Invisible Pelotons: The Gendered Politics of Women's Professional Cycling

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**Introduction**

The start of a professional cycling race is quite a spectacle. Athletes anxiously roll their front tires to the edge of the starting line, their bodies poised for action. The starting gun disrupts the nervous silence. Hundreds of sharp clicks fill the air—the unmistakable sound of riders pressing their cycling shoes into clipless pedal systems. A rainbow of colored jerseys quickly passes by. It is hard to pick out any single rider in the crowded blur of athletes. Strangely, the start of today’s race looks nothing like this familiar scene. With two minutes to go before the kickoff of the event, the professional field sits motionless. This is hard to believe given the significance of the event in the annual racing calendar. Even with precious Olympic qualification points at stake, not a single rider is perched upon their bike. Instead, athletes remain seated on the hot concrete, hands firmly propping up their delicate carbon machines. The shocking reality hits home. With only a few minutes to go before the start of the 2013 Tour of Languedoc Roussillon, the professional women’s field has come to an intentional standstill just behind the starting line. A political statement is being made. *Treat us like professional athletes.*

For the casual racing fan, this scene is wrought with confusion. The contrast between expectations and reality could not be further apart. Where are the bodies in motion? What explains the dearth of racing sights and sounds? Where is the action? For those more fully entrenched in professional cycling culture, one realizes that there is more activity than meets the eye. What appears on face to be in inaction is, in reality, a critical turning point. The paucity of motion elicits a mixture of conflicting emotions—disappointment and empowerment, sadness and hope. An event typically marked with high speed maneuvering has now been re-defined. The social and political significance of the moment is striking as the sit-down protest continues.

The unrest leading up to this protest was no secret among those in the professional cycling world. The 2013 Tour of Languedoc Roussillon, a major opportunity for earning points towards international rankings, was canceled with less than a week to go before the race. This cancelation happened long after teams committed precious time and budget funds on traveling to a remote location in France. The race director blamed a last-minute withdrawal of essential sponsorship commitments. With squads already at the venues, team managers found themselves in a very precarious situation. Was it worth spending additional time and money to wait and see if a new sponsor would step in? With managers angered and athletes no longer enthused about competing, a number of teams headed back to their respective countries. Returning home was viewed as a statement to race organizers all over the world. The sadness of the situation was reflected in a tweet by professional Dutch rider Iris Slappendel. “For the sake of women’s cycling, it’s sad but after a day of uncertainty we decided to leave and not start tomorrow. #RaboLivGiant #Languedoc.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The title of this conference paper*—Invisible Pelotons­—*holds deep social significance. One can think of a cycling peloton as the main field of a bike race. It is the physical location in which most of the athletes are situated. This grouping provides protection and companionship. It also provides a sense of “we-ness” in a niche sport landscape. This work explores how, as the title suggests, the presence of professional women often goes unnoticed or unappreciated within the cycling industry. When their presence is acknowledged, it is often not valued as much as their male counterparts. Using grounded theory analysis, my findings reveal that members of the female peloton continually find themselves in what I refer to as “ambiguous sport spaces”. In some ways, these individuals are caught between the amateur and professional athletic world. This is because, while these individuals are professionals, they are treated by others like amateur competitors. This paper untangles these concerns, identifying the social and political realities that push elite female racers to the fringe of the sporting world. **Theoretical Underpinnings**

*Sport, Power, and Gender Relations*

Sport is one of the most powerful institutions in the world. It serves as a "regulatory agency that channel[s] behavior in culturally prescribed ways" (Eitzen & Sage 2009, 8). Sport reflects societal norms, values, and statuses, meaning that things we value in society are evident in the sporting arena. Sport also serves as a powerful institution for the construction and maintenance of gender ideology (Coakley, 2009). While Lance Armstrong has grown to become a household name, a very small number of people are familiar with the *other* Armstrong of cycling—Kristin. Kristin Armstrong is one of the most dominant athletes in professional cycling history. She is a two-time Olympic gold medalist, winning the individual time trial in both 2008 and 2012. Her fourteen year professional history includes numerous first-place finishes in world tours. Yet, being a woman, she is an unknown even among some self-proclaimed cycling enthusiasts. This lack of familiarity is not by accident. Is it a consequence of the larger power structure in sport.

*Maintaining Institutional Power*

Topics become political when we start placing restrictions on the answers to certain pivotal questions: who can participate, where, and when.Power manifests itself in the tight controlling of environments, activities, occupations, and leadership positions. Men use various institutions to help them maintain their relative position of dominance in society. Throughout history, women have been markedly absent or underrepresented in a wide range of social contexts—from politics to a variety of high-profile professions. For example, women are still vastly underrepresented in the highest levels of government (Carroll & Liebowitz, 2003). It should come as no surprise that the male domination of critical institutions extends deep into the world of sport.

