The Economics of Women’s Soccer in the US: The Production of Soccer from an Embodied Labor Standpoint

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20-minute oral presentation (including questions)

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The U.S Women’s National Soccer Team’s (USWNT) 2019 World Cup triumph—accompanied by a legal battle for equal pay that started a few months before the World Cup—was in some ways a reminder of the 1999 team’s landmark victory which captured the minds and hearts of American sports fans. While the 1999 victory proved to be a turning point for women’s soccer in the U.S, it also revealed the lack of attention to women’s sport (Hanson, 2012). The USWNT’s fight for equality has been continuing to this day, with players seeking fair compensation and an end to institutional gender discrimination. By contrast, sport governing bodies such as FIFA and the U.S Soccer Federation (USSF) argue that any pay discrepancy is a result of different pay structures and/or unequal revenue pools (Rathbone, 2019).

The history of discrimination against women in soccer is familiar to sport management scholars, although not from a labor standpoint. Knoppers and Anthonissen (2003) conducted a comparative study of regimes of inequality in women’s soccer in the U.S and Netherlands, while Markovitz (2003, 2019), Murray (2018), and Allison (2016, 2018) have offered historical analyses of the growth of women’s soccer in the U.S and the challenges that female players have endured. On the other hand, some recent labor studies in sport include discussions about immaterial labor (Hawzen et al., 2018), non-athletic/event labor (McLeod et al., 2019) and the athletic labor of femininity (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). The studies about women’s soccer have offered valuable insights on the role of structural inequalities that hinder the growth of the women’s game while recent labor studies have expanded our understanding of different forms of labor in sport. This study builds on these complementary lines of inquiry to explore the embodied labor practices that female soccer players employ to sustain themselves and their sport—beyond the production of their physically skilled bodies—while negotiating structural constrains such as unequal pay and access.

Drawing from the experiences and stories of 8 current college and former professional U.S.-based female soccer players as a focus group (obtained through semi-structured interviews), I examine the conditions and varieties of labor required to enter the professional labor market. My findings suggest that female soccer players engage in a range of non-traditional and under-compensated labor practices—including emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1999), affective labor (Hardt, 1999), aesthetic labor (Warhurst et al., 2000), hope labor (Kuehn & Corrington, 2013), and aspirational labor (Duffy, 2015)—in the production of value for the teams and leagues of which they are a part. By theorizing the different work that soccer players undertake to cultivate value for themselves and the industry, this study expands the conceptualization of productive labor, emphasizing the centrality of immateriality in producing labor outcomes that, despite their productive capacity, are not counted as productive in the market. Further analysis and implications for soccer development and pay structures as well as implications for the field of sport management will be discussed during the presentation.