

The impact of Fallon Sherrock and the increasing prominence of women within professional darts events: A call for future research

Rationale/Purpose - This positioning paper is a call to action for future research regarding the roles of women in the male-dominated sport of professional darts. Women have been present at darts events for over 80 years; however, the success of Englishwomen Fallon Sherrock and Lisa Ashton at the male-dominated Professional Darts Corporation (PDC) events placed the sport into the global spotlight in the early 2020s. Sherrock's successes in particular have been a catalyst, bringing increased exposure to women players competing in mixed draw professional darts tournaments against their male counterparts. Following a historical exploration of women in darts, the article explores the contrasting roles of women at contemporary live darts events.

Practical Implications - Theoretically, the article draws on gender essentialism and Kane's (1995) sports continuum to consider how the sport can challenge notions of men's 'natural' superiority.

Research Contribution - We propose a number of areas for future research, including: the rise of women players in professional darts; women's fandom at live professional darts events; the changing roles of women in media and broadcasting; critiques of meritocracy in the game; men's responses to the increased visibility of women in this male-dominated arena; and strategies to strive for gender equity.

Keywords: women, darts, sport, gender, gender equality

Introduction

In December 2019, Fallon Sherrock made history by becoming the first woman to win a match at the PDC World Darts Championships, eventually progressing to the third round before losing to world number 22 Chris Dobey (BBC Sport, 2019). This was significant due to the PDC World Darts Championships (and its previous rival, the BDO World Darts Championships) being the premier darts competition that has predominantly involved men (or been a men-only competition) since their inception in the 1970s (BDO) and 1990s (PDC) (see Chaplin, 2009; Davis, 2018). In the process, Sherrock was named ‘The Queen of the Palace’ and is considered the most globally celebrated women’s darts player, and a sporting icon in professional darts (Chadband, 2020). Maintaining elite sport as a sex-segregated activity has helped to maintain men’s assumed ‘natural’ superiority in sport (Pope et al., 2022) but we argue that these recent developments in professional darts show the potential of the sport to challenge notions of biological essentialism through women’s direct competition with men. This could help dismantle the gender divide in sport and could open up opportunities for women to compete directly with men in other sports and thus presents an interesting case study for research. At present, there is a dearth of research on the sport of darts within the sport sociology and management literature, and even less work on women’s involvement in this traditionally male-dominated leisure space.

It is important to locate these developments within wider changes in women’s sport in the United Kingdom (UK). Women’s sport has historically been considered second class in comparison to men (Lebel et al., 2021). For instance, Cheryl Cooky and associated scholars have analysed a selection of research examining the underrepresentation of women’s sport in the mass media since the 1980s, demonstrating how men’s sport is generally constructed as the pinnacle of sporting value and achievement, while women’s sport is considered less worthy of

attention (see Cooky, 2018; Cooky et al., 2021; Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013; Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2015; Daniels, 2009; Kitching et al., 2022). However, change has been occurring; women's sport in the UK was gaining unprecedented attention circa 2019, with widespread discussions around equal pay, media coverage, and the increasing professionalisation of many women's sports (see Bowes, Lomax and Piasecki, 2021). Despite this, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted both men's and women's sport globally (see Bowes, 2020; Bowes et al., 2021; Clarkson et al., 2022; Parry et al., 2021; Symons et al., 2022) including the postponement, rescheduling, and cancellation of live events, and athletes competing in empty stadiums (Parnell et al., 2020). For women, the impact was arguably more significant. Men's sport and teams were prioritised by national governing bodies in the UK such as the Football Association (FA) and the English Cricket Board (ECB) (Bowes, 2020).

