"They Are Doing It Because They Love It": U.S. and English Fan Perceptions of Women Footballers as 'Role Models'

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Abstract

We draw from 102 interviews with American and English adults who attended the 2019 Women’s World Cup to examine how fans perceive women footballers as ‘role models,’ with attention to the operations of gender ideology. Despite the recent professionalization and commercialization of women’s football, there is a dearth of research on fan perspectives of players as role models. Our findings show that most fans perceive role modelling as women’s accessibility and authenticity in interaction. Fans naturalize women’s often uncompensated labor as role models through a supposed love for their sport and desire to see its future growth, endorsing a gender essentialist view of women as notably caring and giving in comparison to men. However, a minority of fans embrace a more critical view by identifying role modelling as an expectation placed disproportionately on women within an already unequal resource environment. We conclude that role modelling is a gendered expectation for elite women footballers and that fans can be a source of pressure towards its enactment.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Football, Fans, Role Models

Introduction

A predominant cultural narrative in elite women’s football holds that professional women athletes are positive “role models” for girls (Allison 2018; Guest and Cox 2009; Leslie-Walker and Mulvenna 2022). This narrative is commonly advanced by athletes, sport organizations, and corporate sponsors. For instance, U.S. Women’s National Team (USWNT) and National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) star Alex Morgan posted a photo to Instagram in May of 2023 that depicted her signing a shoe for a group of adolescent girls clustered at a stadium railing with expressions of joy on their faces. One girl appeared overcome with emotion at meeting Morgan, her hands at her temples and tears in her eyes. The picture was captioned “My ‘Why’ in a picture,” suggesting that to Morgan, the emotional interactions she has with her young fans are a meaningful part of her job. Similarly, in June 2023, England Football partnered with Disney to release an animated video titled *Ella: A Modern Day Fairytale*. The video told the story of a girl, Ella, who loved the sport of football but was treated as an unwelcome outsider by boys. Ella was visited by

"three Lioness godmothers," or players from the English Women's National Team, who encouraged her to continue playing with the exhortation "anything is possible!" (Williams 2023). These examples illustrate the recency of the "role model" narrative, its prominence in marketing, and its intended emotional pull for audiences.

Of course, elite men athletes can and do inspire others through their athletic excellence, and public belief in the power of athletes to motivate children is high (Adriaanse and Crosswhite 2008; Kaiser Foundation 2000). However, feminist sport scholars have argued that "role modelling" has been understood and applied differently to women than to men, both relying on and reinforcing gender ideologies that present women as uniquely selfless and nurturing (Allison 2021). When outreach to children is expected as the supposedly natural result of women's bodies and personalities, rather than physical and emotional labor that is often un- or under-compensated, role modelling obscures the under-resourced and unequal work conditions many women footballers experience (Chahardovali and McLeod 2022; Culvin 2021; Pavlidis 2020; Pocock and Skey 2022; Toffoletti and Thorpe 2018). In addition, marketing in elite women's football has sometimes focused on the value of women's work with children rather than women's athletic skills or competitive drive, further evidence of a gender essentialist ideology of women's inherent difference from (and athletic inferiority to) men (Allison 2018; Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2018). Ultimately, then, role modelling may operate as a gender expectation that contributes to and naturalizes patterns of gender inequality that characterize professional football.

Much of the literature on women athletes as role models has considered whether or how they influence children's physical activity, sports participation, self-esteem, or career aspirations (Andriaanse and Crosswhite 2008; Meier 2015), or on elite athletes' perspectives on their status as role models (Allison 2018; Guest and Cox 2009, Kristiansen, Broch, and Pedersen 2014).

Comparatively little scholarship has considered the perspectives of non-athlete adults such as fans. Yet, adults are the primary consumers of women's sport above children and many fans actively participate in public discussions about women's sport via social media and online platforms that influence women's sport organizations (Guest and Luitjen 2018). The question of how fans perceive and communicate the value of women athletes and women's sport has begun to be addressed (see Parry et al. 2021) but remains understudied, an important limitation given the power of fans through both consumption and communication. This research is also important because it contributes to wider debates around gendered inequalities in women's football. Women players have been shown to operate in a more precarious workplace in comparison to men players, with poorer conditions, lower pay, shorter contracts, and fewer opportunities to play professionally (Culvin et al. 2022). Gendered expectations placed on women players as role models are yet another example of gender inequality in a career pathway that – even for elite professional players – incorporates much hidden and unpaid labour.

The Women's World Cup is a particularly fascinating focal context for a study of fans, as those in attendance experience narratives of the tournament as about the empowerment of girls and women, presumably through the example of elite women's athletic talents (Allison 2023b; Desjardins 2021). We draw on 102 interviews with U.S. and English adults who attended the 2019 Women's World Cup and who define themselves as women's football fans to explore fan perceptions of women's professional players as "role models" and the ways that gender ideologies inform these perceptions. The conceptual framework for our analysis evaluates Hargreaves' (2000) arguments about "gendered heroism" from the perspectives of fans considering recent trends of professionalization and commercialization in English and American women's football.

Background

The visibility of professional athletes, their high-level performances, and the enormous cultural and economic value placed on sport make athletes available for public admiration and emulation (Lines 2001; Lynch, Adair, and Jonson 2014). A role model is a figure one does not personally know who possesses valued traits or skills that may be passed on through example (Adriaanse and Crosswhite 2008). Belief in the motivational potential of elite athletes is high and widespread, and empirical research shows that athletes may provide effective modelling of athletic skill for youth (Bevan et al. 2021; Meier 2015). One national study of U.S. children 10-17 years of age and their parents found that 73 percent of children reported that they "look up to or want to be like" professional athletes and 93 percent felt that famous athletes supported children in following their dreams (Kaiser Foundation 2000). Amid some concern for the misdeeds of men in professional sport (see Cohn 2015), attitudes towards women athletes as role models are particularly positive; a Canadian survey of adults found that 90% agreed that "women athletes are great role models for girls" (Angus Reid Institute 2015).