Men dominate decision-making positions in sport by serving as coaches, executives of national governing bodies, and owners and general managers of teams (Burton et al., 2009; Whisenant et al., 2002). Some use their positions to perpetuate a "good old boys network" of fellow like-minded men (Mullane & Whisenant, 2007). Men even dominate key organizational positions in women's sports (Wilkerson, 1996). As an example, in 2006, the male-to-female head coach ratio in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) was 11 to 3 (Voespel, 2006). A robust collection of academic literature indicates that these gender discrepancies extend deep into the world of various sport organizations (Sartore & Cummingham, 2007; Burton, Grappendorf & Henderson, 2011; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). As my research reveals, these gender discrepancies apply to cycling as well—a fact that female study participants universally viewed as problematic. The Union Cycliste Internationale Management Committee, the executive body that manages the Cycling Federation, has twelve members.[[2]](#footnote-2) After being in existence for 113 years, the first woman was finally elected to the Management Committee in September of 2013.[[3]](#footnote-3) Up until recently, women have had a minimal voice in the evolution of cycling’s global environment—a fact that is reflected in the gendered practices of the sport.

*Sport and Gendered Practices*

One can conceptualize sport on two levels—in the collective (sport as a social institution) or as individual entities (specific sporting contexts such as cycling or skiing). While each individual sporting context has its own unique culture, common undercurrents are shared. Sport, as an institution, projects images of what body, attitude, and actions should optimally be (Atencio et al., 2009; Birrell, 2007; Ford and Brown, 2006; Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008; Thorpe, 2005, 2008; Waitt, 2008). More specifically, sport encourages the hegemonic masculine standards of violence, aggression, wealth, and physical dominance (Coakley 2009). Many athletic competitors internalize these normative images and definitions. Athletes who embrace hegemonic standards of masculinity are idolized (Dworkin & Wachs, 2000). A prime example from the cycling world Lance Armstrong. Even prior to his doping scandal, Lance was a household name. His widespread fame stemmed from sheer domination of opponents. He was believed to have won the Tour de France seven consecutive times (1999-2005), a record that stood until the titles were stripped in 2012. A cancer survivor, he was viewed as a true Ironman—someone who achieved world-class success while overcoming a crippling disease. Prior to his doping confession, his nickname within cycling circles was “the boss,” reflective of this masculine domination. This domination resulted in highly lucrative sponsor contracts and widespread positive media attention.

Early scholarly literature in the sociology of sport describes how the institution of sport has become a central site for the production of gender (Whitson, 1990). It is a space for people to interact with others and demonstrate bodily practices. One such example is the production of manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Bringing due attention to the study of "practices and processes" associated with men's actions, manhood acts help men to reaffirm their status as a biological male (289). Competing in cycling’s most prestigious multi-stage tours is a prime example. Riding for 3,664 kilometers across 21 stages, as riders did in the 2014 Tour de France, brings credibility to the presentation of a masculine self.[[4]](#footnote-4) The privilege of participating in such a manhood act is feverously protected. This helps explain why, despite their continued lobbying efforts, elite women are prohibited from entering many of cycling’s grand tours—including the full edition of Le Tour. Women conquering an identical athletic feat would invalidate the treasured “manhood act” label that participation in Le Tour represents.

Having a golden standard of masculinity allows for political hierarchies to develop. This is because, most fundamentally, not all masculinities are equal (Kimmel 2004). In order to create a hegemonic standard, society must have subordinate masculinities to compare it to (Connell 1987). Femininity, and all who embrace it, are viewed as subordinate. The result of this gendered hierarchy is that women, as well as certain men, face oppression and powerlessness (Kimmel, 2004). Sport is a prime place for the reproduction of such social hierarchies. As Mary Louise Adams (2011) points out in her sharp analysis of figure skating, sport is particularly powerful in perpetuating the social devaluing of effeminacy. Feminine, or “girl’s sports,” are ones that focus on qualities such as balance, flexibility, and agility (Adams 2011, 18). By labeling activities as “manly sports” or “girl’s sports,” connections are reaffirmed between masculine practices (those activities seen in “manly sports”) and non-masculine practices (those seen in “girl’s sports”). The very use of the term “feminine sports” and “girl’s sports” helps to reaffirm the connection between sport and masculinity (Adams 2011, 17). It does so by perpetuating a culture of difference. Feminine characteristics, be they demonstrated by men or women, are devalued.

