“The Girl Switch”: How Collegiate Female Athletes Describe Themselves When Performing and Not Performing Athletically

Patricia B. J. Baum

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Abstract

Our multidimensional, gendered self-concepts are the meanings we hold for ourselves and are fundamental in shaping our lives. Research in athletics, athletic identity and athletic performance has focused primarily on men and masculinity. Using grounded theory, this study examined how NCAA Division I female athletes describe themselves when they are performing and not performing athletically. It also examined how the female athletes describe switching between the athlete and non-athlete sides of themselves and the extent to which the women’s descriptions reference gender. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses identified differences between participants’ perceptions of themselves when they conceived themselves as athletes and when they did not. When performing athletically, the women described themselves as competitive, aggressive, hard-working, intense, and focused, yet still supportive of their teammates. When not performing athletically, the women described themselves as more relaxed and friendly. Some of the women described themselves as “girly girls.” While there were differences in their descriptions, the women noted that being competitive and disciplined is a part of who they are, regardless of the context. Women’s descriptions of themselves both when engaged and when not engaged in sports referenced both masculinity and femininity. This study also employed the Bem Sex Role Inventory to test participants’ perceptions of their gender, and significant differences were found between women’s perceptions of their gender.
“The Girl Switch”: How Collegiate Female Athletes Describe Themselves When Performing and Not Performing Athletically

The self is one of the most studied, questioned, and picked-over topics across disciplines. This thesis study continues the exploration of the self, specifically examining individuals’ conceptions of their multidimensional, gendered selves. This project emerged from my understandings of and questions regarding our self-concept, gender, and multiple gendered selves and identities. Our self-concepts, or how we perceive ourselves, emerge from and are formed through interaction with others. Our sense of self is fundamental in shaping the meanings we hold, our perceptions, our behaviors, our actions, and our lives. The self is also gendered, which further shapes our existence.

The Multidimensional Self

The main topic I explore in this study is the idea that the self is multidimensional. We do not have only one identity; rather, we have multiple selves, some publicly presented and others kept private (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2007). People demonstrate the multiplicity of their identities in everyday interaction. I, for example, am currently alone in my home writing. This self is different from the self I perform when I am teaching, which is different from the self I present with my partner, which is different from the self I present with my parents, which is different from the self I present to strangers I pass on campus, which is different from the self I perform when playing soccer, which is different from the self I present to the sales associate, and the list goes on and on. The behavior I engage in, the context of particular situations, and the meanings I have for my experiences and environment interact with how my identity is gendered. While I have multiple “sides” to my identity, I am not schizophrenic; I do not suffer a major identity crisis every time I encounter a new situation and change the side of myself with which I
am engaging the world. This study explores not only the gendered self, but also the process we engage in as we “go between” and “move” from one side of our self to another side in different contexts.

The Gendered Self

The self is gendered. Gender is an expected set of behaviors, a way of being in the world, and a framework through which we live our lives and structure our social world. Gender is socially constructed, “constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life” (Lorber, 2006, p. 113). Therefore, gender is fluid. Sandra Bem’s (1974) conceptualization of psychological androgyny was one of the first efforts to recognize and measure individuals’ identifications with both masculinity and femininity. Bem’s work is limited in that it allows for only two genders and, by now, is seriously dated. Meanings for gender have certainly evolved since the 1970s. For example, today there are more women than men in college. The title “stay-at-home-dad” is not uncommon. With reference to sports, one in twenty-seven women played varsity sports in high school in 1970 compared to one in three women today (Women’s Sports Foundation, n.d.). Also, more girls play youth soccer today than all girls involved in all youth sports in 1970 (Women’s Sports Foundation, n.d.). Despite being outdated, Bem’s work helped researchers see gender as fluid, dynamic, and not dichotomous or restricted to mutually exclusive categories. Not only is gender fluid, but Butler’s (1990) work calls attention to the performativity of gender. Butler stated that gender is “a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 191). Therefore, gender is something we do, not something that we have. Butler explained that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances” (p. 192). It is through our performances of our selves that we create and sustain gender. The gendered self, socially constructed through interaction, is another topic of this thesis study.
Athletics and Masculinity

While we all have different sides to ourselves, this study looks at women who play sports, specifically NCAA female athletes. I was raised as a collegiate sports fan and played soccer (briefly) as a child. Beyond my general interest in sports, athletics is a particularly rich area in which to study gender and identity. Sports have been a common site for studying masculinity and men. Historically, “sport[s] are highly institutionalized aspects of our culture that help to maintain male hegemony” (Hall, 1990, p. 239). Many have identified sports as training or a proving ground for masculinity, like a kind of masculinizing practice (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982). Messner (1992), who has greatly contributed to the literature about sport and masculinity, explored sport as a social institution and its relation to masculine identities. He explains that, to a certain extent, sport serves as a kind of initiation ritual for young males as “a way into a world of masculine values, rituals, and relationships” (Messner, 1992, p. 8). Performing athletically has been and often still is associated with masculinity. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, team sports “were valued as a means to inculcate ‘initiative and self-reliance,’ along with ‘loyalty and obedience’” (Messner, 1992, p. 10). In fact, “through the late 1960s, the belief that ‘sports builds men’ was widely accepted” (Messner, 1992, p. 19). Connell (1995) explained that “in certain schools the masculinity exalted through competitive sport is hegemonic; this means that sporting prowess is a test of masculinity even for boys who detest the locker room” (p. 37). In fact, “demonstrating the physical and psychological attributes associated with success in athletic contests has now become an important requirement for status in most adolescent and preadolescent male peer groups” (Messner & Sabo, 2006, p. 303). Messner (1989) found that men from lower-status backgrounds often play sports to achieve a public masculine status, whereas men from higher-status backgrounds more typically
used sports “as a badge of masculinity” (p. 78) to be added to their already-strong status. Messner (2005) also found that, in addition to reproducing men’s power over women, sport is used to assert higher-status men’s dominance over other men. In a study on televised sports, Messner, Dunbar and Hunt (2000) examined themes in sports media and devised the Televised Sports Manhood Formula about the messages and performances that boys and men consume about “what it means to be a man” (p. 390). Today, sports are still used as contexts in which to study hegemonic masculinity and gendered violence (Enck-Wanzer, 2009).