Heywood and Dworkin (2009) argue that the "classic sport story" is one "in which the athlete is "heroic" if he or she sacrifices all for the win, physically dominates opponents, is alienated from his/her own body so as to perform like a machine and sees his/her own value as a human being only in terms of athletic performance" (6). As these "classic" qualities of sporting heroism reflect dominant definitions of masculinity, women athletes may be interpreted as unacceptably feminine in displaying them, and thus unworthy of "heroic" status, but more acceptable for embracing supposedly feminine virtues instead (Lines 2001; Meier 2015). Several decades ago, Hargreaves (2000) posited a "gendered heroism" whereby sporting women were less likely than men to be elevated to the status of hero, or their heroism was defined through

"feminine" qualities such as kindness, selflessness, or caring rather than qualities often used to define men athletes like power, dominance, or toughness. Similarly, Lines (2001) suggests that those women athletes who receive the greatest public and media attention are those who most conform to heterosexual femininity. In the aforementioned survey of U.S. opinion, "gendered heroism" was evident in disparate evaluations of athletes that aligned with gender expectations. Children believed that women athletes showed better sportsmanship and were better team players than men but reported that men athletes were more likely to get into trouble off the field and cared more about money than women (Kaiser Foundation 2000). As further evidence of "gendered heroism," Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018) analysis of the Instagram accounts of five professional women athletes showed that, "the Instagram posts that are accorded the most value in the fan–athlete interaction – that is, receive the most visibility in terms of likes and comments – are modes of expression that align most closely to wider social attitudes about the qualities young women today are expected to possess" (313).

While on the one hand, women athletes and their accomplishments are far more visible than at Hargreaves' (2000) time of writing given greater media coverage for women's sport and the prominence of digital and social media, the operation of gender ideology continues to position women as more "natural," appropriate role models for children than men (Lines 2001; Pocock and Skey 2022). Women are presumed to be more nurturing, ethical, and grateful for opportunities than men, and thus more worthy of "role model" standing (Pavlidis 2020). Some women athletes and women's sport organizations have embraced this narrative in recognition of the devaluation of women's athleticism and to carve out a unique source of value for women's sport to be used in marketing efforts (Allison 2018; 2021; 2023b; Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2018).

Guest and Cox's (2009) study of college and professional women footballers in the U.S. found that 80 percent reported themselves to be "very comfortable" serving as a role model. Results illustrated an emphasis on kindness, caring, morality, and hard work as the qualities players had to offer as role models. While these qualities may also be admired among men, a focus on qualities like caring rather than athletic talent reinforces gender stereotypes and relies on homogenized constructions of women. Other studies have shown that women athletes identify themselves as role models and many embrace this as an important aspect of their jobs (Guest and Cox 2009; Kristiansen, Broch, and Pedersen 2014; Pavlidis 2020; Pocock and Skey 2022). However, this willingness cannot be separated from the expectations of important stakeholders like managers, media, or sponsors, or from the cultural and structural context of professional sport, including poor or unequal workplace conditions and the gender ideologies that support them.

As sport scholars have argued, constructions of women athletes as distinct from and athletically inferior to men justify the second-class economic position of women's sport to men's (Allison 2018; Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2018). The narrative of women's role modelling may also support continued gendered resource gaps by naturalizing an altruistic focus on "the next generation" of players over the economic standing of current players (Allison 2021; McLachlan 2019; Pavlidis 2020). Motivating girls to play the sport is understood as a much-needed effort towards greater future gender equality, placing this labor under the umbrella of social change but omitting current players from material reward in the present (Allison 2021; Chahardovali and McLeod 2022; Guest and Luitjen 2018). Based on interviews with women playing professional football and softball, Charardovali and McLeod (2022) argue that professional women athletes are expected to willingly spend unpaid time at community events and running camps and clinics for youth to "inspire" them. They develop the concept of "inspirational labor" to refer to "a time-

consuming, yet un/underpaid, form of labor that often goes unnoticed because its value is not easily measurable, and the work itself is taken for granted as part of women athletes' broader job responsibilities" (1).

English and U.S. women's football has experienced substantial recent professionalization, commercialization, and mediatisation, as well as competitive successes in major tournaments and growing attendance at games (Allison and Pope 2021; Culvin and Bowes 2023; Pope, Williams, and Cleland 2022; Woodhouse, Fielding-Lloyd, and Sequerra 2019). The growth of the sport means that U.S. and English women footballers have greater visibility and societal reach, positioning them as available role models to the public. Yet work conditions for many professional players remain "precarious" and "uncertain" in areas such as facilities, training resources, staffing, travel conditions, and compensation (Culvin 2021; Culvin and Bowes 2023). Resource gaps between women and men professional players persist, despite recent changes towards parity like the U.S. Women's National Team's 2022 Collective Bargaining Agreement with U.S. Soccer (Culvin et al. 2022). While some players voice dissatisfaction with their work conditions, speaking out counters the continued expectation that women players "function and perform within inadequate environments and be grateful for the opportunity" (Culvin 2021, 8; see also Pavlidis 2020).

While marketing in women's football has long targeted girls and their parents under the premise of "family friendly" entertainment (Allison 2018; Fielding-Loyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2018; Woodhouse, Fielding-Lloyd, and Sequerra 2019), limited research has considered fans' perspectives on athlete "role models," focusing most commonly on athletes themselves. However, fan ideas are important not only because fans (or fans' children) are those imagined to receive players' role modelling but as a potential source of pressure towards this labor. Fan

expectations are made powerful through digital and social media, and fans have actively used these and other platforms in ways that have prompted responses from women's football teams and leagues (Guest and Luitjen 2018; Pocock and Skey 2022; Pope, Williams, and Cleland 2022). In their study of the social dynamics of women athletes' social media accounts, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) conclude that, "the feedback of fans and followers (consumers) to sportswomen's posts plays a critical role in influencing the gendered work undertaken by female athletes to present an appealing brand" (300).