*Situating Women in Sport*

Given the intricate connection between sport, masculinity, and power, this history leaves women in a very precarious situation. With sport historically being viewed as a male domain—

an institution designed for men by men—where do women fit in? Understanding the growth of females in sport is not as simple as saying “add women and stir” (Hamm, 1987). With the rise of feminist scholarship, we now have a more holistic picture of how the influx of women into sporting environments has shaped the reproduction of this historically male institution.

One of the greatest insights from this literature is that while women have successfully broken into many of men’s sports, they have done so in a *particular* way. This reflects the notion that there are certain social norms surrounding how we regard sport and women’s place in it—a fact that leads to the gendering of athleticism and competition. This is where the construction of “men’s sports” and “girl’s sports” becomes critical. Different versions of the same game reinforce gendered expectations. These expectations are evident in the way that each respective version is played. Having two different sport landscapes allows for the protection of privileged spaces where gendered practices unfold. Consider this slogan: men’s leagues, men’s courts, men’s rules.

In her work on the politics of women’s ice hockey, Nancy Theberge (2000) discusses critical distinctions in the men’s and women’s versions of the game. Men are permitted to check, women are not. The women’s game of hockey is described as emphasizing finesse over physicality. The very definition of finesse, to “do something in a subtle and delicate manner,” is often associated with less desirable forms of sport. The men’s game, by contrast, is described as emphasizing athletic qualities that are often revered in sport. These include violence, aggression, and excessive physical contact. It is not as if women are incapable of checking, fighting, or boarding. It is instead that these activities, as performed by women, are not socially acceptable. By prohibiting actions such as fighting and checking, punishable with harsh and decisive penalties, these manhood acts are exclusively reserved for the men’s version of the game.

Throughout this work, I demonstrate how these gendered constructions of difference manifest in cycling. I articulate two very different landscapes—men’s cycling and women’s cycling. These landscapes sometimes run parallel to one another, even at times intersecting. When the landscapes do intersect, it is typically in a very calculated and controlled manner. More often than not, we see that the landscapes are set on two distinct paths. These paths create very different realities for the athletes. For men, their work as athletes is often celebrated. Opportunities exist to ride on professional teams, receive a salary, and ride in the world’s most prestigious races. For women, opportunities to ride on a professional team are much more limited. Despite being professional athletes, many of these competitors do not get paid and cannot ride in the same tours as men. The fact that the women are not paid lead some to question the validity of the “professional athlete” label. The result is that women find themselves in ambiguous sport spaces. They are professional athletes, but not being recognized as such. This work explores how ambiguous sport spaces manifest themselves in cycling.

**Methodological Approach**

This article utilizes a mixed-method approach, drawing from a combination of in-depth interviews and personal observations. This paper stems from a larger project regarding inequality in cycling, thus a vast array of data were available for use.

**Interviews**

*Study Informants and Recruitment*

Cycling is a multi-billion dollar industry that includes many different entities—professional teams, sport governing bodies, local shops, gear and nutrition manufactures, media outlets, and of course, athletes. Thirty-three participants were interviewed in all. Study participants were selected based on their ability to shed light on main research foci. I asked questions about habits in training and racing, views towards cycling’s governing body, women’s involvement in professional cycling, and other related questions. Individuals interviewed included amateur and professional competitors, bike shop owners, race directors, sport governing body representatives, professional team managers, and both former and current professional team employees. Both men and women were interviewed, with sensitivity taken towards racial and ethnic sample diversity.

Study participants were recruited in one of three ways. First, they were recruited on location at various cycling events. These events included a mixture of elite “invitation only” races and smaller “open field” competitions. Second, participants were recruited via the Internet. I targeted select Facebook groups and online discussion forums that I knew to be frequented by professional athletes. Facebook organization pages such as those for the Women’s Cycling Association and various professional teams were also fruitful resources. A recruitment posting was issued making a call for participants. Individuals then expressed their interest in participating in the study by sending me an e-mail. The Internet turned out to be a rich recruiting source, giving my research visibility to professional athletes, coaches, and team directors all over the world. Finally, participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Women’s cycling can be described as a small and relatively tight-knit community. This is particularly true within the professional ranks. After the conclusion of each interview, I asked participants if they knew of any other individuals who could possible inform the study. Snowball sampling was particularly valuable at the start of the project. Professional athletes helped to put me in touch with other members of their quad, as well as their coaches and team employees.

