SQUEEZING IN: EXPLORING FEMALE ATHLETES’ BODY PERCEPTIONS

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2015

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ABSTRACT

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Much attention has been paid to female college athlete body image over the last three decades. However, relatively few inquiries employed a holistic approach that examined the myriad of interrelated sociocultural and personal factors influencing athletes’ body perceptions. The primary purpose of the current study was to explore female college athletes’ body image in both social and sport settings. A secondary purpose was to investigate the sociocultural context and how it influenced athletes’ body perceptions. Finally, this study sought to understand the ways in which female athletes’ social identities helped explain their body-related behaviors. Feminist and intersectional methodological approaches guided this inquiry to create partial, in-depth understandings of how female athletes think about and relate to their physiques. The study is particularly unique in its commitment to representing multiple, diverse stories from athletes without privileging one type of body perception. Using an intersectional methodology contextualized athletes body descriptions to uncover deeper meanings and underlying factors. Twenty female college athletes participated in unstructured interviews. These athletes represented eight different varsity sports at NCAA Division I, II, and III institutions.

This study offers a new perspective on the relationship between motivational team climate and female athlete body image. While task-oriented team climates still appear to serve as a protective factor against body disturbances among athletes, findings also indicated that a team’s obsession with the body seemed more closely tied to body image issues than a team’s goal orientation. How strongly women adhered to White, heterosexual, middle-class definitions of femininity influenced their experiences with their bodies both in and out of sport. Further, their social identities related to how women negotiated their physiques within body boundaries.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is the culmination of a journey that my trusted circle of mentors, colleagues, friends, and family made possible. First, I want to thank Dr. Colleen Hacker and Dr. Karen McConnell. That I am pursuing my doctorate is a reflection of the seeds of possibility you both planted years ago. I am grateful for the role you both play as mentors in my life. Thank you for subtly nudging me to create my own path and modeling excellence. Dr. Hacker, your commitment to actively engaging with each moment in ways that are on-purpose and with meaning has directly influenced how I approach each day. Dr. McConnell, your consistent demonstrations of balance and devotion to living an unapologetically authentic life inspire me to do the same.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude for the supportive distance my family and friends provided over the last few years. I feel blessed to have each of you in my life. Thank you for the space you offered without judging or questioning our respective relationships.

To my colleagues at Pacific Lutheran University, I appreciate your advice over the last year and a half. The countless “check-ins” and encouragement throughout this process mattered.

Finally, I would like to thank my committee: Dr. Vikki Krane, Dr. Nancy Spencer, Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, and Dr. Dryw Dworsky. Your insight helped create a critical and reflective dissertation. Dr. Krane, thank you for always making time. From persisting through technology-related errors to attending cross-country academic conferences to talk between sessions, you made completing this project possible. Thank you for challenging me to expand my analyses. I am a more competent and capable scholar because of how you trained me.

Whether directly or indirectly, every person and group mentioned played a significant role in the completion of this dissertation. So, thank you.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

“She was fixated on my weight...on what I ate,” Sam angrily shouted to her athletic director. Her outburst came after nearly two years of doubting her own perceptions and fighting against herself to fit in. Sam was one of the top players on one of the most successful Division I women’s basketball programs in the country. Under Coach F, the team won nearly sixty percent of their games – an impressive feat for any program especially a mid-major school in the United States with few resources. What people didn’t know, at least not until Sam and her teammates shined a spotlight on the program, was the troubled environment the championships covered. When Sam walked into her athletic director’s office, it wasn’t to loft a personal attack on her head coach; it was to take a stand, to prevent future attacks on female athletes’ bodies.

Coach F was known for her intensity with players, coaches, and opponents. But, until recently, her winning percentage allowed administrators and the media to overlook her demanding qualities. They chalked it up to coach’s competitiveness celebrated her “drive” and “passion” as crucial ingredients to her program’s success. A recent recipient of the Pat Summit Most Courageous Award, Coach F received national acclaim both on and off the court. Behind the scenes, however, the team continued to suffer silently. When they finally decided to speak out publicly, they painted a very different picture. Sam and her teammates described their coach as controlling and responsible for creating an environment that mandated thinness and required athletes to critique each other. “If you weren’t skinny, you wouldn’t play...it was automatically assumed you were drinking, you weren’t taking care of your body,” Sam asserted. This rule demanded that all members of the women’s basketball team attain a thin bodied ideal. If not, punishments in the form of reduced playing time or verbal admonishments would follow. Although unwritten and rarely stated directly, this team statute evolved into an unmistakable law governing athletes’ bodies. Players learned to connect their value as athletes to their body size through a variety of experiences. During practice, players dreaded being defended by the coach because, when it happened, Coach F poked their stomachs and physically prodded them relentlessly.

The coaching staff conducted daily, public evaluations to dissect athletes’ physiques. Some actions were small and went unnoticed initially; but, others continue to haunt team members. For example, players had to line up in their sports bras and Spandex for individual photos throughout the year. Rather than being employed to promote the program or for player improvement, Coach F used these photos to monitor players’ appearances. They provided evidence meant to justify punishments that were levied to get athletes back in line. The reprimand might be increased conditioning but often served to reduce their food intake as well. The head coach restricted and controlled their diet so much that,
“I would have to have my teammates sneak me snacks on the road,” Sam remembered.

While the team felt constant weight-related pressure from their coach, they also continued their regular weight lifting schedule geared to increase their muscle mass and, thus, their overall body size and weight. They were caught between two competing forces. To play, coach required them to be thin but, to be successful basketball players, they needed to add muscle. They had to make a choice. Ultimately, this group of Division I basketball players, pressured daily to conform and desperately wanting to play or earn approval, identified one clear option: cut calories. Not only did they monitor their own eating decisions, players often were commanded to police each other. Occasionally, Coach F had the captains tell Sam to stop eating because she was “eating too much at meals.” Eventually, the team’s enforcement moved beyond food ingestion to supervise all nutrition-related components. Tayler, a sophomore basketball player at the school, noted, “[We] would say stuff to [Sam] about how much milk she was drinking...because it was coming from [Coach].” The coach’s control had no bounds. She held mandatory meetings with first-year student-athletes to outline how she intended to govern all aspects of their life. She lectured them on their friends, dating, sex, and food. From required photo sessions to teammate critiques to physical jabs to their midsection, athletes’ bodies were constantly on display; policed by coaches, teammates and themselves.

The stress of managing these expectations and forcing each other to maintain the team code became overwhelming. Harris, a former team member, stated, “It was exhausting...I got stressed out just thinking about talking to her or going to practice or having something to do with basketball.” This sentiment was shared by several other past and present basketball players. Despite the on-court success, thirty-six of the 170 squad members quit during Coach F’s tenure, including seven players in the previous two years. And, four athletes on last year’s team alone battled eating disordered symptoms they developed only after having joined the program. Considering each year the roster carries twelve to fifteen players, the mass exodus should have sounded the alarms. The coach created a climate centering the body and inspecting individual flaws, which clearly took its toll. Many of the young women involved were willing to give up their scholarships and quit the sport altogether just to escape the negative environment. As Sam, who left the team and eventually spoke up about the climate, remarked, “To have someone make you feel so insecure about yourself, for someone to have that kind of power over you, is really, really overwhelming. Looking back, it was just insane.”

(Adapted from McCabe & Snyder, 2013)

Coach F had a clear understanding of what she felt women’s basketball bodies should look like. While this story does not explain where or how she developed these notions of an
ideal female athletic body, it does highlight the impact coaches and team climate can have on an athlete’s body perceptions. Coach F constructed the ideal female athletic body as one that maintained a slender frame with toned muscles. Stemming from that model, she created a team environment where thinness was equated with sport success. Athletes, like Sam, whose bodies did not meet expectations, were punished and closely monitored by teammates and coaches. On the other hand, women who attained the level of thinness Coach F demanded “won” and were rewarded with more playing time. Because the team climate emphasized winning over improvement, athletes learned that they needed to compare bodies and critique teammates’ eating habits. The body became a tool necessary for accomplishing goals rather than inherently valuable and worthy of praise. The results from this overwhelming weight-related pressure and constant body surveillance were staggering. One out of every five players entering the program left before graduating, and almost one-third of the 2012-2013 team developed disordered eating patterns during the season. While not every athlete on the team developed a negative body image, the narrative and statistics show that, how women basketball players thought about and related to their bodies was influenced, in part, by their coach-created team climate.

Coach F provides one example of how cultural notions about women’s bodies are taken up and perpetuated in a sport context. Every day, women are bombarded with messages defining beauty and establishing the body as an object to be worked on. Historically, only thin and passive bodies have been celebrated as the feminine ideal. However, over the last two decades, female athletes have become “cultural icons” (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). And, while they physically appear more muscular, their emergence did not widen cultural expectations. Instead, the public’s desire to inspect women’s bodies for flaws has only increased. The ideal is of a
body that is absolutely “tight, contained, firm” (Malson, 2008, p. 34). Being thin is no longer sufficient, feminine bodies must also be muscually toned.

Sporting contexts further complicate body standards for women. Often, female athletes are encouraged to add muscle to improve their game. College sport, in particular, demands participants engage in grueling weight lifting and exercise programs designed to enlarge their musculature. Promises of enhanced performance drive coaches and strength trainers to push women to increase their muscle mass. In most sports, athletes are trained to get bigger, faster and stronger. However, women in sport also face gendered social pressures to maintain the ideal feminine body discussed above. They must be “firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin” (Markula, 1995, p. 424). In other words, athletic female bodies must tread the invisible lines that mark the boundaries of acceptable feminine bodies. Female athletes are required to build athletes for their sport but must not appear too muscular as the latter label carries significant social sanctions. Women, whose bodies fall outside of this culturally constructed range, risk having their gender or sexuality questioned (Krane et al., 2004). These powerful efforts work to keep women in line and control their bodies. These sociocultural messages define appropriate feminine bodies and influence female athletes’ body image, which, in turn, might impact food- and exercise-related behaviors.

Developing a relationship with one’s own body is a complex, multi-layered process that carries significant health consequences. For example, poor body image can lead to increased depression, impaired sexual functioning, poor self-esteem, and social anxiety (Cash & Fleming, 2002). While much has been learned about the various effects of poor body image (Engel et al., 2003; Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter, & Reel, 2010; Muscat & Long, 2008; Reel & Beals, 2009; Thompson & Sherman, 1999) and contributing factors (Coker, 2011; George, 2005; Kerr,
Berman, & De Souza, 2006), far fewer empirical investigations have explored how athletes make sense of their own bodily experiences. Since factors existing within sport (e.g., team climate, coach, teammates) might complicate body image concerns, it is important for sport and exercise researchers to examine how female athletes construct body perceptions. The current project explored athletes’ descriptions of the social (e.g., coach-athlete relationship, athlete-athlete interactions) and cultural (e.g., team norms, team motivational climate, cultural ideologies) elements that influence body image. This project also examined how normative ideologies about women’s bodies are accepted and perpetuated by various social groups (e.g., teams, other athletes) within sport. These explorations help explain how female college athletes make sense of their own bodies in relation to dominant cultural messages that define women’s bodies.

**Conceptual Framework**

To better understand female athlete body image, this study employs feminist cultural studies, achievement goal theory, and social identity perspective. These three conceptual frameworks shed light on female athletes’ perceptions of gendered body norms and team climate. They also offer theoretical explanations regarding how team body norms are established and how athletes negotiate these standards of acceptability.

**Feminist cultural studies.** Cultural studies explores taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life to better understand how power operates in society and how people make sense of their world (Birrell, 2000; Sandoval, 2000; Sardar & Van Loon, 1997). This perspective considers how language, discourse, and interactions (re)produce socially constructed realities (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Rather than accepting current ideologies, cultural studies scholars interrogate people’s lived experiences to better understand how cultural expectations are negotiated. To do this, researchers explore people’s speech patterns, mannerisms, codes of
behavior, and narratives. Feminist cultural studies focuses specifically on the social construction of gender. This perspective acknowledges that gender and culture are mutually constitutive (Hall, 1996). Just as social practices define what is considered an appropriate gender expression, people’s daily interactions impact gendered expectations. Feminist cultural studies views culture as both a system shaping people’s lived experiences and as their daily social exchanges (Frow & Morris, 2011). Rather than being a stagnant entity in which living occurs, culture is seen as dynamic – both shaping and shaped by people.

Feminist cultural studies recognizes the gendered meanings associated with bodies and body management practices (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Markula, Burns, & Riley, 2008). In particular, femininity is a socially constructed ideal that takes on specific meanings through bodily enactments. While multiple femininities exist and are related to social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation), a hegemonic or privileged femininity also exists (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004). As Kauer and Krane (2013) acknowledge, this hegemonic form of femininity, which asserts a thin, toned body ideal, is socially supported and promoted as the ideal every woman should strive to attain. Hegemonic ideals might not be dominant in the sense that everyone holds or achieves them, but they are the most valued and often go unquestioned (Connell, 2005). This dominant cultural ideal is based on White, heterosexual, middle-class definitions of a woman’s body (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013). Hegemonic femininity ultimately influences people’s beliefs about what “appropriate” feminine bodies should look like. For example, feminine bodies are expected to appear thin and toned. These gendered bodies, then, represent significant personal characteristics. Thin bodies mark women as competent, intelligent, and victorious (Bordo, 1993). Those who embody thinness become labeled as morally successful while individuals who do not represent the thin ideal are marked as moral
failures. Social contexts require women to develop a certain level of toned thinness, but daring to be either too toned or too thin also incites penalties. Women, in particular, experience a double bind (Frye, 1983), in which deviating from hegemonic femininity in either direction (e.g., too bulky or too skinny) can lead to social stigma, isolation, or rejection.

Using a feminist cultural studies lens, sport scholars have explored women’s lived experiences to understand the cultural conditions that confront them (e.g., Krane, Ross, Barak, Rowse, & Lucas-Carr, 2012; Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001). To become aware of women’s complex experiences in sport, it is necessary to recognize the influence of cultural expectations on female athletes. This approach acknowledges the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, and other categories of difference (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). While definitions of traditional femininity center on White, middle class, heterosexual women’s bodies, not all women encounter the same cultural expectations about their bodies, nor do they experience them in the same ways. Women must negotiate multiple body discourses based on their differing identities. From a feminist cultural studies perspective, the goal of this study is not to create a single story about women’s embodied experiences. Rather, examining their lived experiences provides multiple, partial, in-depth insights into how women construct their body image.

The female athletic body incites particularly cruel evaluations since it exists in both the social and athletic realm. Traditionally, sport has been considered a masculine domain (Anderson, 2005; Theberge & Birrell, 1994; Messner, 2002) that emphasizes characteristics associated with masculinity such as: aggression, competitiveness, and power. Anyone, whether male or female, who is unable or unwilling to display these hegemonic gender norms in sport become marginalized with their athletic accomplishments often discounted or ignored. These
gender boundaries construct a binary where masculine male athletes and feminine female athletes must be viewed as biologically opposed. It becomes acceptable in sport, then, to assume male sporting bodies are stronger and physically superior to female athletes’ bodies. As women have achieved elevated status in sport (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003), their presence increased the burden on women’s bodies. Sport provides a space for women to contest the cultural boundaries placed on their bodies as they develop strong, hard, aggressive physiques. These female athletic bodies often counter dominant discourses surrounding feminine bodies. They stand in opposition to cultural norms with their developed muscles and larger frames. However, the need to appear thin, toned, and sexy has not diminished as female athletes have risen in popularity; instead, as Krane (2001) mentioned, female athletes must be strong yet also remain vulnerable. Body surveillance has only intensified, adding pressure to pack layers of toned muscles onto thin, delicate frames.

The phrase *female athlete* is loaded with assumptions about athletes striving for perfection and building an appropriately feminine athletic frame (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Women must find a way to produce firm, shapely muscles while remaining appropriately skinny. This expectation for female athletic bodies to contain almost no fat and possess only *feminine muscles*, toned but never bulky, serves to keep women in line. A lack of adherence can lead to questions about their commitment to sport or their sexuality. As Malson (2008) argues, demanding specific body shapes and sizes has little to do with sport performance, instead, “it’s about managing people’s bodies” (p. 29). Labeling someone *fat* marks them as defiant and their body as deviant. Doing so, serves to encourage women to view food as the enemy and exercise as a necessary tool for shaping their body. Enough pressure and guilt might lead female athletes to scrutinize and agonize over their food choices or engage in other unhealthy practices aimed at
reducing caloric intake. On the other hand, coaches and trainers control female athletes’ bodies when, for example, they make fun of or shame them in the weight room in an effort to increase their body size. Employing a feminist cultural studies perspective provides opportunities to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding female athletic bodies and to better understand how gendered body norms influence female athletes’ body perceptions.

Feminist cultural studies also acknowledges that intense sport training, which entails bodily manipulation and control, provides a pathway to creating an ideal feminine female athletic body (Chase, 2006; Markula & Pringle, 2006). These disciplinary processes may occur in sport in the form of coach required weight lifting sessions, pre-season body fat tests, and mandated athlete-kept nutritional logs among others. At the same time, female athletes endure social critique from partners critiquing their athletic bodies for not fitting cultural body norms (e.g., thin, firm, sexy). Just as in sport, these cultural examples reprimand women for their flawed bodies. These complex and competing demands converge on female athletic bodies pressuring women to conform to an ideal body. Feminist Cultural Studies can be used to realize the conditions that make it possible to develop passive and subdued female athlete bodies that appear strong and muscular. It helps explain why a female athlete might complete Olympic style lifting sessions with heavy weights four times per week while skipping meals or restricting her dietary needs; carefully adding just the right amount of muscle to her frame. Approaching athletes’ body perceptions from this point of view provides insight into how athletes internalize gendered norms prescribed to their bodies.

Feminist cultural studies also acknowledges female athletes’ agency. Power is neither static nor hierarchical but, instead, is maintained through interpersonal relationships (Chase, 2006). Therefore, female athletes can and often do resist the normative ideologies associated
with their bodies. When athletes refuse to participate in conversations with teammates demeaning their bodies or when they continue to lift weights even though their partners tease them, they are engaging in resistance efforts and attempting to reclaim their body. This perceived choice in how to construct and relate to one’s body is seductive; it seems within a person’s control. While there are always opportunities to reject norms, women’s options are constrained, enmeshed in various power relations so that no choice is free from punishment (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Because this framework acknowledges the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality as “the interconnected matrix of relations of power” (Birrell, 2000, p. 65), it is important for researchers to acknowledge how athletes’ social locations impact their ability to negotiate their bodies in relation to dominant power structures operating to control and limit options. This perspective outlines how cultural norms defining women’s bodies influence female athletes’ embodied experiences. It provides insight into the ways in which female athletes’ intersecting identities impact how they experience gendered body norms and how they make sense of their own bodies in relation to these norms. Approaching the study of female athlete body image from this perspective also reveals how cultural ideals influence coaches and athletes in developing their team body norms.

**Achievement goal theory.** As seen in the narrative at the beginning of this chapter, coaches can play a significant role in student-athletes’ lives. This is especially true at the collegiate level where athletes spend a large amount of their time with their coaches in practice, team meetings, study tables, or traveling to competitions. Research conducted over the last thirty years also emphasized that coaches can impact athletes’ psychosocial growth and development (e.g., Coker, 2011; Horn, 2008). One area where coaches have significant influence is in creating their team’s motivational climate. These environments, either task or outcome (Ames,
1992), define the goals, expectations, and reinforcements valued in a team environment (Waldron & Krane, 2005). For example, a task-oriented atmosphere celebrates each player’s position or role on the team and rewards individual efforts and improvements. Every player is seen as valuable regardless of their direct contributions to winning or losing. Athletes are rewarded when their performance of a task improves and for displaying high levels of effort. In this environment, for example, basketball players who make two more free throws on one day than she did the day before would be rewarded or praised. Using this model, athletes are encouraged to engage in self-comparisons as opposed to comparing themselves to teammates or opponents. On the other hand, outcome-oriented team climates stress peer comparisons, public evaluations, and competitiveness among teammates. The goal is to win by outperforming everyone else. Practice drills where athletes compete against each other on a particular skill with the “loser” being forced to run sprints provide one example of this climate. These moments are establishing an outcome-oriented environment by promoting inter-athlete comparisons and rewarding athletes for defeating a teammate. Another example might occur when coaches create a daily award for the “best practice player.” Someone wins at another person’s, the “loser’s,” expense. The problem with these environments is that athletes might start to believe that the only way to be successful in sport is to become the best athlete no matter what it takes to accomplish that goal. Their worth as an athlete becomes wrapped in this singular definition of winning.

The construct of motivational climates was developed on the basis of achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1989) and suggests that any team climates created by significant adults (e.g., coach) can affect participating student-athletes. Coaches creating a task-oriented climate value process over outcome and view performance mistakes as opportunities for growth. In contrast,
coaches who create an outcome-oriented climate punish athletes for mistakes and pay more attention to highly skilled players than other athletes on the team. There has been considerable research on the effects of both types of motivational climates on athlete well-being with outcome climates often linked to higher levels of anxiety, worry, and maladaptive coping strategies among athletes than task-oriented environments (Duda & Balaguer, 2007). In particular, how athletes perceive their team’s motivational climate impacts their behavior, attitude, and cognitions in achievement environments (Ames, 1992; Duda & Balaguer, 2007; Nicholls, 1989). Athletes will notice a task climate when they see coaches focusing on skill improvement and rewarding cooperation with teammates. Coaches encouraging athletes to teach each other a play would be an example of a task climate since the athletes would be working together to accomplish the task. Or, if the coach provides extra points during practice sessions for a player assisting another player in a scoring attempt, that would also be seen as a task climate. In outcome environments, athletes are taught that success is contingent on outperforming everyone else.

Coaches who pursue winning over all other goals (e.g., improving, working hard) create outcome climates where defeating opponents remains the central focus. Coach F from the basketball story outlined earlier was willing to do whatever it took to win regardless of the potential health risks her athletes might experience. Her actions stem from the belief that thin-bodied athletes perform better in basketball games. Players whose bodies hold more weight than others were assumed to be slow and lethargic in sport. As a result, some coaches link body size with athletic success. This is particularly dangerous in an outcome climate because of its heavy emphasis on winning. If coaches in outcome climates believe certain body types lead to success, they may be more likely to require athletes to achieve the thin body ideal. This encouragement
may even take place at the risk of developing disordered eating and exercise behaviors. These coaching behaviors may be less tied to cultural norms and more directly related to the desire to win-at-all costs. Coaches who create an outcome-oriented climate might have their athletes run extra if they believe they are overweight or poke fun at an athlete in front of her teammates for eating a second plate of food at the team’s pre-event meal. Here, understanding that outcome climates highlight the need to win can partially explain coaches’ actions. So, if the connection between body sizes and future success is strong, coaches might be more likely to engage in behaviors that could put athletes at-risk for future health complications.

In task climates, on the other hand, the focus remains on improvement and cooperation. So, even if body sizes are linked to success, because these coaches are focused on skill development and individual athlete improvement, they may be more likely to reject ideas that assert a one-size-fits-all approach to nutrition and training. Instead, coaches in these climates might encourage athletes to experiment with different foods to decide which nutritional combination leads to their best sport performances. They would also be less likely than coaches in outcome climates to punish athletes for overeating since they would not believe in comparing athletes. As shown through these descriptions, team motivational climates can serve as either protecting (task-oriented climate) or mitigating (outcome-oriented climate) factors of body and eating related issues. This theoretical perspective helps explain different coaching practices regarding athletes’ bodies.

Understanding team motivational climates also helps explain how team standards, including body-related issues, develop. Achievement goal theory suggests that all athletes want to demonstrate competence and feel successful. Athletes’ desire for social acceptance (e.g., from coach or teammates) provides one important factor determining whether or not female athletes
might choose to follow team norms (Waldron & Krane, 2005). If an athlete wants to be respected as a competent, valued member of her sport team, then she may be more willing to adopt healthy or unhealthy team norms. This theory also helps explain why every athlete on a team does not adhere to team rules. So, it is not the team climate that necessarily causes athletes to develop negative body image, instead, an outcome climate coupled with an athlete’s strong desire for social acceptance might lead an athlete to internalize team body norms and engage in unhealthy eating or exercise activities.

**Social identity perspective.** Social identity perspective helps provide a more nuanced understanding of individuals’ relationships with their team climate. This theoretical approach explains how female athletes navigate their team climate. People recognize various social groups and identify themselves as members of particular collectives (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). Identity, according to this perspective, then, emerges from group membership and people’s emotional attachment to these groups. If an athlete recognizes herself as a member of a particular sport team and considers that affiliation important, then she is likely to embrace her athletic identity and, as a result, behave in ways that support group values (Kauer & Krane, 2013). Social identity perspective asserts that a key factor in determining individual behavior lies in whether or not individuals hold a particular group membership in high esteem. If so, they will likely obey group expectations; if not, they might be more likely to reject established norms.

This perspective holds true that each social group (e.g., sport teams) contains *social norms* that define accepted behaviors, attitudes, and values. If an athlete wants to be recognized as a member of the team, she must go through the depersonalization process (Kauer & Krane, 2013) where she adopts group values and her actions become consistent with group norms. For example, a first-year softball player who watches her teammates work hard in the weight room
will begin to mimic that behavior if she wants to be accepted by her teammates and sees that act as something they value. Through this depersonalization process, individuals redefine themselves as group members by engaging in normative behaviors and adopting group attitudes (Kauer & Krane, 2013). Even if this athlete previously worried about adding too much muscle, she would start to downplay that aspect of her individuality and act in ways that follow group norms by working hard in the weight room. As other team members talk positively about how her body is changing from workouts, it is likely she will adopt that attitude, too. This theoretical perspective explains that as social acceptance increases and the athlete assimilates to team norms (e.g., working hard in the weight room), she might develop more positive thoughts about her muscular body.

Every person possesses multiple social identities based on group memberships such as gender, sexuality, race, class, or athletic team. These affiliations are “fluid and dynamic” (Wright, 2009, p. 864) meaning that group associations change over time and which membership holds the highest value for an individual shifts in different contexts. People constantly shift how they might present themselves especially when their multiple social identities conflict (Kauer & Krane, 2013). For example, a Latina lesbian athlete who values her role on her soccer team as important and plays with predominantly White, heterosexual teammates might adapt her behaviors to secure team acceptance. If her heterosexual teammates make jokes about other gay athletes or never talk about LGBTQ relationships, the athlete might laugh with them or choose to suppress relatable stories about her partner. According to social identity perspective, her desire to be accepted by her teammates drives these behaviors. Rather than rejecting her lesbian identity, this conceptual framework explains the athlete is simply emphasizing one social identity (athlete) over the other (lesbian) in that moment. In a different situation, the behaviors might
change. As a member of her athletic department’s gay-straight alliance (GSA) board, however, the same athlete might readily tell stories about her partner. Focusing on one identity does not necessarily mean negating others. Instead, this theoretical framework asserts that meaningful superordinate identities always involve other component identities (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). The soccer player maintained all of her social identities as a Latina, athlete, soccer player, lesbian, student in each situation. So, her identity as a lesbian athlete did not change in either setting; instead, she adjusted her behaviors and self-presentation based on the context and the norms of each group. However, not all social identities can be self-selected. For instance, most individuals do not choose a particular racial category in the same way they might select a sport to play or a class to join. Further, a specific social identity often becomes most apparent when it is threatened (Hurtado, 1997). So, the Latina lesbian soccer player described above might find her racial identity most relevant when spending time with a group of predominantly white LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) athletes since it would be the “threatened” identity in that scenario. In a classroom setting, she might attach more to her student identity as it seems most salient in that environment. There may also be particular situations where she finds it necessary to conceal certain identities in other group settings. This perspective explains that it is the amount of emphasis placed on group membership that impacts individual behaviors.

When team climates adopt larger cultural norms about women’s bodies (e.g., as strong, thin, passive) and then link these body sizes to winning, they are, in effect, establishing body norms. Social identity theory further stipulates that athletes who value their team affiliation might begin practicing harmful self-regulatory techniques to ensure they reach these standards. Waldron and Krane (2005) noted that female athletes’ strong desire to fit into a team structure might lead to “reckless adherence to social norms” (p. 165). If athletes do not follow these
agreed upon expectations, they risk rejection or marginalization. Nonconforming female athletes might be ridiculed or ostracized by teammates. Sportspeople who have already met the standards set by the teams are likely to work to reinforce team norms and police others to ensure they do the same. This process of excluding outliers further unites the rest of the team in support of the established social norm (Marques et al., 2001). In this way social identity perspective helps explain how and why individual female athletes accept and express thoughts or behaviors in relation to their bodies that they would otherwise deem unhealthy.

However, when group membership does not improve a person’s self-perception, this framework also suggests that an athlete might attempt to change social affiliations or attempt to alter team norms (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). If a hockey player had a positive relationship with her body prior to joining the team but watched as her teammates rewarded the player who consumed the least amount of food or created nicknames for those who ate second helpings at team meals, she might decide to leave the team in an attempt to maintain or recover her sense of self. Or, she might begin (re)claiming the nickname and create a positive social support group within the team for athletes who had been given these nicknames. For example, athletes who create a “big girls club” on their team are making efforts to reclaim a derogatory label previously used by coaches or teammates to keep them in line with team norms. But, in order to change team norms associated with harmful eating and exercise techniques, athletes must first conceive of the current actions as illogical and believe there is a plausible alternative (Krane & Barber, 2005). Eventually, these efforts could shift the culture to one that celebrates the process of nourishing the body. Overall, social identity theory allowed me to better understand how individuals’ behaviors either reflect or resist team norms.

An Integrated Conceptual Framework
As part of this dissertation, I have taken a sociocultural approach to understanding identity. Rather than viewing identity as a stagnant component, I explain it as being created through various social interactions and cultural norms. In this way, identities constantly shift. Feminist cultural studies asserts that identities are fluid; people construct their identities through various interactions with other people and in relation to cultural norms. Cultural norms define expectations and possibilities as they relate to various identity categories. Then, through interpersonal interaction, people maintain or challenge those ideologies. Through these interactions, people often learn who they are by first understanding who they are not. Social identity perspective provides further understanding about the social aspect of identity construction as it explains individual behavior within sociocultural contexts. As previously mentioned, this conceptual framework suggests that identity can only exist as long as someone identifies with a particular social group. For instance, once a female athlete no longer identifies with her team or sport, she may no longer hold on to her athletic identity.

Approaching identity creation from a psychological and sociocultural perspective helps explain how a female athlete might relate to her body in different ways based on which identity is most salient in a particular context. A female athlete might be proud of her muscular frame in a sport context when surrounded with teammates who celebrate that body type. However, she might feel the need to cover those same muscles later that evening when socializing with friends or in other groups where body norms for women are different. When using a sociocultural framework to understand identities, these seemingly opposing body perceptions no longer appear incompatible or even contradictory. Identities are always constructed in relation to the sociocultural moment as cultural messages and interpersonal interactions shift in various
contexts. The power in this conceptualization of identity is that athletes maintain their agency and are viewed as active participants as they make sense of and relate to their physiques.

All three of these theoretical frameworks, when used together, provide a holistic approach to the investigation of female athlete body image issues. Although each perspective provides a unique path to understanding female athletes’ relationships with their bodies, alone they exclude important parts of this complex process. Feminist cultural studies helps explain how cultural ideologies about women’s bodies are gendered. It also acknowledges how women’s intersecting identities (race, gender, sexuality, age) influence how they are able to make sense of their bodies in relation to cultural norms. Achievement goal theory examines how these dominant sociocultural messages get taken up and perpetuated in sport settings. In particular, this perspective illuminates how coaches impact athlete body image by creating a team climate that establishes body norms. And, social identity perspective helps convey female athletes’ negotiations of these norms based on how they value their various social group memberships. These three theoretical frameworks recognize the agency of women playing sport, which provides further insight into the complexity of these body-related processes. Taking a perspective that includes feminist cultural studies, achievement goal theory, and social identity theory will allowed me to explore the cultural, social, and personal factors that influence the ways that female athletes think about and relate to their bodies.
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Body image issues in sport have garnered a lot of scholarly attention as studies have outlined various antecedents, outcomes, functionalities, and treatment interventions (e.g., Cash, Fleming, Alindogan, Steadman, & Whitehead, 2004; Greenleaf, 2002; Haase, Prapevessis, & Owens, 2002; Hausenblas & Carron, 1999; Reel & Gill, 1996). Most of this research is epistemologically grounded in positivism or post-positivism and employed quantitative methods. But, there have also been a few qualitative inquiries that have significant contributions to understanding the way that women, in particular, view their bodies in sport (e.g., George, 2005; Greenleaf, 2002; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001). It is important to carefully explicate the current literature and major findings as they provide a space for the current study to enter the scholarly conversation pertaining to female college athlete body image.

Body Image as a Construct

While many studies have examined this topic, few have taken time to conceptualize body image. Defining terms not only assists interested researchers in interpreting findings but also in being able to apply data in real-world scenarios. In a meta-analysis of thirty-three studies, Smolak, Murnen and Ruble (2000) found it difficult to discern clear connections among body image constructs. One possible rationale for this outcome stems from a lack of definitional and measurement consistency across studies. Because of this variance in operational definitions, methodologies, and measurement tools, some studies might be examining perceptions of physical appearance while others conceptualize body image as a potential eating behavior disturbance. Before moving forward, it is important to clearly define body image. Thompson and colleagues (1999) argued that the concept of body image “is almost useless without a
specification of which particular [components] are intended and whether the foci are specific body sites or a more global aspect of the overall appearance” (p. 10). Studies must provide more than a definition; they need to clearly articulate the parameters of their inquiries. While often considered to be the mental images people possess of their bodies (Fallon, 1990), body image actually involves several processes that should be clearly identified rather than generally mentioning the overarching construct. Body image signifies the “perceptions, attitudes, emotions, and personality reactions of [individuals] in relation to [their] own body” (Kolb, 1959, p. 751). This conceptualization provides a solid starting point but fails to acknowledge its multiple, shifting characteristics. This definition also is problematic because it assumes bodily disturbances begin and end within individuals. Cash, Theriault, and Annis (2004) argued that researchers must consider body image a social construct in which gender based contexts and experiences change the perceptions, attitudes, and emotions related to one’s own body. This latter depiction provides space for more complicated insights about bodily experiences as it acknowledges that a person’s self-perceptions can change and are inextricably linked to the environment or set of circumstances in which they occur. Accordingly, people are neither passive objects nor wholly responsible for the ways they conceive of or relate to their bodies.

Three body image dimensions have been identified: evaluation, investment, and affect (Cash et al., 2004). The evaluation component includes any attitude or perception of physical appearance. It refers to the overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction individuals feels about their bodies or specific body parts. Body image satisfaction refers to “a discrepancy between current and ideal body shape” (Garner, Garfinkel, & O'Shaughnessy, 1985) while body image dissatisfaction refers to underlying shame and physical self-perceptions (cf. Lau, Lum, Chronister, & Forrest, 2006, p. 259). Another feature of body image, investment, indicates the
degree to which a person internalizes appearance ideals or emphasizes self-schemas (Cash et al., 2004). Body image is one aspect of self-schema, which refers to the belief people hold about themselves. In other words, how people conceive of their bodies impacts their self-schema. If a person views their body as imperfect, they might also see themselves as inherently flawed. On the other hand, a person viewing their body as valuable might also identify their personal growth. Instead of seeing flaws, this person would notice how the “imperfections” relate to important life experiences or knowledge gained. The body is perceived as a treasured container of self – the outward physique holding significant life moments. Investment, then, refers to how much a person’s mental picture of their body (e.g., how it functions, what space it occupies, what it looks like) is determined by appearance ideals. Affect, the third facet of body image (Cash & Fleming, 2002), describes the emotional responses that occur in various situations and stem from an individual’s body perceptions. These three components work together to impact people’s body image. I am utilizing the definition provided by Cash and colleagues (2004) as it offers a comprehensive set of related yet distinct components and recognizes that body image can shift in various situations.

Just as perceptions of the body can impact self-schemas, creating certain body images can have health consequences. More specifically, a negative view of one’s body shape can hamper overall psychosocial well-being (e.g., depression, inhibition, social anxiety) and quality of life (Cash & Fleming, 2002; Cash et al., 2004; Lobera & Rios, 2011). For example, Cash and Fleming (2002) found that women who maintained a negative body image evaluation tended to have poorer social self-esteem and greater social anxiety than participants who reported positive body evaluations. These findings highlight the possibility of a mutually constitutive relationship between people’s social interactions and their body image. As such, it is imperative for
researchers to study how women construct their body image especially in contexts that encourage them to critique or manipulate their bodies. Another harmful outcome of developing a poor body image involves unhealthy exercise. Athletes, in particular, might be at-risk for developing excessive or compulsive exercise routines since they are already schooled in the perceived physical benefits of working out. Unbalanced exercise occurs when activities interfere with other, more balanced behaviors; when working out becomes a rigid obligation; or when engagement continues despite illness or injury (Smith, 2012). How hard, how long, and how often an athlete engages in exercise behaviors can all determine if the practices are compulsive or excessive. And, athletes engaging in compulsive exercise may increase their chances of developing stress fractures, decreased bone density, depression due to overtraining, recurrent injuries, and reduced immune responses among other serious health consequences (Smith, 2012). This research suggests that developing more complete and complex understandings of how people construct their body image is important as negative body perceptions can lead to physical injury or other health complications.

Eating disorders remain arguably the most severe manifestation of body dissatisfaction. For women aged fifteen to twenty-four, eating disorders are among the “top four leading causes of burden of disease,” where burden is measured by years lost via disability or death (Academy for Eating Disorders, 2014). While eating disorders are an important possible effect of poor body image, research has shown that far more people exhibit disordered eating behaviors that carry severe health consequences even though they are not considered pathological issues. In fact, several studies report that eating disorder levels remain fairly low among female athletes (2-4%), but research also suggests that significantly more women in sport (13-25%) might be experiencing and reporting disordered eating symptoms (Coker, 2011; Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter,
& Reel, 2009) with another 1-64% of female athletes being at-risk for developing similar disturbances in eating-related behaviors (Beals, 2004). These alarming ranges are important because people with subclinical eating patterns exhibit similar behaviors, such as food restriction or compulsively exercising, as those who do meet clinical levels, and similar health complications can occur. That said, there are differences between clinical and subclinical eating disorders as the latter do not meet the definition of the former as outlined in the American Psychological Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). The National Institute of Mental Health defines an eating disorder as “an illness that causes serious disturbances to everyday diet,” and it appears as a category within the DSM-V. Disordered eating refers to changes in eating behaviors that do not meet DSM-V criteria for EDs (Milligan & Pritchard, 2006). Further, all eating disorders (ED) involve some sort of disordered eating behaviors, but disordered eating (DE) behaviors do not always reach clinical EDs diagnostic levels (Thompson & Sherman, 2010). Someone could exhibit disordered eating without having an eating disorder, but anyone with an eating disorder displays disordered eating behaviors as well. Disordered eating or other subclinical eating behaviors can occur after stressful events, illness, or in preparation for a sporting event but may not stem from psychological preoccupations with food. These distinguishing characteristics are important as there are many people who struggle with eating issues who might not be clinically diagnosable but remain problematic. Beals (2004) stated that beyond the physiological responses to eating disordered behavior (e.g., protection of food stores, compromised reproductive system, risk of increased coronary heart disease), female athletes suffering from food related conditions might also be at greater risk for injury. Skipping meals or restricting food intake can lead to increased irritability and inability to concentrate, which can enhance the opportunity for injury. With
significant risks associated with the development of a negative body image, more research is necessary to provide more complex understandings of body image, identify possible correlates, and offer comprehensive intervention strategies.

**Contextualizing Body Image in Sport**

Typically, college sport has mirrored the United States’ social structure by organizing itself according to traits associated with traditional masculinity (e.g., competitiveness, aggression, power). As such, sport continues to privilege men’s athletic pursuits over women’s accomplishments. Although the opportunities for women in certain areas of sport have increased significantly over the last forty years (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012), female athletic teams are increasingly beginning to take on the *sport ethic* primarily associated with men’s sport (Coakley, 2009). This sport ethic encourages and rewards athletes for sacrificing their health during competition, refusing to accept limitations on athletic pursuits, accepting risks, and playing through pain. This pressure on athletes might make the sport context seem like a breeding ground for a host of health consequences for athletes, including those related to body image. Recent literature (Atkinson & Young, 2008; Coakley, 2009; Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter, & Reel, 2009) have made this scholarly connection between sport climate and athlete body image. Smolak and colleagues’ (2000) meta-analysis found that sport participation was related to an increased risk for experiencing disordered eating symptoms. Sport celebrates speed and power as key characteristics defining superior athletic talent and determining athletic success. The expectation for heavier athletes, then, is that they will be slower and less flexible (Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble, 2000). As a result, the athletic environment provides an important context for understanding the pressures all athletes face to achieve certain body sizes. Moreover, the sport context provides a space where the body is constantly on display and is critiqued by fans,
coaches, teammates, opponents, and judges. This sport pressure, when added to the social pressure women already face to conform to gendered body ideals, could amplify the pressure athletes feel to engage in harmful body management practices.

Kato and colleagues (2011) found that out of 118 female college athletes surveyed, almost one quarter of those playing Division I sports and a third of Division III athletes reported being very dissatisfied or mostly dissatisfied with their overall appearance. Greenleaf and colleagues (2009) found that a significantly higher percentage (54%) of the 204 Division I college athletes in their study reported body dissatisfaction with 88% of those women believing they were overweight. From the same study, 25% were classified as symptomatic, meaning they employed various disordered eating behaviors such as binge eating, fasting or strict diets, and calorie driven exercise routines. With a quarter of the sample acknowledging they controlled their weight using unhealthy techniques, these findings suggest that sporting environments may not only exacerbate body related disturbances but also, with their emphases “on body size and shape, weight, and physical training, may camouflage disordered eating problems that athletes have, making identification particularly challenging” (Greenleaf et al., 2009, p. 494). Current literature clearly identifies sport as a site where athletes encounter social pressure to view their bodies in harmful ways. However, none of these studies outlines specific factors existing within sport (e.g., motivational climate, team norms, coaching behaviors) that influence athlete body image. Since not all athletes experience these issues, more work seeking to understand how various factors intersect with peoples’ social identities to impact body image is needed as well.

Several studies have examined how sport type impacts athlete body image. Some researchers hypothesize that, since physical appearance partially determines success in aesthetic sports (e.g., figure skating, gymnastics, diving), women playing these sports would experience
heightened surveillance of their physiques and added pressure to conform to the thin ideal. This notion is backed by evidence that shows some athletes in aesthetic sports engage in disordered eating at higher rates than refereed or ballgame sport athletes (e.g., volleyball, handball, basketball) (Krentz & Warschburger, 2011; Smolak et al., 2000). However, other researchers have found that intense training loads and competitive demands in refereed sports made those athletes as susceptible to body image disturbances as participants in aesthetic sports (Kato, Jeffes, & Culpepper, 2011). This conflicted research provides evidence suggesting that it is not the type of sport played, rather, various factors germane to sport and embedded in some athletic team climates influence athlete body image.

Factors Influencing Athlete Body Image

One particular body of research in this area has revealed a number of social issues influencing women’s thoughts about their bodies. For example, as mentioned earlier, female athletes experience dual standards requiring them to be lean yet muscular. A few studies found these competing body ideals lead athletes to develop two different body-related identities. In other words, they perceive of their bodies one way in social settings and hold it to different standards in sport environments. Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, and Stiles-Shipley (2001) conducted one such qualitative investigation. They held focus group interviews with eighteen college female athletes and exercisers who identified body image as a transient construct. Athletes described their bodies with pride or discouragement depending on whether they perceived their bodies as athletic or culturally feminine. Although athletes were elite performers experiencing strenuous training demands, they did not believe their bodies were “good enough.” Social contexts that required lean, less muscular, more socially acceptable feminine bodies seemed to raise athletes’ concerns over their bodies. This example shows that sport cannot be
isolated from society. Greenleaf (2002) examined similar issues in a slightly more recent study. Based on her interviews with six former high school and college female athletes, she labeled *athletic* body image as an evaluation of internal image within an athletic context (e.g., weight lifting sessions, competitions), and *social* body image as the internal image of the body in social settings (e.g., work, school, relationships). Results showed that female athletes’ feelings about their bodies in social situations were determined, in part, by the degree to which they claimed an athletic identity. All of the participants enjoyed being strong and powerful, but those who privileged their athletic identity were less concerned when bigger muscles made it more difficult to fit into clothes than their peers were. Five of the athletes also indicated their physical appearance impacted their athletic body image. How they felt about their body in social settings influenced their belief in their body’s ability to perform well in sport. For these female athletes, feeling toned and thin led them to feel their bodies were more capable of achieving sport success. Interestingly, these athletes discussed feeling their athletic bodies and social ideals conflicted. They felt the muscles they needed for sport made them too muscular in social settings. However, most of the participants negotiated this discrepancy in healthy manners and constructed a positive body image. Both of these studies demonstrate that female athletes, in particular, develop multiple body images as they move through their social and athletic worlds. Their findings also indicate that, rather than being a product of sport environments, athletes are actively constructing their body image as they negotiate hegemonic femininity.

Gendered social norms influence how athletes think about their bodies in social settings and might influence how they perceive of their physique in athletic environments as well. George’s (2005) autoethnographic study about her college soccer team revealed how social and sport expectations converge on women’s bodies. Several members of the team initially enjoyed
the training and weight lifting exercises but, over time, disliked how their bodies were increasing in size. One athlete declared, “I can’t slim down my legs. All this lifting is making them huge. I looked at them in the mirror today while I was at the gym and wanted to puke” (p. 327). This athlete’s attachment to feminine ideals made it difficult to accept her muscular frame. Cultural norms regarding women’s bodies remain at play in sport contexts. This study demonstrates that some athletes follow body ideals even though doing so might prove detrimental for their sport careers. Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, and Steinfeldt (2011) help explain this finding by asserting that even though female athletes conform to the same levels of feminine norms as nonathletes, they must also attend to the masculine norms involved in sports participation. This added pressure intensifies body image disturbances though more research is needed to understand how female athletes who develop positive body images successfully negotiate boundaries placed on women’s bodies.

Some qualitative research has attempted to recognize individuals’ attempts at (re)claiming their bodies through various acts of agency. One athlete from the George (2005) study was dedicated to weightlifting despite negative responses to her muscles from her boyfriend, father, and teammates. And, another athlete refused to participate in “body talk” (p. 340) with teammates where athletes made disparaging comments about themselves and each other. This athlete also expressed vocal dissent when coaches mandated body fat tests. Other studies show that female athletes do create positive body images even higher than that produced by nonathletes as they learn to balance their identities and create acceptance for themselves (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Steinfeldt et al., 2011). They are not passive objects who accept cultural norms; instead, they actively construct their own thoughts and attitudes towards their bodies. Some of the female college athletes in Krane and Colleagues’ (2004) study
even reported feeling proud and empowered by their strong bodies. They knew their powerful physiques brought unwanted social attention and constantly marked them as different from other women; but, they also embraced the psychological and physiological benefits associated with sport participation. Steinfeldt et al. (2011) found that of the eighty five female athlete participants they surveyed, only 16% of them did not want to be muscular. While female athletes continue to be constrained by gendered expectations, these findings provide evidence that they continue locating pockets where they can reclaim their bodies. It is important for researchers to identify these moments of resistance and begin exploring how some athletes are able to navigate social and athletic structures in ways that allow them to construct health body images.

These investigations (George, 2005; Greenleaf, 2002; Krane et al., 2001) are important because they support Cash and colleagues’ (2004) conceptualization of body image as multifaceted and context-specific. These studies also attest to the difficulty in balancing culturally constructed feminine norms within traditionally masculine sport contexts. Gendered body ideals existing in the larger society penetrate the sport realm and impact how female athletes perceive of their bodies. While these researchers acknowledge that hegemonic body ideals influence female athlete body image, they do not explain how women’s multiple identities might impact their construction of self. They explain that female athletes’ develop multiple body images (e.g., social, athletic), but how might their other intersecting identities or group affiliations influence their ability to negotiate body norms and construct positive body images? Further, while they recognize female athletes’ agency, they do not offer paths for future resistance efforts. Future research that aims to investigate these complex processes would add
depth to the current knowledge base regarding the ways in which female athletes create multiple body images.

Quantitative studies in this area have focused on identifying important social factors that influence athlete body image such as the coach and family-of-origin. Blackmer, Searight, and Ratwick (2011) studied 103 male and female college athletes at one Midwestern university and found a connection between body image disturbances and family structure. More specifically, results showed that greater body discomfort was associated with family climates that discouraged emotional exchanges and involved a hierarchical structure with adults responsible for making decisions over children. These family climates led to a decrease in athletes’ psychological health and diminished sense of autonomy or personal control, which also was related to higher reports of body dissatisfaction. On the other hand, athletes from families that promoted open, responsible expressions of emotions and those with warm, supportive family environments were less likely to report preoccupation with their body or negative body image. Blackmer and colleagues concluded that athletes from more controlling family environments tended to also report holding more negative views of their body. These findings suggest that an athlete’s social experiences and family background might play a role in their body image; that people’s perceptions of their bodies develop outside of sport and personal histories might influence how an athlete views or interprets feedback about their bodies in sport settings. Accordingly, sport and exercise researchers should consider how factors outside of sport (e.g., family structure) might influence female athletes’ body experiences in sport when conducting research in this area. This study again supports the complex process female athletes engage in when constructing their body image.
Athletes’ social interactions within sport also provide important information for creating positive and healthy views of one’s body. Jowett and Cramer (2010) explored the degree to which coach-athlete and parent-athlete relationships can predict young athletes’ body image. Meaningful interpersonal relationships between coaches and athletes were found to have a positive impact on athlete body image. On the other hand, when the track and field or gymnastic athletes reported conflicts in their relationships with coaches or parents, their descriptions of their body were negative. Overall, they found that 25% of athletes’ body image issues could be related to their descriptions of their coach-athlete bond. Perceiving their interactions with the coach as deep, close, and meaningful correlated with more positive body perceptions. This makes sense because coaches’ evaluations are important in the sport setting because they determine playing time and reward/punishment systems. Athletes’ body shape and their conflict with the coach were positively associated when parental conflict was low (Jowett & Cramer, 2010). Participants who described little disharmony with their parents also depicted strong relationships with their coaches and more positive body images. Athletes who had strong parent-child relationships also reported possessing positive body images even when their coach criticized their physique. This study shows that athletes’ relationships in sport can impact their perceptions of their body shape. The findings provide one example of how social interactions (e.g., coach-athlete relationship) occurring in athletic settings might relate to people’s thoughts about their own bodies. It also offers one possible path of resistance for female athletes in the form of strong familial relationships. More research might better develop this possible relationship, but it does seem that other social interactions might serve as buffers for female athletes participating in outcome team climates.
The studies outlined in this section help explain how female athletes construct their body image. They identify various cultural norms adopted and describe multiple social interactions occurring in sport. Finally, they outline how these factors impact athletes’ embodied experiences. That said, significant holes in the literature remain. This study aimed to acknowledge the role of multiple identities on the construction of body image and negotiations of body norms. It also examined the social interactions that facilitate positive body image along with the impact of coach-created motivational team climates on female athletes’ body perceptions.

**Factors Influencing Athlete Eating Behaviors**

As noted earlier, body image can affect eating patterns. Restricting or reducing food places athletes at-risk for developing injuries as they may increasingly lose the ability to focus and concentrate on a given task (Beals, 2004). Because of these relationships, it is important to understand what aspects of sport might direct athletes to control their food intake. Research on athletes’ thoughts and behaviors regarding food has identified athletes’ psychosocial makeup as one possible determinant. Some results, especially from quantitative inquiries, suggest that eating disturbances are related to individuals’ psychological characteristics. In Australia, 316 male and female elite athletes representing sixteen different sports participated in a study that linked negative perfectionistic tendencies with social physique anxiety and potential disordered eating patterns (Haase, Prapevessis, & Owens, 2002). Negative perfectionistic individuals are motivated to reach goals as a way of avoiding adverse consequences, and they tend to set unattainable standards. Female athletes who displayed negative perfectionism also experienced high levels of social physique anxiety (SPA), which refers to the degree to which a person feels nervous about how their body is judged by others (Haase et al., 2002). And, athletes with higher
SPA and negative perfectionism were more likely to hold disturbed eating attitudes. These women also set body-related goals that lacked feasibility. Athletes’ self-esteem and competition anxiety have also been correlated with unhealthy dieting practices (Berry & Howe, 2000; Engel et al., 2003). *Competition anxiety* refers to how nervous or worried athletes are prior to sporting events in which they are participating (Berry & Howe, 2000). So, anxiety about an upcoming athletic performance has been shown to negatively influence athletes’ nutritional habits.

In the largest known quantitative research project in this area to-date, Engel and colleagues (2003) examined the eating attitudes and behaviors of 1,445 male and female athletes participating in eleven sports at eleven Division I universities across the United States. The researchers connected athletes’ racial identities to their eating behaviors, then compared the results. In particular, White female athletes reported elevated levels of purging, restrictive eating, and disordered eating attitudes when compared to Black women and all men participating in sport. This finding might be related to differing levels of emphasis placed on thinness occurring within different gender and racial groups. However, because their study was quantitative, this assertion was mostly speculative. Their results could only show that racial identities might be related to body image concerns. This study, in particular, warrants more research on these possible connections.

Social factors in sport also serve as partial predictors of athletes’ eating behaviors. In the Engel et al. (2003) study, athletes’ restrictive eating patterns were related to their perceptions that teammates used excessive dieting techniques to control body size. This connection refers to what Reel and Beals (2009) termed the *contagion effect* where secret information is passed down either through direct communication or observation. Teammates spend a considerable amount of time together, so their personal eating habits can impact one another and possibly create an
environment where the majority of athletes regularly diet and count calories. Watching others is not the only social factor related to eating behaviors; family organization might also impact athletes’ food-related habits. Crissey and Honea (2006) used the data from 7,214 girls (12-18 years of age) in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to study the relationship between athletic participation and perceptions of body size and weight-loss strategies. When comparing athlete and nonathlete samples, these researchers found differences in family structures separating the two groups. They argued that an athlete’s family structure might be significant in determining a person’s susceptibility to weight concerns and eating disturbances. This conclusion lends further support to the proposed need for studying the impact of cultural factors on female athlete body image in sport.

