknowing to this participant, this did occur at a couple of the Saskatchewan Roughriders games at the beginning of the 2018 season, where the WWCFL Championship game was advertised on the Jumbo Tron. The participant’s idea to have a well-established and respected sporting organization help to increase people’s knowledge about women’s football and garner support is certainly a more strategic approach to growth. When asked if she thought this would be the one change that would help the sport grow AJM stated:
The major thing, I think is – yeah, I think the CFL at some level being a part of it would be huge for women’s football. You know, you look at down in the states at how the NFL is getting involved a lot more in women’s football down there. And you look at how fast it’s growing down there, you know it started 4 or 5 years ago with a few teams here and there and now there’s probably 40-50 teams out there, like 3 or 4 different leagues. You know and that’s the NFL just spreading awareness… Yeah, and all the women that they’re bringing involved in their teams alone, on top of that (within the NFL itself). You know, coaching positions and all that stuff. And board members and you know, GM’s – women are getting a lot more involved and it’s a lot more known and it’s…the NFL’s throwing it out there and they’re advertising it. Saying hey, women do exist, they do play football, you know we’re supporting this. And I think that’s what the CFL needs to start doing. The only question is how do we approach that?

4.5.2 Grassroots initiatives and female leadership.

It was reassuring to hear the overwhelmingly positive aspirations participants had for women’s football. Participants had different ideas about ways to garner support and recognition, but many mentioned the integral role grassroots programming has on developing and legitimizing a program. Kyla acknowledged that the most difficult part of recruiting players in their twenties is getting females to try a sport they have never played. Laura elaborated on this point and the impact, in terms of longevity, when recruiting players after their typical sporting careers have ended. She stated:

I think for the sport to thrive the model of pulling athletes from other sports in their late teens, early twenties is a fleeting one. You have to start to develop
football players – female football players – from the time they are 5, 6, 7, 8 years old and then growing all the way through the sport. To do that though, you need to be able to offer them opportunity and a path through. So I think a lot of the dependency on if the sport will thrive or not, will come from the support it gets at those younger levels. So, RMF, Regina Football, Football Sask, in the high school league, and then into the Riot.

Many participants acknowledged the same need to develop the game and expressed their desire to play at a younger age. Becky says, “Oh I love it. I wish I would have started sooner, a lot sooner. But, it’s great. Like I really don’t know what else I could say other than I love it – I love it.” Luc added, “I’d like to see it in every high school as a stand-alone program, not as a co-ed program. I don’t know if that’s a reality.”

In Ontario, Cody acknowledged that grassroots programming would mean encouraging the girls to play with the boys at young ages. Furthermore, it’s exposing those already involved in the game to the women involved. From the PSO level, Cody is working to incorporate clips into coaching seminars and contact clinics to expose others to the women’s game. He said:

That’s another thing we have been looking at, is just exposing coaches to the [women’s] game and having them look at it and say, “oh of course.” Right, of course it’s the same football and of course it’s the same game, but it does help to see it.

Then eventually local football organizations would look to have school flag teams and high school tackle teams. In comparison, discourses surrounding grassroots programming in Saskatchewan hinged on establishing programs in smaller centers, consequently
improving and increasing the level of competition. When asked about development of women’s football from players within Saskatchewan, players responded with comments about developing teams and coaches, and establishing organizations and sponsorship:

I feel like we’re going to have a lot more competition in 5 years because other cities and provinces are going to maybe put a little bit more attention and more effort into building their teams. (Becky)

So I think and I hope that the league and just women’s football in general is going to keep growing but that being said, in order for it to keep growing is they need the athletes, they need the coaches, they the organizations, they need the boards, they need the sponsorships but they also need the communities support. (Kyla)

I asked JD when he was still involved with RMF (Regina Minor Football), “what would it take to have a women’s coaching staff? Like how off do you think we are from having an entire RMF team coached by women instead of a one-off over there and a one-off over there?” Let’s develop a group of women coaches together. (Lindsay)

Lindsay acknowledged the importance of development and leadership opportunities for women in the sport and how that would also contribute to increased development of the sport and its players. She admitted:

So there always has been a bit of female leadership right; our [The Regina Riot’s] training staff, our management, on our Board there’s always been an element of that female leadership, so for me to step in it’s just a reminder that it’s different because now [I’m] on the field…
She further elaborated how having a female coach has improved the coach-player relationship, and ultimately the players’ ability to learn and progress. She said:

In fact, I think sometimes the newer girls do approach me first. It’s more real.