**Observations**

This work is supplemented by personal observations of athletes in their native environments. This included watching pre and post-race routines, as well as interactions with other athletes, fans, and members of the press. These opportunities gave me the chance to see team dynamics as they unfolded. I also was able to observe valuable details about each venue. This included watching the behaviors of spectators, sponsors, race directors, officials, race announcers, and others in the cycling environment. In some instances, these observations provided invaluable opportunities to see both male and female competitors operating in the same sporting contexts. At the third stage of the 2014 Tour of Utah, the men and women utilized the same race venue. While the courses themselves were not identical, the race set-up allowed for me to draw insightful comparisons. For example, I was able to observe the parking areas for both the men’s and women’s squads. The differences in team vehicles were eye-opening. The men’s teams used beautiful RVs. The women’s teams used pick-up trucks and unmarked personal vehicles. Not a single RV was present on the women’s side of the parking lot. Of additional value was the ability to observe the conclusion of the men’s and women’s races. Approximately 45 minutes separated the finish of the two fields. This time gap allowed for me to not just observe—but *feel*—each race at it unfolded. I took detailed notes of the spectators’ reactions, the tone and language used by announcers, and the media attention for both the men and women.

Attending events also allowed for me to conduct some interviews on location. Although shorter, these interviews gave me a chance to capture participants’ body language. I noted important non-verbal cues such as the crossing of arms and shaking of heads. More critically, I could see the participant reacting to his or her sport environment in real time. Interviewing professional athletes just before the historic running of an inaugural women’s tour is not something that can be replicated. I had the opportunity to ask competitors how they were feeling minutes before this historic event. Some women were overcome with excitement and nervousness. One seasoned competitor relayed, “I am not usually nervous before a competition, but today I am. I am a part of history. I want to race well and make this event a success.” These authentic and uninhibited emotions may not have been fully captured had the interview been conducted at a later point in time.

**Analytical Approach**

Analysis of the in-depth interviews and observations utilized a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As opposed to exploring specific hypotheses, grounded theory allows researchers to investigate topics without any preconceptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Glaser, 1992). It is through this process that the key themes presented in the analysis were revealed. Data was subject to multiple rounds of coding. An initial round of open coding gave us a general sense of the themes that were prevalent in the data (Glaser, 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; 1998). These codes served as the basis for the emergence of more sophisticated concepts. I reviewed and collapsed concepts until key themes, or categories, emerged. Open coding of the interview transcripts was crucial for the illumination of repeating concepts. Each paragraph was coded with important notations, including what the respondent is talking about, adjectives that describe the phenomenon, and the like. As coding occurred, memos were also kept on the side for additional information. An integral part of grounded theory analysis, we also wrote interview notes at the conclusion of each interview (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Memos were broken down into three categories—theoretical, methodological, and personal. Careful crafting of these memos allowed us to maintain an up-to-date “audit trail” of key decisions regarding the project (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Charmaz, 2006). Using the coding notes and memos together, findings were sorted into common themes and concepts.

**Analysis**

**Ambiguous Athletic Spaces**

A prominent theme that emerged from my grounded theory analysis was that of “invisibility.” Women of the professional peloton are seemingly invisible within their own sporting world—as are the issues that they face. Part of this invisibility stems from the fact that women often find themselves in what I refer to as “ambiguous athletic spaces.” These ambiguous spaces are places where the expectations and realities pertaining to professional life diverge. Specifically, they are places where women are treated like amateur competitors despite being professional athletes. These spaces do not recognize women cyclist for the professional athletes that they are. Their unique skills and attributes, as female athletes and professionals, are not celebrated.

Ambiguous athletic spaces lead to difficult emotional conundrums. On the one hand, many study participants spoke with a resounding sense of gratitude. Put simply, they were thankful for the opportunity to ride their bike. However, beneath the surface of this gratitude was a desire for greater equality in opportunity. Respondents talked about the desire for things such as a guaranteed minimum wage, the opportunity to race in some of the world’s largest tours, the desire for dedicated racing spaces, and a larger voice in the sport’s governing body—all things that they saw their male counterparts as having. Throughout this analysis, I argue that the core root of these ambiguous athletic spaces stem from the emergence of two socially-constructed realities: “women’s cycling” and “men’s cycling.” Adding to the work of scholars studying gender and sport (see Adams, 2011and Crosset, 1995 as two excellent examples), I argue that the construction of these two distinct sporting landscapes reaffirms a hierarchy where men are seen (and treated) as more important than women. While the tide is slowly turning, professional cycling still reflects and perpetuates society’s system of female oppression and powerlessness (Kimmel, 2004; Adams 2011).

For the purposes of this paper, I am limiting the scope of my analysis to three dimensions of the “ambiguous athletic space.” These dimensions arose from my grounded theory analysis, each of which is elaborated on below. I argue that each of these three elements contributes to women being trapped in ambiguous athletic spaces. Members of the female professional peloton:

(1) Challenge society’s view of the “professional athlete” – Peloton members are professionals, yet most do not make a living off of their craft.

(2) Suffer from the full utilization of the USA Cycling rider classification scheme – peloton members are professionals, yet they find themselves lacking a true “pro” division at many races.