The literature shows that body-related comments from coaches negatively impact athletes’ thoughts and actions related to food (Hausenblas & Downs, 2001). Female athletes who hear weight concerns from others are 2.8 times more likely to develop subclinical eating disorders (Williams et al., 2003). Coaches play important roles as they often determine or plan athletes’ lives (e.g., meal times, workouts, class schedules, travel attire), and athletes often value their insight. If coaches critique body shapes or sizes, athletes’ perceptions of their bodies might change to match the feedback from their leader. Muscat and Long (2008) reported that 58% of the 157 Canadian female athletes in their sample received critical comments from others about their body, shape, or weight; were told they needed to diet or lose weight; or were asked to increase food intake to gain weight. Over a quarter of those comments came from coaches, trainers, and/or teachers. Forty-nine percent of the participants said these critical comments had “quite a bit” or “a lot” of impact on how they viewed their bodies; in particular, they became more conscious of their shape, diet, and weight. Female athletes who remembered critical
comments from others about their bodies reported higher levels of eating disturbances when compared to athletes who did not report negative comments directed at their body. More severe comments or those that seemed more threatening also were related to increased reports of disordered eating. This study highlights the negative effect body disparaging comments can have on female athletes’ eating and weight control practices. The findings also suggest that future researchers carefully widen the sociocultural lens to explore the role significant others play in influencing the process of constructing a body image.

Coker (2011) examined specific coaching behaviors that impact athlete body image and eating patterns. In their sample of 248 female college athletes at two different universities, 11% of the variance in disordered eating was explained by the coach-athlete partnership and perceived weight-related coach pressure. Strong coach-athlete partnerships were defined by lower levels of weight-related coach pressure. A track athlete described that during “freshman year we had to get our body fat tested and we had to be an exact percent (16%)” (p. 94). Twenty-two percent of athletes who reported direct weight-related pressure from their coach met the cutoff score for disordered eating. The coach-athlete partnership “partially mediated the relationship between perceived weight-related coach pressure and disordered eating patterns” (p. 105). Comments about having a positive coach-athlete relationship was shown to coincide with less perceived weight-related pressure from the coach and fewer reports of eating disturbances. These findings suggest that athletes’ perceptions of events and people in their lives impact their body perceptions more than the event itself. This study aimed to examine athletes’ perceptions of their lived experiences to better understand how they constructed their body image. Coker (2011) also emphasized the importance of the coach in determining the food habits of their players. While
this study does not argue that coaches cause disordered eating patterns, they might exacerbate symptoms by engaging in coaching behaviors that target the body as an object for improvement.

Kerr, Berman, and DeSouza (2006) investigated disordered eating in gymnastics by surveying athletes, coaches, parents, and judges. Gymnasts who heard their coaches make disparaging comments about their bodies were significantly more likely to believe they needed to lose weight, engage in unhealthy weight control practices, and report having an eating disorder than those who had not heard such remarks. For example, one athlete reported, “My coach jokes about teenage girls developing hips or breasts. I don’t think he has any idea how self-conscious we are about these changes. His jokes make us feel terrible” (p. 36). Very few responding coaches, however, self-reported practices that targeted athletes’ bodies or food intake. Twenty-five percent of coaches claimed they required gymnasts to log what they eat and only four percent said they advised athletes to lose weight. Clearly a disconnect exists between how athletes perceive their coaches’ regulatory practices and coaches’ self-acknowledgement. More research is needed in this area to better outline the relationship between coaches and athletes’ eating behaviors (Berry & Howe, 2000) since coaches often do not respond to questions about the body-related regimens they require of their athletes. In fact, Kerr and colleagues (2006) had only twenty-eight coaches (19% of those surveyed) discuss practices that were aimed at athletes’ nutrition. Since the results from Coker’s (2011) study also identify athletes’ perceptions of coaching behaviors as important correlates of their eating habits, future research should focus on exploring athletes’ understandings of their social interactions rather than focusing on how coaches view their behaviors.

As outlined in this section, studies exploring eating behaviors in athletes have identified several psychosocial risk factors. These findings provide information that can be used to create
or improve preventative treatment programs; however, some of these claims rely on the assumption that disordered eating manifests in relation to individual characteristics (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Viewing athletes’ eating behaviors in this way can be problematic. These perspectives imply that changing how women behave could potentially eliminate disordered eating behaviors. The conclusion is that since not all female athletes experience these issues, it must be an individual or personal problem rather than systemic and culturally constructed. Other findings in this area lend credence to the current study by calling for more investigations to look at the various social factors in sport such as coaching behaviors, teammate interactions, and the coach-athlete relationship that mitigate the relationship female athletes develop with their bodies.

**The Role of Team Climate**

To-date, there have been few empirical inquiries looking at the role of team climates on athletes’ body image and eating behaviors. This area is imperative because it provides a missing link in understanding how cultural body norms are taken up in various sport settings. Since athletes, especially at the college level, spend a large amount of their time with their athletic team, insight into which environments help athletes develop positive body images is needed. Current research has already asserted that athletes who participate in outcome motivational team climates where winning is the primary goal are more likely to develop an ego goal orientation (e.g., thrive on social comparison, external feedback, rewards) (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002). Subsequently, these athletes might be at increased risk for developing negative body image or disordered eating patterns.

Krane, Greenleaf, and Snow (1997) conducted a case study of a former elite gymnast who talked about learning to view her body as a tool for success rather than of worth inherently. This ego-oriented athlete believed that victory could only be attained by disciplining and
punishing her body through physically extreme workouts and food deprivation. The ego-involved motivational climate of her gym significantly impacted her own goal orientation. With an emphasis on winning and outperforming others, she learned to take pride in overtraining, ignoring signs of pain to continue competing, and engaging in unhealthy eating habits. Her coach expected a thin, petite body frame, and she endured intense body-related scrutiny. “If we ate something that [Coach] did not approve of, he would tell our parents, he would make us feel so ashamed in front of everybody, he used public humiliation” (p. 60). In this way, the body becomes tied to sport performance, and athletes are punished for not adhering to a certain ideal. To be successful in sport, this gymnast viewed her body as an object or machine to be controlled rather than a physical form worthy of praise and adoration. As this study outlines, team climates that emphasize winning are likely to perpetuate these thin bodied ideals as the norm for female athletic bodies. For some female athletes, like the gymnast in this study, participating in an ego-involved motivational climate could relate to maladaptive eating patterns and negative body image.

Aimar (2001) examined the relationships among motivational climate, social physique anxiety, and eating attitudes in 102 young female gymnasts aged eleven to eighteen. She found that motivational climate might not be significantly connected to athlete body image or eating behaviors. Aimar did not find significant relationships between motivational climate and athlete body image because young athletes may face less social pressure related to their bodies since their bodies have yet to undergo puberty where women’s hips often widen and bodies accumulate fat mass. The athletes in this study also participated on their gymnastics club teams for varying amounts of time. As pointed out earlier in the conceptual framework, achievement goal theory asserts that the longer athletes spend practicing with their team, the more likely it is
they will adopt attitudes that reflect the team climate. Therefore, with more time, athletes in this study might have been more significantly impacted by their team climate. Aimar encouraged future studies to use a design that investigates both task and outcome climates and to employ a qualitative methodology to “allow athletes to explain their perceptions of their environment and their behavioral responses” (p. 79).

While these studies (Aimar, 2001; Krane et al., 1997) yielded different results, they both signify the importance of the team climate in relating to athlete body image and eating behaviors. Motivational climates provide one possible link between cultural norms and individual attitudes towards the body in sport settings. Team climates can either help athletes buffer cultural norms and develop productive body images, or they can serve as a compounding factor making it more likely that athletes will construct negative self-images. Alone motivational climates cannot explain individual differences (i.e., not every athlete creates the same body image), but they can help explain variations across sport types. Rather than reducing higher reports of disturbed body image or eating patterns among female athletes to general differences in sport contexts (e.g., aesthetic vs. nonaesthetic sports), this study explored motivational climates to better understand how teams competing in the same sport might develop very different body norms. Investigating this factor could create more complex understandings of women’s thoughts and relationships with their bodies by examining how standards are taken up by social groups. Exploring motivational climates also provides insight into the impact of coaches since they are largely responsible for creating team environments.

The Present Study

Although a substantial amount of information on embodied experiences and body management practices exists, significant knowledges about the relationships among female
athletes and their bodies are missing. This project filled some of the gaps in the existing literature by approaching the topic using a holistic approach. Instead of focusing on gendered body ideologies, team climate, team norms, or individual social identities as separate issues, the proposed study explored how all of these factors worked together to guide the ways in which female athletes make sense of their bodies. This comprehensive approach required an epistemological stance that would allow for not only the recognition of women’s body practices but also critiqued daily lived experiences.

**Epistemology.** *Epistemology* refers to a theory of knowledge outlining what can be considered “legitimate knowledge” (Letherby, 2003, p. 5). Explicating this background information determines how findings can be interpreted and whether or not they can be trusted. How researchers enter the conversation, what they accept as a valid form of knowledge production, determines how they design their studies. I am grounding my work in feminist cultural studies, which I am locating at the intersection of cultural studies and critical paradigms. This study is based on the belief that multiple truths exist and there are multiple ways of interpreting life events. It disputes any claims that assert the value of absolute truths. Instead, each person “socially constructs, interprets, and reacts to social settings” (Krane & Baird, 2005).

Research that recognizes multiple truths also analyzes how particular values regarding body sizes gain their “truth status,” circulate, and are eventually taken up by individuals (Markula, Burns, & Riley, 2008, p. 15). Accordingly, the current study explored women’s diverse experiences and held them all as important, partial stories pertaining to the development of body image. As the researcher, I viewed “truths” related to the athletic female body as being derived from socially agreed upon meanings rather than as “truths” capable of existing outside of human interaction. Therefore, the dual standards of muscles (read: masculine) and thinness (read: feminine) that
limit acceptable female athlete bodies only exist because people are benefitting from its truth status and committed to maintaining it. Acknowledging multiple realities allowed me to better explain how two athletes from the same team interpreted and responded to their team climates differently. It did not invalidate those experiences; rather, it recognized that both were true. From a cultural and critical perspective, all knowledge is seen as historically and socially bound. Female athletes described their bodies in differently throughout the interview based on the circumstances they discussed and the moment in their athletic career they were highlighting. The point of this research was to understand how sociocultural factors influenced female athlete body image from the perspective of female athletes themselves, so generalizing results to other sociohistorical contexts or determining whose experiences are “accurate” remained irrelevant. Instead, this project focused on understanding how various female athletes made sense of their bodies in their sport climates. The finished product highlights multiple voices discussing their rich, distinctive stories.

Much of the current literature employs positivist and post-positivist epistemologies. And, these studies have offered a lot of useful information regarding athletes’ body image and eating experiences. Researchers identified psychological factors (Engel et al., 2003; Greenleaf & McGreer, 2006); biological elements (Johnson, 1994); and social influences (Berry & Howe, 2000; Coker et al., 2011; Jowett & Cramer, 2011) as components related to disordered eating and body image disturbances. However, these epistemological frameworks employed a medical model that pathologized athletes’ embodied encounters. Focusing the analysis on the individual reduces body image constructs to simply “reside within the mind” (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). These approaches fail to locate people in their sociocultural contexts, which previously prevented explorations into the cultural conditions that impact body management practices from
being adequately explored (Markula, Burns, & Riley, 2008). The result has been a partial picture that places the problem of poor body image primarily on the shoulders of individuals without confronting larger social and cultural issues. Identifying the ways that cultural norms interact with body image in sport contexts adds complexity to the current knowledge base and fills holes in the extant literature. Deeper and more complex understandings of the relationships among athletes, their bodies, and personal eating habits would challenge sport climates that promote unhealthy food and exercise behaviors. Rather than finding “cures” to rid athletes of negative body image as much of the post-positivist research has done, the proposed study will explore the “meanings behind athletes’ eating and exercise behaviors” (Busanich & McGannon, 2010, p. 388). Investigations into the conditions that shape definitions of acceptable or normal bodies would create a more comprehensive picture of why female athletes think about and discipline their bodies in a particular manner. It also provides insight into the power issues at play. While women possess differing levels of agency, they also exist in a web of power. Research should recognize this disciplinary power as a means of controlling women’s bodies.

The current study located people within their sociocultural contexts and analyzed how female athletes negotiate competing discourses about their bodies to construct their body image. This study also examined athletes’ lived experiences to better understand the larger, sociocultural issues that impact athlete body image and acknowledge how athletes negotiate these dominant body-related ideologies. Fundamentally, as an example of nonpositivist work, this research refused to assume value-free observations exist, instead highlighting the importance of context. The goal was to focus on the individual meanings female athletes attach to their embodied experiences in and out of sport. As the researcher, I constantly worked to acknowledge my role in the construction of knowledge. Since all existing knowledge is created, I realize that how I
interacted with my participants impacted the stories they told; but, those moments created powerful, rich, and complicated story lines as women described their bodies.

The proposed study also critiqued hegemonic cultural practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). At its core, a feminist cultural studies project is political and provides social critique. Exploring athletes’ perspectives not only helped understand their daily lives but also was used to problematize dominant ideologies and practices that encourage women to control or change their bodies. These paradigms acknowledge that values exist in and through cultural exchanges that often go unnoticed. So, this study sought to illuminate dominant value systems that place women’s bodies on display and normalize the resulting public scrutiny. One of the primary goals of projects grounded in cultural studies and critical epistemologies is to provide pathways for emancipation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Specific to this research, athletes’ daily lived experiences were critiqued and used to understand sociocultural norms and practices that influence their self-perceptions. These insights helped locate areas in sport where female athletes could resist gendered body norms and construct positive relationships with their bodies. Through these political efforts and in line with these paradigms, the researcher is seen as a “transformative individual” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 161). As the primary investigator, I moved beyond listening to female athletes tell their stories, I became an advocate and activist for athlete well-being. This project explicated information that could be useful in designing coaching education programs among other intervention or treatment possibilities.

**Purpose.** As shown throughout the review of literature earlier in this chapter, there is still much to be learned about female athletes’ embodied experiences. Much of the existing literature focuses on identifying specific correlates of female athlete body image without exploring how women make sense of their social worlds and describe their bodies. The current
study inserts women’s voices into the discussion about their bodies and eating patterns. One purpose of the current study was to explore female college athletes’ body image. This project examined athletes’ thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors about their bodies in athletic and social scenarios since they exist at the interstices of both worlds. A second purpose was to investigate the sociocultural context (e.g., gendered body norms, motivational climates, team norms) and how it may impact athlete body image. I explored athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ roles in perpetuating traditional gender norms and constructing motivational team climates as part of this focus area as well. A third research focus analyzed the ways in which female athletes’ social identities helped explain their body-related behaviors. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What social and cultural factors impact athlete body image?
2. How do female athletes negotiate social and athletic bodily expectations?
3. In what ways do team norms impact athletes’ eating and exercise behaviors?
4. What type of agency do female athletes exhibit? And, how do they make these decisions?
CHAPTER III. RESEARCH METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Methodologies provide the framework for analyzing and evaluating the research process (Letherby, 2003). As Krane and Baird (2005) articulated, identifying a methodology makes it possible for researchers to assess the value of a particular method, its impact on participants, and the relationship between data collection and analysis processes. The current project employed feminist and intersectional methodological approaches.

Feminist Methodology

Stemming from my feminist cultural studies epistemology, I utilized a feminist methodological approach. I employed a pluralistic feminist approach characterized by legitimizing personal experiences (Ferree & Hess, 1994) and recognizing the multiplicity of women’s experiences (Reinharz, 1992) and embracing non-hierarchical relationships in researcher-researched interactions along with remaining reflexive (Fonow & Cook, 1991).

Because this methodological approach values all experiences as different ways of knowing without privileging any one understanding, I did not lump female athletes’ body perceptions together. Instead, feminist researchers “view meanings as multiple, open to interpretation, and unstable” (Whaley, 2001, p. 421). I worked to understand how women’s relationships with their bodies might differ based on social identities such as race, age, sexuality, or other categories of difference. My intent was to contextualize women’s experiences by acknowledging multiple, partial stories that complicate and extend what we already “know” about female athlete body image. In this way, I attempted to legitimize each athlete’s experience while valuing their diverse embodied experiences.

According to feminist methodologies, impartiality is neither desirable nor achievable, but it is important to maintain awareness of how my previous worldly experiences might have
influenced what I could “see” or interpret. This project also acknowledged and dismantled the false researcher-researched divide (Collins, 1989). My epistemology suggests that all truths are constructed in and through interactions with others. Consequently, “truths” only exist as long as people agree to uphold them. Stemming from this belief, feminist researchers emphasize non-hierarchical relationships. Everyone involved in the research process (e.g., researcher, participant, advisers) was viewed as a contributor to the construction of knowledge. And, as such, our roles were mutually constitutive, collaborative, and equally shared.

A feminist methodology is marked by researcher reflexivity, which requires self-critique especially regarding how she might be influencing participants’ responses (Krane & Baird, 2005). Accordingly, I examined how my own experiences within sport led me to this research topic. Also, throughout the research process, it was important for me to question how my body image was influencing my method. I had to guard against allowing positive interactions with a particular participant or previous encounters with that person to become a factor in my data analysis process. As a feminist researcher, it was important to occasionally check-in with myself to maintain awareness of how those issues might be influencing the study.

**Intersectional Methodology**

To-date there have been no known empirical explorations into female athlete body image using an intersectional approach, so this is an important aspect of the current study.

*Intersectionality* defines social identities and inequality as interdependent rather than mutually exclusive (Bowleg, 2008). There are no superior social identities just as there are no identity-related experiences based on one, single identity category. As Hill Collins (1998) argued, intersectional projects move beyond identifying social hierarchies to exploring how distinctive power relations construct each other.
As a researcher using this approach, I created open questions that allowed participants to describe their interdependent experiences without separating each identity. I also avoided additive assumptions that required participants to privilege or rank one of their social identities over another (Bowleg, 2008; Stewart, 2010). Rather than asking how athletes felt about their bodies, I posited for participants to “tell me how you describe your body.” Then, I focused on how various experiences (e.g., gendered body ideals, eating behaviors) were shaped by participants’ intersecting identities. Bowleg (2008) provides one such interview probe as she invites participants to “tell me about some of the day-to-day challenges that you face as a Black lesbian woman” (p. 316). Rather than asking female athletes to explain how they feel about their bodies in relation to their race, gender, sport, or sexual orientation, I provided space for each participant to describe identity-related experiences that were important to them.

However, Bowleg (2008) also conceded that it is almost impossible to escape additive assumptions. In this project, I interpreted the data within a sociohistorical context (p. 320) that moved beyond what could be directly observed from the data itself. For example, when an athlete of color mentioned covering her body in social settings to avoid appearing “intimidating,” it was important to consider how cultural (mis)representations of the bodies of female athletes of color influenced how the athlete in this study presented her body. Recognizing how her mutually constitutive experiences as a heterosexual, college, female athlete of color related to historical attempts at rendering similar bodies invisible allowed me to construct a more complex understanding of her body perceptions in that moment. From this methodological approach, it became possible to explore how participants’ social statuses impacted their descriptions of ideal female athletic bodies, their feelings about their own physiques, and their ability to enact resistance strategies.
Method

To explore the research questions outlined above, I conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) with intercollegiate female athletes in the United States. After an initial interview was completed, if further clarification was warranted, participants were contacted again to complete a semi-structured (Kvale, 1996) follow-up interview to improve accuracy. I then analyzed the data to find common themes and connect them to broader my conceptual frameworks.

Participants. The sample of participants included 20 female athletes competing in eight different college sports at the varsity level, including: basketball, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming, tennis, track and field, volleyball (see Appendix D). Four participants identified a sophomore eligibility status, seven claimed a junior eligibility status, and six were seniors. Three other athletes in this study identified as fifth year seniors who had completed their playing eligibility but maintained active student status as they finished their degree program. Women playing at NCAA Division I, II, or III member institutions participated in interviews about their bodies with ten athletes representing Division I, one athlete from Division II, and nine athletes representing Division III. All but three of the participants in this study identified as straight or heterosexual with two women identifying as bisexual and one athlete choosing not to label her sexual orientation. More diversity was found when participants self-identified their race. Fourteen athletes identified as White or Caucasian and two as African American. One athlete identified in each of the following categories: White and Asian, Mexican, Half Filipino Half Caucasian, and Latina. College athletes attended universities from various geographic regions across the United States as well (e.g., Midwest, n=6; West, n=7; Northeast, n = 1; Southeast, n=2; South, n=4) participated. To disrupt unintentional assumptions that all female college
athletes are heterosexual and White, throughout this manuscript, female college athletes are consistently identified by including researcher-created code initials along with their self-identified race and sexual orientation (see Appendix D).

These athletes’ college sport experiences occurred in the current post-Title IX athletic environment. In 2012, forty years after Title IX (1972) passed, the highest number of female college sport teams (8.73) and total number of female athletes participating on varsity teams (200,000) were recorded by Acosta and Carpenter (2013). These scholars also acknowledge other advancements such as improved to facilities, equipment, and competitive schedules along with increases in scholarship opportunities for women continue to occur at the college level. This post-Title IX world also is marked by cultural attitude shifts as acceptance and respect for girls and women as sport participants rises. Visible nationwide support of the United States women’s soccer team during the 1999 World Cup and opportunities for female athletes in some sports to play professionally suggest that seeing women in sport is becoming commonplace, even “normal,” and many women are being respected as members of their sport communities. Unlike pre-Title IX female athletes, the participants in this study matriculated through sport during a time when they had multiple opportunities to engage in various athletic endeavors. As a result, female college athletes playing in this post-Title IX moment often perceive their experiences in sport closely match that of male athletes. Though financial support and media attention (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013) have remained consistently low, many girls and young women athletes appear to rely on their tangible involvement in athletics at various levels to guide their attitudes and beliefs about the larger sport culture.

Procedure. After receiving approval from the university’s Human Subjects Review Board (see Appendix E), I made contact with female college athletes or people I knew who
might have access to potential participants. I sent e-mails about my project starting with people
with whom I was already familiar and asked them to forward my study purpose to others they
thought might be interested and fit the demographic profile of the study. I used *purposive* and
*snowball* sampling techniques (Noy, 2008). Purposive recruitment procedures occurred because
athletes needed to be current members of a women’s college sport team at the varsity level or
have completed their eligibility but still be enrolled at the university (e.g., fall sport athletes who
were interviewed in the spring after their competitive season ended). Because athletes who
agreed to participate were asked if they would be willing to refer additional teammates or
friends, recruitment efforts also involved a snowball process. In the initial stages, I asked other
sport personnel (e.g., coaches, sport psychology consultants, athletic directors) with whom I had
rapport to contact other coaches they may know to spread the word about my project. All of
these key informants were provided with a recruitment script describing the study to share with
potential participants. However, since coaches and athletic directors were not directly involved
in the study beyond recruitment efforts, they received a shortened study purpose highlighting the
desire to interview current female athletes about their relationships with their bodies. Coaches
also were asked not to refer any athletes they currently or formerly coached for the study to
avoid any biased or compromised interviews.

Once athletes were identified, I emailed them specific information outlining all aspects of
the study as well as an informed consent document. Participants had the option to select in-
person, phone, or Skype interviews depending on proximity, availability, and personal
preference. Four interviews were conducted in-person, four via Skype, and twelve interviews
took place over the telephone. After providing an electronic version of the informed consent
document to each potential participant, I asked if they would be willing to participate and, if so,
we scheduled a meeting. For in-person interviews, the athlete signed the informed consent document on the day of the interview (see Appendix C). Electronic (e.g., Skype or phone) participants were asked to read the informed consent document prior to the interview and provided verbal consent at the start of their scheduled interviews, prior to posing any questions related to the study purpose (see Appendix B). In two of the Skype interviews, I noted that the participants provided one serious verbal response each that did not match their respective visual gestures, which suggested they were being sarcastic. While other similar differences might have occurred, in analyzing the data, there were no obvious changes in the depth of interviews based on whether participants opted to meet electronically or in-person. Rather, it seemed that athletes interviewed later in the research process provided more detail and vividness in their responses to various questions. As a novice researcher, this variation was likely a product of improving in my rapport-building strategies and follow-up questions as I gained more experience interviewing female college athletes.

Initially, I conducted unstructured interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2008) to allow athletes to describe their thoughts and feelings about their bodies. Interviews lasted between twenty-nine and eighty-six minutes with the majority of interviews lasting approximately sixty-five minutes. While unstructured interviews allowed flexibility and space for participants to guide the interview in different directions based on their personal experiences, they also provided a general organization or structural element (Berg & Lune, 2012). Instead of creating specific questions as part of my interview guide (see Appendix A), I identified general probe topics for the interview and referred to them throughout the conversation as reminders to pose questions related to my research focus. That said, it was also important to remain open during these conversations as the strength of unstructured interviews is that they allow for organic discussions to evolve and take
shape throughout the conversation. To develop the interview guide, I created rapport building questions including basic demographic queries regarding year in school and sport type (Berg & Lune, 2012). The purpose of these questions was to generate a natural flow to the conversation and ease any discomfort participants felt. Next, I developed probe areas related directly to my research focus (Berg & Lune, 2012). These topics related to my guiding questions but only served as an outline and were not always covered in every interview.

Interviews were formal; organized in advance with a specific time, place, and format (electronic or in-person) agreed upon beforehand with the participant. Prior to each conversation, I reviewed the process, assured confidentiality, and reminded participants the session would be audio-recorded. I also answered all participant questions related to procedure or informed consent. After verbal or written consent was obtained, I began the interview process. And, once early rapport building questions were posed, I ask participants my grand question: “how would you describe your body.” This initial inquiry was meant to be broad, allowing participants to lead the conversation and describe what was important to them about their embodied experiences. I resisted the urge to include identity categories in that initial probe because, as Bowleg (2008) stated, doing so would have created an additive approach to intersectional research. Instead, this broad question allowed participants to self-select which social identities interacted with and shaped their body image. Throughout the interview, I referenced my research guide to ensure I stayed focused on my research interests. I also posed follow-up questions to promote elaboration when necessary. Probes such as “can you give me an example” or “tell me a story about that” led to deeper discussions of female athletes’ experiences and provided rich data. I listed these questions on my interview guide to remind me to delve into
the conversation and increase the likelihood of accurately capturing athletes’ perceptions of their lived experiences (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

After I completed an interview with an athlete, I transcribed that conversation verbatim and analyzed it for any missing data or stories that needed more detail. When this was the case, I contacted female athletes to schedule a second, semi-structured interview with the purpose of adding detail to current data. Once all conversations with an athlete had taken place, I sent a follow-up email to notify them of national education organizations related to the topics we had discussed. If she had any further questions or concerns, I encouraged her to contact the numbers listed in the email provided. Every participant in my study received this final email so as to avoid evaluating female athletes’ stories looking for possible body disturbances. This technique also aligned with my feminist cultural studies epistemology, which, in part, involves a political action seeking to create change of some form.

I began analyzing the data as soon as the first interview was conducted, and continued during the data collection phase. Hesse-Biber (2009) defines this stage as an “iterative process” where themes found in an early transcript inform lines of questioning in future interviews; and, interviews occurring later in the research process provide information that complicates already established codes. I continued conducting interviews throughout data analysis. During the open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), I created initial labels or codes directly from the interview transcripts. In the beginning, I wanted to “open up the data to all potentials and possibilities contained within them” (p. 160). After considering various interpretations and deciding on a list of code names, I employed axial (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) or focused (Charmaz, 2006) coding, which combines open-code labels into higher level themes or categories. This next level of coding is slightly removed from the original transcripts as initial
codes are organized into meaningful groups. As this process continued, I considered merging primary themes with my conceptual framework (i.e., feminist cultural studies, achievement goal theory, social identity perspective). As Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000) claim, this part of the process is important because neither participants nor their voices “should (or do) survive without theorizing” (p. 120). It is in connecting the data to theoretical frameworks that ultimately provided space for new understandings about factors that influence women’s body perceptions. These higher order themes, when theoretically explained, provided rich, detailed insight into female college athlete body image.

**Trustworthiness.** *Trustworthiness* means that the research products represent the experiences of the people studied as closely as possible (Ely, 1991). Specific to this study, if female college athletes read excerpts from my research log, the information should resonate with their general experiences. While there is no one way to establish trustworthiness, I took several steps throughout the research process to ensure credible results. I accomplished this task by remaining reflexive, engaging in rapport building efforts during interviews, conducting a pilot interview, and relying on critical friends.

As mentioned earlier, reflexivity requires me to remain aware of how my personal experiences might be influencing the research process. For example, my interest in this area was impacted by my personal experiences as a member of a college basketball team where negative body image issues and disordered eating became normative behaviors. I needed to carefully consider how I phrased and intonated various interview questions to provide space for athletes to tell their stories and avoid shutting out critical moments in their lived experiences. One way, I remained aware of this potential influence was through journaling about my experiences prior to data collection in my research log. A log is a “chronological [record] of what we learn and our
insights about how we learn it” (Ely, 1991, p. 69). Then, I occasionally looked back through my story and journal to explore how participants’ narratives resembled or differentiated themselves from my own experiences. Further, I numbered my lines so that I could better cross reference material during data analysis. These efforts reminded me to listen for participants’ experiences rather than assuming I knew what they are going through as female college athletes. During the data analysis phase, I wrote analytic memos (Ely, 1991) in my research log about my personal reactions and assumptions about participants’ stories that helped me better understand the meaning I was placing on specific events.

To further assist with trustworthiness, prior to any interviews, I asked one of my peers to interview me using my guide to ensure the clear, strong wording that held a strong rhythm and proper flow (Ely, 1991, p. 62). During this process, I made note of any double barreled questions (Ely, 1991) where I posed multiple inquiries simultaneously. Avoiding this mistake was important because this type of questioning usually leads the interviewee to either choose to respond in only one direction or provide broad, vague answers to both areas of interest. These techniques created successful interview sessions by allowing space and time for participants to share their experiences in deep, meaningful ways. After ensuring careful wording of my questions, I conducted a pilot interview. Here, I interviewed a friend who was a former college athlete about her embodied experiences. I audio recorded this interview, so I could hear any pauses or silences that resulted from the way I posed a particular question. This interview helped me test my interview guide in a more formal setting with someone who was able to answer the questions. It also provided another added measure ensure quality participant interviews.

Berg and Lune (2012) note that building rapport is an important aspect of trustworthiness that begins prior to the actual interview. So, during initial email exchanges with potential
participants, I provided succinct yet friendly responses, ensuring these female athletes understood how important they were to my project and how much I appreciated their participation. These introductory encounters provided opportunities for me to outline the purpose of my project as well. By setting clear expectations and suggesting not only why this project was important but also why each individual is key, I increased the probability of a smooth, productive interview session. This is particularly important in feminist research since the relationship between interviewers and interviewees is intended to be nonhierarchical. To continue building rapport, I shared personal stories about my own struggles as a college athlete with food and exercise to build trust with participants (Berg & Lune, 2012), but only when warranted as athletes shared their own stories. In other words, I did not offer my own stories without prompts or similar stories from my participants. These moments occurred infrequently but offered opportunities to connect during some of the conversations. Each interview is a process of constructing meaning together, so rapport is important in helping participants feel comfortable sharing stories about their bodies that might not be easy to discuss.

Finally, critical friends provided checks throughout various stages of the study and discussed aspects of data analysis to ensure participants’ experiences were accurately represented. My dissertation chair served as my primary critical friend, “audit[ing] the research process” (Ely, 1991). This experienced researcher helped me stay focused on my research goals. I checked-in with her periodically throughout the process to ensure that I was meeting my intended objectives. All of these actions improved the overall trustworthiness of my results.
CHAPTER IV. BODY DESCRIPTIONS

Female athletes conveyed their thoughts and feelings about their bodies in unique and, at times, conflicting ways. As college sport participants, many of these women spent a significant amount of time during their interviews defining athletic bodies by differentiating their physiques from other women’s bodies. They also compared their self-identified physical shape to cultural body norms. These standards of evaluation often were consistent with White, heterosexual, middle-class definitions of a feminine, female body (e.g., thin, toned, sexy). Body perceptions, how this group of women felt about their physiques, shifted during each conversation, based on assessments of their female athletic bodies in relation to cultural body norms. Typically, they expressed body contentment if they perceived their physiques achieved both feminine and athletic body standards. In other moments, female athletes reported discontentment, feeling unhappy or dissatisfied with their physical shape. These dissatisfied self-descriptions often occurred when they believed their body size and shape failed to meet feminine body norms.

The majority of female athletes in this study suggested they were never satisfied with their physical appearance. They explained the body as perpetually imperfect. In sport, athletes learn they can control their success by tirelessly practicing their craft. A similar mentality seemed to be applied to the body. Female athletes consistently identified areas on their bodies they were working to improve regardless of their musculature or physical capabilities. Their body size stood as a physical representation of their self-discipline and commitment to their team and sport. As a result of these conflicting realities, female athletes’ transient body perceptions varied from moment to moment and story to story.

Defining Athletic Bodies
Some female athletes differentiated their bodies from thin, feminine physiques. By creating comparisons, these participants clearly categorized their bodies as athletic and explained why their physiques did not adhere to cultural norms. This group of women created size comparisons and listed body comportment as key identifiers of female athletic bodies.

Female athletes in this study often distinguished their strong, highly trained physiques from thin or fat physiques. MC, a Caucasian basketball player who chose not to identify her sexuality, mentioned that an athletic body possesses “kind of the broader shoulders, not super skinny, and it doesn’t necessarily need to be muscular, but not heavy set.” JS, a White, straight, softball player explained, “I wouldn’t say I’m a little toothpick because I’m definitely not. . . . I have muscle on me, but like I’m not like really fat.” Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual, tennis player, noted,

I guess the comparison would be like “skinny-fat.” So, like “athletic” would be like muscular, um not like a ton of excess body fat, but like you still have like a decent percentage of it. . . . My circumference around my bust is about the same as around my waist, and my hips are smaller than that.

While many American women strive to be skinny, BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, who was recovering from knee surgery, highlighted female athletes’ desire to balance thinness with toned strength:

I don’t know if you’ve ever seen like when you get a cast off, like your [muscle] dystrophy or whatever, like my leg is jello. Like, my right leg, my quad, it’s just like, “Ugh, it’s so gross.” When I squeeze it, there’s just like cellulite everywhere, and, ugh, it’s just not toned. As much as I never really liked my legs, they were really strong. Now, it’s just not strong. My right leg is not strong, like it’s just like flabby and horrible.
Like, I hate it. . . . I think I realized through this, even if I was super skinny, if I was flabby, I don’t think I’d really like my body. I’d rather be like a little bigger but strong and fit and tone.

KC, a White, straight, soccer player, suggested, “I might not have huge boobs and be really curvy; but, you know, I have a flat stomach and I’m muscley. Like, I don’t have any cottage cheese flab.” Rather than fat or thin and flabby (i.e., lacking muscle mass), athletic bodies appeared toned, hard, and defined. As CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, stated, “Uh, I have a stomach, toned upper body, strong build. So, my whole body is basically muscular in the way that it’s made.” JP, a bisexual, African American, sprinter, explicitly described her body as:

“Lean” because last year I would say I was more buff. When we would go to training, my weights were more so heavy all the time. I was buffer, more muscular, but it was thicker. Now that I’m lean, I would say you can see more definition in my muscles. And then, “muscular,” meaning that you don’t see uh flab or cellulite or a lot of jiggly. That’s what I mean by muscular.

An African American, straight, basketball player named CB noted,

A “strong build” is something like you can you can see all the rips, all the cuts. The way they walk . . . you can see everything bulging out. I feel like “toned” is like you can see the muscles and stuff like that, but it’s more like a little slim. . . . It’s not visible as much, but you are strong.

Half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, BL, noted,

Well, I’m 5’8 and I weigh like a 150 pounds. But, I would describe myself as athletic and muscular. I have like thicker legs and like a smaller waist. Not gonna lie, I’m not
like super conscious or think I’m super fat; but, definitely being an athlete, like growing up playing sports, I’ve always been like just thicker than all my friends.

The consistent descriptions of athletic bodies suggest that female athletes were aware of the thin/fat binary and wanted to avoid the repercussions of being labeled as too much of either.

The uniformity among athletic body size helped these women identify each other as female athletes. CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, remarked,

Other girls on this campus are either like short and a little bit meatier or real skinny. There’s no in between. In between is like all the athletic girls. So, if you see like a strong-build girl, she has to play athletics at this school.

MC, a Caucasian basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, said that when she sees a tall person, “I automatically assume either soccer or basketball. White, straight, soccer player,

KC, remembered that she and her teammates walked “by some track athletes. I looked at them and they looked at us, and we just knew like, ‘Oh, y’all play sports here,’ just ‘cause they looked like that athlete build, a lot of muscles.” Similarly, BG, a Latina, straight lacrosse player,

articulated,

You could pretty much line up all the female athletes and, with at least probably 70-75% accuracy, guess what sport they play just based on their body type. Like, you can tell who the swimmers are, you can tell who the runners are, lacrosse players, soccer players, basketball players, volleyball. Like, you can see the difference in everyone’s bodies.

JP, an African American, bisexual, sprinter, shared,

I think track athletes have an overall very tight body as far as shoulders, legs, thighs, calf muscles, arms [and] abdominals. Track athletes have all of it; whereas, other sports, if you see big thighs then it’s soccer, if you see just mainly big thighs but everything else is
slim that is more so VB, if you see muscular but broad shoulders that’s usually swimmers but they’re usually lean, too. Then, basketball, I hear arms, nothing special about their legs but their arms are defined. That’s why I get mostly track and basketball. Because, when you just see my arms, people usually guess basketball because they’re defined.

But, if you see my whole body, people say track.

The women in this study also discussed how their trained physiques helped other people identify them as female athletes as well. TH, a White, straight, soccer player said, “I think I look like an athlete, and people usually ask me if I play a sport or something. Then, whenever I talk to people [or] have a conversation, I mention I play soccer at [university].” As MH, a White, straight, softball player explained, “I think if I was next to a girl who was just thin and didn’t exercise or play a sport, I think you’d be able to tell [I’m an athlete].” This group of women believed they possessed unique features, which separated them from their peers. Caucasian, straight, swimmer, CY, described,

I was teased a lot in middle school. I was swimming a lot and doing sports and not many people were doing sports. So, [other] guys and girls would make fun of me for being like taller than everyone. I was doing a sport that required so much more than everyone else’s little cheerleading thing that it was just hard to, you know, fit in with other people.

The majority of the women in this study portrayed athletic bodies as uniquely strong, lacking a feminine body shape. KC, a White, straight, soccer player explained, “I have really long legs. Not the most womanly figure, you know. I’m kind of that athlete, like kind of straight lines. I don’t have a huge butt. I don’t have huge boobs.” White, straight softball player MH clarified,
I guess if I’m thinking of someone who’s not athletic, I’d say I [have] just maybe more muscle. Just being active in general ‘cause I think sometimes it gives off a different body type. Not all the time. . . . And, maybe, it’s just in my head. I’m really not that muscular, or I don’t have like hips or anything. So, I’m pretty boxy, like straight up and down. Similarly, CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer articulated, her body was “blocky, just kind of like a rectangle.” Athletic bodies were often described by what they were not; namely, they were not feminine, shapely, thin or fat. By contrast, athletic bodies appeared strong, firm and toned with “straight lines.”

Female athletes directly attributed the size and shape of specific body parts to their sport participation. For example, KC, a White, straight, soccer player mentioned that she has “soccer thighs.” According to her White, straight, teammate, TH, “soccer legs are really muscular, like, they’re not thin – muscular, kind of thick, like big butts and legs, and usually slightly disproportional from the upper body.” KC quickly asserted, “but I don’t mind ‘em.” She mentioned that, in soccer, “most people on the team, I feel like everyone, you have like really big quads. I’m lucky because I’m taller, so mine can be stretched out a little bit.” When discussing her body, CY, a Caucasian, straight swimmer described,

I have broad shoulders, like bigger build up front and thick legs, I guess. I think it’s just all the lifting weights and like swimming ‘cause swimming is a really upper body [sport]. And, it can be lower body, but, you know, you’re using your arms all the time. You know, I’ve been doing this for 15 years now, so it’s just kind of over time built up to that body type I guess.
She later said, “I attribute it mostly to like lifting and having to eat more because we’re training all the time. So, like my shoulders are a lot bigger, my arms, my thighs.” BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player also stamped out the role sport plays in defining women’s bodies:

When you play like even high school athletics, you normally don’t workout enough or do enough to really change your entire body shape to look different than you would naturally. But, I think once you get to college, you really do.

Participants signified their athleticism through stories about their dress and comportment.

BL, a half Filipino, half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, said,

You just kind of have to see [female athletes], as weird as it sounds, the way they like carry themselves like the way they walk or the way they dress. I know, like the athletes at my school for the most part wear something like athletic, and I mean I like to dress up sometimes and a lot of girls on my team do. But, like the women’s soccer team, they like never come out of soccer shorts. They just always walk around and you can kind of just tell.

While BL was careful to mention that she does, in fact, “dress up,” presumably to assert her femininity, she also articulated that frequently wearing sports attire, such as sweats and practice gear, provided visible signs of female athleticism. MC, a Caucasian basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, noted that athletes are “more outgoing. Usually, they just joke around a little bit more. They seem to be more confident – shoulders are back.” TH, a White, straight soccer player, added, “No makeup and sweatpants . . . I feel like athletes usually walk with better posture and more confidence . . . because they’re strong. So, a combination of how their bodies look and how they dress.”
The women in this study seem to have a clear picture of female athletic bodies. They understood the thin/fat binary. Often associated with laziness, being labeled “fat” carries significant social consequences; whereas, thin bodies are often praised and related to admirable qualities such as self-discipline and intelligence. As such, this group of women worked diligently through their conversations to rationalize their size and muscular bodies. Constructing an athletic body meant developing a sufficiently toned physique layered with small yet defined muscles to avoid appearing too fat or too thin. Athletic bodies also held a box-like shape often lacking feminine curves. In fact, only one female athlete in this study verbally marked her body as feminine and shapely. BG a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, said, “I’m still shaped like a female. Like my hips still go out and my waist is like, you don’t have that much muscle around where your waist is, so it’s still small or like normal size.” Here, BG asserts that her body fits cultural standards of women’s bodies in relation to both size and shape. Although these tight definitions of athletic physiques helped identify female athletic bodies, they might also serve to marginalize physiques that fail to meet the White, heterosexual, middle-class, feminine body standards outlined in this section.

**Body Perceptions**

Athletes also conveyed their body perceptions, or the thoughts, feelings and attitudes they held towards their bodies. These views appeared connected to whether or not female athletes felt their physiques met sport and/or social standards. Rather than expressing one body affect, the women in this study often developed multiple, complicated relationships with their bodies. These female athletes also reported feeling like they could always improve the physical size and shape of their bodies. Several participants discussed their desire to constantly work on and alter their physiques.
Perceptions of contentment with the body. Six female athletes mentioned feeling happy or content with their physique, which often related to the general aesthetic or outward appearance of their body. These body perceptions were, at times, influenced by both White, heterosexual, middle-class, feminine norms and athletic body standards. More specifically, these athletes seemed satisfied with their bodies when their physiques appeared feminine and/or when they functioned efficiently.

Fitting feminine body norms. Some women in this study who expressed body contentment seemed to identify with the White, heterosexual, middle class definition of feminine physiques. By labeling their size as “normal” or “average,” these female athletes located themselves within socially accepted feminine body norms and distanced their physiques from the margins. When asked to describe her body, KS, a White, straight, basketball player replied, “I mean I love my body. I mean I’m like tall, I guess, like pretty slim . . . I like that I’m tall. I like that my legs are long.” KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, added, “I don’t feel like I’m overweight or underweight. . . . I think I’m average. . . . I like look kind of strong compared to the rest of my teammates.” JS, a White, straight, softball player, also mentioned, “I’m pretty tall . . . so, for my height, I look pretty, I wouldn’t say like thin, I’d say I’m like average build. I’m not dissatisfied with my body though, just ‘cause I’m tall and everything evens out.” KS, a White, straight, two-sport athlete in basketball and track & field emphatically pointed out, “I like that I’m not like stick thin. . . . Like, overall, I’d say: proportionate, in-shape, not obese. We’re golden.” Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual tennis player, elaborated,

I like to think that there’s a happy medium, so like I won’t ever like be one of the super skinny people that people ask like, “Are you anorexic?” Like, I won’t ever be one of
those people. But, also, just because of my body type, like I’ll never appear drastically overweight. So, I think it’s kind of like a happy medium in the real world.

Many heterosexual female athletes often compared their body size to a hypothetical “average” female body to declare their bodies were appropriately sized; neither thin nor fat. BF, a White, straight softball player, realized,

everybody has a different body shape. And, I mean there are some girls that are teeny tiny and that’s how they’re built, and I’m just not like that. I’ll always have some curves and stuff like that. And, now I’m-I’m not as worried about that. I like that. I’m not trying to be super skinny or anything like that. But, I think it’s just accepting that there’s certain things that your body won’t change that like you just can’t change your shape and stuff like that.

BF, seemed to accept her position outside of these body standards. However, the majority of White, or as in Ali’s case, White and Asian, heterosexual female athletes in this study who expressed contentment with their physiques did so by suggesting they were neither too fat nor too thin. They relied on comparisons with other women to prove their conformity to hegemonic femininity.

Occasionally, when female athletic bodies did not fit rigid definitions of White, heterosexual femininity, some athletes relied on biological explanations of body size and shape to help them cope with their body size. For example, CB, an African American, straight basketball player, said, “I think my size has something to do with my family background ‘cause I know a lot of my family has thick thighs. I guess it’s not going anywhere.” And, when talking about the size of her muscles, CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, replied, “My mom is built big . . . she’s just more heavy set, so I think I get a lot of that from her . . . genetics.” JSharp, a
White, heterosexual basketball player, explained, “I just have to accept it. That’s how I was made.” This information seemed to provide relief from negative body pressure to fit the White, heterosexual, feminine body norms that some of the female athletes in this study felt.

**Body function over physical appearance.** Some female athletes discussed how their physique helped them perform efficiently, which related to increases in body contentment. They depicted moments when they could accomplish physical feats other women might not. A Latina lacrosse player named BG said,

> I went on a run just the other day with one of my friends who works out but . . . [is] not a college athlete. . . . She’s not like on a team. We were just running and lifting together. But, we were running and she’s like, “My legs are tired.” Or, “This is tired.” And, I just, I felt stronger. As I was running, I could just see my own muscles like pushing me ahead making it so I could like keep going – longer strides, more powerful sprints. And, times like that I can feel the hard work that I’ve put in to my body and I can see it like giving back to me.

MC, a White basketball player, who chose not to label her sexuality referred to this phenomenon as “functional muscle.” She expanded, “I think a lot of people are like, ‘Oh, they’re toned, they’re in shape.’ But, they can’t lift a weight. Functional muscle, to me, that’s the ideal body.”

These perceptions about functional muscle helped some female athletes feel confident on and off the field. TH, a White, straight soccer player stated, “I like to look confident, and I think that the best way for portraying confidence is by having a strong frame. . . . I know whenever I do a lot of squats, my shot gets a lot stronger.” And, she went on to note, “so, that always makes me feel good because part of my confidence, I think, is in how well I’m doing on the soccer field.” BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, described,
While confidence is obviously a mental state, you show it a lot in your body. I think when physically you’re strong, the more confident you look in your body. So, I think when people tell me I look confident, a lot of times they mean physically. I mean part of it is the more you weight lift, the more you train, the better able you are to control all of your muscles. So, you can make strong, fluid movements instead of movements that are like a step here, a step there, like kind of trying to decide. Because the more control you have over your muscles, the more, I guess, efficient and like precise your movements are going to be.

JP, an African American, bisexual, sprinter, explained,

Coach films us sometimes in practice just to see if we’re sound in our technique, and [I] like just seeing the finesse of it and seeing how smooth it is and how efficient it is. . . . I like my body because of how it functions as well. I feel efficient in how I move. So, basically, if you were to ask me to do anything in any sport, I would basically still feel comfortable giving it a try at least because my body gives me some efficacy and belief in my capabilities in the athletic realm.

AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete in basketball and volleyball, who struggled with her body at different moments, agreed with JP, noting, “I’m proud of how hard I work. I’m proud of how I look.” After describing occasionally feeling bigger than her peers because of her muscles, AP, said, “I have to take a step back to remind myself that I’ve build myself this way. I’ve worked hard to look like this, and I’m good with it. I’m happy with it.” These women felt proud of and satisfied with their efficient and functional bodies. White, heterosexual, basketball player, JSharp, explained, “Well, I’m like, like obviously in good health, like I’m fit, like physically fit.” JP, an African American, bisexual sprinter, confirmed,
I don’t really know how to feel uncomfortable in my body. I still like my body and feel comfortable. I know that the muscularity of it and my muscles are not average or common, so I feel good about it just ‘cause I know it’s not the average, I know it’s something that will stand out. . . . Like I’m used to my body standing out, so it just is what it is. I don’t do anything extra to make it stand out. I don’t do anything extra to downplay. I just wear whatever is comfortable.

KC, a White, straight, soccer player said, “I mean most of us [on my team] are pretty proud of them.” When asked to describe herself, JP, an African American, bisexual sprinter, replied, “Lean, muscular, um, I have a nice physique and silhouette as well. I like my body. . . . When I look at it, I just see power. I see finesse; just the definition of it.”

That their body helped them perform more efficiently mattered to this group of women because many of them connected with their identities as athletes. Ali, a tennis player who identified as White and Asian, mentioned,

But, then, like there was like sort of like another shift when I was like being more serious about tennis and like really focusing more. Who cares what I’m wearing or what I look like outside of practice because this is what I’m more passionate about and this is the only time when my body like really matters. . . . once I started getting more serious about sports, once it got more intense like in high school and moving into college, my perceptions about my body like in tennis definitely made far more of an impact as opposed to my body image outside of tennis so it has like transposed itself over. Like, my body image has significantly improved since coming to college, and I think it’s because I have such a supportive team or maybe just because I’m doing more like within tennis and seeing results from it in my performance and in my day-to-day life that my
body image from tennis has like worked its way more into my day-to-day life outside of tennis.

BL, who identified as half Filipino half Caucasian and straight, noted,

As a basketball player, obviously, I think I give myself more grace because I do play sports. I’m going to be stronger. I’m going to be bigger because I train at this level. You know, I’m doing stuff all the time. How are my muscles not going to get bigger when I’m working out every day?

Identifying as an athlete appeared to help some of the women in this study feel comfortable with their muscular physiques. As an athlete, they could justify why their physiques carried more lean body mass than some of their peers. KC, a White, straight, softball player, described,

I would just say that overall I’m really happy with my body, probably more than a lot of girls who aren’t athletes. And, I think as an athlete, you know your body better and I think we like value it more because it does so many things for us other than look good or look pretty. I think we have like an extra aspect to it that makes us like it more. I think being an athlete does help me like my body more because I know what it can do for me.

TH, a White, straight, soccer player, explained,

We obviously have our soccer team that works out almost all the time, but the majority of girls that are considered feminine these days are the sorority girls who only do like, elliptical and long distance running. They worry about their weight and try to be skinny all the time. Muscles are not something that I feel like most girls focus on. If anything, they just want to be as tiny as they can. I know I look different from most girls. Like, I
don’t look like the average girl most people know. I’m an athlete. I like that about me.

So, I like for people to think I look strong.

This social identity helped some of these women recognize and respect their athletic body for its performance value and worry less about whether or not they fit feminine body standards. CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, said, “I want to say the excuse for me being bigger than the average person is like, ‘Well, I’m a swimmer.’”

**Perceptions of discontentment with the body.** While some women in this study reported feeling content with their bodies, rarely did this group of female athletes report feeling completely satisfied. Instead, their body affect was transient; they reported feeling both content and discontent with their bodies, sometimes simultaneously. For example, CB, an African American, straight basketball player, said, “Uh, my body right now, I think I’m content with it. I’ll say that I have, I don’t know, some problems, not problems, but some things I want to change.” And, LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, said, “Most of the time, it’s positive thoughts regarding my body in general,” but she also admitted,

If there’s like a day that I’m feeling slower, maybe it’s that time of the month or I just ate . . . it just makes me less confident in my body, my abilities and just makes me think more negative thoughts about my body in terms of my appearance as well as my performance.

Many athletes, however, were quick to indicate the limits of their dissatisfaction. In other words, their body affect was not *that* bad. BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, claimed the way she felt about her body “was never that much of an issue where I would like let it keep me from like going out. Like I’m not *that* self-conscious, like I have a lot of friends, I was captain.”
These women understood how their feminine bodies were supposed to look. Caucasian, straight, swimmer, CY, announced,

I would say like the norm especially in my classes or just around campus [is] just like a smaller waist and like smaller legs. I mean not skinny arms, but I have some biceps that these girls don’t have. So, I guess, overall, like a petite frame, a smaller waist. I’m as tall, or a little bit taller, than my boyfriend is, and I’m built like he is. Like, we’re about the same size. I feel like most girls are supposed to be small and just like petite.

And, they were aware of how their athletic bodies did not fit these body definitions. CY continued, “being a swimmer, the body type is kind of weird because, I don’t want to say you’re not normal, but it’s like broad shoulders, bigger up front and thick legs. You’re just like built bigger.” For some athletes, when their bodies did not meet cultural standards, they reported feeling discontent. CY claimed, “it’s just kind of like, not that I feel bad about myself . . . not positive not negative, half and half . . . I wish I wasn’t built like this so my body would fit in more.” When asked what her body would look like if met these standards, she replied, “just like a smaller waist and like smaller legs. I mean not skinny arms ‘cause obviously I don’t want like twig arms. I guess overall like a petite frame.” White, straight, soccer player, KC, shared,

I don’t really have any hips at all, and I mean part of that is from, you know, working out a ton and being an athlete . . . I don’t really have that hourglass um figure that you would think with most girls. And then, I have pretty big like traps, I guess . . . and that’s from working out. But, I always feel like, when I wear tank tops, kind of self-conscious of that ‘cause it’s like bigger. Well, not really self-conscious, I guess that’s just not what most people would think is girly or feminine. My butt’s kind of just an athletic butt, like not a
girl one, it’s not like big and fat, it’s like a really high, you know, tight, almost like a runner, but they usually have bigger butts.

AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, acknowledged,

It’s hard sometimes because you do grow up trying to fit into a box, and it’s definitely like my body type will never fit into that box. A lot of my friends are nonathletes, and they’re smaller and so it will be like, they’ll tell me something, like, “Oh, I’m so overweight, I’m 130 pounds.” And, I’m like I’m going to punch you in the face, like you’re literally going to die [said while laughing]. Like, the last time I was 130 pounds was in middle school, like screw you.

