

It's All Academic Podcast

Episode 5: Women in sport with Dr Helen Owton

Contributors name:

BEN WOOD: Welcome to It's All Academic, the OpenLearn podcast. OpenLearn, a part of the Open University. And my name is Ben, part of the OpenLearn team. And today, I'm delighted I'm going to be talking to Dr. Helen Owton, who is a lecturer in sport and fitness here at the Open University.

Now we're going to be talking about women's sport. We're going to be talking social media. We're going to be talking the challenges faced by elite-level women athletes, lots of subjects that are going to come up, I'm sure. So yeah, without further ado, welcome to today's podcast and let's get learning.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So Helen, thank you very much for joining us, and welcome to It's All Academic. Thank you.

DR HELEN OWTON: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

BEN WOOD: So I said women's sport is the theme for today, but I know you've got a lot of content on OpenLearn. I looked at your profile before we came on. There's a lot of really interesting articles that you've written. But maybe if you could just start off, tell us a little about yourself, a little about the work that you do. Just set the scene for us.

DR HELEN OWTON: Yeah, well, my work focuses on the lived experiences of sport, particularly of women's sport. I'm really trying to understand what it feels to inhabit a body in different sporting environments and how identity, gender, illness, culture, and power really shape those experiences.

I'm particularly interested in embodiment and explore this through qualitative and various creative methods and methodologies-- so not just what people say they do in sport, but how they experience it and how it shapes their emotions, their relationships, and confidence and their continued sense of self.

BEN WOOD: Excellent. So it's going to be plenty for us to get stuck into there, I think. I want to start with-- there's a theme. So there's a couple of the articles that are on OpenLearn, and "resilience" is a word that really seems to come up. And I know that you've written articles both about the England NetVault team and the Rugby World Cup, the women's rugby team. Again, both articles have got a real sense of this sort of infighting to be seen, perhaps fighting for acknowledgment, acclaim, and like I said, and a real resilience to bounce back and achieve something.

So maybe you just tell us a little about that as a theme, as a topic that you've looked into. What is it about resilience and that you find particularly interesting, and in those two examples, what can you tell us about those two teams in particular?

DR HELEN OWTON: Yeah. In terms of resilience, I think if we look at the Rugby World Cup, they showed incredible resilience and also a collective identity. I think that those stories can fade quickly in sport, especially in women's sport. And sport can place people on a pedestal. And one month-- they can place them on a pedestal one month, and then forget the next. And then that emotional whiplash, that sudden rise to fame and public recognition followed by silence, is something most players have to navigate in their own bodies and in their own sense of self.

So in terms of resilience, it's kind of like a fleeting fame. It's a really powerful concept where it can be exhilarating but also unsettling for women's sport. Suddenly you're visible, recognized,

celebrated, and then it disappears overnight. And in terms of resilience, if we look at the historical development of women's sport, Copa 71 documentary on BBC about the history of women's football in the World Cup, and the tournament witnessed record crowds of about 110,000 people, and this was written out of history.

Many of the women in the documentary hadn't even talked about their incredible experiences against the odds in women's football because they felt so ashamed, banned from playing football ever again after that experience. And then there's also the rugby Scrum Queens. That's also a documentary on the first World Cup in rugby and how four friends found the first tournament-- founded the first tournament in 1991, in Cardiff. And it is also the reunion which features the same pioneering players discussing that all on Radio 4 about those experiences.

And when we talk about resilience, it's all about how women have had to fight for that recognition in sport, and that history really shows how hard that's been for women in sport. And I cannot imagine how much of a comedown it must have been after fighting so hard for those opportunities. And that is really what we call fleeting fame. And it's time women's sport is given that respect it deserves, really.

BEN WOOD: On that subject, that's a really interesting one to think, are the examples that you just mentioned there from much longer ago, and obviously that famous view, those people have become almost forgotten completely. On the more recent level, let's take the Rugby World Cup team for example. Yeah, that maybe took a little while to get building, but when interest did really grow in that tournament, that team were sort of maybe not quite household names, but they were much more forefront and lots of people knew who they were.

And someone like Ellie Kildunne, for example, her name, she was the star of that team. And I'm thinking even now, how many people would remember? How many names would we remember of that team? How many people would even be able to look at a picture of her and say, oh, yeah, I know who that is.

