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Masculine Wives

INTRODUCTION *Masculinity with Teeth*

In 2007, I was talking to a guy who had brought one of his figure skating daughters to a public-skating session for a private lesson on basic hockey skills. Ray and his family, who are white, had just moved from another state where, he said, he'd figured out from watching "little seven-year-old Asian girls landing doubles" that his daughters had no competitive future. Maybe this one, unlike the younger twirl-girl "princess," would like hockey. Ray played hockey himself, but he knew he'd never find guys to play with. Why, I asked, with so many options in the area? He explained. A former professional hockey player, drafted by an NHL team in the mid-1980s, he preferred to play without a face protector, like he'd been taught. But he'd get on the ice with these young guys, twenty-two or so, who'd been raised with full facemasks and got their stick right up in your face. He'd tell them, hey, cool it, this is a nonchecking league, we're adults, with jobs, out here to break a sweat, that's the point. Obviously, recreational hockey called for judicious restraint. That's why he chose not to score as often as he could; everyone should get a chance. But the young guys wouldn't listen even when he warned them, "Really, you don't know who you're messing with." Inevitably, a kid would get his stick in Ray's face again. Then Ray would have to go after him, although Ray eventually paid a price for it: "About when they are picking up their teeth from the ice, they're writing me a letter, saying 'please don't come back.'"

Face It

Fans and analysts of masculinity have a lot to see in skating, where various forms of masculinity are constantly being developed and transformed, articulated and transmitted, displayed and dramatized, policed and permitted, enforced and reinforced, challenged and contested—sometimes all at once, as in Ray's story. It begins with figure skating's version of the myth that Asians are taking over the country, garner-

ing honors and opportunities that white people once could count on for themselves. Surely, Ray saw little white girls outjumping his kid in the still heavily white-dominated USFS. In his view, however, changing demographics—undoubtedly viewed through some stereotypes about Asian bodies, minds, parenting, whatever—had disrupted the traditional rink gender order as he understood it and as his family, until then, practiced it. Now, to be a successful athlete on ice, the daughter would have to step into a masculine sport. In their new state, Maine, as elsewhere, changing times had already brought teams for her to play on and some shifting gender associations about which females play hockey, although structures and populations for girls' hockey in area schools were still clearly in development.¹

A new breed of competitors had also compromised Ray's ability to feel at home in his own sport, although generation, not race, told the story for him this time. He painted himself as a tough guy from the older days of the NHL, although, in fact, he had backdated and semifudged his pedigree. He didn't quite hail from an era before facial protection. Instead, he graduated from college almost a decade after the NCAA mandated full facemasks in 1980, which the state he lived in and the Amateur Hockey Association of the United States (AHAUS) by then already required. He would have worn one at the very latest by high school whether he played in an intramural or area league.² Nor had he actually played NHL hockey, as I discovered by checking out his stats online after something about the way he said "drafted by" instead of "played for" made me suspicious. Despite being deemed promising enough to be drafted right after high school for a postcollege position, he played only for the American Hockey League (AHL) and Eastern Conference Hockey League (ECHL) development teams. That itself is an impressive accomplishment, but he never was called up to the NHL even for one game.³

Something else in Ray's story took me some rooting around to decode, not because he was circumventing, but because I was new to hockey history, fandom, and debates: the complicated perceived relationships of wearing facial protection to being a tough guy. Some people believe that refusing to wear a face protector separates tough guys, who scoff at the extra risks, from pretenders to the title, an idea underscored by disparate rules about who may forego what. Children, teens, and college players must wear full facemasks, thus associating those facemasks with youthful, less mature play. The AHAUS rules covering players under twenty