Therefore, historically and to a significant extent today, athletics is not only constructed as masculine, but it also usually requires and trains athletes to perform a masculine-gendered identity and reinforces normative masculinity. Weiss (2001) reports that involvement in sports is one means by which many people experience identity reinforcement. One way that sport shapes our behavior is through the affirmation of roles and characteristics of a “sporting activity: the stressing of masculinity through sports involving strength such as wrestling; the expression of femininity through gymnastics” (Weiss, 2001, p. 394). As Weiss (2001) explains, “human behaviour can be understood as a fundamental endeavour to confirm an identity” (p. 397). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, athletes’ adoptions of their roles as athletes, as defined by and through interactions with their teammates, coaches, society, etc., enables them to reinforce their identities and athletic performance (Weiss, 2001). Simultaneously, athletes’ performances of their identities sustains social understandings of sports. As discussed above, it is through boys’ and men’s engagement with sports and interactions with peers that athletics is seen as an initiation into masculinity (Messner, 1989, 1992; Messner & Sabo, 2006; Messner, et al., 2000).

Athletics and Femininity
Yet girls and women also engage in sports and construct their identities within this historically masculinized institution. Much research has been conducted on the negative, unequal, and sexist portrayal of female athletes and women’s sports in the media (Koivula, 1999; Shugart, 2003). I mention this because I believe that the media are and can be very powerful in shaping the images and meanings people have for anything (in this case, women’s sports) in our society. How others view girls and women who play sports will certainly affect how girls and women view themselves. Others have explored some of the positive effects of women in athletics, identifying the power of women and girls in sport to defy gender norms (Miller, 2007). Heywood and Dworkin (2003) have even identified sport as “an unlikely form of stealth feminism” (p. 29) and explored how participation in athletics empowers women. Athletic performances, as discussed above, have historically been and currently are performances of masculinity. Engaging in athletic performances is one way that women can defy conventional gender norms. Athletics undoubtedly plays a large part in shaping female athletes’ identities. Meân and Kassing (2008) explored female soccer players and the athletic identity and the female athletic identity—the women indicated that they were different from both other women and male athletes. Another recent study examining women who play ice hockey found similar results: the women believe there is a distinct difference between an ice hockey player, a female ice hockey player, and a female (Gilenstam, Karp, & Henriksson-Larsén, 2008). Just as sports, a highly masculinized context, shapes the self-concepts of men, so does it shape women’s senses of self. While gender is of interest to this project, it is only one of the many facets of the multidimensional self explored in this study.

Taking a symbolic interactionist approach to this study, I am interested in the meanings that women athletes have for their multiple selves. Two main tenets of symbolic interaction
theory are: “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” and “that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). I approached this study, therefore, operating from the assumption that the experiences and interactions with their peers, families, coaches, and sports as a social institution influence women athletes’ self-concepts and the meanings they have for themselves and their activities, including their sports. Their meanings and descriptions of the two selves I am examining (performing as an athlete and not performing as an athlete) certainly shape their behavior and how they see themselves. Therefore, I am valuing their own meanings and descriptions for themselves in this study. Because the women are playing at the collegiate level, athletics and the meanings they have for their sport have undoubtedly played a large role in the formation and maintenance of their senses of self.

Research Questions

Women who play sports, like the rest of us, go between the various sides of their selves in their day-to-day lives. The “switch” between the “currently performing as an athlete” side of their identity and the “not currently performing as an athlete” side of their identity is intriguing and certainly warrants further study. The switch, and acting as an athlete, is essential to women athletes’ ability to succeed in an NCAA Division I collegiate athletic program. Therefore, this study explores how female athletes describe themselves when they are performing as an athlete and when they are not performing as an athlete and how they describe the switch and the process of switching between the two roles. I am particularly interested in the extent to which female athletes’ descriptions of themselves reference gender.

RQ1: How do NCAA female athletes describe themselves and their identities when they are performing athletically and not performing athletically?
**RQ2:** To what extent do NCAA female athletes’ descriptions of themselves when they are performing in sports and not performing in sports reference gender?

**RQ3:** If their identities are different when engaged in sports and not, how do they describe the “switch” between the two?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Participants were 17 female athletes from three sports at a Southeastern NCAA Division I university. A pilot study was conducted in which I worked with women soccer players at the same university. The purpose of the pilot study was to examine how women soccer players constructed their gender identities as athletes. All of the women with whom I spoke described themselves when engaged with their sport as having an intense sense of competition and aggression, both of which are necessary to be a successful soccer player. Many of the women also highlighted characteristics conventionally associated with male athletes, such as being tough, having athletic and competitive confidence, being relentless and fast. However, one of the most interesting findings of the pilot study was the distinction members of one focus group made between the different sides of themselves. They explained that when they are on the field performing athletically, “you’re not trying to be cute.” Yet when they were not performing athletically, Lauren¹ explained that they “have to turn off the ‘soccer player’ switch and turn on the ‘girl’ switch.” The difference between these two sides of the women and the “switch” between them was what interested me most from the pilot study. Therefore, this thesis study examined how the women describe these two sides, describe the switch between the sides of their selves if they believe there are two sides, and how, if at all, their descriptions reference gender.

¹ All names have been changed to pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.
This study examined women from three sports at the same university: soccer, field hockey and gymnastics. I interviewed seven soccer players, six field hockey players, and four gymnasts. The participants included five first-year students, three sophomores, six juniors and three seniors. Their experience in playing the sport ranged from 5 years to 18 years. This range among participants allowed me to move past individual team cultures and the wisdom and experience associated with the amount of time playing a sport to broader experiences and conceptions held by NCAA female athletes.

It is important to note that while I conducted this study with women, I am not suggesting that male athletes do not have multiple selves or sides of selves or do not experience a similar “switch.” I assume that we all have multidimensional selves. I am working with athletes because of my general interest in athletics. I am working with female athletes because of my experiences in the pilot study. However, a parallel study with male participants might also be conducted. Like the women in this study, male athletes may also see themselves as having two different sides of their selves that come out when they are performing as an athlete and not performing as an athlete, and they may be able to describe how they go between the two sides. It is also important to note that while I worked with three different sports, more sports can be added. Additionally, I worked at only one university. This study may be duplicated across multiple sports and universities.

Interviews

Prior to conducting the interviews and contacting the participants, I received approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board. Interviews, which were conversational, were conducted with the participants and ranged from 30 to 75 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured; while I had an interview schedule, it was a tentative list of open-ended questions.
Appendix A presents the interview schedule. While I did ask specific questions, the flow and direction of the interviews varied from person to person. As discussed by Fontana and Frey (2005), each interview was “a negotiated accomplishment” (p. 717) and “a collaborative effort” (p. 696). Additionally, I attended many of the team’s games and events over the course of the year. Those observations, including my observations and knowledge of the same teams over the five previous years, informed the interviews. Not only have I seen many of these women’s athletic performances, but my observations have also given me a greater “understanding (of) the language and culture of the respondents” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 707). This knowledge helped me relate to the women and gave me a slightly better understanding of what they meant when they spoke about their athletic performances. The interviews were audio taped and, upon completion, were transcribed with identifying information removed from the transcription. One hundred and thirty single-spaced pages total were transcribed.

