

# From the Cradle to Athens: The Silver-Coated Story of a Warrior in Brazilian Soccer<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Juliana Ribeiro Cabral was captain of the Brazilian women's soccer team that won the silver medal at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. Biographical methodology is used in this article, which is an oral history of an elite athlete's life using semi-structured interviews to capture her personal reflections. Fighting against gender prejudice, Cabral made the Brazilian national team when she was fifteen years old. Three years later she was a member of the Brazilian team at the Sydney 2000 Olympics. Four years after that, at the Athens Olympics, she was captain, leading a team that demonstrated to the world that soccer in Brazil is not only a man's game and that Brazilian women also can play successful football at the international level. Cabral's story, and her personal reflections, reveal the paradoxes in which Brazil's female soccer players are enmeshed: on the one hand, they fight against their subjugation in the field; on the other hand, they display intolerance against non-normative ways of being feminine.

**KEYWORDS:** women's soccer, gendered sports bodies, Olympic Games, Brazil, Juliana Cabral

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1 The author would like to acknowledge Associate Professor Daryl Adair (University of Technology, Sydney) for his continuous support for this work, in particular for the substantial comments provided during this paper revision.

The Athens Olympic Games in 2004 were unusual in the history of women's soccer in Brazil. For Brazil's Olympic delegation, the Games were already distinguished in terms of the prominent participation of women: of a total of 245 athletes, 122 were women, which was both a record number and largest proportion in terms of gender (nearly 50 per cent) in the history of Brazil's participation in the Olympics. Olympic soccer at Athens was notable for the unexpectedly high quality performances of the women's teams. In football-mad Brazil, where men dominate the world of sport, both the media and general public began to take a serious interest in the fate of the national women's football team in Athens. One journalist's observation at the outset of the event gave no hint of what was to come:

... as always, our girls were relegated to the classical abandonment of the Briton sport played by women. Were it not for the men's failure in making it to Athens, the women would have followed the normal course assigned to them: contempt and indifference. Though everybody knows that "soccer is a man's thing", "a sport for 'Machos'", our brave girls spent months under the command of coach René Simões, the father of three girls and who, in a quite interesting perception of reality has said that he felt "a little like Chico Buarque [a famous Brazilian composer and singer who has written dozens of songs on the feminine universe] trying to understand the feminine universe".<sup>2</sup>

Those who have followed the Brazilian players' results will know the end of the story. The women's soccer team grew in confidence during the competition, playing a shrewd tactical game, with excellent physical fitness and a refined technique. They made it to the finals against the United States team — comprised of international women's soccer idols such as Mia Hann — and lost only in overtime, after hitting the post twice. The main television stations in Brazil broadcast the 'girls' campaign live, with people cheering for 'their' team. The result of that campaign — an unprecedented silver medal — made these female athletes famous across Brazil, if only for a fleeting moment.

The aim of this article is to explore the story of one of the key characters of this epic sports campaign: the team's captain, centreback Juliana Cabral. This athlete, whose leadership facilitated a strong sense of team cohesion, was instrumental in leading Brazil to the podium for the first time ever in Olympics soccer.

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2 Paulo Calçade, 'Prefácio', in Antonio Carlos Simões and Jorge Dorfman Knijnik (eds), *O Mundo Psicossocial da Mulher no Esporte: Comportamento, Gênero, Desempenho*, Aleph, São Paulo, 2004, p. 13

## The Gendered Division of Sport and Women's Soccer in Brazil

Psychoanalytic research into the issue of gendered leisure activities reveals firstly, that in childhood there is a major social codification of a child's body practices and secondly, that the performance of those practices contributes to the development of a child's gender role. It is this process that leads to the widely held belief, for example, that ballet is for girls and soccer is for boys.<sup>3</sup> This process is central to the consolidation of gender roles during childhood as the children's socializers, be they parents, teachers, or relatives, all of whom delimit the fields of action, are role models of identity, and orient and choose their children's activities.

These physical activities have a huge impact on the incorporation of gender norms. A boys' masculinisation process develops through several symbolic practices that permeate their entrance into the man's world, practices that are incorporated into the child's *habitus* — the way of using his body in the world.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, and following Bourdieu's thesis of 'masculine domination' in the field of sports culture, it could be argued that the body practices carried out during childhood and controlled strictly within the standard gender rules will result in strongly differentiated gendered bodies.

How does the physicality of the boy's body — a boy who has learned to climb high trees, wrestle his peers to the ground, and out-skill them in games — encourage him to explore the world and relationships with others in powerfully different ways than his twin sister who has experienced the antithesis of these practices for the first ten years of her life?<sup>5</sup>

In the years following this first and differentiated 'physical' and therefore gendered socialization, sports play a central role in the gendered education of children, and particularly for the boys and men.

In a speech towards the end of the nineteenth century, US President Theodore Roosevelt argued that sports have long been credited as a major socializing force, a force of creation and of social bonding for men: only aggressive sports can create 'men's musculature, their spirit, their camaraderie and their vivacity.' The American football field, said Roosevelt,

3 Emilce Dio Bleichmar, *O feminismo espontâneo da histeria: estudos dos transtornos narcisistas da feminilidade*, Artes Médicas, Porto Alegre, 1988, p. 107.

4 Pierre Bourdieu, 'La domination masculine', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, vol. 84, 1990, pp. 2–31.

