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OBJECTIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN SPORT EVENTS¹

Abstract

For more than a century, there has been an objectification of women in the form of cheerleading in sport events. Far from the center of those events, prurient shows of cheerleaders are a peripheral part of a sport event and contribute to the empowerment of the cult of the body in contemporary sport through its sexualization while the reason is surely a profit that goes to the organizers of those events. However, a different approach is possible and authors state an example of the basketball club Alba from Berlin, the management of which had decided, after 25 years, to stop the practice of cheerleading during the time-outs of the matches. The management stated the reason for the fact that the appearance of young attractive women cheerleaders is not convenient today because the club strives to promote women in sport as basketball players who could be a role model for the youth. A similar reason why they do not have cheerleaders could be found amongst some clubs from the National Football League in the USA.

1 The main idea of the paper was exposed through an oral presentation within the 3rd Osijek Days of Bioethics, Osijek, November 11-12, 2019 (Mijatov, Radenović, Marković, 2019: 61-62).

Mentioned examples should encourage a broader interest for this issue from the complex sphere of sport bioethics, permanent and normalized objectification of women through cheerleading that should not be a part of modern society.

▮ **Keywords:** female body, sporting events, objectification, bioethics of sport

Introduction

The sport spectacle, as one of the biggest spectacles in society, has been led by political and ideological motives from its early beginnings in classical antiquity (Tomlinson and Young, 2006: 1). Today, this spectacle is common for almost the entire global population and is significant as a segment for a 'society of spectacle' (MacAloon, 2006: 15-18), where it has spread to almost every corner of the planet with the accelerated globalization of sport as a favorite way to spend free time. In the context of the mass consumer culture and the 'society of spectacle', sport creates its idols, sport stars, to whom numerous young people are comparing themselves and identifying with them (Radenović, 2017: 134-135). In the entire 'sport industry', besides information about current sport events, there is an insistence on information about the everyday life of sport stars and not just their sport results, and, to an 'average consumer', this offers a lifestyle of elite athletes as a possible and desirable model (Milovanović, 2017: 195). In such a manner, the makers of sport equipment are reproducing the culture and the society of spectacle as well as the sport spectacle itself through elite athletes that are promoting and offering products to an 'average consumer'.

The sport spectacle is the most visible aspect of the sport event as a phenomenon which is the basis of this research, which is both in sociology of sport as a particular sociological discipline, as well as the history of sport and bioethics of sport. Besides key elements of the sport event, such as players, intermediators (managers and judges), and audiences, every sport event has its inner and outer surroundings. Thus, athletes, coaches, judges and managers are, conditionally speaking, the inner surrounding of a sport event, while the audience, media, sponsors, as well as cheerleaders, are the outer surrounding of the sport event (Mihajlović, 2013: 107-120). Hence, an integral part of major sport events is a performance of cheerleaders which itself is a specific phenomenon that has its complex history and deserves attention, not just from the perspective of the sociology of sport, but the bioethics of sport as well because, as we will see, it opens numerous questions of notions, instrumentalizations, and objectivizations of the female body.

From past to present: cheerleading as a process of (de)emancipation

Let us perceive the roots of this cheerleading phenomenon. First traces of cheerleading are to be found in the 19th century, more precisely in 1877 when, at Princeton University, an 'official' way of cheering was proclaimed. From official

cheers, soon it was time for official cheerleaders: the first cheerleader team was assembled at the University of Minnesota. The beginning was exclusively male – the cheerleader was Johnny Campbell (Grindstaff, 2020).

The participation of women in this new activity had to wait for the 20th century. The vanguard was the University of Minnesota where, in 1923, women were allowed to participate in the organized cheering. Even though the permission was granted, the conservatism of post-war USA had slowed down the process of development of female cheerleaders. Conservatism was slowing down the process but the war was, as always, the catalyst of social changes: confronted with the mass recruitment of students in 1940 for the war on Axis powers, women were ready to fill in the gaps which emerged (Grindstaff, 2020).