I relied on inductive analysis as used in grounded theory for this thesis study. Grounded theory is “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). It focuses on the participants’ perspectives and words, rather than generalized assumptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In grounded theory, analysis begins during the process of data gathering. After I transcribed the interviews I coded the interview transcripts. Using open coding, identifying concepts as they occurred in the transcripts by sentence and paragraph, I analyzed the descriptions the women gave for their “performing as an athlete” self and their “not performing as an athlete” self. I also analyzed how the women described how they went between these two sides of their selves, if at all. Finally, I analyzed the references to gender in the women’s descriptions. Inductive analysis via grounded theory fit this thesis study because I was interested in the women’s descriptions of their multiple selves and if/how they described switching
between the two sides of their identities. Therefore, their perspectives and the words that they use to describe their selves and switch are important and are given priority in the results, which is an advantage of grounded theory.

*Quantitative Measure*

At the end of our conversation, I asked the women to fill out the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974) twice. The first time the women filled out the survey, I asked them to fill it out thinking of themselves in that moment or when they hang out with their friends. In other words, I asked them to think of the “not performing as an athlete” side of themselves. The second time they filled out the survey, I asked them to fill it out thinking of themselves in the middle of a game or meet, calling upon the “performing as an athlete” side of themselves. I made small talk with the women in between administering the surveys so that they would, hopefully, forget their previous answers. Despite the limitations of the BSRI, which I noted earlier, it was used to measure the gender differences between the two selves the women perform. The BSRI results were analyzed using SPSS.

*Results*

After asking the women about their history with their sport, I continued the interviews by asking them if they ever saw themselves as a different person when performing as an athlete versus when not performing as an athlete. Fifteen of the women said that they either saw themselves as a different person or as having a different side to themselves in the two contexts. The women tended to describe their on the field/in the gym selves first, followed by an explanation of why and how their off the field/out of the gym selves were different. I then asked the women to describe how they went between the two sides of their selves. I present their descriptions below, in that order, followed by an interpretation of their references to gender and
an analysis of the women’s BSRI (Bem, 1974) scores. Appendix B presents a list of the women’s pseudonyms and the sport they play. The order of the themes presented here reflects their prominence in the interview data.

Performing Athletically: On the Field/In the Gym

I asked the women to describe themselves on the field/in the gym during a game/meet, to report how they thought others would describe them, and to describe what happens on the field/in the gym. All but two of the women described a unique on-the-field or in-the-gym side to their selves. Many of the women described themselves as competitive, aggressive, hard-working, intense, and focused when performing as an athlete.

Competitive. All of the women described themselves as competitive and as having a “competitive fire.” Hollis, a soccer player, said, “I’m extremely competitive. I don’t like to lose.” Ellen, another soccer player, said that in order to be a good athlete “you need to be competitive.” Nicole, a field hockey player, explained it as “the ‘never say die’ mentality. Do whatever it takes: cut, scratch, crawl your way through it.” Some of the women explained that being competitive goes hand-in-hand with being confident in their athletic performances. Ellen described her intense competitive mentality and confidence by saying, “it’s having the mindset that I’m never going to lose. I might lose this game, but in the end I’m going to kick your butt. I’m going to kill you. You might beat me once, but nine times out of ten, I’m going to kill you because that’s my mindset.” Madison, a gymnast, described her competitive mentality saying, “You have to have a mindset, ‘I’m going to do this. I’m going to make it.’” Akita, a field hockey player, also described her confidence and competitive fire: “I’m there, this is my territory, this is my game. ‘I’m better than you’ is what I think when I’m going up against somebody.” Celeste, also a field hockey player, explained, “I’m actually extremely arrogant…
You have to have an air to yourself that makes you believe.” Others linked their competitive fire to their passion and emotion for the game, as did Meridith, a soccer player: “it ruins my day if we lose; it makes my day great if we win.” Sports are inherently competitive, so it is not surprising that the women would describe themselves in this way.

While the gymnasts described competition similarly to the soccer and field hockey players, they described another competitive element unique to being successful in gymnastics competitions: charisma. Being charismatic is used competitively as a way to earn more points during a routine. Shemira explained, for example: “My teammate, if you watch her, she is always smiling. Even in her tumbling. Who smiles in their tumbling?!” Shemira continued, saying that “it’s how you carry yourself.” Kayla further described why charisma is important: “there is the fact that in gymnastics, when you smile and you’re cute and you show off, that makes a big difference for the judges … being a girl gets you a little further. Gets more points on the board. You need to use your feminine qualities.” As all the women pointed out, one of the “feminine qualities” is watching what they eat so that their bodies look good in leotards, their uniform. The way the women decorate their bodies for competitions is also unique to gymnastics. Anya said, “we’ll dress [the leotard] up with leg-warmers.” Madison said, “we put ribbons in our hair and we put a little tattoo of [our school symbol] on our face; we put [our school color] eye-shadow on.” Looking pretty and flirting with the judges is one way the gymnasts compete and, therefore, earn points for both themselves and the team. Shemira noted that gymnastics, especially at the college level, is political to the extent that being charismatic is something their sport demands of them. In both soccer and field hockey, however, being pretty and wearing make-up are not relevant to winning games.
Aggressive and focused. Most of the women across the three sports also described themselves as aggressive and, in being aggressive, being intense and focused. Some reported that they are physically aggressive. Missy, a field hockey player, stated: “You don’t want to get in my way because I’ll just push you over.” Similarly, Akita explained that she is aggressive because, “I will fight for the ball. I will push and shove for the ball. If I’m marking you, you’re probably not going to have a good time and probably have some bruises at the end of the game.” Because gymnastics is not a contact sport and physical aggression displayed toward others is considered unacceptable, Madison, a gymnast, pointed out that “you have to be aggressive in your mind.”

Demonstrating skill. Participants also focused intensely on the technical aspects of their sport. It is through demonstrating athletic skills that they perform aggressiveness. A field hockey player, Bella explained that she performs her aggressiveness by “intimidating [my opponent] with plays.” Andrea reported that while she is intense and aggressive, she also intimidates others with the skill involved with her athletic performance: “I like to be able to use the ball to create things on the field. I like to create using skill.” Kayla, who said, “I’m a perfectionist,” described gymnastics in terms of perfection because being perfect in a routine wins points for both the individual and the team. Anya also described this technical intensity saying, “I go into a different state of mind where I’m focused on what I’m doing.”

Being tough. Along with physical aggression, some women, like Hollis, described the toughness required to be an athlete: “I’m in your face, I’m not all the time lady-like. I spit. I cuss. It’s just a whole ‘nother world. I’m taking people out and I’m enjoying it. I’m aggressive and I’m sliding into your feet.” Hollis also stated that, “you’re going to have bumps and bruises, you’re going to have teeth knocked out.” Brook also explained that when she’s in her soccer
uniform, “I don’t care about getting dirty. It doesn’t bother me to get bruised.” Shemira said that in gymnastics, “You can’t be the kind of person who stubs their toe and cries. You have to be the kind of person who tears something and if it’s not going to get worse, then you’re going to wait until the season’s over to get it fixed.” Madison explained that during a competition, “I don’t want to cry because it shows my team I’m weak and I don’t want to be weak for my team because they need me to be strong.”