BL, a Half Filipino and half Caucasian, basketball player, described her body as “thicker than all my friends,” and also suggested, “I haven’t necessarily liked it, but it’s just kinda the way it goes.” Women who felt dissatisfied with their physiques often seemed to unable to reconcile the fact that their athletic bodies, which facilitated elite sport performance, did not meet hegemonic femininity. BL demonstrated the degree to which she felt displeased with her body when she mentioned that she appreciated the recovery process after her ACL and MCL surgery because,

I was in excruciating pain, and I couldn’t keep any of my pain meds down. I was throwing up for like three days straight. I lost like a ton of weight because I couldn’t eat. I lost like ten pounds. Oh man, the good ‘ole days. I remember the first time I went back, and I put like some clothes on, and it was just like extra big and I was like, “Aww yeah!” I was happy. At least if it was going to suck, something good came out of it.

Because she could not perform her sport or workout regularly, BL felt more satisfied with the aesthetic appeal of her body since she appeared thinner.
Balancing their muscularity with their feminine identities seemed to be a priority for some women in this study. BF, a White, straight, softball player, stated,

I want to be healthy. I want to be strong. And, I just want to look a little bit thinner, but still keep that healthy, strong, athletic look, too. I think I’ve accepted that I’ll never have super skinny thighs, but I want to tone, like I just want to look more like firm, um you know, like lose, like a flatter stomach, like stuff like that. But, I don’t have any, I don’t really worry about, “Oh I want to look good in a bikini.” [It’s] more of I want to change certain areas of my body.

TH, a White, straight, soccer player, noted,

I’m normally in between like, 120 and 125 pounds, so if I’m around there I’m happy, and I guess I don’t like my body to look big in the middle, where I feel like, I don’t know, like I’m a body builder. I like to look a little leaner, like muscular and stuff, where it looks…If someone asks me if I run track, that’s a good thing. If they ask me if I’m a power lifter, that’s not a good thing. So, if I was like, 126, like, that’s usually a little much.

When that did not happen and athletic physiques seemed too large or cumbersome, it seemed that, in particular, several White female athletes reported body dissatisfaction. In TH’s story, presumably at 126 pounds, she felt unhappy with her body size because she appeared too bulky and therefore too masculine. Some women in this study seemed to express body dissatisfaction when the size of their muscles was perceived as exceeding standards that mark feminine muscular physiques. White, straight, soccer player, TH, pointed out, “Sometimes I think I look a little boyish because I’m muscular and stuff.” AP, a White, bisexual, two sport athlete, noted, “I think everyone struggles with their body, but I’ve struggled with mine quite a
bit. I’m extremely muscular. I’m extremely strong.” CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, claimed her size impacted her life experiences at a young age. She explained, “I never dated up until junior year of high school, and I don’t want to say it’s because I was big and intimidating. I would say it was both though.” JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, underlined the struggle to balance the practicality of muscles with the desire to be recognized as feminine women. She articulated, “When I box somebody out, I’m actually pushing them outside of the lane. I’m not battling back and forth with them as much. But, I mean, I’m obviously not Hulk, or anything.” As she discussed her “really big quads,” KC, a White, straight, soccer player, stated, “I think, as you get older, like once I get done with soccer, I’d like to get rid of them a little bit and like try and um, I guess, slim them down.”

Some of these athletes overtly linked their body shape and size with their race. TH, a White, straight, soccer player, suggested, “I think that as White women, we deal with more pressures. I think we have an expectation to feel like meek and to remain skinny their whole lives.” And, BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, discussed, I think that it’s just the way my body is. And, playing sports like my whole life at such a young age probably didn’t help. It probably like contributed to my huge shoulders from swimming and doing butterfly all year around when I was younger. And, maybe soccer for my bigger calves and everything like that. But, for the most part, I think it’s just the way like I look at my dad as like Hawaiian and Filipino. And like, my parents are divorced and whenever I go to Hawaii, that’s just like the way everyone is over there. Like, I’m not little but relatively little to a lot of people when I go to Hawaii. And, I have four brothers, two of them are my half-brothers, they live in Hawaii, and then two of them live here in [West coast city]. One of them is in super, super good shape, and the
other one is overweight. But, my one who is in super good shape works really hard at it. And, I know if my other brother worked at it, he’d be fine too. . . . But, I know it’s just our body type just to be kind of like thicker and just bigger boned.

BG, a Latina lacrosse player, described,

I have kind of a big butt. Not like too big. I think it suits me, but the stereotypical White girl doesn’t really have a butt. . . . People read me as White. I’m like pretty pale. I mean when I’m a little tanner, and I have big enough hoops on, sometimes people see I’m Latina. But, I don’t think people are shocked by my features. . . . I don’t think anyone looks at me and is like, “Whoa, she’s way too White to have a butt like that.” Like, it’s not that big. . . . But, like, in that like White realm, I feel like, because I’m read as White, I shouldn’t have that butt. But, then, also there’s enough Latina in me that like if I were to fall in the Latina category, I feel like it’d be okay because it’s more stereotypical for Latinas to have like a bubble butt. So, that’s like something where like depending on how I’m feeling that day or like choosing to identify can go either way. Sometimes, I’ll be like damn, my butt’s so big, but it’s okay because I’m part Latina.

Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual tennis player, described feeling content with her body, yet also mentioned feeling dissatisfied with how her physique compared to the multiple body expectations placed on her raced and gendered body. She reported,

It’s just a lingering thought, it’s not like an active thought about, “I want to lose 5 pounds.” I guess I grew up mostly in Asia when I was younger so like everyone there is like 5 feet tall, so they’re all like 100 pounds; and, then, like I grew 10 inches, so I broke that mold. A lot of pressure comes from my mom I think just ‘cause you grow up in that household where like there’s like a societal view to be little; it’s just like the Asian
standards. She’s from a village town so everyone’s pretty much malnourished as is, and she doesn’t understand, per say, that growing 10 inches taller means that you gain weight.

So, I think that was part of why I struggled [with my body] growing up.

These women seem to be suggesting that body perceptions might be related to their social identities and how they understand raced body expectations. Playing a sport might require women to develop their bodies in particular ways; however, they do not enter the sport world as a blank slate. How women feel about their athletic bodies, their muscul arity and their ability to negotiate feminine body norms might be related to how they identify their race or sexual orientation.

**The body as perpetually imperfect.** Over half of the female athletes in this study reported their bodies could never be perfect enough. They discussed feeling compelled to mold and construct their bodies, always believing they could change some aspect of their physique to enhance either their physical appearance or sport performance. TH, a White, straight, soccer player, who generally talked positively about her body, stated, “I’m not very insecure really. I think that sometimes I wish I was a little taller, maybe like had longer legs, because I’m only 5’3.” CB, an African American, straight, basketball player asserted,

My thighs are like chicken thighs like how the top part is big and the bottom part is skinny. I just want them to be somewhat proportionate, I guess you could say, so they don’t look so much like chicken thighs. More toned. I mean I know I’m like a little toned, but I feel like it’s a lot of meat.

DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, mentioned, “I think my whole body could be better. . . . I’m strong, but you cannot really see it because of the extra fat I have. So, losing that over my whole body would make people see my muscles.” She quickly followed with, “I know I can be better.
Even if I’m not comparing myself to other people, I can be better, like more lean.” A few female athletes outlined their never-ending quest for a toned, sculpted appearance. For example, a White basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality named MC noted,

I mean I pride myself on working out and being in shape, but not to the point where I would say I have the perfect, ideal athlete body. Well, to me, I would freaking love to have a 4-pack or 6-pack. I mean that would be awesome... toned muscle everywhere. . . . I think to me I always know I could be in better shape. I know I’m never at a final stage. . . . To me, if I hit that point, I mean there’s still always improvement after that but it would be like, “Okay, I’m getting closer to that athletic body.”

BF, a White, straight, softball player, also mentioned, “If, you know, I’m running three miles, I’m always trying to push for more. And, if I can get to more, then that means by body is changing.” Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual, tennis player explained,

I haven’t hit my cap yet. And, I mean sure there may not be a cap but, in terms of performance, it’s about constant change and constant improvement. And, I think that in the world, not necessarily having that sense of control where like I can improve if I do this, this, and this, is sort of limiting per se. Because like obviously I can’t change like my body type through like any “normal” means, but I think like that is frustrating in a sense.

She elaborated that sport “made me want to get better. It made me want to improve myself. . . . Sport was the motivator of, you know, I see how far of how I’ve already come, but there’s more that I want to do with my body.” Athletes learn that, if they practice hard enough for long enough, they can determine their outcome and success in sport. If applied to the body, this sense
of control might create a mindset where an athlete feels she is the master over her body, capable of regulating her physical size and shape through “proper” training regimens.

The pervasiveness of their negative body thoughts appeared to drive these compulsions to alter the body. BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player illustrated, “I definitely think that the amount of time that I spend thinking about my body is probably not good, like it’s probably not healthy.” LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, said that she usually thinks about her body at night when she stands “at a full length mirror changing… feeling more fat at night because I have the full meals that just sit there…so I do find myself thinking about my body quite a bit.” Not only did female athletes feel badly about their bodies, they reprimanded themselves for feeling dissatisfied in the first place. BL, a Half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, stated, 

Sometimes, I think I was just dramatic about it. Like, I know I’m not fat even though I’ll be like, “Oh, I’m so fat.” . . . And, I know I’m not fat . . . And I tell myself, like, obviously, I don’t care that much about it because, like, as much as I think about it or talk about it, I don’t do anything about it. So, I try to eat healthy all the time, but I’m not obsessed about it.

Body affect centered athletes’ focus on self-improvement rather than questioning body standards. In this way, norms remain unchallenged; the responsibility to fit in belonged to the individual and failure to adhere to body rules marked a lack of discipline or commitment.

**Summary of Body Descriptions**

When analyzing body descriptions, it became clear that many athletes in this study situated their athletic bodies within White, heterosexual, middle-class definitions of feminine bodies. They often expressed contentment with their bodies when they helped them function as
athletes or when they could be described as fitting feminine ideals. In situations where their bodies stood out or failed to acquiesce to cultural norms, many of these female athletes reported feeling self-conscious or displeased with their physiques. Revealing the complexity of body perceptions, these athletes’ body descriptions were inconsistent or fluid throughout the interview. Their identities as athletes emerged as a potential factor when participants discussed their desire to change or control the body. And, just as athletes learned that training could improve sport skills, some believed a similar relationship existed, which would allow them to continuously enhance their physique.

**Discussion of Body Descriptions**

Dominant cultural discourses suggest that the body serves as a representation of who a person is rather than simply a container of self. As Susan Bordo (1993) asserted, “culture not only has taught women to . . . constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical ‘improvement;’ it also is constantly teaching women how to see bodies” (p. 57). Thus, people learn much more than what someone looks like from her physique; they evaluate an individual’s worth, and mark her as disciplined, successful, competent, hard-working and intelligent (or not) based on physical appearance. The women in this study demonstrated an acute awareness of the various meanings associated with different body sizes and shapes. They worked hard to situate their physiques in the center of multiple binaries, asserting they were neither too fat nor too thin, too muscular nor too lean, too masculine nor too feminine. Doing so, helped athletes avoid the consequences associated with these body-related extremes. When successful, many of these women felt content. However, body contentment never lasted as female athletes defined their athletic physiques as perpetually imperfect and infinitely mutable. This belief was driven by *normative discontent*, a condition in
which it becomes “normal” to feel unhappy or frustrated with one’s own body. As Malson (2008) argues, the toned, “healthier” feminine body ideal does not reduce cultural preoccupations with eliminating body fat; rather, it provides “an intensified emphasis on controlling the body” (p. 34). The female athletic body is constituted as an object to be worked on. Women are inundated with daily messages detailing how their current body is insufficient, should be changed, and that this alteration should remain a priority. The result of such ideologies is that many women focus on their body flaws, seeking modifications that will improve their physiques. In fact, eighteen of the twenty female athletes in this study conveyed their desire to modify their physiques to better attain body standards.

When body contentment did occur, often athletes focused on the functionality of their athletic physique to make peace with multiple body expectations. Female athletic bodies face pressure to appear strong, fit, and shapely while also maintaining a thin, sexy appearance. In this study, women often complained their bodies could not fit both standards simultaneously; they could not be both athletic and feminine. But, some athletes overcame this bodily incongruence by recognizing and celebrating their physical performance potential in sport. As a result, they felt proud and satisfied with their appearance. This finding remains consistent with previous studies that revealed female athletes expressed enjoyment and empowerment through sport (Krane et al., 2004). This emphasis on body efficiency helped disrupt some female athletes’ discontentment with their physique by focusing their attention on what their bodies allowed them to accomplish rather than comparing to White, heterosexual definitions of femininity. However, the sporting culture often asserts that effort dictates outcome. If female athletes work a little harder, they could elevate their game and improve their skill set. When directed towards the body, this mentality seemed to negatively influence how some female athletes related to their
physiques. Although highlighting the body-performance relationship helped some athletes accept their size, it led other female athletes to microscopically analyze their bodies for modifiable imperfections. In this sense, connecting the body with sport performance might serve to both challenge and strengthen normative discontent.

Rarely did their body perceptions remain stagnant; instead, female athletes described a transient body image, one that constantly shifted. Using a feminist cultural studies framework to interpret athletes’ interviews explained how comparing one’s female athletic physique to White, heterosexual, middle-class femininity influenced body perceptions. White, heterosexual, feminine bodies are defined by thinness (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013). Yes, female athletic bodies must also develop toned, ripped muscles for enhanced sport performance (George, 2005; Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2009). And, although, female athletes have become more socially accepted in recent years, they often are admonished for bodies that appear too muscular, code for too masculine. Repercussions for deviating from gendered body shapes can result in social rejection (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013) and being labeled lesbian or experiencing other social stigmas (Kwan & Trautner, 2009). If women felt satisfied with their physiques, they often attributed their body perceptions to fitting hegemonic femininity. In other words, if their athletic physiques helped them perform in sport without the size of their muscles being perceived as “too big” and masculine, then they expressed contentment with their physique. However, this group of female athletes articulated body dissatisfaction when they perceived an incompatibility between their muscular, athletic frames and the culturally feminine body ideal.

Female athletic bodies must balance feminine and athletic bodily expectations to be considered successful in and out of their athletic settings. As such, all of these women made concerted efforts to comply with competing body boundaries except two bisexual athletes (JP
and AP) and MC, an athlete who chose not to label her sexuality. These three athletes did not highlight aesthetics as a reason for their body acceptance; rather, they valued their sport-specific physical attributes. Heterosexual female athletes might have felt increased pressure to conform to White, heterosexual body norms if they wanted to meet the heterosexual male gaze and be seen as a viable partner. Bisexual athletes, on the other hand, might have felt less tied to this negative body pressure. This evidence contradicts the finding from Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, and Striegel-Moore (1997) that lesbian college athletes embraced a beauty ideal that “encompassed both thinness and fitness” (p. 432). Though lesbian and bisexual women may encounter similar body pressures as heterosexual female athletes; in this study, they seemed to construct a different body image, one that celebrated their strength and athleticism.

The intersectional approach employed when analyzing these data further explicated the relationship between women’s self-identified sexuality and race and their body perceptions. Most of the time, female athletes who identified as White discussed their body’s inability to meet hegemonic femininity. Although, body perceptions reported by athletes of color occasionally depended on how their figures compared to these cultural standards as well, these ideals seemed to predominantly lead to normative discontent among White, heterosexual female athletes. Female athletes of color often described the shape of their bodies as a product of their race or ethnic heritage. Historically, female athletes of color have been underrepresented in cultural representations of the ideal feminine body. When women of color they have been shown, their physiques often have been misrepresented to either accentuate their proximity to White beauty standards or exoticize their bodies (Rubin, Fitts, & Becker, 2003). These images, then, reaffirm Whiteness as the ideal and marginalize the bodies of women of color. Consequently, some women of color have developed a body ethic emphasizing body care and nurturance rather than
confirming different body aesthetics ideals than those associated with Whiteness (Rubin, Fitts, & Becker, 2003). A body ethic is defined by women relating to and presenting their bodies in ways that demonstrate care and self-acceptance. Using this body ethic might have helped some female athletes of color resist the negative body pressure they faced in and out of sport. For example, JP, who identified as an African American, bisexual, track athlete created a body ethic that allowed her to present her muscular physique in ways that accentuated her size and contested ideologies of thinness and Whiteness. She created a body ethic that allowed her to nurture her body and display it purposefully and authentically. That said, as Lau, Lum, Chronister, and Forrest (2006) as well as Cummins, Simmons, and Zane (2005) asserted, exploring ethnic differences can provide useful information but careful attention must be paid to the cultural, historical, and religious heterogeneity among various subgroups. Rather than separating experiences by racial or ethnic categories, this study used an intersectional analysis to explore how cultural values (e.g., pressure to be thin, attitudes towards body size) might influence body perceptions.

In line with previous research (George, 2005), these female athletes also scrutinized their bodies if they perceived excessive amounts of fat. These women spoke negatively about bodies with a fat shape and consistently positioned their own physiques within accepted size standards. In this post-Title IX moment (Barak, Krane, Ross, Mann, & Kaunert, in press), hard, toned, firm physiques are celebrated for both male and female athletes. Culturally, fatness often is believed to symbolize laziness, a lack of intelligence, and sloppiness (Martin, 2007); the antithesis of an athletic identity, which often is associated with discipline and intense effort. Being thin also provides one path to achieve White, heterosexual femininity. As such, in order to be perceived as successful sport participants and feminine women, most of these female athletes chose to
highlight their “appropriately” sized athletic bodies. These results suggest that female athletes’
collective desire to achieve a femininity based on White, heterosexual, beauty standards
connected their body descriptions. Because fitness and fatness often are presented as opposites
and since these athletes consistently situated their bodies on the thin-fat continuum, the college
sport culture seems to be a space in which fat phobic ideologies develop and are perpetuated.
Scott-Dixon (2008) found that fit female athletes who competed in non-traditional sports (e.g.,
Olympic weightlifting, martial arts, strongwomen competitions) and self-identified as “bigger”
or “heavier” believed fitness and fatness were neither incompatible nor oppositional citing that
some sports embrace “doing strong” rather than “being thin.” That the current findings
contradict Scott-Dixon’s (2008) results, further supports the notion that the college sport
environment might serve as a breeding ground for fat phobia.

Distinctions among athletes’ perceptions of body size and shape often could be attributed
to whether or not the women in this study adhered to cultural definitions of the ideal feminine
body. Using a feminist cultural studies perspective and employing an intersectional
methodology uncovered how female athletes’ social identities and sociohistorical positions
influenced their access to these ideal body scripts and opportunities for alternative body
negotiations.
CHAPTER V. MOTIVATIONAL TEAM CLIMATES

Female athletes in this study provided descriptions of their task- or outcome-oriented team climates. In *outcome-oriented team climates*, success often is perceived as winning and outperforming an opponent while characteristics of *task-oriented climates* include an emphasis on continued development through self-comparisons. Head coaches on each team often played the most significant role in developing the team atmosphere. Their decisions, comments, and interactions with athletes influenced how team members identified and celebrated successful moments. Both of these college sport environments seemed to impact how female athletes related to their bodies. In outcome-oriented climates, coaches pitted athletes against each other, which often compelled them to compare their physiques to other women. While, in task-oriented climates, coaches helped women recognize their own, unique talents and celebrate their bodies. However, motivational team climate did not account for all of the body-related issues discussed in this study since some female athletes in task-oriented climates developed negative body perceptions while a few women in outcome-oriented atmospheres cultivated a positive body image.

**Task-Oriented Team Climates**

Female athletes from seven different college sport teams described playing in a task-oriented environment. They identified characteristics of these climates such as defining success through personal and team development as well as coaches’ demonstrations of care for athlete well-being. Some women described team meals as one site where coaches could convey team norms. As a result, several female athletes in this study highlighted the positive body-related outcomes they experienced as team members. Although a few athletes and coaches displayed
negative attitudes towards the body, overall, these climates offered body support to college female athletes.

**Success as improvement.** Coaches in task-oriented team climates emphasized individual and collective improvement. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, might have best summed up this environment when she said, “We just are always trying to play our best.” Similarly, LN, a Caucasian, straight, athlete who plays Division III tennis, highlighted, “as a team, we define success as outplaying yourself and playing a better version of yourself each time. . . . [Coaches] would define success as playing your best and that doesn’t necessarily mean a ‘W.’” KC, a White, straight, Division I soccer player, stated that, in practice, her coaches always say you’re competing against your team for the competitive aspect. But, they also say, “Really, we want you to do better than what you’ve done before. We’re not going to compare the slowest person to the fastest person because that’s not fair. I’m comparing you to what your time was last week, and I want you to beat it.” So, that’s like individual success.

Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual, Division III tennis athlete recalled how her coaches approached their six mandated pre-season fitness tests, which served as a barometer of fitness entering the competitive season:

Like we have a mile and a half run, a 20 yard dash, pushups, situps, and, on the tennis court we go from half court and see how many times you can catch the lines from half court, then from sideline to sideline as well. And, we just track like how we did in like Fall during our like Fall training as opposed to like beginning of season, end of season. It just puts like a measure there. And, our coaches are like, “Wow, you cut off like 3
seconds off of your court run,” or whatever, so like it’s not so much like well you’re doing the worst in the group, but it’s like here’s what you did compared to last time. Success required each athlete to improve her game individually by accomplishing smaller, controllable tasks. Caucasian basketball player, MC, who chose not to label her sexuality, illustrated,

One of my [assistant coaches], if she worked with you on post moves, whether she wanted you to just learn one new post move, if you did that in the game, even if you air balled it, she was so pumped that you remembered and you applied it. That was huge for her. Um, the other coach, she was aggressive when she would play with us in practice, she was just really aggressive. So, when you took that play and you were physical and you demanded the ball as a post or you demanded it when you were a 3-point shooter, and, on defense when you were just in the player’s shorts, when you were in their face but playing good fundamental defense and taking that quick step and just making smart passes, that was success for her.

This approach to success did not make winning unimportant; rather, in task climates winning was viewed as a by-product of improving one’s performance over time. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player in the South, noted, “Well, obviously if we like win the match, that’s always good. . . . At the end of the season, that’s sort of a goal we’ll try to reach.” And, as KS, a White, straight, basketball player, said, “I mean obviously winning is important,” but,

With our program, we tried to see the little things as success. We just had our banquet, and I think this year coach really felt we succeeded because we took steps in the right direction. So, taking little steps for the big picture, I guess. . . . You know, outrebounding an opponent or just the little thing like the hustle plays. [Head coach] was big on those.
JS, a Division I, White, straight softball player, said her team set a goal to “win every inning. If we win everything, then the result will be you win the whole game.” She explained that winning every inning meant, “like, don’t make any errors in the field, just have a clean inning um defensively.” She also added that the team also created offensive goals each inning, like, “have good at bats by working the count deep. You know, you don’t want to hit the first pitch every time and, you know, make the pitcher’s job pretty easy.”

Coaches in these team climates measured sport success by creating performance goals, targeting controllable skill elements, and emphasizing self-comparison. Performance goals allow female athletes to attend to their own effort. MC, a Caucasian basketball player, suggested that, when preparing to play an opponent for the second time, her team “would look at the stats from the previous one, whether it was a good game or a horrible one, and be like, ‘We should’ve gotten this. This time we’re going to do better and get this.’” She continued, “So, we would always set the bar high but realistic. . . . Like, free throw percentage, that was a big one: 80% or above, 70% or above. KC, a Division I, White, straight, soccer player announced that, regardless of the outcome, “[Coach] gets really frustrated if we’re just trying to do our own thing, but if we really all lock in on her vision, then that’s when we usually do well and that makes her happy.” She talked about one specific example of her coach instilling this message,

At practice that day, she’ll usually say, these are the two things we really want to focus on in practice today. Like, we want to really focus on breaking our feet down when we defend and we want to work on defending as a unit. And, so if we really just focus on that the whole time and we’re trying to do that, we’re not just trying to you know be on our own like, “I’m going to win this ball by myself. I don’t care about helping my teammates out. I just want to look good,” like that’s not what she wants, you know?
Instead of competing to become the best player, performance goals direct athletes’ attention to cooperating with other athletes and monitoring their performance routines. MC, a Caucasian, Division III, basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, mentioned,

[Head coach] had like goals that she had set for us before the game. It was never an outcome goal like we want you to have or we want you to win this game by this much. It was never that. . . . It was all controllables. Things we had control over. And, if we hit them or came close, that was success. If our effort was through the roof, like we were going after every loose ball, we were gaining fouls on defense but it was because we were hustling and passionate. If we were vocal on the court. . . . So, that to [head coach] was a success. When we were on the same page and everything was flowing.

So, while TH, a Division I, White, straight, soccer player, acknowledged, “Our team, I think, defines success, first of all, by winning,” she also recognized, “That means all the different aspects we’re working on are coming together, and also if there’s, like team chemistry, there’s not bickering, and people are getting along and we’re working together at practice, and then, it’s all translating to wins on the field; then, that would probably be our team success.” As LN, a White, straight, tennis player in Division III, articulated, “[Assistant Coach] always just said, ‘Go out there and have fun and work hard and compete and play every point out.’ So, he helps me maintain that perspective, which is why I play better.” Task-oriented environments share the desire to win and outperform the other team or player. What makes these team climates unique is their celebration of effort and individual improvement as a way of reaching that ultimate goal.

Coaches in task climates helped female athletes recognize their accomplishments regardless of the outcome. Division I sprinter, JP, who identified as a bisexual, African American athlete, suggested that her coach would “give you the ‘a-okay’ sign or he’ll say, ‘I like
Recognizing athlete success and emphasizing spaces for bettering athlete performance stuck with several female athletes. LN, a Caucasian, straight tennis player, said that her Division III coaches used different approaches to help her recognize her success:

The assistant coach will be the first one over there giving you a huge high-5, big grin on his face. Between points, he’s giving the thumbs up sign, like, “You’ve got this.” . . . He always tells me, before the match, “You’re one of the best athletes out here, you always have that to fall back on” . . . It makes me feel much more confidence [in] my body and my abilities. Whereas, my head coach, she is obviously quieter, as I said, but she’ll come up with a huge grin on her face. You can see it from a long ways away, just like, “That was awesome, that was great.”

These climates also typically highlighted athletes’ individual strengths and special contributions rather than identifying weaknesses. AP, a two-sport, White, bisexual, athlete at the Division I level, said her new basketball head coach,

Basically put me in charge of making sure that the rest of the girls were in shape. Like, she told me that she knew I was the one that would get them in shape. She used my talents a little more. She knew I was fast because of my strength, so she used those a little more on the court, and she definitely told me that.

Task climates allowed coaches to help their athletes reframe mistakes or poor performances since success depended on individual improvement rather than winning a single, competitive event. When practicing for a re-match against a conference opponent who beat her doubles team previously, KSW, a White, heterosexual, tennis player, noted, “[Coach] just kept telling us and kept working with us and was like, ‘You can beat this team if you just play smarter
than you did last time.” She explained her reaction: “We just kind of like realized coach was right and were able to beat that team next time around.” Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual teammate, also articulated the significance of her coaches’ feedback:

Like two days ago I had like the worse playing day of potentially like a year or more. It was just terrible like I just couldn’t function. But, like they were still like encouraging and suggesting different things that like I couldn’t hit cross court that day so they just suggested like a variety of different things to try so it became more mental than emotional. So, instead of getting frustrated and getting angry, instead focusing on like say like the tactical side of things. So, like this isn’t working, what’s plan B, C, and D and are those going to work instead. . . . It’s very much about focusing on what is working and use that to your advantage. It’s about finding the good and finding the silver lining and using it to your advantage even like when you might not be playing your best tennis ever. Um, so I think that that approach to things sort of takes your mind off of like the bad and like it sort of refocuses you towards the positive like, “this shot is really good. Now, think of different ways to set up this shot.” It has definitely sort of helped even my way of thinking about it, like I still have this, this and this that it works and it’s good. . . . It has definitely like improved my mindset. Because, before like two years ago, I would keep playing not so well. Like my favorite shot wasn’t working and I would just crack and it’d just be downhill from there.

LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, said,

I lost to a fairly good girl last weekend, and was frustrated and upset, because the scores didn’t indicate the play. My scores were lower than the match. It was a lot more competitive, and so [head coach] comes up to me and was just like, “You cannot focus on
the scores. Sure, the first set, you did not play your best tennis, but you came back in the second set. You were highly competitive, you were playing your game, hitting your shots,” and she’s like, “There’s nothing else you can do. That’s what we ask of you. That’s what we want of you.”

When asked how she felt about her coach’s support after a loss, LN responded, “She was very positive, even though it was a loss, and [that] made me feel, at least part way successful.” Task climates helped athletes view losses or mistakes productively.

Athletes in task-oriented team climates also learned to reframe how they defined success. MC and KS played on a team that did not win many games. MC, a Caucasian basketball player, who chose not to label her sexuality, suggested, “Every game was different. A few times, the seniors got to set goals or the team as a whole got to set goals.” This strategy became a crucial component to her team’s motivation as they only outperformed their opponents a few times throughout the season. KS, a White, straight, teammate of MC’s, mentioned, “This year, we thought we’d just win and win and win. And, we weren’t, so it was really hard to stay up with that.” She concluded, “That’s why we had to find like the little successes, I guess, or think back to the games where we did well and why we did well.” Redefining performance success allowed them to cope with a difficult experience and still find highlights since they focused on their own individual and collective improvement. Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual, tennis player, described,

A lot of our team is just like, “Oh yeah, I wanna beat my time so like I can do better for my team.” But, like I think that sort of mentality definitely has a large impact on the team and even though I am competitive . . . I mean, yes, I always want to win, but I also
think that like I want to push my teammates to do better and push them to make it where no one can beat them but me, so I like to think that’s my ulterior motive.

Female athletes in task-oriented team climates also consistently described how coaches placed their sport experiences within the bigger picture of life and incorporated a person-centered approach. LN, a Division III, Caucasian, straight tennis player, summarized this point by explaining, “After a tough loss, both coaches really come and they’re like, ‘Really, winning or losing does not matter, people will not remember this, it’s your relationships with them.’”

**Coaches’ concern for athlete well-being.** Another marker of task-oriented team climates occurred when coaches demonstrated concern for their athletes’ well-being. While striving to win remained important, these teams placed the health and welfare of their athletes at the forefront. JP, an African American, bisexual, sprinter, summarized this point by stating,

The main thing [Coach] works on is I would say is the self. I mean as far as helping people know and identify and get to know themselves because basically. . . . Yeah, I mean he’s focused on getting people to know themselves because when you have self-actualization and know who you are then you’re more likely to be successful in what you’re doing because you’re more confident and more stable basically. And, you’re more likely to take things on rather than be apprehensive and be afraid. So, he works on self and providing feedback one-on-one to make sure everyone is where they need to be at emotionally and whatnot.

MC, a Division III, Caucasian, basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, suggested that her first-year coaching staff’s philosophy “isn’t just when you come onto the basketball court [and] how am I making you a better basketball player. It’s about how am I making you a
better leader and a better, like empowered woman to go out into the world.” Coaches demonstrated their care from the very first interaction with new team members. MC expressed,

We started off the season with check-in meetings and our coach didn’t want us to even talk about basketball at all during that time. She just wanted to get to know us, our background like where we were from. And, then, like at the end of the meeting, it was like, “Where do you want to go from here? What’s your vision? Where’s your passion? What do you want to have happen? And, like that kind of lit a fire under all of us like okay this is new, this is fresh. Everything was individual.

JP, a Division I, African American, bisexual sprinter, stated,

We’ll have one-on-one meetings; [we] go in and tell coach our thoughts. We just ‘link up,’ that’s what we call it. You know, he’ll ask us, ‘How’s school coming along?’ ‘How’s track coming along?’ ‘Where do you feel you’re at?’ ‘Where do you want to be at?’ ‘What are your goals?’ How are we going to work together to reach those goals?’

BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, attended a university where a campus shooting had taken place only weeks prior to the interview. She explained how her coach’s reaction served as an example of their team climate:

I think coach does a really good job of like caring about us, too. Not just it all being about basketball. Like, she’s always calling and texting us. I guess just like for instance this last week was really hard. Like after the [campus] shooting, she like offered us all over to her house. And, she was like there and offered to like pray with us. And, our team went to like a lot of the services together, and she was there like every second and just giving us hugs and like reminding us how much she loves us and that like there’s more important things than basketball.
When pressed for other examples, BL discussed how her coach helped the team with their grades and consistently followed up with questions about their social lives. This group of coaches put the athletes’ psychological and physiological health before outcome goals such as winning. JP, an African American bisexual sprinter, articulated,

The coaches would have their certain workloads they wanted us to do for the week. I would even try to push it further if I didn’t feel like the workout was enough, or if I felt like I had more energy. . . . Having them say, you know, “No, we’re working within a micro-cycle, so, you know, even if you feel you have more, we want to sit down and rest.” So, they would tell me to recover. . . . [Coach] has a general make-up for practice, but then he also plays it by ear and specializes it as needed.

Coaches’ care and concern also helped athletes feel more comfortable being open and honest about how they felt during the season. JP said that when she tells her coach, “My body feels tight today or it’s not where it needs to be, he’ll give me feedback like, ‘Give me what you got’. . . Or, he’ll say, ‘Okay, we’ll shut it down.’”

These supportive and affirming team climates helped athletes enjoy their college sport experience. As JP announced,

We just have a blast as far as when we’re in practice, we’re in practice mode. Now, we may laugh and joke around during the drill and laugh at each other for our different forms because everyone does everything a little different. But, we’re committed to it. Like, we come in to “do work” and we just make it what it is. We don’t have a cloud of funk or anything like that, like we don’t complain about being tired or sore. Like, we know why we’re there and we’re engaged in that activity. If we’re going jumping that day, then we’re talking about the runway, you know, laughing over there at the long jump pit. If
we’re doing sprints that day and doing the block stuff, we’re talking about the blocks and
laughing about the block set-up. But, we don’t have one consistent thing that just
overshadows everything.

JS, a Division I softball player who identified as White and straight, suggested,

It’s just more relaxing to play under than a coach that if you mess up or you throw a bad
ball and, you know, the ball goes over the fence, he’s not going to yell and scream at you.
He’ll just say, you know, “Yeah, you messed up. But, your teammates will pick up your
back.” You’re not going to get yelled at for doing something wrong. Just more relaxed.

And, I like that.

As mentioned before, MC played on a Division III basketball team where the coaching staff was
in their first year at the helm. She reported that their new task-oriented team climate, “was like a
relief . . . I loved the direction after summer league kinda seeing what she was doing with the
team and her interaction and how professional she was.” Task-oriented climates positively
influenced female athletes in and out sport. As JP said, “I feel like it helps out a lot. I feel
empowered.” By defining success based on individual and team performance improvements and
ensuring team members understood that coaches cared about their overall well-being, task-
oriented team climates appeared to provide a positive, supportive environment for college female
athletes.

**Team meals in task climates.** In college sport, teammates eating meals together is
commonplace, especially during road trips when they are preparing to play at another university.
Female athletes playing in task-oriented environments talked about how their coaches did not
have team mandated food rules, which allowed some of these women to be open to nutritional
information coaches offered. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, expressed, “For like
matches, our coaches don’t ever really tell us what to eat. . . . They don’t really give us any guidelines. . . . But, normally everyone tries to eat stuff that’s going to help them the next day.”

KS, a White, straight, basketball player, described,

I remember one time we actually asked our head coach, because we were on the way to the [away game] and, we were all waiting, of course it was at Burger King ‘cause it was like three fast food places and that was the only one open, and a couple of us went and got Baskin Robbins. We asked our head coach if that like bugged her and she was like, “As long as it’s not right before a game, it’s fine.” It just kind of depended on the timing, I guess.

White and Asian, heterosexual, tennis player, Ali, mentioned, “I mean, like, for the most part, our coaches let us run the show. I think it’s just interesting for them to sort of watch the team dynamics that are playing out when we eat together.” Ali often referenced how her team would discuss and debate which foods would improve their energy for matches or help them perform better. BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, stated, “our coach trusts us to be responsible.”

As a result of this trust between coaches and players, some of the female athletes’ in task-oriented climates sought out nutritional advice from their coaches and viewed food-related conversations as useful. MC, a Division III, Caucasian basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, noted that her coaches made comments in the store like, “Hey, you shouldn’t be eating stuff like candy and sugary stuff before the game,” ‘cause when we were at Western for a tournament, and we had lunch at the grocery store before. But, other than that, no comments about food.
MC went on to articulate that the freedom her coaches “made me earn a lot more respect for them because I think we get into a habit of preaching, ‘You need to be doing this;’” instead, her coaches led “active and healthy” lifestyles as role models. White and Asian, heterosexual, tennis player, Ali, stated,

One of our [male assistant] coaches was like a nutrition major in college, like he knows a lot about food. So, a lot of times he’ll like jump in and join our little food debates at team meals about what the best food for us is.

These decisions to allow female athletes freedom regarding their food choices, gave team members the opportunity to seek nutritional advice rather than follow orders. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, mentioned,

Sometimes, we talk with our coach about how we can eat healthier or like, eat better, so we can prepare for matches. And, normally, that will be the day before the match. Like, one of my teammates will be like, “What’s something good to eat on a daily basis to get stronger or to get faster?” She’ll remind us to eat something that will help us the next day that won’t make us feel sluggish, just like easy steps to do every day that will help us eat healthier.

It appears that team meals provided a space for coaches in task-oriented climate to, once again, affirm their body supportive environment. By avoiding food rules, female athletes could create their own attitudes towards food and develop their eating habits.

**Body-related outcomes.** Task climates helped athletes focus on training their own, individual physiques to improve their sport performance. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, suggested that her coaches “always encourage us just to do the best we can and do extra workouts, especially during our time off. . . . They’ve never said, ‘You need to lose weight,’ but
they always want us to keep pushing ourselves.” JP, an African American, bisexual, sprinter, stated,

[Coach] always lets us know the body is fine. He’s just interested in building the mental space up. That gives me empowerment, like, okay, I just need to conquer the mental side and I’ll be good. . . . I feel if I were ever told I needed to monitor my body, I feel like that would be a distraction for me.

JP appeared to feel that her task-oriented team climate freed her to concentrate on her sport performance rather than monitoring her body size.

Some of the female athletes in this study who participated in these environments seemed to talk about their bodies less frequently. LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, stated, “I feel like, overall, our team doesn’t talk about our bodies at all very much . . . which is surprising. I feel like we would talk about it more as athletes, but we don’t.” African American, bisexual, sprinter, JP, agreed, “Honestly, I don’t think we have a lot of issues as far as bodies. I feel like we’ve all put in work to where our bodies are efficient, to the point where our bodies aren’t hindering us.” Female athletes playing in similar team climates recognized the feats their bodies allowed them to accomplish rather than the aesthetic appearance of their physiques. As a result, their body talk revolved around how their bodies functioned in sport settings. Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual, tennis player, mentioned,

Like, [as teammates], we’ll just talk about it sometimes, like, “Oh my legs just wouldn’t move today. Like, it was terrible. I should’ve done more squats.” Like, never necessarily out of [the] tennis context but very much like how our bodies did that day depending on how they like felt. Or, how what we did or didn’t do in the gym that week impacted our practice or match that weekend.
KS, a White, straight, basketball player, said, “Honestly, [as a team], we don’t care what you look like. We’re just more supportive emotionally.” This supportive environment appeared to create space for teammates to joke and laugh about their bodily discomfort. The locker room often is a place where body pressure can form. But, KS, who played at the Division III level, recalled that her task-oriented team took a different approach:

I think just kind of joking and laughing about being naked. Sometimes, we would play music and just make showering fun. I was probably a little more open than most people. But, we just kind of joked about being naked all the time, so it doesn’t feel as awkward.

Athletes seemed to resist the pressure to compete for the “best body on the team” or compare their bodies with teammates, so they felt free to share and laugh in moments that might otherwise create body stress. JP, an African American, bisexual, sprinter offered,

We’ll be in the weight room lifting, and I lift a lot heavier than everyone else. And, my teammates will be like, “Dang, hulk.” Or, “Okay, I see you. Do you!” Or, like we’ll exaggerate the weights ‘cause sometimes it will uh help me pick up the weights. So they’ll be like, “Hey, what you want today? You going 100s or 500s today? Which one?” Just kind of like stuff like that. They make fun of me at practice. Like, somebody else will be in the lane next to me and they’ll be like, “Watch out, she’s going to just run you over, bulldoze you over.” Or, you know, “The train coming through.” But, it’s nothing belittling or nothing like that. It actually motivates me to maintain or even get better and bigger. It’s like a compliment for me.

She also added,
Sometimes, we’ll be inside and it might be hot. Or, even when we’re outside and it’s hot, we’ll have like “sports bra days,” which is we all just run in our sports bras. And, people will notice, like I’ll get comments about my abs. My teammates will be like, “Dang, how you get those abs, [JP]!” Or, “What you been doing? I need to be doing that.” Or, “Give me your legs, I need to borrow your legs for a day.” Something of that nature.

Though these comments might be perceived negatively on other teams, it seemed that JP’s task-oriented team climate helped her interpret teammates’ comments as recognizing and encouraging her. She believed her team provided body positive reinforcement. Since task-oriented team climates promote fewer comparisons among teammates, female athletes in this study understood jokes about their bodies as coming from a place of support rather than as an attempt to diminish their physical appearance.

Participating in a task-oriented team climate did not necessarily mean that every female athlete on the team adopted a positive body image. However, this body supportive culture allowed female athletes to help each other in moments of self-doubt or critique. JS, a White, straight, Division I, softball player, explained,

“You never hear any negative comments made towards your body. And, you know, if you’re walking into practice and you’re like, “I feel like a fat lard,” my teammates are always like, “No you don’t. What are you looking at? You haven’t looked in the mirror this morning.” They don’t say negative comments towards anybody. And, it’s kind of refreshing to hear not that I need to hear it. But, just very positive girls to be around.

BL, a Division II, half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player discussed,

That’s where like my teammates have helped me, when I’ve just been complaining about my body. You know, stuff happens when you’re getting ready for that day, and you’re
just not feeling it. You just feel fat, and I don’t know if I’m going to get my period or just for any reason. But, like, one of my really good friends from last year and this year does a really good job of like reminding me of like, “C’mon, BL, let’s take a minute. Let’s put things into perspective. You know how many people would like kill to have your body? You look great.” And, that’ll just help me, and I’ll have to just like get over myself.

When feeling poorly about their bodies, athletes had friends on the team who helped them think and feel more positively about their physiques. In task-oriented team climates, where self-improvement is celebrated, it seemed that female athletes supported each other in navigating individual body pressures.

Athletes in body supportive environments also appeared to understand the relationship between food habits and their physical performance. Teammates Ali and LN from the same Division III softball team on the West coast describe such a realization. Ali, a White and Asian, straight, tennis player, suggested,

Even though like I know about the nutrition stuff that theoretically should be happening, [teammate] like actually thinks about it and acts on it. So, like, when we like go out to team dinners, she’ll like talk to us about our food and like how like the different components of it work to pep us up for our big match tomorrow and give us like the carbs that you need to get through the set better. And, then, afterwards, she’s not like hard on us about it, like, “Oh, your breakfast was terrible, but look at this wrap; this one is perfect for you.” She’s not like that at all. It’s very much like bringing out the good and like what foods you need and things like that. So, it’s more like on a consumption level and
not necessarily like body image. But, I definitely think that like I have a pretty close
relationship with food, so it definitely sort of correlates with how I feel about my body.
Ali also stated that she learned,

If I’m tired, it’s not because I didn’t practice enough, it’s probably because I didn’t eat
right in preparation for the match. I think just like thinking about the things I’m doing to
improve or like help my body out in terms of like physical ability and just like being
more conscious of what I’m doing has helped me think more positively about my body.
Her teammate, LN, noted, “After the match, I’ll notice my energy was different because I didn’t
fuel it with the right stuff.” As she discussed her weekend tennis matches, she elaborated, “I’ll
try to increase the caloric intake because I know I’ll be burning a lot more calories. I’ll try to eat
a full breakfast with healthy fats, so I can last through the match and carbohydrates.” These
women developed positive thoughts and attitudes towards food. One particularly excited fan of
food, African American, bisexual sprinter, JP, shared,

I don’t count my calories and stuff. But, at the same time, I don’t eat fast food every
week. I like to say I have a pretty balanced diet. I cook all the time. That’s my main
way of eating. Ooooh! I like to make oatmeal in the morning, and I like to load that up
with fruit like dried cranberries, strawberries or apples. Then, I’ll have a strawberry-
banana smoothie. A lot of times I eat a baked chicken, mixed veggies, sweet potatoes,
cornbread, greens. And, then I do eggs, peanut butter and honey bagels. I do black beans
and rice. Yeah, come over, and I’ll cook.

In task-oriented environments, it seemed that some female athletes learned how food helped their
body function more efficiently as opposed to viewing food as a method to control their bodies or
lose weight.
**Points of contention.** Task-oriented team environments seem to create space for athletes to develop positive relationships with their bodies. In these climates, however, some athletes and coaches still displayed negative thoughts and attitudes about physiques and food. These moments of contention only took place occasionally and did not disrupt the overall team culture. However, their presence helps explain why every athlete did not cultivate a positive body image in their task-oriented team climate.

**Athletes’ negative attitudes.** Some female athletes in task-oriented environments appeared to develop negative body perceptions. BL, a Division II basketball player, who identified as half Filipino half Caucasian and straight, described,

One of my teammates, actually we were close last year, but we’re just not as close this year. There were a lot of things I didn’t realize about her until the end of the season. She was probably like the most self-conscious girl on our team. And, she really had no reason to be, but she just is. Like, literally, she has like a six pack, and she has like the biggest butt. Her legs aren’t like stick legs, but they’re, I think, skinny. She wears like a 28, she’s still skinny, and she’s like 5’9 or 5’10. But, she just like sits there and stares at herself in the locker room mirror, and she’ll walk around all the time naked and talking to everyone. She would always say that she’s fat and all this stuff, which is kind of like normal [for] girls, that’s just the way they talk. But, she would just be like, “I’m so fat,” and I’d be like, “Well, if you think you’re fat, then what do you think about me?” Like, I would just tell her that because I wanted her to shut up; and, it’s true, if you think your legs are huge, they’re way smaller than mine, so what do you think about mine? I know she’d feel bad and she’d say like, “Shut up. But, they’re the same size” blah, blah, blah. And, I’m like, “No, they’re not. Don’t say that. . . . You’re so far from fat it’s not even
funny.” But, I think she wants to hear that she’s not [fat]. . . . I just never really saw it. . . . I guess that made me a little more self-conscious ‘cause I was such good friends with her, and she was always on a diet and doing all this stupid stuff in the middle of season and it’s just like, “You’re annoying.”

LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player on a Division III task-oriented team, explained that her doubles partner “was a little bigger. She was already like a power player as far as just sheer strength on the court.” But, from LN’s perspective, “her cardio did need to be improved.” She continued, however, to acknowledge, “Knowing [teammate], she was on the elliptical to burn calories to try to become thinner instead of lifting weights to become faster and stronger.” On a more personal note, LN suggested,

My doubles partner, because we’re closer, we’ll probably say to each other, “Oh, I’m feeling so fat and slow this morning; just as a warning, I might not be moving as fast.” So, that might be the only time we say something like that on the court at all. I’d probably be upset if I were talking about it during a match just because that’s not where my focus is supposed to be, so it would be during the warmup, if anything. I do sometimes find myself thinking about my body during the match, [but] I try to stop it and get focused on tennis. Other than that, the times [that I make negative comments about my body] would be after meals at the hotel or maybe in the van if we are eating a lot of junk food or snacks.

While LN and her doubles partner played in body-supportive, task environment, both team members appeared to develop negative body perceptions. KS, a White straight Division III basketball player, acknowledged,
There’d been a girl, she only played one year, and I know she would kind of make
comments about her body sometimes. Like, she felt like she was overweight. She would
just kind of make little comments here and there. We would just be like, “No, you’re
fine.” And, I know we had one girl who actually suffered from bulimia. We worked
with her though and just tried to give her more support, like, “We’re here for you.” She
never really said anything to us about it until she pulled us all together and told us. But,
we never really face-to-face talked about it.

Often, women in task-oriented climates avoided talking about their own or teammates’
physiques in derogatory terms; however that did not prevent them from discussing their
opponents’ bodies and making judgements about their potential sport performance based on their
physical size. Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual, tennis player, stated,

Sometimes, like if there’s a larger girl on the other team, we’ll be like, “Wow, she
doesn’t move very quickly to the ball” . . . it’s things like that uh seem to have a sort of
spreading effect like a disease across our team. Um, and sometimes it even makes me
uncomfortable because it’s kind of rude to snark on the other team when we’re playing
them. It mostly happens, when it does happen, it happens at the end of our matches
because like we’re all kind of like tired and like we all want to get out of there and we’re
getting like a little bit grumpy. . . . But, like it’ll start off like, “Wow, that girl doesn’t
move very quickly to the ball,” and, then, it will kind of move to like, “Well, she is kind
of a bigger girl.”

Ali also noted that,

The girls on our team have like a lot of ranges of body types, so I think like a lot of our
girls are really uncomfortable about us talking about other people . . . one of them gets
really tense like physically tense and just gets a weird expression on her face. So, I’m thinking that’s where like that sense of uncomfortability comes in.

Ali clearly identified her environment as task-oriented, yet some players still used stereotypes about body sizes and shapes as an indicator of possible sport success. Another athlete in a task-oriented climate, MC, who identified as a Caucasian basketball player but did not label her sexuality, described,

I think if I had been in a different class, it would’ve been different, but the class I came with my freshman year, called the “Nasty Nine,” we were best friends. . . . The personalities of the individuals in my class are very outgoing and very driven and focused on being the best at what they can be. . . . Some of the other classes on my team . . . they’re not as focused and driven, and they seemed to care about boys a lot more. To them, it’s like, “Well, I should have this healthy food;” or, instead of eating a big meal, they’d eat a salad. And, you’d always see them eating salad and stuff. It’s like eat some meat or eat some food, you know? . . . It was just a lifestyle choice, we chose not to actively participate in some of the lifestyle choices they were making and, therefore, we weren’t around them as much. And, so, I think that was a big buffer for us – not spending time based on what they wanted to do outside of basketball. We just took a different route if that makes sense.

Although MC’s coaches did not establish specific food rules at team meals, she described,

It became a common theme though that everyone would order a side salad. Yeah, it’s kind of weird. Like, everyone would order their food and then, “Oh and a side salad.” Once the underclassmen started to realize that the upperclassmen were doing it, they started doing it. It was hilarious. I never said it out loud, but I think we all kind of just
looked around like, “I think we started a trend with the side salad.” But, most people would talk about, “I don’t want to get a burger. It sits too heavy.” Or, like one girl would always get steak. She would always get steak before, and some people on the team would be like, “I don’t understand how you eat that. I don’t think I could eat that. Or, it would just sit wrong, I don’t think I could digest it in time.” And, other people would be like, “Oh, well, I think pasta’s good for us. It gives us carbs. I think I’m going to have pasta.” So, there was some discussion of what we should be eating. Then, there was a few comments like, “I’m not going to get fries. Probably not the best before games.” And, then, “We’re not getting dessert.” Some people would be like, “I kind of want ice cream,” but never before a game.

MC’s assistant coaches often talked about how they had to reduce their caloric intake after their college sport career, which might explain why some female athletes on this team appeared to monitor their food selections at team meals. On the other hand, MC also identified thirteen of the fourteen players on this roster as Caucasian, heterosexual, female athletes. Hegemonic femininity suggests women should appear thin. Even though they played in a task-oriented, body-supportive climate, they still faced pressure to adhere to feminine body norms.

Female athletes in task-oriented environments were not immune to negative body talk and unhealthy attitudes towards the body. These comments affirm that female athletes do not enter their team setting as a blank slate but, rather, they bring their own, unique experiences and body perceptions. As a result, while some women in these environments might learn to think about their bodies positively, others might be more strongly affected by body-related encounters in other sectors of life that influence their body perceptions.
Coaches’ actions related to conditioning bodies. Some coaches in these environments suggested the need for a few members of the team to engage in extra cardiovascular training sessions beyond what their teammates completed and occasionally made potentially harmful comments at team meals. For example, MC, a Division III, Caucasian, basketball player, who chose not to label her sexuality, said that her coaches made “a few comments on bigger people needing to condition more . . . They would just have to run extra and then, once they got the [coach designated] time, it was like you’re done with that.” BL, a Division II, half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, discussed a rule that her coaches made for bench players on road trips (competitions away from their university site). “Our coach would be like, ‘if you didn’t play 15 minutes, you need to get some sort of cardio in.’ So, I would run on the treadmill in the hotel.” Although this practice did not directly target the body, it appeared to influence and consume BL’s thoughts. She mentioned that, after games, “I’d just be like thinking about working out, like in the locker room.”

One athlete discussed her coach’s behavior at team meals. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, conveyed, “If we’re going away somewhere and we go out to eat the night before, our coaches eat with us, so they can see what we order. . . . But, they don’t really monitor if we’re at home.” When asked if she changed her eating patterns in these moments, KSW said, “I’d eat like meats that are like grilled rather than like fried,” but she also insisted that these adjustments pertained more to the fact that she and her teammates wanted to choose pregame foods “that won’t make us feel bad the next day” rather than relating directly to the presence of her head coach. While watching female athletes consume their pre-game meals influenced some athletes’ eating behaviors, it appears that task-oriented environments offer body support that helps female
athletes interpret these body-related experiences in ways that do not impact their sense of control over their physique.

A few coaches in task-oriented environments offered even more direct body-related advice to female athletes on their team. A White, straight, softball player known as JS said,

When we were leaving for one of the breaks or something, coach just said, “Watch your weight because it will affect your pitching if you go on a crash diet and lose 20 pounds or gain 20 pounds. It will affect your pitching.” He just said something simple like that. . . . He said something to our other pitcher about her weight and that she needs to run on the treadmill a little more and get in the gym more.

JS adamantly pointed out that this interaction with her coach “wasn’t anything special . . . I was like, yeah, whatever, I’ll be fine either way.” Perhaps her task-oriented team climate and supportive teammates helped protect her from what she described as a rare, body-focused comment from her Division I head coach. However, as the conversation continued, JS remembered,

Actually, it’s weird. I just had a conversation with our head coach this morning about how, after the season, he’s going to have all the girls minus the seniors, all go to the strength coach to get their BMI taken – their height and their weight. And like, when they come back in the Fall, if they’re anything over their BMI, then he’s not going to even consider playing them. Like, they need to get back into the shape that they were when they leave, and he said that and it was like very uncharacteristic. It kind of surprised me when he said that because he’s really not like that.