I mean, how does that compare with thinking, like, the rugby team, compared to perhaps the Lionesses, who have become, over a period of years, much more recognizable? Is that something that we think we're going to see more of? Will this rugby team be able to continue that fame? Will this become sort of a longer process? They'll become more recognizable and more well-known. Is that because of a changing of attitudes and recognition in women's sport? Or, again, is this just something we're going to see again, that this team, world champions, are going to have also experienced that fleeting fame. In 5, 10 years time, will we have forgotten about their achievements?

DR HELEN OWTON: I think what's different now is there is a little bit more investment in women's sport. So since the Women's Rugby World Cup, we've seen more visibility of the national leagues. So you've got premiership rugby. And I just love being able to sit down on a Saturday afternoon and think, OK, what women's sport can I watch today? There's women's football, there's women's rugby, there's women's cricket, there's netball-- not all year round, but there are options available at various times of the year of women's sport to watch. And that visibility will help increase the audiences, the investment, the funding, the support that's required to keep the momentum going for women's sport now.

And I loved some of the characters that we had in rugby, and I can't even pick out-- I can pick out many individuals, but there's almost too many in women's rugby because they're able to become so positive in their media during the World Cup. There's just so many characters. It's a really phenomenal kind of drive forward for women's rugby. And if you didn't see any of the women's rugby, you really missed out on some spectacular games.

And in terms of being able to continue that momentum, it just needs even more of that investment, even more of that support, the infrastructure that needs to come with women's sport. Otherwise, there's a risk of with that visibility comes exploitation for women's sport as well.

BEN WOOD: Do you think the visibility, it is getting better-- things like Sports Personality of the Year, and the fact that we've had the likes of Keely Hodgkinson and Beth Mead have been so high-profile in recent times. I mean is there a greater extent-- not maybe "acceptance" isn't the right word, but the media is not seeing it as women's sports, men's sport. They're just seeing great athletes. Is that a change that-- are you seeing that happening across all media? Do we no longer consider it's women's football, or is it just, it's football, it's rugby. These are elite-level sports people.

DR HELEN OWTON: Yeah. I'd like to see it like that. I think as well, with women's sport, historically, they've been seen as intruders into a space that's been predominantly available for mainly men. So when we see things like online abuse, unfortunately that is one of the main common themes that comes up in women's sport and sporting narratives. That abuse is often gendered, sexualized, or attacks the legitimacy of women's sport or space in sport. And like I said, it's sort of seen as women as intruders in a pre-existing male-only space.

And these aren't just comments, they're attempts to control the space or diminish women's place in sport. And they also shape how female athletes inhabit their bodies, creating tension, hyper-awareness, hypervigilance, and creating extra pressure for women to perform not only for themselves and for their team, but for all women. And that's a huge amount of pressure that's put on women's sport.

So yes, we've seen that they've got more attention, perhaps only in certain sports where it's deemed acceptable for women in the past to develop that history and place in that sport. But we're seeing that a lot more in other spaces, and it will be interesting to see how women's football and women's rugby in particular, because some people who watch women's rugby will still think, oh, I can't watch women attack. It's so physical. It makes me cringe.

Seeing women play rugby is quite a phenomenal thing to see. When we talk about women deemed as fragile bodies, they're not fragile in women's rugby. I can tell you that.

BEN WOOD: So yeah, I mean, I think boxing is a great example of that. Women's boxing, again, it's had its moments. It's come to the fore. The Irish boxer, Katie Taylor, I saw how high-profile she was on the recent Matchroom documentary. They had the Hearn family and their sporting success.

But Katie sailor was really high-profile fighting, high on the card on high-profile and boxing merits. Yeah, I mean, what do you think about that? You said about-- yeah, if it was hard to watch people women play rugby, boxing. It's certainly not fragile.

DR HELEN OWTON: No, exactly. I mean, the whole point of boxing is to try and punch the lights out of your opponent. The whole point is to try and knock somebody out, which might not sit well with some people watching women's sport or thinking what women should be doing. And I think that it's interesting when you say about high-profile people.

We look back at 2012, we saw Nicola Adams win the Olympics, and that really kind of projected women's boxing into the forefront. And again, it died down a little bit, and then it comes back to the forefront with particular strong personalities really raising the profile of these particular sports. And I just find that really interesting in itself, that it takes strong personalities. And like we've seen with the Women's World Cup, there's a lot of strong personalities there that have raised the profile of that sport.

