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Under the Influence: Adolescent Girls' Compliance in Competitive Softball

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

Cory Wesley Lewis

May 2004

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Dr. Martha Copp, Chair

Dr. Scott Beck

Dr. Wendell Hester

Keywords: socialization, coaching, parents, teamwork, tenacity, gender roles, discrimination,  
emotion management, external motivation

## ABSTRACT

Under The Influence: Adolescent Girls' Compliance In Competitive Softball

by

Cory Wesley Lewis

This thesis examines how and why young female athletes participate in the competitive organized sport of softball. Based on participant observation and interviews with coaches and players of Team Z, this study examines how parents and coaches influence females to participate in athletics through incentives and punishments. This thesis also examines the cultural assumptions about work that organized sports introduce to female athletes. Furthermore, the study discusses how parents and competitive sports organizations perpetuate the existence of male domination in sports and in society more generally.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Little is known about female sport subcultures and sports organizations, and perhaps even less is known about the socializing agents that affect girls' participation in sports activities. Prior to attending graduate school, I served as an umpire for a girls' softball league. Based on that experience, I was drawn to the world of girls' softball as a setting for thesis research. At first, I wanted to understand better the process of socialization for softball players, and I focused my attention on the role of coaches. But during my research, I noticed a variety of different elements that influenced softball players to be better athletes. I still see the coach as the central force in determining whether or not the young athletes perfect their softball skills, but it is also important to note that many softball players do not play on the same team from year to year. Because of their active involvement, my study includes other agents of socialization, such as fathers and mothers.

Many females now participate in organized sports in public schools due to Title IX, which is a provision of the 1972 Education Act. This act required equal support and funding nationally for females' and males' public school-sponsored activities. Thirty years later, choices for participating in different school sporting activities are still limited for adolescent females (Flintoff and Scraton 2001). Traditional Americans perceive sports that incorporate aesthetics or beauty, such as cheerleading and ice-skating, to be feminine, and those that incorporate physical contact and strenuous activity, such as football and hockey, as masculine. Oddly, activities such as aerobics, which incorporate speed, endurance, and strength, are equated with other feminine activities (sports) because the activity resembles dance, which is perceived as a feminine pursuit.

Sports are categorized by American culture as either being feminine or masculine in nature, even though many women now play and excel in sports that once were perceived to be for men only, such as soccer (Lopez 1997). Despite the limited choices, the growth in female athletic opportunities has resulted in the creation of “female subcultures” in organized sports (Varpalotai 1987).

Participation in youth activities (such as girls’ softball) requires participants to effectively work in groups and promotes the development of initiative (Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin 2003). Youth activities, such as organized sports, can provide players with “opportunity structures” that allow participants to grow and develop (Larson and Verma 1999; Whiting 1980). Parents of children try to provide experiences for their children in order for them to be prepared better for the adult stages of the life course.

Parents motivate their children with a variety of methods when participants are extensively stressed and fatigued (Chin 2000). Parents must also manage the emotions of their children when they do not achieve what parents want (Chin). Increased female sport participation is predominantly the result of interest and encouragement given to girls and women by others such as parents, older siblings, and peers. Social influences in the forms of encouragement and interest from significant others like parents dramatically increases the chances that females will participate in athletics (Weiss and Barber 1995).

When adult mentoring of female athletes comes almost exclusively from males, females are socialized to believe that males should make important decisions (Varpalotai 1987). Traditional American culture assumes that males should be in charge of important decisions, which is made apparent by the shortage of females coaching organized sports. Female athletes

should be mentored such that they go on to coach both male and female athletes, just as male coaches do.

### Importance of the Study

Traditional Americans believe that certain sports are better performed by males, while others are more suited for females. Be that as it may, girls are becoming more involved in athletic activities every year. Athletic activities, such as organized sports, aid in the development of a child's initiative and problem-solving skills, which can help in achieving future goals. It is interesting that while some parents prefer to provide developmental opportunities through formal education, others prefer to enroll their children in athletics. A girls' sport subculture is the culmination of parental motivation and encouragement placed on females to participate in athletic events.

Organized sports such as softball could cause participants to be perceived as masculine, which is something that many female athletes resist by exploiting their (hetero) sexuality. This study is intended to better explain female sports participation in organized sports and the motivating agents that administer support. It is the hopes of the researcher to educate females who participate in athletics and their parents, about the stresses, manipulative techniques, and effects that are associated with female participation in highly competitive softball.

### Overview of the Thesis

Following this introduction, I will describe the methods for conducting this study. Descriptions of the study's setting and data collection methods are outlined in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 discusses the relationship between the different yet similar arenas of softball as an organized

sport and players' future workplaces. Chapter 4 explains the motivation and emotion management methods that parents and coaches employ with softball players to increase participation in sport. Chapter 5 asserts that parents, coaches, and players who participate in organized sports such as softball model gender role behaviors and promote traditional American cultural ideologies that perpetuate America's patriarchal hierarchy.

### Definitions

**Socialization:** Refers to the lifelong social experiences by which individuals develop their human potential and learn culture.

**Gender Role:** The behaviors and attitudes associated with acting male or female in a given historical period and actual setting. Gender roles are idealizations of male and female actions that categorize them as socially acceptable or unacceptable compared to others of the same sex.