BL, a Filipino and Caucasian, straight, basketball player, said that her coaches at the Division II level have never “done anything that has made somebody feel self-conscious. They always say
like eat healthy, make sure you stay hydrated, and you’re eating the foods you need to eat to feel energized.” Yet, she also recalled an experience with one of her assistant coaches that influenced her food habits.

Last year, when I came on my recruiting visit, [assistant coach] was just starting this thing. He lost probably like 60 pounds or something ‘cause he was really overweight. He was doing these shakes like meal replacement shakes. For like two meals, breakfast and lunch, he was eating a shake and then he would eat a healthy dinner at night. And, he lost a lot of weight. He was doing like all the workouts with us [team]. And, like, that was when I needed to go on a diet. And, I asked him if I could get the shakes, and he got them for me cause they’re like NCAA approved. And, he wasn’t like trying to tell me that I needed to lose weight, he was just trying to help me and support me. Um, and then our trainer found out. I think one of my teammates told my trainer that my assistant coach was helping me get the shakes, and she didn’t feel like that was appropriate and all this stupid stuff. And so, then I wasn’t allowed to do them anymore or like my trainer didn’t want me to do it for two meals, just one meal. And, it was kind of awkward, and I felt bad ‘cause I didn’t want him to think I told ‘cause I’m sure they just talked to him and were like, “What is this? [Teammate] is feeling uncomfortable with how you’re helping BL diet.”

These events suggest that, while task-oriented team climates seem to be body-supportive, they are not perfect. Points of contention occurred when some members of the team, whether or coaches or players, did not abide by the team’s body policies. If these moments occurred in a different team climate, they might negatively influence how some female athletes relate to their physiques. However, it seems as though the athletes in task-oriented environments still
interpreted these events as helpful or positive. Since these events occurred infrequently, it may be that other, more consistent elements of these environments served as a body-supportive buffer.

**Outcome-Oriented Team Climate**

About half of the female athletes in this study, participating on six different college sport teams, described their team climates as outcome-oriented. Characteristics such as how teams defined success and the unequal treatment of athletes separated these environments from those identified as task-oriented. Female athletes reported the toll of their climate’s “win-at-all-cost” mentality and addressed the related body perceptions they developed.

**Success as outperforming opponents.** In outcome-oriented team climates, success was defined as winning or defeating others. As JSharp, a Division I, White, heterosexual, basketball player, described, “Ultimately, I mean, it’s all about winning. I don’t think [our coaches] would sell their soul to win, but they definitely want to win.” JSharp elaborated,

> We don’t just go through practice, we want to get better for every practice. She makes sure we do, so she can be hard on us because that winning pressure is always there.

So, our coach is saying, “We’re trying to win the game.” Making comments like that is saying we’re worried about winning. This is about winning. This is a place to win. We expect to win championships here.

Similarly, BF, a White, straight, softball player participating at the Division III level, expressed, “Winning and anything really less than that wasn’t true success.” She added, her head coach “is not one to say, you know, ‘We played really well and sometimes you’re going to get out played.’ It was never anything like that. It was like, you know, you win and that’s it.” AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete played at a school with a rich women’s basketball history in Division
I. She said, “We’re known for basketball. Our success was definitely measured for [head coach] by our championships and our wins and losses, so you knew that.” When describing what makes one a successful athlete on her team, Division III lacrosse player, BG, who identified as Latina and straight, explained,

Probably someone who goes on the field and does whatever it takes to win the game but also while showing a lot of emotion. Like, if we’re losing and you’re not visibly angry and visibly losing your temper on the field, then like you don’t feel it enough and you don’t care enough according to our coach.

Athletes in outcome-oriented climates identified a pressure to win. Presumably, anything less than outperforming the opponent was considered failure.

Coaches in these climates emphasized the importance of winning through their feedback to athletes. MH, a White, straight, softball player on a Division III team on the West coast said her coach rarely got excited. When she did get excited, she tried to look at like the process of things, but the outcomes are what got her excited. So, a girl on our team was like a homerun hitter, but she went into a slump; and, then, she just like worked on little things, but she was failing a lot. So, then, our coach would be mad ‘cause she was failing. But, then, finally she hit a home run and that got her excited. So, she didn’t get excited ‘cause this person kept their hands inside or waited on the pitch or things like that. Like, she would sometimes, but it was more like about her hitting the home run and that making her the best coach ever. It wasn’t about if you do these things right, you’ll make solid contact and that’s good, too. It was about hitting the home run and, then, she would say that she hit it because she did those things.
In these climates, rarely did coaches reward effort or improvement; instead, athletes received consistent feedback on how they were performing incorrectly. DC, a Mexican, straight, Division I swimmer, mentioned,

Let’s say you have to do 4x150s, and you didn’t read it right and you do three or something. Or, you have to do your arm over and you do it under, just messing up the set. That’s pretty much what gets to [head coach]. Or, when you don’t have like the right attitude or you’re like, “Ugh, practice,” or something like that. . . . When she crosses the line, it’s about how she expresses herself. She can be a little mean, I think. Like, for example, recently, actually like two days ago, she made me start the same set four times. Well, the first two times were my fault because I was doing the set wrong. But, then the third time, like, once she’s on you and she’s told you something, she goes back and back and back to like the same thing. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s not the fact that she made me start the set again, it’s just the way she said it. It can be a little, it could have just been, “Okay, you’re starting again, GO!” But, she says, “I don’t know if you’re just that dumb” and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It doesn’t really offend me or anything, but there’s just no need to yell or be mean.

In outcome-oriented environments, mistakes often incur critical comments from sport leaders since the objective is to be the best. DC said that her coach was happiest “when you don’t mess up.” Athletes, as in DC’s case, tend to interpret this feedback as offensive and personal since evaluations of their performance can be construed as attacking their overall worth. However, she later articulated, “the result matters, but I don’t think that’s always the main thing for her. I think it’s just seeing that you tried and that you’re focused and swimming your best at that moment.” Since DC had become one of the top sprint swimmers on the team, it seems possible she might
be agreeing with her coach because she has experienced positive results from this approach. In another example, AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, suggested that her former Division I basketball coach remained “very open in his criticism, but he wouldn’t hesitate to tell you that you did a good job. Well, he would have his assistants tell you. . . . It was definitely a chain of command.” Although she received reinforcement from her assistant coaches, the head coach maintained the outcome-oriented environment by ignoring successive approximations and personal improvement. MH, a White, straight, female athlete who played Division III softball, suggested,

[Coaches] were very different. I feel like a head coach is either really nice or a head coach is like the hard ass and there’s the assistant coach who is like the relief. And, our assistant coach was definitely like that relief, so that was kind of nice that I didn’t have to deal with [head] coach all the time. He was more of the positive, so it was like, [head] coach would yell at you and sometimes [assistant coach] come over and say, “This is what she means. Out of all that yelling, this is what you need to work on.” Or if [head coach] was pissed, she wouldn’t talk to you, so then, [assistant coach] would kind of take that role during games.

In an example of this latter point, MH described how her head coach stood on the third base line, so if “you made a mistake . . . she would literally send our assistant coach, like, ‘Go talk to her. I don’t want to deal with her.’ So, in games, he would take on that role.” The head coach’s silence spoke volumes to her athletes about how she defined as success. Mistakes could also result in physical punishment. MH, described,

[Running] was more viewed as like punishment. I mean it wasn’t supposed to be punishment. Our coaches were like, “Oh, we’re better than everyone, so we want to
condition.” But, just like the word “condition” just sounds like a punishment. It felt like either you sucked at practice today or you were good at practice today, but we’re going to condition you either way. And, you’re going to hate it, but you’ll love the results.

MH claimed that, as a result of her coaches’ behaviors, “We hated running. We conditioned almost too much sometimes. We never had a break. I think you need to rest sometimes, but we just didn’t ever get it.” It seems likely that the desire to be the best led to excessive conditioning and possibly overtraining. Being constantly reprimanded for performance failures impacted athletes’ psyche. BF, a White, straight, softball player, explained that being a pitcher for an outcome driven coach “is hard because there was a time where it was so bad, you would give up a hit and you would look at the dugout and wonder, ‘Alright, when am I gonna get pulled.'”

Outcome-oriented climates could be easily identified in moments where the team or athlete might lose a competition. In these moments, coaches, in particular, appeared to make it clear to athletes that winning was the only true marker of success. BF, a White, straight, softball player, detailed,

[Head coach] is very much hardcore. She’s solely focused on winning and that’s just her personality. I mean I know of at least a handful of times of girls either playing hurt, [or] she would push people to come back and play when they’re sick or before a doctor would release them. I remember one girl, she was a senior, she played outfield, and she was getting sick in the dugout. And, I mean the girl said, “Yeah, I want to play,” but any other coach would be like, “You need to sit down.” But, it was because she was the best one in that position. She was a starter, so it was, you know, “You do what you have to, to win. Get her back out there.” I mean you can kind of see it by just looking at our team in general.
MH, a White, straight, softball player, described her team's national championship the year before. The year that followed, her head coach would come into practice just very high strung and ready to get down to business and um, you know. The year that we won, we were a lot more, we just had a lot more fun days or just relaxed days, you know, work on whatever you need to. But, for some reason, the following year, she was just very rigid and like, “We need to do these drills and these drills and these drills.” It was a lot more tense and the year before it was like, “Oh yeah, we’re just a bunch of kooky [athletes], no one expects us to win. We’re not even ranked.” And, the next year we were ranked #1 and it’s like oh crap. And, we don’t have our #1 pitcher from the previous year and so I think it just kind of reflected in the way that she coached. She was very negative. Very, very negative. I think the previous year she was negative, but it didn’t matter because we were winning. So, maybe people just kind of brushed it off or she brushed it off herself because we were winning and having fun doing it. But, she was a screamer. I can’t even tell you how many times, she attacked us personally. A lot of times.

During the championship run, the process of winning may have masked the underlying outcome-oriented environment this team adopted. MH elaborated,

Everyone was just like, “Oh, it’s coach, whatever.” The first year, I would say that it didn’t matter because we were successful. So, we were like, maybe because she is this way, that’s what is pushing us to be successful. It was like, well, she must be doing something right. Yeah, it sucks, but we’ll get over it.

But, as MH outlined in her previous comment, the unhealthy or extreme focus on winning became more apparent by watching the coach’s behaviors when they team lost more games the
year after they won the national championship. How coaches provided feedback and which elements they chose to reinforce and punish influenced how female athletes’ felt about their outcome-oriented team culture.

**Inequitable treatment of athletes.** Coaches in outcome-oriented environments appeared to favor or disproportionately reward successful athletes. CY, a Division I, Caucasian, straight swimmer, explained,

> I think me and [head coach] have built a pretty good relationship or like I’ve known her long enough and we’re open with each other enough that it’s almost like she doesn’t scare me anymore. It just doesn’t get to me as much. The first time we did the bod pod, it was the end of my freshman year and she was still like the scariest thing ever. But, since I’ve had some personal experiences, and I’ve been meeting with her all the time and just being captain and getting to know her has made her less scary. So, it just doesn’t really faze me as much. Some people don’t have that great of a relationship with her, so that’s why it might intimidate them a little more. . . . I think we have a good strong relationship, and I feel like I can trust her a lot more now. And, I think she trusts me. For example, if I did have a bad bod pod, I feel like now she’d be like, “Well, your results weren’t that great, but I know you can fix it, so I’m not worried about it.” That would be like her new approach.

Her position as a team captain and resulting positive relationship with her head coach might reflect how, in an outcome climate, coaches favor more successful athletes. JS, who identified as a Division I, White, straight, softball player, recognized,

> Since I’m so close to [Head Coach], being my pitching coach last year, then becoming the head coach, all of us pitchers . . . even like before the games, we’ll joke around with
him. And, while the hitters are warming up, us pitchers really don’t have anything to do, so, you know, we’ll just like sit and watch the previous game with him and take pictures with him. It’s not really like he’s our head coach before games. We’ll just hang out with him and just text him and be like, “How’s your day going,” and things like that. He’s more of like an approachable guy, not like a hard nose coach where like you’re afraid of him. Actually, I like that I have such a good relationship with the head coach. I think, you know, being a pitcher, we’re known as like the crazy girls on the team. We’re just weird and don’t fit in with everyone else. And, sometimes it gets bad, and I like that I have such a good relationship with him.

Whether favored or not, all members of the team seemed to become aware of this unequal treatment. As DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, noted, “I don’t want it to sound like ‘poor me,’ because it’s not, but she’s way harder on me with eating and other things.” She recalled a specific moment when one of her teammates said, “‘I’m going to eat two hamburgers.’ And, I don’t know if she realized what she’s doing; but if I eat that, I would get a lecture from [head coach]. . . . It can be kinda hard to be picked out like that.” One of DC’s teammates, EW a White swimmer, whose body fit the team’s standards, described,

When I’m hungry, I could eat anything in my sight. So, coach’s comments weren’t ever anything that impacted me, but it did make me feel bad sitting there shoving food in my face when people across from me could [only] eat granola because they felt so bad about themselves. I just felt bad for them. I felt bad that they would let another person make them feel that way.

BG, a Latina, straight, Division III, lacrosse player, mentioned that her favored teammates were
pretty good about knowing that they’re treated differently than some of us, and they always try to walk that line between sharing information with us so we don’t feel excluded; but, then, also keeping some things to themselves, so we don’t realize how much we really are excluded and mistreated. Which, I think they meant to do as like a nice thing.

As female athletes gained status on the team as key contributors to winning either through their leadership or their skill, coaches in outcome-oriented climates seemed to treat them more favorably than other members of the team. Positive coach-athlete relationships might have helped some female athletes in these environments cope with the expectations placed on them.

**Summary of Motivational Team Climates**

In task-oriented environments, coaches defined success as individual or collective improvement, identified primarily through self-comparisons. Coaches in these climates prioritized and demonstrated their concern for athletes’ well-being. Because the focus remained on comparing current performances or versions of self to previous forms, female athletes avoided comparing their bodies with others and concentrated on how to develop an efficient body for their own sport performance. These task-oriented environments seemed to provide a body-supportive buffer for athletes even when, occasionally, individuals around them expressed body-negative behaviors.

Of the seven team climates that female athletes in this study identified as adhering to task values, three occurred at the Division II or III level. Three other task-oriented team climates took place in Olympic sports at the Division I level such as track and field or soccer. Only one, AP’s basketball team, occurred in a major or more privileged sport. It might be that developing
a task orientation becomes more difficult with an increased external pressure to outperform one’s opponent.

Outcome-oriented environments had a win-at-all-costs focus. Female athletes in these settings played through injury and illness because only outplaying the opponent counted as a successful athletic moment. Coaches imparted their team values by often ignoring signs of improvement and critiquing players for their mistakes. This group of coaches also appeared to treat athletes differently based on their performance capabilities. As will be discussed in chapter six, these outcome-oriented climates seemed to influence how coaches addressed athlete bodies and how college female athletes related to their physiques.

**Discussion of Motivational Team Climates**

In this post-Title IX moment, women are increasingly adopting the performance model of sport (Waldron & Krane, 2005) where the focus is on winning-at-all-costs and often requires an ethic of endangerment. These characteristics are rewarded through a sport environment focused on success and being the best. These norms established and reinforced on sport teams (i.e., motivational climate) influence female athlete body image (e.g., Parsons & Betz, 2001; Raudenbush & Meyer, 2003). In other words, these athletes’ stories suggested that it was not the type of sport they played but, instead, which behaviors and ideas were reinforced on their teams that impacted how they related to their bodies. This finding is in line with research that did not find any differences in athletes’ reports of body dissatisfaction based on the type of sport played (Hausenblaus & Downs, 2001; Karr, Davidson, Bryant, Balague, & Bohnert, 2013). This chapter, in particular, describes the influence of task- and outcome-oriented team climates on female athlete body image. Conceptually, achievement goal theory (Maehr & Nicholls, 1980; Nicholls, 1989) helps explain how athletes are influenced by their team environment. The
foundation of this theory asserts that people are motivated to demonstrate competence and feel successful. Task- and outcome-oriented team climates define how achievement can be earned by various team members. Athletes’ perceptions of their motivational team climates (e.g., via expectations and reinforcements), then, influence their attitudes and behaviors (Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1989). For example, in this study, several female athletes in outcome-oriented environments perceived the only point that mattered was winning, so they viewed their body as a tool for sport performance as will be further discussed in chapter six. Conversely, female athletes in task-oriented climates recognized that their performance and bodies were only compared to previous versions of themselves, so they felt comfortable laughing and joking with teammates about their physiques.

In this study, outcome-oriented environments were dominated by two primary tenets: outperforming others and employing performance-based differential treatment. Consistent with extant literature (e.g., Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997; Waldron & Krane, 2005), athletes in outcome-oriented environments expressed a desire to do whatever it takes to win. They often compared themselves to their teammates or opponents and only considered themselves successful when they defeated someone else. Female athletes in these environments also competed while injured or ill and coaches encouraged these demonstrations of commitment. As a result, they often overconformed to the sport ethic, which Coakley (2009) describes as being willing to sacrifice for the game, refusing to accept limits in the pursuit of success among other characteristics. In these climates, female athletes viewed their bodies as a tool or weapon to be used for winning rather than a container of their being that they should enjoy and celebrate. Though not directly addressed in this chapter, female athletes in outcome climates who bought into the climate and conformed to the sport ethic tended to experience body dissatisfaction.
Aimar (2001) found a positive relationship between outcome-oriented climates and social physique anxiety while Atkinson and Young (2008) as well as Coakley (2009) cited disordered eating behaviors as manifestations of these outcomes. In line with achievement goal theory, as Waldron and Krane (2005) pointed out, athletes who compete in outcome-oriented environments and accept the team’s body norms might be at increased risk for developing a negative body image and engaging in unhealthy eating patterns.

A commitment to individual and collective improvement as well as a deep concern for athlete well-being marked task-oriented environments. Coaches in these climates consistently reinforced effort and improvement, focused athletes’ attention on controllable elements, involved players in goal-setting discussions, provided players with decision-making opportunities, and emphasized self-improvement. These techniques seemed to facilitate athletes’ perceptions of body competence and autonomy. Consequently, female athletes performing in these climates tended to develop positive relationships with their bodies. They wanted to improve their strength or speed to enhance their sport performance and improve their times on conditioning tests. But, on the whole, they avoided comparing their bodies to their teammates. Athletes in the current study who played in these environments also reported feeling free to choose what foods to eat at team meals and appreciated that their coaches allowed them to fuel their bodies according to their own, personal standards. deBruin, Bakker, and Oudejans (2009) found similar results with less coach-related body pressure and dieting reported in task-oriented climates than on outcome-oriented teams. In this study, athletes in task-oriented climates responded by seeking out nutritional advice from their coaches and wanting to learn more about their bodies with one another.
However, task-oriented environments did not provide exclusively productive spaces for women to forge positive relationships with their bodies. The connections between body size and sport performance remained visible within these otherwise supportive atmospheres. If specific body sizes and shapes are seen as producing sport excellence, then it seems possible, even likely, that female athletes whose bodies do not match that body ideal would cultivate negative body perceptions regardless of their team environment. And, in fact, that did occur with several female athletes in this study who felt their bodies could improve despite their sport success. This finding might helped explain why Slater and Tiggeman (2011) found that sport participation does not necessarily reduce body objectification. Thus, while developing a task-oriented climate might help athletes construct a positive body image, body perceptions are complex and female athletes never enter the sport climate or their team with a blank slate; their bodies are constantly being constructed by and through gendered body norms. Despite playing in a task-oriented team climate, some women in this study might have developed unhealthy attitudes or beliefs as part of their mission to attain the socially ideal feminine body. Continuing to find ways to help athletes understand how their bodies help them perform unique sport movements might help female athletes make peace with their body size and shape. Rather than connecting a specific fit, female athletic body to improved performance, team climates should help athletes recognize how diverse bodies positively contribute to performance. Doing so could help female athletes identify and celebrate the talents, strengths, and functionality their bodies provide, which researchers have noted as an important factor in athlete body satisfaction (e.g., Galli & Reel, 2009; Krane et al, 2004; Russell, 2004).

In addition, when looking at the differences between task- and outcome-oriented team environments, some elements of the former appear to help athletes develop a more positive
relationship with their bodies than the major tenets of an outcome-oriented environment as outlined in this chapter. That said, inconsistencies remain in each atmosphere. For example, some coaches in task-oriented climates made body negative comments and, occasionally, athlete in these environments developed body image disturbances. And, while not directly addressed in this chapter, some athletes in outcome-oriented spaces were able to resist taking on a “win-at-all-costs” mentality and cultivate a positive self-image, one not based on athletic success. Dividing the diverse climates described in this study into two discrete categories would provide an incomplete and inaccurate analysis; instead, a more complex investigation of the team environment follows in chapter six.
CHAPTER VI. BODY-OBSESSED TEAM CLIMATES

Separating climates by their goal orientations offered some understanding of the relationship between team climate and female athlete body image. Suggesting that task-oriented environments were always related to the development of a positive body image and outcome-oriented atmosphere were consistently connected with athletes constructing a negative view of self, however, would postulate a singular view of a much more complicated process. Taking a closer look at the data revealed an underlying assumption that seemed to drive the relationship between team climate and female college athlete body image. Some team climates, both task- and outcome-oriented, operated from a belief that a specific body size could lead to better sport performances. Though this body type shifted slightly depending on the sport, correlating physical appearance with athletic success drove the actions and experiences within these environments. Every outcome-oriented atmosphere, and three of the seven task-oriented team climates fit into this body-obsessed category. Despite their general differences in motivational climate, these team environments shared several key features, which served to cultivate an obsession with the body. These foundational characteristics included a belief that appearance yields sport success, body composition tests, sport leaders’ body negative behaviors, team meal experiences, and insufficient health-related education. Related to these environments, athletes developed disruptive body-related outcomes and post-eligibility beliefs about exercise. But, women in this study also described how they provided support for one another during difficult moments with intense body pressures.

Appearance Yields Sport Success

Connecting body size with athletic performance stands as the primary characteristic driving these body obsessed climates. CY, a Caucasian, straight, Division I swimmer said her
team’s focus on the body “stems from [the belief] that if you’re not carrying around as much weight or your body fat is lower, then you’ll be able to perform better.” The coaching staffs sold their preferred body ideal to the team by connecting body size with successful sport performances. According to Latina, straight, lacrosse player, BG, her White, female, Division III head coach “really like breeds the culture that you like need to look a certain way in order to be considered a good athlete,” and she provided “more playing time for the girls that looked like her, even if they’re not in more shape or fitter.” KC, a White, straight, soccer player, added,

   The ideal body that most women athletes and also coaches kind of look for is, you know, you want ‘em to be taller because usually that’s kind of intimidating and, whatever sport you’re playing, usually having some height helps. You want them to be strong, so you want them to have, like good muscle and good strength, but they can’t be so big that they can’t move. If you’re getting so big that you can’t be quick, you know, then that’s too big. That’s not a really good thing. And, then, I mean obviously it benefits most athletes to have like female like a thin stomach, a good core is what our coaches really are after. If you have a good core then you’d probably have less injuries and, you know, you’d be quicker, you’d be more explosive. Like, it all comes from the core

BF, a White, straight, softball player described,

   I mean we’re an athletic looking team. I would say we were a thin team. We don’t have girls that are you know needing to lose a few pounds here or there. Like I said, a majority, almost all the girls last year, were straight. Um, like I said, thin, athletic looking, um, I mean, just that kind of look.

CB, a Division I, African American, straight, athlete, explained,
Our coaches never gave us a specific person to look like; but, if you see our team, we’re all kind of like small and tall. So, I think that’s what she likes, tall slender girls, ‘cause we had a girl that transferred here. She was a big girl, like really thick. [Coach] had her on a weight loss program every week. She had to lose a certain amount or she wouldn’t be here anymore. I think she just didn’t like her fit into the program she’s trying to run here. I think she wants to like run a 5-out [offense], so it’s not really like there’s true post players. I think she wants everyone to like face out so we can like run on them. She wants us to be like quick, you know, running up and down the court.

Coaches also reinforced this belief that physical appearance related to sport performance through their conversations with athletes. BF, who identified as a White, straight, Division III, softball player, told a story involving her teammate and roommate:

After 4 years of being on the team, our head coach called her in and said, you know, “You need to lose weight.” I know she told my roommate, you know, “You used to run faster. You should try to lose some weight.” And, I mean you look at her, and my roommate has always been one who has been considered hot; she has a big chest, she’s really pretty, you know, stuff like that.

CY, a Caucasian, straight, Division I, swimmer, mentioned,

I’m pretty sure my freshman year [head coach] told me that if I lost weight, I would be lighter and be able to go faster in the water. But, I know she’s told other girls on the team that if they lost weight, it would be beneficial to like their performance. Or, like, if they didn’t perform as well one year and then the Bod Pod shows that they gained weight, she’ll say, “Well, maybe that’s one of the reasons you didn’t do well this year because your eating habits are terrible, and you gained weight.”
Some of the female athletes in these body-obsessed team climates appeared to take on this mentality. Although White, straight, Division III, softball player, BF, knew that physical appearance “doesn’t matter, like, bigger players can still hit the crap out of the ball; they’re good,” she still suggested, “We’ve played against teams before where you’re looking at them, thinking and my team would say, you know, ‘They would never make it through the kind of running that coach puts us through.’” Similarly, DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, learned, The leaner you are, the faster you are in the water. I mean it’s something that matters. I mean it’s not that you’re not going to be fast if you’re not lean. . . . If we have to use the word “fat,” someone that’s fat can totally beat someone who’s lean or fit because the person who wins isn’t always lean. I’m saying it’s not the fat that’s going to make you win or lose. . . . I feel like it’s different being skinny than being lean or being fit or whatever. Like being skinny isn’t going to make you fast, but being lean, for me, is being strong and having like not having that much fat in your body. Like I said, someone who is fat could be way faster than someone who is lean just because of talent, but that person who is fat could be even faster if she was lean. You know what I mean? . . . If, at the end of the day, it’s going to get me three hundredths of a second faster to lose weight, then I want those three hundredths of a second. So, being in better shape in that way, it will give you better practices and better results. So, it’s not like you have to do it or you need to do it to win, but, in my opinion, it cannot hurt. Plus, everyone wants to look good in a [swim] suit.

After a poor performance, CY, a Caucasian, straight, Division I, swimmer, said,

[Head coach] makes it seem like, “Oh, the reason I did bad was because I was fat,” when, I mean, it could be a lot of different things. It could be mentally; it could be an injury; it
could be a number of things. But, for her to pinpoint performance like that, it just makes you feel bad because you feel like it’s something you kind of don’t have control over. In all of the body-obsessed environments in this study, the body became a tool for athletic performance. Any performance failure, then, became a sign of the athlete’s inability to appropriately manage her body. JSharp, a White, heterosexual, Division I, basketball player, suggested a few of her teammates acquiesced to their climate as well:

[Head coach] took them aside and, you know, they talked about it and wanted my teammates to lose the weight. But, ultimately, the girls wanted to lose the weight because they wanted to be in better shape, the best shape they can be [in] because, you know, to play Division I basketball is hard to do. So, the coaches told them they needed to [lose weight], obviously it wasn’t like an option, but I mean the girls ultimately were the ones who decided, “Yeah, I’m going to go along with it. I’m going to do what I can to lose this weight like [coaches] need me to.” It was helping them perform better on the court and be able to sustain their game, play the full game.

Embracing the “body size yields athletic performance” formula seemed to influence how some women in this study thought about, related to and behaved towards their body in these team environments. This foundational belief crossed task- and outcome-oriented body-obsessed environments, reinforcing the idea that female athletic bodies should be viewed as objects to be mastered rather than the subjects of celebration.

**The Role of Sport Leaders**

Actions from members of the coaching staff, athletic trainers and strength coaches strengthened body-obsessed environments. Some of the women in this study discussed how these behaviors taught team values and influenced their own body perceptions.
Leaders’ negative behaviors. Coaches in body-obsessed climates were described as taking measures to ensure a similar body aesthetic across team members and adding negative body pressure through direct and indirect feedback. As BF, a White, straight, Division III, softball player, mentioned, “I think that coach, even if it’s not something that she thinks about on a conscious level, she definitely has an idea of how she wants our team to look,” and, as was often the case in these climates, BG, a Latina, lacrosse player, stated, “Coach very much plays favorites and you can tell pretty much how high you are on her favorites list based on how you look.”

Some athletes described how coaches used various recruiting tactics to ensure the women on their team looked the same. JSharp, a White, heterosexual, Division I, basketball player in the South noted, “When coaches recruit you, they judge you by what you look like, so, ‘Oh, she’s physically fit, she’s strong.’” White, straight, Division III, lacrosse player, BG, said, “Well, first of all, [head coach] only tries to recruit athletes that look like her, long and thin.” EW, a White, Division I, swimmer, who was only attracted to males, described,

I guess you don’t necessarily have to be a certain height, but just based off of her recruiting style, she looks for girls who are taller and skinnier and leaner. She’s very open about that. One time, we had a recruit that was pretty short, and she was a bigger girl. I was her host around campus, and I had mentioned that I really liked her and [head coach] said, “No, she is way too short and way too fat. There is no place for her on the team.”

BF, a Division III, softball player, who identified as White and straight, expressed that her coach made it clear which body types she preferred “by who she recruits . . . We don’t have girls that need to lose a few pounds . . . almost all the girls last year were straight, thin, athletic-looking,
pretty. That kind of look.” BF’s comment, in particular, suggests that an athlete’s social identities also might influence her recruitment process if her body visibly marks, for example, her queer sexuality. KC, a White, straight, Division I, soccer player, offered,

I know like just from an experience. I went on my first visit to [university] and there was another girl with me from my club team in high school. She was shorter and a really good player. She was really fast at that time, but she was shorter so her legs were a lot bigger than mine. And, she had, you know, really big boobs and some hips but her stomach was thin. I mean she could run all day, but coach wasn’t interested in her at all. And, I was really surprised because she was starting on my team and really good. And, she really wanted to go there. And, kind of like last year, I brought that up and coach was like, “I just knew her body type would get a lot bigger in college; she would have a tendency to gain weight. And, she wouldn’t get any faster.”

JSharp, a Division I basketball player, who identified as White and heterosexual, described how her body type influenced her own recruitment:

I got recruited by a lot of places, but I mean it was never anywhere, like huge, obviously. I did have a big school [recruiting me] my junior year of high school. Like, I knew [University Coach] came to my games. I talked to them. I had been to their camps, everything like that. Then, my high school coach came to me, and was like, “Yeah, I talked to them, they would offer to you in a minute, but they just think that you’re small.” So, I’m like, “Okay, you can always get stronger, but some things you can’t learn, like basketball IQ. You have it, or you don’t.” You can learn some parts of the game. It’s just kind of weird that people think you have everything else, but your body type’s not
right. It’s just kind of hard to not recruit someone just off their body type, if they have
everything else that you like.

The recruiting process created space for coaches in these body-obsessed climates to cultivate the
physical prototype for women on their teams. By preventing some female athletes from joining
their teams based on their body shape, this group of coaches laid the foundation for an obsession
with the body to develop. These recruiting strategies occurred at both the Division I and III
levels, which suggests that it is not the level of competitive sport; but, rather, the team climate
that might influence how female athletes relate to their bodies.

Body-related pressure and comments from sport leaders helped athletes gain a clearer
understanding of ideal body sizes on their body-obsessed teams. MH, a White, straight, softball
player, recalled,

I loved my athletic trainer, but she made a lot of comments about other teams’ fitness and
body type. There was this girl on [opposing team] who was like huge, like there’s no
other way to put it. And, the trainer would comment about how she had like a big tire
around her waist. She would kind of joke about it. And, my thought was like, “Good
thing we don’t have anyone who looks like that on our team ‘cause that would suck if she
heard her saying that.” So, then, I kind of knew our athletic trainer was like aware of
what people looked like or she’d pay attention to it.

BF, a White, straight, Division III, softball player, discussed,

I understood [Coach] saying to one of the girls that she might want to lose some weight.
I mean that would’ve been beneficial for that girl for health reasons. But, at the same
time, that girl ended up not playing because of that conversation.
According to BF, this female athlete chose to quit her sport to avoid the body pressure. BF also described the personal impact of her coach’s comments:

> Once I got into college, my mentality about my body kind of changed just because our coaches started drawing more attention to it. They tell you, “Don’t gain weight. Don’t gain the freshman 15. You should honestly be losing weight or your body should be looking a certain way after these workouts.”

Feedback, both positive and negative, from the coach about their bodies often reinforced the importance of improving their physical appearance. BF stated,

> When someone lost weight, Coach would praise them in front of the whole team and, you know, some people want Coach’s approval anyway they can get it, so that becomes a motivator. I saw a girl get praised, and [then] she put on a little bit of weight towards her senior year and coach said something to her about it. I remember thinking she lost all this weight and you’re going to jump her for like five pounds. This is insane.

After increasing her muscle mass at her coach’s request, JSharp, a White, heterosexual, Division I basketball player, said her coach responded, “Oh, wow, you actually look like a basketball player now. So, I’m like, okay, I guess before I didn’t? It’s kinda stuff like that.” She also discussed,

> When one of our freshmen came in and was a little overweight, our coaches commented on it and they pushed her to, you know, drop a few pounds; get in better shape. So, she did. Then we had another transfer come in and she was a big girl, you know, overweight, and they worked on her to drop some pounds by running her extra. Then, one of our freshmen, her dad was a trainer, so she came in really physically fit, you know, strong.
And, our coaches commented on how strong she already is. Things like that; they comment here and there. I would say little things. Nothing over the top, I would say. Regardless of whether or not female athletes on her team were able to change their bodies in accordance with these coach standards, JSharp announced that her head coach never said, “I’m glad you’re stronger. It’s kind of like that’s tossed to the side now, and we’re looking at other things to improve.” Her African American, straight, teammate, CB, articulated, “Our coaches are just like, “Oh, you’re losing weight.” It sounds like a good thing. I look toner is what they’re trying to say, so I should keep doing what I’m doing. But, really, it’s them making us run so it’s their doing that makes my body look like this.

CB seems to understand that her coaches’ comments simply reinforce their behaviors and training techniques. All of these remarks and body-related pressure from coaches demonstrated an intense focus on physiques in these sporting environments.

**Athletes’ responses to leaders’ behaviors.** Physical appearance standards were taught in these body-obsessed climates without any input from the female athletes actually competing in their sports. The only choice, and a constrained one at best as many of these women held athletic scholarships, female athletes had was how they would respond to their leaders’ negative behaviors. BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, concluded, “I don’t think there’s a particularly positive body image on my team. [Head coach] has kind of made sure of that.” She admitted coaches’ negative body comments proved “really hurtful probably the first 50 times it happened . . . it’s hard to be compared to your best friend and told you’re never going to be as good.” CY, a Caucasian, straight, Division I swimmer, described how her coach told her to lose twenty pounds over the summer. Then, she explained, “I cried . . . I was so upset. . . . It’s great that everyone says I look great [before I lost weight], but it hurts the most when negative comments come from
her because she’s like the coach.” BF, a Division III athlete, who identified as a White, straight, softball player, said,

I think that by telling people, you know, you need to lose 10 pounds – ten pounds is not something someone should lose sleep over, and it became that for some of the girls on the team. It got to the point where you started worrying about that rather than your performance -- which is just mind blowing to sit back and think about -- but that’s just how it was. So, I think there are times when it would’ve been okay for coach to tell someone they needed to lose weight, but it should’ve been handled in a completely different way.

Some female athletes responded to leader-related body pressure by engaging in unhealthy weight management behaviors. EW, a White, Division I, swimmer outwardly asserted, “[Head coach] just flat out told people that they were fat and needed to lose weight, and I know, for a fact, it made some people [on the team] develop eating disorders.” One of EW’s teammates, DC, who identified as Mexican and straight, mentioned,

At practice this morning, I was done with my practice. I finished earlier because I had class. So, I was walking in my [swim] suit with my equipment bag. And, my head coach was walking towards me, not even looking at me, but I sucked in my stomach. I was like, “Oops, [head coach] is coming, I’ve got to suck it in. I don’t want her to see me and then a week later tell me that I looked fat, so I’m just going to suck in my stomach.” So, basically, I sometimes feel bad [about my body] at practice when my head coach is staring at me or something.

This Division I college swimmer, who also set team records as a first-year student-athlete and became the only representative from the team at the NCAA tournament, still felt it necessary to
hide her stomach to avoid negative body pressure from her head coach. At the same time, she seemed exasperated with the fact that her body was constantly being monitored. DC explained,

It’s not what she says, it’s just the fact that she said something. Whatever it is, I don’t want her to tell me anything about my body anymore. I think that happens because I don’t want to talk about my body with her or eating because I know what she’s going to say. I’m over that topic with her, you know? Yeah, I’m just tired of hearing it. I know what I need to do and probably I could try harder, but I’m just tired of hearing her.

These women often expressed conflicting feelings when trying to make sense of their embodied experiences in these body-obsessed climates.

A few of the female athletes in body-obsessed climates seemed to disagree with how their coaches talked about their bodies. EW, a White, Division I swimmer, who affirmed her attraction to males only, directly stated, “Our coach thinks there’s a specific mold that every person should fit and, in reality, that’s not true. We have girls on our team that coach considers to be severely overweight, but [they] are record holders.” EW cited, “Personally, I don’t agreed with that [philosophy].” After the Division I softball coach told JS, who self-identified as White and straight, to monitor her weight over winter break, she noted, “I was like, whoa, why would you say that? Does it really matter that much if you improve one point on your BMI? I don’t know.” Similarly, some of the female athletes in this study successfully voiced their dissent and resisted team body norms. BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, said, “For a while, I took everything [head coach] said like the gospel, she couldn’t say anything wrong. She was not only the adult, but she was the coach and everything she said was right.” As she continued in the program, BG said,
I finally realized that she says things that are wrong all the time, like she’ll use words
wrong or say facts that are untrue. . . . IF you hear negative comments enough times, it
doesn’t really mean anything anymore. Like, she says, “I wish you were more like [tall,
thin, blonde teammate]. You’ll never be as good as her.” But, that’s my friend and that
doesn’t really mean anything. I don’t want to be like [teammate]. I’m me. And, I’m
happy being me. I think that if I tried to be like [tall, thin, blonde teammate], I probably
wouldn’t do a very good job.

According to BF, a White, straight, softball player, her coach told her teammate and roommate,
who BF described as “hot,” that she needed to lose weight. As a result, BF questioned,

I think it’s hard to look at somebody and be like, “Oh yeah, coach is right,” because they
look healthy and they’re happy. And, you start to wonder, why are you being told to lose
weight in a sport when you’re healthy and you’re still working hard and it’s not like
you’re eating wrong or anything? . . . I actually took a little bit of a different approach
[after that event] . . . I think back then it was more of, you know, I want to be thin. Now,
it’s more I want to be as healthy as I can be, and I want my body to show that. Looking
at me now, I look like how I feel. . . . I’m not as worried about all the numbers. Like, I
try really hard not to weigh myself. I just try to look at myself in the mirror really hard. .
. . I can go and lift, and I’m not worried about if my number goes up; but, if I like how I
look, then I’m happy.

More recently, after living through the experience with her friend, BF explained,

After my junior year, my head coach said something to me about my weight about either
trying to lose [weight] or something like that. And, it was in my end-of-the-year meeting,
and the other coaches were in there too. And, I said, “Coach I want to stop you right
there,” and she was like oh okay. I was like, “Listen, you know I’ve lost weight in the past, like a massive amount of weight. That’s something that is for me to maintain and to worry about. That’s not something that I’m going to talk to you about.” And, she just kind of looked at me, and she was like okay. And, she and I never talked about weight again. I knew if I let her kind of take that role of trying to . . . change my body, then the whole point of it would change for me and that’s not what I wanted. I’m not someone who talks back and doesn’t listen, but that’s just the one thing. I’m not going to let someone sit there and give me guidelines of what they think I should weigh or anything like that.

CY, a Caucasian, straight swimmer, learned “to not take negative comments from my coach personally. And, if I do kind of feel bad about myself afterwards, I talk to my parents or my mom after to reassure me that it’s [head coach] that’s a little crazy.” These critiques helped some female athletes in body-obsessed climates to resist body pressure from their coaches. Finding sources of support outside of a body-obsessed team climate helped CY cope with body pressure. Latina, straight, lacrosse player, BG, described how her White coach, once or twice a week, would tell me that I should get meals with one of my best friends on the team [who] is a few inches taller than me and a little thinner than I am and she has this long, blonde hair. [That way.] I’m eating what she’s eating, so I can look like her.

Or, she tells me that I’ll never be able to be as good as her. Those like exact words.

After finally realizing that her coach did not always know the correct answers, BG, recognized, “So, saying that I’m not as good as [teammate], that’s just like another untrue thing. What she’s saying isn’t right and it’s not correct.” DC, a Division I, Mexican, straight, swimmer, refused to continue keeping her coach-mandated food journal because
I told her that it wasn’t healthy for me because it put a lot of stress and anxiety in my life.

. . . She wasn’t really pleased about it, but I don’t care. I just stopped doing it. . . . I’m just better without it, and I didn’t need a food journal to be responsible about food.

Both DC and BG identified as female college athletes of color. Their coaches consistently compared their bodies to their White teammates and hegemonic femininity. When comparing diverse women’s bodies to a singular, White, heterosexual definition of femininity, athletes of color could be disproportionately affected. They may also be more likely to stand up or resist this coach-related body pressure if they recognize it as an attempt to force their bodies to match an appearance standard that has historically worked to “other” women of color’s bodies.

A few of the women in this study seemed to cope with their climates by either trying to see their coaches’ negative body pressure as an integral part of the performance enhancement process. DC, a Mexican, straight, Division I, swimmer, said,

My head coach is harder with certain people than others because like there’s people that can take it and there’s people that can’t. Like, if she did a food journal with some of my other teammates, like she did with me, they would probably quit. She knows who can take it and who cannot. Maybe if she started yelling at [a freshman on the team], she wouldn’t do well, or if she started treating me nicely, maybe I wouldn’t do well. So, she knows what works.

Caucasian, straight teammate, CY, announced that her coach’s declaration that she lose weight over the summer motivated me a little to come back and show her that, yeah, I’m not fat and I can do it . . .

So, I came back that sophomore year, and I had lost like 12 pounds and she told me that I looked great. And, I was like, yeah, I know.
While their devotion to their coaches might be useful in some athletic contexts, when considered within the framework of this study, it seems this unwavering support might also lead some female athletes to construct a negative view of their bodies.

**Body Composition Examinations**

The preoccupation with body shapes and belief that physiques are infinitely mutable connected these climates. Accordingly, some type of body composition test was found in every body-obsessed environment. These teams used body measurements to quantify body ideals and restrict acceptable size ranges. As CY, a Caucasian, straight, Division I, swimmer noted, “If coach sees you gained five pounds but most of it was muscle, then it’s not as bad as if it was mostly fat. Obviously, she’s okay with weightlifting . . . but, yeah, she knows whether you’re gaining muscle or fat.” Often, coaches told their athletes the measurements would help them improve their sport-specific training methods and overall performance. According to BG, a Latina, straight, Division III lacrosse player, her coach used these tests “to like make sure we were squatting our [body] weight.” And, when deciding whether or not an athlete should practice, KC, a White, straight, Division I soccer player, said, “If [Coach] sees your weight is low and your energy wasn’t up that day, she thinks about it more.” But, ultimately, measuring female athletes’ body composition served to keep the focus on women’s bodies thus affirming body-obsessed climates.

**Testing procedures.** Coaches in body-obsessed climates employed a variety of body measurement examinations including athlete weigh-ins, bod pods, and skinfold or “pinch” tests. When outlining the testing procedures, female athletes described how their teams conducted these body examinations, how often they occurred each season, and how their coaches’
disseminated the results. They also discussed the repercussions for poor test outcomes and their responses to these testing procedures.

**Athlete weigh-ins.** These body composition examinations, which required women to stand on a scale that measures their body weight, provided the most popular form of assessment. BG, a Latina, straight, Division III, lacrosse player explained, “We have like a scale in the weight room, so . . . [Head Coach] would just come in and weigh us.” In a more public display, BF, White, straight, Division III, softball player, mentioned,

In the fall, you would go probably about a week of practice and then you would do your first road run, which is like a couple miles. And, you would stop at the rec center, after our timed mile run, and go in . . . and line up and take turns getting on the scale in the training room. So, not only is it just our team, but you have football players in there, you have, you know, volleyball players and you [get weighed] in front of everybody.

BF also acknowledged that either the head coach or graduate assistant weighed each member of the team. JS, a White, straight, softball player at the Division I level, said her team weigh-ins took place “right before a lifting session, so our whole team is there.” Waiting in line to be weighed often caused body-related anxiety for these female athletes. BF, a Division III athlete, who identified as a White straight softball player, noted, “We had weigh-ins, and, you know, you get in a line and weigh-in, and I think that’s when you start immediately comparing yourself to everyone else.” JS, a White, straight, Division I softball player, added, “Oh, my gosh, there’s girls on the team that are like, ‘Don’t look at my thighs’ or ‘Don’t look at my stomach.’”

The pervasiveness of these tests was alarming as many female athletes had their bodies measured multiple times each year. Given the simplicity of team weigh-ins using scales, it is no surprise that form of measurement occurred more frequently than bod pods and skin caliper tests.
KC, a White, straight, Division I, soccer player, said, “Before every workout, you have to weigh yourself and write it down with the athletic trainer. Then, after every workout, you have to go in and write it down.” BG a Latina, straight, Division III, lacrosse player, said her coach weighed everyone on the team, “Once a month, when we were lifting.” BF, a Division III athlete, who identified as a White, straight, softball player, outlined,

In the Fall, you would go probably about a week of practice . . . and you know you do it once. Then, you weigh-in again after Fall ball and again at post-testing, which is I think like 4 or 5 weeks after that pre-test. Then . . . you got two weeks when you got back from Christmas break to, you know, get into school and then you’d start practice and right around the first week of practice is when we’d have weigh-ins again after Christmas break.

These tests provided coaches with a tool they could use to constantly scrutinize and evaluate even small changes in female athletes’ bodies.

Testing results were disseminated in a variety of manners. BF, a Latina, straight, Division III, lacrosse, player, expressed,

[Head coach] would just like weigh us and keep up with it. She said she could just remember if you were up or down, but I don’t know. There were 20 of us, so I don’t know if she could remember that.

BF, a White, straight, softball player, described,

That next time you come in to lift after your pre-test, you’d be given a little sheet of paper, like a slip, and it had your name on it and the dates that you’ve weighed in so far. So, if you’re a freshman, you’d only have like two [weight measurements] on there. When you’re a senior, you have like this pretty good slip of paper to look at.
She also articulated that, other than the initial individual meeting with the head coach at the start of the academic year, the coach would only “call you in if your weight was that big of a deal.” Some coaches in body-obsessed climates disseminated athletes’ weights in a public forum. JS, a White, straight, Division I, softball player, suggested,

Last year, we had to get our BMIs taken and like our weight and our height. . . . Then, I’m pretty sure our strength coach did sent it to our coach, so coach saw it, too . . . They took that and made it into this huge spread sheet and said they were going to test us at the beginning of the Fall and the end of Fall to see where we were at and if we gained muscle mass from our training programs.

KC, a White straight Division I soccer player, acknowledged their testing results were sent to the [Head coach] and our strength and conditioning coach because, at the end of the year this year, we got a sheet and it had everyone’s beginning weight and everyone’s ending weight, so what everyone weighed in January and in May. [Strength coach] actually sent it to us all in a mass email, so everyone saw everyone’s weight and your maxes on squat and power cleans. That was all together. Then, it was how much you lifted compared to your body weight, so you lifted this percentage of your body weight, and that table was given out to everybody.

She further analyzed, “He’s a guy strength and conditioning coach, so I don’t really think he thought about it that much.” But, body comparisons often ensued as she depicted,

I sat with one of my roommates and was like, “Oh, look who gained weight. Or, “They’ve been doing this a lot this semester, you know, this is why they gained.” Or, “I’m surprised they didn’t gain weight or they lost weight.” And, like you go through everyone’s [weight]. And, we’re not meaning, you know, to be like mean or anything,
we’re just curious. But, I know I got to my weight and, usually each spring I gain about three pounds in muscle, and I had gained three pounds and I was embarrassed.

This study does not suggest that body composition tests caused body image disturbances among athletes in body-obsessed climates. However, for some athletes, with other body perception issues, these tests might place further stress on their bodily relationships. F, a Division III softball player who identified as White and straight, explained,

   Early on in college, between having to weigh-in for softball and just coming off of losing weight in high school, I got a little too into the number that I was seeing on the scale. It just got to be a little too much. It got to where that’s what I was worried about more than anything. I think the whole focus changes for my team right around weigh-ins or right before we knew we were having a weigh-in ‘cause you would stay after practice and run.

She continued,

   When I really started to get into running and started seeing the results and started really paying attention, I would start weighing myself after every run. I would pay attention to, you know, what I ate. I was trying to eat less carbs. I was trying to, you know, eat less in general. Um, it just got to the point where I was trying so hard to lose weight that I stopped worrying about what was healthy and what wasn’t. So, I think that the focus got switched from what it should have been.

KC, a White, straight, Division I, soccer player, initially felt like TH, her White, straight, teammate, who said, “Weigh[ing] ourselves . . . is really just to make sure that we’re not losing a bunch of weight or getting sick.” However, she expressed,

   I guess it was my roommate’s sophomore year Spring. She was really trying to slim down. She was trying to lose weight, but it was good weight to lose. And, I was kind of
in the training room and the trainer was like, “You can’t practice because you’re this much lower than you were last year” and made a big deal about it. And, my roommate was kind of like, “I needed to lose this weight. I gained too much weight freshman year.” And, it’s almost like they’re too much into your business because some people know their bodies better than the trainer does. Not everyone’s the same. Like, I didn’t need to lose weight, but it’s okay for her because she needed to lose some. She had just gained, you know, the freshman 15, and she was getting back into shape. But, the trainer was thinking that was always her weight. And, [teammate] was like, “You didn’t know me in high school and how I used to be.” So, some of those conversations come up and kind of get awkward.

Because of her body-obsessed climate, KC viewed this weight monitoring technique as an attempt to control her teammates’ body.

The pressure to register a low weight on this test seemed to influence some athletes’ eating and exercise behaviors as well. For example, BF, a Division III, softball player who identified as White and straight, explained,

I mean the craziest I saw it get was we had some girls put on weight over Christmas break and you have 2 weeks when we get back before practices start. . . . that’s usually the [weigh-in] people are most worried about because, you know, you’re at home for a month, so you’re eating different. You’re not working out as hard and stuff, so that’s the one that people would stress the most about. . . . And, I remember people going into the cardio room and running and getting on the elliptical in sweats. And, I mean it was already hot. I mean it wasn’t about softball at that time; it was about losing weight. I had never experienced that until [college].
And, JS, who identified as a White, straight, softball player, suggested,

It’s weird because I just started thinking about this like a couple months ago, and it just keeps coming up and coming up. My teammates are obsessed with these fad diets. Like, they are just so crazy about dieting and going on these crash diets and you know eating clean. And, my one roommate is so psychotic about it, she’ll come home after practice and say, “I need my egg whites right now.” And, I’m like, “Why don’t you just eat a regular egg?” And, she’s like, “No, I can’t eat the yolk. There’s too much fat in it and too much cholesterol.” I don’t usually say anything to her. I know that nothing I say is going to impact what she thinks. I’m usually like, whatever, blow it off and grab my food. It just drives me crazy just the way that people get like that. It just turns me off. I don’t like it at all. It drives me up a wall. And, there’s some girls on the team that like count calories. But, they do it all wrong. They’ll be like, “Okay, I can have this salad, but tonight I’m going to eat seven mozzarella sticks and three pieces of pizza.” And, I’m like you’re doing it all wrong if that’s how you’re going to do it. It just drives me crazy.

She also said,

Even some of my teammates will mention, like, “I need to go the gym because I’ve eaten this today.” Our coaches have never really said anything about it. But, it’s funny because the same girls that I’m talking about that are obsessed about it are the same girls that, when we go out to eat like at a restaurant at a road trip, they’ll be the ones to be like ordering a full meal and you know try to sneak in a dessert. They’re just crazy.

On a positive note, a few athletes in body-obsessed climates disagreed with these body measurement tests and responded with frustration and anger. BF, a White, straight, Division III, softball player, stated,
You know, I thought that all these tests and conversations was just to make sure that we stayed healthy. But, I honestly don’t know just because I can only think of maybe one or two people where, yeah, they needed to lose weight to be able to play the sport more effectively.

Latina, straight, lacrosse player, BG, agreed, “There’s no reason to weigh us. If we’re passing our weight lifting test and our running test, then what difference does it make? We’re not wrestlers.” Although these athletes seemed to resist the idea behind these examinations, none of the athletes in this study refused to participate. They all seemed to view body measurements as a necessary component of their body-obsessed climates.

**Bod pod exams.** Only two teams employed bod pod tests since they required specialized equipment and practitioners with expertise in body composition research to perform the examination with athletes. Associated costs might make it less feasible for Division II and III college sport teams to employ this form of assessment, but, when used properly, these examinations provide more specific feedback regarding overall health and well-being than athlete weigh-ins offer. As DC, a Mexican, straight, Division I, swimmer, stated, “the bod pod process is you go into this egg-shaped thing, and they take our height and weight. And, they do math and give you a body fat percentage based on your weight and height.” Teammate CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, indicated, “the thing with the bod pod is that it will tell you, like how much fat you gained or how much muscle you gained.” She also noted that first time through the bod pod, not all athletes “were required to do it, but they were given the opportunity to. Our head coach signed our team up . . . since then, we’ve been doing it 2-3x per year, and now she’s requiring it.” Upon arriving at the testing facility, “there’s timeslots, so you go in with like two or three teammates at a time.”
Although team weigh-in information often was disseminated using spreadsheets or other forms of documentation, the two teams using body composition tests required coach-athlete meetings to discuss the results. EW, a White, Division I swimmer who acknowledged that she was only attracted to males, said, “We got the results, from our coach, rather than from someone who knew what they were talking about.” DC, a Mexican, Division I, swimmer, asserted,

After [the bod pod test], you don’t know your results until like a week later [when] you meet with your head coach. You go in there, you close the door for privacy, she just stares at you for a few seconds and she tells you the numbers. Then, you talk about, well you’re never too low; but, either you’re “good” or, if you need to improve, how you’re going to improve. She’ll ask, “What have you been doing? Why are you so bad?” Blah, blah, blah. And, that’s pretty much it and then you try to improve it or just don’t care about it, but I do care about my weight. Well, for me, I have never had a good Bod Pod meeting. . . . And, that’s pretty much it. That’s how the meetings go. You just talk about it and how you can improve your body and, you know, lose fat.

