

## MASCULINITIES IN SPORTS: THE CASE OF RUGBY

*MASCULINIDADES NO ESPORTE: O CASO DO RUGBY* 

*MASCULINIDADES EN EL DEPORTE: EL CASO DEL RUGBY* 

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 **Francisca Islandia Cardoso da Silva\*** <islandiacardoso@hotmail.com>

 **Dulce Maria Filgueira de Almeida\*** <dulce.filgueira@gmail.com>

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\*Universidade de Brasília. Brasília, DF, Brasil.

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**Abstract:** This essay aims to question rugby as a mediation practice in attributing meanings to masculinities. Amid the process of civilisation and the suffragette movement, the regulations for that sport, along with the views of masculinity as defended by players have suffered modifications. Rugby has traced a nonlinear movement which on occasion reproduces traditional conceptions, and at times contributes to tension in gender relations.

**Keywords:** Sports. Gender identity. Masculinity.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

According to Bracht (2005), the modern sport consists of activities marked by their competitiveness; it was born in Europe around the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of modifications in elements of the bodily culture around movement. The author states that the criticism of sports is also criticism of one's society, acknowledging that it is also an example of social practice and, therefore, liable to modifications, once its specificities are preserved.

In the social imagination, rugby is considered an eminently "masculine" sport. That idea associates that modality – at times, mechanically – to producing a given configuration of masculinity, because of a set of technical and tactical procedures that surround it, as well as the historical process that enabled its constitution as a modern sport.

Based on bodily appearances, subjects are classified, set within a hierarchy, and defined through the incorporation of power-related traits that serve contextual standards and cultural references (LOURO, 2004). The body is affected by processes and social agents such as habits, the labour market, urbanisation, education, and sports. These influences are structured around gender; therefore, gender arrangements are not a mere effect of anatomic properties; they "[...] also preceded the body, forming the conditions under which it develops and lives" (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015, p. 93).

In the case of rugby, the expected set of behaviours in relation to the male gender are signified and reinforced in different ways, forging a sort of manual of good behaviour, in which norms of conduct are prescribed and followed by the players of that sport. However, these norms of conduct that reinforce standards and stereotypes in rugby must be better evidenced and understood, given that they constitute a control mechanism over the body, like any other form of discipline.

This essay aims, based on a sociohistorical approach, to question the potential mediation of rugby in the process of configuring masculinities. To do so, the chosen path was to treat rugby as a modern sport, in the light of Norbert Elias's and Eric Dunning's texts. Once a clear relationship is evidenced involving rugby, the constitution of masculinities and the development of its own *habitus* occurs as it goes from being an elite sport to a sport of the working class in Britain. Furthermore, relying on Raewyn Connel's foundations, we discuss issues of gender and the masculine universe. This text is organised around the rules of rugby (its code) and, therefore, approaches the ambivalences between amateur and professional practices of that sport which has come to present as a peculiar mediator of masculinity, that is, as a warrior's *ethos*, a tool for controlling bodies.

## 2 THE FIRST WRITINGS ABOUT RUGBY'S CODE OF CONDUCT

From the 16th century, in Western Europe, the social models of conduct, particularly in the high social classes, started to transform towards banning excesses in self-punishment and self-complacency. That change found expression in the

concept of civility, “symbol of a new refinement in manners” (ELIAS, 1985a, p. 41). Rugby’s development as a sport, in particular, underwent changes in its norms of conduct and sensitivity to violence.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to the advancements in the process of civilisation, the British society watched the insurgence of women against gender inequality. Towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was evident that the suffragette movement, despite not being able to achieve all their goals, caused imbalance in the relationship between men and women in England. The attribution of some rights to women was read by a group of men as a thread to their position of dominance, especially to men in the middle class, to which also belonged most of the suffragettes. As a response, some of them mobilised around rugby as an enclave where they would be able to reinforce their threatened model of masculinity and undermine women as the weaker sex. It is possible to note, from the actions of these men, a hostile attitude and, paradoxically, a fearful one towards women, who started to challenge societal structures and practices that had been, until then, considered feminine (DUNNING, 1985b).