Despite the setbacks in women's sport deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic, several events during 2021 and 2022 have highlighted that women's sport is once again on the rise in some contexts. For example, the likes of Rachael Blackmore, Hollie Doyle, Hayley Turner, Bryony Frost, and Josephine Gordon have made significant impacts as leading jockeys in the predominantly male sport of horse racing, winning several prestigious events since the mid-2010s. This culminated in Blackmore's 2021 landmark season in which she won a number of leading races, was the leading jockey at the Cheltenham Festival, and won the 2021 Grand National riding *Minella Times* (Keogh, 2021). In tennis, Tunisian Ons Jabeur made significant headlines after becoming the first Arabic woman to reach the Wimbledon and the US Open 2022 ladies singles finals (Carayol, 2022; MacInnes, 2022). Professional boxing held a landmark event at the O2 Arena in London in October 2022 when which all fights at the event were between women. The night concluded with USA's Claressa Shields defeating Britain's Savannah Marshall by unanimous decision in an undisputed middleweight title fight (McRae,

2022). In athletics, the women's 400m hurdles, featuring the likes of Olympic champions Sydney McLaughlin and Dalilah Muhammad (USA), plus the rising Dutchwoman Femke Bol, is now one of the marquee events at major athletics championships (Mashiter, 2022). The UEFA Women's EURO 2022, held in England and won by the England Lionesses in front of a record crowd of 87,192 fans, was heralded by England captain Leah Williamson as a 'tournament to change society for women in elite sport' and a contemporary example of certain changing cultures regarding how women athletes are viewed in the strive for equity with their male counterparts (Morgan, 2022; Taylor, 2022). Clearly, some caution needs to be exercised around claims of a 'utopian moment' for women's sport (McLachlan, 2019). However, despite several setbacks from the COVID-19 pandemic, events during 2021 and 2022 have highlighted that progress continues to be made in what might be argued is a 'new age' of media coverage of women's sport (Petty & Pope, 2019) - at least in the UK context.

Progress has also been seen in professional darts, with the Professional Darts Corporation (PDC) expanding their economic investment (fourfold, increasing the total prize funds on the PDC Women's Series from £60,000 to £240,000) since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Allen, 2022; Gorton, 2020). Therefore, this article provides an overview of the journey of women in darts and, as a positioning paper, calls for future research in a sport where the women's tour is expanding rapidly, crowds are increasing for live women's events, and where six-figure total funds are being provided (PDC, 2022). Following a brief historical exploration of women in darts, this article analyses the increased participation and roles of women at contemporary live professional darts events. Theoretically, we consider the potential of the sport to challenge male hegemony and notions of gender essentialism. We conclude by offering multiple avenues for future research.

Historical perspectives of women in darts

Women have been visible at darts events since the 1930s, but the journey to acceptance in the sport has been slow. Darts events were almost an exclusively male domain in the early 20th century. However, the conscious effort to desegregate the public house (pub) in order to permit women to engage in social and sporting activities such as darts demonstrates the games' popularity pre-WWII (Thompson, 2017).

During the interwar years, Chaplin's (2009) research highlights the ways women's participation was constrained via the male dominated space of the pub (see also Osborne and Skillen, 2020). However, references are also made which indicate a shift towards the increased participation of women, in what remained a largely male dominated society during the interwar period. Chaplin (2012) highlighted how Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother's participation in a game of darts in 1937 was a moment which captured the public's imagination, with a range of reports on the event evident in the media.

Prior to the outbreak of World War II, women's involvement in darts became more high profile in the UK, with a woman making it through to the grand finals of the News of the World Individual Darts Championships, held in London (Gulliver, 2008, p. 16). Mrs Morgan won an area title in 1937 and was the wife of a licensee, therefore was able to compete in her own right (Gutzke, 2016, p. 40). Although there was no gender restriction to enter the *News of the World* Championship, the legacy of women succeeding in mixed darts was undermined by broader patterns of gender discrimination (Thompson, 2017). The derogatory perspective of women as emotional and too sensitive and excitable to play darts persisted into the ensuing decades, with the author of the 1936 book *Darts*, Croft-Cooke, asserting that: "[t]here are

women who play darts. They are few and their merits are usually exaggerated" (quoted in Chaplin, 2012, p. 44).

