

# REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



## Could a New Co-Ed Sport Promote Gender Equality?

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*Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

*In the workplace, we want normalized interpersonal relations where dignity, respect and equity are universal, yet there remain significant cultural barriers in society that reinforce differences between groups such as across gender lines that spill over into the workplace. I believe one of those barriers is related to sports at the professional or high amateur levels. Although sports played tremendous roles in bringing people together, such as international competitions like the Olympics, it can also reinforce traditional gender differences. We want men and women to work as a team in the workplace, but we really don't have many coed options in sports. If we want to encourage better gender relations in all aspects of society, is it time for a change?*

*My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.*

This is a topic that I've been thinking about for a very long time, and part of this is because I see two things that are potentially very good for society. First, on the side of sport -- I've been a sports fan all of my life. I followed the Olympics. I love international competitions. I love professional competitions. I've watched sports all over the world. And there's so many great things that we can we can gain from sport in terms of, you know, individual and collective development. Certainly, there have been a lot of studies that have shown the positive impacts of sports, such as wellness, self-empowerment, better social integration, development of leadership and communication skills is especially true. As in the past couple of decades, we've seen a lot more elite women athletes excelling, gaining attention in the workplace and in general society.

There's also a lot of studies that talk about the benefits of gender equity in society. There's a TED talk that I love to use because it's such a great talk. It's from 2015 and it's by a commentator by the name of Michael Kimmel, who draws from several psychological studies that shows how [societies with] greater gender equality -- the societies have a tendency to be happier. They have less strife. Businesses are more efficient. There's less turnover, [higher] job satisfaction. Family life is seen to be more stable and balanced. I mean, there's a whole bunch of benefits for gender equality. And with sport, you know, there's a lot of overlap. I mean, you talk about the benefits that I just gave. There's a lot of overlap.

Above all, probably the most important thing are the values that are taught in sport -- you have sportsmanship, which is the practice of ethical conduct associated with participating and spectating at sporting events. And sportsmanship is a very strong value that has tremendous benefits for the self-esteem and interconnectedness, the interpersonal relationships between people. All of these benefits are very, very clear.

[But when] we look at sport -- I'm not talking about just the game itself. I'm talking about the whole environment of sport. So we think about the games, we think about the spectators or those who watch. And we also talk about the economics of sport. I mean, these are three parts, very important parts about the environment, the sport, because, of course, you know, the game is not just the game. In order to sustain the games, you've got to have resources, you've got to have money, and you also have to have public interest. People need to be willing to either watch or participate or become involved in some way in order to support a sport. And so you got to do is we've got to if we're going to talk about the sport environment, we've got to cover all three.

When we look at the you know, the whole environment of sport, despite all of the benefits that it has, there are just too many cultural barriers that I think are ... in the way, when it comes to using sport as a way of promoting gender equality. Part of it, I think, is the design of the game itself and how the design of the games translate into what people expect when they watch sports. And I'm going to focus mostly on team sports for this, because team sports are definitely male-dominated. There's a definite difference between the men's professional leagues and women's professional leagues just in terms of the quantity, the sheer quantity, but also the economic numbers. You know, studies of the formation or the design of sports really shows that there is a lot of masculinity associated. Part of it is this notion about how sports has been used as a rite of passage for boys specifically to become men. And the the competitiveness, the possibility of war, just the sheer environment of what was expected of men in a male dominated society meant that a lot of sports were designed, in essence, to become rites of passage.

As a matter of fact, I've read one history that showed that this was definitely the case for sports like American football and rugby. They were rough sports designed to toughen boys up and bring them up into manhood. [A]nother thing about the design of sports was how a number of sports have military origins. And some of them like fencing, like equestrian, like boxing -- these are these are sports that derived from skills that were needed by soldiers or their commanders on the battlefield. And so they became sports -- sort of like a combination of training and entertainment. And, of course, war itself is very, very closely associated with masculinity.

The sports were developed by and for men. And so it's no surprise that, you know, that in some way has perpetuated over time. That's the design of the games now. How is it translated into the environments for spectators or the economics of it? There's a lot of literature that is actually kind of taken a look at that, because there are, in fact, a number of sports that are played by both men and women. And you would think that because you have, you know, at least equal opportunity, say at junior levels like college and below, then you would think that since you have equal opportunity for these men and women to play in sports, that you would see some degree of equality emerge. But the fact is that from a spectator and from an economic standpoint, there's the view that people have about women's professional sports being, by comparison, watered down.

Now, what does this mean? Well, let's let's consider a couple of things about women's sports. Let's take ice hockey. Ice hockey is played by men and women, but there's qualitative differences in the game. I mean, it is the exact same game they're playing on the same ice rink. But for example, women are not allowed to [body-]check, which is to say to initiate strong physical contact with other women players. Not in comparison to the men's game where the men, they check each other rather

constantly. It's a very, very integral part of the game. A number of sports, i.e. the women's variant of it, limit the physical contact, which, of course, means that the excitement or the buzz that's generated by a heavy hit of some kind. Well, if you don't have that in the women's game by comparison and you're looking at the two, well, of course, you're going to think or you might be more liable to think that the women's game is in some way, I hate to say it, inferior.

For myself. I happen to enjoy women's basketball very much. And in some ways I like women's basketball better than the men because the men's game can be a very power oriented game and the women's game is a little bit more tactical. So when you compare the two, you know, some of the differences may very well make one like a women's game better. But if you were to compare the economics between men and women's professional sports, well, there's just there's just not the same. I mean, men's leagues are everywhere, women's are not.