**Subculture:** Cultural patterns that distinguish some segment of a society's population. Subcultures help to define what is normal and abnormal within a group and to some degree reproduce the status quo.

**Life Course:** Socially constructed stages that people pass through as they live out an aging process in their lives.

**Emotion Management:** People's efforts to change, suppress, or evince feelings or expressions in themselves or others (Copp 1998).

**Sexploitation:** The exploitation of a person's sexuality in hopes of being perceived as attractive. Sexploitation performed by females aids in reproducing the status quo by positioning females as sexual objects for male approval.

Patriarchal Hegemony: Refers to leadership, authority, influence, and dominance by males in virtually every realm of American society.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

Team Z (a pseudonym) is a highly competitive softball team for 10-12 year old females located in Tennessee. I decided to study Team Z because of my past experiences umpiring female athletic events as a source of income. I wanted to know why females participate in an athletic activity such as softball due to the sport's competitive nature. I also became interested in what made female athletes remain active participants in an organized sport.

To begin my study on team Z member participation, I began attending practices and games during a regular softball season. Each observation lasted approximately three hours. I took notes and video-recorded interactions during observations (with written consent granted by each of the players and parents of players before the study began). In all, I observed seven practices and six games. My purpose and presence were explained as part of the consent process. I conducted personal face-to-face interviews with six active members of team Z who agreed to be interviewed and two interviews with their head coach. All participants interviewed were white. Three interviews with players could not be completed due to lack of parental cooperation. Personal interviews were incorporated into my study in hopes of triangulating observation techniques. All team Z members interviewed had played softball for more than five years. Four of the six interviewed members had played for team Z for two or more years.

In my fieldwork and later in my analysis of team Z, I relied on a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, a social-psychological perspective that focuses on the social development of individuals. Its most basic function is to study how individuals develop socially through group

interactions and to understand what meanings people attach to themselves and others in the course of their interactions (O'Brien and Kollock 2001).

### Description of the Setting

Team Z practiced and played softball in various locations. No two games or practices took place on the same ball field. Parents and coaches paid for ball field access through parking passes. Spectators like myself also paid to attend games and to use parking facilities which aided in lowering teams' rental fees. This made following team Z difficult and expensive. I interviewed members of team Z in a variety of ways. Interviews were either conducted before or after practices and games. Some interviews were conducted over the telephone in order to save time and money. Interviews were recorded with a small tape-recorder which was placed between the interviewee and me, or attached to a speaker phone when phone interviews were necessary.

### Data Collection

I attended team Z practices and games for several months during the 2002-2003 softball season. The interviews with the six-team Z players and the head coach varied in length from 15 minutes to one hour. I also interacted with a few parents but formal access to parents was limited due to Institutional Review Board restrictions that prevented me from interviewing anyone other than team Z athletes and coaches. All interviews with team Z members were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. Once the interviews were transcribed, I wrote "notes on notes," in which I analyzed my observations as well as reflected on my own experiences with competitive organized sport (see Kleinman and Copp 1993). Themes that emerged from my analysis guided

further data collection and reflection. The patterns that emerged from this process are the ones discussed in this study.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOFTBALL IS A JOB: THE EDUCATION OF FUTURE WORKERS

Participating in organized athletic activities allows team members to experience a workplace setting before actually entering the world of work. Athletes must conform to many of the same requirements that are found in many workplace settings in addition to learning problem-solving skills. Athletic activities for females, such as softball, can provide different learning environments that promote social development and growth (Larson and Verma 1999; Whiting 1980). Many women have reported that sporting experiences provided positive life lessons that extended to other realms of their lives (Varpalotai 1987).

As a child, I can remember my father, brother, and me practicing baseball almost every day during the summer months. We practiced at least three to four hours a day. During practices, I distinctly remember asking my father why we had to practice for so long everyday. My father would simply reply, "You have to practice to win." Another remark I can remember my father saying is, "Practice, practice, practice!" Even at a young age, I knew that practice was perceived by my father as being important. My father's philosophy has in fact extended to many others facets of my life and helped me achieve many goals. Do parents and coaches of team Z assume responsibility for teaching team members this same type of work discipline?

#### Employee Training

Softball and other organized sports are framed much like the workplace. To begin with, attendance is a virtue that is highly prized in both the workplace and in sporting activities. As a baseball player in middle school and high school, I can remember my coaches benched team

members who did not attend practices. Usually my coach would restrict a player from participating if he missed practice more than twice during the week. I observed a similar pattern with girls' softball. During an interview with the head coach of team Z, I asked if he allowed players to play in games if they did not practice. The coach replied, "If they don't practice they don't play, but the parents usually have them at practices and games on time." In other words, the *parents* took responsibility for ensuring that players participated in team activities.

In addition to workers and team members being expected to attend regularly, incumbents of both roles are reprimanded before being terminated from participation. For example, if a worker or player does not attend regularly, the position may be given to another who is willing to participate regularly. Reprimands are also issued that enforce organizational virtues such as attendance and participation. In short, workers and players on athletic teams may lose pay or playing time before being fired or cut from participating if behavior is not corrected. For example, the head coach told player B after she showed up late for practice, "You've been late twice this month. I am going to have to start Sara (a pseudonym). She has more practice time."