Like you did this. Because when you turn to Addison Richards [the receivers’ coach], CFL players, 6’2” [and the response is], “Oh, you just do this.” Well, maybe it looks more real when I tell you, you just do that then when you talk to a guy like him. I’m just more accessible to them.

By encouraging youth to play at younger ages and having all female leagues, football would certainly present itself as both a male and female sport. Some participants did not share the same vision or knowledge about where the sport would be in the future. Laura was hopeful for continued growth, but she explained, “I feel with a sport that is as new as women’s tackle football is, there’s always, you always feel like you’re on the edge of it falling off and becoming nothing and it continuing to grow and move.” Yet, it was clear that despite the cautious optimism related to the growth of women’s football within the next five to ten years; even those currently involved in the sport are left with ambiguity in regards to how best to approach and achieve this development.
CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

The present study explored the discourses present in women’s football and what effects, if any, they had on the development of the women’s game as a whole. While there is growing literature related to women’s football (e.g., Berg et al., 2014; Knapp, 2011, 2014; Liechty et al., 2015; McDowell & Schaffner, 2011; Migliaccio & Berg, 2007), few studies have explored the ways in which people communicate and think about this sport throughout its various organizational levels (e.g., player, coach, administration, organization). Notably, Willson et al.’s (2017) recent research with regards to the Australian Football League (AFL) provided some insight into the progress in development of contact sports, resembling the North American version of football, for women through attitudes, discourses and practices. Their findings revealed similar opportunistic narratives emerging from the gridiron and the female players competing. Furthermore, the discourses in this study reveal that women’s participation in football is encouraging inclusivity and changing the understanding related to gender and sport.

5.2 Conclusions About Women’s Football

Using Fairclough et al.’s (2011) framework, critical discourse analysis (CDA) of participant interviews and a self-ethnography helped to gain a broader understanding of the players’ and coaches’ lived football experiences. In addition to examining the perceptions and language used surrounding women’s football, in this study I sought out to understand how these factors influence the growth in participation and popularity, the development of the athletes, and the overall advancement of the sport in Canada. Studying both athletes and non-athletes provided a comparison of perceptions.
As Fairclough (2012) points out, the heart of discourse analysis is two-fold, an analysis of language and one of societal practices. Through speaking and writing, we shape, produce and reproduce the world around us. Currently, women’s contact sports are at a critical state of change and Willson et al. (2017) suggested, “Its progress will contribute to conversations around gender, equality and the various ideologies embedded in the institution of sport” (p. 12). Findings from this study provide further evidence that although football has been previously constructed as a masculine sport, women’s entrance into the game is a new reality. Instead of being met with resistance, like women’s hockey was (Theberge, 1997, 2003; Weaving & Roberts, 2012), athletes and non-athletes are cautiously optimistic about women’s football. While the evidence of the CDA suggested women’s football continues to be situated as an alternative, seemingly inferior version to men’s football, other traditional discourses surrounding female athletes and women’s sports were not as prominent as expected.

What is unique about CDA is the interconnectedness of language to social, cultural and even political issues (Fairclough, 2012). Because language help create meaning, there is great power in the ambiguity that was found to surround women’s football. By exposing new or alternative discourses there is emerging potential to shape new meanings and negotiate new norms in relation to football in the North American context. Furthermore, findings from this research provide insight as to how the sport is perceived, why athletes choose to play, and individuals choose to be involved on both a coaching and administrative level. It is apparent that there exists transformative potential for the women’s game, but it will take a concerted effort from not only women (and men) in leadership roles (e.g., coaches), but those of governing bodies to continue providing
opportunities for girls and women to access, learn and play the game. Unique to the present study was that the availability of the game was dependent on geographic location. These findings may help explain why, despite the momentum leading up to this point and the optimistic discourses surrounding women’s involvement in this particular hypermasculine sport within Saskatchewan, there still exist barriers that hinder the development of the women’s game throughout Canada.

5.3 How Does This Add to Existing Knowledge?

Over ten years ago, Migliaccio and Berg (2007) suggested that women’s football was an ideal arena for further research given the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and the heteronormative nature of the game. In comparing the discourses from this study to previous research on gendered discourses connected with female football, notions of negativity and contestation surrounding the players and their participation in a hypermasculine sport is more uncommon than initially believed. The rise of women’s football and women’s sports in general, is a result of a myriad of reasons, with one of the most significant arguably being societal change that sees shifts in gender paradigms.

Kendall Coyne-Schofield’s performance in the fastest skating competition at the 2019 (men’s) NHL All Star Competition broke barriers for women’s hockey and called attention to the skill of the players and the gender discrimination that has plagued them for decades. Current contributions have brought a spotlight to serious forms of discrimination, more importantly given way to conversations about disparities within the sporting arena. From the results of this qualitative and ethnographic exploration of discourses, one could argue emerging discourses of ambiguity, as opposed to negativity,
are beginning to challenge conventional gender roles in relation to sport. The results further suggest people are somewhat open, rather than closed, to new opportunities.