And maybe that's what it takes. But then, equally, it comes with risks of those people being exposed to online abuse. The visibility, the visibility, the high profile, that also comes with exploitation and the risks of mental health issues.

BEN WOOD: And you mentioned a little while ago-- you said about the online abuse. And perhaps in terms of the women, the abuse they're getting, it's not necessarily just them. It's about women. They get abuse and it covers all women athletes, all women sport. And for men, not the case. It may be probably less abuse and perhaps more personal, more aimed at the individual. I mean, is that the real difference?

I mean, what is the difference? Is there seemingly more abuse online for women athletes, and what is the impact of this? I mean, is there anything that can be done as sporting bodies? Can anything be done to try and stop this or is there any solution?

DR HELEN OWTON: I think in the recent Olympics, they tried to protect some of the athletes from the media exposure and just staying off media, and recommending athletes to stay off media. But obviously, sometimes those sorts of threats are going to get through and are harmful. I mean, the impact of online abuse or any sort of abuse, football's been the major problem, not just for women's football, but for men's football-- Kick It Out, racial abuse, all of those sorts of things that they've been trying to kick out of football for years and years.

It just seems like a gendered abuse isn't as-- what's the word I'm looking for? Gendered abuse isn't as serious as other forms of abuse. It's like, oh, it's OK. Women, get back in the kitchen. It's just a bit of banter. What are women doing on the pitch? Again, it goes back to that idea that sports, or particularly football, in this case, is seen as a male-only space where women are intruders in that space and they shouldn't be there.

And I think now we're seeing that they're showing that they are deserving to be there, and if there's an appetite for women's sport and women's football and women's rugby, that are traditionally male-only sports, and there's an appetite and huge investments are going to benefit the sport.

BEN WOOD: So on that, I'm now interested in the changes in-- I mean, I think we've seen, probably, saying the football, the WSL, there's been a real change in the last few years in terms of support. I think it's gone from being a few people turning up because there's something happening and they're just a bit interested. These teams have really developed proper support, and the fans that are supporters of that women's team, they get a turn out in bigger numbers for home games. We're seeing greater support traveling away, actually following the team all over the place.

So I think we're seeing a change maybe in that sort of recognition. I'm really interested in seeing, are we seeing a change in how women's sport is dealt with on the coaching side, in terms of-- in management training, injury seems to still be a really big topic-- again, particularly in the football, the number of ACL injuries that are happening.

Are we seeing, alongside this shift in profile and interest and support for women's sport, are we seeing an equal shift in the coaching and the care and the specific training and medical needs of players on the women's side of the game?

DR HELEN OWTON: Yeah. I mean, we've already seen heightened injury risk, especially, as you say, ACL injuries. And that's not because women's bodies are weaker. It's just because the infrastructure hasn't caught up with the demands being placed on them. Yes, there's an improvement, but we need to look at that even more so with the amount of more sport women are playing on a regular basis.

We talk about the Women's Super League, we're talking about the rugby, that's all-year-round. And the more women are playing sport, the more that support needs to be there. So the expansion can be good for all of women's sports. I mean, again, like I said, I'd love to be able to sit down at the weekend and be able to watch that sort of sport available. But this expansion is only positive if it grows responsibly and with the athletes at the center of that care and that duty of care. And that needs to happen alongside enough investment to keep improving the sports.

And in terms of when you increase the fixture load without simultaneously increasing things like medical provision, rest time, we talk about menstrual cycle-informed training, maternity support and long-term welfare planning, you create a situation where the body becomes both celebrated but also exploited.

BEN WOOD: What's your thoughts on the number of women coaches in the sport? I mean, it seems to me, looking, there's still a lot of male managers or head coaches of female teams. And is that something that you would want to see changed? Does it need more women in those positions to make that change happen? The women who understand what women need, their players, are they going to understand them better? Is that a change that's needed?

DR HELEN OWTON: Yeah, I think so. I think that-- I mean, in terms of being informed, I'd like to see more female coaches just because I think that there's that real role model visibility to see women's coaches being-- [CLEARs THROAT] excuse me-- women's teams being coached by women and women teams.

I mean, mixed teams of coaches is fine. But there does need to be more women in coaching positions, in management positions. We talk about women's sport, but why not have women coaching men's sports? We don't see that hardly ever. Am I allowed to talk about Nottingham Forest?

BEN WOOD: Of course, you are.