Coaches and parents of team Z also buy equipment for members, which is similar to employers paying for worker training. Coaches and parents, like employers, perceive new uniforms and personal educational experiences (such as private coaching, or free college courses) as investments that daughters can pay off by winning and workers pay off through increased productivity. The father of player D informed me that players (i.e., parents) need to purchase some "necessary" equipment to play on a softball team. After registration (\$65), uniforms begin at the price of \$100 per player. Players also need to buy gloves for fielding, which can range from \$35 to \$200. Athletic shoes are also required, which cost approximately

\$50. Members of team Explosion must also buy other forms of athletic gear: a bat bag (\$50), a helmet (\$15), at least one sports bra (\$10), and “sliders” (\$30).

The financial burden increases during a season because players of team Explosion are required to travel almost every weekend in order to play. In an interview, the head coach told me that a parent can expect to spend between \$40 to \$80 per weekend. During the videotaping of a tournament, I was even required to spend \$20 for a parking pass. Luckily, I was given a coach’s pass for the following games. From this, I learned first hand that perfecting the skills required to play competitive softball is financially taxing.

Just like employers, the greater amount of time and money the coaches and parents of team Z invest, the more they pressure players to perform well. For example, during game 4, I had a conversation with a player’s father. During this conversation, I learned that the man’s child wanted to play another sport while also playing softball. The father informed me that he told his daughter that too much money had already been spent on uniforms and lessons, and therefore she could only participate in one sport, not both. He then told me that she would still have to finish the softball season, which meant that she would not be able to try the other sport until the following year (season). I later learned that this particular player was cut from the team because of her deficiencies (fear of getting hit) and is now attempting the other sport. I wonder if she exaggerated her deficiencies in order to force the sport change.

Another similarity between working and participating in athletic activities is that both are framed by a hierarchy that places superordinates (i.e., bosses, coaches, and parents) in charge of subordinates (i.e., workers and players). Athletic activities for females such as softball are based on the ideology that there are people (most often males) who are superior to others (most often females) (Varpalotai 1987). The hierarchy can be seen when workers are required to ask for their

superior's permission before implementing a new idea. The same is seen on the softball field. The players demonstrated their understanding of team hierarchy when they asked the coaches for permission to play during games . For example, during game 1 player B asked, "Coach, can I play left field next inning?" and, during game 3, player D asked the head coach, "Coach, can I pitch?"

Another aspect that pertains to both athletics and the workplace is that they both employ teamwork to accomplish goals. This is seen as members of team Z work together in order to win games. A parallel is found in the workplace in the fact that workers may be placed into groups in order to achieve company goals. Youth activities such as softball teach players how to work with others by setting goals that require nine participants to work together while developing cognitive and physical skills (Hansen et al. 2003). Skills obtained through sports participation can aid athletes in becoming more efficient workers by introducing players to experiences and relationships that involve cooperating with other people.

In many respects, the workplace is an environment that is filled with competition as well as cooperation. A cultural assumption exists that workers who work hard outperform others. In addition, many U.S. citizens believe that those who work harder often receive promotions and raises before their less productive counterparts. People also evaluate a person's success by how many wins (i.e., promotions and financial success) versus losses that she or he has accumulated over a period (Macionis 2004). Softball is much the same.

By developing a good work ethic through practice, parents and coaches hope players will become more proficient at playing softball, which is believed to improve their chances of accumulating a higher number of wins than losses, and thus making them "successful," not just in softball, but also later in life. During observation of team Z, I never heard any team members

deny any attempts from parents and coaches to provide additional practices. However, my research suggests that members on team Z try to divert their attention from softball participation when out of sight of parents and coaches, which leads me to believe that the girls would prefer to do something that they (players) consider fun. This type phenomenon is similar to workers not refusing overtime opportunities due to fear of management disapproval.

During my time observing team Z, I often overheard coaches and parents discuss the necessity of practice with team members. For example, during game 1 the head coach told his players, “We made a lot of mistakes today, but it’s o.k., we’ll work on it during practice. That’s what practice is for.” During game 2 of my study, a father told his daughter, “We practiced swinging at the ball before we left the house. I guess we’ll work on it again tomorrow.” Players on team Z also mimic this philosophy. During game 4, player F told her father, “I need to start practicing hitting against someone who throws faster. I’m used to a slower pitcher.” While parents and coaches provided team members the opportunities to internalize strong work discipline, team members are the ones who practiced at acquiring a work ethic. The process is somewhat cyclical. Practices administered by parents and coaches were employed in order to perfect softball skills. Youth activities like organized sports and the practice that they demand leads participants to develop an initiative to perfect skills in order to achieve long-term goals such as winning the World Series of baseball. The attainment of long-term goals helps strengthen team members’ desire to work, which also increases team members’ work discipline.

### Playtime Is Over

Many of the athletes on team Z were often reprimanded for “playing” (i.e., loafing). This can also be found in the workplace as bosses may formally write up a worker for lethargy.