One important exception to the paucity of research in this area is Leslie-Walker and Mulvenna (2022), who interviewed female fans of the English Women's Super League. They found that fans' involvement was motivated by a desire to support the development of women's sport, notably given the paucity of opportunity they had experienced personally in earlier decades (see also Allison and Pope 2021). Of importance to the current study, they found that fans did expect players to act as role models for girls, seeing "inspiring the next generation" as a player responsibility and noting with pleasure how often players interacted with their youngest fans.

In this analysis, we advance this work by including men and women fans of women's football across the U.S. and England, countries where women's football is similarly professionalized and commercialized. We do not focus on whether women footballers *are* role models, given persistence of the "role model" narrative in the marketing of women's sport and unanimous agreement among our participants that they are. Instead, we focus on *how* fans make sense of women footballers as role models, that is, the meanings fans give to this term and how they understand this work to operate. Further, we integrate a critical perspective by considering where and how gender ideologies inform fan perspectives, and with what consequences. Specifically, we ask:

1) How do fans understand professional women footballers as "role models?"
2) How are gender ideologies reinforced or challenged through these understandings?

Methods

We draw on in-depth interviews conducted with adults living in England (N= 49) and the United States (N= 53) who attended one or more live match of the 2019 Women's World Cup. While tournament attendance, age (18+), and nationality formed the basis of our criterion sampling, these adults ubiquitously defined themselves as "fans" of women's football and were generally knowledgeable about and invested in both women's national team and domestic professional leagues. Recruitment materials that were developed collaboratively by the first and third authors were posted to social media accounts, sent to journalists who cover women's football and those working in women's football known to the authors, and at a fan embassy during the 2019 Women's World Cup. We also used snowball, or referral sampling, to find 10 participants. Most interviews (N= 60) took place over the phone, while a subset took place via video chat application (N= 31) and others took place in person. Interviews lasted between 35 and 185 minutes in duration, with most lasting over an hour. All interviews took place between April 2019 and May 2020, with the second and third authors interviewing nearly all English adults and the first author interviewing several English adults and all U.S. participants. A few interviews took place with two partners who preferred to participate jointly, but most interviews were individual. 85 percent of U.S. participants and 74 percent of English participants were cisgender women, and between 79 percent (U.S.) and 98 percent (England) were White. Most participants were middle to upper-middle class, with only 11 of 102 participants without a college degree or current enrolment in college.

From a collectively constructed interview guide covering fans' histories of playing and following football, their pathways into women's football fandom, their experiences attending

women's matches, and their perspectives on various events in the sport, we focus on discussions of women players as "role models." A question about whether participants felt that players were role models was included in the interview guide, but this subject often came up spontaneously. Following Deterding and Waters' (2021) "flexible" coding approach, the first step of data analysis involved an index coding of cleaned transcripts for both planned and emergent topics. This is a "lumper" method useful for organizing data for future rounds of analytic coding. Then, the first author developed and applied analytic codes to smaller pieces of data that had been identified with the first-round code "role model," relying predominantly on in vivo codes (i.e., "authenticity") that captured meaning in participants' own words and process codes (i.e., "creating change") that denoted action within the data (Saldaña 2013). Through writing about these codes in analytic memos and refining them with additional data coding, the first author related codes to one another to form broader themes. This process, referred to as "codeweaving," entails "the actual integration of key code words and phrases into narrative form to see how the puzzle pieces fit together" (Saldaña 2013, 248). Codes, memos, and themes were shared with the second and third author and revised until all authors agreed upon the final themes.

Findings

We generated three themes that address the research questions: *role modelling for social change*; *role modelling for love of the game*; and *role modelling as inequality*.

Role Modelling for Social Change

English and U.S. women's football fans argued that players' status as professional athletes made them highly visible and thus available for others to admire or aspire to be like. Reflecting recent commercial growth and professionalization in women's football, players were

perceived to have a "platform" (Lilly, England; Kim, U.S.) and were "public facing" (Gaby, England) and "high profile" (Ivan, England) akin to "public officials or politicians or other people that people look up to as being in positions of leadership in the world" (Andrea, U.S.). As evidence of expectations of role modelling labor, fans argued that players needed to recognize the "responsibility" that accompanied their jobs. For instance, Andrea [U.S] argued, "Like kids put up posters of athletes in their bedrooms and stuff…And so I think athletes do have a responsibility to recognize the fact that regardless of whether they accept or disclaim that responsibility, it's something that they take on by virtue of how visible that they're held up in by society." And Clare (England), too, noted that players were role models for others even if they did not want to be. She said, "Those WSL [Women's Super League] players have to realise that they are going to be role models because it's going to be their faces on the posters. It's going to be their names that are used in inspiring stories, you know. So, I think rightly or wrongly, whether they agree with it, or want to be, they are going to be role models."

Ana (U.S.) described how her 10-year-old nephew was excited when she took him to a National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) game and told her "I have a new favorite player" after receiving a player's autograph. Beyond this exception, however, fans ubiquitously argued that girls were the target of players' role modelling efforts. The assumption that girls most receive and benefit from women's position in professional sport has been noted in academic research and has informed marketing efforts that have focused heavily on football-playing girls (Allison 2018; Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2018). While certainly, there is evidence that same-gender role models are important to girls' career aspirations (see: Bevan et al. 2021; Meier 2015), the exclusive focus on girls risks the (gendered) assumptions that women cannot inspire boys and men or that boys and men are uninterested in women's sport. An

example of this can be seen at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, where several high-profile men such as former player David Beckham and Prince William were criticized for only including their daughters and not their sons in messages of support for the England women's team (Parker 2023).

