Zachary Veith: Sexism Among Hockey Fans

America is one of the most sport-orientated countries on Earth (Li-Shiue 2011). American university students are no exception when it comes to being fans of spectator sports. As spectators, students are allowed to forget all about classes and other outside responsibilities, and come together in the experience of watching their team compete (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971: 54). At SUNY Geneseo, students can’t get enough spectator sports, especially hockey. Geneseo’s Assistant Hockey Coach Kris Heeres said in an interview with myself that there was a “national poll that had us [SUNY Geneseo] ranked top 5 in the entire country for attendance and for atmosphere.”

An article about the historical interpretations of hockey says that hockey is a sport that has always brought people together. The spectators develop a “cultural amnesia” about the other’s race, social class, or religion and come together to watch the games. (Robidoux 2002: 218). This sounds very egalitarian and optimistic, especially for spectators at a hockey game. This notion expressed by Robidoux illustrates the anthropological idea of “communitas.” Communitas is a term used to describe the coming together of groups of people, regardless of background or culture, for something larger than their own individual lives. It can be seen everywhere from war-time disasters, such as groups coming together during the horrors of the Second World War, to individuals of different social backgrounds coming together to cheer for their favorite sports team (Turner 2012: 1-2).

While there may be communitas among the spectators of Geneseo hockey games, or hockey games in general, there is also a latent sexism amongst fans. Minority members of the spectators, especially women, are devalued as fans. They are seen by some male fans as not “legitimate” fans and can be stigmatized for this (Dietz-Uhler et al. 2000). The term “puck bunny” has developed out of this, and is used to label women that males think are not “true” fans. Garry Crawford and Victoria Gosling wrote an article titled “The Myth of the Puck Bunny” about this phenomenon and clearly defined this offensive term as:

The term ‘puck bunny’, which is applied almost exclusively to female ice hockey fans, implies that these supporters are ‘inauthentic’, not ‘dedicated’ in their support, and are more interested in the sexual attractiveness of the players rather than the sport itself (Crawford and Gosling 2004: 478).

Most women, however, do not self-identify with this term. It unfortunately becomes a generalization for all female hockey spectators, even the ones who are true fans. In highly aggressive sports, such as hockey, there is often communal “identity issues” involved amongst the fans (Wann 2008: 15). As the female fans interviewed in the film explain, spectators do not know who the true fans are, and who is not, and often the majority of true female hockey fans get grouped together with the minority of non-fans at games. This generalization is the result of these communal “identity issues.” (Wann 2008: 15). According to both Crawford and Gosling’s research, along with my own, most female hockey spectators are true fans of the sport in every sense, and are not just there to lust after the players (Crawford and Gosling 2004: 479).

A survey I conducted at the Geneseo Men’s Hockey games (attached below) illustrates that females are just as much fans as their male peers. While 100% of the men at the games self-identified as fans, 83% of the females at the games also identified themselves as fans. In addition, 80% of the males responded as saying they watched both hockey and other sports in general. The female respondents were very close with 50% of them saying they watch sports and 64% saying they watch hockey. Toffoletti and Mewett’s book Sport and Its Female Fans cites examples of female hockey fans going back to the early days of the sport during the 1930s. In addition, they also explained that many female fans “disturb, disrupt, and challenge men’s claiming of sport as their domain.”(Toffoletti et al. 2012: 5) A similar statement was expressed by Sarah Chin in her interview. This challenge to men’s reign over the domain of sports can be seen as a reason why men feel the urge to delegitimize females as fans and generalize them as “puck bunnies.”

In conclusion, female hockey fans are often wrongly generalized as not authentic fans and only interested in the attractiveness of the players on the ice. Labeled as “puck bunnies,” many of these women are just as much ice hockey fans as their male peers, as evidence by my own and other’s research and surveys with hockey spectators. Nicely written and researched.
References

Crawford, Garry, and Victoria Gosling

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Li-Shiue, G., and K. Jong-Chae

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Wann, Daniel L., Frederick G. Grieve, Ryan K. Zapalac, and Dale G. Pease