Reprimands of players on team Z were distributed by both coaches and parents. Illustrations of team Z's coaches reprimanding players for "lollygagging" occurred while videotaping official team practices and games. During a team practice, a coach on team Z said to player C, "Why didn't you catch that grounder? Because you were staring up at the sky when I hit the ball." During game 5, a father of a team Z member told his daughter, "Hurry and get out of the dugout, the other girls are already out there. Hustle!"

In an interview, the head coach of team Z spoke about the girls' level of commitment. The coach stated, "These girls would rather be doing anything than practicing." His statement referred to the girls' reluctance to pay attention and participate fully during practices, despite the coaches' and parents' hopes of facilitating better player performance.

Despite adults' attempts to treat softball as a work responsibility, the players resisted full commitment to softball's work-oriented environment. The girls on team Z also wanted to have fun and did not perceive softball as a job. After game 4, parents and coaches discussed the team's lodging arrangements for an upcoming state tournament. Parents and coaches stated that they did not want team players to be distracted. During this particular parent-coach meeting, a father stated, "We need to rent rooms away from the beach or the girls will want to go swimming before games. It'll be hard enough keeping them away from the pool in the hotel." This is similar to bosses trying to control workers by managing their work conditions. It seems as though adults believed that they could lessen adolescents' resistance to the work-oriented atmosphere inherent in highly competitive activities (e.g., trying to prevent a loss of player focus) by eliminating sources of distraction and stress when able (Chin 2000).

Players' resistance also appeared when the head coach instructed players at bat. During this type of one-on-one instruction, the other players let their guards down (no longer

preoccupied with coaches' and parents' expectations) and spent a majority of their time talking and fixing each other's hair instead of watching their teammates.

Resistance peaked during practices. During many practices, I observed players talking about everything but softball. At one practice, the head coach was hitting each player a series of "pop ups" in order for them to practice catching balls hit high into the air. Rather than watch teammates field the pop ups and perfect their skills, players diverted their attention to non-softball concerns. Player B asked player E, "I didn't think you were going to go to the movies. Can I go?" Shortly after this question, player D asked player F, "How long do you think practice is going to last?" In response, player A stated, "I think we are supposed to quit at four. I'm hungry. I want to go eat."

In all, during the many practices that I observed, the coaches and parents often reprimanded players for their lack of focus and enthusiasm. During one practice, I even overheard the head coach shout, "Practice as if it were a game!" In my own experience, playing baseball was much the same. I did not fully understand why I had to practice, but I knew that it was something that was expected of me to do in order to become a better baseball player.

## CHAPTER 4

### MOTIVATION AND EMOTION MANAGEMENT

In compliance with adults' demands, each player on team Z spent countless hours practicing in hopes of perfecting the fundamental skills of softball. Members of team Z practiced every day in order to become better ball players. Often practices were held in the afternoon under a scorching sun. To induce the girls to practice actively and maximize their chances for winning, parents and coaches employed a variety of methods, alternating between rewards and punishments to varying degrees, which parents and coaches administered within the context of softball and also beyond it. Members on team Z also traveled constantly for games, seeking a win. After all their time and effort spent during practice, a loss or poor performance frustrated participants, whose hopes for a win were disappointed. Parents and coaches on team Z managed team members' emotions and provided motivation for players who might be struggling.

#### Rewards as Motivators

Many coaches and parents on team Z seemed fully committed to perfecting their child's athletic skills. Several coaches and parents hired special batting and pitching coaches in order to fine-tune a player's abilities. Such practices were held after regular team practices, and might be located in a different setting, such as a park. At first, I thought that this was a form of punishment for not performing well, but I soon learned that coaches and parents most often treated it as a reward or motivational tool, and not as a punishment. During one observation, player B's father discussed her need for a pitching coach. In order for the father to raise player B's interest in additional practice he told her, "He was the pitching coach for the Lady Vols!" It seemed as

though the father thought that the use of a prestigious figure would create a desire for player B to participate in extra practice.

The coaches and parents insisted that players wanted to practice more in order to become more proficient at softball. They talked about seeking additional coaching as if it were a badge of competence for their daughter or team player. During game 2, I overheard a conversation that occurred between several parents and coaches. I heard one father snobbishly state to the other parents and the coach, “She’s got a pitching coach, a hitting coach, and a personal trainer.” Such bragging implies that adults also vie for a badge of competence from other adults. Marshalling personal coaching for daughters represents parents’ conviction and support for their child’s success.

### Celebrations

Rewards for participating successfully on team Z also came in the form of victory celebrations. Team Z usually celebrated with victory dinners after winning games. When the team won a tournament, most often players received personal trophies as well as a victory dinner. The bigger the victory, the bigger the celebration and reward. As player B stated, “Last year, after the team won the league championship, I got a trophy and the team ate out after the game. That’s a lot different than when we won the state tournament. After winning that, I got a huge trophy and the team had a banquet at Ryan’s. There was a whole section reserved just for the team.”

It seemed as though players expected to be awarded bigger trophies as the competition and tournament levels got tougher. While observing team Z, I witnessed player reactions to trophies that team members received after winning game 5, which happened to be a regional

tournament. After winning and receiving trophies from the tournament sponsors, player C sarcastically stated, “This is what they call a trophy?” referring to the trophy’s small stature. In response to player C’s comment, player D stated, “There’s no name, or anything!”