DR HELEN OWTON: OK. Not the men's. Let's not talk about them at the moment. So I'm a-- oh, god, how shall I say this? I haven't really prepared this, but it's just come to me. So when we look at some of the women's teams, we've got a really strong projection of Nottingham Forest Women's Team really coming up the ranks. They've moved up to the Women's Super League Two just through the manager-- well, I should say the owner-- investing, Marinakis, investing in the women's side. And we've seen how that really helps a team progress.

They've moved already into the Women's Super League Two. We've got Carly Stewart, who's a female coach, and she is fantastic. She really knows the team. She really plays a strategy well throughout the game. And when we see-- when I see that myself, personally, I just can't help but feel so proud and feel so honored to watch and privileged to watch that take place. So yes, I'd like to see that more.

BEN WOOD: Is there a pathway there? I mean, I think we're seeing, maybe in the media, sort of high-profile people like Alex Scott and Jill Scott, who are both presenting sport on prime time mainstream television, have become recognized figures in the world of entertainment and sport. But is there a pathway for the players of that generation-- that's of the early Lionesses, when they first came to prominence-- to push through and become high-profile coaches in their own right?

I'm thinking maybe the likes of a Leah Williamson, for example, one of the more senior players, Millie Bright, players like that. Is there a pathway in place for the likes of them to move into coaching if they want to, or are they being encouraged that way? Is the-- yeah, is there a platform there for them?

DR HELEN OWTON: To be honest, I'm not actually sure if there is a platform, so I don't know if you want to cut that out. But what I do know is in terms-- you mentioned presenting. I'm not sure there's a pathway for presenting. And I think it is difficult for all players, male and female, to come out of sport and transition into something else and another career.

We've seen a lot of sports people struggle after sport. They retire so young, and it's difficult because some of them do become well-known. They become celebrities. And what is it that they can do after their career in sport? A lot of people go into speaking, presenting, or coaching. Maybe coaching is perhaps the, I say, "easier" pathway.

But recently, there was Karen Carney talking about the abuse that she experienced as a presenter and it threw her out of that pathway completely because she felt so distraught and demoralized by those comments online that it's taken her years to get that confidence back to be in the limelight again. And it's a shame to see people like that, have got so much to offer, women's sports, be pushed out because of online abuse. Doesn't seem fair to me.

BEN WOOD: One thing I am interested to ask you about, and again, it's a topic that we've got an article or two from you on, is motorsport. And that's a particular sort of interest of yours. What I'm really interested in is that's a sport where-- and I think you mentioned in one of the articles, you kind of said-- that's a sport where if you were watching it, you would have no idea who you're watching.

You can stand at the side of a football pitch, a rugby pitch, a cricket pitch, and instantly you're watching a women's team, you're watching a men's team. And motorsports, I'm thinking entirely different-- sat inside a car, sat on a motorbike, underneath, there's a helmet. And I'm just interested in your take on that, of the perception of watching people compete when you don't know if it's male or female.

Does that make a difference in how people see a sport, see the abilities of the people they're watching, do you think, when you don't know if it's a male or female taking part?

DR HELEN OWTON: Yeah. Now, that's an interesting point. I think in terms of feeling anonymous as a motorcyclist, on the road, you can be quite anonymous and nobody really sees you unless you put telltale signs out like the odd-- you can get these ponytails that you pop on or you can add a bit of pink to your bike or your gear. And we see that in motorsports, where they're perhaps they might add a bit of pink to their adverts on to their sponsorships.

But the fans will know who they're watching. The fans will know who's who and who's perhaps in what car and who's on what bike. And I think it's more about the culture in motorsports and motorcycle sports, because that's what is challenging in those arenas for women, is breaking through those, again, male-dominated areas and arenas. But what's really positive is there are, again, movements to increase the visibility of women's motorcycles, motorcycling.

They've got specific tournaments for women available now for women to really develop. And I think that's needed and required for them to go straight into-- obviously some of the women are riding against the men, but to improve performance and improve confidence, that needs to happen. And then that can then help the sport and the confidence of the women to go into other tournaments.

And we've seen that with the Isle of Man as well, the road races. There are very few women who take part in that, and I think that's a lot to do with the culture as well. But again, that's a huge demand to go into the Isle of Man. It's an incredible race to put your life on the line, really. That's what you're doing.

BEN WOOD: Do you think we're starting to see a shift, right? Think it's accessible for more women, or do you think-- is that still not the case?