(3) Lack a dedicated home in training contexts – many peloton members find themselves being forced to ride with men. Women tend to be overshadowed and/or ignored in such contexts. This stifles the development of the sport.

***1. Defining the Sporting “Professional”***

What constitutes being a “professional?” Dictionary.com suggests that a professional is someone who follows an occupation “as a means of livelihood or for gain.” Merriam-Webster even goes so far as to specify the word “sport” in their definition, suggesting that a professional is someone who is “paid to participate in a sport or activity.” Indeed, social construction of the term “professional” usually conjures up thoughts of monetary payoff. This is particularly true in sport, where the inking of hyper-inflated contracts make headlines on a weekly basis. This is a big part of why many in society idolize the social status of the professional athlete. The potential for money and fame, all in exchange for playing a “game,” makes it a job that many fanaticize about. The women of the peloton offer a significant challenge to these cultural conceptions of the term “professional.” Virtually every female study participant held a job beyond that of being a professional athlete. Those who did not have outside employment were financially supported by either a parent or working spouse. Even more surprising is the fact that some study participants expressed a hesitation to expose their identities as professional cyclists to non-industry employers. A prime example came from the world of academia. A young assistant professor concealed her identity as an elite bike racer to maintain an externally-perceived “focus” on her tenure-track career.

Very few women in the professional peloton actually earn a paycheck for their athletic efforts. By contrast, most end up losing money when they attend an event. As a consequence, study participants stressed alternate dimensions of the “professional” classification. These dimensions focused on things other than money, such as achieving the pinnacle of one’s craft. After a long hesitation to being prompted for a definition of the term “professional,” Michelle described:

I don't think necessarily you have to be paid to be a pro. I think, and that maybe being paid is that pro level, but I think once you are at that competitive level, once you are at that top level. There is no further to go, so you are a pro. I am actually a Cat 2, so I am not a pro-ranked racer. Women’s racing in the states, you actually don’t have a pro license, only an international pro license. So if you are in the U.S., you don’t have to carry a license. Only the men do. Which is something most people don’t realize as well. So, technically my license doesn’t say pro but I am racing with these pro women who’s license does say pro, and I'm just as competitive. So, I think once you are actually at that top competitive level, you can't go any further.

Michelle’s comments bring up two interesting points. First, she articulates how cycling’s own governing body treats male and female professionals differently. USA Cycling issues a professional license for men but not for women. I argue that such distinction in licensing practices on behalf of the governing body contributes to placing women in ambiguous sport spaces. It reaffirms the existence of two different landscapes in the world of cycling, where women are viewed as “lesser.” This is particularly troubling in light of the idea that instituting a women’s professional licensing procedure would be a rather seamless step for USA cycling to take. The infrastructure for such processing is already in place. Michelle also mentions that cycling’s international governing body (UCI) issues a professional license. With USA Cycling not having such a procedure, the organization denies female American racers an important “rite of passage” that their male country counterparts enjoy.

Mike, an avid cyclist and women’s cycling supporter, also echoed the focus on achievement level. When asked how he defined the word “professional,” he replied:

When you make it to the level. I mean, I think when you are racing at this level, you are

a professional. I think a lot of people define professional as getting paid for it, but if you

are racing and putting in time, an athlete like this, it’s an all-day lifestyle. I mean, we

hosted a couple of riders [for an upcoming race] and we got in late Sunday night and

there was bananas, yogurt, oatmeal, and my wife was like, oh, look at this food, you eat

so healthy, I mean, that’s their life.

In light of not getting paid, and not being eligible to apply for a license in the States, participants stressed other elements of being a “professional. Janice pointed to the acquisition of free gear:

Well, I say that I don't pay to ride my bike. In a sense, I get paid to ride. I get an awesome bike that I don’t pay for. So in a sense, I get paid. I have great kids, I have great things. Yeah, maybe I don’t get a paycheck, but I don’t think that I am any different from pro men that makes a paycheck. I still ride my bike. I still train, I still race where I can. Unfortunately, I can’t be at every race like they can, but yeah.

Collectively, the concept of lifestyle was a resounding theme in how participants reflected on the “professional” label. Mike, quoted above, pointed to eating habits. Others talked about a continuous effort of training, racing, and recovering. However, as Anna explains below, women’s lifestyles differ dramatically from those in the men’s peloton. While many female peloton members mentally focus on their athletic performance during the day, most do not have the financial luxury of spending hours on end training their bodies. This is because outside obligations, such as employment and family, consume much of that time. When people think of a professional athlete, outside employment is not something that comes to mind. Anna’s description of the male peloton lifestyle is more akin to what people conceptualize a “professional athlete” lifestyle to be like. She describes:

Yeah, just their [professional women’s]daily lifestyle was, you know, they eat right. It’s

not like the men where they eat right, go for a ride, go nap, it’s eat right, go for a ride,

shower, go to work, you know, try and rest. The women have to go back to their jobs

after a race.