Women participated in local league and professional darts across the late twentieth century, which was recognised through the creation of the British Darts Organisation (BDO), now World Darts Federation (WDF) Women's World Championship in 2001 (Webb, 2001). Trina Gulliver was highly successful in the sport throughout the 2000s, winning ten Women's World Darts Championships, competing against regular rivals such as Francis Hoenselaar, Deta Hedman, Lisa Ashton, and Anastasia Dobromyslova. Dobromyslova became the second woman (after Gayl King) to compete in the PDC World Darts Championship, losing to Remco van Eijden in the preliminary round in 2009 after previously competing in the 2008 UK Open and Grand Slam of Darts (DW, 2018). Despite Gulliver's sustained success and Dobromyslova's achievements, women's darts in the early 2010s was still seen as secondary to the men's side due to the scoring averages and the lack of women reaching the latter stages of the tournaments on the BDO and PDC circuits. By the late 2010s, the likes of Ashton and Dobromyslova had competed in the first round of the PDC Darts World Championship on multiple occasions, and Japanese two-time BDO women's world champion, Mikuru Suzuki, competed in the Grand Slam of Darts (Gorton, 2019). Women were beginning to reach the earlier stages of the premier professional darts tournaments on a regular basis.

We argue that darts has unique potential as a sport to challenge notions of biological essentialism and gender hierarchies in sport. Discourses of meritocracy, individual choice, and equality are often engrained within sport (Hylton, 2015) but the illusion of meritocracy arguably places responsibility on individual women to succeed, without dismantling the cultures, structures, and prejudices which may impact their participation and success (Bekker

et al., 2018). It is important not to neglect the wider structural barriers that prevent women from participating in darts equally with men. Much of the training required continues to take place in pubs, a male-dominated space that continues to be unsafe for many women and where sexual harassment is rife (Fileborn, 2016) – especially for unaccompanied women. Major competitions until very recently involved men players being accompanied by young, attractive “walk-on girls” (Jones, 2018), sending a clear message that this is a sport to be played by men, where women’s sole purpose is to be attractive for an assumed heterosexual male audience. However, despite these issues, the sport is unusual in that women’s alleged inferior physical strength (on average) in comparison to men cannot be used as a reason to prevent direct competition men and women, as the sport does not rely on physicality. In the following section, we consider how this could challenge notions of biological essentialism and advance gender equality.

Theoretical considerations: Challenging gender essentialism

In sport and leisure, gender differences are long-standing and historic (Rogers, Snellgrove & Punch, 2022). Sport plays a central role in reinforcing Connell’s (1995) ‘hegemonic masculinity’. For Connell (1990; 1995), hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that is socially and culturally accepted within a particular society or group. It is the idea that there is a set of qualities and behaviours that are seen as “masculine” and that these traits are idealised, while other forms of masculinity or femininity are often marginalised or even stigmatised. This form of masculinity incorporates a variety of different characteristics and identities which are culturally idealised; nevertheless, it is not a fixed type of masculinity and cultural ideas vary in different places and times, meaning multiple hegemonic masculinities may exist (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Mary Jo Kane's (1995) seminal paper introduced the sport continuum theory, challenging sociologists, psychologists, coaches, administrators, parents, athletes and fans to revisit sport as anchored in ability and performance rather than in notions and practices of "female" and "male". Kane described how sport has become an ideal site for perpetuating men's alleged superiority by reinforcing fundamental assumptions around biological determinism. Sport serves to reinforce the assumption that there are two mutually exclusive sexes and works to maintain sex difference as hierarchically ordered and grounded in the physical body (see also Bandy, 2014; Birrel & Cole, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Knoppers & McDonald, 2010; Sartore-Baldwin, 2019). Biological essentialism refers to the idea that any differences between men and women are 'natural' and simply biological. This often exists alongside the categorical belief that, 'men are uniformly physically superior to women and that biological sex differences account for the comparatively marginal position of women in sport' (Allison, 2018, p. 8). If men and women are born with different physical capabilities, then the lower status attached to women's sport is to be expected and inequality will be the 'natural' outcome. For example, in research on football, Pope et al. (2022) found men performing misogynistic masculinities was the most dominant group, with men in this group typically defining men's football as having 'extra speed and strength' or as being 'faster and more skilful'. The women's version, in contrast, was 'slower and weaker', 'less competitive' and 'not as dynamic, quick, skilful' as women are 'not as strong as men' and lack 'power' and 'physique'. In a society in which masculinity is perceived to be constantly under threat as advances are made towards gender equality, sport can provide, 'daily, common-sense, apparent empirical proof that men are naturally superior to women' (Kane, 1995, p. 192). This is summarised by Rogers et al., (2022, p. 342) who state, 'much of the discussion around elite sport, focusses on the physical differences between men and women and explains the lack of representation and success at the

top as reflective of women's inferior physicality'. Moreover, when women do outperform men, doubts are often raised around their sex or gender identity (Rogers et al., 2022).