Women’s desire to compete on the gridiron is yet another example of women fighting to gain access to resources, opportunities, and experiences that they have previously been denied in sport (McDowell & Schaffner, 2011). As Saadia Ashraf, owner and general manager of the Montreal Blitz noted, women’s football has been in existence for 20 years (O’Leary, 2019). She recalls her and seven other Montrealers commuting to New York State to play for the Rochester Galaxy prior to the millennium. It was only within the last ten years that the women’s game became more conventional, even encouraged, in various parts of our country. The overarching ambiguity expressed in relation to women’s football from athletes and non-athletes in this study, along with the critical moment in the history of women’s sport, provide a more positive platform for developments then when other hypermasculine sports, like ice hockey, were initiated for women.

Comparable to prior research, women in this study acknowledged that they were drawn to the sport because of the physical nature of the game that required them to display characteristics frequently associated with masculinity like aggression, strength and physicality (Caudwell, 2013). Similar to findings from Hardin and Greer’s (2009) research, which concludes that some sports are gendered – based on the characteristics affiliated to the game – women from this study explained they never thought football was available to them as youth because it was only encouraged for boys. Where prior research has suggested that the female athlete paradox has limited the ways in which female athleticism was constructed (Meân & Kassing, 2008), the narratives in this study provide
important insight into the changing discourses surrounding the female athlete and the existing relationship to gender-appropriate sports. Previously, women and girls might have been dissuaded from participating in more masculine sports, now they see it as a new and exciting, but unknown opportunity. The responses of the discourse shared in the defensive chat group about going “live” during scout period (referred to in Chapter 4) contradict notions of the female frailty myth and provide examples of new and even replacement discourses within the sport, that see women embracing their strength and their role as football players. Adams et al. (2005) explain how athletic endeavours require women to engage their bodies in practices that are typically associated with masculinity. These discourses rupture the typical representation of a football player (e.g., a tackle football player is synonymous to a man; Berg et. al., 2014) and disrupt the cultural meaning of the female body and how it is regulated in sport.

Moreover, athletes from this study did not intentionally categorize themselves or their performance as a football player to be associated with being different or abnormal, like the athletes of Meân and Kassing’s study (2008). While gender (unfortunately) remains the primary identifier of the sport (i.e. women’s football), the discourse used to create their representation as football players suggests the female athlete paradox is not a challenge players encountered or at least alluded to during interviews. Football provided an outlet for women who did not ever feel small enough to run a marathon. It was a place where larger women’s strength were celebrated and embraced. Additionally, the paradoxical linking of female athletic ability and traditional female heterosexual appeal was not obvious or embraced by many, if any players. At the root of the Regina Riot, under the history section of the website, it states:
But we’re more than just football players. We are students. We are business owners. We are mothers. We are volunteers within the Regina community. And we’re committed to growing the sport of women’s football in this city, in this province, and in this country. (Regina Riot, 2019)

The construction of women’s athletic identities was subject to their many roles and responsibilities rather than traditional gendered hegemony that would require the negotiation of heterosexuality and femininity.

The findings showed that women’s football was supported by athletes, non-athletes, and the community. For example, on June 16, 2018 the Regina Riot walked in the Queen City Pride Parade. I recalled:

As we walked the street downtown Regina, we received many cheers and people even shouted, “Did you find your jerseys?” Be it from the success we had seen on the field that season, or the increased public relation and community outreach initiatives we undertook as a team, this happened so frequently. People in the crowd knew who the Regina Riot were and the success we had had that season. It was almost surreal to have the team be recognized without the need to explain who the Riot are.

Participant discourses also conveyed that the initial impressions of women’s football continues to be most frequently associated with various versions of the sport. People’s inherent tendencies to associate women’s football with the LFL or touch football may stem from the lack of knowledge of availability and encouragement of women’s participation in the tackle game at younger ages. Such findings reinforce Knapp’s (2011) suggestions of encouraging participation from a young age. Currently, in Saskatchewan integrated tackle football is being introduced at younger ages and girls
have their own league to compete in. The Regina Victoria’s were established in 2018 with a coaching staff comprised of two male coaches and eight female coaches (who played or coached for the Regina Riot). In 2019 Saskatoon will be initiating a minor girls’ football program with four teams. Additionally, that same year, Football Saskatchewan initiated the Girls High School Flag Football League, with ten high schools competing in Regina and nine high schools in Saskatoon.