While study participants have embraced alternate dimensions of the “professional” classification, these individuals face a certain conundrum when articulating these views to others. In some sense, women have to constantly argue for their status as “professionals” —a burden not felt by their male counterparts. This suggests that women’s professional cycling is distinct from men’s professional cycling, a reality that manifests itself in policy differences instituted by cycling’s international governing body. Not only do women not get paid a salary, but they lack a minimum guaranteed minimum wage. Upon signing with a team, men are guaranteed such a wage. Men earning this salary can afford to spend more time on their athletic craft, a luxury that most professional women do not enjoy.

***2. The Utilization of USA Cycling’s Classification System***

Cycling’s own governing bodies have a large role in contributing to women’s placement in “ambiguous sport spaces”. The previous section pointed to both discrepancies in licensing procedures and a lack of minimum wage for women as two such examples. Another example comes in looking at the rider classification scheme. Within the United States, USA Cycling is responsible for establishing rider categories—or “cats” for short. The number of categories differs between disciplines. For road racing athletes, USA Cycling currently has five distinctions for men (categories 1-5) and four for women (categories 1-4). The lower the category designation, the more competitive the rider. This can sometimes catch people off guard, as athletes will talk about moving “up” the rankings (when the actual category numbers themselves will be going down). If someone holding a ranking of “Cat 2” moves up, he or she would then be classified as a “Cat 1.” With this new ranking, that individual would then be one step removed from being classified as a professional. Individuals seeking to move up in classification must meet pre-determined milestones. For example, a male rider looking to move up from Cat 5 to Cat 4 must complete 10 mass-start races that last a minimum of fifteen miles. Each of these races must be sanctioned by USA Cycling.

One issue that frequently emerges for female riders is the collapsing of categories in races. Women riding in the Cat 1 or Cat 2, and sometimes even Cat 3 categories, will often grouped in with professionals. This became evident when speaking with Kate, one of my first study participants. She is racer and part-time team director. She described the process of inadvertently transitioning to the professional ranks:

Because we were Cat 1/2 women, they [race directors] put us in that [professional] category and it just, you know, our first race was kind of a fiasco for us. We didn't know how to play together. We had been competitors for so long, so we were trying to learn the ropes with fairly new young riders in the sport. And as the races went on, we became a very tight-knit team and we learned how to race together. We learned how to support each other. Everything just drastically improved and we became what we are right now, which is this pro team that was kind of thrown into the pro peloton without any direction. And we grew around it.

This “accidental” transition to the professional ranks was echoed by a number of study participants. By virtue of simply participating in a Cat 1/Cat 2/Cat 3 event, many women are thrown in with the professional field. My data reveal that such a pattern is plagued with concerns. First, the collapsing of categories presents a disservice to both inexperienced riders and professional athletes alike. Second, the pattern places women’s cycling in a participation pattern that is extremely difficult to break. While the athletes in this study overcame the challenges of being thrown into the professional peloton (as evidence by the fact that they were current racers and not former ones), many women do not.

*Talent Differentiation in Cycling*

For recreational and amateur athletes, most sports have a built-in way to differentiate and classify athletes. Triathlon and running events break down competitors by both gender and age group. So, as an example, an amateur athlete competing in an IRONMAN triathlon may find herself in the “women’s 50-54” division. Such an athlete delineation says nothing about the talent of the competitor, save the fact that she is not a pro. Other sports establish proxies for talent designations. Martial arts competition would be a prime example. Competitors are sorted by rank, separating color belts from black belts. Still, large talent gaps can exist. This is because black belt divisions encompass *all* black belt ranks. This means that, hypothetically, a 6th degree black belt Master could be placed in the same division as someone who was just awarded their black belt last week. By contrast, cycling is one of the few sports—if not the only one— that systematically ranks amateurs based on talent. In establishing “categories,” some of which are awarded by performance outcomes, cycling has a platform for meaningfully distinguishing between the relative talent of amateur competitors. If used properly, such a ranking platform could be used to make athletes feel comfortable in competing with people of a similar ability. If distinctions are ignored by collapsing categories, this ranking platform loses much of its utility. In women’s cycling, the latter is much more reflective of reality.