The girls of team Z seemed to need material affirmations of their accomplishments. Perhaps this need for affirmation is induced because of a lack of recognition from their peers (Eder and Kinney 1995). Player C ambivalently stated in her interview, “My friends don’t really care if I play softball,” which suggests that participation in organized sports does not lead to increased social status for females, as it does for males (Messner 1992; Eder and Kinney). Players A and D also stated similar experiences that their success in softball mattered little to their peers.

Consequently, team members took great pride in their trophies and the sizable collections that they accumulated over time. Many players on team Z reported that they displayed their trophies in their rooms at home. During interviews, several different players spoke of their immense trophy collections. Player F stated, “I’ve got forty or fifty trophies. I have the big ones in my room, and the smaller ones in boxes.”

In addition to the major rewards of dinners and trophies, refreshments are often used as short-term incentives for players. Each inning, refreshments were given to the players when they entered the dugout. The type of refreshment received upon arrival seemed to depend on the type of performances players gave. For example, players received Coca-Colas and even food (e.g., hot dogs, candy, or nachos) when the team was winning. However, when the team was losing, more often than not players received only water or sports drinks. Not only did parents use refreshments as incentives for winning, they prescribed particular refreshments in an effort to help the team

win. In game 3, a parent prophetically stated, “No Coke. Drink some Gatorade. Coke will make you sluggish.”

It seemed as though all facets of the players’ lives improved if the team won. For example, players often talked about their new civilian shoes and pants that they were expecting to buy after a big win. Many parents motivate participants to perform well in highly competitive activities by administering monetary rewards (Chin 2000). After winning game 5, a regional tournament, members of team Z talked about new jeans and shoes that they planned to buy at the local mall.

### Managing Emotional Lows

Motivational tools, such as rewards, were presented in the form of special coaches for better instruction, refreshments, new equipment, trophies, and celebratory dinners. Through these rewards, parents and coaches hoped to encourage members to continue practicing and playing softball. As with rewards administered for performing well, punishments for bad performances also seemed to be administered both internally and externally to the softball setting. When players performed badly, coaches and parents seemed to feel as though they needed to emotionally motivate the player, most often with guilt. Parents and coaches seemed to place guilt on players for performing badly in hopes that the struggling players would be shamed and inspired to practice harder. For example, after losing a game, the head coach aggressively lectured his players, “Y’all are better than the girls on team Delta (a pseudonym). How could y’all lose? I know that y’all can play better.”

Parents also administered punishments in players’ civilian lives for disappointing performances on the field. For example, player D said that she felt ill between the first and

second games of a double header. Player D told her father that she did not feel like playing in the second game that was about to begin. Despite her greenish pallor, her father did not believe that she was ill, and, because she struck out several times during the first game, he insisted that she help her teammates by participating in the second game. In between the first and second game of the double header, player D's father told her, "You just don't want to strike out again. If you don't get out there, you won't be using the phone this week." I had a similar experience when I was 10 years old. My father restricted me from riding my motorcycle because I was tired and decided to sit down on the field during the last inning of a game that we were losing.

Emotion management (like the shame and guilt parents induced) occurred when parents and coaches attempted to modify participants' emotions, so that players would work through difficulties and stresses associated with softball participation and try to achieve desired goals. A common difficulty for softball players was striking out, and I asked players how this made them feel. Most responded that they felt bad after striking out. For example, player A of team Z stated, "After striking out, I just feel like I didn't do what I was supposed to do. I mean, it's real disappointing." Player E of team Z demonstrated similar feelings: "Striking out is bad. Sometimes I strike out four or five times in a row. When that happens, I don't even want to bat."

My observations indicate that the notion of softball being a "fun" activity is more of a cultural assumption than a reality. It is called a game, but is it really fun? Players on team Z displayed a wide range of emotions. As previously mentioned, disappointment and frustration were predominant emotions found among team Z members during play. When players did not hit or field the softball correctly they seemed to condemn themselves and magnify their failure. Many players on the team reacted to striking out by hitting their bats on the ground after strike three was called. For example, in game 1, player C struck out after swinging and missing at the

first three balls pitched to her. She then raised the bat over her head and swung at home plate. Such a display of emotion suggests that player C was frustrated due to her not being able to advance to first base, let alone make contact with the ball.

After observing several players strike out while at bat, I reflected on my own experiences with batting on a baseball team. Batting is one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of playing baseball, which is similar to softball. In general, a player has to be able to judge the speed of the ball coming towards home plate and then locate the ball with the bat while swinging. As memory serves, there were more than several occasions in which I hit home plate with the bat after striking out.

Given the frequency and frustration of striking out, players thus repeatedly hit emotional lows. To motivate players and rally their spirits, adults employed “pep talks.” Through pumping their children up (Chin 2000), parents and coaches hoped to motivate players to be aggressive and determined before games by assuring players of their abilities. At each game, I observed the coaches on team Z administering pep talks. During game 2, for example, the head coach made eye contact with each of his players and said to the team, “We’ve practiced hard, and we need to be ready. We need to dominate the field, and be aggressive in the batter’s box.” This pep talk was administered to members in hopes that players would focus on winning and set aside anxiety. Players understood that the coach was serious when he spoke.