The post-war USA had witnessed a tremendous development of women cheerleading and, at the same time, tremendous oblivion of male cheerleading. The process of development of female cheerleaders had coincided with the long process of female liberation which had had its dynamic in the second half of the 20th century and reflected itself on female sport which, on the other hand, had left its consequences on female cheerleading as well (Juhas, 2016: 161-162). Female liberation had two sides of the coin. On its other side, women were ever more frequently sexualized and objectified in mass media and newly gained freedom of clothing had given its dynamic to this process. Cheerleaders were, if not bellwethers, then surely a part of this process where their performances could be characterized as a thin line between dancing and striptease. Scarcely dressed and with choreography filled with lascivious and provocative elements, cheerleaders had filled halftimes of matches with this type of 'fun' to the joy of spectators, more precisely men, who were the majority in the audience.

Cheerleaders had stepped out of the field and made their performances mobile. There is no better example to show their significance than a show done by The Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders in 1983 for the sailors of the warship USS Bainbridge (United States Department of the Navy, 1983: 1). Soon, performances could also be seen on TV as team members would often appear as guests in movies and TV shows. In effect, cheerleaders had become an integral part of American culture, members of prominent teams had become famous and the whole phenomenon of women cheerleading had become normalized and a part of mass culture and everyday life.

The issue of the development of cheerleading goes even further. The growing trend of entertaining content during pauses of sport matches indicates that a

crisis of modern sport is ongoing where the match itself is no longer enough to quench the thirst of spectators for fun, but a specific 'Hollywood spice' is necessary in order to make sport matches attractive enough and a sport spectacle as a whole. Cheerleaders are the ones that usually have the key performance in which they add the extra fun to (ever-more boring?) sport events. In fact, they are instruments of strengthening and reproducing the whole 'industry of sport', which is evident in the example of some sport spectacles such as the Super Bowl. The whole process has two dimensions: crisis of sport is ever-more in progress and entertainment content in pauses of matches is growing to be bigger and more glamorous in order to fill in those (fun) blanks. Within cheerleaders, the process is going in the direction of ever-increasing instrumentalization and objectivization where performances of today cheerleaders can hardly be compared with the performances of their predecessors.

If we take into account that 'gender inequality is defined as the difference in status, power and prestige between men and women within certain groups, collective and society' (Radenović, 2016: 148), it is evident that the phenomenon of cheerleaders is a segment of this inequality and a significant aspect of the overall inferior position of women in sport. As such, the phenomenon must be a part of the feminist view of sport, which it is often not. The focus is usually on athletes, even though cheerleaders are also participants of the sport spectacle (Birell, 2000: 61-76). It is necessary that we go even further: deconstruct whole gender roles in sport, masculinization of athletes, and, at the same time, instrumentalization and objectivization of cheerleaders standing beside the court. Theberg states (2000: 322) that sport is a phenomenon of clearly marked gender roles in which the male holds dominance and the sub-phenomenon of cheerleaders within it is based on gender roles. It is not just that the gender roles are clearly divided, but women's sport is subject to long-termed trivialization where it is not watched nor respected or compensated as male sport. Adding to this, women rarely hold management positions in sport, and decision making is usually in the hands of men. Consequently, the influence of women on changes in sport is significantly lower than the influence of men (Müller, 1999: 122).

Still, in the decades after the 1970's, the integration of women increased in all aspects of sport through numerous activities, research, declarations, and conferences. The number of sports and disciplines in which women participate is constantly increasing at the same time with the improvement of results of elite female athletes (Juhas, 2016: 162-164). However, today it is still difficult to find a woman in a top managerial position in a sport organization of any kind, despite

the fact that numerous women possess high levels of expertise. Also, it is still hard to find a woman as a coach in elite sport and especially a female coach of a male team (Juhás, 2016: 162).

In correlation with what was stated above, it is evident that the role of women in male sport is to fill in the blanks in half-time by performing choreographies. It is clear that cheerleaders are contributing to the trivialization of women's sport and even stronger marginalization of women in sport as a whole.

The body has its function in sport. However, the role of the cheerleader body is radically different from the role of the body of female athletes – athletes use their body as a means for reaching their goal – the result. The body of a cheerleader is its own purpose, even though their choreographies are extremely demanding and require a serious level of fitness and regular training. The body of a cheerleader is exposed to the eyes of the public, whether in the stadium or on television or the internet. The exposure itself is the purpose of it or, as Biti (2012: 9-27) defines it, a 'supervision of the body'. The 'supervision of the body' is at such an intensity that the body of cheerleaders is objectified and even vulgarized.