Among fans, girls were understood as the recipients of role modelling within an unequal, male-dominated sports system where men athletes had long been the primary exemplars of sporting talent available to the public. For instance, Jeff, a male fan from the U.S., argued that the players were not role models for him as a man but certainly were for girls, who would benefit from greater representation in sport. Jeff said, "It's less obvious for me for there even to be a need for them to be role models. So, I see that they are role models and that there's probably a need for them to be role models from a basic representation standpoint and from an inspiring other people standpoint." Many fans argued that despite their higher profile, men were worse role models than women, referring to the well-known transgressions of male athletes. Due to a comparative lack of public scandals, women were often understood to be better, more appropriate role models for children. As Justin (U.S.) explained, "If a player does something wrong and they're seen as a role model, then suddenly it brings in a whole load of other issues. We've not had that within the women's game." We found slight variation on this point by nationality, with English fans using examples of men in football and U.S. fans referencing other men's sports. Felicity (England), for instance, said that "men's football has got a bit of a bad rep," while Cameron (U.S.) noted public concern about "domestic violence in the NFL [National Football League] and the NBA [National Basketball Association], and the substance abuse issues and performance enhancing drugs issue in MLB [Major League Baseball]."

Like Leslie-Walker and Mulvenna (2022), we found that older (40+) women fans in this sample recalled childhoods without prominent female sporting heroes, which made the current generation of players particularly meaningful. For instance, Bonnie (U.S.) said about her childhood, "All my heroes were men…there was really no female role model." Reflecting on her 12-year-old daughter, who "looked up to" U.S. players Alex Morgan and Kelley O'Hara, Bonnie said, "How great is that that she's growing up in a time when she has access to those people and can see them on TV and things like that?" And when discussing her past in sport, Keira (England) laughed and said, "I'm going to sound really old now!" She perceived that contemporary teenage girls received encouragement to continue playing football that she herself had been denied, saying, "They [players] definitely are just showing girls that it is a career and it is possible to do. When I had that teacher saying no, I just sort of gave up, whereas they probably didn't."

As Keira's example illustrates, fans believed that players' positions in professional sport inspired girls to imagine themselves as potential professionals and thus to continue to play the sport. Role modelling took place simply through women's status as professional athletes. As Sarah (England) explained, "they are the idols for our younger generation coming up. Like people now are in the position that I was in at 6 years old, playing 5 a side in school, going, I can be the next [England Women's National Team player] Lucy Bronze." Ultimately, this role modelling was valuable because it was believed to generate social change towards greater gender equality in sport. Social change unfolded through girls' new aspirations, rather than through structural change to sport itself; as Diana (U.S.) commented, "As women's professional players in this male-dominated world of sports and soccer, they are role models for girls who don't think that playing at a professional level is something that is socially acceptable or that they shouldn't

pursue. And I think they are role models for breaking the boundaries of gender norms every day."

Like Diana's mention of gender norms, other fans believed that role model players generated change by showing that physical strength and athletic talent were compatible with womanhood. While muscular, athletic women's bodies have gained substantial cultural acceptance (Heywood and Dworkin 2003), some fans perceived that there were limited examples of strong women's bodies in the public sphere. As Renee (U.S.) noted, "I think there is a thing about being an athlete and showing how strong and good you are at your sport that has really positive impact for women." And Jane (U.S.) concurred, saying, "I think maybe they're showing what strong women look like." The message sent by the example of sportswomen was imagined to influence how girls saw themselves, and thus expectations for their own achievements. Fan perspectives on women's role modelling thus relied on a future orientation that allowed gender inequality in the present for an imagined linear progression forward over time (Allison 2021; Chahardovali and McLeod 2022). The issue is that this makes change a matter of girls' and women's goals and behaviors, individualizing responsibility for inequality and taking focus away from the structural level of policies, practices, and institutions (Desjardins 2021). Whilst there are clear benefits for professional athletes who advocate for social justice both within sport and wider society (Cooky 2017), expectations to advocate for change place additional pressure on women players who are unable to focus exclusively on their careers.

In understanding role modelling as work towards social change, we noted some different emphasis across nationality. Reflecting the masculine and heterosexual codings of football in England and its status as the nation's pre-eminent men's sport (Allison and Pope 2021; Pope, Williams, and Cleland 2022), English fans alone made the case that role model players

challenged the assumptions of inadequate femininity, and thus lesbianism, that accompanied women's football participation. While these fans recognized queer players and praised the inclusivity of women's football, they also remarked on the number of heterosexual, feminine-presenting players, seeing them as a message to girls about the untruth of masculine and lesbian stigmas. Presumably, destigmatizing football enabled girls to continue to play. For instance, Kylie argued, "You've got people you can look up to. You can be sporty, you can be a bit butch and straight as well, because they're not all lesbians. Instead of someone assuming, "Oh, you play football you're a lesbian."" Similarly, Betty said:

> "In terms of like Instagram and things you see them out of kits and they are all dressed up and, you know, it's like you think about their identities as well. And that's really impressionable for like a 10-year old now in a good way. It's like hold on I can be this tomboy but actually not worry about being the odd one out anymore because I can play football…You have got the likes of Alex Greenwood, her bright blonde hair and her big thick black eyelashes, Toni Duggan, always made up, you have got like Marta who had her lipstick. And actually, just because you are a woman and you play football, does not mean you are any less of a woman."

In contrast, some U.S. fans argued that players' public statements in support of their political beliefs was evidence of their role model status. As Tania (U.S.) said, "Athletically I think yes, role models and even in terms of off the field in their political views." Jane referred to U.S. player Megan Rapinoe in particular, arguing that, "Megan Rapinoe, I think she's definitely someone that has the courage of her convictions and doesn't filter herself when she wants to talk about the things that matter to her like homophobia and racism. So, I think she's definitely a major role model." This evident political dimension among U.S. fans and reference to Megan Rapinoe reflect the uniquely politicized context leading up to and during the 2019 Women's World Cup. Rapinoe, long an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, had generated public controversy in 2016 by kneeling during the playing of the national anthem to protest racist police brutality. Further, a comment about not visiting the Trump White House released partway

through the 2019 tournament, as well as the then-President's taunting response on Twitter, put an enormous spotlight on Rapinoe (Allison 2023a). Further, and likely considering the U.S. Women's National Team's highly visible public campaign for equal pay to men (Culvin et al. 2022), U.S. fans uniquely tied players' status as role models to their work towards greater resources for women's sport. Elizabeth, for instance, said of the U.S. Women's National Team players, "I mean they definitely are role models for me. And also, they are role models for so many different people. They've helped people in other industries try to fight for equal pay or equal representation."