When players felt frustrated and disappointed after performing badly, coaches and parents used additional emotion management techniques in order to motivate their girls to practice and correct mistakes that might have occurred during play. For example, during what participants referred to as “the ride home” after games, players’ parents commonly reviewed the game. Players on team Z suggested in interviews that their parents used the time to discuss

players' performances. Parents of team Z members reassured players that additional practice would remedy imperfections in members' performances, motivating players to try again. For example, after losing game 3, I overheard a father tell his daughter on the way to the car that, "We can work on it. You just have to remember to keep your eye on the ball next time."

Unfortunately for players there can be a negative side to the ride home. In my own experiences I can remember a teammate of mine telling me about his father reaming him out for missing a ball or not getting a hit during their rides home. My friend told me that his father yelled until his face turned red.

Another viewpoint of emotion management is seen from the players' perspective. As my research suggests, members on team Z must manage their frustrations while playing softball in addition to constructively taking criticism from coaches and parents. Members of the team are thus emotionally pushed and stressed by numerous adults. What do players feel about the time consuming and exhausting practices? Is participation worth it? Do members of team Z really want to play, or are they trying to please their coaches and parents?

Team members asserted that the amount of practice and emotional stress (i.e., guilt, shame, and frustration) did not outweigh the attraction of participating in softball. Players on team Z seemed to parrot the adults' beliefs when questioned about whether or not participating was worth the effort required. Player B stated in her interview, "Practicing is just something you have to do to be good at softball." Player D seconded this view in her interview when she said, "I don't really like to practice, but I know that it will help me play better." If the team lost a game, many players were observed walking silently to their vehicles, often behind their parents, as if the loss of the game was the most unfortunate thing that could ever happen. For example, after losing game 3, players A and D were observed leaving the ball field walking silently behind their

parents. Player C even stated during her interview that, “I don’t feel like doing anything after losing.” Such a statement suggests that the player feels guilty for not winning, and therefore does not feel as though she deserves any reward for playing and trying to win. The players’ emotional lows after losing game 3 were amplified when the coach told them that their performance was below par. After the game, the head coach chastised the team, “Y’all didn’t even try.”

## CHAPTER 5

### CONTINUING PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY

Organized sports is a male-dominated arena where boys experience a “rite of passage” to become men (Messner 1992; Malcom 2003). A strong pattern in my data is that parents and coaches influenced female participation in seemingly gender-inappropriate activities (Brown, Frankel and Fennell 1989) such as softball, at the same time that they modeled a conventional gender and power relationship in the world of adults. While playing softball seemed to be only about winning games, there were many other lessons that coaches and parents implicitly taught players. Parents and coaches positioned males as leaders and women as caregivers and characterized young girls who are physically larger than their peers as abnormal.

#### Fathers as Special Sideline Coaches

Both (male) coaches and fathers on team Z instructed the players and issued commands during practices and games. In fact, many fathers stood behind the coach as they watched the team together during defensive innings. They (fathers) discussed their daughters’ performance and participation while players were at bat or in the field. Fathers aided coaches in managing the responsibilities of team Z frequently. Consequently, the head coach of team Z could expect as many “helpers” as there were fathers among team players. For example, during game 3 player D watched a third strike slip past her, then she turned to her father and offered, “It was low,” suggesting that it was not her fault. Shortly after this, rather than take his daughter to task, the father discussed his daughter’s need for a professional hitting coach with another player’s father.

Getting extra help and coaching provided motivation for players and their parents (fathers, in particular).

Sometimes fathers even acted as silent coaches to players. Some fathers sent their daughters gestural signals while standing on the sidelines if they happened to get in trouble. For example, many fathers sent their daughters signals while they (daughters) performed the role of a pitcher (throwing the ball to a batter on the opposing team).

Coaches and fathers seemed to be attuned to their daughters' anxiety levels and became active supporters at games. For example, I observed that player C's father called her pitches when she was in trouble on the mound, helping avert any anxiety that his daughter might be feeling. He motivated her to pitch the best she could by becoming responsible for the unknown consequences of play calls. Perhaps her father hoped that by managing his daughter's emotions during great times of emotional stress, she could be motivated easier considering the fact that an unfortunate team loss was because of his error and not entirely her mistake or athletic ability.

It seemed that every girl on the team tried to pitch. In my own experiences with baseball, I can remember that all of my teammates tried to pitch. Of course some players were better than others and therefore pitched more frequently during games. Fathers of team Z seemed to take it upon themselves to issue commands to increase the players' chances of winning. For example, during game 3, player D's father stood behind a fence behind home plate. He raised one finger for player D to throw a fastball; then, shortly after this play, he raised two fingers for player D to throw a slower ball. Likewise, as a baseball player, my own father helped me for many years as a pitcher. In fact, I won many games due to my father coaching and calling my pitches.

In addition to sideline coaching, fathers of team Z members also practiced with their daughters at home. On many occasions, I overheard fathers talking to their daughters. Many

fathers said, “Don’t you remember how we did it at home?” This response usually came from the father after the daughter had made a careless mistake such as missing a pop up.

