Canadian Women’s Experiences in Wheelchair Rugby

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The Problem and Research Objective
Wheelchair rugby exploded in popularity after the documentary Murderball was released in 2005. The sport was developed in Canada in the 1970s and named a Paralympic sport in 2000 (Litchke et al., 2012). In contrast to its’ able-bodied counterpart, wheelchair rugby is one of the few Olympic or Paralympic sports that includes mixed-sex participation. Where historically women with disabilities have had limited access to elite sporting competition (Depauw, 2005), wheelchair rugby provides the opportunity for women to represent themselves as competitive and physical beings, capable of the physicality and aggressive nature of the sport alongside men (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Yet there is a paucity of research in considering women’s experiences’ in these potentially highly gendered sport settings. This is a critical context for understanding how to shape, promote, and manage mixed-sex sports. Thus, this study uses a narrative approach to explore female athletes’ lived experiences of participation in wheelchair rugby.

Literature Review
Female athletes are grossly underrepresented at the Paralympic Games. In the 2016 Summer Games, of 96 wheelchair rugby athletes, only two were women (International Paralympic Committee, 2019). Further, there is little research on cis-gendered or otherwise identified women in disability sport (Blinde & McAllister, 1999; Seal, 2014; Richard, Joncheray, & Dugas, 2017; Hardin, 2007). Previous authors have focused on how female athletes in disability sport are often referred to in ways that emphasize their “physical and/or mental limitations” (Schell & Rodriguez, 2001, p. 128), as opposed to ways that highlight their athletic experiences.

Methods
Data collection involves in-depth narrative interviews with eight Canadian female wheelchair rugby players. Narrative analysis places value in language and considers what is said in addition to how it is said. This approach emphasizes placing trust in the participants to share what is important to them and allowing their stories to serve as the key empirical tool (Smith & Sparkes, 2007). Themes develop organically through an iterative process focusing on what participants deem valuable enough to share. Narratives also impart information about “others’ internalized worlds” (Smith & Sparkes, 2007, p. 18). Sharing others’ realities is a way for organizers to acknowledge the reality of female athlete's participating in wheelchair rugby and to act as a spark for change.

Results and Implications
Contemporary portrayals of female rugby players experiences reflect the culture of hegemonic masculinity and devaluing of physicality of women. The presentation of results will focus on discussions of athlete identity and construction of hierarchies of (dis)ability, gendered cultural norms and disrupting these traditions, and legitimacy of being a female athlete. The culture of hegemonic masculinity that encapsulates the sport remains pervasive, often preventing women from participating. This is layered with further challenges of intersectionality with disability culture. The focus of this research on women’s experiences in a mixed, yet traditionally masculine sport can help enable sport managers to develop strategies to develop a disability sport culture that welcomes and supports women in wheelchair rugby (Rowe, Sherry, & Osborne, 2019).