superseded a rule that restricted face protectors to players who already had facial injuries, showing the facemask's inherited association, beyond weakness, with debility.⁴ Women, too, must always wear full facemasks, even in the Olympics where their male counterparts (born after 1974) need to wear only visors, thus linking full face protection and “pussy,” in its interconnected meanings. Don't worry your pretty little head about your pretty little face. The AHL and ECHL mandated visors starting in the 2006–7 season, leaving the NHL, which did not even require helmets until 1979, with the sole status of housing the guys who can handle going without. Marty McSorley, a famous NHL “enforcer,” the term for skaters who occupy an unofficial position of designated fighter, viewed the ability to progress beyond the facemask as a measure of suitability for NHL play: “For [the college guys] to come in without that face mask on, that changes everything big time. I saw so many young guys come into training camp over the years pretending that they were tough and gritty, but most of those guys really didn't have a clue. Those guys got weeded out pretty early.”⁵ As Jarrett Freedman explained to me, some of the “young hotshots,” like Alex Ovechkin and Nicklas Bäckström of the Washington Capitals, still take advantage of the rule that you can forgo head protection during warmups.⁶

Face protectors, then, may be seen to separate the wimps from the tough guys and the boys (and girls and women) from the men. But they may also be seen to separate dishonorable, tough-guy upstarts from honorable, tough-guy gentlemen. Some people locate mandatory face protectors among changes like the instigator rule, which penalizes starting (some) fights, that, they argue, has turned hockey from a game of skill and controlled violence, self-policed by players with honor, into a game filled with less skilled players and cheap-tricking thugs. Without fear of getting a stick or puck in the face, players are more likely simply to block the puck with their bodies,⁷ and to perform illegal, unsportsmanlike maneuvers that they won't lose an eye for in retribution. These maneuvers include the high-sticking that Ray mentioned, which refers to hitting another player above the shoulders and is, in theory, penalized when done intentionally or irresponsibly.⁸

That's why, for Ray, wearing a full facemask could signal, paradoxically, both a departure from rougher, tougher days gone by and a refusal to adopt standards of risk appropriate to recreational adult hockey, where players have adult responsibilities—we all have to work the next day, as

people frequently express it—and lower stakes, or, more precisely, supposedly lower stakes. An employee at another local rink told me about fist-fighting lawyers and doctors there, including surgeons obviously in need of highly functioning hands, and another player who was ejected for anti-Semitic rants at a ref. They are the disturbing among many bits of evidence that recreational hockey has high stakes, too. In any case, when someone disrespects the play or the deference that Ray is trying to engineer, he channels his (image of the) bad old days by fighting the guy and winning. He's like the aging guy in a Toby Keith song who describes backing up his old high school buddy in a bar fight in the verse after he mans up for hot twin sisters: "I ain't as good as I once was / but I'm as good once as I ever was."⁹ But it's the bad old days filtered through new practices. Ray has to wait for the kid to remove his facemask. Like removing one's own to fight, it's a newer sign of toughness and honor.

Wile You Are Watching

The pieces in this section engage incidents involving masculine performance in skate sports that foreground issues and expectations about masculinity. I named the section "masculine wiles" partly to signal how beguiling masculine-coded moves and looks can be. They can certainly beguile me. While I hardly swooned over Ray's posturing, I'd almost start smoking again to have a hot butch light my cigarette—maybe the one who used to drawl "Wanna come watch me check some fluids?" when she was heading out to work on her car. I did.

But I also want to pull at the ordinary association of wiles with femininity that makes my title an obvious switch-up on a cliché. Feminine wiles are often understood as enchantments that female or feminine people deploy, seductively and sometimes sneakily, to achieve their own aims in situations that they do not have the power to control outright. Madame de Pompadour allegedly gets to rule France, and fluff up the décor, by becoming Louis XV's official mistress. Yet wiles may be diversely gendered and deployed by people in power, sometimes to uphold a dubious status quo. Both the delightful and the dubious, separately and together, concern me here.

The essay named "'I Stand Beside Him with an Axe!': Hockey Guys Together" looks at several occasions for reflection about masculine norms in hockey, considering barriers challenged and maintained in the

process. The next essay, “Quads Make the Man, or What’s Too Gay for Men’s Figure Skating,” looks at attempts to craft recognizable criteria for sufficient masculinity, and therefore heterosexuality, in a sport reputedly devoid of studly straight guys. Finally, “The Girl Who Fooled My Butchdar” returns to a topic I talked about in part IV: the sometimes disjuncture between a person’s skating and nonskating genders—this time across sex-gender categories that I engaged, not as a participant, but as a beguiled spectator.