There is indication that rugby originates from a variety of medieval games, practiced according to oral rules, in open fields and village streets across England (RIAL, 2000). These games expressed an extreme form of a patriarchal regime, characterised by State and social development structures at relatively reduced levels, with regularly manifested acts of violence in daily life and power mechanisms exerted over both genders, but generally favourable to men. “As such, they integrated the *macho* expressions in a relatively unbridled way” (DUNNING, 1985b, p. 395).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in English public schools – starting with Rugby School –, rugby emerges gradually as a game with distinct characteristics (ALASALMI, 2017). The formation of that educational system by young descendants from aristocrats and the middle class determined the construction of a certain identity of nobility, chivalry, and virility, as the aim of these institutions was to develop to a level of excellence young and strong men for business or military positions (BETTI, 2009). Meant as a symbolic practice of confrontation, rugby was praised as the ideal mechanism of education and socialisation for future military and administrative leaders of the British nation, as it became a vehicle of imposition and expression for virility (DUNNING, 1985b).

Sports are the site of observation, evaluation, and comparison amongst its players; those who reach the most effective results and performance receive distinctive gains, to use Bordieu’s term (2003). In that perspective, pressured by British society to practice sports, young men were forced to abide by their rule; otherwise, they risked fame as effeminate, which in turn was associated to homosexuality. The practice of competitive sports in which physical domination is celebrated represents an important social resource of experience and validation of masculinity during one’s youth and adulthood, acting as a barrier against what is feminine or emasculated (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015, DUNNING; MAGUIRE, 1997).

In 1945, at the Rugby School, the first rules of rugby were formalised, among which “the use of navvies is completely forbidden” (boots with an iron pointer, often used in rugby matches and in other schools), which suggests a decline in the cult to

violence (DUNNING, 1985a, p. 336). Conceived by the Aristotelian philosophy as a school of courage and virility, “[...] capable of forming one’s character, engraining the will to win”, the sport should respect the rules and adopt fair play, a disposition then opposed to seeking victory at all costs (BOURDIEU, 2003, p. 187). Despite that fact, rugby did not become free from “[...] patriarchal prejudice, characteristic of a society in a relatively started phase in its emergence as an urban and industrial nation-state” (DUNNING, 1985b, p. 395).

To solve criticism regarding the violence in rugby, the Football Association (FA) was created, meant to guide rugby football and modern-day football. However, in the end of 1863, after FA prohibited carrying the ball with one’s hands and kicking an opponent’s legs (the so-called hacking) – rugby’s main characteristics at the time –, English teams refused to participate in the federation. Those who defended hacking argued that abolishing them “would make the game more effeminate” (ELIAS; DUNNING, 1985, p. 288).

The attributes related to rugby compose what Elias (1985b, p. 204) calls “warrior ethos”, which can be used as a tool to control bodies. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the modality is associated to the cult of violence and strength, to controlling and disciplining bodies through pain, misogyny, and homophobia. Therefore, the civilisation process the sport underwent was characterised by some players as a feminization process for rugby, as “while the male ideal is portrayed as arrogant” and strong (both physically and psychologically), “the female ideal – according to a male perspective – is portrayed as shy, fragile, and dependent” (DUNNING, 1985b, p. 398-399). Avoiding physical dispute against one’s adversary was a cowardly, effeminate act; it did not suit the needed warrior ethos of a rugby male player (RIAL, 2000).

Despite not mentioning rugby, Pierre Bourdieu (2012), in the book *The Male Domination*, explains the concern in fulfilling a given model of masculinity in/of rugby. The author states that the male order imposes upon men the obligation to possess and to demonstrate their virility at every opportunity, characterising their reproductive, sexual, and social capacities.