As many of my study participants pointed out, it is harder to make discrete talent divisions when you have a smaller field of athletes to work with. In the men’s field, due to the larger membership, the spectrum of talent is extremely wide. It is easier to draw talent division lines when such a wide spectrum is available, evident by the fact that men’s racing features an additional amateur category (Cat 5). The women’s field is smaller. Consequently, robust divisions are harder to establish in any given competition—a fact that works against the professional peloton. Often, due to lack of numbers, race directors tend to combine Cat 1 and 2, and sometimes 3, with the professional field. Sometimes women compete in what is referred to as an “open division.” This means that women from all categories, including the professional ranks, toe the same start line. While the name “open” sounds welcoming, in reality, it is anything but. Having a Cat 4 woman race next to a Cat 1 racer is not an intelligent way to advance the sport. As I elaborate on below, such a practice is dangerous, dilutes the quality of upper fields, and intimates newcomers to the sport.

We saw such dilution at the USA Cycling National Championship, USA Cycling’s biggest domestic stage. Recall that, in road racing, women only have 4 racing categories. Their male counterparts have 5. At the 2014 Connecticut Cycling Festival, professional women, as well as Cat 1/2/3, all raced together. By comparison, men had four different races (Pro/1/2/3, Cat 3/4, Cat 4/5, and Masters 40+). By combining the professional field with less talented categories, the “professional race” is diluted. In essence, the professional race is capturing people from more amateur divisions. Less talented women standing side-by-side with the elite is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes the race more populated with athletes. This gives the *appearance* of a larger pool of athletes. On the other hand, artificially inflating the field detracts from the overall skill level of the race. Having a large talent gap does not jive with the word “professional.” Further, having amateurs competing with professionals is dangerous. A number of study participants described cycling as a contact sport. They also mentioned that Cat 4 athletes lack the bike handling skills to hang with the professional field. Looking more broadly, a large talent gap in a racing environments leads to the event seeming more unappealing to sponsors, mainstream media, and spectators. As thoughtfully articulated by Deena, an active Cat 1 racer, “the talents of professional women deserved to be showcased.” The collapsing of categories does not allow for this.

***3. Not having a dedicated home in training and racing opportunities***

Not having a dedicated home in training and racing opportunities has a substantial and often unspoken repercussion—intimidation. Consider these facts: the jump from Cat 4 to Cat 3 is simply participation based, not performance based. By simply starting 10 USAC-certified races that contain a field of at least fifteen athletes, women become eligible to move up in category. This puts mid-level amateur racers in a very difficult predicament. With Cat 3 women race side-by-side with professionals in some races, each field lacks a true “home.” Here, again, is where another distinctive feature of cycling emerges. In sports like triathlon and running, the vast majority of amateur athletes are competing with themselves. Their relative performance to the race winner is of no consequence. Amateur IRONMAN competitors may finish 7 hours behind the actual race winner yet still revel in their personal accomplishment. This is not the case in cycling. In many criteriums, athletes are disqualified if they are lapped. This means that a Cat 3 athlete needs a certain level of skill to avoid being lapped by members of the professional peloton. With that reality, many novice racers ask this simple question: why bother competing to simply be lapped? While a runner can still have a meaningful experience crossing the finish line of a marathon hours after the winner, the same cannot be said of a criterium racer. If lapped, her day is done. This leaves many novice competitors feeling like there is no place to develop their skills in a racing context. One cannot overlook the psychological aspect of this conundrum. The thought of racing with athletes in the Pro/Cat 1/Cat 2 categories is intimidating, leaving these athletes with no place to go. Laura spoke about the intimidation factor:

When I started racing, there was whole race series for CAT 4 women and CAT 3 women, where you could be at the championship. And some swag and stuff like that, but it was enough of a carrot to keep you, oh, this one is part of this series, you know? And that’s kind of gone by the wayside and so the numbers have dropped down more, and races are now going to open [division], and like I said earlier, that’s really hard. It’s really, really hard to get an entry level women to come to the line knowing she is going up against cat 1. She is going up against a couple of national champions and world champions. That’s very intimidating and really, really hard to get women to come. I think that having the clinics and tying clinics into races, that helps. We’ve tried that a number of times with mixed results and I think it’s just a matter of time. I think to get people to, and promoters especially, to say that yeah, we will commit to that. And to have somebody to do it. It’s a lot of work.

The way that categories are often collapsed stifles athlete development. The sport lacks sufficient development opportunities for mid-tier amateur racers. This actively works against the development of the sport, and ultimately the professional peloton. Recreational riders looking to get into racing are often well aware of this unfavorable landscape, a fact that keeps some on the sideline. This also puts race directors in a difficult position, particularly those who want to advance women’s cycling. This sentiment was reflected by Brenda, a highly accomplished rider:

We’re at a kind of a uncomfortable catch-22. The race promoters that consistently offered entry-level races for women no longer are because there weren’t women doing it, and you get a few women to do it, but there is no place for them to race. To throw in a beginner racer in an open women’s field is like taking a recreational rider and telling them to go ride with Hincapie. I mean, that’s the same thing that you are dealing with because women in general, the numbers of USAC licenses were about 1/3 of the numbers, at best, of men. There is just that big number discrepancy. And promoters are going to look, “oh look, you only have 20 people coming on the line. We can’t support a race like that.” Well, 20 is a lot for women because our numbers are down. So that 20 Cat 3 women could be, in the entire state, there could only be 90 or less Cat 3 women in the entire state. Who knows. Probably be less. So you run into safety, places to race, expense.