In MacKay and Dallaire’s (2012) study, girls used a blog to generate their own content. Their discursive portrayals as poly-gendered skaters were unique to other media representations, and helped expand and alter existing discourses about female skateboarders (skirtboarders) while also challenging normative definitions of gender. These types of conversations and social media platforms, where people have the power and the space to create their own narratives, could be used across sport. They could help to propel the women’s game into wider consciousness, change attitudes and push the drive for equality. From this study, it appeared that women and men involved in women’s football are generating new language about the sport and the athletes who compete. While football remains a male-dominated sport, the growing number of females playing the sport makes it very rarely referred to as a ‘male-only sport.’ Moreover, more language exists that not only credits female athletes’ abilities as football players but relates the setting of football with women such as the term Gridiron Girls, and Female Flag Football League and Ontario Football Alliance’s Women’s Combine.

Rather than shutting down the conversation, creating spaces and environments that promote football as both a male and female sport have provoked greater curiosity in the potential of the women’s game. This is where one participant places a great deal of
focus. Cody explained that through tweets, webinars and daily conversations he hopes to increase awareness about women’s football and then generate ideas about what can actually be implemented, whether it be starting with high school football programs or community programs. These conversations and discourses shared help to break down barriers of the continuation of heteronormative gender construction, in addition to the centring of male privilege in sport.

5.3.1 Transformative potential.

Combative sports, such as football, are said to represent the last bastions of masculinity (Knapp, 2015). Many sports are socially constructed as masculine spaces and women’s involvement is often seen as invasive, particularly in hypermasculine sports (Autunovic, 2014). Autunovic’s (2014) research in blogosphere spaces related to Shannon Eastin’s participation as a referee in the NFL demonstrates that although single intrusions threaten male dominance, they often do not lead to systematic change in gender relations. Autunovic and Hardin’s (2015) later work illustrates women’s participation in sport through physical participation and fandom presents an opportunity for women to create new discourses and negotiate the masculinized ideal of football in a space where they are not intruders. Similarly, findings from this study suggest that the presence of female football players, women’s teams and leagues is changing the way football is perceived, at least in Saskatchewan.

Twenty years ago, coaches, administrators and players alike might have easily said football is not appropriate for girls. This shift in mindset is redefining the larger heteronormative practices that differentiate gender-appropriateness of sports (Hardin & Greer, 2009) and inherently construct expectations about the athletes who compete.
The cautious optimism expressed by participants reflects a shift in societal discourses, one that does not place limitations on female’s athletic competence, nor associate one’s athleticism with their perceived sexuality (Adams et. al, 2005; Krane, 2001). The ripple effects are being felt across the province, even across the country (O’Leary, 2019), with more experienced coaches getting involved and greater awareness being generated about women’s football. Grassroots football programming for girls has been established in various cities in Canada throughout the course of this study, including the Capital District Minor Football Association (CDFMA) in Alberta, who formed a new Female Midget League for girls ages 15-17 in 2019. Provinces have taken notice of the interest in women’s football and governing bodies are beginning to implement and promote female programs outside of Saskatchewan. For instance, on March 30, 2019, Ontario Football Alliance held its first ever Women’s Combine and Safe Contact Clinic (Football Canada, n.d.). As more work is done to promote inclusion of females in football, from grassroots to the professional levels, the potential for development of the players and teams will continue to increase. Based on the feedback from the interviews, there are smaller practical steps that PSOs and leagues can take, beginning with including clips of women’s football in coaching clinic material. Secondly, in areas like Saskatchewan that have elite female teams, governing body could create specific mentorship programming for women who no longer want to play but want to remain engaged in the game. These are just two examples of avenues that could help change discourses and people’s football paradigms at various organizational levels of the game.

Women have also become part of the men’s football system and organizations. In 2015 Jen Welter served as an intern for the Arizona Cardinals. In 2016 Kathryn Smith
became the first woman to hold a full-time coaching position in the NFL, as a Special Teams Quality Control Coach for the Buffalo Bills. Katie Sowers continues to work with the San Francisco 49ers as an Offensive Assistant Coach and most recently in 2018, Kelsey Martinez became the Oakland Raiders’ Strength and Conditioning Assistant Coach (Connley, 2018). Meanwhile, Toyota took the initiative to feature Toni Harris, the first female to receive a football scholarship for a men’s team, in their 2019 Super Bowl commercial.