Role Modelling for Love of the Game

In discussing professional women players as role models, many fans easily and quickly took up ideas about women as notably, even naturally giving of their time and effort to fans. Here, role modelling took place not only when girls saw women in professional sport, but also when players interacted with their fans, including after games, during public appearances or football camps, or even though social media. In this work, women were positioned as selfless, accessible, relatable, sacrificial, and passionate, qualities that align with definitions of femininity as caring and giving to others. Instead of seeing qualities like nurturance as inferior to those defining masculinity such as toughness or competitiveness, however, fans lauded women players for what they perceived to be virtues, seeing these qualities as a reason that women footballers were positive role models for girls and a motivation for their own support as fans. As Allison (2018; 2021) has previously found, fans often used these qualities to contrast women footballers positively with men, using gender difference as a source of value for women's sport but solidifying such difference in the process.

First, women footballers were understood as selfless, playing and interacting with their fans to advance women's status in football, and not for their individual benefit. For instance, Abigail (U.S.) explained, "Whenever any of these women in any of these sports are asked anything about their sport, they're always talking about the way things are for women in soccer, or women in basketball, or women in hockey, and it's never just about themselves." In a remark that made such selflessness a natural expression for women athletes, she continued, "It's never just about their team. It's in the DNA of women's sports." And Beth (U.S.), when asked if she saw professional players as role models, also referred to their lack of self-concern in answering, "I do, I do. I think that their bravery and their selflessness in this pursuit of equal pay has just one hundred percent cemented that in my mind." As part of their supposed orientation towards the growth of the sport, rather than their own reward, fans suggested that women played out of love for their sport, rather than the expectation of financial reward, a perspective that they admired, even as they wished that women athletes had more resources. For instance, when explaining why and how she became a fan, Isobel (U.S.) argued, "I wanted to support these girls, they worked hard. I know they're not making any money. They're just doing it because they love it, they love soccer." Similarly, Betty (England) argued, "I don't think they are ever going to get too big for their boots or like, I don't think their egos, like the men's team. They don't get paid as much, they are doing it because they love it and I think they acknowledge now like how important it is." Fans' emphasis on players' selflessness is also part of a future orientation, presenting a reality in which current players gladly sacrifice reward in the present for the sake of the slow growth of their sport (Allison 2021; Chahardovali and McLeod 2022).

Second, fans also emphasized that they found women players to be authentic and accessible, and that these qualities made them good, effective role models for children. On social

media, as well as in interviews, advertisements, and promotional videos created by football organizations, fans saw "authentic" representations of players' personalities, glimpses of their daily lives, and stories about their histories and goals in football, content which some felt they rarely saw on the professionally managed, carefully cultivated accounts of men footballers. Men footballers were a continual point of reference, constructed as more distant from fans, and media about them less interesting and personal. Like others, Emma (England) said that women footballers felt "real," saying, "They're much more real than men. I can't begin to imagine the lives of men's footballers, whereas I can identify with these women." Fans emphasized how the storytelling in media drew them in and made them feel a connection to women players as somehow "like" them. As Sadie (U.S.) remarked, "I think that there are so many personal stories on the women's national team that feel so relatable and real to people. Somehow the women have made it very humanizing to be playing sports at the level that they're playing." Fans appreciated the individualized, highly personal content about women footballers they saw in media, including on players' own social media accounts.

In believing this content to be an "authentic" expression of women's personalities and "real" reflection of their lives, fans ignored the enormous amount of labor that goes in to developing, creating, and editing media content (Toffoletti and Thorpe 2018). In fact, women's sport was an early adopter of social media and women athletes have long been digital and media innovators, as they have been shut out of mainstream media (Pope, Allison, and Petty 2023). Yet it is work to create content that reads as authentic, and women athletes feel acutely the expectation that they be responsive and personable through social media (Pocock and Skey 2022). In desiring highly personalized, first-person content to foster a sense of connection, fans mark role modelling as an expectation that players divulge personal details about their training,

their challenges, and their relationships. While media covering men's sport often tell deeply personal human-interest stories (Pope, Allison, and Petty 2023), fans' expectation of "authenticity" meant that such stories needed to be told by players themselves, and with high levels of access to their daily routines and personal lives.

Fans also praised women players for being accessible, or available to meet and talk to fans, often while giving autographs and posing for photos. In being accessible, players enabled emotional connections to fans, who felt that they knew and could get close to women footballers in a way they could not with men. For instance, Cristin (U.S.) contrasted the availability of men and women players, making the case that fans' greater access to women enabled a unique intimacy. She argued:

> "I feel like women are a bit more open to their fan base maybe as far as being accessible and stuff. Like you can go to a women's game and have a conversation with one of the players. I've gone to open practices and gotten to meet different players and talk to them and I'm not sure that's something you can do with the men's games or other pro athletes in general. There's not as intimate a relationship I guess between the players and the fans."

Similarly, when asked if the players were role models, Phil (England) justified his reply by noting women's greater availability to fans than men. He responded, "Yeah, I think they are. Because, after matches they've spent so long doing the autographs and selfies and all that sort of thing, whilst the top male players, you're very lucky if you can say hi to them, let alone have a photo with them." And Chrissie (England), like many other fans, was clear that the access she had to women players was one of the things that drew her to women's football; the labor women players performed for their fans per was a source of value (Chahardovali and McLeod 2022). She said, "In the women's game you get them coming up to you, you get photos with them, you get autographs with them, but in the men's, you don't get any of that. So that for me, that's more appealing."