Often, female athletes reacted to bod pod examinations by thinking more negatively about their physiques. Caucasian, straight, Division I, swimmer, CY, suggested, “We have to do the bod pod like three times a year and that just destroys everyone’s confidence.” She added, [teammates with bad results] were bawling because coach is telling them, ‘You’re fat.’ I don’t know if she uses the words, but . . . she says, ‘you need to lose this many pounds by this date.’” Division I, Mexican, straight swimmer, DC, said,

I remember [teammate] was saying, “Yeah, I did it last year. I can totally drop 5 pounds before Bod Pod.” . . . She was really obsessed with it, basically, because she didn’t want to have a bad conversation with our coach. But, I don’t think she actually was able to
[lose the weight]. I thought it was really stupid. I think she said she wasn’t going to eat any carbs for two weeks and that she did it last year. But, I don’t think she was able to this year. People lie to each other about their bod pods. Like everyone doesn’t tell the truth.

EW, a White swimmer who identified as being attracted to males, stated,

I know for a lot of people, the bod pod was very anxiety inducing. I mean, even up to a week before, people were skipping meals because they thought it would help impact their results. Then, once they would get the results back, people would leave the meeting with [head coach] crying and go home and not eat for a while because they were so devastated by what she had said to them.

The timing of these tests also seemed to dictate how female athletes’ responded to the experience. CY, a Caucasian, straight, Division I, swimmer, described,

[At] last week’s team meeting, we knew bod pod was coming so people were kind of freaking out about that. And, we kind of talked about it as a team. With a bod pod like right now, because we’re out of season, people are more like, “Oh I know it’s going to be bad. I know she’s going to yell at me, so I don’t care what I eat at this point because I know it’s going to be bad.” Or, some people are annoyed because, “I know it’s bad, so I don’t need her telling me I need to lose weight because I already know that I gained or I’m not where I should be.” Now, when the bod pod is midseason, like January, people are like, “Yeah, I don’t care, do it,” because we’re at the peak of our training, so people are a lot more confident about it. But, it’s the out of season times when we meet, that people are just kind of down about it.
Consequences related to test results varied based on athletes’ appearance. It seemed that some female athletes, whose bodies closely matched team norms, received the benefit of the doubt from members of the coaching staff. After a summer of not swimming or preparing for the season, EW, a White, Division I, swimmer who was attracted to males, described,

Coach was just like, “You went up, like, whatever, it’s not a big deal. I know that you’ll be fine.” Then we did [the bod pod] again right after we got back from Florida, so it was that hardest point in our season, and she told me that I had the lowest percentage on our team. So, she just told me to keep doing what I was doing. My meetings with her were always less than five minutes long.

Prior to that particular bod pod test, she noted, “I was kind of worried . . . because I didn’t workout all summer, and my coaches didn’t know that. I knew that my percentage was going to be [worse] than it was in the Spring.” She acknowledged her physique met team body standards, stating, “I’m tall, really lean . . . I have a strong body.” She explained,

My training program and just genetics, I think [made my body]. I could go to McDonalds and eat four Big Macs and not gain a pound while I was swimming because my metabolism was so high, and I just burned everything off really fast. I can do whatever I want to, and it doesn’t affect me.

This example supports the notion that body fat tests were often used more for strengthening the body-obsessed team climate and less about assessing athletes’ fitness levels. EW’s teammates provided more scarring repercussions from their bod pod results. DC, a Mexican, straight, Division I swimmer, detailed,

Well, actually at the end of my freshman year, I was like a 23%, which at the beginning of that year, I was 26.7%. So, she was like, “It’s good. But, it’s not good enough.” She
said, “You should be a 20. You’ll be fine with 20. You don’t need to be an 18.” So, she wasn’t like, “You need to be 12%,” like she does with other people on the team, but she was like okay with a 20. And, then, in my next one, I was a 26 again after the summer, so that meeting went pretty badly. She said, “You don’t care. You’re just going down that same road again,” blah, blah, blah, which was probably true. I could’ve done better, so she basically just told me the truth like straight in my face.

DC initially described her body as “fat . . . I just can improve a lot more.” Teammate, CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer who characterized her body as “blocky” and rectangular, announced,

The first time, my freshman year, it made me feel obviously really bad about myself. She basically did tell me I was fat. “You’re chunky. You need to do this, this, and this.” And, she told me I had to lose 20 pounds over the summer, which like, yeah, that’s not going to happen.

All three swimmers occupied similar high status positions on the team and reported testing poorly according to their bod pod tests, yet they were treated very differently. The only difference in their experiences seemed to be related to EW’s physical appearance more closely resembling the body ideal her coach established in their body-obsessed climate.

This differential treatment led to added attempts to monitor some female athletes’ bodies. EW articulated, “If [Head Coach] thinks that someone’s body fat is too high, then she makes them keep a food journal, and she checks it weekly.” Even when female athletes set records and consistently contributed to the team’s scoring total in swim meets, EW added, “she still tries to control what they do. I mean she still requires them to keep a food journal and basically treats
them the same as everyone else who doesn’t look right.” One of the affected athletes, DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, mentioned,

When I was doing my food journal, it just put a lot of stress on me because I was keeping a really true food journal, which some people didn’t do. But, if I ate a cookie, I’d write it down. Or, sometimes, I’m a little bit of a perfectionist when I want to do something right, so I almost wrote that I had 300mL glass of whatever. So, it was like really specific and really stressful, too. And, just thinking, “Oh, I ate. I need to show this to [head coach].”

She later acknowledged,

You know the problems that I’ve had with bulimia . . . I used to be bulimic, like I used to throw up if I felt like I ate too much; not anymore though. Yay! I’m still more conscious about everything I eat and what I do. . . . It makes me feel better. I’ll say things to myself like, “I’m not going to eat two cookies; I’m only going to eat one.” Or, I’m not going to drink orange juice, I’m going to drink water,” just like small things. Even if I don’t think it makes much difference when I’m swimming, I still like to do it. It just makes me feel like more in control.”

Along with adjusting her food habits, DC recalled,

I went running outside of our practices at least twice or three times per week and did extra abs. Actually, my first week, my head coach told me to always do extra abs outside of practice. I don’t do it every day. [If] she tells me to run a mile, I’ll run a mile and a half, which is actually not much difference.

DC admitted that she felt body pressure from her family as a young, elite swimmer. Female athletes did not enter body-obsessed climates as a blank slate; instead, they came equipped with
their own, unique set of body image issues. But, these climates and especially the related body composition examinations seemed to add body-related stress, which might be particularly harmful for athletes like DC who are already coping with body dissatisfaction.

**Skinfold measurements.** Three athletes experienced skinfold tests, which required skin calipers to squeeze specific body parts to test body fat percentage. As JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player noted, this examination involved “this pinching gun thing that pinches your skin on your legs, on your arm and on your stomach.” AP, a Division I, two-sport, White, bisexual, athlete, mentioned “I think we did the pinch test twice for basketball, and I did it once for volleyball.” The accuracy of these tests was called into question when AP suggested, “we had a student athletic trainer do the [pinch test] and, to this day, I still insist they did it wrong.” She asserted that the “45% body fat” result could not be right because “I just don’t think the person had enough practice doing it. It’s a hard test to run, and I don’t think they have enough practice doing it to get all of us done accurately.” AP also argued,

> We had just run our fitness tests that day, and I had run like a sub 6 minute mile and had run every sprint. And, [head coach] called me into his office, and he told me that like I was one of the fattest girls on the team. And, he was worried about my health. And, I was never going to play for him.

The real purpose of these body composition tests seemed to be preventing women on the team from gaining too much weight or developing nonathletic bodies, signified by excess fat.

Once athletes completed the test, they waited for their results, some of which never arrived. JSharp said, “I don’t think they tell us our results.” African American, straight, basketball player, CB, said her Division I head coach only talked about their weight when “it’s a problem where you have to lose weight in a certain amount of days or weeks. Then, you have to
talk to [Head Coach] about that.” AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, felt her coaches did not provide the results to most athletes because “a couple girls on the team were more concerned about their weights. I think our coaches got a little worried that, if they did tell us, a couple of the girls would freak out.” But, she outlined how her coach shared her results:

My coach is very, like he’s very to the point. Our whole saying is like, he’s going to say stuff to you, he’s going to put you through everything; but, at the end of the day, he’s going to have your back if you dealt through everything with him. So, I sat there and bawled because I couldn’t believe this was being said to me. Like, I knew I wasn’t playing that well in practice. I was just struggling with pre-season practices, like I can’t tell you why. I still don’t know.

After her meeting, AP told her assistant coach, “‘Well, I’m going to start running.’” Eventually, AP said she recovered her confidence in her physique, but, noted, “it took a little bit [of time] for me to feel better.” CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, noted, “[Teammates] have been trying to be on like diets and trying to eat like I don’t know mainly fruit and that’s pretty much it. [Some teammates] was like, ‘We don’t want red meat.’” She mentioned how she took a different stance in relation to these body composition tests:

Our [athletic] trainers test us individually, but I mean we all go together. It’s like to boost my confidence up, I guess. Before season, I see where I’m at with my weight and, hopefully, after season, I go down a little bit and usually I do. That’s like a big relief like, okay, I’m losing something here. So, it’s a good little test for me.

JSharp, a White, heterosexual, teammate, argued that her testing procedures helped “to just check-up and see how you are, make sure you’re healthy and everything,” and related the event to “like when you go to the doctor, they check your weight and everything, so I think it’s just
more of a health issue [to] make sure that you’re healthy and stay healthy throughout the year.”

JSharp often experienced critique for being too small while CB was rewarded for losing weight,
but they both started and became team captains in their outcome-oriented climates. Perhaps,
their performance success helped them interpret skinfold tests more positively than their
teammates. However, their attitudes also support the cultural myth that women’s bodies can and
should achieve a certain aesthetic ideal.

Many of the body-obsessed team climates that regularly evaluated female athletes’ body
composition also were categorized as outcome-oriented environments. Since these climates
define success as defeating or outperforming an opponent, it makes sense they would incorporate
body fat tests as a way to improve their odds. Less expected, were the two environments
mentioned by JS and AP who both described their teams as task-oriented, meaning they focused
on individual improvement and self-comparisons. The foundation of body-obsessed team
climates appears to be a deeper belief that physical appearance is related to and, ultimately,
influences success in sport. This belief led to increased surveillance and monitoring of female
athletic bodies. In turn, some of the women playing in these environments reported a
preoccupation with their own body shapes and sizes.

**Insufficient Health Education and Body Guidance**

Body-obsessed team climates placed a large emphasis on ideal athletic bodies, yet they
often failed to offer helpful guidance on healthy living that could facilitate behavioral changes
when appropriate. Most female athletes whose physiques did not meet body standards were told
to lose weight, yet they rarely were offered productive information on how to achieve weight
loss goals or why they should be concerned. As JS, a White, straight, softball player, like every
other athlete interviewed in this study, said, “At [university], we’ve never met with a nutritionist.” BF, a White, straight, Division III, softball player, articulated,

To lose that massive kind of weight should be a process for anyone. I feel like the focus in our program was, if we want you to lose weight, we want you to lose weight now. It wasn’t about how you were losing it or the type of weight that you were losing.

When nutritional advice was offered, it seemed to be another attempt to control athletes’ eating behaviors rather than improve their understanding of how food fuels the body. BF elaborated,

The most I’ve ever heard of where [head coach] gave someone an idea of what they should do was, “you should eat more salad,” or, you know, “drink less [alcohol],” or something like that. And, I mean the weight loss was expected to happen fast. It wasn’t, “You should shoot for this or that over the summer.” It got to the point where you could tell that instead of worrying about getting ready for the season during winter practices, it was, you know, “I need to lose weight if I want to play,” so it was just more of a feat to get the weight off rather than helping you do it the right way.

BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, articulated how her coach would identify “how many calories we should eat or tell us that, for whatever height, we should weigh this much.” Some coaches in body-obsessed climates took this nutrition focus one step further as EW, a Division I, White swimmer who was attracted to males, expressed,

Our head coach talks about nutrition all the time. She’s made us go to the dining hall together, and we’ll walk around. She’ll tell us what we can and can’t eat. She’ll have us go to the grocery store together, and she’ll put us into groups. We’ll have to plan a week of meals with what our budget would be based on her nutrition rules. She wants us to eat
everything organic. We have to do it, she makes us do it. Pretty much nothing – no processed foods, no dessert-type foods, pretty much just chicken and vegetables.

In response, White swimmer, EW, who identified her attraction to males only, expressed,

I think I’m the person that gets the most worked up about it because I think it is the stupidest thing ever. It’s not something that we can really control. She makes us do it. I mean, I think there’s some people that really do learn a lot from it because there are some people that just are clueless, but I think that the majority, at least the majority of people on our team are pretty intelligent people that can make a decision about whether something is going to be good for us or not. I think, for the most part, people just roll their eyes and just do what she says while we’re there. Then, we just continue with what we normally do. I just don’t think that it’s her place to tell us that kind of stuff. I mean, I think it’s one thing for her to get a nutritionist and have them educate us, but for her, someone who has absolutely no background in it, I don’t think it’s appropriate. I think it’s just her way of trying to control us.

DC, a Mexican, Division I, swimmer, stated,

We get advice. Well, I don’t get advice on how to lose weight anymore because [head coach] has told me twice already . . . but, yeah, she gives you advice. She’s like, “Oh you need to do this or that. Drink more water.”

DC went on to describe how specific her coach’s feedback regarding food choices became.

I remember this one time, she told me that I was doing like it all backwards. I was eating proteins before practice and eating carbs after practice. She told me I should be doing it the other way. She’s actually really specific or like, “Oh you ate this cookie. You didn’t need that cookie. You could’ve just eaten an apple.” She’s actually good at it. I don’t
hear it anymore because I’ve already heard it, and she told me she’s tired of telling me, which I understand. And, I already know it, so she’s not interested in repeating herself. But, she does give advice. I know if I went and asked, she’d tell me what I needed to do to get leaner.

This coach’s comments seemed like an attempt to control DC’s eating behaviors rather than educate her on nutrition. Both of the female athletes who received comments about their food choices from their coaches identified as female athletes of color playing in outcome-oriented environments with the majority of their teammates and their coaches identifying as White. They also both described their bodies as “curvier” than the team standards established by their coach. Two of DC’s White teammates also took part in this study and neither received specific advice about their food habits nor did they report their coach monitoring their food choices at any point during their careers. These factors suggest that bodies of women of color might be labeled deviant more often than their White teammates, especially in outcome-oriented, body-obsessed team climates.

Two athletes also talked about the lack of food options provided for them. BF, a White, straight, softball player, said,

My team always talked about how ironic it was what our coaches would stop and get us to eat after games on away trips. How it works is for away games you would change, we’d drive somewhere (usually about 2 or 3 hour trips), and it was always fast food. And, you would only get about $6 from the athletic department to spend. So, what you’re forced into, if you’re real hungry, you think, “Alright, I’m going to the dollar menu and get whatever. It’s not like you can wait until we get back to get something because, I mean, by the time we’re getting back sometimes it’s 11 o’clock at night. So, it
was always ironic to me how coach would want us to lose weight and yet those were the options.

KC, a White, straight, soccer player, added,

My team, we’ll kind of be like, “Do they think I don’t need to eat that? I’m an adult. I can choose what I want to eat.” And, sometimes our team will be like, “Don’t tell me you want me to eat healthy here when you take us to Wendy’s after the game,” and it’s fast food. It’s almost like, “Don’t tell me you want me to eat healthy when you take us to places like pizza or fast food.” We feel like we’re being contradicted. Like, “eat healthy” but, “Oh, we’re going to a fast food place,” or something like that. We just want to eat something that tastes good. We don’t want to be unhealthy, but there’s not a lot of options at Wendy’s, you know?

These stories illustrate the contradictions within body-obsessed team climates. On one hand, coaches constantly monitored and evaluated female athletes’ bodies. On the other hand, at least some of these sporting environments failed to supply athletes with the knowledge and access to food and exercise options that would facilitate the body changes coaches demanded.

**Team Meals in Body-Obsessed Climates**

College teams eat a lot of meals together during the season, especially during road trips where they may spend two or three days traveling to multiple competition sites. Whether eating at a restaurant or on the bus, team meals provided an opportunity for coaches to observe and judge athletes’ food habits as they were corralled in one location. In particular, coaches in body-obsessed environments typically established food rules and monitored food intake during team meals to keep the focus on body maintenance strategies at all times. As a result, many of the
female athletes in this study described these moments as stressful and developed negative attitudes about food as they participated in team meals with their coaches and teammates.

**Establishing food rules.** Head coaches of task- and outcome-oriented, body-obsessed team climates found ways to overtly manage female athletes’ eating habits by creating food rules that limited female athletes’ consumption during team meals. JS, a White, straight, Division I, softball player, quoted her head coach’s motto about food as, “Garbage in, garbage out.” Female athletes were prohibited from eating chicken fingers and french fries. If you like meat, get like chicken and vegetables.

. . . Usually, we’re not allowed to order desserts. He’ll just give us like a $15 budget at Applebee’s or something. And, you know, that includes your tax and tip and a drink. So, we’ll all usually get water and a meal. Usually, that’s it. You don’t really need any extra food ‘cause they give you a big portion.

BG, a Latina, straight, Division III, lacrosse player, noted, “We went to a pizza restaurant and coach was like, ‘Okay, you can’t get pizza.’ It was pretty much just pizza and salads on the menu, so we all got like salads.” She also discussed,

We went to Oregon this year for our Spring Break tournament, and my mom came and wanted to like take me out to get ice cream after the team dinner and we had a game the next day. So, coach like made it super clear to both me and my mom that we definitely could not go out and get ice cream. If we were to go out, I was allowed to have juice and water and like fruit if I wanted it but definitely no ice cream. Nothing like that.

Although half Filipino half Caucasian, Division II, basketball player, BL, primarily described her head coach as not having team rules, she did mention, “We’re only allowed to have water and they buy us healthy snacks but only water. They’ll buy us like fruit and chewy bars.”
Some outcome-oriented leaders appeared to create food rules for their team based on their own eating habits. White, bisexual, Division I, two-sport athlete, AP, noted her volleyball coach “was [a] very, very strict vegan, like crazy. We tried to avoid eating stuff that would piss her off because we didn’t want to get lectured. That was the main goal there.” And, when asked if her team developed limitations regarding food options, BG who identified as a Latina, straight, Division III, lacrosse player, replied,

It depends. If coach is there, there’s rules. There are always rules with her. But, if she’s not there, you pretty much just eat whatever you know your body will like work best with. If we’re with coach, there’s always rules ‘cause she has Celiac [disease], and she feels the need to impose that on the rest of us. She thinks that everyone should eat just like dark vegetables and lean protein, which in her mind is just chicken all the time and that’s all anyone should ever eat. She doesn’t understand that just because she can’t eat carbs doesn’t mean that the rest of us don’t need carbs because you do. And, like when we’re traveling, if it’s the team and we’re all there, she’ll definitely put restrictions on what we can and can’t eat. She’d be like, “Make sure whatever you’re getting has a protein in it, vegetables and isn’t more than like 20% carbs.” Or, like if we have a game the next day, we’re not allowed to have dessert.

This group of coaches also applied or removed rules based on the team’s success. In an outcome-oriented climate, team meals provided another space for some coaches in this study to stress the value of winning. KC, a White, straight, Division I, soccer player, suggested, “Our team rule is you can’t get dessert or soda unless you win and coach says it’s okay. . . . But, other than that, it’s water at every meal and no like ice cream. None of that.” While KS, a White, straight, Division III, basketball player portrayed her current team climate as task-oriented, she
also depicted the team atmosphere her previous coach created. In her previous, body-obsessed environment, KS stated, “We always just wanted ice cream, but they didn’t always allow us to get it. Honestly, for our previous coach, she was just mad we lost and didn’t want to give us anything.” Since outcome-oriented climates are typically focused on winning and outperforming opponents, some of the coaches in these climates appeared to use food as a reward or punishment depending on the outcome of the competitive event. The penalty for breaking these food rules could be steep as MH, a White, straight, softball player, articulated,

There was one time, I remember, we were traveling, we were in Subway. And, next to Subway, there was a TCBY, and we had like $10 to spend and there was four girls that went to TCBY in between games. Everyone else went to Subway. And, on the bus, they got like screamed at, because they had decided to spend their money on ice cream rather than the sandwich. That was hilarious. Coach was mad because it was in between games and it was a bad choice. . . . Like, “That’s not sustainable enough for you.” I can’t remember if she threatened to bench them.

Several coaches in these outcome-oriented climates made their disapproval known to everyone. KC who identified as a White, straight, Division I, soccer player, said, “If you bring candy on the trip, coach kind of looks down on that. There’s always people that do, but she won’t buy it for you.”

**Coach-monitored meals.** Many coaches in body-obsessed climates patrolled the tables where athletes consumed their pregame meals, which allowed coaches to ensure food rules were being followed. They did not want athletes to consume too much of the “wrong” foods. Two athletes from the same Division I swim team, CY and DC, portrayed their coach as an example of this group of coaches. CY, a Caucasian, straight, team member, explained, “When we travel
for meets and we have to eat as a team, my head coach um watches what people eat like all the
time.” She also stated, her “[Head] coach is not afraid to say something, not like a nasty
comment; but, like, ‘Oh, you’re really going to eat that pizza even though it’s going to make you
fat?’” And, DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer offered a personal example:

This one time, we were going to have lunch on the bus on the way to the meet, and we
were going to order Panera. I don’t remember what I ordered, maybe a panini and a
bagel. And, my head coach called me and she told me that was too much and that I
should not have the bagel. And, I was like, okay. And, for like a team dinner between
meets, I ordered like a pasta alfredo or something. She was like, “You’re not eating that.
It’s too cheesy. I changed it already.” And, I was like whatever it’s better for me. Then,
this year, she didn’t tell me, I just didn’t order the bagel I wanted. But, basically just like
things like that. It’s not too much.

White, straight, softball player, JS, explained,

Our coach just had a big freak out about us ordering desserts and stuff that won’t be good
for people. So, it’s kind of funny. . . . But, you know, he kind of got mad at the girls, like
one of them got a milkshake and another one got like those little brownie bites from
Applebee’s. And, he’s like, “Really, you really need that? You shouldn’t have enough
room after a meal. You don’t need dessert.” So, he kind of got mad about that one
instance.

Occasionally, these monitored team meals worked to ensure athletes consumed enough
calories. KC, a soccer player who identified as White and straight, described,

Coaches are usually coming by me and saying I’m not eating enough. It’s usually not our
guy [assistant] coach. It’s usually the girl assistant coach but sometimes [head coach]
will get up and do it. Usually, it’s just like, “Oh what did you get to eat?” Like, trying to be kind of like conversational. . . . Sometimes, coaches can make a face like, “Ugh” or “That’s good,” but I think they try not to show too much of that. They don’t want to make us too self-conscious. . . . Sometimes they would say, “You need to eat more.” And, I’d be like, “Okay, well, I’m not hungry.” Like, this one time I had ordered like salmon and potatoes and green beans. And, you know, I ate my salmon, it was good. But, I didn’t really like my potatoes, so one of my teammates was full and didn’t want the rest of her pasta, so I ate the rest of it. And, my coach came over and saw my plate and saw that hers was completely gone. She was a goalie. Then, coach saw mine still had the vegetables on it, and she knew all I had gotten was salmon. And, she was like, “You get enough to eat? Why did you not eat that?” And, I was like, “No I hate half of her meal.” And, my coaches like didn’t believe me for a long time. They were like, “I know she’ll eat her plate. She doesn’t have a problem with that.” And, I was like, “No, really, I ate half of her plate. She ate so much bread, she didn’t want it.” So, sometimes it takes that convincing to like show them that, “No, I really ate enough. You didn’t see what it was.” If they really think I need to eat more or I’m losing weight, sometimes they’ll have you drink muscle milk after practice, like a recovery shake. That’s what [head coach] does to some of the players that she thinks have what she calls a “high stress metabolism.” She’ll make us drink muscle milk after workouts if she sees our weight fluctuating too much.

AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, added, “My basketball coaches . . . watched what a girl was eating because they thought she was losing a lot of weight and they wanted to make sure she was losing it ‘the right way.’” Both coaches’ actions may have been to ensure the health and well-being of their athletes, but they also demonstrated to athletes that their caloric intake was
being monitored. Female athletes who did not meet the team’s body standard would either be required to consume more calories or would be reprimanded for overindulging.

**Athletes’ attitudes at team meals.** As mentioned when discussing female athletes’ reactions to coaches’ body negative comments, many of the women in this study appeared to either agree or disagree with how their coaches behaved at team meals. KC, a White, straight, soccer player, announced, “We’ve had conversations as a team before. We know that them saying, ‘Y’all need to eat healthier. Y’all need to watch what you’re putting into your bodies,’ when we’re eating together, that they’re asking for a purpose.” Not all of the athletes in body-obsessed climates agreed with their coaches’ behaviors at team meals. Latina, straight, lacrosse player, BG, responded to her coach’s food-related pressure, outlining, “She’s not always right. If I ate like her, I would never have any energy to play. Everybody is different and everyone’s body handles food differently.” JS, a White, straight, softball player, said when coaches observe the team eating, athletes engage in “conversations, like, ‘Why are they doing that? They think we don’t need to be eating this. I’m going to eat what I want to eat. Don’t tell me what to eat. I’m an adult.’” KC, a White, straight, soccer player, argued,

> Our coaches don’t always get to see how we eat. They only get to see on trips and not everyone eats the best then. . . . Some people, you know, haven’t eaten anything bad all week, and they just really wanted that [food] on that one night.

And, BG, a White, straight, lacrosse player, said,

> I don’t think she should get to like dictate. If I play like shit the next day because I like had ice cream the day before, I think that’s a problem in and of itself. I play fine, in fact, I play better when I eat ice cream the night before I’m pretty sure.
However, some female athletes’ attitudes towards food appeared to resemble their coaches’ expectations at team meals. JS, a White, straight, soccer player, suggested,

If you’re going to eat chicken fingers and fries, the next day you’re going to play and feel like crap and, you know, “garbage out.” You’re going to feel terrible. We have this one girl on the team who always gets chicken fingers and fries and when she gets on the field the next day, she just plays like crap and she just doesn’t look that healthy either. But, I kind of take it to heart. I choose my meals wisely. If I have a game, I’m not going to eat seven plates of pasta. I’m going to watch what I eat, but I’m not going to be crazy about it and be like, “I can’t eat more than 500 calories.”

Coaches’ actions and food rules at team meals seemed related to many female athletes’ own eating behaviors. BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, Division II, basketball player, said,

Obviously, no one’s going to order fries. We’ve gone to Applebee’s for a pregame [meal], so it’s kind of hard to order something really healthy there. Some people get potato chips, so it’s not like she’s on us all the time. It’s just like don’t cross that line, then she won’t have to say anything. She trusts us to be responsible and stuff.

Caucasian, straight, swimmer, CY, expressed,

People are like scared to eat in front of her kind of or are afraid they might order the wrong thing or that she might say something to them ‘cause she will. . . . So, I think that alters some people’s eating. . . . When our head coach is at the team meal, people are like eating salad and vegetables. They’re probably eating what they normally wouldn’t eat just ‘cause she’s there. Because, even when like recruits come and they get like pizza or something, she’ll say something to me later like, “That recruit is eating pizza. She has terrible eating habits.” And, there’s more like tension at those meals because my
teammates don’t want to eat in front of her. . . . Or, you see it when we’re at the dining hall, people won’t eat as much because they’re like, “I don’t want to eat all this ‘cause I don’t want [head coach] to say something.” Or, “she’s been on my back about this, so I need to lose weight.”

BF, a White straight Division III softball player, discussed,

I mean you would see some girls get salads or split meals or something like that. And, especially if we would sit down to eat on those rare occasions, you would see girls that worried about what coach thought and order specifically because she was around. They would get either order a half portion or not eat as much as they normally would. Like, they would get a side salad and soup. And, you would know it was happening because these were girls you had seen put [food] away and not care. I mean it was definitely something that people worried about. Like I said, I could care less if coach found out what I was eating, but some girls really worried about what coach saw and all that.

Some athletes in body-obsessed climates seemed committed to ensuring compliance with food rules and to ensure compliance with team body norms. JS, a White, straight, Division I, softball player said,

When we sit down for a meal, everyone asks like, “What are you getting?” You kind of pick up what people’s tendencies are. The girls that have been here for four years, you kind of get a feel for what they’re eating. I kind of compare myself to other people, you know, she kind of looks like me, a little taller but like we have the same like body type, so I’ll be like, “Oh, what is she getting, maybe I’ll get that or something comparable.” But, it’s not like over the top.
When asked what happened at team meals if someone attempted to get dessert, KC, a White, straight, soccer player, replied,

Tries to get like dessert? Oh, I don’t even know if that’s ever happened ‘cause you would be like not only in trouble by the coach, but you would probably have teammates coming up to you like, “Why are you doing that? She’s going to get mad and she’ll be mad at all of us.” As teammates, we would probably stop it before coach would even notice. Most people wouldn’t even push past that. It’s mostly like somebody will ask, “Can we get soda?” I’m like, “Don’t ask. Like, no. Don’t push it now, let’s wait.”

Although KC believed her coaches had a “right to watch us eat because they want to make sure you’re fueling your body,” she also acknowledged, “Still, when there’s someone asking you what you had to eat after almost each meal, like it does make you think about it.” These observations “make more people self-conscious. Like, my teammates and I will say, ‘Oh is that okay? Should I not have eaten that?’ Or, ‘Is coach making that face at my plate or is it someone else’s?’” Hiding food became one strategy some female athletes engaged in to better cope with their body-obsessed team climates and maintain control over their eating habits. White, bisexual, two-sport, athlete, AP, whose vegan coach attempted to force athletes into similar eating habits, stated, “If we wanted to eat something ‘bad,’ we made sure to hide it from our coach.” And, Mexican, straight, swimmer, DC, mentioned, “Maybe if I really wanted the bagel, I just brought it with me instead of putting it on the order form.” Even if, as BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, noted, her teammates “still eat ice cream or popcorn or all of those things that coach says not to eat . . . they feel like they’re doing something wrong or bad.” She also described,

I know, for me, personally, sometimes, I’ll eat a little bit differently around my teammates. And, I’m sure I’m not the only one. My teammates are some of my best
friends, but, if we’re in a team setting, sometimes I feel the pressure to eat the way that I would envision an athlete eating. Like, if it’s before a game, even if I know that I can eat eggs and a pancake and play well, sometimes I won’t get that pancake. I’ll get like fruit or like oatmeal or something instead because I feel like that’s what an athlete would eat before a game or like that’s what the track athletes eat.

It appears that team meals afforded coaches in body-obsessed climates another opportunity to convey their values and required female athletes to learn how to cope with their coaches’ body negative behaviors.

**Negative case examples.** While many body-obsessed team climates included very specific experiences at team meals, other female athletes in similar environments characterized their food-related encounters differently. Some coaches did not create food rules for their athletes. For example, CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, discussed,

I don’t think we really have a specific, “Don’t eat this. Don’t eat that.” It’s just that we have a pregame meal, and you have to come to that to eat. . . . They actually like give us orders; like, they’ll say what do you want from IHOP. Our coaches let you choose from that restaurant menu. I mean it’s get whatever you want just don’t go overboard, like we can’t really eat that much ‘cause it’s on the road and we don’t have time.

JSharp, a White, heterosexual, teammate, elaborated, “If we just go to our head coach and say we want this, she will usually work with us. She will give us what we want unless it’s something crazy.” She went on to note,

We’ve been pretty lucky, so we usually get pretty spoiled. We get excited when [head coach’s] mom comes on the trips with us because we know she probably brought some goodies for us, and we love anything fattening, anything sweet – cookies, popcorn.
The coaches described here appeared to trust their athletes to fuel their bodies in a way that would enhance performance. TH, a White, straight, Division I, soccer player, announced, “I guess my coaches now don’t really worry about it that much. They just make sure we’re drinking water and everything. Like, in high school, our coach was more concerned with what we were eating because there was a good chance people don’t understand what they need to be eating before a game and not like pass out. In college, we’re all grown women, and we all want to do well, so they pretty much can trust us to eat right. I think that we’re focused on being good at soccer, so we’re not as concerned with eating fat or, like, it’s not on our minds that often. Mostly, if we’re getting better, that’s the main thing, and if we’re stronger, and we’re stronger on the ball, and faster. That’s kind of what we’re going for, so our coaches will comment and be real excited if we look fit; if we look like we could last longer than another team. They make comments about that kind of stuff.

Division III, softball player, BF, said, “The only rules that we had were about alcohol but those were more team enforced by the players than by coaches. I know that coach would you know say little things before like, “Try to eat some fruit.” Or, if we had like a Saturday game, you have to be at the field at 11. So, she would say, “Eat something healthy.” But, I mean most of us were lucky if we had something that resembled a breakfast for Saturday games. We never had any rules.

Even though the tenants of these body-obsessed environments would suggest monitoring food would be important to ensure appropriate athletic bodies and increase success rates, some of the female athletes like TH, a White, straight, Division I, soccer player, said their coaches’ “took
away from the pressure I think a lot of girls have to be skinny and worry about their weight because we’re focused on another goal with our bodies.” Some team leaders may have felt it unnecessary to observe athletes’ eating patterns since, presumably, every team member would monitor themselves for the sake of winning.

**Body Results**

Many of the female athletes in this study talked about how they developed negative body talk and engaged in body comparisons. Although outcome-oriented climates often are associated with assessing skill levels against others, evaluating one’s body in relation to others seemed to be more of a function of an underlying obsession with the body.

**Negative body talk.** Teammates occasionally engaged in negative body talk with their teammates. Some female athletes in body-obsessed climates made disparaging remarks about their own bodies and created jokes to highlight an aspect of their teammates’ physiques. MH, a White, straight, softball player, added, “If you’re rooming with someone and you’re putting on your uniform, they’re like, ‘Is this too tight?’ So, then it’s like you’re giving each other feedback.” As opposed to thinking about their upcoming game, at least some of the athletes on this outcome-oriented team prepared by making sure they looked good in their uniforms. BF, a White, straight, Division III, softball player, explained, “You would hear girls saying, you know, ‘My butt looks big,’ or ‘I swear I’ve gained weight’ . . . It was never negative about someone else . . . but . . . people would point things out about themselves.” On a different Division III softball team, White, straight, athlete, MH, emphasized that athletes on her team would remark, “Oh, my love handles in these pants. Not okay.” DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, noted, “I think all the same comments like, ‘I’m not going to eat this because of like my fat ass.’ That happens with people on the team who are not as fit.”
Female athletes also communicated negatively about body types through team jokes or teasing. In fact, MH also mentioned that some of her teammates “had really big boobs, so we’d be like, ‘Your boobs look extra big today.’ We would notice if someone lost weight and we’d be like, ‘You look small today.’ Like, not in a bad way.” Although not scrutinizing the body, these comments serve as negative body talk since they remind team members that their displayed bodies are constantly monitored. In a more personal example, MH discussed,

I got made fun of because I wore my [uniform] pants up higher than other people. So, I got the, “MH, you have a long butt.” They just made fun of me. It was hilarious. They would be like, “Is your butt crack here? I’m confused.” . . . They were just more comfortable for me up high though. That’s just how they fit.

JSharp who played at a Division I university and identified as a White, heterosexual, basketball player, mentioned,

Jamei [an older teammate] used to always comment on my shoulders because my shoulders are probably the only thing that gets really muscular. So, she’ll always say stuff about my shoulders and, it’s ultimately a compliment, but I obviously get embarrassed when anybody says anything about my body. She’d be like, “Oh, your shoulders are looking good,” or “Look at your shoulders.” Now, it seems to be like, “Oh, I can see your muscles. You’re getting stronger.” It kinda makes you feel good about yourself but, at the same time, it’s kind of embarrassing because it brings all the attention to you.

Even though, in this case, the comments served as positive reinforcement, because body-obsessed climates constantly monitor and evaluate the body, this teasing ultimately brought more unwanted attention to the body.
Making body comparisons. On body-obsessed teams, female athletes often compared their bodies with teammates. When asked why she disliked the size of her arms and believed they were *too big*, JS, a White, straight, Division I, softball player, explained,

No one’s ever said anything to me about my arms. I guess it’s just something my mind made up, just kind of a self-conscious thing. I guess it’s more of comparing myself to other people. Even, you know, comparing yourself to teammates. I have some teammates who are like obsessed with working out and running, so they’re really thin . . . And, like [with] other athletes, I’ll be like, “Oh I like their arms. I don’t like mine.” Theirs look like nice and tiny. Mine are like big and gross. I’d say women’s basketball, soccer, they usually have pretty tiny arms. Softball players are known to have like big arms and big thighs just because that’s how we’re built and how our muscles have to be for the sport.

BF, a White, straight, Division III, softball player, stated,

At school, I lived with five other girls and two of them used to play softball and four of us still played. Our team is majority smaller, thin girls, and I think the main thing that I became more self-conscious about is what I would wear compared to what they would wear. I mean some of them would wear really short shorts and crop tops or really tight clothes. And, that’s just not something that I’m comfortable enough with my body to do. So, that’s when I felt most self-conscious at school about my body and my body image.

Some of the women in these environments developed thoughts about their bodies based on how they stacked up against other women’s bodies. JSharp, a Division I, White, heterosexual, basketball player, said that her teammates “are more like toned, and they’re more secure in themselves. I don’t feel like any part of my body, like my arms or my legs is muscular in a way.
I never get big.” Interestingly, while she included CB as one of her toned teammates, CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, created her own comparisons:

I want to be toned and some of my teammates have real flat stomachs. And, I’m like I want something like that, too, you know. I just want to tone up my stomach a little bit. Most of my teammates are skinny anyway so their stomachs are going to be toned anyway. I have to do a little extra work ‘cause I got a little more meat than they do. So, that’s pretty much what I do; I do a little extra work in my room.

Three teammates on a Division I swim team described how comparing their bodies to teammates influenced their thoughts and feelings about their bodies. DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, demonstrated,

I know my head coach does it too even though she doesn’t say it as much. She says not to compare ourselves, but I know she does it. And, then, just to see people that are like leaner. It’s like if I did the same exact practice and I eat way better than this person, how can she be looking that fit and I don’t? And, then, when you see people that are not as fit as you, if you’re comparing yourself, I know it makes some other people feel better seeing that they’re not the worst ones. But, for me, it doesn’t make me feel better.

Similarly, Caucasian, straight, swimmer, CY, suggested she primarily compares her body with “other girls that are faster than me.” When considering performance differences, she noted, faster swimmers “are just way skinnier than me or more toned. Maybe if I looked like them, I might be as fast as them. Mostly, I compare with outside teams and people who do my strokes.”

For other women, whose bodies more closely aligned with team standards than their teammates, these body comparisons were described positively. EW, who claimed a White identity and was attracted to males, mentioned,
I also compare myself to other people on the team a lot. If I felt like I looked better than someone else, then that would make me feel good because I know how much work I was putting into it. It was nice to be able to actually see that like pay off. When we took a training trip to Florida this past year, like right around the time when our training was really, really difficult, and that’s always when I notice a huge change in my body, just more definition. And, being in Florida and like being at practice in bikinis, like, laying out just feeling like I looked better than other people on the team. [It felt] really good. I felt like, especially this year, because this year was just hard with my scheduling demands, I wasn’t with the team very often. So, being with everyone for that time period, it just felt good. It was like a confirmation of how hard I was working and being able to see it pay off.

BF, a White straight softball player who played at the Division III level, said,

You’re going through such demanding practices, and you’re seeing your body change from these intense, constant workouts. But, at the same time, you’re seeing people’s bodies change from gaining weight on the flip side of that. So, I think just being around more people and seeing other people going through changes with their own bodies. I just realized that, you know, everybody doesn’t go through it the same way. . . . I think it’s just more of a reality check where you start looking around and are like, “Okay, I’m not the only one,” and it’s just different for everyone.

Over time, coaches in these environments did not have to directly manage female athletes’ bodies; instead, athletes assumed that responsibility. BF acknowledged that her Division III coach “had never said anything to me about my weight. But, like I said, I police myself pretty well and maintain my weight. And, that’s my own thing.” At another point in her
interview, she discussed a situation with her roommate and teammate who, as a first year athlete, started gaining weight. She stated that, as teammates, they were both attempting to lose weight, and they would tell “each other, ‘When we go to the dining hall, make sure I eat a salad before I eat anything else,’ but it was never like negative. We would never sit there and pick things apart.” Some of these interpersonal assessments appeared to influence not only body-related thoughts but also how some women in this study felt about food. JS, a White, straight, softball player, explained,

There’s about four girls on our team that are like obsessed with their body. And, you know, they all like talk about it all the time. And, you know, they’re the ones that think they’re so fat, but really they’re so skinny and so fit compared to the rest of us. And, you know, they’re just obsessed with their body image. . . . We’ll be getting food and one girl on the team will literally just be, “Is there fat free cheese? Can I have just a little portion of eggs?” And, we’re just like, “Girl, don’t be afraid to get more food. It’s really okay.” We’ll all just be like, “Just give her the big portion. She’ll eat it.” We just kind of encourage her to kind of, you know, don’t be so hard headed about calories and eating little portions because you want to be skinny when you already are. . . . We’re like, “Shut up. We get it. You’re fine. You’re really skinny. Go eat a cheeseburger.” We’ll make comments like that for them. . . . Our team, whenever we all go down for a meal together and like sit down, we all just like laugh at them, like, “Really, you can eat two apples in one sitting. You’re still going to live. You’re still going to be fine. You don’t have to go to the gym and burn off the apple.” We all just laugh at them and make jokes because it’s just ridiculous how far they take it. . . . And, everyone has the same mindset when it
comes to that. We’ll be like, “Shut up. Go eat whatever you want. No one’s judging you here. You’re still going to be a skinny little girl.”

In another dining hall story, JS elaborated on the conflict within her team:

This one girl on our team is just crazy about dieting, and she doesn’t do it healthily obviously. We’ll walk into the dining hall, and she’ll list off all these random foods and how many calories they have and if she’s allowed to eat them or not. . . . And, she’s kind of judgy, like she’ll say, “If you’re not going to drink skim milk, you probably shouldn’t drink milk.” And, it’s just like, you know, let me be. You can do what you want to do. She’s probably the worst out of all of them. She’s counting calories and she’ll say, “Oh, I can’t get this Tim Horton’s coffee because it’s too many calories.” She’s just crazy about it.

JS, who wanted her teammates to become less body-obsessed, stated, “Let me be. You can do what you want to do.” JS seemed frustrated by her teammates when they displayed an obsession with their bodies, especially since, as she viewed them, their small, thin physiques already resembled body ideals. AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, articulated a similar frustration,

I got to the point where when I would hear it, I would just roll my eyes and say ‘I gotta go.’ Like, I’m not going to stand around and listen to you guys talk like that when I weigh twice as much as what you guys think you weigh. Like, stop. . . . Like, come season, some of the girls would be like, “Oh, my gosh, I’m so fat.” Like, dude, shut up, sit down.

Both JP and AP played in task-oriented climates, yet their body-obsessed environment appeared to influence how they interacted with teammates. In particular, when comparing bodies, it seemed that both athletes believed only some of their teammates, presumably those whose bodies

did not match team norms, had a right to complain about their bodies; other, “skinny,” athletes were expected to silently appreciate their elevated status on the team without complaining.

Because of the focus on the body in these team environments, women felt compelled to look to each other for body affirmation rather than trusting their own self-evaluations. While a few female athletes reported the benefits of such comparisons, many others eluded to the negative consequences. Though body image remains an internal process, female athletes’ in body-obsessed team climates appeared to rely on their subjective evaluations of teammates’ physiques to construct their body image.

**Athletes’ post-eligibility beliefs about exercise.** Several of the women in this study, who were finishing their undergraduate degree, had previously completed their playing eligibility. These female athletes spoke about their feelings towards their bodies after completing their collegiate sport careers. EW, a White swimmer who identified her “attraction to males only males,” said, “I think that the ideal body would be what I had when I was swimming,” and acknowledged, “Now that I’m done swimming, it’s kind of shifted a little bit. I still feel like I have a strong body. I want to take care of it, but it’s just harder to now that I’m not swimming like I used to.” White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, AP, suggested that not playing competitively “and starting to workout on my own has definitely been a challenge because I mean you don’t have that constant yelling at you anymore.” Though still playing, senior soccer player, TH, who identified as White and straight, affirmed,

My friend that I work out with all the time when I come home, she used to play volleyball, and now she doesn’t. I notice her work out; she never pushes herself nearly as hard as she used to. So, I figure, if I wasn’t playing soccer, I don’t know if I would make sure I was working out just for like my body. I wouldn’t be as intense, and I wouldn’t
have the idea of like, “I need to get faster. I need to be as strong as I was before Spring.”

I would probably be more lax on it.

Presenting physical activity as a way to modify the body adds to the knowledge these women have gleaned that their bodies are currently not good enough and that they should consider techniques to further sculpt their physiques. When no longer needing to shape the body for sport performance, it seems some athletes found it difficult to continue working out. BF, a White, straight, softball player, noted,

I just think that, even when I go out on a run, I have to make it a competition with myself. It’s not even a speed thing, it’s how long I can go. And, I think it’ll be nice to have something that pushes me physically like softball did just because I can’t go from doing all of that to just sitting around.

BF seemed to be looking for another outlet for her competitiveness. But, other female athletes who played in these climates seemed less interested in physical activity altogether. White swimmer, EW, mentioned,

I haven’t been working out since I finished. I think that if I was still working out, I would still feel fine about myself. I haven’t worked an entire off-season training camp routine since I’ve been done with swimming. I almost feel like I don’t have time to do anything.

As a result, she explained,

Because I’m not doing anything [active], any time I eat something, I just feel gross about myself. I don’t hate my body right now. I definitely think it could be better, but it’s not something that’s like awful to me. I’m also not willing to put in the time to do that again.

MH, a White, straight, softball player, articulated,
You know, being an athlete and then not [being an athlete], my body image is maybe a little less good. I don’t think it’s really that my body composition has changed that much. It probably has a little, but I think just going to practice every day and engaging in that, just reflects more confidence for me. Competing, just knowing that I’m like getting enough exercise every day ‘cause we would, you know, lift and practice for like 5 hours. Using that as kind of like your gauge of like how active you actually, now, I have to put more effort into exercising.

EW, a White, straight swimmer, also recognized,

I’m not working out as much. I’m not lifting weights as much. I’ve lost a lot of muscle, so I definitely don’t look the way that I used to, which I really don’t like the way my body looks. I mean, I never used to worry about how my clothes look when I put ‘em on, or like, how other people are looking at me. It was never an issue. But, now that I’m not working out as much anymore, I’m more conscious of that I would say. I think, now that it’s getting nice out, I used to be wearing shorts more, like showing [my body] off, mostly because I used to be comfortable. Before, I would never even think twice about what I would wear but now I just don’t necessarily want to show off my body. . . . If I don’t feel comfortable in it, then I’ll change it for something that I feel looks okay. Like, the other day I was getting ready for school and I just put on a pair of pants, and they just made me look like I weighed more than I actually do because of the way they fit me. It’s harder to love my body when it doesn’t look the way that it used to.

From these stories, it appears that body-obsessed team climates might influence how some athletes view their bodies and exercise even once they no longer compete. When participation in
these environments ends, it would make sense that some of these women feel less content with their bodies since they are no using their bodies to be competitive and accomplish athletic goals.

**Providing support for teammates.** Many of the female athletes in this study created a buffer of support with their teammates to counter the body pressure they faced within their body-obsessed team climates. They encouraged each other during difficult moments when a member of the team experienced body image disturbances. CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, detailed moments after the bod pod:

When I’ve seen teammates upset, I’ve tried to console them and tell them, you know, “You’re a DI athlete, there’s no way you’re fat. [Head coach] can’t tell you that.” I think it’s hard for people because she’s really skinny and fit, so I think it’s hard to take criticism from her. We just kind of like band together not like against her, but we just kind of talk to each other and say, “No matter what the result is, you’re still a great swimmer, and it doesn’t have any reflection on like who you are as a person.” So, I think that just helps people if they can just tune her out for a little bit and then get the support from us, it’s a lot better because a lot of the girls take it really personally.

After a particularly negative meeting with her head coach about her body fat percentage, AP, a Division I White bisexual two-sport athlete, detailed, “My assistant coach was like, ‘You’re fine. You start making layups and he’s going to be fine . . . You know that your weight isn’t out of control.’” And,

Another girl on the Division III [basketball] team, who has always struggled with her weight as well, I sat down and talked with her and she was like, “First off, you’re fine. Second off, if you want to run extra, I will run with you.” I think we ran extra for like a
week and then, after that, practices started getting really intense and we were like, you know what, if we can survive practice, then he’s happy and that’s all that matters.

African American basketball player, CB, tried to help teammates who were on “all-fruit” diets:

The rest of us on the team try and tell them we have to eat some meat ‘cause like we’re just running everything off, so you have to eat something. Lately, some girls were feeling weak and about to pass out so like you gotta eat something. I mean you just have to eat.

Lacrosse player, BG, who identified as Latina and straight, discussed:

When I’m lifting, teammates will be like, “Wow, I can definitely see you’ve been putting in the work. I can see that you’re strong. You look strong; you look powerful.” Or, if I do something good on the field, like jumping up and getting that ball or being able to make a really fast sprint or cut, people will say, “You look powerful; you look strong; you look confident.” . . . I’m just really lucky to have really good teammates who see my coach be mean and they’ll be like, “Hey, just so you know, you don’t need to be anyone else. You’re great how you are. You’re such an asset to this team. Don’t let her get you down.”

Developing a culture of support seemed to help athletes successfully navigate moments in their body-obsessed climates that might otherwise prove harmful for their body image. CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, said, “I don’t think it’s that bad to do the bod pod in front of teammates because they know what I look like without a shirt on, and we’re around each other so much.” She elaborated,
I think we’re a pretty close group when it comes to body image. Like, nobody ever would you know put down somebody else for the way we look because we already get so much of it from [head coach] that nobody is judgmental in that way.

Some teams attempted to avoid engaging in body comparisons. White, straight, Division III softball player, BF, asserted, “It was never ever competitive throughout the team. You never had girls say, you know, ‘I weigh this’ or anything. Thank God because that would’ve been horrible.” At team meals, these women would attempt to help their teammates develop positive eating behaviors. MH, a White, straight, softball player, discussed, “I think within the girls, if someone just had an orange, we’d be like, “Oh, my gosh, why do you just have an orange? Aren’t you going to eat something else?!”” White, straight, soccer, player, TH, said,  

We’ll eat a lot of carbs get pasta or whatever. Nobody orders a salad. And people will make fun of you if you don’t eat a lot. They’ll joke around, like, “You need your energy you know.” We like to eat a lot, and don’t really worry about it because we’re going to lift a lot, or run a lot the next day. . . . We’ll want to go eat in [university cafeteria], and we’ll stuff our faces.

Some teammates also helped stop or reframe negative body talk. AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport, athlete, recalled one particular experience in the volleyball locker room:

We had warmup shirts that were too small, and girls were trying to trade because we were all trying to get the best size. I remember one girl handed me a shirt and she was like, “Here, you can have this one.” And, I looked at the girl and was like, “This shows my stomach.” And, she looked at me and goes, “You’ve got a six-pack, it’s fine. Go away.” And, I was just like okay, yeah, I was being dumb, I’ll shut up and go away. It was just like interesting to see how everything was different.
CY, a Caucasian, straight, Division I swimmer discussed the importance of her team’s support:

My teammates have been really supportive. And, whether you like the way you are, or even if you’re trying to lose weight, they’ll be supportive. I basically only surround myself with people that are going to be supportive or be nice about it. Well, end of my freshman year, that’s probably when I was at my heaviest and that’s when my head coach told me to lose 20 pounds. And, I told my teammates about it, and they were like, “Don’t listen to her. She’s just saying that.” But, I expressed to them that, well, I do need to lose some weight like, you know, this is something that I want. So, I think they were more supportive, just like cheerleading, and they weren’t trying to stop me like, “Oh, you don’t need to. Don’t do it.”

As this story illustrates, female athletes knew their bodies and appreciated that their teammates supported their decisions. EW identified as a White, Division I swimmer who was attracted to males, and she used her position as a team captain to help her teammates:

I talked to my teammates about how they were feeling and help some of those problems. I would encourage them to go see a health provider on campus or whoever they needed to go talk to because, I would always tell them, “I can tell you whatever I think but you need to talk to someone who has been trained in this. You shouldn’t be feeling this way about yourself or, if you do feel his way, you need to find a healthy way to deal with it [rather] than just not eat.” I mean, I never really took it like it was a weight subject because it wasn’t, and I didn’t want anyone to end up hurt. I always made sure that I encouraged them to speak to someone that knew how to handle the situation.
By banding together against harmful body norms and creating a buffer of support, several female athletes in body-obsessed climates made conscious attempts to resist developing a negative body image.

**Summary of Body-Obsessed Team Climates**

These body-obsessed team atmospheres included both task- and outcome-oriented climates and crossed college divisions and sports. More specifically, all of the athletes in outcome-oriented environments (e.g., EW, DC, CY, JSharp, CB, MH, BG, BF) reported body-obsessed team climates while AP, JS, and KC discussed their task-oriented climates as demonstrating an obsession with the body. This group of body-obsessed team environments centered its focus on athletes’ bodies because of their shared foundational belief that physical appearance could influence sport success. It appeared that the amount of pressure these climates placed on female athletes’ physiques played more of a role in determining how women related to their bodies than their motivational team climate enacted. These climates employed body composition tests, negative coaching behaviors, and restrictions at team meals to construct an atmosphere dominated by a preoccupation with the body. And, although many female athletes appeared affected by these team environments, the results suggest that some of these women successfully navigated their team’s body norms by creating a supportive buffer to help each other cope with body pressure.