5 David Brown, 'Pierre Bourdieu's "Masculine Domination" thesis and the gendered body in sport and physical culture', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 23, 2006, p. 174.

'is the only place where men's supremacy is unquestionable'.<sup>6</sup> These words could also have been said about soccer in modern Brazil, a sport that is a space for masculine socialization at elite clubs, on beaches, in favelas, peripheral neighborhoods, prisons, and so on.

Therefore, before this article focuses on Juliana Cabral's life and personal reflections, it is important to identify specific points in the history of women's participation in sport in Brazil. As sports were considered to be appropriate only for men, women's involvement was seriously constrained in Brazil for several decades in the nineteenth and 20th centuries. The conservative National Sports Council passed legislation that forbade women to play football.<sup>7</sup> This legislation remained in force from 1941 to 1979. What were the social conditions that allowed this kind of legislation to be introduced and endure for so long, and do so much damage to female sports in the process?

In the first half of the twentieth century there was heated debate in Brazil about ideas of the female body. Many influential voices — doctors, educators, legislators, army officers, academic lecturers and physiologists — talked in lectures or on the radio and wrote opinion pieces in journals, newspapers and books about the relationship between women's bodies and engagement in sports. The newspapers of that period pedaled misogynistic pseudo-scientific theories about what was appropriate for the female body.<sup>8</sup> An influential voice in this debate was a lecturer in the Army School of Physical Education, Walter Areno, who wrote several papers about the female-sport issue such as 'Female sports: medical aspects' (1942) and 'Biological foundations of female physical education' (1962). In the latter paper, Areno stated that it 'is inappropriate for a female to participate in sports where there is physical contact, such as the infamous female soccer or futsal. It is abnormal to watch 20 women (as two are the goalkeepers) running around a ball in ungraceful and rough conditions'.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the debate about woman in sport, the

6 Quoted by Joan Hult, 'The story of women's athletics: manipulating a dream. 1890–1985', in Margaret Costa and Sharon Guthrie (eds), *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, 1994, p. 84.

7 National Sports Council Act 3199, 1941.

8 Goellner, Silvana Vilodre, 'Mulheres e futebol no Brasil: entre sombras e visibilidades (Women and soccer in Brazil: between shadows and visibilities)', *Brazilian Journal of Physical Education and Sport*, vol. 19, 2005, pp. 143–51.

9 Walter Areno, 'Os desportos femininos: aspectos medicos (The female sports: medical aspects)', *Physical Education*, vols 62, 63, 1942, p. 57; Sebastião Votre and Mourão Ludmila, 'Ignoring taboos: Maria Lenk, Latin American inspirationalist' *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 18, 2001, pp. 196–218.

National Sports Council, whose board was dominated by socially conservative men, approved legislation in 1941 that limited or even forbade women to participate in many sports that were considered to be 'inappropriate for females'. Soccer was one of these sports. It took some years for the legislation by the National Sports Council to become effective and widely implemented. The new law proved to be a disaster for the women who played soccer in Brazil in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>10</sup>

Modern sport, as conceptualized by Elias and Dunning, had been a cultural reality in most cities across Brazil since the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Federal organizations, local clubs, coaches, competitions and regular practice schedules were common for many sports in urban areas, including women's soccer. In Pelotas (an important city and commercial harbour in Brazil's south) during the 1950s, two women's teams, Vila Hilda FC and Corinthians FC attracted a large numbers of fans, who packed the local stadiums, paying to watch these teams play each other. Local newspapers featured, on a regular basis, articles about the games and the outstanding players in both teams. The athletes and teams were gaining respect for their talents and achievements around the state of the Rio Grande do Sul. When the women's game was at its pinnacle, conservative voices appear in the newspapers, reminding people of the 1941 legislation. When coaches and players became aware that they were breaking the law, everything stopped and female soccer died, not just in Rio Grande do Sul, but throughout Brazil.<sup>12</sup> The National Sports Council removed the prohibition in 1979, by which time it was widely perceived to be outdated, harmful and discriminatory. Many women were taking part in forbidden sports, participating in international competitions and winning medals. By 1983 women's soccer was officially accredited as a sport by the Council.<sup>13</sup> That decision was timely for Juliana Cabral, as this was the sport she would embrace during her childhood in the 1980s. She represents the second generation of female players, a new generation that emerged after the withdrawal of the legislation that constrained Brazilian women in sport.

10 Rigo, Luiz Rigo, Flavia Garcia Guidotti, Larissa Zanetti Theil and Marcela Amaral, 'Notas acerca do futebol feminino pelotense em 1950: um estudo genealogico (Notes on women's soccer in Pelotas, 1950: a genealogic study)', *Brazilian Review of Sport Science*, vol. 29, 2008, pp.173–88.

11 Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986.

12 Rigo et al., 'Notas acerca do futebol feminino.'

13 Goellner, 'Women and Soccer in Brazil'.

## Interviewing Juliana Cabral

At the time of the interviews Juliana Cabral was 23 years old. I had met her fortuitously during a debate about women and soccer at the University of São Paulo in May 2005. When asked about the possibility of face-to-face interviews she was keen to do all she could do to support women's soccer and make herself accessible. The captain of the national women's soccer team was a self-confident and articulate woman. Already going to college, she was well-spoken and outgoing. I conducted five interviews that focused on Juliana's athletic career from her early experiences in sport, the obstacles she faced in playing, to the several phases that preceded the Olympic medal. What follows is a part of this story captured during those in-depth interviews. The focus here is what Juliana's story reveals about the assumptions, ideas and theories regarding women and gender in football and indeed the broader issue of human rights in sports. In the first two interviews, Juliana talked about her high level of involvement in soccer since her childhood as well as her first steps as a young player. The final sessions, however, are more relevant and critical to this paper: in these she talked about her experience as a professional player in the Brazilian team and being an athlete in two Olympic Games. In these sessions, she reflected on this experience with a critical eye, opening many doors to further analysis. The interviews provide important primary accounts about female soccer in Brazil in the first decade of the twenty first century.