Being a man “[...] is not something spontaneous, it must be constantly proven, even though it comes at a heavy price” (RIAL, 2000, p. 254). However, that virility is, at the same time, men’s glory and angst, as it leads them to invest in “every violent game [...] and more specifically in those most adequate for producing visible signs of masculinity, so they can manifest and test these supposedly virile qualities” (BOURDIEU, 2012, p. 65). One way to demonstrate such an attribute is to engage in bodily practices, mainly the risky ones, like rugby.

In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the public controversy over hacking continued. The level of violence became a threat to the acceptance of rugby as a civilised sport. For that reason, the Rugby Football Union (RFU), established in 1871 with the aim to unify its rules, decided to abolish hacking (DUNNING, 1985a), despite criticism by those who believed a game of rugby would not be complete without a real opportunity to display one’s bravery – in other words, to inflict and to bear pain without complaint.

### 3 THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF RUGBY AND THE CHANGES IN THE PROFILE OF MALE PLAYER

When the RFU was established, rugby was performed by people from the upper-middle and middle classes, mainly in schools and clubs in southern England, forbidden to working men. In the list of rules set in 1880, that criterium for composing a team was abolished (RIAL, 2000).

Thus, rugby underwent what Phillpots (2000, p. 42-43) describes as a “democratisation”; most of the population contributed to the sport, and the amount of necessary players for a match at the time was 40 men. Bourdieu (2003) does not use the term democratisation to describe the process that made rugby popular or massive amongst fans. The author observes that movement in sport as a strategy of political control of the masses. Before considering the sport was a tool to shape one’s character, English public schools, that must take on the job to occupy the teenagers under their wings for 24 hours a day, every day of the week, saw a means to keep them busy at a lower cost; during sports practice, students would be easily watched over, they would be dedicated to a healthy activity in which they would be able to unload their violence upon their classmates instead of doing so within the school’s walls or in front of their teachers.

The development of sports practices amongst elite youths results partly from this fact, and the same happened for underprivileged classes. As it acknowledged such a possibility to use sports in mobilising, occupying, and controlling youngsters, the state, along with other institutions and agents – political parties, unions, churches, business owners – fought for the symbolic achievement in the poor population, as they started to support financially the practice of the sport and the constitution of sports associations. It became a site of political struggle (BOURDIEU, 2003).

Concerned with ensuring “a continuous and complete involvement of the working population”, business owners would offer them, in addition to hospitals and schools, stadia and other sports establishments (BOURDIEU, 2003, p. 194). In the industrial north of England, entrepreneurs and local industries, especially in the regions of Yorkshire and Lancashire, founded a series of rugby clubs, which would go on to attract diverse social classes to practice sports, most notably the working class (PHILLPOTS, 2000).

Rugby teams were composed by men who had not gone through the socialisation process of public schools and universities in England, who, therefore, did not have the same values (PHILLPOTS, 2000). The propagation of rugby in elite schools and lower-class sports associations was followed both by a change in the function attributed to the practice by its players and a transformation in the practice itself (BOURDIEU, 2003).

New players considered themselves gentlemen and shared traditional concepts of masculinities with teams from the south, like hardship and strength (PHILLPOTS, 2000), but those who conserved rugby’s nostalgia in university had trouble admitting their taste for violence and for “an exaltation of the obscure sacrifice, typically plebeian” attitude that characterised rugby players (BOURDIEU, 2003, p. 196).

Moreover, players from the working classes also had different conceptions regarding the amateurish aspects of the game, refuting them in favour of professionalising the sport (PHILLPOTS, 2000) and its correlated demands, such as rationalising training and “maximising specific forms of efficacy (measured in ‘victories,’ ‘titles,’ or ‘records’)” (BOURDIEU, 2003, p. 196). For these players, expenses and losses in salary due to team commitments were considerable. Then, after highlighting that it was not payment for practicing rugby, the northern clubs were open to compensate players’ expenses so they could keep them and ensure competitiveness amongst teams (ALASALMI, 2014).