This research participant is pointing to a vicious cycle. In order to justify holding races specifically for the mid-tier amateur, race directors need to see demand. Demand cannot be established with potential competitors sitting on the sidelines.

To get experience, many women find themselves having to ride with men. As an example, I observed a local criterium practice series in a nearby state. This series, which lasts all summer, is billed as a great opportunity for new athletes to “gain experience.” While the fields are billed as being “co-ed,” women are in the very small minority. This becomes a difficult place to learn, particularly when the intimidation factor comes into play. When asked about this intimidation factor, Andrea describes:

I think that's a huge part of it, too. Because, especially crits, because they're racing with the men. And the men are aggressive, and the men are tough, and the men are mean. You know, not in that sense, but they are more aggressive, so they will take a more daring line where the women may be like, “I’m not going to take that” and then they get yelled at because they didn't hold the same line. You know, so I could see that that could be very intimidating, is to race with men. I get intimidated, too. I go race with men and you have to get a different game on, you know? I got to really work aggressive, even though the pro peloton women are quite aggressive as well, but it is a little different volume than the men. So I think a lot of it is that hesitation, which is why I think if you look at the women-only rides, they're so popular too because they’re not riding with the men at all. And that’s why, years ago, they started Curves gym. Women could work out on their own. Women like to make sure that they're doing it right before they throw it all out there for everybody else to see, so I think that causes some hesitation.

I argue that such co-ed environments represent “ambiguous sport spaces.” This is true for both professional and amateur women. Andrea, a highly experienced rider, talks about the intimidation of riding with men. This suggests that, while criterium practices such as the one mentioned above represent a learning opportunity, they also potentially put women in a precarious place. These riders are often overshadowed by stronger male competitors. There is little nurturing space to grow and celebrate their passion as female athletes. Thus, while learning is possible, the environment is far from optimal. With the pipeline for athlete development being filled with ambiguous classifications and lack of gender-specific learning environments, women’s cycling is not reaching its full potential. This, in turn, impacts the size and competitiveness of the professional peloton. At the same time, a thriving women’s peloton, with a clear vision for growth, is needed to help advance opportunities at the amateur level. Creating spaces for women to establish camaraderie with other females is a pivotal part of that development process.

**Conclusion**

Study participants described a lifestyle of continually negotiating ambiguous sporting spaces. Cycling’s governing body, sponsors (particularly those that back out of financial commitments), media outlets, and race directors all have a hand in perpetuating the existence of such spaces. I argue that the existence of such spaces is the consequence of dual landscapes in the professional cycling world—“women’s racing” and “men’s racing.” As my analysis revealed, women are hampered by a few key dimensions of ambiguous sport spaces, elements that unique to them as female athletes. These dimensions are not conforming to the socially-understood definition of a “professional athlete,” not fully utilizing the USA Cycling rider classification scheme, and lacking a dedicated home in training and racing contexts.

These realities reaffirm what Theberge (2000) refers to as “patriarchal relations of power” (8). Her analysis of the ice hockey context thoughtfully untangles inequalities in the distribution of resources (namely ice time), as well as the philosophies of hockey’s provincial and country-wide governing bodies. My deconstruction of professional female cycling adds to this understanding of gendered institutions in sport. Similar to the athletes interviewed in Theberge’s study, my participants talk about complex webs of resistance and discrimination. They face governing bodies that are separatists, keeping women on the fringe of the sport. The organizational structures that surround them present an unwillingness to challenge the power of men. Ambiguous sport spaces can be viewed as a form of “moving boundary of resistance.” This means that, as women make incremental progress in breaking down boundaries in some areas, they face increased resistance in others. It is difficult to make progress from the position of an ambiguous space.

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1. http://prowomenscycling.com/2013/05/17/on-the-cancellation-of-the-tour-of-languedoc-roussillon/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The current membership can be viewed here: http://www.uci.ch/inside-uci/organisation/management-committee-161115/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A profile of Tracey Gaurdry can be viewed here: http://www.uci.ch/inside-uci/organisation/management/committee/tracey-gaudry-aus/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.letour.com/le-tour/2014/us/overall-route.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)