### 'Mafalda' begins to play ball

Ju Cabral, as she is known everywhere in Brazil, stated that her team mates have a "secret" nickname for her: *Mafalda*.

Well, people usually call me Ju Cabral, but the 'girls' call me Mafalda ... Because I have an aunt called Mafalda ... And my left leg is only good to get on the bus, if at all ... Since I only kick with the right one ... So, every time I get ready to kick the ball with my left leg, they call out 'Hey, Mafalda!' But it's just a joke ... My aunt is very sweet ... They love my aunt ... So, when someone is up to teasing the other, they call the other by their mother's name. And since my mother is no longer alive and there was granny Mafalda [the name of a character, a man who cross-dresses in a comic series on Brazilian television] ... It became a joke among us.

This observation is striking, as it points to the issue of camaraderie among soccer mates. Women's soccer teams are usually described as tense places, full of competitive intrigue, with little room for friendships to flourish. Therefore, it is noteworthy that Juliana opened the interviews speaking about her nickname, of how she enjoys being among her soccer mates, having fun in a very positive atmosphere.

Next, Juliana provided an account of her initiation into soccer, a

beginning very much like other stories encountered in previous research — with young girls playing on the street with boys and relatives.<sup>14</sup> With Juliana it was no different. What for many would have meant a sacrifice, as they would not have anybody of the same sex to play with, for her turned out to be good fortune: the youngest in a family with three brothers, she learned to walk while kicking a ball.

I have been playing since I was little, when I started to walk ... My brother is two years older, so we always played on the street with the boys. When I began to walk, my brother already played since he was older and had no-one else to play with and so he gave me the ball and we played a lot of games, we came up with so many ideas ... And then he started to play on the street with the boys ...

Juliana's differentiated socialization stands out in this statement: she grew up among boys and this fact led her to another space, a space that was not 'foreseen' by her community to be routinely occupied by a girl.

The fact that Juliana played with her older brother was decisive in her sporting life. For her stereotypical brother, playing with dolls was out of the question, so she quickly learned boys' games with him. This situation is similar to that found elsewhere, for example in research on girls who played Australian Rules Football, a sport dominated by men. In their childhood, the athletes' brothers 'would not play feminine games, so [the girls] played masculine games instead'. One of the players depicted there, Tanya, 'kicked a football with her three older brothers when she was younger'.<sup>15</sup> This account could be by Juliana, because she too had three older brothers and it was the one closest to her in terms of age who introduced her to soccer. Despite examples of girls taking up soccer in the same way as Juliana, the gender disparity in Brazilian football continues nowadays, with soccer 'not recommended' for girls. As mentioned earlier, Brazilian gender relations in sport have long been shaped by popular representations of the body that indicate "soft" activities for girls and "hard", vigorous workouts for boys. Juliana alluded to this when she spoke of how her mother used to react to her soccer activities:

At first, my mother didn't approve of it, so she forbade it, she didn't like it that the boys came knocking at our door and my brother was

14 Jorge Dorfman Knijnik and Esdras Guerreiro Vasconcellos, 'Les femmes en crampons à cœur ouvert au Brésil', in Thierry Terret (ed.), *Sport et Genre: v1 — La Conquête d'une Citadelle Masculine*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2005, pp. 295–308.

15 Quoted in Nikki Wedgwood, 'Kicking like a boy: Schoolgirl Australian Rules football and bi-gendered female embodiment', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 21, 2004, p. 146.

the guinea pig, because the boys always wanted me to participate in the pickup soccer games ... So, for quite some time my brother told my mother that I only refereed the games and didn't play, but I was right there playing ...

Obviously, the 'slip up' of Juliana's mother, who, by giving in to her son allowed Juliana to play with her brothers on the street, reflects the differentiated socialization and incorporation of a gendered identity for girls. The difficulties that girls in Brazil face in playing sport in public places are especially pronounced in soccer, a sport almost totally associated with masculine power. The daily practice of soccer and other 'masculine' physical activities and sports, even in an unstructured way, in parks and streets, or even in clubs and federations, embodies hegemonic masculinity. Women are in the minority everywhere. As Connell argues:

We can trace the problem of difference/dominance almost endlessly to social settings where men and women interact; in the occupation of space by boys and men ... The intrusion by boys on girl's games in playgrounds ... These are enactments of hegemonic masculinity in everyday life.<sup>16</sup>

There is much anecdotal evidence of the difficulties, violence and prejudice faced by women who want to enter this world dominated by men, since they represent — to many male traditionalists and some conservative females — a threat and danger to the patriarchal status quo.<sup>17</sup> The second section of this paper outlines how these stories have their roots in conceptions of the body that underpinned the official law that discriminated against women in sports for nearly 40 years in Brazil.