While stereotypical negative comments surface and perceptions still exist related to women in sport, the discourses in this study certainly did not attempt to exclude women from sport or protect the male domain of football like those in Autunovic’s (2014) findings. This examination of discourses further suggests that the optimism surrounding female football could be, in part, due to a greater cultural shift in attitudes of acceptance and push for gender equality that Willson et al. (2017) noted. When Robert Earnshaw, a former Welsh International soccer player tweeted: “If money didn’t exist would you chase the same dream?” there were quickly many replies, with one that stood out to me. Rhian Wilkinson replied: “You’ve just described every female athlete.” Rhian is a three-time Olympian, two-time bronze medal winner in soccer and 4-time World Cup participant. Female athletes are no longer satisfied with the opportunity to simply play; they want equity and they are empowered to voice those opinions. Most recently, the USA’s win over the Netherlands in the 2019 Women’s World Cup final sparked far more than celebration. It generated a fight for lasting change. The win validated the team’s status as icons and whose willingness to break down sport barriers serve as
representations of the wider movement to end the gender wage gap and challenge perceptions of how female athletes should behave.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

In this section I discuss the limitations of the study, its findings, and present suggestions for the direction of future research.

5.4.1 Limitations.

This study focused on a small sample of players and coaches, to understand greater barriers and or opportunities in women’s football, I would recommend extending research to the many other groups involved in the game such as, management, fans/spectators, family members, friends, sponsors and the media. There is limited research on fans of women’s sport and sponsors, despite their investment (both fiscal and time) in the game. Additionally, it should be noted that this research reflects general public discourses on women’s football via the views of players, coaches and others involved within the game. While these experiences are valid, future discourse analysis of public media sources (e.g. news media, blogs and social media) would provide further understanding of public discourses in regards to the sport. Of note, discourses analysis was used at a very general level in this study. Future studies could enhance the depth of analysis related to the words and connotations through other critical approaches such as a textual analysis.

Khomutova and Channon’s (2015) content and semiotic analysis of commentary and visuals from 26 LFL matches reinforced previous findings that sexualizes the visual content of programming. Findings from Cooky et al. (2013) and Martin and McDonald’s (2012) suggest the lack of coverage and also the type of coverage afforded to female
athletes and sports often emphasize conventional feminine norms. Where the LFL is able to garner a fan base as a unique sport and revenue through sexualizing females, the newness of women’s tackle football and the lack of visibility creates a barrier in garnering support beyond the scope of social media. Discourses in the study made it clear that the women want to showcase their athletic abilities, yet it remains difficult to consider women’s football exclusively without inherently comparing the athletes to their male counterparts. Many may hear of a girl or woman who joins a male team, but those stories, like that of Sam Gordon, are often sensationalized as rare occurrences. While these individual efforts have certainly laid the groundwork for women’s teams and leagues, women competing in these leagues want to be recognized for their accomplishments versus other women, not how the game compares to that of another gender.

One of the limitations of this study is that most of the people are from Saskatchewan, where football is popular. From the Saskatchewan Roughriders of the CFL, to the Saskatoon Hilltops of the Canadian Junior Football League (CJFL), to the University of Regina Rams and University of Saskatchewan Huskies, each team has an incredible history of tradition, presence and popularity within the province. For whatever reason, Saskatchewan boasts a unique tradition of excellence when it comes to football. Even six versus six football, touch football leagues and flag football leagues are incredibly popular for both men and women across the province. This has ultimately resulted in a culture where there is an affinity to football. The optimism and acceptance expressed towards women’s football in this study might not be shared across provinces or between countries that do not have this same deep-rooted affinity to the sport.
5.4.2 Future Directions.

A more comprehensive study of female football players across the country is needed to compare players’ experiences and gain an understanding of the discourses that exist to maintain or challenge the development of the game from a national and international perspective. Most of the people included in the study were from Saskatchewan and the inherent popularity of football in the province is unique in comparison to other areas of the country. Where Saskatchewan has two female teams and competes in a league of eight teams, the Montreal Blitz is the only team in Quebec and formerly competed in the Women’s Football Alliance (WFA) American league. This means the Blitz played by American rules, but they were forced to leave the league in 2016 due to financial and travel constraints. What exist as barriers to the Regina Riot would certainly differ from the Blitz.

Deeper understanding could also be gained about player development within and between each province through a longitudinal study that incorporates direct observation of female players over the course of their football career. A longitudinal study could provide greater insight into development trends and the factors beyond discourses that influence the evolution of the women’s game. For instance, does having women’s teams in towns where there is at least a mid-sized university with a breadth of female U Sports teams create for more recruiting and a higher level of athletes being recruited? Another idea that comes to mind is having mentorship opportunities available for graduates of the Riot program who wish to pursue coaching to foster a development system for female coaches.