As depicted in the photo Alex Morgan posted to Instagram mentioned in the opening of this article, fans had witnessed women players stay up to an hour or more after the end of their games to interact with fans. While adults sometimes received autographs or took photos with players, what Allison (2018) has called "Autograph Alley" typically features children in front of stadium railings as the primary recipients of interaction. While players are not directly compensated for this use of their time, some fans suggested that they happily and willingly gave it, seeing these interactions as role modelling in action. For instance, Justin (England) said, "All the players are really good in terms of spending time with the girls, and are happy for autographs and photos and whatever, and so that's a really good part of the game… I think that's a really good way of bringing young girls into the sport and giving them the opportunity to see those role models or their heroes close up." Similarly, Michaela (England) noted that at the conclusion of matches, "every single player…is walking around seeing and signing autographs for fans. I think that's the women wanting to connect with the fans because there's that, again, that mutual admiration of having those female role models." In presenting players' post-game interactions with fans as a function of their desires with words like "happy" and "wanting," both Justin and Michaela naturalize these as a form of gendered expression, rather than work stemming from cultural and social expectations. In contrast, Chahardovali and McLeod (2022) note that the expected inspiration of others requires emotional labor, or "the process of evoking or suppressing feelings in the self to produce specific emotions and affects in others" (3). In valuing close interactions with players, fans expected women's free emotional labor. Bonnie (U.S.), for instance, said of players' interactions with her daughter, "Every one of these girls is so polite and engaged and look [her] in the eye. It isn't just an x where their autograph should be. As soon as Sam realized that this was something that these women were accessible to her and good kind

people…She came to realize these were people who were worthy of her looking up to." To Bonnie, what made women footballers "worthy" of their status as role models was the emotional labor they performed, often with little to no compensation, to connect with young fans, presumably in service of the future growth and commercial viability of their sport. Such expectations work to reinforce inequalities in a career pathway that is often fraught with insecurity, low pay, and poor conditions (Culvin 2021; Culvin et al. 2022).

Some fans connected accessibility to authenticity, arguing that the interactions fans were able to have with players made them seem like "normal" or "down to earth" people, sometimes contrasted against men footballers whose lives appeared far less typical. For instance, Keith (England) explained why he felt that players were role models by saying, "It's partly the accessibility, so because they do come and talk to all the little kids and everyone afterwards, they just are different, they're more down to earth." Similarly, Hattie (England) responded quite similarly to the question about players as role models, answering, "Yeah, I do. Because I think they're approachable…They're still extremely down to earth and come across as normal people. Whereas obviously the men footballers have kind of been put on such a pedestal." These and other fans noted that women's accessibility and authenticity enabled them to feel an emotional connection to the sport that deepened and motivated their investment. Yet while this process took place through the labor of players, fans often subtly positioned work to connect and inspire others as the natural result of gender. Through a gender essentialist ideology of women's difference from men, here in the form of women's natural nurturance, selflessness, and generosity, fans concealed the pressure of their own expectations on players.

Some fans also contrasted the images and videos players posted from those of celebrities to make the case that footballers' bodies and lives were more "authentic" than other images of

women available in popular culture. For instance, Katherine (England) said, “I think one of the things I love is the fact that, you know, you go on social media, and you see all these celebs Photoshopped up to their eyeballs, but these female footballers, they seem so much more normal. And these kids need to have these role models.” Similarly, Betty (England) contrasted the “made up” women on the show *Love Island* with the “real” players of women’s football. She said, “Like the things like *Love Island,* those women, like young women are instilling this thing about men’s attention and for them their confidence is kind of built on the fact that people like them. And I don’t think that footballers really care about people liking them and what they present on things like Instagram is their real life, it’s like, their family homes, it’s not this whole like made up world.”

Role Modelling as Inequality

In contrast to most fans in this sample, a minority of fans understood role modelling as a form of labor performed in response to gender expectations for women’s nurturance. To these fans, expectations for role modelling to children were placed on women far more than men, and in already unequal resource environments. Importantly, there was limited overlap between the fans whose perspectives relied on gender ideology to naturalize women’s role modelling and those who embraced players as working, quite literally, under a different set of expectations than male peers. This group of fans had a different and more critical consciousness, identifying the gender expectations and unequal labor conditions within which women footballers were often identified as role models.

Several fans made the case that the narrative of women’s role modelling for girls that they frequently saw in media and marketing often overshadowed players’ athletic talent and work in their sport. When the value of women’s football was presented as only or primarily

about inspiring the next generation, women's athleticism was devalued, presumed to be lacking and thus not a selling point for women's football. Abigail (U.S.) felt an internal conflict as a fan, as she saw value in girls' seeing players as role models but also recognized that framing players this way sometimes took the focus off the sport itself. As she explained, "I have this constant awareness of myself over, this is a really important thing for women and girls and for next generations, but also, I hate when it's framed only as an empowering thing for women and girls. These are athletes. This is a professional sports environment and please treat the like this is sport."

Role modelling was described not as the inherent desire or ability of women players but as a sociocultural expectation, and one that was placed on women footballers, more than on men. Ana (U.S.), who had attended both NWSL and men's Major League Soccer (MLS) games, said, "It feels almost more expected for women to come and chat with the crowd and be more accessible." Francie (U.S.), too, referred to gender-unequal expectations when she said, "People definitely put a lot of stock in these women as role models. It's really interesting with the women and how they're held to a different standard than the male players." Kinsley (England) noted that women footballers faced pressure not only to excel at their sport but also to work towards change for other women, suggesting that this added expectation was unfair to women. She argued, "I think that there is—and whether this is fair or not--I think as professional women athletes there's a little bit more of a role model aspect to it. Because there still is kind of that sense of barriers needing to be broken."

Felicity (England), too, expressed a sense of frustration at the disparate expectations of professional footballers. She said, "I disagree with the pressure that puts on them, for example what [England coach] Phil Neville said after the Cameroon game about young girls at home

watching this…That's unfair, why are they held up to a separate standard and why do they have a responsibility to inspire a nation of girls?" And Justin (U.S.) acknowledged that women's status as role models was a common approach to selling and marketing women's football. Like Abigail, he felt the emotional pull of this narrative, but, like Kinsley and Felicity, he also disliked the unfairness he perceived in expecting women, but not men, to inspire children. In an impassioned tone, Justin explained:

> "I think the Women's U.S. National Team has sort of marketed and traded on the women as role models and inspirational for the younger generation. And I get that, and I like that but I'm also ready for them to move beyond that…I just felt like they're just not doing the same thing, they're not talking about it the same way on the men's side. I don't think it's fair to expect them to play that role, either…I think if that's something that resonates with them, if that's what they want to do, that's awesome, that's fantastic. But it's sort of like we don't expect that of men as much, right?"