“Meaner” self. Some of the women also noted a mood change and personality difference, manifest as a “mean” self, when on the field/in the gym. Hailee, a field hockey player, explained that “a lot of people think I’m really mean until they get to know me off the field.” Madison, in describing how serious she can get during a competition, admitted, “Sometimes I can get a little mean when people try to talk to me.” Missy also described herself as “a little bit meaner on the field.” Lauren a bit more directly stated: “I tend to get pretty pissed off on the field,” when talking about her aggression. Nicole even more directly stated: “On the field I can be a little more of a bitch.” Ellen most directly stated: “My friends on the team are like, ‘I hate playing against you because you’re such a bitch.’” Some women described themselves as vocal leaders and noted that this “meanness” comes out when they are directing their teammates. Celeste said that she’ll tell her teammates: “‘You need to step it up!’ And it’s not in a tone that’s really sweet. On the field you have three seconds to say that.”

Yet supportive. Despite the intense competition and aggression the women associate with their on the field/in the gym selves, some of them described themselves as still being caring, supportive, compassionate, and happy when on the field/in the gym. Nicole said: “I’m a big encourager. I’m always yelling, encouraging my teammates on and being vocal and things like that. I think that’s the emotional, nurturing part that takes over.” Nicole continued, explaining
that “If you’re struggling in a game, I’m like, ‘Come on, we can do this together.’” Meridith said that she is good at “back[ing] up my teammates.” Madison explained that during a competition, “I’ll cheer on my teammates; I’ll give them hugs when they’re done.” Andrea even described herself saying, “I like to have a sense of humor about everything. We’ll do some pretty hard stuff in practice and people are nervous and I like to make it as fun as possible” in an effort to ease the tension for others. Many of the women described their teammates as their “sisters” and “best friends” who they care for and support in any situation.

Not Performing Athletically: Off the Field/Out of the Gym

After the women described their on the field/in the gym selves, I asked them to describe themselves when they were not on the field/in the gym. Fifteen of the seventeen women I interviewed said they saw differences between the two sides of themselves; they all also saw similarities. Some women described themselves as completely different people whereas others, like Meridith, said, “I think there’s different aspects (of myself) that are magnified when I’m playing or magnified when I’m not playing.”

More relaxed. Many of the women who described themselves as very intense, competitive and aggressive when performing as an athlete, described themselves as outgoing, social, and laid-back when not performing athletically. Nicole explained: “[I am] much more laid-back and I’m not intense at all. I let things roll off my back much easier when I’m off the field.” Some women particularly emphasized how much they like to relax when they are off the field or out of the gym. Bella even described her off the field side as though she’s going through “detox” because she gets to relax. Akita described herself as being “extremely chill.... My ideal day would be being in a hammock all day and just reading a book.” Akita continued, “I’m very carefree when it comes to off the field and I’m particular when it comes to on the field. So I
would think they’re pretty much opposites in my book.” Celeste even began her description of herself by saying, “I try and not associate myself with athletics or field hockey off the field.” Many of the women described various things that they like to do off the field. Some like to do other physical activities, like biking and hiking. Others like to hang out with their friends and socialize and go out partying at night, whereas some like to relax quietly by themselves. Others said they are creative, “artsy,” a “dreamer.” There was a mix of activities, interests and characteristics, just as you would find with students on any college campus.

**Friendly.** The women who described themselves as mean on the field tended to describe themselves as nicer and friendlier off the field and placed a greater emphasis on relationships and friendships. Ellen described herself saying, “On the field, you know, I want to kill you. Off the field I want to meet you and get to know you and I’m more compassionate… Off the field I’m a very different person.” Many women described themselves as Nicole did, saying, “I’m much more caring off the field, nurturing almost” and emphasized how important their friendships are to them. Anya explained that, “family means the most to me; my friends mean a lot to me, too.” Meridith said, “I have a lot of close friends and we have heart-to-hearts.”

**Girly girl.** Interestingly, about half of the women described the differences in the two sides of themselves the way that Brook did: “[Off the field,] I am one of the biggest girly girls you’ll ever meet.” Brook explained:

I get dressed up for class every day. I will take two hours to get ready to go out. I enjoy doing my hair. Don’t get me wrong, I like to be comfortable and there are days I’ll go to class in sweats, but I love to go shopping… I have more high heels than I do running shoes. I like to wear dresses.
Akita described herself saying, “I love fashion, I love to dress up, I like being unique, I like being beautiful, I like being a strong confident woman, I like knowing what I want.” These were some of the first differences the women identified between the two sides of their selves. Hollis said that as a woman, “I’m very into my appearance. I wear designer clothes and that’s important for me…. When I go out … that’s my social life, that’s my time to interact with people of the different sex and I spend an hour to get ready.” Even Ellen, who will kill you on the field, said at different points in the interview, “I wear dresses, I do girly things,” and, “I’m such a girl.” Nicole described herself as “very delicate and emotional.” Meridith, who claimed she was different but “not completely different,” described her off-the-field self by saying, “For me, I’m emotional, or I like pink, or I put make-up on when I go out, or I like to do my hair, or I like to dress up.” Fifteen of the women saw a different side of themselves—“girly” or not. The two who did not identify any change in who they are described themselves as having some characteristics often considered feminine in our culture.

Similarities Across Contexts/Sides of Selves

While the women noted differences between the two sides of themselves, there were also similarities between the two sides. Many characteristics that the women mentioned and used to describe themselves when they were performing athletically carry over into their lives when they were not performing athletically.

Still competitive. Almost all of the women said that they are still competitive off the field. Celeste explained that “off the field, I’m competitive with myself… (I’m) goal-oriented.” Lauren noted that she’s competitive when it comes to grades, but not against others: “the only way I’m competitive in school is with the grading scale. I can’t see myself competing against
someone else one to one.” Andrea, who does not see herself has having two different sides, explained it similarly:

I’m competitive in everything I do, though. I know with my roommate, we’ll be walking somewhere … and slowly we’ll be kind of looking at each other and one person will speed up a little in their walking and eventually we’ll break out into a sprint. It’s kind of like an acknowledged competitiveness in everything we do.

Whether it’s getting grades on tests or whatever it is, it’s the way I am. It’s always the way I am.

Hollis even said, “I’m a very, very competitive person. If I lose a ping-pong game, I’m pissed. Pissed.” Shemira, who also does not see herself as having two different sides, said, “I’m always competitive. Even when I’m walking to class I’m competitive. … I pick a person and I pass them.”

