



Women's sporting options laid bare

Karen Brooks



IF EVER a women's "sport" courted controversy, it had to be the Lingerie Football League.

Akin to American men's football, it's a full-contact and quite brutal sport, only, unlike their male counterparts, women don a uniform of bra, panties and garters with helmets and shoulder padding.

Ever since the LFL played its first Australian exhibition game in Brisbane on June 2 – and its second in Sydney last Saturday – it has attracted not only crowds, but also much social commentary.

Called everything from a "meat-fest" by Collective Shout member Deborah Malcolm, who attended the Sydney LFL game; a "cheap degrading perv" by Sports Minister Kate Lundy; another "sexist American spectacle" by Dr Michelle Smith in the *Sydney Morning Herald*; to "non-stop action" where you can see "young, fit, athletic girls, looking extra hot in lingerie and smashing the absolute tripe out of each other" by Michael on sportsnews.com.au, this women's sport has pundits' tongues wagging – but for all the wrong reasons.

Although the notion that the games are family friendly is promoted, tweets live from Saturday's game would

suggest otherwise.

Malcolm (and other tweeters) wrote about the increasing drunkenness and lewdness of the (male) fans; a blow-up doll that was passed around and the simulated oral sex performed upon it; the groping of female players escorted from the field; and the replay on the large screen of a player losing her panties.

There was also much cheering, jeering and leering, Mexican waves, loud music, and giveaways at half-time from women in high-heeled boots and lingerie.

Yes, sounds like a great night out for all the family.

There's no doubt the crowds enjoyed the spectacle of these strong, athletic and aggressive women playing a truncated version of gridiron. Whether they would have enjoyed it as much, let alone attended, if the women hadn't been wearing the equivalent of bras and knickers is obvious – they wouldn't have.

Yet what's interesting about the talk this display is generating is not only how much it polarises the public and the predictable methods being used to silence those who express concern, but also how we maintain the pretence it's a serious sport.

Young women involved in the game have roundly criticised those who dared to challenge their choice to play, citing they're not only current or ex-professional sportspeople (some are former sex

workers too), but the fitness and commitment required.

Mitch Mortaza, the game's founder, was quoted in a *Guardian* blog: "First and foremost you have to be beautiful to be in the game." Athleticism and robustness, despite what the competitors say, isn't a priority for the LFL manager.

Surely, a professional "sport" that requires you to wear "lingerie"; sign an "accidental nudity clause"; and agree to a "Waiver of Compensation" (which means, despite being encouraged by Mortaza to "pancake the s--- out of each other", any injuries are players' own financial and other responsibility) deserves to have our collective attention focused upon it.

Is this what women's choices in sport have been reduced to?

Professor David Rowe from the University of Western Sydney argues the LFL "lays bare the persistent male domination of sport and the continuing dubious resort to sexualising sportswomen".

We're a society that devalues women's sport unless it's a sexualised spectacle.

To intellectualise or rationalise participation is to be both dishonest and deliberately blind to the ways in which women buy into their objectification.

Melinda Tankard-Reist, a long-time critic of the game, says members of the LFL aren't even paid "except at the elite levels".

Mortaza told CNBC: "There is no salary. The players get a percentage of the gate based on them winning and losing."

It's an incentive to "play fierce football and win games".

"Sexploitation" by any other name.

To ignore the culture this "sport" creates, how it is part of misogyny and sexism, is to be disingenuous.

Tal Stone, a university student and athlete who attended the Sydney try-outs and blogged about her experiences, wrote: "The night ended with a pep talk about how we're showing ourselves as sexy, hot girls who had a lot to offer on or off the field."

How can we take the vehement insistence that it's a valid sport, or this type of branding, seriously? The insult is, we're not meant to – it's a particular, crude (male) fantasy made manifest.

Deluding ourselves otherwise does nothing more, as Tankard-Reist states, than limit options for women.

Remove "lingerie" from the title and we either have a serious sport or an empty stadium.

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