To some fans, the unfairness of the greater expectations for role modelling placed on women was exacerbated by the larger resource environment in football, where women were paid far less than men but expected to do more (Culvin 2021). For example, Ana (U.S.) said, "Everything they [women] do is a lot more scrutinized and it's scrutinized on that lens like what will the youth think…I think it's just a lot more pressure to have, especially on the group of people making like sixteen thousand a year playing this. Which is insane. That's less than working at McDonald's!" And when asked if he saw women players as role models, Russell (England) noted that many players did see this as part of their job responsibilities, which was challenging given their comparative lack of resources to men. Russell said,

> **"**The age-old question. It's a lot harder because I think the amount of money that men's footballers are paid; they've got much more of a responsibility. Whereas a lot of the women's players that we're going to watch, there's probably a lot that I've been to see that earn less than I do and I'm not on a huge wage by any means. So, I think there's probably a lot of pressure on them in comparison to the amount that they get paid, but then I think a lot of them take that on and a lot of them see that as their responsibility."

While calling attention to gender inequalities in material resources, fans also acknowledged that women footballers were creative and strategic within this unequal environment, especially by leveraging the role model narrative to their own advantage. Fans challenged the ways that this narrative reflected additional labor expected of women who were already undercompensated for their work, but often understood why players would embrace it. As Jana (U.S.) acknowledged, "I think the role model piece can be overrated but it can also be used to promote the sport." Francie (U.S.), who noted the "different standard" women were held to, suggested that players conformed in part to solicit sponsorship support, saying, "That's been fascinating to watch… I think they make themselves accessible because it's good for endorsements so they can make money. A lot more likely to get sponsorships that way." At the same time, however, these fans perceived that in selling themselves as accessible and authentic 'role models' for girls, especially on social media, women footballers were required to give up their privacy in ways that men did not have to. There was a difficult balancing act between privacy and accessibility, as Kaitlyn (England) argued: "I think it is hard because yes, probably for the football, they should be considered role models. But it's when you step out into their personal life, I know that a lot of them, they don't use their privacy, because they put it on social media. But I do think that there are a lot of them that do stay private, and I think that's good…I think it's hard on them."

As noted above, most fans saw players' role modelling as generating future change through affecting how girls saw themselves. However, for the group who identified role modelling expectations as contributing to gender inequality, a more equal future was defined not by the swelling aspirations of girls to professional careers but by similar treatment of the men's and women's games on the part of sport organizations, sponsors, media, and even fans. Women's

football should be treated more like men's football, which meant interrupting or even eliminating the narrative of role modelling altogether, as well as greater resource parity. Ultimately, some fans advanced a vision in which others, including fans, stopped expecting women to be more accessible and personable than men. For example, Harriet (England) said that she had gotten into arguments with other fans when they expected women players to interact with them. "I feel very strongly that they shouldn't have to do things for fans. Like, from my perspective, I go and I pay money to watch the football and support my team," she said, "But I don't think it should ever be expected of a player. Like I've heard some Chelsea [Women's Super League] fans slagging off Chelsea players because they didn't stay behind after a game. And you know, I've turned around and said to them "They're being paid to play football. You're paying to watch them play football. You can't expect anything else of them."" And Joelle (England) reflected on what she hoped to see in future decades, saying, "You talk to the team, and they still do feel that they need to be- they're visible, they're accessible, and it's role models. And you know, will it be like that in 20 years times? It probably won't be. Because hopefully it means the game has grown that much that it's just not logistically possible."

Discussion

Many elite women footballers embrace their status as role models for youth, often conveying the meaning and reward they find in this position in interviews, social media posts, and empirical studies (Guest and Cox 2009; Kristiansen, Broch, and Pedersen 2014). Our aim with this analysis is not to suggest that players are not inspirational for others, that players should not enjoy or use their status as role models, or that role modelling should not be a way to market women's sport. Instead, our aim is to understand role modelling not as a natural expression of women athletes, but as a cultural narrative existing within the broader material and cultural

environments of elite-level sport. Longstanding and enduring gender ideologies of women's essential difference and often inferiority to men have been used to devalue women's sport and justify its comparative lack of resources to men (Allison 2018; 2021; Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2018). This environment has generated marketing efforts that often propose gender difference as a unique strength of women's sport to men's (Woodhouse, Fielding-Loyd, and Sequerra 2019). In many marketing campaigns, role modelling is suggested as part of what women's sport has to offer in the sports marketplace in ways that men's sport does not or cannot. However, role modelling has been subject to limited empirical investigation treating it as related to cultural ideologies, rather than as an actual social process influencing youth outcomes (Adriaanse and Crosswhite 2008; Meier 2015). In addition, the physical and emotional labor that role modelling requires need to be understood in context of the often-tenuous, undercompensated careers of professional women's athletes (Chahardovali and McLeod 2022; Culvin 2021).

We focus on fans as a group whose understandings of women athletes have rarely been investigated (for an exception, see Parry et al. 2021). Yet fans' perspectives can be powerful influences on team and league events, and fans are important as the imagined receivers of role modelling efforts. Drawing on 102 interviews with highly identified women's football fans in England and the U.S., we find that the predominant understanding of role modelling is as interactive labor undertaken for love of football and for the sake of its growth, rather than for personal gain. Many fans explicitly draw upon gender essentialist ideology to present women footballers as naturally more altruistic and moral than men, seeing gender difference as an advantage for women's sport. Paradoxically, fans embraced ideas of inherent gender differences to establish the distinct value of women's sport while also solidifying them, failing to recognize

how these same ideas have also been circulated to support the second-class status of women's football (Allison 2018; Pavlidis 2020).