Disciplined. The women also identified other traits that carry over into their off the field/out of the gym selves. Brook identified herself as being a “really hard worker” and being persistent and said, “I think those are general traits that carry over from soccer into my life.” Meridith said, “I think the aggressive nature carries over to be somewhat assertive in life.” Kayla, who said gymnastics was about being perfect, said that “the perfectionist quality [is something] I put into everything.” Many of the women explained that they have to watch what they eat. Soccer and field hockey players said this was because they needed to think about how what they ate would affect their fitness training. They viewed food as fuel. Gymnasts, on the other hand, explained that they watch what they eat because they have to look good in a leotard. Anya explained, generally, “I have to be responsible for what I do, and if that affects gymnastics
then that will be a problem. A little part of me when I’m outside of the gym still is thinking about gymnastics.”

No switch. Two of the women, Shemira and Andrea, did not identify themselves as having two sides to their selves and, therefore, described themselves as consistent across both contexts. While Shemira described herself as competitive both in and out of the gym, she also described herself as “feminine” and fun in and out of the gym. While she acknowledged that a gymnastics meet is a time to be competitive, she described herself as consistent in her behavior. While many women described themselves in large part as competitive with brief references to supportiveness when performing athletically, Shemira described herself as equally competitive, supportive and fun: “When you’re training you want to train with intensity, but … at the same time you can have fun.” Andrea, though competitive and emotional, described herself first and foremost as disciplined. She explained, “For me, a big thing about my athletic life and in every part of my life is discipline. I like to be very disciplined in my training, doing everything I can to take care of my body. And I think that really carries over into everything I do.” Andrea described herself as “composed” on the field and in life. While she discussed her competitive fire and her emotional side, the focus of Andrea’s self-description was about being disciplined. She explained that she saw no separation between herself both on and off the field.

Switching Between Selves

After the women described themselves when performing as an athlete and when not performing as an athlete, I asked them how they go between those two sides of their selves. I encouraged them to elaborate in their descriptions, asking them what switching involves, what it feels like, and how conscious they are of it when they are switching or transitioning. Eight of the women described going between the two sides as a literal “switch”—something that they can
turn on and off instantly; seven of the women described the switch as transition or progression that happens over a period of time; two women said they do not switch or go between two sides of their selves.

*On/off switch.* Some saw the two sides to themselves as an actual switch that they turn on and off. Ellen described the immediacy of her switch, saying I think it’s like, “switch.” Okay, we’re doing something competitive—BAM—it’s on and I’m ready to win. … Before practice I’ll be so chill, just hanging out. And then training will start and I’ll be like [snaps fingers] into it, ready to go, focused. …(We) call it “flame on,” because it’s just like, BAM, you’re ready to go.

Many women used the phrases “it’s on,” and “okay, it’s time,” or “BAM” to describe flicking the switch. Nicole explained, “For me it’s automatic. It’s just a mindset. You just stop thinking. It’s just instinct.” Bella said, “It’s how I’m programmed.” Akita said it all comes down to “whether or not I’m holding a field hockey stick…. Cross that boundary, game on.” The women who described it as a switch described it as an unconscious experience. While they know the switch happens, they do not have to tell themselves to turn on the switch. The women explained that it happens “naturally.”

*Gradual transition.* Others described the switch as more of a transition. Brook described the transition as “unconscious,” as did many of the women. She continued, saying, “The best way for me to prepare for a game is just not to talk to anybody. I’m not even thinking about anything. My body just does it for me. Staring off into space, it takes everything from the outside and just melts it away.” Heather and Meridith both described the transition as starting when they arrive in the locker room and ending when they begin playing. Heather explained,
“we get to practice and everyone’s putting on their stuff and we’re just talking … and then we warm up … and then once the warm up, the stretching and stuff is over, then we’ll do the first drill, we’ll kind of ease into practice.” Hollis said that she mentally prepares herself for games by envisioning the game in her head and doing mental imagery exercises starting as early as the night before a game. “It just happens. I’ll be laying in bed and I’ll just start to think. … For some reason if I don’t do it the night before, I’ll wake up [and do it]. … There are times when I’m still imagining what I’m going to be doing when the national anthem is playing.” When Hollis arrives in the locker room, she recounted that she and her teammates like to play music and dance and get themselves pumped up. After the pre-game talk, however, she does not leave the locker room with the rest of her team.

I’m always the last person out of the locker room because I [go to the bathroom and] look at myself in the mirror and I do not leave the bathroom until I look at myself and I know I’m ready. You can call it whatever you want, but for me, I’m not leaving that locker room until I know I’m mentally ready to go and give it everything I have. …I’ll look at myself and say, “Okay, you’re ready, let’s go,” and I’ll walk out on to the field.

Natural. Whether the women thought of the switch as instant or a process, sometimes including a ritual, almost all of them described it as “habit,” “second-nature,” or “natural” because, as they explained, they’ve been doing it for so long.

Some of the women said that as they go from their off the field/out of the gym selves to their on the field/in the gym selves they are switching on whereas others said they are switching off. The women who said they switch on typically identified something that they “turn on.” Missy said she switches on because she is “turning on the competitiveness.” Madison said, “I’m
standing there at the end of the vault runway, and I say, ‘Okay, one, two, three, go.’ That’s when I turn on the focus.” Akita explained that compared to her off the field personality, “On the field it’s more directive and I feel like it’s a switch on because I’m thinking constantly, whereas I might not be thinking constantly off the field.” She also said that, “It’s a focus. It’s knowing what I need to do, it’s getting the job done, it’s my competitive fire.” Bella even described how she gets tingles in her body when she switches on. “It’s an adrenaline rush. Ultimate excitement.”

However, others described themselves as switching off. Anya said she switches off because, “Gymnastics has always been a part of my life. Even when I am out, I’m still thinking about gymnastics. But I feel like when I walk in, I turn off everything else.” Celeste also described how field hockey is “always in the back of my head.” She explained how she prefers to “be in Celeste-mode” and sees herself as switching off because “my personality and my habits and my characteristics in Celeste-mode are not going to help me be a better athlete.” Nicole also described herself as switching off “because you’re switching off your thinking. You’re switching off what’s going on in your life. You’re focusing on this play.” Nicole continued, explaining how “physically and mentally you feel different. Because when you turn everything else off, you turn on your instinct … everything is heightened … so, physically, you’re much more on edge. … I think sports are very instinctual.”

When asked why they think they switch, all of the women who identified these two sides to their personalities explained that they do it because their sport demands it of them. Hollis explained that she does the mental imagery exercises to get into her “‘ideal performance zone.’ If you don’t get into that, you’re not going to be successful.”
competitive athlete at the collegiate level, the women explained that they have to go from one side of themselves to the other.