It would be interesting to replicate this study in Ontario or British Columbia,
where there has been little development of women’s football, to see what barriers they are facing and if they are similar or how they differ. Using the results of this study, is it possible to change discourses used? This idea of action research, using Saskatchewan as a model, could help present new ways to think about football played by females and evolve at a quicker pace (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). Action research is most commonly used in academic environment, but its application is in living inquiry of practical issues among society. It links practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing across communities and environments.

Many of the current players have careers, spouses, kids and other commitments. To be an elite team requires a large time commitment from everyone involved and the more supportive the environment, the easier these identities can exist simultaneously. This is the culture the Regina Riot has created and I think it’s necessary if they want to continue attracting the best athletes, knowing there is no salary – instead it’s pay-to-play. Women’s sport and the female athletes who have fought to compete and fought to break down the hierarchies that reinforce the broader inequality in society are being heard. Yet, with discourses of caution and uncertainty, women’s football continues to be conceptualized in relation to men’s football. To gain acceptance, women’s football needs credibility as its own individual sport, not in comparison or in relation to the men’s game. This is where greater focus can be placed in the future to determine what those specific discourses or discursive practices are, that can help to conceptualize women’s football with greater integrity.

A former teammate posted this message on her social media site, which is visible to the public (March 24, 2018):

where there has been little development of women’s football, to see what barriers they are facing and if they are similar or how they differ. Using the results of this study, is it possible to change discourses used? This idea of action research, using Saskatchewan as a model, could help present new ways to think about football played by females and evolve at a quicker pace (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). Action research is most commonly used in academic environment, but its application is in living inquiry of practical issues among society. It links practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing across communities and environments.

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A former teammate posted this message on her social media site, which is visible to the public (March 24, 2018):
Upon arrival for a coach’s clinic it was assumed I was a mom there to help with registration. Rage… Def was not polite when I explained I was there for coaching. Once past the gatekeepers the clinic has been good. #fuckingpatriarchy #womeninsport.

One of the participants touched on this point that there needs to be a push from governing bodies to get women involved in coaching and leadership positions. This allows players (male and female) to see there are various avenues, especially for women, to ensure they can see themselves there in the future. Likewise, women’s football needs to be marketed to both players and coaches as a game for all athletes, regardless of gender. This means intentionally including clips of women’s football in coaching clinic sessions and engaging female players to pursue certification. Lindsay also noted that expectations of coaches of the women’s game should be held to the same standard as the men’s. Studying the experience of female football coaches could certainly be another avenue for future research.

Admittedly, this is critical moment in the history of women in sport, and football in Canada in particular because of the intersectionality of gender, equality and masculine hegemony. Men’s football continues to shape interpretations and representations of the athletes and coaches who are involved in the game. However, cautious optimism, instead of negativity, demonstrates an openness and potentially growing acceptance of the sport. If alternative discourses can help to reframe women’s participation and athleticism in football it will help to generate new reference points for the next generation of athletes, furthermore aid in removing barriers that come between women’s participation as a player and at the leadership levels. I recommend further research on these particular
women, who occupy roles in such a male dominated environment to increase the public’s knowledge of this cultural shift, one that celebrates women’s involvement in various facets of the game to encourage diversity.

Decades worth of battles in the sporting field, media and within society have brought gradual shifts in equality, equity, acceptance and positive change in the perception of women’s sport. Women’s soccer has created a platform that demonstrates that women’s sport is profitable, at least at the National level. However, how can we translate this respect and acceptance to the semi-pro and local level? It would be interesting to know how much acceptance people are willing to give women in a sport that exudes the epitome of masculinity. Despite the optimism from participants in this study about women’s football, Rhian’s comment highlights the major limiting factor – if there is this positivity and shifting cultural ideologies why has women’s football not seen greater growth?

5.5 Epilogue

In presenting some early findings at an academic conference, which took place during the fall of the 2018 Riot season, one of the men in the room referenced an experience he had with another typically masculine sport that made him realize his innate pre-disposition to associate sport and gender. He walked into an arena and after watching the first two periods he realized it was actually two women’s teams playing. He explained that the fast pace of the game and the fore-checking strategy caused him to assume that it was men playing. While this occurrence helped him to change his perspective moving forward, it also revealed that even in present day, people carry expectations in relation to
the gender and sport. This is especially true for women who compete in sports deemed inherently masculine.