In addition, fans' understanding of role modelling as contributing to a slow, linear process of growth in women's football advances an acutely individualist, neoliberal model of change by placing responsibility for the transformation of an unequal system onto individual women (Toffoletti and Thorpe 2018). Change to the status of women's sport was believed to unfold as the result of the aspirations to professional sport careers that girls developed as a result of seeing and interacting with women players. Here, both players and girls take on the burden of creating change, presumably through altering young women's goals and thus actions towards achieving them. While it is certainly the case that players have been instrumental in driving change towards equality, especially through collective and activist efforts (Cooky 2017), narratives of role modelling are limited in shifting responsibility for inequality away from owners, managers, media, and corporations and in neglecting a structural analysis of sport systems. Further, role modelling narratives present a world of assured future equality, encouraging some acceptance of unequal conditions in the present in exchange for an imagined future. As scholars have argued, linear conceptions of progress are not only inaccurate against empirical reality but rationalize and justify present inequality (McLachlan 2019).

Fans' perceptions of players as personable, available, and sacrificial, especially contrasted against the imagined greed and remoteness of elite men, is a part of what draws many fans in and keeps them invested in women's football. It is evident that getting to meet and talk with players has been a valuable and emotional experience for many fans, and one that has deepened their connections to the sport. Yet some fans neglect that these interactions, and players' "accessibility" more broadly, have largely been possible only when women's leagues

have been small and under-resourced, with personal outreach necessary given a paucity of mainstream media coverage and corporate investment. Thus, continued trends of mediatization and commercialization in professional women's football will have implications for the level and type of interaction between players and their fans, likely making close personal contact less possible. To date, securitization has not been addressed in academic research on women's sport, but this commonly accompanies professionalization and commercialization and will likely also act against unregulated fan access to players in the women's game. While gender equality is a central value of many women's football fans (Allison and Pope 2021; Guest and Luitjen 2018), the results of this analysis suggest that continued movement towards equality in the realm of resources and investment will simultaneously alter the conditions under which players can be accessible to their fans. It remains to be seen how fans adapt to a context in which players are less accessible to them or their children, but enjoy greater compensation, sponsorship opportunities, training resources, (inter)national attention, and career stability.

Recently, important analyses have addressed the physical, mental, and emotional labor that women athletes perform, and have turned attention to the social, economic, and technological conditions within which it is performed (Chahardovali and McLeod 2022; Culvin 2021; Culvin et al. 2022; Pavlidis 2020; Pocock and Skey 2022; Tofoletti and Thorpe 2018). These studies have acknowledged facets of players' lives and experiences that have been invisible as labor, often expected of players without direct acknowledgement or compensation. As an extension of this focus, the results of this analysis illustrate that fans are a source of the social expectation that women players perform physical and emotional labor to connect to others, and most notably to girls. As Chahardovali and McLeod (2022) identify, women face expectations for un- or under-compensated "inspirational labor" that men do not, including in

their interactions with fans. When this expectation remains taken for granted and naturalized, the inequality that gives rise to it persists. Thus, part of ongoing challenges to gender inequality in women's football must involve making explicit role modelling as a *gender expectation*. Steps to address the exploitation that players experience through the normative strength of expectations for role modelling could include more directly measuring and compensating all of players' time meeting fans or by altering the expectation itself, for instance in contract clauses or emails to fan clubs noting that players have no requirement to give their time to fans after matches.

In fact, this is the world that a minority of fans envision, seeing others' desire to receive time and attention from players as an unfair burden not placed on men in the same ways or to the same degree. We find that a minority of women's football fans have developed a critical awareness of role modelling as informed by gender ideologies. Interestingly, the football landscape they envision in response is one in which women's football looks somewhat more like men's football, with women, like men, living increasingly remote and managed lives apart from fans. Yet is this the future that either fans or players truly desire? The larger question that this perspective raises concerns what the "equality" that fans want really looks like and how is it achieved; as feminist sport scholars have long argued, women's sport is limited by simply mirroring the model of sport established by men and founded in masculinist ideals (Hargreaves 2000). The commercialization of women's sport is often viewed as equality itself, and yet its prospective downsides are rarely examined.

As women's football remains unevenly professionalized, commercialized, and mediatized, with variations in marketing efforts and fan base composition, there are many important directions to pursue in building on the current study. Although we have emphasized similarities in understandings of role modelling across national context, and there are certainly

mostly points of agreement, we also find some differences across U.S. and England fans, and these suggest the value of continued comparative analysis. The divergent cultural and institutional position of football relative to other sports generated differences in fan emphases and points of reference. Specifically, fans noted sporting men's misdeeds in the sports most culturally central (football in England and basketball/baseball/gridiron football in the US), and English fans referenced a persistent lesbian stigma attached to the sport that US fans did not perceive. In addition, longitudinal perspectives would also enable greater understanding of whether and why fan perspectives shift, whether about players as role models or on other subjects.

We find that in describing what role modelling was and how it worked, fans emphasized "authenticity," using it to describe players' interactional styles and the content of their online and social media content. As Popock and Skey (2022) note, because social media enable reach to a younger audience, they are perceived as platforms through which role modelling takes place. And Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) argue that on social media women work to brand themselves as "authentic," calling attention to the labor that women do to present to their audience as embodying a set of traits defining contemporary womanhood, like positivity, physical beauty, self-love, and a willingness to divulge personal information. Consequently, analyses of women's social media accounts or of fans' definitions of what is (or is not) authentic on women's social media, would be a critical counterpoint to this interview study.

At the turn of the 21st century, Hargreaves (2000) argued that women athletes were elevated to 'heroic' standing to the extent that their self-presentation aligned with culturally defined femininity. We conclude that "gendered heroism" remains a relevant concept to understanding women's sport today, as many U.S. and English women's professional football

fans identify the value of women's sport in the qualities believed to define women uniquely apart from men. To fans, these qualities are exhibited through role modelling and this labor is naturalized as the inherent expression of womanhood, rather than as work. Ultimately, this analysis illustrates the complex and contradictory position of women in professional football, holding power and influence as "heroes" to others and yet expected to live out this status within a system that fails to fairly reward this labor.

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