To understand the reasons why players from the working classes presented such distinct conceptions when compared to players from the elite in relation to amateur and fair play, it is necessary to remember that, for the latter, a career in sports was practically absent from the field of possible and admissible professional lives for someone in the hegemonic classes, with the exception of tennis and golf, owing to their distinctive salaries. As for the boys in lower classes, a career in sports represented one of the “only ways to rise socially,” justifying one of the few possibilities for social mobility (BOURDIEU, 2003, p. 196).

That perspective of professionalising rugby did not please the elite, which argued that paying salaries went against the true values of sport: leisure, pleasure, and the development of the English character, marked by chivalry, loyalty, and decency. Monetary gain would mean making the sport a commercial endeavour, reducing it to a mere competition in which the appreciation of the game and the production of values would be subjected to results (SKINNER; STEWART; EDWARDS, 2003).

Bourdieu (2003) corroborates Skinner, Stewart, and Edwards (2003), adding another factor to the contrary stance taken by the elite to working men entering teams and to the professionalisation of rugby, consequently the requirement of paying a living wage to players. For the author, the sport, like any social practice, is the object of struggle “between the dominating classes and the social classes” (BOURDIEU, 2003, p. 189) “by the definition of a legitimate body and its legitimate uses” (BOURDIEU, 2003, p. 190). Sports in the 19th century (and in the current days) carries within itself an aristocratic ideology that, in addition to defining it as “a disinterested and free activity,” masks the “truth of a growing portion of sports practices,” a value attributed to activities such as tennis or horseback riding, mostly played by the elite, along with “distinction earnings” which doubtless partly justify their demand (BOURDIEU, 2003, p. 190). Professionalising rugby would allow men from lower classes to practice that sport that had originally been meant for the elite; moreover, it would enable its transformation into a mass spectacle, further reducing its distinctive earnings.

Until the 1880s, rugby’s *ethos* as a sport existed in Great Britain in a relatively vague and shapeless way. It was only after the growing threat from the lower classes of engaging in these practices, previously exclusive to an elite, that amateur leagues began to articulate and mobilize players. The main goal of that movement was to protect ways of participating in sports that the elite judged as their exclusive right (ELIAS; DUNNING, 1985). Under the guise that “playing for money would make the sport less of what it was, less noble than it was,” the elite kept the lower classes

as far as possible from their enclave (RIAL, 2000, p. 245). Skinner, Stewart, and Edwards (2003) reaffirm that perception, adding that the amateur *ethos* in rugby was expressed through wealth, independence and exclusivity amongst the English elites. That *ethos* was threatened as the game became more popular, cascading around the lower classes.

Attitudes varied greatly amongst wealthy and working men. Workers had little consideration for the wide concept of amateur values. On the contrary: they fostered a sports tradition that emphasised gains, wages, and material compensation. According to that vision, so that rugby could become a more competitive, high-stakes game, cups and leagues were considered essential, as opposed to friendly matches, insistently sponsored by southern clubs (PHILLPOTS, 2000).

The juxtaposition of socially exclusive rugby clubs and open organisation was a potential setting for conflict. In 1895, through a concentrated effort at their highest levels, RFU created anti-professional regulations that widened the gap between clubs from the south and from the north of England, strictly declaring itself an amateur organisation (PHILLPOTS, 2000). Even English public schools mobilised in favour of amateur rugby practices, highlighting in their argument that pleasure by itself was not the essential ingredient of the sport, but also “the educational rationalisation of the sport, in particular within teams, as an instrument for building character” (ELIAS; DUNNING, 1985, p. 314).

As consequence of those actions, 22 northern clubs, composed of workers, among others, withdrew from the organisation and formed, in 1898, the Northern Rugby Football Union (NRFU). At its centre, it carried the brand of professionalism; in 1892, it was renamed Rugby Football League. The result: rugby was divided into two different formats: Rugby Union (amateur) and Rugby League (professional), which remain to this day (ALASALMI, 2014).

