**The atmosphere of sexism in Women’s football is casting a dark cloud over the sport**

By Miles Earl

The AFLW has given women the opportunity to pursue their dreams in professional football, but in doing so has increased the scale of sexist abuse that either pushes those away from the game, or fuels them to become better for it.

In an interview with RMIT, AFLW Melbourne premiership player Maeve Chaplin, sat down to talk about her journey through battling sexism and how its presence shifted during her years of development.

“I wasn’t allowed to do tackling drills or I wasn’t allowed to do push-ups because I was a girl, which is weird when you’re seven or eight because if all the boys are doing it why can’t I,” she said.

Whereas playing at her junior football club in Darebin, presented Chaplin with more purpose in her playing as she said, “It being all women meant we were building something revolutionary”.

Unlike when Chaplin had to play among boys during her first years of competition football, which tested her mental health and anxiety by being the target of unsolicited criticisms from the likes of coaches and spectators.

This began to build of her mental health and elevate her anxiety toward playing, leading her to become alienated with her love of the sport and the moments that come with it.

 “I tackled one of their players and the opposition coach just started yelling at me like, ‘get off the field, you shouldn’t be playing’ just because I tackled this boy and hurt him,” Chaplin said.

Training and her general approach to the game was hindered when she said, “training at a footy oval, you’ll hear people drive past and yell something out of the car,” with her facing the “constant getting laughed at when you go on the field”.

Around the same time, she faced similar doubts during her years at high school where the dichotomy of partying against building her career began to take its toll on her social wellbeing.

Coupling that with the quick rise in women’s sports at the time, Chaplin faced many pushbacks that attempted to push her away from the game that allowed how to have an identity and purpose.

It would eventually turn into name-calling, as Chaplin went to say, “you want to be liked by all your peers and if you’re playing footy that is a male dominated sport you get called all the stereotypical names like a lesbian and everything”.

“When that’s not something you identify as and someone’s putting you into that box, it makes you feel not accepted by them and in high school all you want to do is be accepted by everyone,” she said.

However, once the path toward the top league began to draw closer, Chaplin found new a light that dimmed the negativity of sexism around her by playing in an competitive all-women environment, after joining Essendon in the VFLW.

Gaining perspective of others who had similar experiences growing up, that made it easier for her to find passion in the game and face the realities of the past that still played constantly in her head.

“There’s so much more of an aura of acceptance and so much more diversity in women’s footy, it’s just a big group of females that all want to do the same thing,” she said.

“You learn to accept the fact that it’s not us, it’s there issue and they have a problem that society is changing, especially in the sporting industry, women’s sport is growing every year and there probably jealous,” Chaplin said.

After going undrafted in her draft class, Chaplin continued to stick with Essendon’s culture, eventually paying off after she was recruited by the Melbourne Football Club, signing with them on the eve of the first game of the season.

Playing 12 games for the club, she found herself becoming a part of the first premiership team for the club, making her realise the abuse was needed to push her to become the player she is.

Comparing to the pressure of playing in the AFL, Chaplin went on to say, “it’s not really like your living up to this expectation that’s been going around of 150 years like the men’s league, where building our own expectations”.

“Melbourne is one of the most influential environments I’ve ever been a part of, everyone there wants to be the best player they can be and if you don’t want that you kind of fall behind,” she said.

The league’s introduction has led to many women joining the game at grass roots level, with Heathmont Jets coach Joanne Sayer, taking up the responsibility of being the first women to coach an all-girls team at the club.

Though during her coaching days, Sayer found she was no longer able to continue to support her girls and moved away from the sport, due to the level of league discrimination and prejudice against her team.

Just the way her team was allowed to play, Sayer said “Sometimes our games were moved or shortened because the boys had to play” playing quarters of 18-minutes that were “sometimes shortened to 10-minute quarters”.

“I can’t say exactly what was said, but I do know that there were a couple of boys that were watching, probably under seventeens that had certainly made derogatory comments whilst my girls were playing,” she said.

While elements from the league’s regulations kept the girls team to the same uniform requirements that the boys follow, showing no care or effort to make the girls standout on their own.

It causes many to have anxiety problems related to how they are presented on the field, while indicating the lack of care toward the girls teams, with the uniform being fitted for boys.

“A lot of teenage girls are quite body conscience, the football shorts they had to wear the same football shorts the boys had to wear and being teenage girls their bodies and certainly very different to teenage boys,” she said.

“If you were a girl that had curves, you certainly didn’t feel comfortable in the shorts because they weren’t cut for your body” so it “just made them feel really self-conscience,” Sayer said.

The lack of confidence and faith Sayer coaching the first girls’ team for the club, lead to an outpour from parents and spectators that undermined her credibility just because of her gender.

This is what began to push away the coach from future years of helping develop the next generation of women’s footy players since

“One girl’s father in particular, would call me up on game day and would tell me where he thought his daughter should play and how I should coach the game because he was a stall water at the club,” she said.

“He thought he needed to tell me how to do my job” that was “especially tough during the first season because it was early days of girls playing football”, Sayer said.

Simon Rice, a Sports Psychologist at the University of Melbourne, talked more in an interview about the relationship between girls playing football and how it affects their mental health.

Especially when discrimination occurs, Rice said, “it can be a very difficult experience for some, it will be traumatic and is often associated with poorer mental health outcomes”.

“Balancing the expectations from teammates coaches and parents, there could be conflict around the amount of time that’s required to be put into training and preparation versus other elements of their life, part time jobs or studying,” he said.

To help avoid this drop in mental stability from playing sports, Rice contests that treating mental health for young girls playing football is more achievable than attempting to play through it.

Listing a few different methods and practices that are used by coaches and trainers throughout the sporting elite, both for grass roots and professional athletes.

“Self-management, stress reduction, exercise is helpful but if someone is engaged in high-level physical activity, they might need to step back on the frequency of exercise with it becoming stressful,” he said.

“Good social support is critical, for some it may mean reaching out for more mental health support through mental health channels”, or just having “an awareness of what is going on is important”, Rice said.

The cause of the sexism problem is rooted from young boys who are in the opposite corner of wanting attention kept on their sporting play, instead of the development from the girls.

Rice speculates that boys have projected their own level of insecurity that sprouts from the uncertainty of seeing a greater investment in women’s sport, among other causes that are known to happen.

“Expectations related to masculinity or emerging manhood or that boys only play with boys and a culture, that if there’s a player or athlete that’s not male, then they don’t belong and would be subject to ridicule and discrimination,” he said.

While others feel the need to please their peers, with Rice saying, “that it’s expected of them from their male peers that they would give someone from another gender group a really hard time because that’s what the group expects”.

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