**Gendered Selves**

In this study I was interested not only in how the women describe the two sides of themselves (and if they see themselves having two sides at all), but also how their descriptions reference gender. The self is both multidimensional and gendered. Athletics, as previously discussed, is, for the most part, a highly masculinized social institution.

Women’s self-descriptions. All of the women described themselves as competitive. All of the women also described themselves as physically and/or mentally aggressive, and/or athletically intense when engaged in their sport. These are all characteristics that are commonly thought of as masculine. While “focus” may not be commonly considered gendered, the focus that the women in this study talked about was a competitive and aggressive focus that was clearly instrumental, a quality long associated with masculinity (Wood, 2009). As Akita stated, “It’s a focus. … it’s getting the job done.” Some of the women described athletics as a job. Lauren described her performance as “a responsibility to my team. It’s also a responsibility to my university, to my parents … to all my supporters at home … my coaches that have coached me … family that has supported me, I think it’s a responsibility to all of them.” Again, the women believe they switch because their sport demands it of them—it is their job and their responsibility as NCAA athletes. Many women also said that they switched because, without “getting into the zone,” they wouldn’t win. Therefore, they focus on this side of their self to achieve a goal. They use these masculine characteristics instrumentally.

Though some women described themselves as “mean” and “intense” on the field, others described themselves as nurturing, encouraging, and caring. These characteristics are most
commonly considered feminine. The women also explained the deep, close connection they have with their teammates, both on and off the field/in and out of the gym. This focus on their relationships and being nurturing and encouraging emphasizes the relational aspect of their on the field/in the gym selves. This relational aspect is often perceived as feminine in our culture. Some of the women described themselves as emotional players, whereas others spoke about how, though they are emotional, they do not cry on the field or in the gym because they believe it shows weakness. Emotions and weakness have historically been associated with femininity. While some women will display that kind of femininity while performing athletically, others specifically try to reject that feminine aspect of themselves when they are performing athletically.

Being close, caring, providing support and nurturing one’s teammates seems one way that some women athletes conform to social prescriptions for femininity. However, the women are not only doing this for their own relational benefit. Though teams can win games without the individuals being best friends, it is certainly beneficial and helpful to the team’s success on the field/in the gym for the teammates to get along. It could be argued that when you are willing to put the team before yourself and support your teammates when they are struggling, the team will be more successful. Therefore, the women’s use of encouragement, nurturing and support on the field/in the gym is instrumental in their competition. In other words, the women use their feminine characteristics for instrumental reasons, which, again, is most commonly considered masculine. The gymnastics team also demonstrates this in their use of their “feminine qualities.” Though they work to look good in a leotard, wear make-up, put ribbons in their hair, and act cute and “flirty” with the judges, they do so to get more points and win, an instrumental goal. The
feminine aspects of their job as an athlete are used to achieve instrumental goals: winning and taking out their competition.

Off the field, the women’s descriptions of their selves varied in terms of gender. Some women emphasized how competitive and assertive they are in everything they do. Some women also talked about how they loved being active, playing other sports, and doing anything physical. These are all commonly considered masculine characteristics and activities. Some women also described themselves as “girly girls,” who love to dress up, wear make-up, and socialize with their friends. Some even described themselves as “artsy,” care-free, and naïve. These are often seen as feminine characteristics and activities. On the whole, the women’s descriptions of themselves when they are not performing athletically referenced femininity more than their descriptions did of themselves when they are performing athletically.

*The Bem Sex-Role Inventory.* All of the women completed the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) twice during the interview: first, thinking about their off the field/out of the gym self, then again thinking about their on the field/in the gym self. Several comparisons were made of the women’s off the field/out of the gym BSRI masculinity ($M = 5.01; SD = .67$) and femininity scores ($M = 4.72, SD = .78$) and their on the field/in the gym masculinity ($M = 5.69, SD = .68$) and femininity scores ($M = 3.19, SD = .79$). Results of a series of dependent $t$-tests revealed the following:

- Masculinity and femininity scores off the field/out of the gym did not differ significantly: $t(16) = 1.47, p = .16$.
- Masculinity on the field/in the gym was statistically significantly higher than femininity on the field/in the gym: $t(16) = 11.09, p < .001$. 
• Masculinity on the field/in the gym was statistically significantly higher than masculinity off the field/out the gym: \( t(16) = 4.71, p < .001 \).

• Femininity off the field/out of the gym was statistically significantly higher than femininity on the field/in the gym: \( t(16) = 10.96, p < .001 \).

To assess whether differences in masculinity and femininity may be sport-specific, a series of analyses was employed to explore possible differences associated with sport. Although the \( n \)'s are quite small for each sport, making it impossible to offer statistically meaningful conclusions, the analyses were conducted to enhance explanation of the results of this investigation. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the masculinity and femininity scores for each sport.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Off the Field/Out of the Gym</th>
<th>On the Field/In the Gym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Masculinity ( M / SD )</td>
<td>Femininity ( M / SD )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer ( n = 7 )</td>
<td>4.54/0.34</td>
<td>4.31/0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Hockey ( n = 6 )</td>
<td>5.26/0.59</td>
<td>4.93/0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gymnastics ( n = 4 )</td>
<td>5.45/0.82</td>
<td>5.14/0.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering each sport separately, ANOVA results (with Least Significant Difference follow-up multiple comparisons to significant \( F \) results) indicated that the soccer players see
themselves as less masculine than players in the other two sports both on the field, \( F(2, 14) = 4.24, p = .036 \), and off the field, \( F(2, 14) = 15.24, p < .001 \). The other two sports did not differ from one another in masculinity scores. No differences in femininity scores between and among the three sports were found both for off the field/out of the gym—\( F(2, 14) = 1.98, p = .175 \)—and on the field/in the gym—\( F(2, 14) = 1.32, p = .299 \).

Dependent \( t \)-tests were used to compare masculinity and femininity scores within each sport. For both soccer and field hockey players, masculinity and femininity did not differ off the field: \( t(6) = .82, p = .45 \), and \( t(5) = .76, p = .48 \), respectively. On the field, masculinity was significantly higher than femininity for members of both teams: \( t(6) = 7.69, p < .001 \), and \( t(5) = 8.13, p < .001 \), respectively. Also, masculinity on the field was higher than masculinity off the field: \( t(6) = -3.85, p = .008 \), and \( t(5) = -3.02, p = .03 \), respectively; and femininity off the field was higher than femininity on the field: \( t(6) = 10.96, p < .001 \), and \( t(5) = 9.04, p < .001 \), respectively. Finally, for gymnasts, masculinity in the gym was significantly higher than femininity in the gym: \( t(3) = 4.34, p = .02 \).