### **'I already can play ball, no one can stop me!'**

When growing up, Juliana was forever playing football in the streets and satirical comments were endless:

My mother pretended she didn't hear all those remarks; my father, deep down, was happy but he wanted my brothers, instead, to become great players. At home, I had to deal with my mother, who wouldn't let me play, so I played without her knowing. I went to

16 Robert Connell, *Masculinities*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, p. 232.

17 See Suraya Darido, 'Futebol feminino no Brasil: do seu início à prática pedagógica (Female soccer in Brazil: from beginning to pedagogical practices)', *Motriz*, vol. 8, 2002, pp. 43–49; Knijnik and Vasconcellos, 'Les femmes en crampons à cœur ouvert au Brésil'; Jorge Dorfman Knijnik, *Femininos e Masculinos no Futebol Brasileiro [Feminines and Masculines in Brazilian Soccer]*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sao Paulo, 2006.



school and came home all sweaty. My mother scolded me, because for sure I had been playing ball. Fortunately, I had my brother who covered up for me. And when my mother saw that it was useless, that that was what I really wanted, she began to support me and I started to show them all that soccer wasn't just a man's game. One day — I was ten or eleven — there was an ad for a tryout to play for a team belonging to the Flash Book model agency. The model on the ad was Milene [Milene Figueiredo, ex-wife of player Ronaldo Fenômeno, at the time the world's best player]. A former brother-in-law had seen it, talked about it at home. My mother took me there and I passed the test.

These teams of models are famous in Brazil. They are made up of beautiful, smiling girls who advertise everything from washing machines to microcomputers. Their agency links sponsorship of a soccer game with them with commercial promotion. What matters least is the players' skills and the result; the uniforms are designed to call attention to their bodies and the game is a party, where dozens of men, including young players and older soccer executives, get together and stand on the field laughing at the female players' falls and their apparent 'inability', all the while admiring their bodies and setting up social dates. The physical objectification of women in these games is total. There are comparisons to be made with the issue of cheerleaders as 'eye candy' in North American sports:

The female cheerleader's body movements, facial expressions, voice, use of space, and so on, have all been selected and refined to stand in contrast to the muscular, rapidly accelerating, highly charged masculinized habitus of the male athletes ... These relations have all been constructed in complicit accord with a socio-cultural sporting 'field' that uses symbolic opposition as a core interpretive framework that imposes certain differentiated regimes of practice upon the body until it adapts and conforms. If any of these gendered bodies do not conform (or, it might be said, 'perform conformity' in a more symbolic interaction sense) then they are made invisible from the mainstream eye and rendered as 'unsuitable' or even as an unnatural 'other' by those with the dominant schemes of perception and the social legitimacy to make that 'judgment'.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, research on racism and sexism in the imagery associated with Native American Sports Mascots shows that the male mascots are usually depicted as bellicose and strong; in contrast, the Indian girls that represent

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18 Brown, 'Pierre Bourdieu's "Masculine Domination" thesis', p. 171.

those mascots are always depicted in sexually suggestive and attractive clothes in situations that evoke flirting and gallantry.<sup>19</sup>

Juliana recalled going to such a game — sponsored by a well-known model agency for promotional rather than sports purposes — for the first time, chaperoned by her mother. While her mother did not want her to play with her brothers or the boys who were her peers, she allowed her to go to a game that was designed to exploit and objectify girls' bodies. Perhaps her mother was not aware of what went on there, but it is an important indication about her preferences for her daughter's future.

When Juliana went to this first 'match' she was at the beginning of puberty. This is a critical age for girls who play sports because their bodies are maturing and the social import of sport will be quite different. A number of girls who had their families' support while practising sports as children now lose that support as young adults. The determination of many young girls to take sport seriously is often 'broken by a hegemonic ideology which determines that children and teenagers literally incorporate and feel what it means to be 'gendered', and accentuate their secondary sexual characteristics to comply with the social norm. Brown describes a situation common to many countries: in puberty, boys are encouraged to demonstrate physical prowess and take physical risks, while girls are discouraged from engaging in vigorous physical and sports activities, especially in the early stages of puberty. Differentiated norms for girls and boys are a major cause of over-estimating and stigmatizing differences between the sexes.<sup>20</sup>

Despite these stereotyped practices, Juliana's view was that the games played by the models were an important part of her early sports experience. Paradoxically, in an environment where her body was objectified and her soccer practice belittled she found the space for the beginning of a process of subversion of gendered body practices. It was not long before she started to play in other teams:

At the age of 12, I changed from this Flash Book team to Pro-Sport; later, I joined the Saad team, which in 1996 was the base of the Brazilian team in the Atlanta Olympics ... from the Saad I changed to the São Paulo F.C., which was the team that brought me to the Brazilian team. My first call-up, I was fifteen years old. I stayed with São Paulo for four years from 1996 to 2000 ... It was a golden period for female soccer in Sao Paulo. We had reasonable conditions; the clubs were structuring female teams, as there was a company, called

19 Richard King, 'On being a warrior: race, gender and American Indian imagery in sport', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 23, 2006, p. 319.

20 Brown, 'Pierre Bourdieu's "Masculine Domination" thesis', pp. 172–73.

Sports Promotion, which was doing promotions, marketing and making some money with female soccer, organizing championships ... But when we came back from Sydney, 2000, the clubs closed their doors: that company did not want to work anymore with women's soccer and the best players went to the US. So, everything became sad, as there was nearly no more female soccer in Brazil ...