Administrative changes were happening. To exemplify the degree of violence still served by rugby, Phillpots (2000) cites two incidents from the 1960s, involving two English players. In 1964, Mike Davis was playing against New Zealand when he dislocated his shoulder, yet still remained in the field. Two years later, David Perry also continued playing despite a serious lesion to his knee cartilage in the first 15 minutes of the match.

After 1968, substitutions for injured players were allowed, first in international matches and, later, for all games, which helped improve the image of sport as a spectacle. The notion that an injured player should stay in the field regardless of pain, to demonstrate a certain commitment to the cause, no longer had a place in modern sports. It was also not appropriate to suggest that a team with ones or two players less than their opponent should display its true character by overcoming that adversity, based on the argument that, reaching players' and viewers' expectations—and remains – required an uncertainty as to the match results throughout the period. Losing a player might make your team make more of an effort to win, however, it is far more likely that the victorious team will be the one with a full roster of players (PHILLPOTS, 2000).

After reflecting about gender relations in rugby, Dunning (1985b, p. 399) states that the modality contributed to develop “symbolic expressions of sexism”. An example of such action in rugby, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lies in the prohibition of women in after-game meetings, except for women present at the scene for “serving tea, preparing, and serving meals, or to admire and encourage their men” (DUNNING, 1985b, p. 402). In other words, the presence of women was only tolerated in player meetings if they kept within a role of servitude towards them.

Among other facts, those meetings included hazing rituals in which new players were forced to strip, to mimic behaviours associated with women and homosexuals, under an extremely disrespectful and humiliating view of these categories. Yet, their genital organs were violated “occasionally with shoe grease or vaseline” (DUNNING, 1985b, p. 400). The ritual aimed to officially insert the player in what was considered the life of a true man, leaving behind any aspects that would violate the strict norms of masculinity preached by their team and the society in general.

However, despite filled with patriarchal values, the modern sport emerged as part of a civilisatory shift – one of its aspects was the transformation, however feeble, of gender relations. Along with the process that made rugby a professional practice, a small opening appeared for the indirect participation of women in the practice of the sport (DUNNING, 1985b).

Thanks to the ongoing process of women’s emancipation, British clubs no longer held the borders of gender so firmly as they did before. Structures and ideologies regarding the ideal of masculinity in that period, which had been the foundation of rugby’s code (here, understood as a set of rules for the game itself, but also as a set of values and conducts held by its players and fans), were suddenly fragile. Women were not spoken of as rugby players yet, but, in a double-faced movement, they were at least allowed to visit, as long as they were in the company of a man. This opening of the gates for women was partly caused by financial contingencies that led teams to use dance balls as instruments for fundraising. However, that same opening also shows that, despite the resistance of male domination in British society, that rule was under question and, to a certain extent, even corroded (DUNNING, 1985b).

In 1995, issues around professionalism in rugby increased and, on August 27<sup>th</sup> of the same year, the International Rugby Football Board (IRFB) – a worldwide rugby governance organisation, created in 1866 to solve disputes around rules and regulation – changed its rules to make it an open game officially, that is, to allow professionalisation (PHILLPOTS, 2000).

Since its regulation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the present day, rugby’s code has undergone several transformations. However, Light and Kirk (2000) observed that, even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of those values still survive. In an elite school in Australia, the authors found a clear structure of masculinities built from rugby, centred in domination, aggression, and implacable competition.

Considering rugby’s use as a form of educating male bodies, Connell (1995), in a study about the historicity of masculinities, notes that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the sport was also an instrument of nationalist, militarist propaganda, a site for masculinity as

violence in New Zealand. In a study performed in the 1990s in Brazil, Rial (2000) highlights that, despite changes in regulation, amateur rugby players still defended their ability to endure pain as something inherent to the game and, thus, that they must remain in the field as long as possible. These physical manifestations are, according to the author, appreciated by players and considered essential to the image of what they call male. Pain is experienced with “a certain dose of pleasure; scars are proudly displayed and, more often than not, he [the player] and his mates sacrifice themselves for the game, playing with injuries” (RIAL, 2000, p. 235).