Two final analyses considered masculinity and femininity differences that may be associated with whether the athlete indicated an immediate switch or transition from on the field/in the gym to off the field/out of the gym, and the number of years playing. First, no differences in masculinity or femininity \((p > .05)\), on or off the field/in or out of the gym, were related to whether the women said their switch was immediate or happened over time. Second, femininity on the field/in the gym was statistically significantly negatively correlated with the number of years playing the sport \((M = 12.71, SD = 4.12; r = -.55, p = .02)\). An independent \( t \)-test follow-up to this significant finding indicated that those who played 12 years or less \((n = 7, M = 3.69, SD = 0.77)\), in comparison to those who played more than 12 years \((n = 10, M = 2.85, SD = 0.92)\),
SD = 0.62), described themselves as more feminine on the field/in the gym, \(t(3) = 2.50, p = .02\). There were no other differences.

Finally, correlations between masculinity and femininity were unrelated for both on-the-field/in-the-gym and off-the-field/out-of-the-gym conditions, supporting Bem’s (1974) argument that masculinity and femininity are separate gender constructs.

**Discussion**

This study asked how NCAA female athletes describe themselves when they are performing athletically and not performing athletically, to what extent the women’s descriptions reference gender, and how the women describe switching between the two sides of their selves. While there were similarities between the two sides of themselves, 15 of the 17 women identified distinct differences between themselves when on the field/in the gym versus when off the field/out of the gym. As the women described themselves on the field/in the gym, they described their performances as athletes. When performing that side of themselves, the women reported that they are intensely competitive, aggressive, and focused on the game/meet. Many of the women described competing in their sport as a job with the goal of winning. It is not surprising, therefore, that the women’s descriptions of themselves on the field/in the gym indicate an instrumentality and reference masculinity in their performances. However, supporting Bem’s (1974) argument that we can exhibit more than one gender, the women’s descriptions of themselves on the field/in the gym included aspects of nurturing and caring for their teammates. Though their athletic performances are strong in masculinity, the women still perform femininity when on the field/in the gym. Gymnasts differed from the soccer and field hockey players in that they perform femininity more than the other two sports when in the gym. This is probably due to the feminine aspects of the sport that the women identified above. While the gymnasts still rated
themselves as more masculine than feminine when in the gym, they did not rate themselves as less feminine when performing athletically than when not performing athletically. Soccer and field hockey players rated themselves as less feminine on the field than off the field.

Off the field/out of the gym, the women described their selves in a variety of ways, further showing the multidimensionality of their selves. Some explicitly identified themselves as “girly.” Others described their lack of intensity off the field and their greater focus on relationships rather than competing against others. Some described the differences in themselves as drastic and said they see themselves as different people. Others described themselves as being the same person, but having a different side to themselves. The women’s descriptions of themselves off the field/out of the gym referenced femininity more often than did their descriptions of themselves when on the field/in the gym. However, they also identified masculine-typed aspects of themselves that carry over from the field/gym into their selves when they are not performing athletically. The women’s BSRI scores, not surprisingly, indicated that their gender performance is androgynous when off the field/out of the gym.

Fifteen of the women identified that they switch between two sides of themselves. Some described the switch as immediate, whereas others believe it to be a process or ritual. Almost all of the women described this switch as natural and something that “just happens.” While the women are able to identify that it happens, they do not consciously think about it when it is happening. The women also described switching as “turning on” their athleticism and competition for instrumental goals, associated with masculinity, or as “turning off” the outside world and their off the field/out of the gym personalities that they do not see as related to their sport and which include more feminine characteristics. The BSRI results reflect both this
increase in masculinity and this decrease in femininity when the women are performing athletically.

I also asked the women to explain where or how they learned some of these characteristics that they attributed to themselves. As Blumer (1969) states, symbolic interactionism operates from the principles that people “act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (p. 2) and that this meaning is created through social interaction. Because the women placed so much emphasis on their competitiveness, I specifically asked how they learned to be competitive. About half of the women I interviewed had parents who played sports, whether in high school, college or even at the elite level. Others had parents who coached their teams when they were younger, practiced with them and encouraged them to get better, or simply signed them up for sports. Some of the women also had older siblings or cousins who played sports and, as children, they looked up to their family members and wanted to do whatever the others did. Our families are typically the first people we interact with, observe, and learn from as children. Because many of the women’s families were involved in sports and the women wanted to be like their older siblings or cousins, it makes sense that the women would see sport as something that is fun, desirable, and perhaps even normal or expected. Ellen said that though her parents were both athletes and competitive, she didn’t realize that she was competitive until she was about 10 or 11 years old. “One of my coaches called me competitive and I never really realized that I was. I always thought that was normal, wanting to win. But then I realized other people did not want to win as bad as I did.”

Brook explained that, growing up, her parents made up games and competitions to get her and her sibling to do things. For example, Brook’s family played the “seatbelt Olympics,” and competed to see who could put their seatbelt on the fastest. In fact, Brook and her father still
play that game to this day. Brook also told stories about racing to see who could put on pajamas the fastest before bedtime and other mini-competitions her family did for entertainment. Brook said, “We’ve got recorded video of me running obstacle courses in the house when I’m five years old.” Not only were competitive games some of the actual social interactions that Brook had with her family growing up, but she also described them as fun, pleasant experiences that played a role in framing competition as both normal and enjoyable.

I also encouraged the women to elaborate on how they learned the “girly” side of them that they described. Brook explained that her mother, though feminine, is not what she would consider “girly.” While her interactions with her mother created meaning and shaped Brook’s behaviors and perceptions of womanhood, she instead learned about “girlyness” through interactions with her friends, such as how to put on make-up and fashion. Bella also said that she learned how to be “feminine” from her friends in high school—when femininity began to stand out to her. Lauren told another story from her childhood:

On the field I was spitting. Off the field I was spitting—until my mom got it into my head, “That’s not okay. You need not do that because you’re going to be looked down upon. That’s a disgusting habit, blah blah blah.” And then once you start realizing those things, I think you grow more into a woman.

Lauren’s mother certainly shaped what Lauren believes it means to be a woman on and off the field. While Brook and Bella explained that they learned about behaviors that _were_ girly, Lauren learned what it meant to be a woman by learning that her behavior _was not_ feminine. This is an interesting finding because men often learn that what it means to be a man is to _not_ be feminine/a woman. Generally, women cited their mothers, friends, and the media as their sources for learning what it meant to be a woman and how to behave when not performing athletically. The
interactions that the women had with their parents, teammates, coaches, friends, siblings, and others have undoubtedly shaped their perceptions of and meanings for their multidimensional gendered selves.