Assumptions that men demonstrate superior strength, skill and competitiveness are grounded in essentialist reasoning. Men have been shown to be complicit in sustaining this hegemonic model, as they stand to benefit from the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995). Indeed, it is simply not the case that *all* men are 'stronger', 'faster' and 'more skilful' than *all* women (Pope et al., 2022), as sport performance transcends the boundaries of sex, where women can (and do) outperform men (Fink, LaVoi & Newhall, 2016). Kane (1995, p. 193) refers to this as the sport continuum, in which:

Many women routinely outperform many men and, in some cases, women outperform most – if not all – men in a variety of sports and physical skills/activities. The acknowledgment of such a continuum could provide a direct assault on traditional beliefs about sport – and gender itself – as an inherent, oppositional binary that is grounded in biological difference. In short, an awareness of sport as a continuum of physical, athletic competence could serve as an important vehicle for resistance and transformation.

For Kane (1995), sport as a continuum can provide empirical evidence that many women can outperform many men, even in traditionally 'male' sports such as basketball, football and baseball. Calhoun (2017), in support of Kane's theory, evidenced this via the Twin Cities (USA) marathon results in the mid-2010s. Sport as a continuum, would allow greater visibility of women running faster, jumping higher and throwing further than many men; but this is precisely the reason why we are not allowed to see this. In other words, it is vital to maintain elite sport as a sex-segregated activity and to channel women towards certain feminine-appropriate sports, in order to maintain men's assumed 'natural' superiority in sport (Pope et

al., 2022). To expand, through the patriarchal dividend, sex-segregation benefits men as a wider group; through this system, men as a group are considered superior, while women are considered inferior and in need of protection (Pieper, 2016).

Rogers et al. (2022) highlighted the ongoing debates about women's ability to compete with physically with men in various elite sports (see Alvarez, 2017; Thibault et al., 2010), and that the women who excel statistically, have their gender brought into question (see Longman, 2016). Whilst we agree with Kane (1995) that there is a need to see women outperforming men in sports which require physical strength and power, we are less convinced with the suggestion that women competing equally in a sport like professional darts would not be considered threatening. For us, the sport of professional darts is unique in that it is one of the few sports that has allowed women to compete directly with men. On the one hand, this does not offer evidence of women's ability to physically compete against men, as the sport does not rely on physical force. On the other, the sport is unique in offering high profile examples of women who are able to directly compete against men, exhibiting other characteristics associated with Connell's (1995) 'hegemonic masculinity', such as competitiveness, skill, and the ability to perform under pressure. Not only does this have potential to challenge notions of biological essentialism, but powerful women role models in the sport of professional darts could initiate discussion around women's ability to compete with men in *other* sports. This in turn could help to advance gender equality by dismantling gender divisions elsewhere.

Rogers et al. (2022) asserted that when contentions around physicality are removed from the equation, and the sport and leisure activity is not one that requires physical strength, divisions and discriminations still endure based on sexist overtures which assume that the mentality which women are supposed to have (including maternal and caring responsibilities), is not as

robust as men competing in high level sport. Research has been conducted by Channon (2013) in relation to integrated training (as opposed to competition) practices in martial arts, which arguably help to ‘undo’ stereotypical notions of gender and challenge hierarchical and essentialist understandings of binary sex. This topic is currently under-explored within other sports, including professional darts.

We now turn to examine Fallon Sherrock and Lisa Ashton as our two recent high-profile examples of darts players who have shown their ability to compete directly with men. Both players have received high-profile media attention in a ‘new age’ of media coverage of women’s sport which has moved towards greater gender equality (Petty and Pope, 2019).