Regarding post-match meetings, the aforementioned authors states that, in Brazil, they are called “a third half” – like in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these are occasions in which team players meet at a private location, where the presence of women is forbidden, to engage in hazing, initiation rituals and other forms of socialising. As she was barred from attending this third half due to her gender, Rial (2000) describes her thoughts as tending to go towards “a chivalry of intersexual interaction and regimented aggression [...] is countered by a manifestation of certain savagery [...], a feature of truly male beings” (RIAL, 2000, p. 237).

Similar situations to initiation rituals cited by Dunning (1985b) are remembered by Rial (2000), but, in that case, they take place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Featuring pain and moments during which rookies are forced to simulate feminine situations and performances, the ritual aims to do the same as it did a hundred years before: to mark the rookie’s progress to “macho” *status*.

During its long and ongoing civilisatory process, rugby has adopted and redefined the chivalrous characteristic formerly required of its players. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rugby players “made a point of displaying their chivalry in intersexual interactions, even though their private behaviour with their teammates would be savage,” as noted in the examples about initiation rituals and the third half (RIAL, 2000, p. 245). In the field, in addition to several actions and attitudes seen as belonging to a gentleman, the rugby player would: respect his mates and opponents, in victory or defeat; always encourage one another; never celebrate scoring a point with a theatrical display, as it happens in football; and would never strike the opponent’s supporters (RIAL, 2000).

Therefore, it is possible to observe an arrangement of alternative masculinities in contrast to a previously dominant one, marked by acts of explicit violence. In addition to that, but cautiously avoiding a claim of cause and effect, it was possible to verify various uses of rugby as a bodily sports practice.

It is not the aim of this essay to discuss the concept of *habitus* proposed by Bourdieu, mas it is worth citing it, given the author’s contribution to reflect about that polysemic possibility of a sport. Bourdieu (2004) understands the universe of sports practices as existing in a given historical moment as a result of the relationship between two spaces: (i) the space for offering modalities and passable models to be practiced or consumed; and (ii) the space of demand, as inscribed in dispositions (the *habitus*). That offer includes technical properties of a sport, its possibilities and restraints to expressing different bodily dispositions. Their structural properties are also seen in relation to the set of other modalities that are offered simultaneously. The space of demand is construed by sports dispositions which, within a *habitus*’s dimensions, are “defined by the current

state of offer (which contributes to fabricate need, introducing the effective possibility of its realisation) and by the materialisation of the offer from a previous state” (along with a previous set of interpretations) (BOURDIEU, 2004, p. 214).

Quoting Christian Pociello, Bourdieu (2004, p. 213) states that “the program of bodily practices inscribed by the word ‘rugby’ is not the same, even though its formal and technical definition has remained unchanged, with few rule changes, in the 1930s, in 1950 and in 1980”. Across the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20 centuries, it was also possible to observe different practices of rugby, that is, practices that were not limited to its technical definitions, but that encompass concurrent readings that mostly influenced in the reduction of violent acts during the game due to the imposition of a new sense of civility.

Rugby, as a sports phenomenon in general, is marked by its objectivity and representations, by the means of social appropriation as operated by agents with dispositions that are constituted, at the same time, collectively and privately, guiding its practice (BOURDIEU, 2004). Thus, despite its intrinsic properties (the rules of the game etc.) limiting social uses of sports practices, these also introduce an availability and diversity of uses and interpretations – especially within the same timeframe –, marked, at every moment, by the dominant values attributed to them.