**Discussion of Body-Obsessed Team Climates**

The relationship between the social environment and female athlete body image and eating behaviors has long since been established (Blackmer, Searight, & Ratwick, 2001; Crissey & Honea, 2006; Engel et al., 2003; Jowett & Cramer, 2010; Reel & Beals, 2009; Reel, Petrie, SooHoo, & Anderson, 2013). This study indicates that, in particular, the norms on any sport
team play a role in how team members think and feel about their bodies. This study exposed how team cultures that become obsessed with creating and rewarding an ideal female athletic body might influence women participating on the team.

The foundational characteristic of a body-obsessed environment is that the aesthetic appeal of a woman’s physique can influence her sport success. As Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr (2011) proposed, these environments also include adherence to traditional gender roles, lack of power for women, and an emphasis or focus on physical body attributes. While not directly stated by any of the athletes in this study, these team environments seem to be the result of two factors: the intense pressure coaches face to create a winning program, especially at the college level; and, the relationship coaches develop with their own bodies. Similar to research on outcome-oriented climates, some coaches of body-obsessed climates might develop a win-at-all-costs mentality that causes them to monitor athletes’ bodies in an effort to win and often retain their jobs. The latter dynamic, coaches’ beliefs about their own bodies, appeared most salient when athletes from three different sport teams (volleyball, swimming, lacrosse) recounted stories about team requirements to adopt the same food beliefs their coaches valued or lived. When combined, the resulting body-related pressures active in this type of team environment can lead to increases in female athlete body dissatisfaction (Anderson, Petrie, & Neumann, 2012).

As Coker (2011) discussed, and consistent with the current findings, team norms were passed on through direct (e.g., coach remarks, one-on-one meetings) and indirect (e.g., body composition tests, public records of body size, food rules) sources. Athletes felt their coaches wanted them to present tall, strong, lean, firm physiques with small traces of body fat. These standards, while related to performance success, also reinforced what Krane and colleagues (2001) found with coaches who wanted (White, heterosexual) feminine athletes. Because these
climates focused on the body, they required athletes to participate in regular body composition
tests to further monitor and manage their physiques. Similar to George (2005), these athletes
viewed the examination of their body fat as an invasive measure policing their bodies, yet they,
too, often began monitoring their physiques for imperfections.

Coaches direct body pressure further reinforced body-obsessed team norms. As Jowett
and Cramer (2010) noted, coaches become some of the most important influencers in athletes’
lives during high school and beyond. Coaches hold power over their athletes (George, 2005),
often controlling how they spend the majority of their time. And, as Greenleaf and Petrie (2013)
mention, athletes typically value their coaches’ opinions and ideas. Sport leaders often are
viewed as the all-knowing authority figure that controls athletes’ college sport experiences. As a
result, their words and reinforcements matter. The majority of coaches body negative comments,
in this study, targeted athletes’ appearance and focused on eating behaviors, which supports
celebrated “fit sport bodies,” but also compared female athletes’ bodies to an assumed sport
ideal. The current group of athletes reported similar experiences with their sport leaders making
comments about their bodies and comparing teammates’ physiques against one another. This
study supports previous research, which asserted that negative comments from coaches influence
female athlete body satisfaction (Coker, 2011; Coppola et al., 2014; Kerr et al., 2006; Muscat &
Long, 2008; Reel et al., 2013). Along with previous results (Coker, 2011), this analysis found
little, if any, differences in the amount, significance, or timing of negative coaching comments.
Instead, coaches from all body-obsessed team climates seemed to critique athletes’ bodies if they
did not match the invisible and elusive, yet controlling fit, feminine, athletic body ideal.
Athletes often connected their bodies with performance, so their body perceptions related to their athletic play in a particular competitive event. This finding supports deBruin, Oudejans, and Bakker’s (2007) work with Dutch gymnasts who seemed convinced that a particular body size, in their case, a thin figure, would be more successful. These scholars went on to argue that this connection between appearance and sport success might play a role in disordered eating, thus making it possible that body image dissatisfaction may not be the primary or sole culprit of disordered patterns in athletes. Instead, how bodies are framed in relation to being identified as a successful or competent sportsperson might prove significant in promoting female athlete body image satisfaction.

But, not all women playing in these body-obsessed climates developed body image issues nor did they all agree with the body tenets espoused. Unlike Coker’s (2011) argument that athletes’ uncritical acceptance of the demands of a negative sport ethic could lead to health consequences, the athletes in this study who seemed most affected appeared just as savvy or knowledgeable about the faulty appearance-performance relationship as athletes who disagreed with their team’s emphasis on the body. Rather than being duped, social identity perspective (Kauer & Krane, 2013) might help explain why some athletes did not buy into their team’s body standards or experience body image disturbances while their teammates did. According to this perspective, if a female athlete values her membership on the team, she will embrace the social identity (female athlete), attach to it, and behave consistent with her team’s body expectations. It explains why some women in this study consistently demonstrated their understanding of the faulty appearance-performance belief but announced their active participation in it. This conceptual framework elucidates that their adherence resulted from the desire to be seen as a successful member of their team. This theory also clarifies how some of these female athletes
 resisted dominant team body ideals and created a supportive buffer for teammates but did not go so far as to outwardly disrupt or change the body-obsessed climate. According to social identity perspective, in order to change team norms, a female athlete would need to notice the current structure was unfair and believe in a healthy, feasible alternative (Krane & Barber, 2005, p. 68). In this study, it seems likely that athletes noticed their faulty team dynamics but were unable to envision a plausible solution as current members of their team, especially given that their identity as female athletes appeared to hold significance for many of these women. So, while athletes viewed leaders’ behaviors and their overall climate as an invasion or attack on their privacy, rarely did their concern lift above the level of voicing their disapproval.

Interestingly, the athletes in this study who had completed their eligibility or talked openly about what they imagined their activity levels would be like after sport seemed to carry their negative thoughts about exercise, in particular, with them. As members of their body-obsessed sport teams, they viewed training as a way to create successful sporting bodies. Previous research found that retired gymnasts became more aware of their team’s emphasis on body size and the relationship between disparaging body comments and their decisions around food and exercise after they quit their team (Kerr, Berman, & De Souza, 2006). Comments from athletes in the current study who had completed their eligibility or were considering life after sports seemed to suggest that because the end goal of improving performance no longer existed, they felt less motivated to be physically active at a similar level. This result appears to support Kerr et al.’s (2006) findings that athletes become more critical of their sporting environment and its related effects on their lives once their participation ends.

With all of the negative sport leader behaviors discussed throughout this chapter, it is important to note that Jowett and Cramer (2010) asserted athletes’ perceptions of their physical
self can be positively influenced by meaningful coach-athlete relationships (p. 146). As Krane et al. (2001) stated, coaches and sport leaders “should minimize discussion of weight and specific body shapes and instead focus on . . . improving athletic skills” (p. 21). Further, when teams adopt body negative assumptions, they become a “normal” part of the sport environment. Therefore, unhealthy behaviors become acceptable because “everyone else” has endured similar experiences. This truth underscores the importance of examining body-obsessed team climates as a key element in female athlete body image. Coaches and the team climates they create may serve to prevent or exacerbate athlete body dissatisfaction, so identifying characteristics of body productive team climates remains crucial.
CHAPTER VII. COLLIDING WORLDS:
FEMALE ATHLETIC BODIES IN SOCIAL AND SPORT SETTINGS

Female athletes occupy spaces in two worlds, sport and social, simultaneously. These lived experiences place unique demands on women’s bodies. As members of their athletic teams, female athletes often are required to build muscle mass and add strength. They are encouraged to manage their bodies in ways that contradict social expectations of, particularly, White, heterosexual, feminine bodies, defined as small, thin, sexy, and toned. JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, noted, “No matter what race you are, I feel like you want to have a nice butt and nice boobs as a woman, but, like as an athlete in the athletic world, you want to be strong and have muscles.” These bifurcated demands ensure public reprimand regardless of which body type is constructed. BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, mentioned,

I think it is a hard thing to have all of society telling you that you should look a certain way, you know, skinny. The thigh gap – the fucking thigh gap. All these features that you should have, like you somehow need to be really thin but also have like big boobs. That’s not how that actually works. Like, that’s not a thing. But, then, you’re also told you need to look a certain way for athletics. Not necessarily look a certain way, but you have to do all of these things, which result in you looking a different way than you’re being told to look by most of society. And, it’s kind of hard to figure out where that line is and to really fully do everything you can to be the best you can be at your game, but also feel confident in who you are and how you look when you go out to a party.

The women in this study discussed how they negotiated these varying expectations and learned to relate to their bodies. Female athletes’ discussions of their lived experiences in both worlds helped explain their transient, and, at times, conflicting, body descriptions.
Female Athletic Bodies in Sport

Several female athletes spoke about how they perceived of their bodies and related to food in the sport setting since they spent the majority of their time in that location. As BF, a White, straight, Division III softball player, stated, “Personally, I’m more comfortable with myself around my teammates, at softball, stuff like that. But, that’s probably just the amount of time we spend together. We’re all going through the same things.” Their sport-related body perceptions held significance because they identified as female athletes and wanted to be recognized as such. LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, suggested, “I’ll usually identify myself as an athlete outside of the athletic world and take confidence in that. I just identify with that [athlete identity] so much more . . . such a big part of my life.” TH, a White, straight, soccer player, articulated,

I’ve always kind of identified as an athlete, so I think I look like an athlete, and people usually ask me if I play a sport or something. And, whenever I talk to people, I mention I play soccer at [Southern University] because they’re in a sorority or a fraternity. It’s kind of like an identity thing for me.

BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, stated, “I think at this point in my life, probably a huge part of my identity is wrapped up in the fact that I am a college athlete, so it’s easy to decide what takes precedence.” Although the “athlete” identity is different than other social identities such as gender, race, class or sexuality; for the female athletes in this study, being an athlete influenced how they thought about and related to their bodies in sport. More specifically, these women identified a few fundamental elements of sport that made it such an important space for their body image development. They also discussed how their participation in athletics influenced their body perceptions and eating behaviors.
**The nuances of sport relieve body pressure.** The female athletes in this study reported that certain inherent characteristics or nuances in the sports world ultimately helped them create a positive attitude towards their bodies. The college sport environment is comprised primarily of athletic bodies, physiques that were vividly described in chapter four. For many of these women, seeing similar body sizes and shapes brought a sense of comfort. TH, a White, straight soccer player in the South spoke about her muscular “soccer thighs,” stating that, in sport, “I don’t feel as different when I’m in my sport, I guess, because the girls around me are all muscular and athletic and it’s normal. I don’t feel like I stand out.” TH continued,

I went to a frat party last year, and there was a bunch of sorority girls there and like other normal people. And, there were a few soccer girls, but we were surrounded by everyone else, I guess, and I definitely felt like, you know, most like girls that we were talking to were like, we’re so fit muscular and stuff. I definitely felt like we stood out in that scenario; but then, like, we hang out with the lacrosse guys on campus a lot, and so we’ll go to their parties – it’ll be mostly soccer girls and lacrosse guys some other sports come, too – and I feel like it’s not as surprising to see people that are really good shape and muscular and stuff. It’s kinda normal. . . . I definitely like to hang out with that [athlete] group more just because they understand commitment, like, that we have a job that isn’t just go to class and go to work. We are actually expected to uphold certain standards; and, I don’t know, I think it’s just easier to just be around other athletes because they are more understanding.

BL, a Division II, straight, basketball player who identified as half Filipino and half Caucasian, expressed that her teammates
know what I look like, and they know that all that matters is basketball. I guess ‘cause we do all of our workouts and all of our conditioning together and like no matter if someone was a twig or a slow post [player], they see my ability. It’s not like my body, because I’m thicker, would make me any worse, I guess. They know what I can do, and they’ve seen me working really hard and everything like that.

Rather than marginalizing muscular physiques, the athletic context normalizes female athletic bodies, which helped some athletes feel more secure or at peace with their physical size.

Sport requires action; inherent in its core structure, it demands human movement. This characteristic of performance reduced the amount of time women could focus on and pick apart their physiques. CY, a Caucasian, straight swimmer, pointed out, “I’m not thinking about my body when I’m actually in the water ‘cause I mean nobody can really see you.” And, Caucasian, straight, tennis player, LN, stated,

By the end of practice, I was fine. I wasn’t thinking about my body. I was changing my focus off my body itself onto specific tennis tactics or techniques we’re working on that day. I don’t have time to really think about it. Once I’m moving, I’ll feel better.

BF, a White, straight, softball player, expressed,

I felt that the most comfortable with how I looked was when I was playing softball because that was my thing, like, that was my spot. I didn’t even worry about my body when I was playing softball. It wasn’t about that. It was just about playing at practice, in doing the drills.

When athletes were not in-action, their body focus intensified. As JS, a White, straight, softball player, mentioned,
I think about my body more after the game because there’s this one parent who is always taking pictures of us. And, I’ll be like, “Oh, my gosh, my arms look huge in that.” Or, “That’s an awkward picture because my arm makes me look like I’m 700 pounds.” But, when I’m in the game, I don’t think about my arms. It’s not on my mind at all. But, I guess it’s more after the fact when I’m looking at pictures and stuff.

LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, explained,

Usually, feeling bloated, like I ate too much, will affect me more in the beginning of practice. As I’m just getting there, we have to warm-up, so for that time, I’m like, “Whoa, my goodness, I feel so full and heavy.”

BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, compared how the action element of her sport practices and less active social settings influenced her body awareness

I mean I think there’s definitely a difference [between sport and social settings], especially because in athletics, it’s not about what you’re wearing, it’s about how you’re performing. So, for instance, our practice shorts . . . they’re just really weird shorts. But, because you’re all wearing them, it doesn’t really matter. Honestly, they’re not that bad. They’re just shorts, and you just run around in them for practice. Like, no one looks good in them, and you all know that, but no one cares. It doesn’t really matter when I’m on the field. It’s the last thing that I’m worried about. Whereas, you don’t know that if you’re going out socially. Like, if I have to go straight from class to practice, then I have to wear those shorts to practice. And, then, I’m always like really, really self-conscious about what other people will think that I look like in these shorts. They’re never something anyone would voluntarily wear.
These sport-specific elements suggest that the athletic realm provides a setting in which female participants might view their bodies differently than they would in other moments of their lives.

**Performance-based body perceptions.** In sport, some female athletes developed relationships with their bodies based on how their physiques helped them perform. Specifically, these women appreciated how their body shape and size provided them with unique athletic talents or advantages in sport. KSW who identified as a White, straight, tennis player added,

I think there was one other girl on my team that was my height, but everyone else was shorter. I’m glad I’m tall because it gives me advantages in certain ways on the tennis court at least. I can reach farther and reach higher than the shorter players. And, I can hit a faster serve because I can reach up higher. I don’t think I’m like faster than my teammates, but I can definitely like reach farther. Um, sometimes when I’m playing doubles, I can reach farther for volleys than other people can. It’s easier to be at the net when you’re taller. Like in doubles, there’s one person that plays up at the net and one person that plays back. It’s harder to lob over taller people or like to get it past them on the sides.

Similarly, White and Asian, heterosexual, Division III tennis player, Ali, outlined,

I think part of it is just like the height thing. I use that as a confidence mechanism um just because most of the people I’m playing are like 5’5, so I’m still kind of looking down. Definitely in tennis, my body is like one of the biggest assets, even more than sometimes the mental side of my game.

She also noted, “In terms of tennis, I’m very much like a speed player, so even if I’m getting my butt kicked, I will make you run.” Teammate, LN who identified as a Caucasian, straight tennis player, said,
On my tennis team, I take pride in the fact that I’m like the fastest one and will work the hardest on the court to be the fastest one. That’s actually one of my thoughts going into matches: “I’m not necessarily the most technically sound player, but I am pretty fast on the court and will always get the ball back.” I take pride in knowing that I’m going to beat you with my speed and athleticism if I can’t in another way. . . . It happens quite a bit in doubles, so I’m playing with my partner, and [our opponents] hit a really good shot. And, it happens a lot, even last match, so I’m running down the ball and just get my racket on it and get it back over the net when no one thought it should be going over, just laying your body out there and going all out. And, it kinda surprises the other team. It surprises my partner actually. . . . When people already start clapping for the other team and then all of a sudden, I put balls back on their court, that’s like my favorite play in tennis. They’ll kind of stop playing, and we’ll end up winning the point and that’ll change the momentum of it. It’ll instill more confidence, not only in myself, but also in my partner. I rely on that, on those plays, to change the momentum and to kind of throw off the other team. I rely on my speed to do that. . . . That gives me confidence because I know they can mess with my mind, but they can’t mess with how fast I run or how hard I try. On the court, I’m more confident in my body because that’s what I’m good at doing.

MH, a White, straight, Division III, softball player, described how her head coach would say, “MH, you’re fast. Run the bases.’ So, I was like, ‘Oh, I’m fast. I’m more athletic and, you know, people who are usually considered fast are like smaller.” Based on performance feedback in sport, MH also gained information about her body size. As EW, a White, swimmer who is attracted to males, stated, “When I was working out and swimming every day, I definitely felt
like my body was strong. My body was a way for me to be good at swimming.” KSW, a White, straight tennis player claimed,

I could probably lose weight and workout more, but I feel like I’m stronger and can do more than someone who’s like really thin can. And, I feel like it’s kind of an advantage.

In tennis, I really like to hit it harder and faster than everyone else does.

Being tall, fast, or strong helped these athletes feel more confident in sport. Instead of concentrating on their appearance, sport allowed them to focus on how their training improved their physique and how that trained body then elevated performance. BF, a White, straight softball player, announced,

I am not fast at all. That is not something that I pride myself on. That’s just not something that I’m blessed with and we condition every day. I mean we condition a lot, and one of the ones that we do is the 4/30 and you have to do two down and backs and two laps around the court in a minute and a half three times or whatever it equals out to. So, you’re just beating the time each time, but you can’t start until the buzzer goes off. It was going to be my last time doing it ‘cause it was my senior year, and I remember I was running it real well and it’s all sprints and usually that’s not something that I’m very good at ‘cause, like I said, our team is real athletic and fast and small. And, I remember looking up in the last like set of it and you know coach was yelling, “Good job!” I noticed the girls were saying stuff, and I looked up and realized I was in the top 3, which was not something I was usually doing. So, that was the first time that I realized like, okay, I’ve gotten a lot better at this and like it was a lot easier. That was a time where I felt, compared to my teammates, my body had improved. It wasn’t about the number. It wasn’t about oh I lost 10 pounds or I lost this much, you know? It was I’m working my
butt off and it’s paying off. So, I think that it just became more of, you know, you put the hard work in and you see the results.

Women in this study also acknowledged how their physiques dictated their exact style of play. For example, AP, a White, two-sport, bisexual, athlete, articulated,

My whole thing on the court was, the best way to describe how I played was like, “I’m an enforcer.” I pushed girls around. We had a lot of scorers, like our starting point guard, to this day, she’ll tell you that I would tell her to run a certain play because I was pissed that someone was pushing around one of our other girls who wasn’t as strong. I was going to make sure that a message was sent – a hard screen, maybe I box out – and I could do that because of how strong I was because of the weight room. It was definitely a buildup of muscle. Going up against another girl never scared me because I knew how prepared I was.

CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, shared, “Ever since I was little, my strength has been the thing that has helped me. Not only can people not knock me down, I knock them down most of the time. Everybody says I’m strong.” MC, a Division III, White, basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, also played in a women’s football league during the summer months. She detailed how her body helped her adjust to the performance demands specific to each sport:

Football, in my head, I know that I actually get to hit someone. . . . I know I can be physical. I know I can hit people and take people to the ground. When I’m playing basketball, I need to be quick. I need to be, you know, light footed. But, I don’t really need to hit people. I don’t need to be that physical. Under the hoop I need to be, but it’s more of what can I do with the ball. Can I shoot? Can I get open? How can I distance
myself from people to score? In football, it’s how close can I get to someone? How hard can I hit them? So, it’s just different.

All six basketball players reported feeling proud of their muscular, strong physiques because they represented their sport competence – competitiveness and dominance. This group of female athletes looked at their bodies as a contributor to their athletic performance and a way of being acknowledged as successful sport participants.

When discussing their body-related thoughts in this setting, some female athletes mentioned feeling powerful. JP who identified as an African American, bisexual sprinter, noted that she “just see[s] power” when she looks at her body. White and Asian, straight tennis player, Ali, mentioned, “Whenever I go out there [on the court], like 95% of the time, I feel like one of the most powerful people on the court just in terms of build.” And, she appreciated how her strong muscles allowed her to exhibit “powerful sprints.” BG, a Latina straight lacrosse player, further expounded,

I would say I’m built like a powerful athlete. I think there’s two types of athletes: power athletes and technique athletes. Technique ones are just built smaller, they don’t put on muscle as easily and so their skills are generally in the area of speed or quickness or like little movements. But, I’m definitely built more like a power athlete. I would say, literally, I’m built muscularly. I mean I definitely run with like a lower center of gravity. Okay, kind of a concrete example is, I’m not afraid to drive through people to get to the goal. I’m not afraid to tuck my stick, tuck my head, and go through them. I’m not worried that they’re going to elbow me or they’re going to hurt me or anything like that because I know I have literally the muscle to protect my entire body [and] that I’ll be able to get through them. And, if I don’t, I’m not going to be hurt, like injured. There’s
definitely thinner girls on my team who you can see are afraid of that just ‘cause they’re built with a smaller frame; they’re less muscular. And, you can see that kind of fear when they’re driving through people; where, I’m not afraid to get up on that other strong, fast girl, because I know I like have the bulk to do it. I’m not particularly large. I’m not huge, but it means I’m also really good on the circle, jumping up really high to get that ball in the air because I do have such strong quads and hamstrings that I can jump really high.

The female athletes of color in this study described their bodies as “powerful.” White female athletes discussed wanting to be stronger or admiring professional athletes’ strength and power, but did not refer to their own bodies as powerful. As CB, an African American, straight, basketball player described “People think as an African American, we have this natural power sometimes.” She continued, “I feel like sometimes people think Black people who are strong or powerful might be intimidating or want to hurt them,” which is why, as she suggested,

I do want to be intimidating because I want them to be like, “Oh shoot, she’s on the court, who’s got her?” But, off the court, I don’t want them to be like, “She looks mean or she looks big like she’ll beat me up.” That’s not who I am. I’m friendly. I want them to know that just because I’m on the court and look mean, when I’m off the court, I want to be friends and be friendly. Say hi to me if you want. That’s why some people don’t know how to come over to me because of how I play on the court.

BG, a Latina lacrosse player, asserted that, while muscular and powerful, her body is neither “large” nor “huge.” These comments suggest that how female athletes, particularly female athletes of color, view their physical power may differ in sport than in social settings.
From these comments, it seems clear that, when performing well, female athletes seemed to develop positive body perceptions in sport settings. They recognized and celebrated their bodies for allowing them to become more competent and successful sport participants. However, two of the female athletes in this study talked about how their sport performance negatively influenced their body perceptions. Swimmer, CY, who identified as Caucasian and straight, suggested,

There’s times where I feel like as long as I’m performing well, I don’t really care what I look like. . . . When I’m feeling good in the water, I feel light like on top of the water. It almost doesn’t take any effort to go fast; not that I’m not trying, but it’s kind of an effortless feeling I guess. You feel smooth in the water. . . . If I have like a really good [race] time, then I’m just like, I don’t care. . . . I’m like, “Yeah, whatever, I don’t care what I look like. I just want that time.” But, then, you get to those points where you might not be performing well. . . . I feel like I’m swimming through jello. It’s just like harder to get through the water or harder to go fast through the water. . . . You’re like, “Oh, well, it might be because I’m fat or you feel a certain way. I mean I don’t want to blame it on, “Oh, I’m fat, I went this really bad time,” you know. But, you just don’t feel as good, so you don’t look as confident and you’re back to worrying about what you look like in your suit. . . . And, I know I’ve been gaining weight obviously since [conference meet] ‘cause we’re not really doing anything, so that kind of got in my mind. Like, well, maybe since I’ve gained weight since conference, I’m not like feeling as good as I should in the water. . . . I think like, “Well maybe if I wasn’t carrying so much weight on me, I might be going faster, or I might be feeling better when I’m going through the water.” I think that’s like the number one thing, you know.
Just as athletes acknowledged their bodies for sport success, performance failures were occasionally blamed on their physiques in sport settings. One athlete, LN, a Caucasian, straight tennis player described a reciprocal relationship between performance failures and body perceptions:

If there’s like a day, maybe it’s that time of the month or I just ate, I definitely feel slower. I don’t know if I actually am. I might not be, but just that fact makes me less confident in my body, my abilities. Like two nights ago . . . I was kind of feeling bloated, fat, you know, and [my body] just didn’t feel as fast or as powerful or as strong. And, then, I didn’t feel as confident in the way I looked or the way I was playing.

These athletes played different sports at both the Division I and III level from various places in the United States, and only CY performed in a body-obsessed climate. So, it seems that, beyond those factors, the very purpose of competitive sports, to crown a victor, might influence how some women relate to their bodies. And, this factor seems to play either a positive or negative role in female athlete body image development, depending on how the individual is performing.

Respecting the body by recognizing its limits. In sport, some female athletes learned to respect their bodies by testing their maximum fitness and pain thresholds. Mexican, straight swimmer, DC, felt proud of her body because she could “take a lot of pain at practice. And, I can do ten 200s breast stroke or whatever, which is something that a lot of people cannot do.”

Caucasian, straight swimmer, CY, explained,

I appreciate everything [my body] can do in the pool and the weight room ‘cause I feel like not a lot of people can do that. Regardless of how it looks or how I think it looks or how other people do, I know a lot of people can’t do physically what I can. And, like, my body being able to push through everything that it has, you know, I really appreciate
that. I think all the work that I put in in the weight room and pool have helped my body develop those abilities.

For some athletes, with this respect and the desire to perform well in sport, came the development of a healthy bodily relationship as athletes tuned into their physical needs. White swimmer, EW, stated, “With swimming, you are only going to be as fast as how strong you are. I knew if I didn’t take care of my body, then I wouldn’t swim the way I wanted to.” JP, an African American, bisexual, sprinter, said,

As you compete at the college level, you learn how your body feels after workouts and how you want your body to feel. And, you know how you need it to feel to perform at a peak level, so you learn how to use your body to be competitive and preventative. You know that if it’s a hard workout, you’re going to be more sore after the second day than you were after the first day. So, you learn to start your recovery process immediately after that workout. Coaches teach you to build up, you have to break through different levels, but they don’t really teach you how to recover, so you can break through more levels. As you’re here and you experience more and as you get to see your body become more competitive and work, you learn to recover so that you don’t backslide. I learned how to rest. And, rest and recovery is a big part of how to have longevity in your career ‘cause if you work, work, work, you’re going to break yourself down. But, if you rest and recover, you’re going to be able to keep going.

**Extending sport-based body competence.** Body perceptions often stemmed from the performance-based awareness female athletes cultivated in their respective sports, but these women also extended their positive views of the body to other arenas. For example, some
athletes acknowledged how their athletic builds helped them become competent performers in multiple recreational sports. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, explained,

I mean I could go and play a pickup game with a bunch of guys if I wanted to; whereas, like my friends that don’t play sports would never do something like that. I can stay active with everybody else, and I can keep up. My friends that don’t play sports can’t really do that. They watch stuff a lot. Or, like when we took a spring break trip to Hilton Head [South Carolina] to play a bunch of matches and there was a volleyball net up, and we all played together. We just all split up onto teams. It was nice we could all play beach volleyball. Half of us had played that sport, too, you know. We can go out and actually do stuff where I know a lot of my friends that don’t play sports wouldn’t be able to do that. Not that I’m good at beach volleyball or anything like that, but I can try. The basic skill level for everyone was about the same, so it was still pretty fun. I can like run around and hit it and stuff like that.

When asked why she loved the strength of her athletic body, TH, a White, straight soccer player, responded, “I’ve always had brothers, and I’ve wanted to be on their level in sport and do things they could do. I hate when people ask boys to come help with something and don’t ask girls.”

JP, an African American, bisexual sprinter, expressed,

I like my body because of how it functions as well. If you were to ask me to do anything in any sport, I would basically feel comfortable giving it a try at least because my body gives me some efficacy and belief in my capabilities in the athletic realm. It makes me feel like I have no limits. I’ve never had an instance where like I couldn’t participate in basketball because I was too [much of] something. So, the fact that I was able, I think that was the thing that has been the most empowering thing about my body.
JP added,

I played with my brother a lot and my cousin, which are both males. I always looked up to them and thought they were cool. So, just seeing how they were able to do everything, and I didn’t feel like my body prevented me from doing anything, so I never had a problem with it. Now, if I was maybe a little more on the heavy side or big side, then maybe I would’ve been like, “Oh, I can’t run with them because I can’t keep up.” But, like I said, I didn’t have any reason to not like my body. The main component that has made me feel more comfortable about my body is just feeling that my body is able, just that I am able to do things. That just comes through various experiences like you raced your brother and you beat him. Now, I wasn’t conscious of that when I was little like, “Oh my body is developing.” It just kind of happened. It has helped me embrace my body and just want to go even further as far as toning it or competing even harder at an even higher level.

Participating in sport helped these women understand the usefulness of their strong, muscular bodies, which some female athletes, then, connected to the ability to help others, gain respect, and protect themselves. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, mentioned,

In everyday life, I guess I don’t feel like there’s a lot of things I can’t do. Like, if people need help moving stuff, I can move stuff. Like if I need to go out and help someone do something, I feel like I can. I feel like I’m strong enough to do a lot of things. And, big enough.

TH, a White, straight, soccer player, said,

I guess I like to feel like I can hold my own if someone was to take advantage of me or hurt, and I don’t really like the girly look that hasn’t lifted a thing in their life. Like, I’ve
always wanted to, like I said, be on the same level as my brothers and be as important as them, I guess, because they always seemed super important to me as a kid. They were always playing baseball, and my dad was coaching their teams and stuff, so I don’t want people to disregard me because I’m a girl, or think that I’m incapable. So, I like to look capable and fit, and like I could hold my own under different circumstances. I just like looking strong.

She further developed this idea that the body can earn respect from other people:

You know, like, people look at you and think that you’re a strong person whenever they don’t see like [a] little, frail, model-esque, looking person, you know. . . . And, you know, just being like a strong person, I feel like, you know, you won’t get messed with as easily, you know, like, guys think they can take advantage of someone who looks weak, and other people think they can too.

And, TH provided a specific example:

I mean, I’m not like my brother’s girlfriend [who] is like, really tiny, and she’s thin, but she works for Geico and she’s trying to be – or she’s an advisor. She says that when she first got on the job, people would disrespect her because she’s little, and I can tell that it would be hard to gain very much respect like very quickly if people look at you and see a little meek girl.

Through sport, many female athletes developed a sense of body competence they could apply to other areas in their lives.

**Clothing-based body perceptions.** Some of the women expressed how their sport clothes (e.g., practice gear, sweats) and uniforms influenced their body perceptions in sport. These female athletes typically described their sport clothes in two ways: helping them feel more
confident or facilitating body discomfort. Illustrating these complex clothing-based body perceptions, Caucasian, straight, tennis player, LN, said,

I’m much more comfortable and confident in sweat pants, or even tighter fitting yoga pants. I feel much more comfortable in dry fit t-shirts. . . . I feel like athletic clothes are designed to show off athletic bodies, and so that’s probably part of why I prefer to be on the court.

But, she also acknowledged,

Sometimes, we wear skirts for matches. During practice, I don’t really think it influences me; but, during matches, when you have to wear skirts, it can be self-conscious. The skirt fits a little tight, there’s a bulge in my stomach, so that is something I definitely think about every time I put on my uniform. If it fits, I’ll look at myself as more attractive. I’m not sure how it affects my performance. It could just because I’m more confident in general.

Positive effect of sport uniforms. Athletes enjoyed wearing their uniforms and spoke more positively about their bodies when their sports gear fit their muscular bodies. BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, specified,

I like them because they’re like tank top uniforms and they’re racer back. They look really good, especially like the shirts with the way that we’re really built. They’re just like made for lacrosse players, so I like them. They definitely go in at the waist; whereas, like, soccer jerseys don’t do that. They go in at the waist but then they kind of go back out because most people know that lacrosse players usually have decently big sized butts because that’s how you run fast. And, they’re a little bit bigger up top to allow for any sort of upper body muscle, which is nice. I like wearing my uniform.
White, straight, softball player, MH, articulated,

    I guess the difference in practice and game uniform was our shirts in practice were looser
    than our jerseys. We had to all look the same pretty much. We had to wear pants to
    practice. I liked the tighter game jerseys because they didn’t get in the way.

Previously, MH described her body as “athletic, thin;” and, although BG consistently described
her musculature, she, too, asserted her body did not appear “large.” That both of these athletes,
who appreciated how their jerseys fit, possessed feminine, female athletic physiques suggests
that whether or not a body adheres to hegemonic femininity might relate to their experiences of
body satisfaction when playing sport in their uniforms. BF, a White, straight, softball player,
depicted,

    Some girls . . . wanted them tight. They wanted them to fit a certain way. And, I don’t
    know if that came down to more of a comfort thing playing. Some girls said they were
    used to playing in pants that “fit,” which means tighter. But, other girls would say, “Give
    me whatever. I don’t care.” I think it went player to player on how big of a deal it was.

Although she does not specify the body sizes of teammates who held a preference for a particular
uniform fit versus those who “don’t care,” when put in the larger context of these quotes, it
seems BF might be describing a similar phenomenon.

Some of the women in this study reported that wearing properly fitting uniforms made
them feel skilled in their sport, ready to compete. MC, a Caucasian basketball player, who chose
not to label her sexuality, described,

    When I’m in my game gear, I feel different. I feel more athletic than if I was just in a
    pair of jeans or than I would right now [wearing dress pants and shirt]. I definitely feel
    like I’m more active obviously. I feel better about myself. I feel like I am an athlete
when I’m in my game gear [or] practice uniform. And, it’s more of when I put that stuff on, it’s that mindset change to, “I am an athlete right now.” I’m no longer, you know, a student. I’m no longer at work or anywhere else. I am an athlete, and I get the opportunity to play.

KC, a White, straight soccer player, discussed, “When I put it on, I feel really cool, like, I’m in my uniform. I don’t really like our uniforms and how they look, but I do like what they mean. I feel empowered when I put it on.” BG who identified as a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, explained,

I feel the most confident in my uniform, partially because I’m wearing my team. I’m representing my team but also like it has my number on it. So, I’m representing my team but, at the same time, I have my own place, you know? I’m #7. I’m different than everybody else. And, like that’s kind of nice. Feeling like you have a place.

**Athletes’ reactions to uniforms not fitting.** Wearing uniforms that did not flatter their body shape seemed to make some athletes feel uncomfortable. EW, a White swimmer who was attracted to males, elaborated,

I definitely think that [competition] swimsuit makes you realize every flaw on your body whether you thought you had it before or not. I mean, I’ve had regular swimsuits in the past that I’ve worn in public and been fine in. I’ve always been very thankful that I’ve been fortunate enough to have the body that I do because I think it would be difficult if you didn’t love your body to put a swimsuit on every day. Like, the suits that we wear for our big meets, like conferences, are meant to be so tight, and you’re not meant to have any piece of fabric loose on you at all. So, if you put that on, it definitely shows you any part of your body that you don’t feel good about. . . . When everyone is in the locker
room, everyone is making comments like, “Oh, my gosh, I should have skipped breakfast,” or, “I shouldn’t have had that spaghetti for dinner last night because I can’t get my suit on now.” But, that’s common because, at those meets, all the teams are in the same locker room, so you hear all the people on other teams saying that as well.

And, later, she acknowledged,

I’d be saying, “Oh my gosh, I’m so fat” but only when I was putting the suit on. I would also wear the smallest size that was made, [which] made me feel like I couldn’t get it on because I was fat. I didn’t truly think that I couldn’t get on because I was fat. . . . I like to wear mine tighter than most people do, so I usually have to have [teammate] help me get it on. It’s just personal preference. No matter what size that suit is, [it’s] hard to get on. . . I mean, pretty much everyone needs help getting it over the shoulders, but, for me, and for other people, too, it’s like getting it up over my hips and just getting it up to my stomach even because the tightest point is the hip area. It just doesn’t have any give there. It doesn’t stretch at all, so sometimes you need an extra set of hands to help get it up. Most people are pretty open to it.

In total, eight female athletes in this study, including two of EW’s teammates, expressed how they felt about uniforms that did not complement their bodies. Mexican, straight, swimmer, DC, noted that she and her teammates “think our suits make us look flat in the boobs, flat in the butt and then your thighs are a little more prominent in it. You want to look more tiny in it.” When putting on her racing suit, DC described,

I mean there are sometimes when you have to wear a certain suit that’s not very flattering . . . it’s really tight. Like, our racing suits are really tight, so you can see if you have that extra fat in your body. You can see it hanging out your back, and no one wants that. I
mean no one wants to look bad in the suit if you know there’s going to be people watching you at the meet. But, I’m not sure if a lot of people think about it besides me. Probably they do, probably not as much as I do. I mean even if you don’t really think about it that much, I’m pretty sure everyone has. It’s in the back of your mind. It’s more when I’m at meets . . . when I know people are watching . . . if I don’t look extremely fit in my grey swimsuit, I feel like I’m not going to be as fast, which is a stupid thought. But, I can’t help it most of the time.

Another teammate, CY, who identified as Caucasian and straight, mentioned,

Well, our practice suits, people probably think they’re not the most flattering thing. I mean, now, obviously, our practice suits have loosened up a little bit because we’re this far into the season; but, when they’re new, when they’re tight, people are like, “My love handles are bulging out,” or “My back fat is like hanging.” It’s kind of uncomfortable. And, like meet suits, since we don’t swim in them very often, they’re always tight. I mean that’s just for me. I don’t know how other people feel in them, but I feel like they’re not very flattering. They’re tight in all the wrong areas that makes things bulge out a little bit. I don’t feel very comfortable in it when I’m like putting it on. And, then, when I’m up at the blocks getting ready to go, I feel self-conscious. I’m worried about like who might be in the stands looking at me. Usually, I stand [on deck] in my suit. But, I’ll usually put my warmup jacket on or put some clothes on while I’m just standing there, so I’m a little covered up.

Some female athletes’ clothing-based body perceptions appeared to influence their athletic performances. Caucasian, straight, tennis player, LN, said, during matches,
I play on the first court, and so everyone is up above watching. There are definitely times when, maybe a point was just played and then I come back and my skirt’s all ridden up, and [I’m] feeling self-conscious and sometime just have to pull it down because I know everyone sees and is watching. [Doubles partner] mostly laughs about it or she’ll be like, “Oh, me too, which is almost comical in the same sense. It’s usually light hearted. Yeah, there might be a few instances where it might distract me, like a couple of points later; but, usually, I would just get back in to the match.

And, KSW, a White, straight tennis player, stated that when one of her teammates had to wear a uniform that was too long, during matches, “She would kind of tuck it in to her Spanxx, so it would stay out of the way and she wouldn’t feel it moving around.” She also discussed,

I remember when I was a freshman coming in, I got like a size too small in one of the dresses that we had. I always hated wearing it ‘cause I thought it was too small on me. It didn’t look horrible, I guess. But, I always tried to avoid wearing that one. When I was playing, [my] small dress . . . was like, kinda tight, and I keep pulling it down and stuff. I wear Spanxx under the dresses, so I would pull it down all the time. I just don’t like it being real tight. I didn’t think I looked great in a dress that was too small. I guess I had an idea of what everyone’s supposed to look like in a dress or like a skirt and tank. I didn’t feel like I looked like everyone else, and it would be uncomfortable. I could play in it, but it would be uncomfortable during like changeovers ‘cause I was messing around with it and pulling it down and stuff. I guess it just gives me one less thing to worry about. Like if it fits, then I don’t have to worry about it and I can worry about the match and think about the match ‘cause I already get like really stressed out during matches. So, like if it fits and everything, I don’t have to worry about it.
Swimmers and tennis players might seem more likely to develop negative body perceptions in their typically feminine, form-fitting and tight sports gear. However, uniform fit in masculine-perceived sports such as soccer, softball, and basketball also created issues for female athletes in this study. Several of these athletes felt unhappy with uniforms that did not accentuate their muscular frames. KC, a White, straight, soccer player, suggested,

I don’t think it’s the most flattering thing ever. And, a lot of us really hate like the shorts because they’re just like long and they have these weird things. They do not make your butt look good. They make it look small. They’re not the girliest things. It’s different than like volleyball where guys will go watch that, and I’m like, “I wonder why.” Ours are long and our shorts particularly have these lines right down your butt that almost makes it look like a diaper or like white underwear just like the lines that go down it. But, then, also, you have to wear your slider shorts underneath them so that like sucks everything in. You need those. Like if you slide, it would hurt if you didn’t wear them, and it’s not comfortable to wear any other underwear. But that combination and I already have a small butt, so it’s just not good.

JS, who identified as a White, straight, softball player, noted,

Our uniform is just like baseball pants, but they stop right under your knee and then you wear the tall softball socks that go up to your knee. And, then, you have a softball belt and our uniform tops. I guess this is where it comes from. Our sleeves are maybe three inches long on our tops. And, it’s so annoying because every other softball team covers their arms. You know, they show a little bit of them. Ours are so tiny. It looks awkward on my body. I don’t really care. It’s whatever. But, I guess it just looks really small on me. My arms are really long so, when you have a 3” sleeve come down on my arm, it’s
just kind of weird looking. Yeah, our tops are really weird. We can’t wear anything underneath it because the sleeves are so short.

BG, who identified as a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, said her team’s practice shorts are not attractive. They are really, really ugly and they don’t fit anywhere well. They’re just like a weird length; they’re just a little longer than soccer shorts but definitely shorter than basketball shorts. They’re just like a weird length and there’s only one size, so there’s people who are drowning in them and there’s people who, like, they’re way too tight on them. I’m somewhere in the middle in them, but I’m not that tall so they’re way too long on me. So, then, you roll them, but the waist band is smaller than the rest of the shorts so then the rest of the shorts like bunch out.

White, straight, softball player, BF, recalled,

Growing up, we would always wear shorts, so you worried about it being more comfortable than anything else. But, as you get older, the huge thing to do is to wear pants. You want to wear your pants pretty much as tight as they can go. It’s a huge thing. It’s the norm and almost the expected thing to wear them tight. So, yeah, you’re running around with girls that are way thinner and are taller, that just look better. You start worrying about, you know, what size pants am I going to get and stuff like that.

MH, a White, straight, softball player, described, “We had like men’s [practice] t-shirts, too, which didn’t help [because] I’m just like constantly pulling at them in practice when I’m batting. So, I got a size small and they were still baggy.” Instead of disliking their bodies due to their tight uniforms as mentioned by swimmers and tennis players, all but one of the female athletes playing sports associated with masculinity struggled with uniforms that felt too big and covered too much of their bodies. These women identified as feminine, heterosexual female athletes and
wanted to make sure those identities were represented. To compensate for their muscular, often
deviant, athletic bodies and uniforms that did not accentuate their feminine shape, some of these
athletes added feminine touches. As KC, a White, straight, soccer player in the South,
announced,

This might sound dumb, but if we’re like playing a soccer game, I’m going to get sweaty;
but, I’m going to put on some mascara, you know, and I’m going to make sure like if I
have a blemish, it’s covered. I’m going to look presentable. I want my hair in like a
cute, high ponytail, kinda funky. I feel like that kind of labels me as more girly-girl in a
uniform that’s kind of like, you know, longer shorts and a top that’s not fitted. It’s just
like everyone wears kinda the same thing. I feel like that makes me more girly girl. And,
they’re like, “Oh, okay, she has on makeup, her hair’s cute.” And, sometimes, I’ll even
wear a pink hair tie just ‘cause it’s pink and it’s different than my non-straight friend on
my team. Even outside of soccer, when we dress up, I’m usually in like a dress or a cute
top and shorts; and, [teammate is] always in boy clothes and like a ponytail slicked back
real low. And, like she looks good like that. I don’t care. She’s one of my real good
friends on the team. But, you know, we’re different in that way. And, that kind of shows
I guess.

On some college sport teams, teammates worked together to limit these clothing-based
distractions and locate a uniform that fit every person’s body. White, straight, tennis player,
KSW, said,

Normally, we get like one new uniform or like a couple of new uniforms every year.
And, sometimes, we’ll just keep the ones we have, so the freshmen who come in can pick
from those. We wear skirts and dresses. Normally, we’re just complaining about the
sizes. Sometimes, a girl’s size is too big and like mine fits sometimes too small. And, we kind of have to trade around, so that’s normally what we talk about. Well, sometimes we’ll order like a couple extras. Last year, I was like, “Make sure you order a couple extra or like a couple larges,” ‘cause me and a couple [teammates] that wear larges and a couple girls that wear small and mediums need new sizes this year in our dresses. So, I had one that fit this year, but a couple of my other teammates had some that were too long. We just kind of trade around until we figure out what’s the best way to do things.

BF, who played softball and identified as White and straight, expressed,

When you first get issued your uniforms, there’s certain girls that obviously need like smaller pants ‘cause they’re little girls. Then, what it ends up coming down to is you’ll have some sizes that there’s not many of. I remember one year we didn’t have many medium pants, so you’ll have girls that are either going to be in large or mediums and we’re kind of deciding amongst ourselves who is getting them. And, what it boils down to is you’re saying this girl is skinnier than you, she needs a medium. So that’s where it got to the point where the uniform part came in to play.

In sport environments like these, where the same set of uniforms is being reused year after year, newcomers might not always find sports gear that fits their body shape. As BF pointed out, these scenarios might increase the likelihood of body comparisons as athletes try to bargain or trade for appropriately sized uniforms.

Overcoming gendered eating behaviors through sport participation. As outlined in chapter six, team climates often influenced female athletes’ eating behaviors. However, these women also discussed how their relationship with food changed depending on their sport or social context. In particular, these female athletes admitted that they tend to ingest more calories
when playing their sport or eating with teammates than they do in social settings. TH, a White, straight soccer player, said, “We’ll want to go eat in [cafeteria], and we’ll stuff our faces and, you know, we’ll laugh about it because more girls eat like a normal portion.” BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, outlined,

I feel like when I eat with my athlete friends, like after a workout or something we’re like, “Oh let’s go. Let’s eat so much.” Like, I don’t think twice about it. Sometimes, I think twice about it when I go out to eat with friends that aren’t athletes and I’ll eat like the right size portions. I’m like, “Maybe, I should chill on the food.” After workouts, like we’re all obsessed with Chipotle, so we’ll be like, “Let’s go to Chipotle. We’re getting the bowl. We’re getting the chips. We’re getting the guac.” And, we’ll get our food, we’ll sit down, and like not a word is spoken until we’re like halfway through ‘cause we’re just like going in on it and just like eating a ton. I wouldn’t even think twice. Like, if I don’t finish it, they’re like, “C’mon, finish it.” And, I actually went to [another university] a couple weekends ago and visited my two best friends from high school. And, we went out to Chipotle for dinner, and they were full after not even half of it. And, I don’t know if it was just like subconsciously that I was like I don’t want to keep eating while they’re not eating. But, I just like got full earlier, too. I didn’t come near finishing it, but I remember like them stopping and I was still eating for like a couple minutes.

MC, a Caucasian, straight, basketball player, offered,

We would always go to dinner together or go to lunch together, and we would pack food away. And, people would like look at us like you guys are crazy, like what are you doing. Like, you guys aren’t eating like ladies, but we didn’t care. We were working out
all the time and we were fueling our body. And, that, we laugh about it now and we’re like, “When we eat together, it’s insane.” But, we don’t even think about it. We don’t think about what we’re putting into our bodies and like how much we’re consuming and being lady-like and what’s considered the stereotype of eating a salad and small portions. . . . I think we always did all of our meals pretty much together, and we were always hungry. By the time you get to college and you’re lifting, you’re conditioning and then practice on top of everything. So, it just seemed normal to eat that much, I guess.

These female athletes reported feeling more comfortable eating larger amounts of food with their teammates. Several of these athletes alluded to gender stereotypes that require women to monitor and restrict their food intake socially. In the sport context, they seemed to successfully navigate these social pressures and develop their own eating habits; whereas, female athletes became more aware of gendered eating expectations when they ate with nonathletes.

One reason some athletes may have been able to disregard body-obsessed team climates and social norms governing eating behaviors relates directly to their sport participation. It seemed that college female athletes believed they could eat as much food as their bodies could tolerate because they were active female athletes. In this way, sport helped them to discard some of the gendered behaviors their friends exhibited when eating. As KS, a White straight basketball player, suggested, “We always kind of joke about how during basketball season we can eat whatever we want.” KSW, who identified as a White, straight, tennis player, stated, I don’t really watch what I eat. I’ve never really dieted or anything like that. I just think as long as I’m going out and working out and stuff like that, I don’t have to watch it as much as I would if I wasn’t playing a sport.

TH, a White, straight, soccer player, announced, during season,
I’m more focused on soccer, so what’s important to me at that time is to make sure I have enough energy to play my best, and like I’m eating the right stuff and everything; whereas, at different times during the year, like the summer, the reason I work out is because I want to look good, so I eat less because I’m thinking about, well, I don’t want to, you know, overeat.

Their intense training workloads helped these athletic women feel comfortable consuming more calories than they would in the off-season when their identities as feminine women became more salient and, presumably, gendered expectations guarding appropriate caloric intake once again became relevant. Ali, a White and Asian tennis player, added, “I definitely eat like a ton, which I love. I can do that because I’m playing 15 hours a week.” White, straight softball player, JS, agreed, “I’m happy with eating seven granola bars. I don’t care. I’ll just eat whatever I want. I don’t pay much attention to it.” TH, a White, straight, soccer player, acknowledged,

As long as we’re still playing, we usually still eat a lot because we don’t really think about, “Oh, we’ve got to cut back,” until maybe once the season is over. But, as long as we’re still playing, even if we’re not lifting as much, we usually don’t concern ourselves with eating less because we figure we’re still going to need as much energy as possible to run. We know soccer is one of those sports where, just playing it, you’re going to spend a lot of energy even if you’re not actively conditioning. So, we don’t really have to worry about like gaining weight during season. If anything, we lose weight during season because we’ll stop with the lifting and just be running all the time. . . . I have to make sure that I eat something small before we work out and then I’ll eat a ton after. And, I make sure I eat. I don’t let myself get very hungry; whereas, like, in the summer, I don’t eat when I wake up and then, if I get hungry later, I’ll eat something later, but it’s
not set. But, during off-season, I make sure I eat three meals a day at the same time and that I’m getting enough food and the right kinds of food.

Teammate, KC, who identified as White and straight, stated,

I don’t know anyone on my team that’s really been like, you know, “I don’t need to eat because of this.” They’re usually like, “I need to eat tonight because I know have a hard workout in the morning. I have practice. I know I need to be fueled for that.” . . . But, as a team, as a whole, I think everyone knows that they need food to fuel their bodies for the workout coming. I don’t think they’re thinking about, you know, “I want to be smaller. I want my thighs to be smaller, so I’m not going to eat this.” I think it’s just whatever is good for the workout.

When asked how her team approached food, JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, laughed, remarking, “That’s one thing we do not ever hesitate about. We love to eat. . . . We eat fried food, dessert, any fattening stuff. We know we’re going to run it off anyways, so we don’t care.” KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, shared, “I have a roommate that will eat like half of what I normally eat. She’s like shocked that I can eat that much, but I have a workout every day, so I’m always really hungry.” LN, a Caucasian, straight tennis player, said, “I eat the same thing every morning. I will try to, on those afternoon matches, increase my caloric intake a little bit . . . because I know I’ll be burning a lot more calories.”

These women believed that, if they trained hard, then they could eat whatever they wanted. For some female athletes, that equation seemed useful. KSW, who identified as a White, straight, tennis player, stated, “I definitely like being an athlete because . . . otherwise, I probably wouldn’t workout as much, and I would probably worry about my weight ten times more than I do now.” For others, learning that their training loads afford higher caloric intake
can reinforce negative body perceptions and feelings of inadequacy when they fail to train hard enough. For example, Caucasian, straight, tennis player, LN, stated,

I will feel much worse depending on what I ate or how I exercised that day. I usually feel more confident in my appearance and better in my body in the morning when I wake up than at night after a full day of eating or indulging myself. . . . Like, if I’m feeling fit and feeling good about my body, and if I ate right that day, I’ll feel good in my tennis outfit, and I’ll feel attractive. But, if I did the opposite, then I won’t like how I look in the tennis outfit.

EW who identified as a White swimmer, noted,

I think a lot of it is my own fault because I haven’t been working out since I finished [my eligibility]. I think that if I was still working out, I would still feel fine about myself. Because I’m not doing that, any time I eat something, I just feel gross about myself.

This belief could also become harmful if it leads athletes to develop unhealthy relationships with food or exercise, driven by a fear of gaining weight. TH, a White, straight, soccer player, stated,

I workout a lot because, like, I fear getting overweight or out of shape for both the soccer reason and just because I want to look good, you know. . . . I get very anxious if I haven’t worked out for like more than two days. It’s weird, because I know that I don’t look different, but all of the sudden I feel like my abs are going away or like my muscle tone’s leaving, even if it’s only been like a few days. But, I usually don’t work out on the weekends, so I can go two days. More than that, I get like anxious, and I have to do something. It has to be more than going out for a walk. I usually lift and do some sprints, or I do like a long run and then some short distance stuff to work on my speed. It has to be where I feel like exhausted by the end of it.
LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player who recently started feeling guilty about her eating habits, stated,

I think part of it does go to the fear of being fat, especially because being athletic is something I identify with so strongly. The idea of putting on weight and being slower and looking different is a scary thing to me. I guess just the fear of, first of all, being out of shape. I unfortunately associate weight with being out of shape, which isn’t obviously necessarily true, but I would associate that. I would be worried about my appearance and what people my age, men and women, say about my appearance. Also the fact that they will decrease my performance in multiple aspects. Both of those things.

It appeared that playing a sport led some women to view physical activity and food choices as ways to manage the body rather than paths to improve health and fitness levels.

Overall, sport seemed to provide a positive space for many female athletes to construct productive relationships with their bodies and food. BG, a Latina, lacrosse player, described,

When I’m with people like who I’m friends with who know I play lacrosse, I feel fine about my body because they know, not why I’m built the way I am, but I feel like it’s almost like kind of an excuse, like, “Oh I play lacrosse, I can eat whatever I want. Or, I can be as big or as small as I want because I play lacrosse. I’m supposed to be like that.”