The success of Fallon Sherrock and Lisa Ashton and the rise of women’s professional darts pre-post the COVID-19 pandemic

As highlighted earlier in this paper, pre COVID-19 in the late 2010s, women’s sport was somewhat on the rise in certain contexts and in particular areas of the globe (see Bowes et al., 2021; Nielsen, 2018). Following the spread of COVID-19, which halted most forms of competitive sport worldwide, there were repeated concerns about the future of women’s sport (Hilborne, 2020; Parry et al., 2021; UN Women, 2020). After the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK in 2020 and 2021, and the full return of live sport events in 2022, it is evident that the sports industry is still re-thinking how women's sports are produced, measured, and distributed (Bowes et al., 2021; Bowes and Culvin 2021; Clarkson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2022). As briefly discussed earlier in this article, the PDC were one of very few sports organisations to have arguably broken ground in women’s sport during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the successes of the women’s game also ongoing. The PDC increased their investment into

competitive professional darts for women (in the form of a Women's Tour, see Table 1) following the success of Fallon Sherrock at the 2020 PDC World Darts Championship, when she became the first woman to win a match at the tournament, eventually reaching the third round (Bloom, 2020; Prenderville, 2020).

IMAGE 1

Figure 1: Fallon Sherrock celebrating onstage in December 2019 after winning her first-round match at the 2020 PDC World Darts Championship, Alexandra Palace, London (Photo: Lawrence Lustig).

Sherrock's run at the 2020 PDC World Darts Championship brought the PDC worldwide media attention, receiving widespread praise from the likes of Tennis legend Billie Jean King, to film stars including Sarah Jessica Parker (Halliday, 2019; McRae 2020). Following the tournament, in January 2020, Lisa Ashton became the first woman to gain a PDC Pro Tour Card (Keogh, 2020), further increasing women's participation on the PDC Professional Tour.

Osborne & Skillen (2020) considered whether the media hype around Sherrock was a 'flash in the pan', or whether her achievement marked a turning point in terms of improved mainstream media profile for women players. Chaplin (2008, p. 182) previously explained the struggle for female players to find success 'in a sport where the men's game far outstrips the women's in terms of press attention, sponsorship and television exposure'. However, Sherrock's performance at the 2020 PDC World Darts Championship were not isolated examples – she also reached the final of the 2021 Nordic Masters, and the quarterfinals of the 2021 Grand Slam of Darts (Hammer, 2021, Sky Sports, 2021a). Both Ashton and Sherrock¹ then qualified for the

¹ Ashton qualified for the 2021 and 2022 PDC World Darts Championship; Sherrock did not qualify for the 2021 PDC World Darts Championship but qualified for the 2022 tournament.

PDC World Darts Championships in 2021 and 2022 (Phillips, 2021). These successes subsequently led to the formation of the PDC Women's Series (Hudd, 2020), which was expanded to 20 events in 2022 and then 24 events in 2023, increasing from a total prize fund of £20,000 in 2021 to £240,000 in 2023 (see Allen, 2022a; Allen, 2022b; Boyce, 2022; Sky Sports, 2021b).

TABLE 1 – 2023 PDC Women's Tour Events

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no PDC Women's circuit: approximately 12 women competed as professional darts players on with other organising bodies. By 2021, there were approximately 70 professional women competing in the PDC Women's Series; by the start of the 2023 season, over 100 women are competing in the 24 event series (see Table 1), which consists of two events per day across a weekend (PDC 2021; PDC, 2023).

The top two players who win the most prize money across the PDC Women's Series Order of Merit (see Table 1) receive automatic entry into the PDC World Darts Championships (PDC, 2022). In comparison, the one man who wins the most prize money competing on the PDC Challenge Tour and the one man who wins the most prize money competing on the PDC Development Tour receives automatic entry into the Grand Slam of Darts, a tournament not as prestigious as the PDC World Darts Championships. Although Ashton finished top of the Women's Order of Merit to gain qualification to the 2023 PDC World Darts Championships, Sherrock was pipped to second and final spot by the fast-emerging youngster Beau Greaves,

the 2022 WDF Women's Darts Champion² (BBC News, 2022; BBC Sport, 2022; Sky Sports, 2022). Greaves did not compete in the first 12 PDC Women's Series events (and was absent from the PDC Women's World Matchplay), but then won 8 straight events (including a record 52 matches in a row in the Women's Series) to gain her place at the 2023 PDC World Darts Championships ahead of Sherrock. However, although only two places were provided to women from the Order of Merit, the PDC granted Sherrock a place at the 2023 PDC World Darts Championships due to her win at the 2022 Women's World Matchplay (see Gill, 2022). It is clear that Sherrock's impact on the sport of professional darts led to the PDC making their decision to allocate a place for her - just three weeks prior to the biggest tournament of the PDC annual calendar commencing.