Sport is more than a game and has been from a long time ago. In the context of cheerleaders, we could take into consideration Graydonom (1983: 5-16), who states that, from the feminist point of view, a sport is an institution. It is not just an institution, but an extremely conservative institution in which gender roles take a significant part and do not show any signs of dynamic towards a fundamental change. Cheerleaders in this institution are oppressed, objectified, and vulgarized. Their personality and dancing skills are reduced to several seconds of fast, entertaining, and lascivious performance that is in the shadow of the key event on the court, which is usually dominated by man. The question of the purpose of such an institution today is self-emerging; in the internet era of the ever-more present and easily accessible pornography, there surely is no reason for cheerleaders to perform their well-designed and perfectly trained choreographies in costumes that clearly emphasize the body in a sexual manner. Nudity has no place in stadiums which are regularly visited by children. The demand for nudity in society is present but could be satisfied with pornography, which is legal and easily available. Cheerleaders are professional dancers and their profession within the institution of sport today is outdated and should find its resting place in history.

Where is the need for cheerleaders today? As we stated above, sport is in its ongoing crisis – it is less and less fun. In the context of the ‘industry of sport’, cheerleaders are an integral part of the sport spectacle, a part of the ‘Hollywood element’ of the sport manifestation. The audience expects extra content and the breaks during matches are a perfect opportunity. Still, why cheerleaders? Surely, it is alluring for a male eye to observe well-trained choreographies executed by selected and scarcely dressed dancers, and men are the dominant audience of sport events. However, the issue is more complex: sexuality has a significant place in sport: machismo and clearly separated gender roles are the essences of modern sport (Müller, 1999: 125-127). Having that in mind, the development and position of cheerleaders within such a phenomenon is no surprise, it is in fact expected, which does not mean that it is justified.

A different approach is possible

The process of development of female cheerleading had lasted for more than a century and had followed other processes in the society, especially ones close to it: the liberation of women, sexuality, fashion, and the liberalization of the society as a whole. From its progressivism, in the beginning, sport has come to such a point that, in certain aspects, it now plays a conservative role and disrupts and disables further process of emancipation. One such aspect is one of the cheerleaders that persists as an epiphenomenon, a form of accessory fun of the sport spectacle.

However, there are some changes. The management of the basketball club Alba from Berlin, after 25 years, had decided that cheerleaders of that club should stop performing. The reason behind this decision is within the essence of the problem: management had stated the fact that the appearance of young, attractive women entertainers is not suitable for modern times because the club aims to promote women in sport as elite athletes, female basketball players that could serve as a role model for young girls (Tanjung, 2019; Deutsche Welle, 2019). A similar process is also evident in the National Football League (NFL) in which certain clubs had stopped the usual practice of cheerleader performances for the same reason (Rhoden, 2010; Armour, 2018). Otherwise, it is important not to omit the fact that some of the cheerleaders in the NFL during 2018 had filed a lawsuit based on gender discrimination. Five former cheerleaders in the lawsuit had stated that, despite the fact that NFL clubs are extremely rich, cheerleaders that this club enlists are paid miserably (7,25 \$ per hour), without full rates and

without paid overtime. They are, at the same time, exposed to the sexism of men and forced to humiliate themselves in order to get a job (The Associated Press, 2018).