The athletes who compete in hypermasculine sport are often confronted by prior discourses that associate their sport with male and masculine attributes. This is especially true for football – with all previous paradigms drawn from the NFL, the CFL or college football. Despite this history, the results of this study certainly proved to be more optimistic than originally anticipated. A few specific examples came to mind; one participant alluded to the success her team has seen in the last three seasons as opposed to the first three, due to the quality of players that are being recruited at younger ages. Another participant explained the evolution of team standards, alluding to the lack of team culture and expectations in her first couple of years with the team. She explained the sense of accountability and level of professionalism, with new coaches there is now a code of conduct that players and coaches are expected to operate within.

The study revealed that women’s football in Canada has come a long way in the last ten years. Even since beginning this project five years ago there have been significant developments in female football, specifically in Saskatchewan, that could have contributed to people’s acceptance and open-mindedness in regards to its development.

The fact that these discussions about grassroots programming, athlete development and recruiting are being had and there are strategic initiatives to market football, both flag and tackle programs, demonstrates the willingness to make the sport available to both girls and boys from a young age. These are all new initiatives not previously noted prior to 2015. Now, five years later, through the course of this research more opportunities exist, which certainly influences the perceptions of the greater
population and makes them more open-minded to the legitimacy of women competing on the gridiron.

While there have been incredible strides in the last five years, I don’t think any have reached the point of acknowledging that women’s football could be a professional sport, with a league of its own and receive the same recognition or status as their male counterparts. Not to be compared to, but respected for their abilities and play.
List of References


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Appendices

Appendix A - Terminology

AFFL: Alberta Female Football League
CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis
CFL: Canadian Football League (Men’s)
CWHL: Canadian Women’s Hockey League
Football: Tackle football
GM: General Manager
Hockey: Ice hockey
IFAF - International Federation of American Football
IWFL: Independent Women’s Football League
LFL: Legends Football League (previously Lingerie Football League)
MWFL: Maritime Women’s Football League
NBWFL: New Brunswick Women’s Football League
NFL: National Football League (Men’s)
NHL: National Hockey League
USWFL: United States Women’s Football League
WNFC: Women’s National Football Conference
WFA: Women’s Football Alliance
WWCFL: Western Women’s Canadian Football League
Appendix B – Recruitment Letter

Hello,

My name is Mira Trebilcock and I am a graduate student at the University of Regina, in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies.

I am conducting a study that looks to examine the reiteration of gendered discourses present in organized women’s tackle football and their effects on the overall development of women’s football in Canada. I am currently in the process of recruiting 12-15 participants for this study. The selected participants will be asked to complete one (1), 30-60 minute individual interview at the location of the participant’s choice. During the interview, participants will be asked to discuss their experiences in relation to women’s football, to reflect upon their experiences relative to their male counterparts and discusses the foreseeable future of women’s football.

The criteria for participants are:

- Have been (within the last two years) or is currently involved with women’s football in Canada as either:
  - Player
  - Coach
  - General Manager
  - Trainer and/or equipment manager
  - Board of Directors member
  - League administrator
  - Referee
- Over the age of 18

Interviews will be conducted through the fall and winter months, October, November, December, January and February. Participants will receive a consent form at least one week in advance of the interview. If you know of anyone who may be interested, please feel free to forward them this email. The first 12-15 individuals who meet the criteria for the study will be interviewed.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the UofR Research Ethics Board on February 27, 2019. If you meet the aforementioned criteria and are interested in being a part of this study, please email me at trebilcm@uregina.ca.
Appendix C – Interview Questions

Player Questionnaire:

1. When did your interest in sports begin?
2. Have you played other sports? If so what other sports have you played?
3. What inspired you to play women’s football and when did you start playing?
4. Did you have any pre-conceptions about women’s football?
   a. If so how were they met or contradicted upon joining the team?
5. What was the reaction (perception) from your friends, family, co-workers when you first started playing women’s football?
   a. Friends:
   b. Family:
   c. Co-Workers:
6. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive, if any?
7. Are there any challenges facing female football players?
   a. If so, what are they?
8. Have you ever encountered or heard alternative reactions or perceptions to what you previously mentioned about women’s football (from friends, coaches, family, etc.)?
9. Knowing that men and women’s football share the same rules and equipment, what are other similarities or differences between the sports?
10. Where do you foresee women’s football in five years, and in ten years?
    a. What needs to change to meet your vision of the sport?
Coach /Administrator / Board Member / Staff Questionnaire:

1. What inspired you to begin working with women’s football and how long have you been coaching / volunteering as a board member / training?

2. Have you coached / trained other sports or other football teams? If so, what teams?

3. How does coaching women’s football differ from prior coaching roles?

4. Did you have any pre-conceptions about women’s football? If so, what were they?
   
   a. Have these notions been met or challenged?