Limitations

This study was conducted with only three teams. While the results reflect perspectives from each of the three sports, there are many other sports in which women participate that were not studied. The culture, norms, and skills or abilities necessary within the various sports and teams have certainly affected the results of this study. Additionally, this study was conducted at one university. Athletic departments and athletic climates vary from university to university and conference to conference. This study reflects only the views of the university at which it was conducted.

Because I worked with NCAA athletes at a university, the women were both students and athletes. Many of the women described school and their sport as two full-time jobs. The women had very little free time during which to conduct interviews, which limited their availability and, therefore, the length of the interviews. While I would have preferred for the interviews to last longer and to be even more in-depth, taking more time from the study’s participants was simply not feasible considering the women have very little free time. I had also intended to work with the women’s basketball team at the same university to provide even more variety in sports, but was unable to work with them for combination of reasons.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

This study examined how female athletes describe their multidimensional selves, how they describe switching between sides of themselves and how their descriptions of themselves reference gender. This thesis study, therefore, has implications in multiple areas of research.
This study certainly contributes to the literature on athletics, athletic performance, and athletic identities. How athletes see themselves and the differences and similarities they identify on and off the field can help us better understand not only what it means to be an athlete, but what it’s like to perform as an athlete. This study also sheds light on how athletics and experiences throughout women athletes’ lives shape the athletes, how they see themselves, and their behaviors. This study also provides a picture of the outcome of sport socialization, another area I have studied and in which I have an interest. Interestingly, the BSRI results also indicated that women who have played their sport longer described themselves as less feminine on the field/in the gym than those who have played their sport for a shorter length of time. Some of the women in this study have played their sport since they were three or four years old. Being socialized into sports at such a young age must certainly affect the women’s gendered self-concepts. Studying the relationship between sport socialization at varying ages and people’s descriptions of their selves may be another interesting step in this line of research.

More generally, this study also contributes to the literature on sports and gender, specifically how sports create, reproduce, reify and resist gender norms. In a broader sense, this study will hopefully shed light on negative stereotypes often associated with female athletes. Many of the women I interviewed explained that while some people are accepting of female athletes and give them the respect they feel they deserve, there are still people who think all female athletes are “butch” and unfeminine. This study is evidence that though the women may perform a more masculine self while on the field/in the gym, their gender performance changes in a different context. Some of the women even described themselves as very feminine outside of their sport, challenging stereotypes held by some in our society. The women’s behaviors and self-descriptions when they are performing and not performing athletically work to, perhaps,
reshape gendered meanings. According to Alvesson and Billing (1997), gender can “be radically changed through human action in which gender is redefined” (p. 22).

When the women and I discussed gender during the interviews, many of them struggled in connecting gender with their behaviors, even if they identified and understood gender. The women actually resisted gender categorization. When Akita and I were discussing competitiveness and its connection to masculinity, she refused to call it masculine behavior and said, “I would call that competitive behavior. I don’t think that because a girl is competitive and strong that she has to be labeled as masculine. I think that brute strength and competitive fire are things that can no longer just be considered masculine.” Meredith explained her on-the-field characteristics saying, “I would describe them as commonly thought of as masculine, but I don’t know that I would necessarily think they’re masculine.” Ellen said, “I’ve never thought of myself like that. I’m a girl that has, I don’t want to say masculine qualities because I think that’s dumb … and people think it’s black and white, but I think there’s so much gray.” There are many theories about gender, and this study certainly identified gender as a performance (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Butler, 1990). Alvesson and Billing (1997) discussed the possibility of moving away from gender and suggested to, in research, “try to take an open stance and investigate when social categories such as man, woman, masculine, feminine appear in the talk of those being studied” (p. 214). During the interviews, I often initiated talk of these social categories. However, the women demonstrated a resistance to categorizing their behaviors, particularly those conventionally associated with masculinity, as gendered, preferring to label their behaviors simply as behaviors. While I do not think we are at a point where we can do away with gender, this tension the women felt and the resistance to gender categorization that they demonstrated may be a sign that gender theory is evolving and should be reexamined.
Future research could expand this study by using more teams. Future studies should also expand across multiple universities, as each university has its own athletic climate and culture. The same goes for teams—each team has its own culture, bond, and set of expectations. Another element that plays into the team’s culture is the sport itself. Different sports require different skill sets and behaviors, especially seen between contact team sports and non-contact individual sports.

It is my hope that this study will be replicated looking specifically at male athletes. Men may also identify differences between their selves when they are performing athletically and not performing athletically. It would be interesting to compare the differences and similarities in their selves that the men identify with the descriptions the women provided here. It would also be interesting to see how, if at all, men describe the switch between the sides of their multidimensional selves and even how their descriptions of themselves reference gender.

In addition to contributing to the literature on multidimensional selves and how people manage the various sides of themselves, this study may also be used as a springboard for research into how people switch between sides of themselves that are not necessarily related to gender. The notion that the self is multidimensional is common, but substantial studies about the actual switches and transitions people go through are absent. Switching could be examined across multiple sites and contexts. Future studies could examine the professor switch, the parent switch, the doctor switch. This study could even be renamed “The Athlete Switch.” The switch could be studied in any situation where people change their contextual behaviors.

With sports being such an incredible force and institution in our society, I hope this study has popular implications as well. A great many people participate in athletics or know someone who has played sports. Whether it is through this study or future studies, I believe this line of
research is helpful in understanding the self-concepts of our children, parents, friends, and athletic idols. At the very least, I hope this study will provide as much insight for the women I interviewed, other girls and women who play sports, and the greater athletic community as it has for me.
References


Appendix A

How long have you been playing (sport)?

Do you see yourself as a different person or as having a different side to yourself when you’re on the field/in the gym than when you’re off/out?

How would you describe yourself as an athlete? What are qualities or traits you think you have as an athlete?

How would you describe your non-athlete self, if there is one? What are qualities or traits you think your non-athlete self has?

What does it mean to you to be an athlete? Describe some of your experiences as an athlete.

Would you describe yourself differently when you’re not performing as an athlete?

What does it mean to you to be female?

How do being an athlete and being female relate to each other? (What does it mean to you to be a female athlete?)

Do you think your identity as an athlete affects your identity as a woman?

Do you think your identity as a woman affects your identity as an athlete?

(Assuming there’s a difference in how they act or who they perceive themselves to be:)

It sounds as if you switch between “doing athlete” and “not doing athlete.” When does that switch occur?

How conscious are you of the switch when it’s happening?

How would you describe that switch? What happens to you when you’re switching? Do you do anything in particular to switch? What does that feel like?

How are these two modes of being? How are they the same?

Why do you think you switch?

(Assuming there’s no difference in how they act or who they perceive themselves to be:)

How would you describe yourself when you’re on the field/court, during practice and during a game?
Do you act the same way in everyday life? What behaviors or characteristics do you share between the two? Are there any differences?
### Appendix B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akita</td>
<td>Field Hockey</td>
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