Many of these athletes, if performing well and fitting into their uniforms, resisted gendered norms that often require women to monitor their physical size and caloric intake. However, sport remains a complicated site and the very same equations or beliefs that helped some female athletes feel satisfied with their bodies in sport might influence others to develop negative relationships with their physiques, food, and/or exercise.

**Female Athletic Bodies in Social Settings**
Women in this study also talked about their body perceptions in social environments. Most of the body discussions that took place in reference to this setting centered on female athletes’ perceptions of their muscle size relative to hegemonic femininity.

**Dressing “up” femininely.** Many of the women in this study discussed how important it was for them to dress up when they had the unique opportunity to participate in a social function. KC, a White, straight, soccer player, described,

I think when I’m with my friends that are soccer players, I’m a little more laid back and I’ll just wear, you know, like a t-shirt and shorts and tennis shoes. We all dress just kind of like athletes in front of each other. But, if we go out at night or if we go to dinner and we’re going to be with other people, we always try and like, you know, do our hair, do our makeup like wear a normal bra, like don’t wear a sports bra. You know, try and wear bright, happy colors, like girly stuff. I think it’s just that we don’t get a chance to dress up a lot, so I always get excited like when we have banquets for soccer. We’re all like, “What are you wearing? What are we going to do? Are we going out afterwards,” just ‘cause it’s like, you know, at the time we look cute, we look girly, we like to do that every now and then. I guess it makes it more special when we get to dress up than when other people do it all the time, not all the time, but more than we do. Most of the time, we just go to school with no makeup on and tennis shoes.

LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, articulated,

When I’d be going out with friends to dinner, it’s sad. It doesn’t happen very often any more. I’ve been going out on a date or sometimes going to class, I’ll just have extra time and decide to dress up. If the other people I know are going to wear sweatpants, then I’m not going to dress up. If they are going to be looking nice, I don’t want to look like a
couch potato. If I go out with a bunch of girls or my fiancé, I definitely will try to be more feminine. I don’t know if I would try to be less athletic, I still identify so much as that, but it’s almost as if it goes down a little bit. Well, it has to do with the makeup and the hair. I definitely put on more makeup and actually do up my hair when I try to be more feminine in that situation. My outfits do change. I mean, that’s when I’ll wear the skinny jeans, and higher boots, and try to be more fashionable. I don’t always like to give off the athletic impression.

African American, straight, basketball player, CB, commented,

When I’m not on the court, I wear like cute little clothes, you know, getting my nails done, hair done, eyebrows done, that kind of stuff. I wear dresses just to make me seem girly ‘cause, on the basketball court, you just get to wear basketball shorts and a jersey and you got to put your hair back. You can’t really show your feminine side, so that’s why I do what I do to look cute whenever I can. Probably when I’m going out with friends, or, if I’m going to a sporting event, and we have a day off the next day, I’ll dress up cause it’s nice outside and I wanna try something different. But, it’s mainly when I’m going out. I always dress up when we’re going out. It’s always the perfect time to do that. I don’t have time to normally dress up any other times and I have clothes. I just want to let people see that, you know, I’m a girl. I like wearing girly clothes. I like fashion and all that stuff.

Athletes who perceived their muscles as feminine and toned rather than masculine and bulky sought out clothes that helped them show off their physique. AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete in basketball and volleyball mentioned, “I don’t really want to hide anything that I have, like, I don’t really want to cover up my muscles. I just think it’s about presenting myself
in the right way.” In sport, muscles often demonstrate aggression and physicality. But, here, AP seems to be suggesting that socially, she wanted to present her muscles in ways that fit White, heterosexual feminine body norms. She went on to say,

I’m proud of what I look like. I’m proud of where I’m at. It’s come a ways. A lot of my friends are littler than me, so I’ve learned to get used to it. But, in social settings, I’m a little more comfortable because I’m able to wear things that fit me a little more properly and like shows off like what I’ve got. Like, say, date night or whatever, like I can actually wear a fitted shirt that shows off my muscles as opposed to track shorts and a t-shirt every day where I feel like I look huge just because like that’s how things fit. I definitely like more fitted tops, fitted t-shirts, skinny jeans, leggings. I definitely do a lot of those. A lot of boots. In the summers, it’s definitely like shorter shorts. Things that do show off my muscles a little bit more. . . . Like, I don’t need to wear a lifting tank top every day, but there’s nothing wrong with wearing a sweater where, like, you can actually see the outline of my shoulders as opposed to like hiding them completely. Um, I think it’s definitely a part of who I am. . . . I’m fit. I actually look like it. I think that’s important.

BL, a half Filipino and half Caucasian basketball player, also noted,

I just like the way I look in my clothes, like the way they fit. I think a lot of times I don’t judge my weight off being on a scale. I don’t have one at school, and I hardly ever weigh myself at home. It’s more of how my clothes fit and like, whenever I gain weight, it’s mostly in my face and in [my] arms. I guess kind of my legs, too. But, like my stomach pretty much stays the same.
As members of a sporting community often associated with masculinity, some female athletes wanted to assert their femininity socially. To do that, their actions (e.g., dressing “up,” form-fitting clothes, makeup, styling hair) often reaffirmed hegemonic femininity.

**Self-conscious of athletic bodies.** Other female athletes in this study seemed self-conscious of their muscles in social settings, especially if they believed they looked “too big.” JS, a White, straight softball player, expressed,

> I would say outside of my sport, it’s kind of awkward. If I’m getting dressed up to go to a wedding with my family, I feel awkward in a dress because softball players are known to have like huge arms, which my arms are pretty big ‘cause I’m a pitcher.

These experiences are defined by: athletes hiding their muscles, clothes marking female athletic bodies as abnormal, and depictions of athletes’ shopping woes.

**Hiding “oversized” muscles.** Some female athletes attempted to hide their oversized muscles by covering their bodies in social settings. DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, expressed, “I am conscious of my body when I’m going out. I’m definitely conscious wearing like a tight dress or shirt or skirt. When I’m going out, there’s things I get to hide.” BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, acknowledged that she typically wore baggy clothing to cover her body even though she worried her clothes would make people “think that I’m fat ‘cause . . . if I’m wearing a sweatshirt, you can’t always tell if I have flabby arms or muscular arms.” She also described one stressful social event that required female athletes to wear revealing clothes. Apparently, the athletic teams at her west coast university held a “Pirate Party,” where basically everyone runs around really drunk in bathing suits. Like, the amount of stress that puts on the female half of the athletic department is like crazy. Runners are fine because they are skin and bone and a little bit of muscle, but, like the
rest of us, it’s hard. I mean we’re just so big, our muscles. And, I mean I’m sure even [runners] have their problems. Like, I’m sure they’re like, “Wow, I have an 8-pack, what do I do with that?” So, I’m sure they have their own problems, too. But, I don’t know. It’s hard.

CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, illustrated, “I mean I still want to look good in girl clothes and look cute in them and not muscular.”

A few White female athletes like JS, a straight, softball player, seemed to share a similar belief, articulating,

I just feel like my arms are huge and muscular and look awkward. I just don’t like my arms hanging out and being so exposed. And, if, I’m going to wear a strapless dress, like no, you’ve got to give me a jacket or something over it. I just don’t like my arms being so full. I don’t like my arms being like weirdly out. I mean it’s just that they’re muscular. I feel like, especially if someone takes a picture of me and I don’t have a sweater on, I just feel like it’s half the picture. It’s all I can look at. Anything else than that, like in a bathing suit and a pair of jean shorts, who cares. But, if I’m trying to dress up or look nice for like a wedding or something like that, it’s just kind of awkward.

TH, a straight, White, soccer player, provided,

I try to show my legs off. I like to look pretty, so I do my hair and my makeup. I know I can like, look intense if I don’t wear the right clothes or do my hair feminine. So, being straight definitely affects how I present myself. It doesn’t make me uncomfortable, but I do have to be careful that I don’t wear certain shoes that might make me look like boyish, or I have to make sure that I walk feminine and that I don’t look boyish or unfeminine.
She also described how she and her teammates “talked about having big soccer legs, like big thighs.” She continued,

If we’re thinking about going out that night, we’ll be like, “Are we going to bring out the soccer legs, like in shorts or a skirt and usually, like, heels?” Or, somebody will say something about not wanting to wear certain shoes or a certain outfit because they don’t want to look like a dude.

JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player explained, “I don’t wear belly shirts or anything. I’m fine with my body, I just don’t like to show it off, I guess.” And, White, straight soccer player, KC, added,

I guess just being straight is different because, like I have friends that are not straight and, I don’t know, I feel like they dress differently and they can act a little bit differently. They’re almost athlete-competitive, like kind of mean. Not mean but just cool, like their athlete side can always come out. But, if you are straight, you really have to be able to transition from like an athlete to a girly-girl or else you can get pegged as not being straight. And, not that that’s a bad thing or a good thing. But, sometimes as an athlete, you have to try to identify yourself as either straight or not straight, or people will identify you as one or the other. As stupid as that is.

Clothes mark the body “not normal.” Several female athletes also spoke about how their bodies, while useful in sport, disrupted their fashion sense. Their clothes visibly marked their bodies as abnormal, thus contributing to women’s self-conscious feelings about their athletic physiques in social settings. MH who identified as a White, straight, softball player, said,
It’s a vicious cycle. I think my mood, how I’m feeling that day, has something to do with it. So, for me, I don’t like to wear tight shirts because it’s not as comfortable. But, maybe it’s not as comfortable because I am more self-conscious than I think I am. If I wear a looser shirt, that’s still like cute and fashionable. I’m definitely more comfortable in sports clothes. . . . When you’re in season, it’s like you wear your sweats and you go to class and then you go to your game. And, then, it’s like randomly one weekend you’re like, “I’m going to wear normal clothes this day.” It’s more uncomfortable because you don’t wear those clothes that often usually. Going from sweatpants every day to wearing like jeans and a cute top, it’s like you’re more self-aware and more exposed. It’s not what you’re used to because you’ve been wearing t-shirts. So, then, I think it’s like, “Oh, do I have a farmer’s tan right now, or like, a neck line?” If I wore a cute shirt, I’d be like, “Oh, I have this little neck line,” so I’d be like, “What kind of shirt can I wear to like cover it up?”

KS, a White, straight, basketball player who played the post and stood six feet tall, remarked, Oh, I have the hardest time finding clothes. Finding them long enough is usually a problem. And, I usually can’t find shirts that fit over my shoulders or they’re too short in the arms [or] not long enough in the torso. It’s tough. I usually always go with this one girl. We’re pretty much the same size, so we’ll always joke about, “This isn’t big enough.” I mean pretty much my closest friends are all basketball players, so we’re all kind of built the same. When we go shopping, we’ll all be like, “Oh, we want to get cute clothes.” And, we always end up with like athletic clothes. It never like works out to get like cute clothes. We try.
Female athletes’ muscular physiques prevented them from wearing the clothes they preferred, which seemed to increase their insecurity in social settings. BG, a Latina, straight, lacrosse player, offered,

You know those boots that are kind of in style right now? The leather with the zip up the side. I’ve got kind of small feet, so I have to get kind of small pairs. My feet, they’re proportionate for my body, I’m not that tall; but, you know, they’re kind of small. Their 5s or 6s. But, I’ve had to get a pair of size 7 boots because my calves are really muscular, which makes me fast and strong and powerful. But, it also means that I can’t zip the boots all the way up in my own shoe size. So, that’s definitely a time when I was really frustrated because I was muscular. Sometimes, I wear an extra pair of socks. I mean it’s not like that much bigger and it’s like snuggish around the calves so it stays where it’s supposed to be.

BG also suggested, “definitely my legs are too big. Shirts are a lot easier to find than jeans that fit both my legs and [my] butt but also stay on my waist.” She continued explaining,

I’m still shaped like a female. Like, my hips still go out and I don’t have that much muscle around where your waist is, so it’s still small or like normal size. But, I have this whole extra like part of my jeans that’s like loose. They’re really tight everywhere else.

Similarly, BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, argued,

I definitely have a style [that] is like kind of hipster-y. I go to school in [west coast city]. I shop at Urban Outfitters a lot and like Nordstrom. But, for the most part . . . it’s not like I’m not able to buy stuff. I’m not that big. But, definitely like wearing some things that are in-style are flattering on other girls ‘cause they’re skinnier. And, I feel like I do a good job of knowing my body type and what suits it or is flattering. It sucks sometimes
when I want to wear a romper or something that doesn’t look good. But, it’s not the end of the world. There’s plenty of things that do fit me. I still find them.

African American, straight, basketball player, CB, outlined,

When I go look at these clothes on other people, I’ll be like, “Oh that’s cute on her.” So, I want other people to look at me and be like, “that’s cute on her.” A lot of girls here are very strong built and sometimes it’s different for us from like regular-type girls who wear like halter types. We have like a strong build and we have shoulders and look a little muscular I guess. Some girls like their muscular type bodies and I mean I like it, too.

But, it’s just the fact that it looks so muscular in a cute little halter top.

As heterosexual women of color, these female athletes seemed frustrated they could not force their athletic frames into the outfits worn by other heterosexual women. BF, a White, straight, softball player, stated, “some of the stuff I thought was cute and I would wear, but I’m not comfortable enough with my body to wear that.” LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, mentioned how she dislikes how she looks in “skinny jeans because I feel like they don’t flatter my body type as much. I will still wear them. I can make any outfit look cute, but I just don’t feel as secure or confident.” These women went to great lengths to make peace with the fact that their athletic bodies did not fit much of women’s clothing.

Female athletes rarely critiqued clothing manufacturers or distributors for these unflattering clothing options; instead, they blamed their bodies for being out-of-line. For example, Caucasian, straight, swimmer, CY, suggested,

When I go to try on clothes and it doesn’t fit the first time, I’m just like, “Oh, that’s my fault because this is how I’m built,” ’cause I feel like my thighs are really bit, both in muscle and just overall size. I know I have a lot of muscles, but I also feel like they’re
just big in general. Shorts probably wouldn’t look as good on me because they’d be like tighter fitting across my legs or my butt.

And, although Ali, a White and Asian, heterosexual, tennis player, attributed some of her apparel not fitting to “the cut of my pants and who makes them,” she strongly asserted that these issues occur primarily “because my legs are just weird. They’re between regular and longs,” and added, “finding pants that fit is incredibly frustrating! But, I think that’s a problem that everyone has. I hope.”

**Shopping woes.** Socially, female athletes expressed the most body discontentment during shopping excursions. When asked about a moment when she felt uncomfortable with her muscles and overall stature, AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport, athlete, replied,

Shopping. Definitely. Going to the mall is a nightmare. I hate it. Well, I hate it but I love it. It’s really interesting because I might wear a small in a top; but then, we’ll get a dress, and I’ll have to get an extra-large in the same company. And, those things are definitely when the self-consciousness comes in. I’m like, “I’m not sure if this looks good on me. It’s huge. Like, am I really this big?” Jeans are usually the worst to shop for because my legs are long, so I usually have to wear a long. And, then, my thighs and my ass are just big and so that part is tough, too, because that’s where I always rip jeans at. So, just finding a pair that fit is a headache and a half. It’s terrible.

African American, straight, basketball player, CB, shared,

[My family] just comes from people that have big thighs and it’s kinda hard to find jeans that’ll match that and my weight size. So, I have to get clothes that are bigger than what I would get so they fit my thighs, which is nothing to complain about. But, sometimes, it’s hard to get sizes. They don’t really have my size ‘cause I have to go a size up from what
I am. I just feel like wearing jeans is hard for me because I have to make sure that it fits my thighs and my waist is small, so it’s kinda hard doing that. When I go to a shopping place and I wanna buy like a shirt or some shorts, and they got their sizes, you know, the zeros and ones and threes or however they do it. But, I have to get the size that’s higher than the biggest size that they have. They don’t have my size. If they have like a 12, I need like a 14. And, they don’t have that many sizes ‘cause not that many girls get those sizes at those stores, I guess. It’s pretty frustrating ‘cause you have to go around and find out who has a size like that or if you can fit into those kind of jeans. And, for the shirts, it’s not really that hard to find ‘cause I’m kind of slim up there, usually a medium or a large. So, it’s not really hard to find shirts for me besides the ones with the sleeves because my arms are muscly. If they have sleeves on them, I have to probably go another size up unless it’s for sports and supposed to be tight like Under Armor. I usually go online because they usually have the sizes that I need online. They usually tell me they have the bigger sizes online, so I don’t really worry about it as much. But, it is kind of frustrating when I can’t find jeans at the place ‘cause they have a lot of sizes for the slim, skinny, or shorter girls but they don’t have them for taller girls, bigger girls, like me. I just try to find a dress or something. I can never go wrong with a dress.

Though college athletes spend the majority of their time playing their sport, being able to find ensembles that work for their body types outside of sport is essential in creating comfortable social interactions.

These negative experiences even ended some shopping trips altogether. CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, discussed,
On the rare occasion that I do go shopping for normal clothes and not sports gear, I try to play it safe. Like, if I see something and think it probably won’t look good on me, I’m not even going to try it on. That does happen sometimes. And then, other times, like when I do find something like that, and I try it on and it ends up not fitting or not looking good, then I’m just totally done with shopping. Period.

White, bisexual, basketball player, AP, described how she tried to limit her body dissatisfaction when shopping:

If I need to go shopping because I need a few different things, I’m like, “Okay, someone has to go with me because I’m going to lose my mind. Like, one of my friends and I would always go shopping together. . . . If she said like, “AP, come on, get your head together,” that’s when I know that I’m being stupid. She’s the one that I can take everything as face value. If she says like, “Just so you know, you’re getting heavier,” I’ll trust her. So, it helps that I have that person.

Overall, these shopping woes and related clothing issues influenced how some of the women in this study related to their bodies in social settings. When trying on clothes that her body could not squeeze into, CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, announced, “it makes me feel like everything’s not going to fit, and, if I were only skinnier, then it might fit better.” Similarly, LN, who identified as a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, claimed,

I just feel curvier and not necessarily athletic curves. It might be the muscles – can’t see my calves. It also might be the tightness of the waistband. Now that I think about it, that [tightness] affects me a little bit more just because pants are tighter than sweatpants, so it bulges. You feel like you have more fat on your stomach even though you don’t; it’s just how they fit.
These changing body perceptions often led to behavioral adjustments. CB, an African American, straight, basketball player "felt pretty confident [in social settings] because I go in my room and do sit-ups by myself sometimes when I want to tone up my stomach." She noted these exercises were particularly useful when preparing to go out with friends because, "if I want to wear like a half shirt and show my stomach, it’s not looking like I’m pregnant." Being pregnant in this sense presumably refers to women who are evaluated as overweight or fat, which CB wanted to avoid. Latina, straight, lacrosse player, BG, mentioned,

I’ll try and wear things that I know make me look good or look a certain way rather than what’s comfortable ‘cause you always want to impress people that you don’t know or people that you’re meeting. So, I’ll try to do that. It’s not really a problem I would say; it’s not like all I think about when I’m meeting new people. It’s just like a fleeting thought that I have. But, if I was hanging out with friends that I knew wouldn’t care if I wore like a sweatshirt or like a t-shirt that’s not that like form fitting, then I’d do that.

When thinking about their physiques in social environments, female athletes often discussed their body satisfaction in relation to how well their muscular bodies fit nonathletic clothing such as jeans or form-fitting shirts. These discussions often correlated with whether or not their bodies fit hegemonic femininity. And, based on those assessments, the majority of the women in this study felt somewhat insecure about their athletic bodies in social settings.

The Role of Mediated Female Athlete Images on Body Perceptions

This group of female athletes were savvy media consumers. As Caucasian basketball player, MC, who chose not to label her sexuality, discussed,
You know, what the media says influences us whether it be magazines, radio, songs on lyrics or movies. Once I started to see [how the media influenced me], I think that’s when I started to notice it impacted me a little more or I was aware of it more. They understood their bodies did not fit mediated messages about femininity. White, straight, softball player, JS, recognized that, on commercials, “Those people are pretty thin, and, like, I don’t look like that. I’m not that thin. . . . I wouldn’t compare myself to them just ‘cause I weigh a solid twenty pounds more than them. EW, a White swimmer who mentioned being attracted to males, noted, “I don’t necessarily agree with those examples.” Therefore, images of female athletes seemed to resonate with these women and influence how they felt about their bodies. These women explained in their interviews how images of muscular, female, athletic bodies influenced them and described some of the associated repercussions of this cultural influx of women with muscles.

**Images of elite, muscular, female athletic bodies.** Watching female athletes perform either in-person or on television provided women in this study an opportunity to see a female athletic body that resembled their own. Accordingly, several women said these images helped them better understand and appreciate their bodies both in and out of sport. MC, a Caucasian basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, said,

I loved watching the Olympics growing up, whether it be track and field or any athletic sport. Just seeing how strong and how muscular the women were, I wanted to be like that. That, to me, was normal. And, watching even college basketball, like that, to me, was normal. Like, that’s what an athlete should be. So, in my head, when I think athlete, I think they’re strong, they’re muscular, they’re powerful. I guess watching the WNBA, like I watched that and a lot of soccer growing up. Mia Hamm in soccer and probably
Skyler Diggins in basketball. Even watching male athletes, seeing their physique, I guess in my head that started to develop like, “They’re so athletic.” And, in the media, that’s not how they’re always portrayed, which frustrated me, but you can’t do anything about that. As a female athlete, I wanted to work more towards that and actually work towards what male athletes looked like, too.

JP, an African American, bisexual, sprinter, said,

I watched the Olympics and watching those runners, like Carmelita Jeffers who’s a short sprinter, on the level I want to be at, just seeing that, “Oh, wow, our bodies don’t look that different.” Um, just the leanness of it and just the definition in her body. I mean everybody’s body is different. But, just to see how muscular they are and how lean they are as well. To see that my training is producing a certain result, it kind of gives me hope that I’m going in the right direction towards getting there on the professional level. I can’t remember which one, but Carmelita just did a cover for a magazine, she was basically bare naked. You could only see a side view. And, just to be able to see her muscles, I can see that in myself. From the pictures people take of me in different meets and stuff, you can see the definition there, too. I felt a bit motivated and empowered to continue to pursue my dreams because the training that I’m doing, I’m not even on a professional level, yet my body is similar to hers as far as the muscular figure of it. So, it was kind of giving me hope that, “Okay, I am moving in the right direction in terms of my training.

When asked what helped her feel confident in her body, basketball player, KS, who identified as White and straight replied,
I think definitely looking at like DI athletes, professional athletes, you know, they’re not like stick thin. They’re bigger and they’re filled out especially when you see girls who are lifting and stuff. You can see the definition in their legs. And, they have big thighs. And, I personally find that look way more attractive than no muscle at all I guess. I just think of a lot of the girls and just like the DI tournament or just like the UConn girls. They’re all pretty much, their arms, you can tell they’re toned, they’re defined. And, they don’t let anyone push them around. That’s what I look at a lot.

KC, a White, straight, soccer player, stated,

People like Alex Morgan. She’s like the best soccer player right now at least I think. And, she’s in all these magazine photo shoots, so it shows that now the athletic body is becoming to be more of an asset and people want to like put it out there in magazines.

Ali, a White and Asian, straight, tennis player, mentioned, “I’ve definitely struggled with my body image and like, ‘Oh, my thighs are too big,’” also recalled that comparing them to pro tennis on TV during like opens, like that helped me just see the muscle definition. I personally have super muscular legs and no like visible muscles anywhere else. So, seeing Serena Williams and how her leg muscles impact her movement and her agility as compared to someone like Maria Sharapova who’s like fairly thin . . . how it impacts their different playing styles and how they use their strength for their benefit. . . . I definitely watch Serena [because] she’s like close to my height, body type, things like that. I guess it’s more like she’s very muscular all through her body. Like, her body is very similar to mine, so it could be possible for me to like shift and grow my game. I admire just like her dedication and like the commitment that you make to obtain that body.
Seeing muscular, female, athletic bodies seemed to reassure some of these women and ease their apprehension about their athletic bodies in both social and sport settings. They also observed CrossFit athletes who competed with large muscles, and the female athletes in this study wanted to develop similar bodies. BF who identified as a White, straight, softball player articulated,

Since I got into college there’s been a huge boom in women becoming more worried about being strong and being athletic. Like, I mean I remember seeing when CrossFit got real big, you know, these girls are now ripped. And, you know, they’re talking more about healthiness and that’s becoming more of the ideal for some girls. Not all, but I’d rather look, you know, strong and healthy than honestly even like a Victoria Secret model. That’s more of what I’m shooting for than a model ideal or anything like that. I think more of the competitiveness of it than the beauty of it.

They wanted to look strong and toned. As AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, offered,

I mean it definitely started with this whole like this new wave of “strong is the new sexy” campaign that’s going on like the big CrossFit things. Like, that helps. All of the sudden, you see like real people going like that (flexes arm muscles). And, I used to joke with one of my friends that it’s like strong is the new sexy. Guys are like, “Oh, I love your arms,” and me being like, “Who are you talking to? I know you’re not talking to me.” For the first time, I’m not like, “Oh, I want to be skinny.” I’m like, no, I want to be as jacked as her. Like, holy shit!

However, there are also some risks with these images of female athletic bodies. Specifically, the increased number of muscled frames being celebrated might place even more pressure on female athletes to try to construct the perfect or ideal female, athletic body, which
could, in turn, exacerbate some women’s relationships with food, exercise, and the body. AP outlined,

ESPN the Magazine the Body Issue, like that’s awesome. I love that issue and I would kill to be in one of these issues and to have my body like that. . . . It definitely makes me feel almost better and worse. Better because I’m like, “Oh, someone else looks like me. And, worse, because it’s like, “Ugh, maybe if I worked a little bit harder, I could look like that.”

And, JS, a White, straight, softball player, emphasized, “[My teammates] retweet all those health and fitness accounts that are like, ‘Eat Clean and run twenty miles on the treadmill.’” While seeing advertisements and images of women with muscles has been productive for some female athletes’ body image, this cultural phenomenon might eventually become problematic as female athletes feel increased pressure to develop the perfect athletic body.

*The impact of narrow representations of female athletic physiques.* Many of these representations of female athletic bodies continue to reinforce hegemonic femininity, meaning not all female athletic bodies are being visually portrayed. For women in this study whose bodies met White, heterosexual, middle-class, feminine body norms, seeing these representations seemed to help them maintain a consistent body perception across social and sport contexts. In other words, whether they were participating in their sport or spending time with friends socially, the female athletes in this study held similar views of their physical appearance if their bodies met cultural norms and were reflected in sport media. JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player who described herself as “physically fit” and often eluded to small muscles, mentioned, “My body image pretty well stays the same. I mean, on and off the court, you know, it’s all
pretty much the same.” Basketball player, KS, who identified as White and straight, suggesting she was “tall and pretty slim”, believed,

Being an athlete, it’s just been a part of me for so long, it’s kind of what I know best I feel like, and it’s what I’m most comfortable with. I think it kind of just sticks. I still wear I feel like basketball shorts every day even though I’m not in season right now. If the sun’s out, I’m like oh perfect, I can wear basketball shorts. I’m not like in short shorts. I’m not about that. I’m way more comfortable in basketball shorts and a shirt. And, I’m fine with it if I’m the only one on campus wearing a t-shirt and shorts ‘cause, honestly, it’s who I am. If I wear like jeans one day, people are just like, “Whoa, what the heck.” I feel like it’s what I’ve worn so much and so long. And, obviously, it’s not tight fitting. It’s a little more loose and relaxed. I feel way more relaxed when I’m in sweats or basketball clothes.

JS, a White, straight, softball player who identified as “tall . . . muscle[d] . . . not fat,” noted, “I don’t really care what about I look like. If I’m going to wear a pair of sweat pants, [then] I’m going to wear sweats. Tall and lean, White swimmer, EW, who recently completed her eligibility, depicted,

I don’t think my thoughts really changed. I think, especially while I was swimming, I’ve always been pretty confident in my body, so it wasn’t something I ever really worried about. I knew that I could just put something on and I would feel good about how it looked, so I don’t think it changed. I was pretty confident with my body in a crowd, in all different aspects.

Caucasian basketball player, MC, who chose not to label her sexuality, described her body as “athletic and in-shape,” and expressed, “I carry many different hats when it comes to roles in my
life, so I’ve learned to segment off things. I mean throughout the course of the day, I could be wearing ten different hats.” But, MC asserted that regardless of the changing contexts she finds herself in, her body perception remains the same. She continues to feel “toned . . . fit . . . athletic.” Perhaps these five White women’s body perceptions could remain stable across both their social and sport worlds because their physiques met the cultural body standards reinforced through mediated images of female athletic bodies.

These media examples of female athleticism continue to be compared to White, heterosexual femininity, with athletic bodies that closely resemble these body norms being highlighted or portrayed most often. BF, a White, straight, softball player, claimed,

Guys started paying attention to female athletes and softball players and imagining Jenny Fitch walking onto the field that were super good looking and tall and blonde and dark [tanned skin]. I think the expectations of what softball players looked like and how they acted changed by how the sport’s level of popularity and who was being shown changed. I think there’s pros and cons to that. I think that there is a little bit more pressure because I mean watching the college world series this past week with my boyfriend, the thing he pointed out is, you know, a lot of them don’t look gay. The thing that I’ll even point out is that these girls are very pretty, they’re very athletic, they’re very talented. So, I feel like there’s more pressure to look a certain way, to be in shape, to be pretty, to present yourself well. I mean these girls have makeup on, have their hair done up, have bows on. Like I said, people now watch the sport and you’re not saying, like, “That girl is gay,” that’s not the focus anymore.

Because of these select representations of female athletic bodies, some of the women in this study felt pressured to portray themselves as heterosexually feminine. BF stated,
I think the sport getting more popular and the people representing the sport has brought more pros in general. The cons are more of, you know, players pay more attention to how their bodies are and how they present their bodies on the field. I remember being younger not giving two craps about what my hair looks like when I was playing anything like that. I noticed that once I got into college I would put makeup on for a game, not all done up or anything like that. Some girls, it was a process to get ready for a game like it was a process to get ready to go out on a Friday night. I noticed how it changed me. I thought more about makeup and how my hair looked and stuff like that.

This reality also related to some female athletes discussing ways they attempted to distance themselves from images of female athletic bodies that appeared more masculine (read: lesbian). After being asked why she did not want to gain more muscle, JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, responded,

Serena Williams, like, she is a big strong girl, and her body is almost manly. She is still like a pretty girl, but I was thinking and people were saying, you know, she has a manly strong body. She always has had boyfriends in the media, so it’s not like her sexual orientation is in question, or anything like that, it’s just that her body is really big and manly. I don’t want that.

Teammate, CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, provided,

I’ve seen like women that are bodybuilders and they’re really strong like manly. And, I mean I don’t look like that, so I feel confident that I’m not looking that strong, like a man. I still have womanly features to me. So, I mean it gives me confidence that I’m strong, but I still got a womanly-type figure to me. When they have like pects, and they’re like bulging and you can see how the men do it and you can see all the cuts in
their arms, legs, stomachs. But, they just don’t look like girls anymore. It’s just all muscle. No fat. You need a little bit of fat, just a little bit. It can’t be all gone.

As some of these athletes indicated, the media portrayals of women in sport often reinforce appropriately feminine female athletic physiques and marginalize other athletic bodies. Ultimately, these cultural images render some women’s bodies invisible or, at least, less desirable by labeling them masculine. The resulting fear of the lesbian label and being perceived as “too manly” continues to influence female athletes’ attitudes towards their own and other women’s bodies both in and out of sport.

**Summary of Female Athletic Bodies in Sport and Social Settings**

Sport provided a space for many female athletes in this study to disrupt gendered body expectations and develop productive relationships with their bodies. These women explained that certain nuances in the college sport environment, such as the high number of muscular athletic bodies and reduced time for critiquing the body, made it easier for them to accept their physiques. In athletic settings, body perceptions often related to how well female athletes performed athletically and fit their uniforms. When playing well, these women appreciated the sport-specific advantages and improved, strong, physical play their bodies offered. In their uniforms, many women reported feeling mentally prepared to play because of how they looked. Sport helped the women in this study listen to and respect their body’s needs, nourish their bodies by consuming more calories, and extended their body competence to other domains.

However, the athletic world remained a contested space in relation to the development of female athletes’ body image. While sport provided a reprieve from gendered body expectations in some moments, other experiences seemed to almost intensify these pressures. For example, when playing poorly, the emphasis on sport success seemed to heighten women’s focus on their
bodies. Their performance failure provided another reminder of their perceived physical inadequacy. Tight uniforms occasionally related to body complexes while baggy or big uniforms led some women to add feminine touches like bows and makeup to ensure they presented culturally feminine bodies. And, although female athletes often spoke about feeling free in sport to consume more calories, their belief that training demands could erase the effects of overeating, influenced the relationships with food and exercise. In the end, sport seemed to help some women overcome body image issues; however, this space was also problematic because of women’s focus on connecting their bodies to performance.

Socially, a few of the women in this study enjoyed dressing up and wearing feminine, form-fitting clothes and often did so to show off their appropriately sized, feminine muscles. However, the majority of these athletes felt self-conscious about their bodies in social settings and discussed wearing clothes that hid their large muscles. Shopping excursions became nightmares as they rarely found clothes that fit their athletic frames; instead, feminine clothes often marked their bodies as abnormal

Finally, mediated images of elite female athletic bodies appeared to help many college female athletes celebrate their muscular physiques. And, although these representations often highlighted feminine muscles thus reinforcing White, heterosexual, middle-class, feminine bodies as the ideal physique, many of these women attributed their positive body perceptions to their ability to watch similar sizes and shapes on television. Several athletes even suggested they were able to maintain the positive views of their bodies, which had developed in sport, across multiple domains in their lives. It seemed that how women negotiated White, heterosexual, middle-class, feminine, body norms influenced how they perceived of their bodies in both sport and social settings. Many of the women who felt comfortable or uncomfortable in either
environment appeared to do so because of how they perceived of their bodies in relation to the body standards established in each space.

**Discussion of Female Athletic Bodies in Sport and Social Settings**

Female athletes live in two competing worlds that place dueling demands on their bodies (Greenleaf, 2002; Krane et al., 2001). In sport, women must develop strong, toned physiques to be successful competitive athletes; whereas, socially, the same athletes were expected to present a feminine body shape based on White, heterosexual, femininity. In essence, female athletes face a double bind where no matter how they choose to present their bodies, they are disrupting one norm while affirming another. And, regardless of their “chosen” direction, repercussions of deviating from body norms can result in social stigma or rejection (Judge & Cable, 2011). If they celebrate their muscles and prefer wearing athletic clothing, women may have their sexuality questioned. On the other hand, if they want to appear feminine and downplay their muscular physiques, their sport commitment and focus may be critiqued.

The women in this study developed multiple, bifurcated identities and incorporated diverse, context-specific presentations of their bodies. For example, similar to previous research (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalki, & McHugh, 2009), athletes in this study viewed muscularity as beneficial for performance. In a masculine sports world, where women’s athletic accomplishments often are trivialized or ignored, these athletes felt proud of their muscles and celebrated their bodies. Their uniforms contoured their figures and displayed their muscles in ways that some female athletes appreciated. Using a feminist cultural studies framework and intersectional approach helps explain these findings by situating them in the current post-Title IX moment. Some athletes in this study characterized putting on their uniforms as a significant part of their mental preparation for competition; they identified as
athletes and wanted to be respected for their sport accomplishments. Those who adhered to their membership in the sports community also reported that the athletic arena helped them overcome gendered eating expectations that require women to monitor their caloric intake at meals to ensure thinness. Instead, as competent athletes, these women consumed more calories in order to perform well. These findings are consistent with previous research (Greenleaf, 2002; Krane et al., 2004) that suggests female athletes develop two, separate, context-specific body images.

However, while Krane et al. (2004) found that female athletes “put aside” their femininity during sport, several of the women in this study identified their desire to attain hegemonic femininity in all settings. As such, a few of these female athletes, especially those in masculine-perceived sports (e.g., softball, basketball, soccer) wanted to wear revealing sports gear, presumably to embody their identities as feminine, female athletes. Thompson and Sherman (2010) argued that revealing uniforms diminish women’s seriousness as athletes and offered no performance advantages. However, given the historical masculinization of sport, if these women felt they already achieved status as a competent sport performer, some of these women may have viewed form-fitting uniforms as a way to portray themselves as viable heterosexually feminine partners. Conversely, swimmers and tennis athletes complained their uniforms remained too tight and revealing. They discussed how their gear made them more self-conscious when competing. This latter finding supports previous research, which asserted that athletes exhibit body image disturbances associated with their sport clothes (Torres-McGhee, Leaver-Dunn, Green, Bishop, Leeper, & Richardson, 2011) and that tight, uncomfortable uniforms served as a distraction (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Bodey, Middendorf, & Martin, 2013).

Previously, the athletic environment was highlighted for its role in helping some female athletes overcome gendered eating expectations, but a few of these women also discussed in
some detail their unhealthy eating and exercise behaviors in sport. Although these athletes did not mention weight loss behaviors as Krane et al. (2001) and Sundgot-Borgen and Torsveit (2004) found, they did appear to be consuming food to the point of feeling “stuffed,” and like they could not perform effectively. Greenleaf and colleagues (2009) as well as Petrie, Greenleaf, Reel, and Carter (2009) reported the college female athlete population does, in fact, engage in overeating and extreme exercise to control their weight in ways that are less detectable in the college sport environment and may even be celebrated as athlete discipline. Sport is an important site for examining female athlete body image. Steinfeldt et al. (2013) discovered athletes’ body perceptions influenced their performance. Athletes in this study shared similar experiences, which suggests women sport participants’ body image affects not only their social and affective responses but also cognitive processes necessary for performing skilled athletic movements.

Socially, all but three of these women primarily wanted to be perceived as feminine; therefore, if their toned muscles appeared to meet White, heterosexual feminine standards, they wanted to show them off in form-fitting clothing. Otherwise, female athletes described wanting to hide their bodies. Similarly, Howells and Grogan (2012) found female athletes did not want to be seen as too masculine or “manly.” How women hid their bodies appeared to differ based on their racial identities. Heterosexual female athletes of color attempted to distance their bodies verbally and visually from the “powerful athlete” label. They mentioned covering their bodies and often described presenting their bodies in ways that would remove, or at least diminish, assumptions of power, explosiveness, or aggression placed on their racialized bodies. Historically, the bodies of women of color have been eroticized, exoticized or ignored in the media (Leonard, 2014; Rubin, Fitts, & Becker, 2003). The bodies of female athletes of color
have endured further cultural scrutiny as part of an obsession with Black athletic bodies, in
particular. Athletic bodies of color often are distinguished by assumptions of their “innate
physicality” (Andrews, 2001) with descriptions centering around “superhuman” feats of strength,
power and explosiveness (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013). Cultural constructions of racialized bodies
serve to “other” their appearance and perpetuate the systemic marginalization of women of color
in sport. Their muscles are described as powerful and “natural” (read: unattainable), which
might diminish their sport accomplishments by attributing them to inherent physical
characteristics rather than hard work. And, while they can be talented sports participants,
socially, others label them as “unapproachable” and “intimidating,” because of their powerful,
muscled physiques. These categorizations make it less likely for women of color to be
perceived as heterosexually available women (Leonard, 2014). These descriptions render female
athletes of color neither the ideal sportsperson nor ideal woman. Women of color in this study
demonstrated their knowledge of raced and gendered body ideals by attempting to distance
themselves from these cultural labels and hiding their bodies to present a softer, feminine image.
The only athlete of color that suggested she enjoyed and actively displayed her large muscles
socially, despite their inability to fit White, heterosexual, feminine body norms, was JP who
identified as an African American, bisexual, sprinter. It could be that her sport required
revealing clothing, and she felt more comfortable with her muscles because of their frequent
visibility. Or, it might be, as previous research has recognized (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, &
Striegel-Moore, 1997), as someone who claimed a minority sexual orientation and identifies as a
person of color, her contextual and historical experiences allowed her to create a more
productive relationship with her body.
Mediated images of female athletic bodies seemed to play a pivotal role in how these college female athletes perceived their bodies in their sport and social worlds. These female athletes played their sport in the post-Title IX era, a time in which women playing sport at a variety of competitive levels has become somewhat commonplace. As a result, these college female athletes had more opportunities than their predecessors to watch their idols, elite female athletes, on television or at live events. These experiences often are not only available but encouraged by coaches, trainers and other sports personnel. Throughout their interviews, many women claimed the cultural representations of women with muscles helped them accept their own muscularity and redefine the ideal feminine body. But, as indicated by a few of the women in this study, not all female athletic bodies were visually represented in mainstream media. Often, images of female athletes’ bodies highlight White, heterosexual, femininity and present them as sexual objects rather than touting their athletic success (Kane, LaVoi, & Fink, 2013; Kauer & Krane, 2013). The focus, then, shifts to their appearance, specifically their attractiveness, rather than women’s athletic abilities (Daniels & Wartena, 2011). Further, cultural representations of lesbian and bisexual athletes (Bernstein & Kian, 2013) as well as female athletes of color (Leonard, 2014) remain almost completely absent. In relation to these ideas, some of the female athletes in this study felt increased pressure to perform femininity appropriately, meaning according to White, heterosexual, middle-class standards. They wore bows and feared gaining too much muscle. It might also be true that, as mentioned previously, female athletes’ behaviors related to their inability in this post-Title IX era to be acknowledged as feminine, female athletes.

All of the findings in this chapter suggest that female college athletes constantly negotiate their bodies in relation to hegemonic femininity. These judgements and physical comparisons
occur both in and out of sport. Previously, it seemed that sport could provide a safe haven from social body pressures (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013). However, as athletes continue to play in this post-Title IX moment and be accepted for their sporting abilities, two major changes have occurred. On a positive note, many women seem more comfortable with their muscular physiques. However, several female athletes also seem to be experiencing increased pressure to present feminine female athletic bodies in all areas of life to be seen as heterosexually feminine and athletic. In other words, women must do it all, have it all, and be it all in order to be successful members of both their sport and social worlds.
CHAPTER VIII. EXPERIENCES IN THE WEIGHT ROOM

The dueling expectations placed on women’s bodies from the social and sport worlds intersect in the weight room. On one hand, as elite college athletes, they were expected to lift heavy weights and increase their overall muscle mass. On the other hand, as feminine women, cultural body norms required them to develop toned, thin, sexy physiques. Expectations of toned muscles existed in both sport and social contexts though the definitions of appropriate amount and size differed. Many of the female athletes in this study described how divided they felt when participating in team mandated weight lifting sessions. These women described how both they and their teams approached lifting. When female athletes emphasized their sport goals above any others and identified primarily as athletes, they loved lifting or felt weights could prevent future injuries. This group of women often highlighted their team’s commitment to getting stronger and demonstrations of support. However, several female athletes described how their team took a divided stance in the weight room, with some members of the team wanting to lift and other team members disliking their lifting experience. This latter group of players, athletes and teammates who strongly adhered to gendered social norms and privileged their femininity, cheated their sets and repetitions by not completing the required number of lifts.

Lifting for Sport

Several female athletes in this study seemed motivated to lift weights because they viewed sessions in the weight room as one path to enhance their sport performance. When asked why she enjoyed lifting, JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, said, “I want to get bigger for basketball. I’m dedicated to basketball. I’m not worried about the outside world, I’m worried about the basketball world.” White, straight, basketball player, KS, mentioned,
I just wanted to succeed and do well in athletics and just be in shape for season. It seemed like lifting would be a huge factor for us if we wanted to do that. . . . I’m in the post position, and I don’t want to get pushed around. I wanted to get big for my sport. I was putting on muscles.

And, BG who identified as a Latina lacrosse player added,

I understand lacrosse, I play well; but, I’m definitely not the best one on the team. I don’t usually start and sometimes I don’t even get to play, so it makes me know I have to work really hard to keep my spot on the team. And, I think that hard work has kept me on the team more than any skill I may or may not have. So, for me, personally, it’s just about doing whatever it takes not just to physically get stronger but to prove that I’m working hard. I don’t know if squatting like 130 versus like 90 particularly makes me any stronger or more powerful. But, by pushing myself on the weights, it shows the captains, it shows my coaches, and it shows my teammates that at the end of the day even if I’m not the one scoring the goals, I’m the one who worked the hardest. So, for me, that’s what’s been able to push me to do that.

She added,

I kind of justify it by saying I only have four years and now only one to give everything that I can to this game. I play DIII, if I played DI and thought that I had a career in this, then maybe it would be different, but I play DIII. I’m decent. I’m fine. I play a sport every once in a while, but I don’t really have a future in this game after I graduate and that’s okay. But, that’s kind of what I tell myself, “I have four years to give everything I have and after that I can worry about wanting to look the way I want or wanting to look the way society makes me feel like I need to look. But, this is my time to give everything
I have to this game. I have 11 months left and my last season is over.” You can stick out anything for 11 months, you know.

BG also discussed how some of her teammates did not share her belief:

I mean it really frustrates me because we only have 4 years to play. You have the rest of your life to look how you want. Looking pretty on the field doesn’t get you the “W”.

You know, that won’t help you win.

These athletes seem to understand that lifting weights would result in them appearing less culturally feminine. But, they chose to spend time working hard in the weight room anyway because their performances in sport apparently mattered more than the consequences they believed they would face socially.

Some of the women who lifted for sport reasons suggested they did so because they believed improving their strength would prevent future injuries. LN, a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, acknowledged she lifted “high reps, low weights mostly protect from injury . . . doing a lot of lifts that support the shoulder and the opposite muscles so I can protect the shoulder.” Teammate, Ali, a White and Asian, straight, tennis player, said,

I would definitely say injury prevention is the biggest thing for me. When I go in, I’m not necessarily lifting for strength. My first year, when the team mentality was like, “Yeah, we have a lift workout, but we never go do it,” I just had a ton of overuse injuries that season. [Strength trainer] develops workouts that use the muscles that are like opposite to what we use in tennis. So, for me, like for peace of mind, if I’m putting in the time now to strengthen the muscles that are like counter to what I’m doing in tennis, I won’t get hurt. But, if I do get hurt, it won’t be because I didn’t exert the energy to help protect myself. So, that’s my mentality going in to the weight room personally.
As she discussed her rationale for lifting while injured, African American, bisexual, sprinter, JP, announced she focused on,

Strengthening the muscles that weren’t hurt to maintain those. . . . It’s never been about my body’s appearance itself. It’s more about how to maintain my fitness level so that, when I’m healthy, I can make a smooth transition back to competing.

Often, these women talked about how much they enjoyed being in the weight room and felt their teammates demonstrated a commitment to improving their strength as well.

**Lifting to enhance sport performance.** Female athletes who viewed lifting as a necessary component of their sport experiences, discussed that they enjoyed lifting because they felt stronger. White, straight, tennis player, KSW, said, “I like lifting. I like to be strong, and I want to get stronger all the time ‘cause I don’t feel like I’m strong enough.” Mexican, straight, swimmer DC suggested, “I love the way it makes you feel like a badass. Feeling my muscles work happens more in the weight room. I like it. It makes me feel like I’m getting stronger and getting fitter.” Similar to previous expressions of female athletes feeling grateful their bodies separated their fitness levels from their peers, CY, a Caucasian, straight, swimmer, articulated, “I really do enjoy weightlifting. It makes me feel, you know, strong. And, like, how many girls can actually do this?” KS who identified as a White, straight, basketball player, recalled,

In high school, I was a scrawny little 6’0 girl. Clumsy. I hadn’t really grown into my size, and I just remember one of my coaches being like, “You just need to get bigger.” And, at first, I was like, what does that mean? I came to college and I realized I love to lift. So, I tried to pretty much just lift and lift and lift and really kind of bulk up.
White, straight, tennis player, KSW, stated, “I like lifting. I like to be strong and I want to get stronger all the time ’cause I don’t feel like I’m strong enough.” MC, a White, basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, mentioned,

Sometimes, some of the girls would comment, “Oh wow, you’re looking really jacked. You’re looking really muscular and toned.” When it was said to me, I was like, “Yeah!” Some of the other girls were like, “Yeah! Good. We’re athletes. We should be.” We were taking pictures flexing and thought it was cool. I would flex. I would get excited. I think it’s awesome! I think it’s a huge compliment to me.

With an increase in strength came an increase in confidence levels for some athletes. As White, straight, softball player, MH, depicted,

It felt like lifting made us faster. I don’t know if it did, maybe it was just because we were in shape so we were able to go longer. We kind of like looked like we were in shape, or we just perceived it that way. So, then, we’d go against teams and we’d be like, “We do CrossFit every Saturday! They don’t have anything on us!” Like, other teams looked lazy and maybe it’s just because we did work really hard that we’d look at other teams like that. But, they’d just be going through the motions or just like walking places instead of running. We had big girls on our team, but they just looked more in shape. Like, they were still, you know, bigger girls. But, they just, like after lifting and doing all of the conditioning that we had done, they just seemed more fit in comparison to other teams.

Although the appearance-related gains occasionally emerged when these women conveyed their love for lifting, athletes quickly affirmed those improvements, while valued, occurred as a by-
product of their sport-specific focus. LN who identified as a Caucasian straight tennis player stated,

[I] just like feeling stronger, just the feeling after a good weight lifting session, and then the next day when you are super sore, and you’re like, “Yes, I’m getting stronger!”

There’s also appearance issues related to that, too. It’ll make my body look better with more muscle mass. I guess it’s the transformation of taking body fat and changing it into a lean body mass and just tightening up different body areas that makes you look even tighter and feel stronger at the same time. I don’t think I lift for my appearance. I always follow the tennis workout. It’s always performance related when I do it, and the appearance factor is just bonus for weightlifting.

White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, AP, mentioned, “I can back squat 275 no problem, like my ass looks really good. I’m okay with that.” And, DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, suggested, “I LOVE lifting. It’s something I enjoy. Mainly, it’s not just the body image, it’s like feeling strong.” These women understood how their bodies were expected to look in social situations, however, when confronted with the dueling demands in the weight room, this group of female athletes focused on increasing their strength and achieving sport-related benefits.

Some of these women also appreciated how lifting made it possible to see the visible changes in their bodies and improvements in their performance. When asked why she enjoyed lifting, White, straight, softball player, MH, replied,

‘Cause it was challenging, and you could feel your improvements in strength in the game. Like hitting, your legs just felt stronger, like your connection with the ball, ‘cause you use your legs so much. And, then even just throwing, it felt easier.
AP articulated, “I like seeing the physical evidence of how I lift and what I can lift.” In responding to a similar question, MC, a Caucasian basketball player who chose not to label her sexuality, noted,

I’m not like the strongest athlete. Well, I used to not be as strong until I really started lifting and applying myself. And, to me, that made me more physical. I wasn’t as scared of contact. I felt like I was stronger, more powerful. And, also, with speed, I’m not the fastest, so I love speed and agility work because I know that’s something I struggle with. I know what I used to be and what I am now has changed a lot.

Whether lifting to improve their sport performance or to feel stronger, these female athletes clearly enjoyed participating in weight room workouts with their teammates. Although not all of these women portrayed a positive body image in every sector of life, the weight room appeared to provide a body positive reprieve from the intense appearance-related pressure they faced in other arenas.

Committed team attitude. A group of female athletes described their team attitude in the weight room as committed; everyone on the team wanted to improve their strength. AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, expressed,

Volleyball definitely was probably one of the most positive experiences I’ve had. Like, all of the girls worked hard. I guess, when you wear that much spandex, you have to be comfortable with your body, but they all came to work hard. They all like really enjoyed it and were all trying to work hard and get better when it came to the weight room especially.

JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, portrayed,
It’s definitely like a lead by example type of thing. We’re partnered up, each of us has a partner. Like, if your partner is going hard, it’s hard to be like, “Oh, I don’t want to lift that.” You know, that’s a bad time; and, for the most part, we’re working hard for each other as much as we are for ourselves. It helps having a partner to kind of push you, giving encouragement, you know, “We got this.” Just remind them, like, there’s bigger things than here in the weight room. You know, there’s stuff on the court we’ve got to handle. It’s ultimately about, like I said, winning games, so being in the weight room is just a piece of that.

Ali, a White and Asian, straight, tennis player, characterized a changing team attitude towards lifting:

I think that our team attitude towards lifting has been really good actually. In the past it, I guess the commitment hasn’t really been to do whatever it takes to improve and protect ourselves from injury. So, I think they understand that and have really committed to that. But, in years back, three of us were on schedule and would actually go lift and then everyone else was kind of like, “Eh, I don’t want to go do that,” so they didn’t go lift. It’s kind of been really refreshing having this new team take on that responsibility and really commit to going.

Teammate, LN, who identified as a Caucasian, straight, tennis player, felt like one reason this year’s team seemed more committed in the weight room was because, “we have an accountability system, a google document, where we’ll report every time we lift. That has been, I think, a big help because everyone can see when you’re in there and if you’re not.” Competing with one another to improve the amount of weight being lifted provided one sign of their collective commitment. KC who identified as a White, straight, soccer player, explained,
When we’re maxing out and, you know, you kind of pick girls that you usually compete with. They’re usually at your level or they’re in your position. And, me and the other captain were on a platform together. She maxed out at this weight, and we both couldn’t get the weight. Then, she got it, and she just turned at looked at me. It was just like, okay, now she got it, I have to get it. And, you know, it’s that competitive vibe. But, once we both got it, we both were really happy for each other and wanted to go on. And, she got an even higher weight. And, I told my strength coach, “I want to try that.” And, she was like, “Yeah, if I got it, you try it. Go for it!” So, it’s just like competitive between us, but still also wanting the other person to do well.

White, straight, softball player, MH, outlined,

We were really into it. We did Crossfit every Saturday before practice at like 8 a.m. I hate it, and I think it’s ruined my knees for life. A lot of us didn’t want to do it, but then once we got there and we were doing it, we were like, “Heck yeah!” Like, we weren’t necessarily going against each other, but we were just going against ourselves and like teams we would play even though, you know, they weren’t present. It was just kind of like we’re doing this to win or do better. And, last week, we did blah, blah, blah, and this week we’re going to do more or longer or whatever the workout was. So, it was very competitive.

Although no one is perfect or committed all the time, JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, outlined,

We all, obviously have our lazy moments, but, like last week, coaches can’t make us lift in the weight room during finals, but we still all went to the weight room. They gave us a sheet of lifts. A couple of our girls are like, “Oh, I’m only going to do this and this, two
things.” I’m like, “Well, we could at least try to do six things. I mean, you can pick what you want, but at least try to get six workout pieces in.” As everybody was doing more exercises, it kind of made the two that were only going to do two exercises, do more exercises. So, we ended up getting the full list. So, it kinda led into that. It was kind of a positive, you know, rub off of everybody else wanting to work hard, so they were like, oh, I should probably work harder and lift more, too.