5. Where and how do you recruit players? (coaches’ only)

6. Have you changed your coaching approach based on the players you’re coaching? If so how?

7. Knowing that men and women’s football share the same rules and equipment, what are other similarities or differences between the sports?

8. Where do you foresee the development of women’s football in ten years and why?
Appendix D – Consent Form

Project Title: An examination of the discourse present in women’s tackle football and their effects on the development of the game.

Researcher: Mira Trebilcock, BA
Faculty of Kinesiology & Health Studies (Graduate student)
University of Regina
Phone: [Redacted]
Email: [Redacted]

Supervisor: Dr. Larena Hoeber, PhD
Faculty of Kinesiology & Health Studies
University of Regina
Phone: 306-585-4363
Email: larena.hoeber@uregina.ca

Purpose and Objective of the Research:
• To explore the discourses present throughout various organizational levels of women’s football.
• To examine the discourses present to gain a broader understanding of female’s experiences in football.
• To examine how these discourses influence and/or effect the development of women’s football.

Procedures:
• You are invited to participate in a one-on-one interview, which will last between 30 - 60 minutes.
• In the interview, you will be invited to speak about your experiences related to women’s football (e.g. when and how did you get involved, what team you play for, why do you play women’s football), what discourses are present and your impressions of how they influence you and how the game itself.
• You are encouraged to bring any documents such as newspaper articles or photographs that you think may provide relevant information or contribute to your experience in women’s football.
• With your permission, interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorded and will be transcribed verbatim.
• Interviews will take place at the location of your choice. If, for logistics reasons a face-to-face interview is not possible, interviews will occur over the telephone (zoom or telephone).
• A self-ethnography will take place throughout the 2018 Western Women’s Canadian Football League pre-season and season in Regina, SK.
• You are encouraged to ask the interviewer any questions regarding the procedures, goals, aims and implication of the study, or about your role as a participant in the study.

Potential Risk:
• There are no known risks with this study.

Potential Benefits:
• There are no personal benefits as a result of participating in this study.
• Your participation will contribute to valuable knowledge about the discourses present in women’s tackle football and how they effect the development of the game.
• Research related to females competing in traditionally masculine sports can help provide insight to developing greater athletic opportunities for women at younger ages.

Storage of Data:
• During data collection and analysis, the data will be stored on the researcher’s password protected computer. The journal in which the field notes are recorded will be stored in the researchers locked apartment and locked vehicle to and from the area of observation.
• After the finding have been disseminated, the data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the Motivation and Active Living Lab, in the Faculty of Kinesiology & Health Studies, at the University of Regina.
• The data will be stored indefinitely, as it may be used for subsequent studies on women’s football, gender relations and discourses analysis.
• When the data is no longer required, the field notes will be shredded and the other data will be electronically deleted.

Right to Withdraw:
• Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason at any time, without explanation or penalty of any sort.
• You right to withdraw data from the study will apply until 40 days after you interview.
• You may withdraw by contacting the primary researcher by phone or email (see page 1). If you choose to withdraw the data you provided (including copies of photographs) will be permanently disposed of and will not be incorporated into the final project.
• After this withdrawal deadline it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.
Follow up:

- To obtain results from this study, please email the researcher at the contact information listed on page 1 of the Consent Form.

Questions or Concerns:

- If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact the researcher using the contact information at the top of page 1 of the Consent Form.
- This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the UofR Research Ethics Board on (DATE). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at 585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca. Out of town participants may call collect.

Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided;

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: ______ No: ______

I wish to use the following pseudonym: ______________________________________

_____________________________ ____________________________ __________
Name of Participant Signature Date

_____________________________ ____________________________ __________
Name of Researcher Signature Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be kept by the researcher.
Appendix E – Ethics Approval Form

Research Ethics Board
Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Mira Trebilcock

DEPARTMENT
Kinesiology and Health Studies

REB# 2018-008

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Larena Hoeber

TITLE: An examination of the discourses present in women's tackle football and their effects on the development of the game

APPROVED ON: February 27, 2018

RENEWAL DATE: February 27, 2019

APPROVAL OF:
Application for Behavioural Research Ethics Review
Recruitment Letter
Consent Form
Interview Questions

Full Board Meeting ☐ Delegated Review ☒

The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://www.uregina.ca/research/for-faculty-staff/ethics-compliance/human/forms1/ethics-forms.html.

Raven Sinclair, BA, CISW, BISW, MSW, PhD
REB Chair

Please send all correspondence to:
Research Office
University of Regina
Research and Innovation Centre 101
Regina, SK S4S 0A2
Telephone: (306) 585-4776 Fax: (306) 585-4893
research.ethics@uregina.ca