The PDC also created a Women's World Matchplay tournament, consisting of the top eight players on the PDC Women's Tour at the Winter Gardens, Blackpool during the same week as the Betfred PDC World Matchplay. The inaugural 2022 event was won by Sherrock, beating Dutchwoman Aileen De Graaf in the final (Price, 2022). One of the quarterfinalists, Laura Turner, was effusive about the venue and highlighted the global recognition and impact that the Women's World Matchplay event was receiving by being broadcast on Sky Sports (see Barrs, 2022).

IMAGE 2

Figure 2: Fallon Sherrock lifting the inaugural 2022 Betfred Women's World Matchplay, Winter Gardens, Blackpool, England (Photo: Chris Sargent, Tip Top Pics).

The increasing prominence of women in professional darts: A call for future research

² Following the collapse of the British Darts Organisation (BDO) in September 2020, the World Darts Federation decided to launch its own WDF World Championship at the same Lakeside (Surrey, UK) venue for the majority of the previous BDO World Darts Championships. The inaugural WDF World Championships and WDF Women's World Championships took place in April 2022.

Darts is an arena where women's successes are being showcased in various broadcast and digital media (see Gorton, 2020; Halliday, 2019). The carnivalesque atmosphere at live professional darts events involves a significant number of women. As confirmed by Chaplin (2009; 2012) and Davis (2018), it was acknowledged by the BDO/WDF and PDC administrators that women have always been a part of the darts spectacle, with the aforementioned women players on the BDO/WDF and PDC circuits regularly competing against their male counterparts at the premier darts tournaments and exhibitions (Davis, 2022a; Hammer, 2020). Further research is needed on the successes of these women, the PDC's support for all genders participating in the same tournaments such as the Grand Slam of Darts and the PDC World Darts Championships, as well as the barriers that continue to remain for women. Our suggestions for future research are considered below:

- 1) Performative women's fandom at live PDC darts events

There has been an exponential rise in the numbers of women attending live PDC darts events in the twenty-first century: in late 2018, PDC CEO Matt Porter stated: "We have seen our audience change from 90 per cent men and ten per cent women to 70 per cent male and 30 per cent female now. There is growing female interest in darts, and it is a sport that women can play without restriction in the same way that anyone can" (Friend, 2018). In agreement with Cooky et al. (2021) and Kitching et al. (2022), research regarding women sports fans is increasing. Future studies may also consider women's fan contributions to the creation of atmospheres at live in-person darts events, advancing Davis' (2022b) research regarding the tools to create atmospheres at PDC events.

- 2) Motivations for women attendance at live PDC darts events

Research into women's motivations to attend the live events, in what has previously been a predominantly male fanbase, could develop research in the area of women sports fandom (e.g. Allison & Pope, 2022; Osborne & Coombes, 2013; Pope, 2010; 2017).

3) Mixed sporting spaces and gender equity for women

Professional darts is one of the sports where women are succeeding in mixed sex or 'open' tournaments – future research could build on existing studies focused on mixed sporting spaces and equity for women. The potential for mixed events to dismantle binary models of gender and provide an inclusive space for trans and gender nonconforming groups may also be worth exploring; many sports have cemented the gender binary through their trans inclusion policies, and mixed sports cannot always be relied upon to provide an inclusive alternative, often due to gendered rules and practices whereby it 'matters' if you are a man or a woman (Phipps, 2019). However, as darts is an individual sport whereby anyone, regardless of ascribed biological sex or gender identity, can directly compete against others, this may present fewer barriers for trans and gender nonconforming people. This is due to ideas gender and biological sex do not 'matter' in the sport, at least in terms of biological demands as opposed to wider (gendered) cultural practices.

4) Barriers or accessibility for women in professional darts and meritocracy in the sport

Furthermore, the emergence of teenagers such as Beau Greaves who we mentioned previously (see Mardle, 2022) and Katie Sheldon (see Curran, 2021) into the elite women's darts circuit demonstrates the visibility of youth women players entering professional darts. Research could explore the barriers or accessibility for women in the professional circuit, considering prevailing ideas about meritocracy in the sport.