So you've got various things that are feeding a perception that the women's game is in some way inferior. So we're perpetuating this idea that there is a difference between men and women largely associated because of the design of the sports in which emphasize brute force, upper body strength, things where the propensity is that men and women are different, have very, very significant differences. And so it shouldn't be surprising that when we have a sports world where we're all designed and looking at, you know, games such that were devised, designed by men, but being adapted for women, that women's game is not going to be looked at as favorably.

So one of the challenges that I think is present is that we need games that are actually designed to be played by men and women where they are in some way on equal footing. There are very, very few sports that exist right now that are like that, that were specifically designed for men and women to compete as teammates [and] what I'm arguing here, [it] needs to change. Probably the most prominent example of a true designed-for-coed-play kind of sport is the game of *korfball* -- which is kind of a variant of basketball. Korfball, is it's played in Europe largely. I mean, it's very much more popular in the Netherlands and Belgium. And there's you know, there are certain nations that really take it very seriously.

And the differences between it and basketball are many actually. There's I mean, you watch the two games, they're very, very different. In the first place, the basket is actually just a ring that's suspended on a pole. There is no backboard and it's suspended on a pole in the middle of the court or in the middle of the offensive half of the court. So basically, players can go all the way around it and surround the the pole. It is much, much higher, so it's far more difficult to shoot a shot. And then, men must guard men, women must guard women. And when you get the ball, you cannot move with it. You basically have to either pass it or shoot it, and you're only allowed to shoot if you have possession of the ball in your open.

Now, the reason why I say all of this is because korfball basically brings about gender equality through a rather restrictive means. It basically creates a whole bunch of rules that are designed to try to limit the differences between men and women so that they could play together as equals. I've actually watched korfball matches, and I will say as a spectator of it, it's not exactly the most exciting game to watch as a casual sports fan. It is certainly a very good game to play because, you know, it reinforces all of the things that you would want, you know -- good teamwork. It emphasizes communication--I mean, korfball players yell at each other. I shouldn't say yell at each other. They

yell to each other. There's a lot of, you know, a lot of tactical movement. But the problem is, is that it is a slow paced game. It is a very, very difficult to score. So in a lot of ways, korfbal is not going to be the sort of sport that I think would break the ceiling in terms of, say, getting an event out there that would be co-ed, that would really be able to build that environment of sport, of the spectating, of the economics, of the buzz, of the whatever.

So we've got to think about if we think that co-ed sports could be a step forward in trying to promote the kind of gender equality, dignity, respect that we are looking for, then one of the things that I'm thinking is that maybe what we want are some different games. What I want to do is talk a little bit about what I think some of these games might be, because, you know, the thing that you would want is you would want something that emphasizes what men and women are equally good at and not to try to have the rules of the game be so burdensome that it would mute individual capabilities, you know, recognizing that obviously the game would have to avoid something like the upper body strength differences. What are things that men and women are perhaps a little bit more, at least in close or equal footing on nowadays? That could be emphasized in a co-ed sport.

Things that come to my mind are endurance games that have a lot of tactics and a lot of decision making. Now, decision making--this is something I think is kind of important--because when you think about the the sports that are very popular, that have a lot of drama, one of the things that I find is that there are so many choices that are present in players' minds that allow the spectators and allow the pundits and allow people to converse. Why did they do that? Think about what's really good about American football, for example. American football is about an incredible array of choices, choices about how you set up each play, choices about whether to kick or punt or go for it on fourth down things of that nature. Baseball, the choices available to a pitcher, what kind of a pitch to throw, how fast they throw it, where to throw it, what the batter is going to do. It's what's expected and what's unexpected. Sports that have those kind of choices seem to elevate more drama. Again, they elevate the conversation. I mean, people will -- "armchair quarterback" is a term we like to use the United States -- they'll dissect every play to try to come up with ideas about what should have been done differently.

So I think that there's a possibility of trying to build a sport that emphasizes endurance over body strength because, again, elite women athletes nowadays really have excellent conditioning, just like the men. And I think that's something that capitalizes on that would be tremendous, something that involves tactics and choices, something that presents players with choices to make in the middle of the game that would generate the buzz.

And the other thing is, is that we have to, you know, with the rules, the tendency is indeed to try to design rules so that it restricts movement or it restricts options in a in a way to try to limit the capabilities of some players in order to make everything appear equal. And I think that in the end, if we're serious about trying to come up with a co-ed sport that would be exciting and serve the purpose that we're talking about, it's got to do the opposite. It's got to be simple and yet make sense so that we don't have a lot of rules that have to be explained. Otherwise, you know, people are just going to get confused. They're going to get bored. If everything has to be explained, people aren't going to watch the sport.

So with all of this, you know, kind of getting circling this back around. I really believe that sport presents a tremendous opportunity for individual development and the development of the interpersonal relationships we want right now. We're not leveraging that opportunity. And I do believe that there's possibilities there on the website. As I release this episode, I am actually going to include a very simple write up for a game that I want to propose as a coed sport with these characteristics that I'm talking about, which I would hope would be effective as a coed sport. That would be interesting to watch. And that would be also kind of exciting, fun to play and reinforce all the values that we want. I encourage you to go ahead and download the paper. I will definitely welcome feedback. Does this sound like a good idea?

But regardless, you know, what we should be doing is we should be having these sorts of conversations. You know, it's not enough to say that we're getting a lot of things wrong. Well, let's let's think about what can we actually do? What can we do to enhance these tools that we have available to us, you know, affect social change and do so constructively? You know, let's turn this into a positive conversation. I really do think that there's an answer to be found.

*... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.*

**ALL THE BEST!**  
**TOM GALVIN**