#### 4 FINAL REMARKS

The sport, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, presents constant transformations in technique, exposition, and appropriation by the society. Therefore, it is necessary to consider its particularities and the historical period of the societies experiencing them and, consequently, transforming them according to their history, culture, and values. Rugby, then, is not an isolated element, immune to social, historical, and political configurations. At certain moments, that set of behaviours, attitudes, emotions, and values proposed by rugby’s code has acted as a tool for regulating masculinities that were divergent from the hegemonic model.

On the other hand, there are fissures in rugby’s code that establish references that go beyond normative structures. Despite its discourse of strength and pain endurance remaining common to masculinities as displayed by rugby players, the ways these manifestations are expressed have suffered significant modifications.

If, at first, rugby was a bodily practice restricted to men from the English elite, after a historical process that modality was also appropriated by working men – men with masculinities, social, cultural, and economic contexts that were distinct from those of the elite. Using the body for rugby reached – or was reached by – men in the lower classes, which in turn attributed other values to that sport.

However, rugby was not the only one to suffer modifications or to be described in distinct ways; the body and its masculinities have also been so. The clashes amongst men from the elite and between those and new players from the working classes for a single definition of rugby demonstrate the intention to control the use of bodies in one social class or another. Meanwhile, the features of what is masculine have also been affected, because the practice of rugby, as previously noted, was not

restricted to men, but to wealthy ones. Their bodies might be physically similar, but the uses attributed to them certainly were not – and these uses would also define their masculinities.

It is also important to highlight changes of technical order that happened in rugby. As it had been a space where players should demonstrate a masculinity marked by the appreciation of explicit acts of physical violence, rugby has taken on, little by little (and in a dominant but not absolute way) the idea of “civilised bodies,” integrated into the civilisatory process. New rules for the game and for the conduct of players – such as fair play – were instituted to control these violent acts.

After these considerations, it is possible to ask: has the dominant configuration of masculinity been modified by sport, or has sport been modified by alternative masculinities? Despite the legitimacy of that question, I believe it carries an essentialist character as, in the first case, the body would behave like a blank canvas, and culture would stroke it into an image (representations and senses) of what a man and a woman are (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015); in the second case, the body would be immersed in such an independence from its medium that it could attribute meanings and senses to sport and to itself without any influence from cultural factors and agents. As Connell and Pearse (2015, p. 96), highlight, bodies can participate in disciplinary regimes and practices such as sport, “not because they are docile, but because they are active” and they “seek pleasure, experience, and transformation”. The body is not just a social product, but simultaneously product and agent.

I conclude this essay with some further questions. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, men from the English elite and, later, from the working classes, sought rugby as a way to reaffirm their masculinity, according to the period’s standard. What about today; what do male players seek in rugby? Why not select a different modality to play? What is the impact of women’s presence in the training field on the perceptions of masculinities for rugby players and, therefore, about gender relations in those spaces? Asking these questions is important to understand the sport as a mediating space for the process of development of masculinities and femininities, be it through the reproduction of traditional concepts or through the contribution to more modifications in gender relations of contemporary society, although these alterations do not determine gender arrangements in a society.

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**Resumo:** O ensaio objetiva problematizar o rugby como prática mediadora na configuração de significados de masculinidades. Em meio ao processo civilizatório e ao movimento sufragista, o regulamento da modalidade e as masculinidades defendidas pelos praticantes sofreram modificações. O rugby realizou um movimento não linear em que ora reproduz concepções tradicionais, ora contribui para tensionamentos nas relações de gênero.

**Palavras chave:** Esportes. Identidade de gênero. Masculinidade.

**Resumen:** El ensayo objetiva problematizar el rugby como práctica mediadora en la configuración de significados de masculinidades. En medio al proceso civilizatorio y al movimiento sufragista, el reglamento de la modalidad y las masculinidades defendidas por los practicantes sufrieron modificaciones. El rugby realizó un movimiento no lineal en el que a veces reproduce concepciones tradicionales, a veces contribuye a tensiones en las relaciones de género.

**Palabras clave:** Deportes. Identidad de Género. Masculinidad.