Juliana's account was solemn. The 'golden period' she claims for the end of the 1990s centered on the fact that there were clubs and places where 'the girls' could play. However, the best aspiring professional players received around US\$150 a month to play for the big clubs, a sum that would never pay their weekly bills. Juliana took the view that tough conditions were better than nothing, but when the Sydney Olympics finished, even the big Brazilian soccer clubs, which had previously offered basic support for female teams, now decided to close their female departments as they could not make any money from them. The best Brazilian female players, such as Sissi, Pretinha and Maycon among many others, went to the US to play in the WUSA, the new North-American professional female soccer league.<sup>21</sup> Several fine players who did not want to go to the US struggled to survive in Brazil, working as cleaning women to make ends meet.<sup>22</sup>

Behind the scenes, old-fashioned ideologies about the female body prevailed. In Juliana's opinion, the Brazilian media at the Sydney Games paid too much attention to what they saw as the 'lack of femininity' of some of the players. Brazilian women's soccer was in such an embryonic stage that even a little negative media gossip about players' sexuality could lead to enormous damage to its public image. According to Juliana, this was a key reason why after the 2000 Games everything 'tumbled and women's soccer was completely forgotten and fell into disgrace'. However, as she started to talk about sexuality, femininity and body shape, Juliana also spoke about the 2001 Paulista<sup>23</sup> Championship and the attempt of the Paulista Federation to revival female soccer in Brazil — though, unfortunately, based again on heterosexual body conceptions and aesthetic assumptions designed to objectify women. Here, the interviews entered the second main section, where Juliana detached herself from basic chronological memories to reflect on and be more critical of the story she was instrumental in creating.

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21 *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 2 September 2000.

22 Soró, woman soccer player, personal communication, October 2004.

23 'Paulista' means 'from Sao Paulo' the Brazilian state with the most powerful economy, and where most sports have more structure, support, sponsorship and money than in the rest of Brazil.

## A Milestone: The 2001 Soccer Women's Paulista Championship

The 2001 *Paulista* Championship was laden with gender stereotypes, as Juliana affirmed:

In 2001, there was this Paulista championship that was televised. There was a one-week try-out. But the criteria were ... the girls had to be beautiful and have long hair. She couldn't look masculine. The Federation stipulated the age, maximum 23. Many players from the national team couldn't play because they were older. Many of the athletes failed the test. They were technically prepared but didn't make it because they weren't pretty or because they had short hair or because they were thought to be too masculine looking. The games were televised and those who watched didn't see anything very interesting. The uniforms were minuscule, making it impossible to play ... a lot of the girls went to the media, to complain telling that the Federation managers said they were ugly, they didn't have light eyes, they weren't blond ... after that there wasn't any championship.<sup>24</sup>

Juliana then reflected on the players' appearance, expectations about their bodies and the sexuality of the female athletes. This was a new kind of reflection, a series of tense, broken statements, producing a discourse that was, at the same time, self-conscious and paradoxical, demonstrating the forces acting in the make-up not only of Juliana's thinking but also in the stereotypical representations of women's soccer in Brazil.

There was no doubt in Juliana's mind that the normative standard in soccer is masculine. She recognized this from historical street games to professional practice, from fields on the outskirts of cities to professional stadiums, through the media coverage, the practices, the idle talk, the tactical schemes, the expert coaches and sportscasters, the school teams, street teams, beach and competitive teams and their uniforms. She questioned why everything seemed to belong to the masculine world and tried to envisage the possibility of women's inclusion in that milieu:

I don't know, because when they watch soccer, they'll think it is men's soccer that they see here in Brazil ... It's the same thing when speaking of basketball, you think of both, but in relation to soccer, it's not like this. It's a national passion. Brazil is a five-time [world] champion. And I think many people think that soccer is just for men. But I don't think so! At the last Olympics we saw: men's soccer

24 Knijnik and Vasconcellos, 'Les femmes en crampons à coeur ouvert au Brésil'.

is all about physical force, women's is not. Women's soccer is about technical quality, about swing. So, I think a woman's place is in soccer! I think it is a sport that identifies with a woman. It's got that side that the woman has ...

At this stage of the interviews, issues associated with the female body and gender discrimination began to surface. Simultaneously with complaints about eroticization and about using the feminine body in a way that is submissive to masculine desire, a subject that permeated the interview, she also revealed a concern about the players' masculinization because it would supposedly upset the evolution of gender modality among women. This contradiction was explicit in her discourse:

The tight uniforms, the skimpy shorts ... It's disrespectful to women. I think that from the moment when you work with women, you can gain charm, beauty, a lot of things. What's the reason for the too tight, short uniforms? So that on television you would see a very feminine thing. But disrespecting the athlete, that player that was there, couldn't make a larger movement because of the too tight and short uniform, which has been made and designed only to attract men to the stadium. You don't have to abuse a woman's appearance to attract someone. In Europe they'll see it because they like it. They don't go to see beautiful women, they don't go to watch legs or buttocks. Rather they go to watch the show, the soccer game.