The effect of all this mentoring was that team Z fathers socialized their daughters to assume that males should make important decisions, especially decisions that need to be made when winning or losing is concerned. Players on team Z had to ask for coaches’ (males) permission in order to play. Players seemed to assume that only male coaches and fathers could teach them how to throw, catch, and hit a softball. This suggestion is strengthened by the fact that players even asked coaches if they could carry the coach’s bag to and from his car. Player B was observed during practice sheepishly asking the coach, “Can I carry the bag tomorrow after the game?” Player B’s statement suggests that such a detail was a privilege and therefore must be reserved in advance. In light of the players’ subordinate statuses under males, it is important to note that players on team Z were never observed practicing with or asking mothers about how to improve their performance. In six months of observing team Z, I never observed a female coach on team Z or any other team. My research suggests that the predominant male influence, and the players’ reliance on the male role model pertaining to female softball participation perpetuates and affirms the cultural assumption that males are superior to females inside and outside the realm of athletics.

### Booster Moms

Softball players’ mothers consistently performed the role of caregivers. They provided refreshments for players between times of play. I observed several mothers during several games literally running back and forth to the concession stand to make sure that their daughters received refreshments. It seemed as though mothers employed food and drink as motivators for girls to

perform well. Player B's mother told her during game 4, "Hit a home run and I will buy you nachos and a large Coke."

In addition to providing refreshments, mothers also acted as boosters and fundraisers for the team. During practices, mothers of members sold goods such as assorted candies, jams, and team apparel. This type of informal economy was cultivated for the purpose of raising money for the team. When I first noticed that the mothers of players were selling products to each other, I wondered why they did not just give a donation to the team and skip the goods. It seemed as though the fund raising was providing the mothers with something to do while the fathers shared their wisdom with the head coach and their daughters.

Messner (2004) asserts that while the majority of head coaches are male, the vast majority of team managers are mothers. Furthermore, Messner posits that team managers are referred to as "team moms" and that formal authority is in the hands of men while the support role of team manager (i.e., housekeeper) falls in the hands of women. Mothers of team Z players acted as boosters and not leaders. Thus, they supported the message that male leadership, and reliance on the male role model is necessary for success. As previously mentioned, not once during my fieldwork did I observe a female attempt to coach either on team Z or their opponents' teams. My research suggests that the all-male presence of authority on team Z limited the potential developmental experiences that sports are intended to provide to female participants (Varpalotai 1987).

#### For Certain Girls Only

Some female players on opposing teams were physically larger than members on team Z. When this was the case, the head coach and team Z fathers sometimes referred to such players as

“hosses,” because they were taller and heavier than team Z members. I never observed any mothers of team Z refer to any of the larger females as hosses, although they did argue that larger girls looked older than twelve years of age. An example of such gender discrimination was documented during game 4. During this game, the head coach of team Z threatened to protest over a particular player who was larger than all of team Z’s members. While the larger opposing player was at bat the head coach stepped on the field and called for a time out. He then approached the umpire and began to question the larger player’s age. The head coach did not follow through with the protest because the other team provided a record of the player’s age, which fell within regulations. The opposing team’s head coached yelled at team Z’s coach, “We got her birth certificate right here. You can wait to protest until after the game? This is ridiculous.”

My data suggest that the main issue for the coaches and fathers of team Z was not the fact that a girl might be too old, which would be a legitimate reason for protest considering that an older player may possess more athletic skill due to age; but that the girl’s body was larger than that of her peers. It seemed as though coaches and fathers challenged female players whose larger bodies made them (the females) appear more boyish and less feminine. By calling attention only to larger female players, adults thus communicated through their derogatory remarks that larger female players did not conform to what society perceives as appropriately female because they lacked traditional feminine characteristics (Holland and Andre 1994). Some team Z players mimicked the male adults’ attitudes and also referred to larger opponents as hosses during observation. Player D stated during game 4, “She is as big as my brother.” Players’ embracement of such derogatory remarks demonstrates that “prosocial” norms (National

Research Council 2002), which are usually perceived by many to be good, may also perpetuate the status quo of gender discrimination.

I began to notice that female athletes were scrutinized in different ways than male athletes. During my own experiences as a baseball player, coaches and fathers boasted about the size of young males who happened to be larger and more robust than others in the league. I remember a friend of my father saying, “I wish Chris had Billy’s size,” which meant that he wished his son was taller and stronger. Chris was already one of the biggest players in the league. I never heard my mother or any other mother covet the size of another boy to that of their own. On team Z, no parents and no coaches bragged about a female player’s larger size as an asset. Data on team Z, when compared to my experiences, suggest that it is the body and not the level of athletic skills that adults, particularly males, politicize when defining large males’ bodies as assets and large females’ bodies as suspect.

I began to notice that many of the players both did and did not conform to society’s social construction of gender during observation. Players seemed to incorporate both masculine and feminine characteristics at the same time (Goldberg and Chandler 1991). The girls on team Z displayed masculinized behaviors when physically active. They perspired and got dirty during play. Members of team Z also enjoyed physical humor that many people perceive to be masculine in nature such as belching or even farting on each other. At the same time, players also participated in behaviors that are perceived by many people to be feminine in nature (Holland and Andre 1994). Such behaviors are believed to affirm femininity. For example, player A braided player C’s hair in between the fourth and fifth innings of game 2. Player E brushed player A’s hair during the same game. Player E also stated, “Sorry I don’t know how to

braid” as she fixed player A’s hair. It appeared as though player E was apologizing for not knowing supposed feminine skills.