Besides abolition, the phenomenon of cheerleaders is changing and surpasses its gender dimension: it is ever-more-frequent to see male cheerleaders performing alongside their female colleagues. Even though organized cheering was invented and started by men, it was obviously necessary for a whole century to pass in order for men to go back to this profession. Pioneers of modern male cheerleading are cheerleaders such as Napoleon Jinnies and Quinton Peron who, unlike their colleague and founder of organized cheering from the past century Johnny Campbell, perform highly demanding choreographies and do so alongside their female colleagues that are far less dressed than they are. It is important to notice that, even in such a case, it is clear that it is a matter of objectivization and vulgarization of the female body, minding the fact that male cheerleaders, unlike their female colleagues, are dressed far more appropriate, so that the focus is yet again on the provocative and lascivious performances of female cheerleaders. The question emerges: why are male cheerleaders not as provocatively dressed so they could be appealing to the eye of female spectators from the audience? The answer lies in the aforementioned clearly defined gender roles in sport as an institution, which can be progressive, but in this case show its conservative side. Females as cheerleaders are reserved for the eyes of men and their entertainment, while male cheerleaders are just an addition, an epiphenomenon of their colleagues, some sort of attraction. Still, the male body is not objectified and vulgarized in the manner in which the female body is. We can assume that the reason lies in the smaller percentage of female audience due to gender roles and the fact that the majority of women are not interested in such a form of entertainment.

Conclusion

Cheerleaders are not just a segment of sport spectacle and sport as a whole, but also a segment of social changes within sport or its catalyst. Today, it is clear that the vulgarization and objectification of the female body through the performances of cheerleaders is unnecessary and unneeded for modern society, but it still persists. The need for cheerleaders surely is present but there has not been one recorded protest because of their performances missing. Still, even if there is a need, that does not mean that sport should satisfy it and further

reproduce it. Sport can play its vanguard and progressive role and cancel this form of cheerleading, which would surely contribute to the improvement of the position of women in the global society and help further emancipation. Sport has been a vanguard before and allowed women to participate in elite competitions and was a catalyst for an overall change in the position of women in society. At the beginning of the 20th century, sport had played a significant emancipation role in women's issues because it positioned itself as an activity in which women could participate even before they participated in politics and other social segments: due to clear, simple, and precise measurability of sport results, women in sport could exceed man to the point in which the result would be impossible to deny (Mijatov, 2019: 182-183). Many were against the participation of women in sport, even Pierre de Coubertin himself, a founder of the modern Olympic movement. However, sport was a vanguard and, regardless of the opinion or the authority of the majority of sport professionals then, sport had contributed to the development of female sport and sped up the process of women participation in all spheres of society. By marginalizing de Coubertin in the Olympic movement, women had taken a more active role in elite and professional sport and, by doing so, achieved a great victory in the process of emancipation (Mijatov, 2019: 182).

Women's sport was ridiculed in the beginning. It is still sometimes ridiculed today. However, it is a significant step in the process of the emancipation of the oppressed majority of mankind. Likewise, when it comes to cheerleaders, sport can step out of its comfort zone in which it satisfies all aspirations of its own (dominantly male) audience and finally abolishes this outdated type of cheerleading. Instead of cheerleaders, elite sport can insist on successful female athletes as possible role models for young girls and, in such a manner, contribute to further development of women sport and the emancipation of women as a whole.

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OBJEKTIVIZACIJA ŽENSKOG TIJELA NA SPORTSKIM DOGAĐAJIMA

Sažetak

Više od stoljeća traje objektivizacija žena u pogledu navijačica (*cheerleaders*) na sportskim događajima. Daleko od središta tih događaja, lascivni nastupi navijačica dio su perifernog dijela sportskog događaja i doprinose jačanju kulta tijeka u suvremenom sportu kroz njegovu seksualizaciju, a iza koje sasvim sigurno stoji profit koji ubiru organizatori. Međutim, drugačiji je pristup moguć i autori navode primjer košarkaškog kluba Alba iz Berlina, čija je uprava odlučila da poslije 25 godina navijačice tog kluba prestanu nastupati u pauzama utakmica. Uprava kao razlog navodi činjenicu da pojava mladih i atraktivnih žena-zabavljačica nije prikladna današnjem vremenu, jer klub nastoji promovirati žene u sportu kao košarkašice koje bi mogle biti uzor mladim djevojkama. Sličan je razlog i zbog kojeg navijačice nemaju i neki klubovi Nacionalne lige američkog nogometa (NFL). Navedeni bi primjeri trebali potaknuti interes za ovu problematiku iz kompleksne sfere bioetike sporta, permanentnu i normaliziranu objektivizaciju žena kroz navijačice za koje u modernom društvu ne bi trebalo biti mjesta.

Ključne riječi: žensko tijelo, sportski događaji, objektivizacija, bioetika sporta