Thus far, Juliana's discourse focused on a plea for respect for female athletes. She put herself among the victims, the women who are constantly subject to the embarrassment of adjusting to the stereotype of 'desired femininity'.<sup>25</sup> But then, and suddenly, she started to question the women players themselves because many of them would be unable to adjust to the standards imposed by the society and this would be damaging for the image of women's soccer:

You go to the stadium and see the girls in those huge Bermuda shorts, looking like boys, their hair so short ... OK, everyone does what they want with their life, but like it or not, it hurts women's soccer and those who struggle to make soccer be seen from another light. And it denigrates the image so much. There's already the bias that soccer is a man's thing ... You go to the stadium and see those extremely masculinized women. Why would a father take his daughter to such an environment? He won't. If I have a daughter, as much as she likes it ... I don't want her to be involved in that. It's not prejudice, but I think it is society that determines it.

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25 Connell, *Masculinities*.

In a clear contradiction, Juliana admitted her own prejudice against 'certain' women — those players who, because they do not fit the norm 'denigrate the image of soccer'. This position echoes the history of international women's soccer. A study carried out across various cultures has pointed out how much difficulty there is in adjusting to dominant gender norms in sport. The pursuit of adjustment sometimes resulted in an overvaluation of that which is masculine and of men themselves; the result was a desire to be like them, which did not change gender relations in sports because the performance reference point continues to be men.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Juliana, the 'warrior', faced a great paradox because she herself, by practising soccer, walked on a tightrope, on the frontier of gendered identities, doing that which the unwritten social norm would not allow her to do. This unwritten norm is unquestionably present in Brazilian society, where there is intolerance of women playing soccer. Yet even as Juliana clarified her stance on the issue, pressuring for the broadening of gender frontiers, invisible although unmistakably delimited, she also supported the idea of not crossing these frontiers completely. Juliana believed that those who brought a non-feminine perception to women's sport, 'upset and damage women's soccer'.

Here, the mood of the interviews began to change, taking on a more intimate tone. The theme of the masculinized image of certain athletes began to open up a space for the issue of sexuality:

I think that this is what upsets women's soccer most — sexual orientation. That exists everywhere or in any profession. For instance, there are a lot of gay players in men's soccer. But it isn't shown ... I simply don't know why in women's soccer there is such a fate. If my sexual orientation is different from the one society determines, in women's soccer it's like this. If you'd rather go out with a woman it's because you like women. If you don't like men, why would you be the man? So, to me, all this is very disturbing. And those girls who have another choice and think they have to be masculinized or because they play soccer and think they have to act masculine, it inhibits sponsorships and keeps back the media. Unfortunately, women's soccer in Brazil doesn't evolve because of the organizers, but also largely because of the players. Even out there, you see a lot of things on the streets, but nine out of ten one are masculinized ... A lot of people think it is a disease, but none of them is as masculinized as here. And others are, but they don't lose their femininity. I think this is very damaging. Wherever I have

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26 Sheila Scraton, Karin Fasting, Gertrud Pfister and Ana Bunuel, 'It's still a man's game? The experiences of top-level European women footballers'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 34, 1999, pp. 99–111.

the chance, I stress the importance of appearance. I don't mean that you have to wear high heels. You're a woman, you're not a man. These are different attitudes and they have to be different.

Juliana's words are grave, serious and profound. The masculine appearance of some female players 'is very damaging [because] it inhibits sponsorships and keeps back the media'. Upset about the 'ill-fate' of there being so many visible homosexuals in her area, she used sexual discourse as a means to blame the athletes themselves for the low prestige of soccer in Brazil. For Juliana, while women's soccer was not developing in Brazil in part because of organizational structures but also 'much of it is the players' fault'.

The blame was clearly focused: it is the players' appearance, their being masculinized, their wearing those large Bermuda shorts and short hair, in short, and their not complying with the norms of the 'compulsory heterosexuality'.<sup>27</sup> The double standard in which Juliana found herself is shown in its force, since they are incorporated in the female athletes' bodies, legitimizing heterosexual order. In men's soccer there are gays but nothing is said because they are not visible. The women's bodies, however, must adjust to a norm that fits masculine desire: those who are inadequate in terms of heterosexist femininity should hide behind an appearance that fits this norm. Since this is not the case, sponsors and the media back away; after all nobody wants to support or show the 'abnormal' ones, those players that do not incorporate themselves into the prevailing heterosexual model. The victims of prejudice, in this discourse, become their own executioner because, according to Juliana, they prevent women's soccer, which they enjoy so much, "from evolving." Yet this means evolving in men's terms.

### **René Simões, the Silver Medal and the Fight for Acknowledgement**

The next part of the interview was very 'sportive' as it included Juliana's account of the lead up to the achievement of an Olympic silver medal in 2004. The captain's canny sensitivity was highlighted, and she provided some idea of how she experienced everything very emotionally and how this was perceived politically. What is important to note is how, amidst so many emotions, the captain had the perspicacity to perceive that neither she nor her team mates were there for their own sakes; they were the representatives of a 'greater cause'. Female soccer and all the barriers to women's soccer in Brazil were on public display, attracting attention to this national Olympic team.

Juliana played in the United States in 2001, because things were going from bad to worse for women's soccer in Brazil. She returned at the end of 2003 driven by 'a dream, to play again in the Olympics, with all our best players

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27 Connell, *Masculinities*

together. I lost money, but my dream may come true'. The preparation of the Olympic team was very good; the wealthy Brazilian Soccer Confederation (CBF) lodged them in their Training Center at Granja Comary in Rio de Janeiro, and since the men's team had not made it to the Olympics, all attention — in terms of Brazilian soccer at the Games — were focused on the women's team. They wanted for nothing as regards material things, and the CBF provided a big change: it brought a well-known men's soccer coach to work with the 'girls'. René Simões, a coach with a successful career in Brazil with Vasco and Flamengo, had already led the Brazilian men's under-20 teams and adult teams in countries like Iran and Jamaica, with the latter qualifying for the 1998 World Cup. But he had never coached a women's team.