5) Men's attitudes towards woman players in professional darts / professional sport

Men's attitudes (such as fellow players, fans and stakeholders) towards women players also needs to be considered; with women players such as Fallon Sherrock building a significant fanbase, it is important to consider to what extent this has changed men's attitudes towards women in sport (in darts and more broadly), as well as the extent this has prompted a backlash, previously considered in the football context by Pope et al. (2022).

6) Critical analysis of the roles of cheerleaders / the impact and changing attitudes towards the walk-on girls at live professional darts events

From the 'walk-on girls' (women who lead the players onto the stage during their entrance as their theme tune plays) to the all-women cheerleaders/dancers who perform during the players' entrance to the stage, women have been very visible during the broadcasting of professional darts throughout the early twenty-first century. However, due to the controversy stemming from the 2017 #MeToo campaign and more specifically, the Dorchester Hostesses scandal in 2018 (Marriage, 2018), the perception of the walk-on girls at professional tournaments changed unfavorably, and the practice ended in 2019 at UK and European events (Darts News, 2019). Two of the leading PDC walk-on girls in Europe during the 2010s, Daniella Harper and Charlotte Wood, saw this from a different perspective. They believed that they were primarily full-time models trying to make a living, similar to the cheerleaders who are still participating at PDC events across the globe. Critical analysis of the roles of cheerleaders or the impact of the walk-on girls, would be a welcome addition to research in sports such as boxing and mixed martial arts 'Card Girls' and the pit/grid girls in motorsport (see Adams & Betis, 2003; Grindstaff & West, 2006; Hindman, 2022; Jakubowskaas, 2018; Tippett, 2020).

7) Considerations of the increasing the profile of women in darts, alongside the increasing roles of women in the media in other sports

The increased visibility of women presenters can help to normalise women in sports, especially women curating content in predominantly male-dominated sports. Media personalities such as Emma Paton, Laura Woods, Abigail Davies, Gabriella Partington and Polly James are regular presenters, interviewers and content creators at the premier PDC events (see Turner, 2021). Considerations of their roles and how they are increasing the profile of women in darts, alongside the potential ‘backlash’ this increased visibility of women in the sport can provoke (Pope et al., 2022) also needs to be examined. This is important as past research has suggested the increased prominence of women in sports journalism does not automatically lead to gender equity and may instead be regarded as tokenism (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). Research in this area could help to counterbalance some of the negative stereotyping of women in the media that continues to occur on a weekly basis.

Conclusion

In this positioning paper, we call for future research regarding women in professional darts due to 1) a clear lack of research in this area and 2) the increasing prominence of women at live professional darts events following Fallon Sherrock’s landmark wins reaching the third round of the 2020 PDC World Darts Championship and further successes in predominantly male events. Alongside our empirical considerations, we have advocated conceptual advances in terms of the rise in women’s participation and fandom in a predominantly male sporting space, and we have encouraged the need for rich methodological research regarding the increasing role of women in sports and broadcast media in professional darts.

Women made significant advances in sport pre COVID-19 and there is evidence that women’s sport is growing post the COVID-19 lockdowns and the return to fan-attended professional sports events. Research on gender and women’s sporting experiences is significant within the

field of the sociology of sport. However, this article provides a rationale as to why more research is needed on women in darts, a male-dominated sport whereby somewhat uniquely, women and men have opportunities to compete *with and against one another*. Specifically, we argue that more research is needed on the different roles of women in darts, as fans, walk-on girls/cheerleaders, in media roles such as presenters, and as competitors. We argue that ideas of meritocracy still prevail in darts, and alongside research further exploring the impact of the success of women such as Fallon Sherrock, further investigation is needed on the structures which may continue to hinder women's participation and success. Professional darts is one of the sports where women are succeeding in mixed sex or 'open' tournaments – future research could also build on existing studies focused on mixed sporting spaces and equity for women. As live professional darts has returned and progress has been made, including the creation of the PDC Women's Series and the inaugural Women's World Matchplay in 2022, we argue that more can still be done to achieve gender equity.

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