Many female athletes on team Z even overemphasized their femininity in order to prove that they were females. Before playing in game 3, players C and F wore athletic shorts with logos printed on their rumps. The words “Play Hard” did not constitute sexploitation in and of itself, but the fact that it was printed on their rumps and not their shoulders drew unnecessary attention to a sexualized part of the female body. Other players on other teams wore shorts with logos printed on their backsides that read, “Hot Stuff.” Such sexploitation of the female body by players is evidently a way for them to announce their status as female sexual objects, and tone down their masculinized status as athletes. Unfortunately, such displays do not empower female athletes because they reduce them to sexual objects.

As my research suggests, coaches and parents, predominantly fathers, model conventional gender roles for team Z members. Coaches and parents of team Z attempt to socialize their daughters to accept and participate in America’s male dominated society by transmitting knowledge and beliefs from one generation to the next. Coaches and parents teach players on team Z to differentiate between males, females, and the culturally accepted gender roles that are associated with each, which ultimately affirms and perpetuates the existence of patriarchal hegemonic values. This demonstrates that equality can not be achieved when a system has been devised and maintained by males to the exclusion of female leaders and role models.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Youth activities such as organized sport offer participants opportunities to cognitively and physically grow and develop. Positive experiences, and the agents who provide them, are believed to aid participants in learning how to manage stress and failure for future stages of their life course. My study suggests that female softball players on team Z were socialized to value strong work ethics as well as learn how to be successful in the male-dominated arenas of organized sport and the modern workplace. Softball, as an organized sport, is similar to the modern day workplace in the sense that both require a participant's dedicated effort. Yet, both the structure of organized sport and the workplace are also perceived by traditional American culture to be led by men only. The institutions of the workplace and organized sport use rewards and punishments, primarily administered by males, to encourage socialization and goal achievement.

Female participation in organized sport is encouraged by adults and peers in order to insure that participants continue to play. Girls on team Z continue to participate in competitive softball, like other competitive activities, through intense motivation and emotion management from adults (Chin 2000). Motivation for better player performance and high achievement is given to members through monetary, material, and emotional incentives. Emotion management is also provided to players by adults, usually males, through pep talks. When participants of organized sport do fail, male adults act as counselors to athletes away from the field of play by advising them on how to improve performance.

Parents and coaches on team Z seemed to want their daughters to have fun and acquire athletic skills at the same time. While the acquisition of athletic skills seemed to be most important, parents and coaches provided diversions for their daughters such as a team party that was held after the completion of the season. Parents and coaches of team Z wanted their daughters to learn the importance of determination and winning which seemed to be the main reason that they (adults) issued players rewards and punishments.

Traditional American culture perceives the arenas of organized sport to be for males only. Unlike male athletes, females who participate in athletics do not receive an increase in social status. Girls on team Z were socialized to believe that male leadership more than female leadership is essential to success beyond the confines of the home. Organized sport and the effects of the patriarchal hierarchy that it entails (as exemplified by the lack of female coaches and role models in organized sports) threaten the increased cognitive and physical developments that sports are intended to provide female participants. My observations of team Z suggest that females are educated to internalize the belief in gender-appropriate characteristics and behaviors which perpetuate male domination of many arenas of interaction that occur outside the home.

In essence, I believe this type of superordinate/subordinate interaction supports the patriarchal hegemony that exists in the United States by conditioning females to ask for permission of males in authority before making decisions of any kind. A study conducted on adolescent boys and girls by Coakley and White (1999) affirms this problem by finding that girls feel more constrained by males (i.e., unrelated males, fathers, and boyfriends) when participating in sports than boys do. This type of constraint for females occurs even after permission to participate has been granted (Coakley and White).

I hope and suggest that coaches and parents socialize their athletic daughters to continue playing organized sports. The shortage of female participation in coaching (Messner 2004; Wong 2002) also needs to ease in the future. Therefore, I hope that many of the female athletes playing now will be encouraged to pursue coaching careers. By doing this, females will be able to incorporate themselves into positions of leadership on and off the field of play. If such socialization is provided to young females, the long-term result will be women who expect and *demand* equal pay in the workplace.

Future research on female sports participation should focus on the relationships that fathers have with daughters and explore fathers' motivations to participate in their daughters' athletic activities. An important question is whether or not the female players have any brothers. My study suggests that the parents of team Z invested a great deal of time and money encouraging their daughters to play softball. Was this parental investment because they wanted their daughters to participate in competitive softball, or was it because they (parents, particularly fathers) did not have sons to compete in sports such as baseball, football, and ice hockey? Exploring these questions would yield further insights about parents' involvement in organized sports and their gender role expectations.

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VITA

CORY WESLEY LEWIS

Personal Data: Date of Birth: December 8, 1974

Place of Birth: Starkville, Mississippi

Education: Hixson High School, Hixson, Tennessee

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee; English, B.A., 2001

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Sociology,  
M.A., 2004

Professional Experience: United States Army Reserve, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1992-2000

Graduate Assistant and Instructor, East Tennessee State University,  
College of Arts and Sciences, 2002-2003