Juliana's first impression was that Simões was there only to add to his résumé and go back to men's soccer. He was a stranger; he knew neither the athletes nor the history of women's soccer. 'Why was he placed there? Where are those who have always been with us? Those were the questions in the players' heads'.<sup>28</sup> The roses with which he welcomed the players at the airport on the day of the introduction only left them confused and suspicious. In his book *O dia em que as Mulheres Viraram a Cabeça dos Homens* (*The Day Women Turned Men's Heads Upside Down*), published in 2007, Simões' details his Olympic experience with the women's team saying that on the first day with the girls he told them his story pointing out that he was there to "close a cycle" with the Brazilian teams, with the interpretation of this being left to each of the players. While some of the athletes liked him, others found him a demagogue:

I've always questioned coaches and this one wasn't any different. Practices were weird, too wearing. The technical staff had so many people I'd never seen before, assistants, psychologist, and a nutritionist. It was all very professional; no one was used to it ... But the mistrust was huge and mutual. I felt that he didn't like the way we played, that he didn't believe in us. During the first practice matches against the United States team, we were awful ... Then, everything changed. Practices became tougher; it seemed that nobody would be able to endure them.

Simões has stated similar feelings about the women's team. Initially he was afraid about the team and his position. In time, his goals became the same as the athletes: to win Olympic gold. The coach gave this dream a symbolic shape. First, on the evening of his wedding anniversary, he took his wife and daughters to the team's training camp to celebrate the event. By giving a tennis ball to each player, he symbolically materialized their Olympic dream.

28 René Simões, *O dia em que as Mulheres Viraram a Cabeça dos Homens*, Qualitymark, Rio de Janeiro 2007.



The idea was that they should each keep the tennis ball as a representation of the gold medal: the more they hung on to it and took care of it, the greater would be their desire to win the gold medal:

What started out as a joke became a serious thing. No one wanted to lose that ball, some of the girls even argued to know which one was whose. Look at the photo on the podium after the final ... The girls held the medal with one hand, even with their mouth and with the other one, they proudly raised their dream, the tennis ball professor René gave us ... That really touched us.

But Juliana said that that team also had a mission. Besides playing and winning the Games, all were intent on saving the reputation of women's soccer in Brazil. They got together constantly to discuss it and always fell back on the theme of the players' image:

This team was completely different; we had to win something, because women's soccer was in the hands of 18 girls who played over there. The 18 of us were fighting for the rest who were in Brazil and wanted to play. We used to talk about how important appearance is. Regardless of our sexual orientation, we needed to persuade the players that they all had to be different, that we had some roles to play. This part of the appearance was something we needed to pay more attention to.

Under Simões' coaching, the players were learning to 'read the game' and make 'tactical changes', something that no coach had taught them before. But the players also discussed sports politics, perceiving what several researchers have found in studies on women in sports: that, above all, an athlete must be depicted as a feminine woman in line with the hegemonic heterosexual norm:

As a consequence, to compensate for less 'feminine' traits, some female elite athletes are actively trying to emphasize symbols of heterosexual femininity. They detach themselves from images of masculinity by making feminine attributes more explicit.(...) These women are engaged in looking feminine in masculine sports, such as handball and soccer. They are constantly working out an acceptable balance between feminine and masculine characteristics. It is important for them to achieve acceptance both as women and as elite athletes. This enterprise entails a continuous emphasis on femininity, and is according to some of the athletes perpetuated through the use of make-up, by having long hair and by dressing in feminine ways outside the sporting arena. One of the worst things that can happen to these women, is to be taken for being a man or for being lesbian. They want to be recognised as

women and to look 'proper' (that is feminine), even though they are soccer players. What we see is that female athletes who are acting in areas which traditionally are connected with masculinity, are submitting themselves in a way which makes it possible to prove to themselves and to others that they actually are women.<sup>29</sup>

However, what these athletes were not able to understand was that, paradoxically, by trying to appear more 'feminine' so that the media would depict them that way to the masses, they were in fact working against any real possibility of increasing the rights of women to practise sports. This is because footballing women, by conforming to hegemonic gender norms, serve as objects of male sexual pleasure and their athletic value becomes secondary.

This type of phenomenon is evident in a recent study into the photographic coverage of United States inter-collegiate sport. In an extensive quantitative analysis, the authors demonstrated that female athletes were always being photographed in ways that emphasized their heterosexual appeal. In several photos it was hardly noticeable that those images were of athletes or sports teams had the captions not explicitly said: 'Basketball team' or 'gymnastics'. According to the researchers:

The marginalization of women's athleticism that results from these particular media presentations serves to reinforce male dominance and control of sport. Thus, the media create a fundamental barrier to any significant change with respect to conceptions of the female athlete and her body ... As others have argued ... media portrayals of female athleticism contain and limit women in sport and subsequently deny them much of the status, power and prestige that men experience in sport. By trivializing and marginalizing female athleticism, the media reinforce the notion that women's sport is a lesser version of the real (men's) sport.<sup>30</sup>

This idea that women's soccer is a 'lesser version' of men's soccer is endorsed by those who advocate adjustments to soccer's rules to facilitate — as they see it — women doing what they want, that is, play soccer. This became clear when the largest Brazilian television network broadcast the women's soccer award ceremony after the final at the Athens Olympics. The network's most important sportscaster held that a new game should be created, a soccer game adapted to women, where the goalposts would be smaller, the duration

29 L. J. Kolnes, 'Heterosexuality as an organizing principle in women's sport', *International Revue of Sociology of Sport*, vol. 30, 1995, pp. 61–77.