DR HELEN OWTON: Unfortunately, it's not-- there is an increased grassroots. There's an increase in the grassroots of motorcycling, so we might see those women coming through and taking part, but there's still very few and far between.

BEN WOOD: All right, I'm going to give you two questions to end on, and hopefully not to put you on the spot too much. So I'd like to know from you, who are the women that have really of laid the groundwork over the last 10 years? Who are the-- maybe you can give us a couple of people and tell us why and what it is they've done to really bring women's sport forward. Have they-- is there any that have really led the way?

And again, an article that you did for us last year on OpenLearn, which was about the trailblazers of 2025. So I'm going to ask you, at this point, are there any trailblazers of 2026 that we should be looking forward to? So first of all, the yeah, those people who've really led the way. Who's are a couple of names, a couple of people that you could maybe tell us about that you think are worthy mention for the work that they've done so far, and looking forward to next year, are there a couple of names and a couple of people, a couple of women in sport that we should be looking out for?

DR HELEN OWTON: Well, in terms of individuals, as I said earlier, I think some of the women that have paved the way are the ones that we don't know about. When we talk about the history of women's football, as we talk about fleeting fame, they're the ones that have tried to-- they've played the stepping stones for women to achieve what they can achieve. In terms of the Women's Football World Cup in 1971, those women there, they paved the way. We don't know that, but they did.

It's coming out now that the history of that exposure is being given that exposure there. And then you've got the Scrum Queens, the four friends that founded the first tournament in 1991. That's been given more exposure about how they pioneered through adversity to get those tournaments going. So some of the women that I would say have been trailblazers aren't necessarily the women we know about. They've provided the stepping stones for other women to have the confidence to keep going.

There's so many in women's football, there's so many in women's rugby, in tennis. We've got Billie Jean King, who's done an enormous amount for women's equal pay, not just in tennis but across all women's sports at once. It starts in one sport and once it's acceptable in one sport, of course that's going to start then being leveraged for making equal pay for all women's sports. And obviously that still needs to improve in football and rugby so women don't have to do part-time jobs or even full-time jobs alongside playing sport, as if it's just a hobby not taken seriously.

And ones to watch. Looking forward, we've had-- so, I mean, there's been so many this year that I could pull out. I mean, one of my favorite players is Lucy Bronze on the women's team, because I've watched her throughout the years and she's just so strong. She now talks about being a different type of player, not just for the team, but for the youngsters coming through and being able to be that strong, resilient player with all that experience and hold the team. I find that she's the glue in each game.

BEN WOOD: I was going to say. It was about the word "resilience" earlier on. As soon as you said her name, I was like, yeah, that's a perfect example of a resilient player, not only from each individual games. I think everyone knows the way she carried on playing with a fractured shin or a fractured ankle.

DR HELEN OWTON: Yeah. I didn't condone that. But, yes, exactly. Yeah, it just goes to show how much it means to her. And in women's rugby, you've got, as you mentioned earlier, Ellie Kildunne. I mean, she's just a phenomenal player and she's just got such a great attitude to the sport. And whilst we talk about online abuse, it's like no one can keep those players down. They're going to continue. They're going to be a force. They are a fierce team. They really are. And it's not just that they've got one fierce team. They've got two fantastic, fierce teams coming through the ranks. So I could reel off a whole load of names, but there's probably the top two that have stood out for me this year.

BEN WOOD: Well, I think we will finish on that point at the high point of, yeah, Lucy Bronze, Ellie Kildunne, some fantastic names for us to reflect on. So thank you very much for your time today, Helen. It's been a fascinating conversation with you. I'm sure there's a lot more we can talk about, and hopefully we will do again in the future.

So I will say thank you for joining us and anyone out there who's been watching this, I hope you've enjoyed that. Please do subscribe, follow, leave a review. That really does help us reach out to more learners who will see this podcast. And please do comment as well. If there's anything in today's episode that you found interesting, if there's anything that you want to highlight, if there's a name of someone that you think we should have been talking about and we didn't, then please pop it in the chat.

And if there's any questions, yeah, any further topics that you would like us to discuss, whether it's on women's sport or anything across the OpenLearn platform that you think we could be hosting an episode on, then please let us know. So yeah, follow, subscribe, review and comment and thank you for joining us on It's All Academic and we'll see you again soon.

Thank you Helen, and thank you for listening.

DR HELEN OWTON: Thank you. Bye.