Teammates also provided support for one another during their lifting sessions. When asked why she felt her team had such a positive experience in the weight room, AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport athlete, replied,

I guess, for us, it was really encouraging other people. If someone was going for a max, we’d be cheering them on. We would help each other with different lifts just like encouraging people to keep going and definitely not give up after like a set or two when it was hard just to continue on.

As she characterized her team’s attitude towards lifting, CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, outlined,

It’s not like competing, it’s more like encouraging people to go up. We just want people to like succeed in the weight room ‘cause we know it’s a lot of girls in here that’s skinny, and we know that [head coach] wants them to bulk up a little bit. And, they haven’t really lifted the weights in high school, so we try to help the younger girls try to move up or push the weight one more time. But, it’s not really a competition in there. We just want everyone to get strong any way that they can.

MH, a White, straight, softball player, claimed,
We have a supportive environment because we’d like cheer each other on. And, if someone was like struggling, we’d do what we could to like help them. There would be times where someone just couldn’t flip a freaking tire. So, then, we’d have like another teammate go over there and either like cheer them on and push them or physically just help them flip it. It was just about improving and lifting more.

In a specific show of support, JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, depicted, [CB] is really strong. Recently, you know, we did our max’s and stuff. So, towards the end, we were pretty much done except for [teammate] was pretty much the last because she was so strong. And, we’re all over just watching her, like, “Okay, girl. You get it,” just encouraging her to keep going because it’s exciting to see how strong somebody actually is. We were just helping her up.

Teammate, CB, acknowledged, “They’ll like be cheering me on, like, “Okay strong lady,” and “You’re so strong.” It’s kind of like a compliment. It’s like motivating. I know they’re saying it ‘cause I am strong.” Ali who identified as a White and Asian, straight, tennis player provided one way her teammates demonstrated their support:

We approach it kind of like practice, so we all have buddies or even groups. We go in and there’s like 4 or 5 of us, and it’s always like a positive environment. Like, if you’re in the last set and you just go, “I can’t do 10 pounds in the other set, so I’m just going to bump myself down to like 7.5 or like 5,” it’s just like, “Yeah, whatever you need to do to finish.” Like, it’s always encouraging and, if like one of our girls doing bench presses can do like 15 on each side and I’m over here with like 5’s struggling away, it’s not like, “Oh you’re super weak.” But, it’s just like you’re improving because last week you were
at 2.5 and now you can do 5s. So, it’s very much looking at the improvement, which is actually really nice.

These moments helped female athletes who lifted for sport reasons to feel comfortable adjusting their weight as needed since presumably everyone on the team wanted to improve their strength and resisted judging each other. JP, an African American, bisexual, sprinter, conveyed,

I just follow the training, and I just listen to my body. So, sometimes, I feel like I can just lift any weight I can put on the bar. But, at other times, my body will feel tired. Like, for instance, this weekend we just had a two-day meet and my body was expending a lot of energy during those two days and then we’d only have one day off. So, this morning, when we were lifting, I didn’t lift as heavy as I would normally lift. Not that I couldn’t lift it, but because my body was tired. I don’t press my body more than what it wants. If I have 70% of a 100, I give the 70. But, I don’t try to give 100 if I only have 70. That would be detrimental to me in the end.

African American, straight, basketball player, CB, discussed,

Our strength and conditioning coach gives us our cards with our weight limits that we can go. And, sometimes, it’ll be too high and I can’t really lift it myself. I just base it on what I like and what I feel. And, if I like feel a burn, I stay that way, and I go up like 5 pounds or 10 pounds. I really just base it off how I’m feeling at that time.

Changing anti-lifters’ attitudes. The majority of athletes who enjoyed lifting spoke about the importance of increasing their muscle size for sport performance, but, occasionally, a member of the team did not lift as hard or view the weight room from the same perspective. KSW, a White, straight, tennis player, identified, “A couple people will complain because I
guess they don’t really care to get stronger or they’ll like complain of an injury or something.”

DC, a Mexican, straight, swimmer, explained that some of her teammates completely hate lifting. They’re doing like light weights and they’re like all they do is complain like, “I’m going to be so sore. This is so hard.” Or like, “We’ve already run, why do we have to lift for an hour?” Just like complaining. I think it depends on the person.

Some of these comments appeared to be related to feminine body norms. JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, stated, “There’s a couple of girls that are a bit reserved because they are strong. They’re like, ‘I don’t want to get any stronger. I don’t want my arms being too big.’” BG, a Latina, lacrosse player, explicated,

It’s kind of hard because playing lacrosse, like the kind of stereotype is like strong, built, a lot of upper body. I think a lot of that is true because the stronger your upper body is, the stronger your passes are and stuff like that. But, a lot of girls don’t want to look like that. . . . I mean sometimes it can be a little intense because obviously those of us who are willing to sacrifice [appearing feminine] are normally the same group of people who also really, really want to win and really, really go far. It’s always that fine line of trying to like push your teammates who are also some of your best friends to like make themselves better to make the team better. Or, kind of letting them look the way they want ‘cause it is their body, and they should have control over it.

In these moments, this group of female athletes discussed how they tried to help their teammates feel more comfortable and committed to weight lifting. White, straight, soccer player, KC, offered,
We just like pump each other up. We’re almost kind of like boys sometimes where we’ll be like, “Yaaaa, good job!” When we’re testing, when we’re maxing weights, you want to get as much weight as you can, so we come at it different places. . . . There aren’t girls who are like, “Oh, well I just want to do body weight or I want to do really low weight and like 20 reps, so I don’t bulk up,” because, yes, we’ll bulk up some, but we’re still girls and we know there’s kind of a limit. Unless we were on like steroids, we’re going to stop getting bigger at some point.

KC and her teammates seemed to reinforce these gendered body ideals to help each other feel more comfortable in the weight room. Other athletes tried to more directly confront or challenge these assumptions. White, straight, basketball player, KS, said, “We would try to like switch up our working partners to get more excitement going. It was just kind of hard to get some of them going.” More specifically, Latina lacrosse player, BG, tried,

I try and frame it more as like, “Hey, you’re doing great. You could probably go heavier, like I know you can do that.” I try and make it more positive, encouraging them almost as if I think they’re not lifting more because they don’t think they can do it even though I know that’s not the reason. So, I try and frame it like, “Hey, you’re doing awesome. If you want to like lift more, I’ll definitely spot you. I can help you.” Stuff like that to try and encourage them or to like let them know that I know what they’re doing, especially as an upperclassman to say like, I see what you’re doing, you can’t get away with that. But, in like a nice way. It doesn’t always work. People will still be like, “No, I’m okay” or “This is the heaviest I can go” or “No thanks.” I mean sometimes it’s received and they’ll be like, “Okay.” Sometimes, they’ll give you that look that they’re letting you know that they know what you’re doing and what you’re actually saying, and they’ll kind
of begrudgingly pick up that heavier weight. And, sometimes, they’ll just pretend to like, they’ll kind of play the game, too. They’ll be like, “No, this is really the heaviest I can go. I can’t go any heavier. But, like, thanks for your help. Thanks for your encouragement.”

A recipient of similar attempts from her teammates, BL, a Half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, remarked, “Some people are upperclassmen and seniors that are like really trying to work hard ‘cause it’s their last year. They’re like, ‘C’mon guys, do everything.’”

**Demonstrations of Adhering to Feminine Body Norms**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the weight room was a contested space. On one hand pressures from sport made some of these women feel they needed to lift heavier weights and increase their body size. On the other hand, socially, female athletes were expected to present bodies that matched hegemonic femininity. As a result, some of the female athletes in this study suggested they either did not enjoy lifting or only wanted to lift specific body parts for a precise number of repetitions using an exact amount of weight they determined acceptable. In other words, they identified as feminine women and often wanted to portray physiques that met White, heterosexual definitions of femininity. They wanted to feel toned rather than “big” or “bulky.” Half Filipino half Caucasian, straight, basketball player, BL, outlined, I know like going to the weight room, I don’t want to get any bigger. Like, I don’t want my arms getting bigger. My arms have gotten litte since I haven’t lifted in months. But, when you’re at your peak like right before season, I’m just like, “Ugh, my arms are big.” They’re strong; but, like, to me, they just look like big. Other girls have like more definition. Like, when I flex, you can see your muscles, but I just think I have more fat on my arms. I think like I’m just more muscular like I’m just bigger boned, so I just get a
lot bigger. I didn’t like it. I just felt like they were fat. Even though I knew they were stronger from lifting, I just felt like they were fatter, so I just don’t like lifting arms. And, I feel like, in my shoulders, when we were doing shoulder press, I’m like (BL groans), “I don’t want to.”

CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, suggested,

I actually like lifting, but not a lot of weight. I mean a lot of weight is good, but not to the point where it’s just like you’re about to get real bulky. I just like toning it up; keeping it toned just the way it is. I don’t like maxing and trying to squat grown people and all that stuff. I just want to stay toned in how I am and just be strong.

KS, a White, straight, basketball player, noted,

I know specifically one girl, she didn’t want to get big. That was one thing she was afraid of, like, bulking up and all that. And, a couple other girls, you could just tell by comments of like, “Oh, having to do it again,” or “I’m so done with lifting.” I just don’t think they saw the benefit of it, and they just looked at it as more of a waste of time. Early in the morning, it’s hard to be so motivated, but you could just kind of tell by their attitude about it or just like skipping reps or skipping sets, like, it was just little things like that.

Caucasian teammate, MC, who chose not to label her sexuality, agreed, “[Teammates] were saying, ‘I don’t want to bulk up. I don’t want to get big.’ Like, they would always do like super light weights ‘cause they thought doing heavier weights would make them bulk up.” She recalled,

We were over there lifting, and we were there with a bunch of football guys and like some of the girls, their minds changed on what they were doing. So, they took out the
major lift of the day, which is deadlift. It’s my favorite lift, so I was over there pulling as much weight as I could. And, they had skipped it altogether because they felt like they just didn’t want to do it. Too many guys in the gym. So, they did a couple of the minor lifts we had that day and then they just left. They were in there for about ten minutes of our lifting session ‘cause they didn’t want to do it. I mean everyone else is in there for half an hour or 45 minutes. And, then, even the girls that were doing it, they’re like, “Oh this is too heavy.”

TH, a White, straight, soccer player, mentioned,

Our team, usually, pretty much, wants to get stronger, not necessarily bigger. Everybody wants to be stronger. We usually weigh ourselves every day so that [our] athletic trainers can keep track, so if someone’s getting dehydrated or losing too much, they know. We see it every single day, and I would say as long as our weight’s staying steady, which it usually is because we run a lot, everybody’s pretty positive and happy. There are maybe a few people who aren’t good at lifting or that don’t like it as much, but the majority of people are like pretty into it and want to improve.

This point was supported by athletes who enjoyed lifting as well. For example, JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, announced, “[I’m] small and probably won’t ever reach that point, you know, so I’m just going hard. I’m not every really worried . . . because I’ve never reach the point where I’m like, ‘Wow, I’m too big.’”

These beliefs appeared to stem from many of these athletes’ understandings of gender expectations. As BG, a Latina, straight lacrosse player identified,

Like, the more muscular you are as a male athlete, like the more macho you are, the more manly you are. It’s viewed as a really positive thing. And, also to be a male athlete, you
need those traits, so they really kind of line up. Whereas, it’s not like that for a female athlete.

She elaborated,

So, we’re supposed to do low reps, high weight, and a lot of girls won’t do that. They’ll just do low weight, low reps because they don’t want to build that muscle, and they don’t want to look like that. There’s always kind of this divide between those of us that are kind of willing to sacrifice, I guess, looking like everybody else. Those who are willing to sacrifice that and those who I guess have appearance as more of a priority. . . . I understand wanting to look pretty and thin and like everybody else. Like, I get that, too. I’m still a girl. . . . I think it can be kind of tricky in the weight room. It’s kind of a hard place for my team.

White, straight, soccer player, TH, outlined a specific weight range she wanted to maintain when lifting weights. When asked why she disliked these added pounds gained in the weight room, she replied,

I don’t think much about if I’m getting fat, so I guess I felt like I was starting to look manly. Like, I’ve seen girls that I think look too big, you know, like body builder types, or whatever, and I don’t like that. I guess I was afraid that people would stop seeing me as a strong girl, and start seeing me as butch. I’ve seen other people, like, other teammates and people that have that look. I guess my brothers are muscular and stuff, so I was always between wanting to be strong like them and not wanting to look totally like them.

As she explained why she did not always want to lift heavy weights, CB, an African American, straight, basketball player, stated,
I think being female also impacts me ‘cause we have to work harder, I think. I guess you can say that men have it naturally. When they work out, it seems like their muscles and how they looked toned, it comes faster. When girls have more meat, they have to tone up. . . . If we don’t, it might mess our body up. I feel like that all the time when I’m trying to fit in some clothes. I don’t want to be that muscular, big person that I don’t look cute in clothes or cute in anything else. I still want to keep my feminine side.

JSharp, a White, heterosexual, basketball player, acknowledged that the connection between muscle size and appropriately performing femininity impacted female athletes differently depending on their overall body size.

I mean, I think it’s kind of hard to tell what that line is. It’s obviously different for each person. I don’t know. Like, people who are obviously bigger, they can get bigger and not look so manly. Some people, I feel, are more successful at building bigger muscles than others. Some get strong, they’ll be able to lift a lot, just won’t have big arms. I’m smaller in body type. I’m never going to be like big, or my arms aren’t going to be huge, like, my calves are never going to be huge. I’m never going to have huge muscles. So, I think if my arms got too big looking, I would look manly, so I think it definitely depends on your height, how big you are already. I don’t necessarily want to get too big. I don’t want to look like a man. It’s just one of those things. You want to go out in public without having people look at you and think you’re too much like a man. . . . It’s kind of hard to tell [if you’re muscles are too big], really, until you are there, and it’s like, “Wow, this is as far as I can go before I start looking manly.” Well, people will think you’re a dude.
As she realized, these gender expectations and body-related stereotypes often were conflated with sexuality. JSharp continued,

Obviously, if you like guys, you’re heterosexual, they might think you’re [gay], so I think it’s definitely a stereotype issue. And, then, other people might not find you attractive. For me, it’s more of, I don’t want to look like a man. I don’t want other people thinking, “Oh, she’s like a man” . . . and all the things that come with that, like, “Oh, she looks like a dude.”

White, straight, soccer player, KC, shared,

You don’t get mad if someone says you’re gay, but it’s just like why does that even matter? . . . I feel like that’s kind of big in athletics. . . . I’m like you can be just like a normal girly-girl or you can be not straight. Like, it doesn’t matter. We all just like to play sports. That kind of annoys me.

Accordingly, the stakes of adding muscle to their bodies might be higher for female athletes who identified as heterosexual. In this study, eight of the seventeen athletes who identified as straight or heterosexual admitted they monitored themselves in the weight room because they feared “getting too big” or being perceived as manly. On the other hand, the three athletes who either identified as bisexual or chose not to label their sexuality described some of their teammates as sharing some of these connections, but asserted they enjoyed lifting weights and adding muscle. Based on these results, an athlete’s sexuality and desire to meet White, heterosexual, feminine expectations appears to influence their attitudes in the weight room.

These gendered beliefs about body size influenced many of these women’s lifting behaviors. AP, a White, bisexual, two-sport, athlete, said, “If it was hard, sometimes the girls would just stop the lift.” Caucasian straight, LN, highlighted,
In previous years, I feel like our other teams have been more out of shape as far as just higher body fat percentage and not willing to work as hard to get stronger. . . . Previous years, they wouldn’t even go to the weight room; and, if they did, it was when the coach was there and they had to go. Some would lift but maybe not all days of the week. Some might go just to the elliptical even though we were supposed to be getting stronger. . . . If they did workout, I think it was much more appearance-oriented and light lifting and running.

KS, a White, straight, basketball player, detailed,

I just feel like, as girls, we didn’t really push each other. I would workout during the summer here alone. And, I honestly prefer to lift by myself, and I like to workout with guys because I tried to lift more than all of them. So, I’m a little more motivated by guys than by my team I guess when it came to lifting. The guys were a lot stronger. They got way more pumped up about lifting that the rest of my team did. I feel like for females, too, they don’t really like to lift as much as males. Me and a couple others, we would get really excited for lifting but it’s like, when not everyone’s in it, it’s like, okay well I’m just going to hangout with the people that are pumped up to do this.

Other athletes avoided lifting some body parts. BL, a half Filipino half Caucasian basketball player, announced,

The most self-conscious part about me is probably my legs, so I don’t have an issue trying to get my legs more toned or like getting my butt harder or like stronger. And, some upper body isn’t bad like obviously like abs and stuff. But, just too much lifting on my arms and my shoulders, and I just don’t like it. I think everyone on our team is like that for the most part. Everyone likes leg more than arm day or upper body.
Ali, an Asian and White tennis player, admitted, “I definitely focus on my legs more, like when I’m actually trying to build muscle mass. . . . I focus more on [my legs] in terms of strength, which, now that I say that, I should also be focusing on my arms.” Some of these women also mentioned cheating on their lifting sets or cutting the number of repetitions the strength coaches asked them to complete. BL, a Half Filipino Half Caucasian, straight, basketball played, stated,

We’ll cut corners. It’s bad, but it’s just what happens. It’s not that hard to cheat. We do so many sets and like reps. If you just did eight instead of ten or something like that. Or, like we always split up into groups when we’re doing like supersets and stuff. You can just do one less round. I’m guilty of it.

Caucasian basketball player, MC, who chose not to label her sexuality, explained,

[Sam], our strength coach, has your workouts written down, so you know what weights you’re supposed to be doing. And, so they would look at it and they’d be like, “Oh this is going to be too heavy. What weight are you doing? Oh perfect, I’ll do that weight, too.” And, they would just buddy up and all be doing the same exact weight because it was easier. They didn’t have to take off and put on as much weight according to like who was lifting.

Situations where female athletes performed fewer repetitions than required differed in two major ways from the events mentioned previously in which some of the women in this study monitored their health and adjusted their weights accordingly. First, the group of athletes who cheated during their lifting sessions reported being secretive and trying not to let anyone see them commit these acts. Second, whereas the previous group of women wanted to ensure their health and well-being during the season, athletes who cut their sets or omitted repetitions, appeared to be doing so because they did not want to lift heavier weights and risk adding more muscle to
their frames. One lacrosse player, BG, who identified as Latina and straight, affirmed this intent when she expressed her disapproval of teammates behaviors, stating, “It really frustrates me that my teammates cheat when they lift because I am willing to like make that sacrifice for my sport and not worry about what I look like.” So, while similar behaviors might have occurred, the frequency and intent of these actions differed significantly.

**Strength Coaches Rely on Gender Norms**

The weight room often is considered a masculine space where bodies constantly are on display. Some strength coaches appeared to be guided by gendered assumptions about female athletes’ behaviors in the weight room. Latina lacrosse player, BG, declared,

We hate the strength coach. He’s kind of an asshole. . . . We were doing um snatches, which is like the Olympic lifting, for a while and it’s a difficult thing to do, especially because like normal bars are 45 pounds. That’s obviously not a heavy weight, but, if you’ve never done it before, that’s a heavy weight as like a girl. And, so people weren’t getting it and people weren’t understanding, and he took it as a really big lack of effort and he just kind of gave up on us. So, when we came in, he would be like, “Your weight lifting is on the board, go lift.” And, then, would just like ignore us. We’re like your pay check is coming out of our team funds, and he would like ignore us. Oh, and, we were doing squats and he’d be like, “Do what you would do at the beach when a cute guy walks by.” And, we’re like, “What? What are you talking about?” He’s like, “You would stick your butt out. You would obviously stick your butt out. You guys are girls.” We’re like, “Have you met any of us?” Just stuff like that.

A few coaches carefully reinforced masculine ideologies in their facilities to ensure athletes understood appropriate behaviors. TH, a White, straight, soccer player, elaborated,
There’s no complaining though, so, if you’re caught complaining, you get reprimanded. Like, if you said, “This sucks”, or “I don’t want to do this today”, or, “I can’t believe they’re making us lift this much”, or anything against the coaches, or, you say you can’t do something. There’s so many different ways to complain, but all of those fall under the category.

Hegemonic masculinity requires that people avoid questioning authority or risk being labeled “whiny” or a “complainer.” In this case, TH’s strength coach appeared to support dominant ideologies.

On the other hand, some strength coaches employed gendered notions of appropriate body sizes to reassure female athletes and help them feel more comfortable lifting heavy weights. For example, White, straight, soccer player, KC, expressed,

I’ve had two different strength coaches since I’ve been at [university], so one was a girl, one was a guy. I think both of them would agree that lifting works to help your explosiveness. And, they always say, you know, it’s not about being big and it’s not about lifting the most weight all the time, it’s about doing what you need to do to get more explosive and to get faster and quicker. So, I think when they tell us all of that, we’re not thinking about getting big. We’re thinking about how lifting is helping us on the field. If that makes sense.

She insisted that she really appreciated

Our current strength coach, even though he’s a boy, told us, “I understand that you’re girls, you don’t want to bulk up. But, we’re going to do running also that’s going to lengthen your muscles and you’re girls, you have estrogen, you’re not going to get huge.” So, I think we’ve all just kind of trusted in that and just did our workouts.
Their reinforcement strategies helped female athletes feel proud of their accomplishments in the weight room. KC’s teammate, TH, who identified as White and straight, said,

I’m one of the strongest ones on the team, and our strength coach will make comments and get really excited when I can lift a lot, or like, you know, I guess there’s positive feedback from there. Like, do the best you can, be the strongest you can, and the fastest, and most fit. He’ll like, tell us, “If you’re only lifting this much this week or last week, then you need to be lifting more this week.” So if we’re using 25 pound dumbbells, he’ll make us write it down, what we lifted that week, and then he’ll get on us if we’re not using more the next week. Then, also, if someone is lifting a lot, like doing 35s or 40s, on military press or something, he’ll like, call them out and get real excited. And, it’s kind of like everyone else wants to do that, too, and get the positive recognition. So, this Spring, it got real positive, and the energy level was good. Everybody is positive and the energy level is usually pretty high because they turn music on, and we’ll be yelling and stuff like that.

CY, a Caucasian straight swimmer, discussed,

They’re all, you know, 24 year old guys, so they can’t really say anything about my body. But, I mean they’re really encouraging in the weight room when you’re lifting heavy weights. You know, it’s more of a positive reinforcement type thing. Like, a couple weeks ago, we were lifting and we were doing one of the Olympic lifts and I got up to a pretty heavy weight and I did every rep. And, my strength coach comes up to me and he was like, “Yeah, that’s really good. You’re getting a lot stronger. How ‘bout you bump it up to the next weight?” And, then I tried and I failed. And, he was like, “At least you
tried. You got it next week. We’ll try again next week.” [He’s] like encouraging, always pushing us to get the heavier weights and at least try new things.

African American basketball player, CB, explained,

I was one of the girls up there for strength or being most improved and, our strength coach gives it to one girl on each team in front of the whole athletic department. So, I was one of them. It’s just acknowledging your effort and performance. I think it’s about your max if you went over it, so I think it’s really based on our performance and kind of effort in the weight room. For me, it felt pretty good ‘cause I was up there with a couple of volleyball girls. I mean it felt good that we’re all somewhat strong.

Female athletes in this study described most of their strength and conditioning coaches as young White men. These men often engaged with female athletes in ways that suggested their expectations of women in the weight room were related to dominant feminine body ideals. It seemed this tactic was used to reassure this subgroup of female athletes they could successfully navigate social and sport expectations in the weight room. Strength coaches attempted to teach them they could lift to improve their sport performance while still meeting hegemonic femininity.

**Summary of Experiences in the Weight Room**

Many of the women in this study described the weight room as a contested space among team members. Hegemonic femininity and the athletic body ideal converged at this site, requiring female athletes to actively negotiate their own appearance standards and body perceptions before “choosing” how to engage in lifting weight. This perceived choice was always and already constrained, however, by the dueling norms outlined in chapter seven regarding the demands of sport and social settings. Some female athletes seemed to enjoy lifting
and felt their team demonstrated a commitment to getting stronger because they wanted to either improve their sport performance or prevent future injuries. In these explanations, women strongly adhered to their identities as athletes and appreciated how their muscles helped them become competent sport performers. Other athletes, however, adhered to gendered norms in the weight room. In this case, athletes either chose to lift lighter weights or focused on strengthening certain body parts to ensure they maintained a consistent body weight. These women also reported cheating their lifting cycle by performing fewer repetitions than required in order to avoid developing bulky muscles.

Athletes frequently depicted situations in which their strength coaches affirmed gendered body norms as well. Often, they helped maintain the masculine-perceived weight room by rewarding athletes for lifting heavier weights, admonishing female athletes for not adding more weight to their lift, and not allowing athletes to voice complaints or negativity. According to these women, the weight room appeared to be a no-nonsense, serious space that required a “tough it out” mentality. Strength coaches also used gendered beliefs to reassure female athletes they would not gain too much muscle mass by completing their lifting programs. While these strategies were designed to help women perform at a high level in the weight room, they also, perhaps unintentionally, reaffirmed gender stereotypes limiting women’s bodies and defining appropriate body sizes for female athletes.

The group of committed lifters discussed their efforts to help some of their teammates overcome their aversion to lifting and feel more comfortable lifting heavier weights. They attempted to teach their friends to value their athleticism over their desire to fit hegemonic femininity. However, these attempts often were ignored or confronted by their teammates who wanted to train their bodies according to their own standards and agendas. In the weight room,
the body was on display, and every female athlete in this study discussed her awareness of this fact. How they negotiated this challenging space depended largely on whether they adhered more to their athletic or feminine identities, and, at least for the women in this study, it seemed they had to choose one or the other when deciding how much weight to lift or how many repetitions to complete.

**Discussion of Experiences in the Weight Room**

Examining female athletes’ interactions in the weight room provided a partial, distinctive, and important insight into the complex ways in which female athletes relate to their bodies. This contested space puts athletic bodies on display, which forced these women to actively confront their physical appearance and how their bodies were perceived by others. The weight room is also a unique space within sport because it exists at the intersection of sport and social ideologies along with their associated gendered body norms. As a result, female athletes had to negotiate their own body perceptions within this milieu of body boundaries where they were expected to develop strong yet attractive physiques (Krane et al., 2001).

Socially constructed gender ideals already are mapped onto athletic bodies (Grogan, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Markula, Burns, & Riley, 2008). Men’s bodies are expected to be muscular, strong, and powerful, taking up space; whereas, women’s bodies, while strong and toned, must also appear lean, sexy, and thin. These bodies, then, represent men as independent and in control while women’s physiques portray dependency. The strength coaches discussed in this study affirmed these gendered body ideals as they attempted to encourage female athletes to lift heavier weights. Although their comments were aimed to help these women create an athletic body that challenges normalized feminine and masculine bodies, strength and conditioning coaches also reinforced masculine ideals such as pushing through pain and never
complaining. Predominantly men, these trainers tried to gain women’s trust by assuring them their trained athletic bodies could still appear lean enough to meet hegemonic femininity.

Feminist cultural studies provides the framework for examining how these female athletes’ interpretations of gendered body ideals might influence their attitudes and behaviors in the weight room. Through this lens, it is possible to examine, in this case, female athletes’ lived experiences to understand how they negotiate gendered body norms in the weight room. This framework conceptualizes that ideologies about men’s and women’s bodies result from people reproducing socially agreed upon gendered discourses related to the body and exercise (Birrell, 2000; Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Female athletes who developed negative attitudes about lifting built their beliefs on gendered assumptions that only masculine bodies should develop large muscles. Even athletes who enjoyed lifting reported that they understood why their teammates would want to avoid building a bigger, stronger, faster body. Although strength coaches attempted to use dominant discourses about the body to reassure female athletes they could still attain privileged feminine body norms while lifting, they simultaneously reinforced gendered beliefs about which bodies should add muscle size and shape and which physiques should strive for a more toned, lean look.

Yet, feminist cultural studies also acknowledges that the discourse surrounding the phrase “female athlete” is loaded with assumptions that suggest they will strive for perfection, sacrifice to win, and maintain an feminine female athletic build (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). The female athletic body is viewed as sculptable object, modifiable through intense weight training and body manipulation (Chase, 2006; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Women in this study who agreed with these ideologies about female athletic bodies upheld their beliefs by reporting they loved lifting and followed their coach’s weight training program. This finding supports George’s
finding that some women in college athletics participated “fully and enthusiastically” (p. 339) in training regardless of the effect on their bodies. Women’s social identities influence which ideologies about feminine female athletic bodies are made available to them (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Accordingly, female athletes in this study who chose not to label their sexuality and those who identified as bisexual seemed to want to develop their muscles more in the weight room than their heterosexual teammates. While some heterosexual athletes felt similarly, none of the bisexual or non-identifying athletes in this study reported negative attitudes in the weight room. These women might not embrace or accept the same definitions of White, heterosexual, feminine bodies as their counterparts; and, as a result, might feel less obligated to adhere. This study does not provide one, all-encompassing understanding of how female athletes negotiate their bodies in the weight room, rather it provides multiple, partial explanations.

Feminist cultural studies also affords the opportunity to further examine these female athletes’ actions. These women’s toned, strong, muscled bodies both challenged hegemonic femininity and intensified the perceived need to control women’s physiques. Rather than liberating female athletes’ bodies, these standards create an ideal that “is absolutely tight, contained, bolted down” (Malson, 2008, p. 34). In other words, through lifting weights, female athletes construct bodies that visibly demonstrate restraint. The body represents protection from emotional eruption as it, presumably like the inner self, has been trained into controlled submission. These women, then, are inadvertently creating another set of boundaries on female athletes’ body size and shape.

Some of the women in this study “cheated” by performing fewer than the number of prearranged repetitions or lifting lighter weights for a higher number of repetitions despite being prescribed a training program that required the opposite (heavy weights, low repetitions). These
findings support previous research that suggested women college athletes often express a fear of musculature even though being strong was necessary for their sport (George, 2005). As Malson (2008) suggests, “the body is constructed as a passive object of resource to be controlled, worked on, and made good” (p. 39). Over time, these repetitive weight lifting programs create highly functioning, sport-specific female athletic bodies, but, at the same time, women’s bodies become increasingly regulated by their minds and their training programs. Consequently, these acts of self-monitoring might have been some female athletes’ attempts at resisting practices in the weight room that forced their bodies into shapes they neither wanted nor valued. Yet, their choices remain constrained (Markula & Pringle, 2006) as their only other option, lifting lighter or fewer weights, simultaneously affirmed White, heterosexual, feminine body norms. Engaging resistive or disruptive strategies in one direction simply brought repercussions from the other direction as they garnered unwanted criticism from teammates and strength coaches questioning their sport commitment.

Markula, Burns, and Riley (2008) contend that feminist cultural studies portrays power and control as unstable, inserting that individuals have agency. All meaningful reality is contingent on the compliant interactions between human beings and their social world (Busanich & McGannon, 2010, p. 65). The idea that the female athletic body is flawed and infinitely changeable through proper training is only “real” if female athletes, coaches and other members of the sporting community accept it as the “truth.” As such, the women in this study seem to be taking back their bodies in the weight room and actively deciding how they will train them. Ultimately, both groups of female athletes, those who wanted to gain muscle mass and those who preferred building feminine muscles, performed acts of resistance and adherence. The difference in these actions can best be explained through social identity perspective, which describes
behaviors by connecting people’s desire to be recognized as a member of a social group (Kauer & Krane, 2013). If an athlete valued her identity as a feminine woman, then she might be more likely to resist weight room norms that suggest she should add muscle to her already athletic frame. This finding supports George’s (2005) conclusion that some women, who enjoyed their strong physiques in sport, attributed their overall aversion to large muscles to aesthetic issues and remained acutely aware of how their appearance compared to the beauty ideal. These female athletes, according to social identity perspective, clearly emphasized their identities as feminine women. However, for women in this study who felt most connected to their identity as an athlete and member of their sport team, they might resist gendered body norms that require them to limit body size and, instead, follow training programs that would improve sport-related strength.

Often, sport is celebrated for offering opportunities to promote healthy body perceptions among female athletes (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013) and as a space for transgressive practices (Bobel & Kwan, 2011), but, perhaps, these findings suggest that sport should open up to meet female athletes where they are in their body image development. Rather than prescribing a generic program based on fitness data and requiring that every female athlete follow protocol, the weight room could provide a space for women to engage in strength training in a way that best represents their identity-based sport and aesthetic goals.
CHAPTER IX. CONCLUSION

This study occurred in partial response to the call for more research on female athlete body image that acknowledges the intersection of gender, race and sexuality as “the interconnected matrix of relations of power” (Birrell, 2000, p. 65) and deBruin, Oudejans, and Bakker’s (2007) call for future investigations to analyze sport-specific factors such as the role of motivational climate. In particular, the current project incorporated a feminist intersectional analysis to examine the diverse embodied experiences of female athletes both in and out of their college sport setting. This methodological approach allowed for an in-depth exploration into the gendered meanings of female athletic bodies and a better understanding of the multiple, unstable relationships women hold with their physiques. Incorporating a feminist methodology prevented the privileging of a single story or momentary body-related thought. Employing an intersectional approach precluded gender from becoming the sole category of analysis when considering how bodies are constructed. Instead, focusing on how women’s varied social identities placed them in different sociohistorical positions complicated initial analyses. These locations allowed varying degrees of access to cultural body norms and strategies of resistance, which helped explain the distinctions among women’s embodied experiences.

Methodologically, these decisions led to a rich, complicated investigation of college female athlete body image, one void of reductionism and additive assumptions about how women think about and relate to their figures. This conclusion will explicate the major findings from the current study, outline its practical implications, and offer suggestions for future research.

Major Findings

This study included four primary research questions to better understand how sociocultural factors impacted female athlete body image, how female athletes negotiated social
and athletic body expectations, how team norms impacted athletes’ behaviors, and how the women in this study expressed agency. The findings in each of these areas both confirmed and extended previous knowledge.

Athletes’ vivid, multifaceted lived experiences provided unique insight into their relationships with their bodies. When looking at the role of team norms on athlete body image, the current study supports the notion that developing a task-oriented environment focused on self-comparisons and individual or collective improvement could serve as a protective factor against body dissatisfaction. Social approval is a strong motivator, so the team culture seemed to play a significant role in how these women felt about their bodies. Findings also supported the notion that outcome-oriented environments, those focused on winning and outperforming others, might exacerbate body-related issues.

However, the current study adds to existing literature by identifying the foundational body-related tenet that coaches used to build their team culture as having the most significant interaction with female athletes’ body perceptions. Climates that connected physical appearance with successful sport performances appeared to be associated with more body image disturbances than environments that helped female athletes focus on the functional efficiency of their physiques. These environments included body composition tests and, occasionally, food rules or monitored team meals. As a result, participants in these environments consistently described a heightened awareness and scrutiny of their own and each other’s bodies. In these body-obsessed climates, the assumed body-performance relationship meant that sport outcomes dictated how these women felt about their physiques. When they succeeded in sport, female athletes felt confident in their appearance; but, losses often were blamed on physical deficiencies such as weight. Interestingly, athletes’ narratives suggest that these types of team environments
could occur in both task- and outcome-oriented climates. So, it seems that while the team environment could heighten body issues, it is the team’s approach to the body that influenced this group of female athletes. These unique findings exist as a direct reflection of the method utilized in this study. In-depth, unstructured interviews with college female athletes identified nuanced associations between motivational team climate and body perceptions as the body-performance relationship appears to act as a mediating factor. Hearing their stories uncovered inconsistencies that further complicated the interaction between team culture and behavioral outcomes. While the connection between body-obsessed climates and body image disturbances did not prove causal, it did appear correlated with the prevalence of body issues described by female athletes on body-obsessed teams.

That said, team climate, by itself, could not fully explain athletes’ body perceptions. Taking an intersectional approach to data analysis revealed that women’s social identities influenced how they related to their bodies in different moments. How women navigated social and sport body expectations depended on which identities they valued in different moments. For example, an emphasis by some athletes on being perceived as heterosexually feminine intersected with their shopping and weight room experiences. These women reported feeling frustrated on shopping excursions as their athletic bodies often did not fit into feminine clothes, and they suggested they lifted in ways that ensured they developed feminine muscles, meaning they wanted to feel stronger without gaining size. How women felt about their muscles also appeared to be linked to race and sexual orientation. Athletes of color and bisexual women in this study reported feeling comfortable with their body size, especially in sport settings. However, a few athletes of color also suggested they hid their physiques publicly to avoid being perceived as intimidating due to their race and body size. These findings affirm that athletes’
identities influence their embodied experiences, but they also assert that female athletes are negotiating more than their feminine and athletic identities. The women in this study constantly negotiated their body from their sociocultural positions and chose to present their bodies in ways that helped them successfully navigate their surroundings.

Muscles provided the single, largest point of contestation on female athletic bodies. This study asserts that rather than being influenced by sport or social settings, generally, many female athletes’ perceptions of their bodies were influenced by their gendered experiences. A feminist cultural studies perspective allowed for an exploration of this cultural factor. This perspective explains that bodies are always and already gendered (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Markula et al., 2008). Masculine bodies often are associated with strength, power and taking up space while feminine physiques often appear thin, toned and sexy (Markula et al., 2008). These gendered physiques carry unintended meanings and consequences with masculine bodies representing aggression, physicality and competitiveness in sport and feminine bodies standing for fragility, passivity and dependence. The female athletic body, then, crosses gendered body boundaries. Crossing these borders could result in social stigmas (e.g., lesbian label), teasing, or isolation. As a result, employing a feminist cultural studies framework to interpret body descriptions helps clarify why some female athletes might not want to develop large, cumbersome muscles even if they would be useful in sport. Doing so, might relate to other people perceiving them as masculine and, therefore, less heterosexually feminine. According to the results outlined in previous chapters, on the whole, normative ideologies about feminine women’s bodies and female athletic bodies remain consistent. However, aspects of these physiques appear to be merging as exemplified through the number of female athletes’ stories that included exact weights or specific
“appropriate” muscle sizes. Women’s bodies should apparently contain muscles, but only if they can appear small and defined.

Based on conversations with these women, it appeared that muscles were acceptable in both sport and social settings only to the extent that their size remained appropriately feminine. All of the athletes in this study provided ample evidence suggesting they did not like big muscles in sport or social settings. In sport, a masculine domain, these women recognized they needed muscles to be recognized as successful athletes (e.g., aggressive, powerful, competitive). They did not appear unhappy or dissatisfied with their muscles overall; in fact, they described their muscles as an important factor in earning respect and separating their bodies from other women’s physiques. They felt proud that their muscles set them apart. Yet, they also wanted to develop a specific, “appropriately” sized musculature. More specifically, these women desired feminine muscles (e.g., small, toned, shapely, firm), presumably, because they would help them function in sport and express their femininity. These findings highlight the importance of using a gendered analysis to better understand how female athletes perceived of their athletic bodies.

Another sociocultural factor this study examined in relation to female athlete body image was the role of context. Specifically, in this current post-Title IX moment (Barak et al., in press), women’s sporting experiences often resemble that of male athletes. While not equivalent, female athletes have become more socially acceptable and visible. Many of the women in this study grew up watching female athletes play in professional leagues and participate in the Olympics. This contemporary context provided them with consistent opportunities to watch their idols actively performing their sport. Representations of female athletic bodies is important because athletes are always learning from cultural institutions. So, these images, for some of the women in this study, helped them make sense of their own bodies. They believed these mediated
images had, in some ways, helped shift the feminine body ideal, making muscular, athletic bodies more popular. Unfortunately, it appears that these images developed even more rigid, narrow and restrictive body standards are becoming even more narrow, rigid, and restrictive as women must now develop strong, toned, firm, shapely, thin, sexy physiques. In this post-Title IX moment, women might be more accepted as members of the athletic community; however, these heterosexually feminine portrayals of feminine female athletic bodies adds pressure. Several heterosexual participants discussed the added burden they felt. On one hand, they appreciated their athleticism being respected; but, on the other hand, they felt a need to assert their femininity and carefully monitor their bodies to ensure a feminine female athletic physique.

Finally, this study examined how social identities affected female athletes’ ability to navigate cultural body messages and express agency. Rather than being seen as passive victims of hegemonic femininity or athletic body ideals, this study confirms that many of these women actively chose how to live in their bodies. How strongly they identified as an athlete and member of their sport team certainly related to whether or not athletes adopted team body norms. The same can be said regarding the influence of their gender, race, and sexual orientation on their adherence to White, heterosexual, feminine body standards. How they identified in each of these categories influenced which cultural body scripts (e.g., hegemonic femininity or athletic body ideal) these women could access how their bodies were restricted. And, the salience of each of these identities in any given moment seemed to alter how women thought about and related to their bodies. For example, how women identified and valued their gender influenced their behaviors in the weight room. If they adhered to hegemonic feminine body norms, they seemed more likely to cheat on their weight lifting sets than female athletes that strongly valued their athletic identities. This study also revealed that athletes expressed their agency when
deciding how to present their bodies in social settings. Although hegemonic femininity expects that women will present a thin, toned, sexy body, not all female athletes chose clothes that would allow them to achieve this ideal. Therefore, whether actively resisting or adhering to body expectations, female athletes were active creators of their embodied experiences; they exhibited agency. However, choices remain constrained at all times. Each resistance strategy employed by a college female athlete resulted in becoming enmeshed in another set of limitations set by their sport teams or other social institutions.

This study offers a partial, in-depth look into the gendered body expectations that constrain female athletes’ embodied experiences. By using an integrated conceptual framework and allowing for the contradictory body descriptions to emerge from athletes’ narratives, this study complicated current understandings of the relationships between team climates, athletes’ multiple identities, and their body perceptions. The purpose was not to create a single, cohesive interpretation, but to allow athletes to share their stories about what influences the ways in which these women define, interpret, and, ultimately, live in their female athletic bodies. As such, the research findings from this study might open up space to improve current strategies for change within the sports world as scholars continue to intervene in the construction of female athlete body image.

**Implications for Practice**

The current study provides several implications for future sport and exercise practitioners. First, the entire sporting community must understand that no known ideal weight or body fat percentage equates to superior performance in any sport. Considerable variability in physical sizes and shapes continue to be successful in a variety sports and at multiple, competitive levels. The athletic community should, instead, help female athletes improve their
skill proficiency, mental preparation, and fitness. With regards to body composition testing, athletic departments might consider eliminating these testing procedures unless absolutely necessary for monitoring athletes’ health and well-being in competitive situations. If these tests are conducted, they should be held in private by medical personnel with the results only known by the athlete and person(s) administering the test. Further, test results should be explained in their entirety to the athletes without connecting them to sport performance or potential successes and failures. In general, athletic departments would benefit from developing or enhancing specific policies for conducting body composition tests and outline the procedure for how the results would be disseminated and used. College female athletes should also be given a choice or opportunity to participate rather than be required to have their bodies monitored and evaluated.

Coaches can play a significant role in helping female athletes construct a positive and productive relationship with their body. When creating their team climate, sport leaders should emphasize learning new skills and encourage personal improvement. While winning is important in competitive athletics, it should be kept in perspective and viewed as a by-product of consistent self-comparisons to improve performance. These comparisons with the self would also, according to this study, decrease the likelihood of creating a body-obsessed climate in which teammates compare not only their skill sets but also their physical appearances. To create this type of environment, coaches must first recognize diverse athletic bodies and the individual talents or skills they afford athletes. Time during team meetings might be devoted to helping women learn to view their bodies as unique, capable of affording diverse sport abilities. Efforts should be made to help female sport participants recognize their body’s efficiency as opposed to viewing it as a modifiable tool used in the pursuit of sport excellence.
All sport leaders should also pay special attention to the gendered body ideals they may be inadvertently espousing. It is important to understand that all athletes are capable of performing adequately in the weight room and in their competitive environments, but not all women will want to train their bodies in the same manner. Rather than reinforcing feminine body ideals and then admonishing women for adhering to these standards, it would be useful to talk with athletes about how they want to practice or train their bodies; educate female athletes on how to maximize and improve their current strengths; and, ensure that body positive attitudes and behaviors are rewarded. Coaches should also encourage productive team body-talk in which physical diversity and individual strengths are celebrated. Hearing body-negative conversations and not intervening is an act and a practice in itself. Whether or not sport leaders actively engage, they are constantly reinforcing athlete behaviors.

This study affirmed the importance of uniforms in influencing how female athletes feel about their bodies. This point, in particular, seemed to influence how confident this group of women felt before and during both practice and competitive events. Accordingly, coaches should determine if there are any performance advantages to their currently selected uniforms. If not, players should be involved in discussions to determine which jerseys they will wear in training and competition. Allowing female athletes decision-making opportunities might improve their confidence and feelings of control over how their bodies are presented in the sport setting. As a result, some athletes might feel more comfortable with and confident in their physical appearance.

In terms of body prevention programs, the findings from this study would support much of the educational focus already being implemented. However, this research would also emphasize the need to find ways for athletes to become aware of and acknowledge the cultural
constraints acting on their bodies and limiting their resources for change. The primary focus of these programs should assist in the recognition of body functionality and efficiency. Intervention efforts might also incorporate mental skills training (e.g., arousal regulation, imagery, self-talk) as a way of helping athletes maximize their performance and cope with failures without attributing either outcome to their physique. Implementing any of these strategies, however, without also addressing people in power in sport settings minimizes the opportunities for change. Instead, it is essential that body image education programs include coaches and other sport leaders in the educational process. Providing practical strategies and role-playing scenarios that teach coaches and athletes how to talk and interact around issues of the body would be especially important. Coaches would also benefit from learning tools related to structuring or organizing team meals and delivering nutrition information in a healthy manner.

**Future Research Directions**

In the future, research should examine discourses surrounding food, exercise, and the body (e.g., training as a body management practice, physiques as modifiable objects) that athletes use when constructing their body image. Feminist cultural studies provides a framework for moving beyond the recognition of behavioral outcomes such as disordered eating or exercise addiction to better understand the meanings behind these actions and how women’s actions uphold or resist dominant ideologies about female athletic bodies.

Future efforts should also explore body issues occurring across the diverse female athlete population, particularly those often marginalized (e.g., female athletes of color, transgender athletes, LBQ athletes). This study focus would help identify how body negotiations might differ depending on an athlete’s historical and sociocultural position and their related access to alternative ideologies. In particular, examining female athlete body image within the current
post-Title IX moment would be beneficial in explicating female athletes’ shifting perceptions of the ideal female athletic body. Similar studies might also consider how the post-feminist context (McRobbie, 2007) influences female athletes’ perceptions of control over their body presentations. In doing so, scholars must carefully examine within-group comparisons among various populations to better understand heterogeneous encounters and responses. Rather than focusing on the factors that influence entire social groups, it remains important to consider how various social identities interact to impact women’s embodied experiences in a myriad of ways. Providing more detailed and specific descriptions about participants when discussing their stories offers one path to accomplishing this task.

And, finally, more research looking at the connection sport leaders seemed to have created between physical appearance and performance should be explored. Many female athletes in this study seemed to identify weaknesses in this presumed relationship based on their own sport experiences; however, they often judged their bodies in compliance with this body-performance bond. Understanding how these messages become “known,” accepted, and shared would be useful from both an empirical and practical perspective.

The purpose of this study was to add to existing literature on female athlete body image in hopes of helping to create a more positive sporting environment for all college-aged women. The stakes are high as the behavioral and emotional outcomes of healthy body relationships can influence an athlete’s performance as well as her overall health and well-being. So, it is paramount for all sport professionals and researchers to engage in processes that will assist female athletes in learning to respect and value their own, unique body shapes and sizes.
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American Psychological Association.


APPENDIX A: UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview #1
“Before we begin the interview, I need to ask for your verbal consent to participate in this study. Previously, I e-mailed you the consent form. Have you read this document? (If not, researcher will allow time for participant to review it). Do you have any questions about the procedure, confidentiality, or anything else? Are you over 18 years of age? Do you willingly consent to be a participant in this study?”

“Thank you. I also want to remind you that you may choose not to answer or respond to any question.”

A. Background information
1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
   a. Age
   b. Current sport team
   c. Years on every team
   d. Year in school
   e. Eligibility status
   f. Gender (preferred pronouns)
   g. Race and/or ethnicity
   h. Religious affiliation (if any)
   i. Sexual orientation
2. Can you generally describe your team make-up?
   a. Team or individual sport, number of teammates, team demographics (race and/or ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender)
3. Can you generally describe the make-up of your coaching staff?
   a. Number of coaches, coaching staff demographics (race and/or ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender)
4. “I’m interested in how college athletes feel about their bodies…”
   a. How would you describe your body?

B. General areas of interest
1. Grand Question: Tell me what impacts how you feel about your body in sport.
   Probe Topics
   a. Impact of team
      i. Definitions of success
      ii. Impact of teammates
         1. Discussions about the body
         2. Food (team meals)
         3. Exercise (running, lifting weights)
      iii. Impact of head coach
         1. Values (defining success)
         2. Food (team meals)
         3. Exercise (running, lifting weights)
b. Impact of other sport personnel
   i. Trainers, strength coaches, assistant coaches, athletic administrators, other athletes

c. Impact from outside of sport
   i. Parents, romantic partners, friends
   ii. Media
   iii. Social events (e.g., parties, dinners, movies)
   iv. School (e.g., class)

2. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding how you feel about your body?

C. Follow-up questions: “Can you give me an example?” “How did you know or realize that?” “Can you describe a time when that happened?” “Why?”

Interview #2

The specific questions will be developed after reading the transcript of interview 1. Topics for the follow-up interview might include:

- Previous topics from Interview #1
- Questions that emphasize storytelling and elaboration to fill any gaps identified in the first transcript
APPENDIX B: ELECTRONIC CONSENT LETTER

Project Title: Female College Athletes’ Body Image
Researcher: Mallory Mann, Graduate Student, American Culture Studies
Advisor: Vikki Krane, Professor, Human Movement, Sport & Leisure Studies

Study Purpose and Procedure

You are being asked to participate in a research project as part of my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to learn about factors that impact how female college athletes feel about their bodies.

Your involvement in this study includes participating in 1-2 interview sessions. The first session is likely to last between 60-90 minutes. It will focus on your body image and other thoughts and feelings you may have about your body. This initial interview will be audio-recorded and occur through Skype or by telephone. You have the choice of which format is more comfortable for you. Please be aware that electronic communication may not be 100% secure.

Within two weeks of completing the first interview session, you may be contacted again by the researcher for a second interview. This follow-up session will allow time to clarify and elaborate on discussions from the first interview. The second interview is to ensure your story is being understood the way you prefer. I anticipate it will last 30-45 minutes.

Confidentiality of all information you provide in the interviews will be protected to the best ability of the researcher. Members of your team or your university will not receive any information about your participation in this study. Each of the interview sessions will be transcribed word for word. Any information that could identify you or your university will be removed or coded in these transcripts. There will not be any identifying information included in papers or presentations related to this study. The researcher and advisor will be the only people listening to the audio-recordings and reading the original transcripts. The consent forms, audio-recordings of the interviews, and printed transcripts will all be secured in a locked office throughout the study. All computer files related to this study will be stored on password protected computers. Every audio-taped session and original transcript will be shred (physically or electronically) immediately after the study is completed.

Additional Consent Information

Your involvement in this study will help the researcher understand how female athletes think and feel about their bodies. You also may benefit from being able to talk about your experiences in sport.

Risk of participation is not expected to be any greater than that experienced in daily life. However, you might find yourself wanting more information on these topics after talking about your own body and eating habits. The researcher will email you after the interviews to share the contact information of national organizations. Our procedures are designed to protect your
confidentiality. Any information that could link you or your school to this study will be removed or coded in all printed products. Should any topics in the interviews make you feel uncomfortable, you may choose not to respond and to move on to the next question. You may also withdraw your consent or end participation at any point during the project. If you choose to withdraw from the study, it will not negatively affect your relationships with the researchers or Bowling Green State University.

Additional questions or concerns about this study may be directed to me, Mallory Mann (253-279-8182, mannm@bgsu.edu), or my advisor, Vikki Krane (419-372-7233, vkrane@bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716, hsrn@bgsu.edu).
APPENDIX C: IN-PERSON CONSENT LETTER

Project Title: Female College Athletes’ Body Image  
Researcher: Mallory Mann, Graduate Student, American Culture Studies  
Advisor: Vikki Krane, Professor, Human Movement, Sport & Leisure Studies

Study Purpose and Procedure

You are being asked to participate in a research project as part of my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to learn about factors that impact how female college athletes feel about their bodies.

Your involvement in this study includes participating in 1-2 interview sessions. The first session is likely to last between 60-90 minutes. It will focus on your body image and other thoughts and feelings you may have about your body. This initial interview will be audio-recorded and will take place in a quiet, comfortable location that you can select.

Within two weeks of completing the first interview session, you may be contacted again by the researcher for a second interview. This follow-up session will allow time to clarify and elaborate on discussions from the first interview. The second interview is to ensure your story is being understood the way you prefer. I anticipate it will last 30-45 minutes.

Confidentiality of all information you provide in the interviews will be protected to the best ability of the researcher. Members of your team or your university will not receive any information about your participation in this study. Each of the interview sessions will be transcribed word for word. Any information that could identify you or your university will be removed or coded in these transcripts. There will not be any identifying information included in papers or presentations related to this study. The researcher and advisor will be the only people listening to the audio-recordings and reading the original transcripts. The consent forms, audio-recordings of the interviews, and printed transcripts will all be secured in a locked office throughout the study. All computer files related to this study will be stored on password protected computers. Every audio-taped session and original transcript will be shred (physically or electronically) immediately after the study is completed.

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Your signature below indicates that you are 18 years of age or older and you have been informed about what is expected of you as a participant in this study, the confidentiality procedures, and that your participation is entirely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty.

Signature  Printed Name

Phone Number  Date

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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TH</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E: HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

DATE:                               February 10, 2014

TO:                                  Mallory Mann
FROM:                                Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE:                     [562946-2] Female College Athlete Body Image
SUBMISSION TYPE:                  Revision

ACTION:                             APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE:                  February 6, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE:                 January 25, 2015
REVIEW TYPE:                     Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY:                 Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please add the text equivalent of the HSRB IRBNet approval/expiration date stamp to the "footer" area of the electronic consent document.

Please note that if you are recruiting BGSU athletes, you must obtain ICA approval before any BGSU athletes can be enrolled in your study.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 25 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.
All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on January 25, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.