30 Jo Ann M. Buysse and M. S. Embser-Herbert, 'Constructions of gender in sport: An analysis of intercollegiate media guide cover photographs', *Gender and Society*, vol. 18, 2004, pp. 66–81.

of the game reduced, and the field reduced. This came after the women had demonstrated that they could play a soccer game very well under the current rules, for the Olympic final between Brazil and the United States was decided only during overtime in the golden goal format.

The patronizing view that the game needed to be adapted to women's allegedly more fragile conditions was not endorsed by coach Simões. As soon as he committed himself to working with the team, he was strict and demanding during practice, but also developed a strong psychological work ethic. The result of this work was his text 'Women's soccer, overcoming barriers and defeating prejudices' which the coach gave to the athletes just before their trip to Athens. It told the story of a girl who loved to play football and who fought and overcame prejudices to head towards an outcome where 'in an Olympic alchemy the dream comes true and turns into gold and prejudice becomes understanding, acceptance, and love'.<sup>31</sup>

After the final game, the coach and the technical staff insisted on helping athletes get up from the floor where they lay crying, trying to convince them that silver was a fabulous achievement. However, all television channels showed the tears streaming down coach René Simões' face during the award ceremony. After the ceremony, the seasoned coach asked his three daughters to forgive him for never having taught them to play soccer. To Juliana, despite the sadness of the defeat, it was a positive outcome: 'Had we won the gold medal, many wrong things in our soccer would have continued to be hidden'.

## Conclusion

In many ways, Juliana was right. Political articulation was more than necessary for the team as well as the awareness of the fact that those 18 medal winners had played in the name of all girls who love soccer and wished to play it freely in their country, which many consider 'the land of football'. While still in Athens, Juliana said that the group wrote a letter to the president of the Brazilian Soccer Federation urging him to keep the promises he had made during the Games that he would organize women's soccer in Brazil with championships and budgets. The letter explicitly stated that in the next championships no athlete should be excluded on account of age or appearance. Juliana was incisive when she said that the letter emphasized the importance of the participation of the 'pioneers, those who played in 1996 and in 2000 and opened all doors for us'.

This insistence was justified. The desire to keep away from soccer those athletes who did not have the desired appearance — the feminine standard discussed above — remained and still remains strong among Brazilian soccer organizers. As soon as the Olympic Games were over, a qualifying

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31 Excerpt from the text by René Simões, courtesy of Juliana Cabral.

match against Bolivia was played in São Paulo, the largest Brazilian city, by the national men's soccer team, packed with global stars — Ronaldo, Kaká, among others — vying for qualification for the World Cup in Germany. At a preliminary match on October, 2004, the CBF's directors announced a women's match. Although everybody expected the women's Olympic vice-champion team to participate and be honored in front of 80,000 viewers, what they saw was the traditional match played by models, low-skilled but physically attractive players in heterosexist terms. Nothing had changed.

It is not only managers who maintain this objectified conception of the feminine body in sports; sometimes, Juliana herself thinks in this paradoxical way, wanting to improve the image of women's soccer by being in favour of making the athletes conform to minimum standards that many renege upon on account of their own differentiated identity. However, unlike the management staff, Juliana is brave in her recognition of this paradox. The beginning of her career was ambiguous enough; as it began in an environment, a team of models, absolutely conforming to gender rules that objectify woman and then she went through a way which is acting to subvert those rules. Since that time to the days of the Athens Games, she has lived on the tightrope, between submission to and subversion of the hierarchical order of genders.

In fact, during the Athens Games and immediately after, the captain was leading a rupture the extent of which she may not even have been aware of, and because of this she clung to the more obvious explanation of blaming the so-called masculinized athletes. But, actually, it is hard to perceive that the masculine power in Brazil is symbolically concentrated on and harnessed to the soccer fields. As Juliana resumed the theme about the body and the abuse of the athletes imposed by the managing staff, she declared that she would rather 'play in empty stadiums than to have to submit and expose my body and the girls' bodies in sensual uniforms only to attract men'.

Finally, Juliana was able to overcome this paradox. At the end of our interviews, she said that there is no need for women's soccer to be like men's soccer in terms of budgets, media exposure, and millionaire salaries:

There really is no need for all that. I know that men's soccer is involved in a network of corruption that is hard to understand or escape from. We don't want that, we simply want to play our soccer, with dignity. We don't want to earn millions, but we also can't live earning so little, in poverty, like so many players who continue to work as cleaning women to be able to support themselves.

Amidst the contradictions and paradoxes that women's soccer generates, Juliana and her companions were challenging the gender and sexual politics that come between them and their practice. Female soccer players were building something new in the field, and they were giving a new meaning

to soccer and to all gendered practices embodied in Brazilian culture. They were building and rebuilding old practices, redefining gender boundaries through their practice in soccer fields throughout Brazil. They were challenging established gender rules and trying to build a fairer society, with some progress but sometimes with backwards steps.

