

Are Women Beach Volleyballers 'Too Sexy for Their Shorts?'

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Abstract: This is a paper on the philosophy of sport or the ethics of sport more specifically. It provides a critical assessment of a particular feminist approach to a specific issue in the ethics of sport with regard to what some feminist scholars refer to as the 'sexualizing' of women in sport with particular attention paid to women beach volleyballers.

Keywords: autonomy, Joel Feinberg, harm, offense, Olympic games, paternalism, sexism, women beach volleyball.

Introduction

It has recently been argued that it was wrong for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) or the International Federation of Volleyball (FIVB) to devise rules that limit the apparel of female beach volleyball players to revealing competition gear that is considered by some to be offensive and that it limits the freedom of such women to choose to compete in more practical and less revealing gear and that it sexualizes women's volleyball for purposes of commercialization targeting a mostly heterosexually male spectator base. The argument also incorporates a role model dimension, stating that the Olympic requirement that women compete only in what has been termed as 'bikini bottoms' or 'short shorts' has a 'trickle-down' effect on younger women and girls in the sport, creating expectations that the wearing of bikini bottoms or short shorts is the ideal and that if female volleyballers want to fit into the sport's culture that they must comply and wear them whether or not they really want to and regardless of the practicality of the short shorts or bikini bottoms for playing the sport (Weaving 2012). The 1999 FIVB rule concerning what women beach volleyballers were required to wear during competitions read as follows:

24.4 Women's Uniforms

- Style (see diagram)

The top must fit closely to the body and the design must be with deep cutaway armholes on the back, upper chest and stomach (2-piece), respecting the space for the required for the manufacturer logo, player number, country flag and country code, and the place for the player's name. The briefs should be in accordance with the enclosed diagram, be a close fit and be cut on an upward angle towards the top of the leg. The side width must be maximum 7 cm.

The one piece uniform must closely fit and the design must be with open back and upper chest, respecting the space for the required inscriptions to be made.

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- Fabric

The top and briefs or the one piece uniform must be made of elastic material, Lycra or a combination of Lycra/cotton, or other similar quality synthetic material.

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- Color

The top and briefs or the one piece uniform should be of bright and light colors, avoiding dominant white color is not recommended by the Host Broadcaster.

- General guidelines and design on uniforms (see diagram)

a) Manufacturer's Logo

It can be printed or embroidered or woven on the front of the top and on the front of the briefs and cannot exceed 20 cm. It can only be printed **once** on the front of the one piece uniform and must not exceed 20 cm (FIVB 2004, emphasis provided).

b) FIVB Player's Number

The FIVB players' numbers measures 8 cm x 6 cm and must be placed as per the enclosed diagram on the front and on the back of the top. It must be printed, or embroidered or woven, in a color contrasting well with the color of the top (i.e. light on a dark tank top, dark on a light tank top).

c) Country Code and Country Flag

The three-letter international country code and the country flag must be compulsorily printed or embroidered or woven on the front of the top or one piece uniform as per the enclosed diagram. The country code and the flag must be placed on a total surface of max. 8 cm (height) x 10 cm (width). Only the country code must be placed below the flag. Country code's letters must be max. size 1cm wide maximum.

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d) Player's Name

Player's name must be printed or embroidered or woven on the back of the top or one piece uniform as per the enclosed diagram and in a color contrasting with that of the uniform. Letters must be max. 8 cm high and 1 cm wide.

The player's name must correspond with the international player's identification (team name used for the results, rankings, on scoreboards, TV graphics, etc.) and be written in Latin letters (FIVB 2004).

Recognizing that the FIVB had in March of 2012¹ modified the above rule to permit the wearing of significantly lengthier gear which covered more skin in

¹ According to the FIVB 2013 rulebook:

4.3 EQUIPMENT

A player's equipment consists of shorts or a bathing suit. A jersey or "tank-top" is optional except when specified in Tournament Regulations. Players may wear a hat/head covering.

4.1.1

4.3.1 For FIVB, World and Official Competitions, players of a given team must wear uniforms of the same colour and style according to tournament regulations. Player's uniforms must be clean.

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order to accommodate the cultural differences of some who otherwise would be unable to compete in the sport (FIVB 2004), one author nonetheless expectantly bemoans that “...the majority of women beach volleyball players will continue to wear the bikini-style uniform ...” (Weaving 2012, 239). But what some persons fear is what many others appreciate. Precisely what, if anything, about the former rule is morally problematic, and why?

What is *Not* Wrong with Requiring Women Beach Volleyballers to Wear Bikinis during Competitions

While viewing women’s beach volleyball it is difficult to ignore the fact that, weather permitting, most women wear bikini bottoms in competition and that it appears that those working the cameras for the media do their best to make sure that those bikini bottoms are noticed by television viewers in ways that do not seem to be true of men’s televised matches in the sand. Of course, to make matters along these lines fair, there could be rules devised which require men beach volleyball players to wear ‘speedo’-type gear, which is as close to a bikini bottom as men might ever wear in competition. But given the modified ruling of what the women can wear in competition (FIVB 2004), this would turn out to be a permission instead of a requirement.

While it is reasonable to concur that it ought not to be the business of a sport governing body to regulate athletic gear in ways other than to address matters of safety, fairness, etc., it is unclear that, given the new modification of the old rule regarding the required revealing apparel of women’s beach volleyball players (FIVB 2004), there exists a genuine problem if some women choose to compete in bikini bottoms or short shorts as they see fit. What seems to be the real issue given that female volleyballers now have a significantly wider array of choices about what to wear during their competitions?

While many women beach volleyballers will by personal choice want to opt out of the bikini wear during competition, many others will gladly comply with the norm as they construe wearing a bikini as a sign of their femininity. Moreover, some might even exploit their own sexuality to attempt to garner endorsements due to media attention that their wearing bikini bottoms in competition might well attract. Not all women have inner battles with (against) socially dominant views about what constitutes female sexiness. Many of us, males and females, consider certain cultural practices to be marks of our ethnic heritages and so we wear them proudly. So the fact that, say, Brazilian women beach volleyballers are successful and dedicated athletes demonstrates their

4.3.2 Players must play barefoot except when authorized by the 1st referee.

4.3.3 Player’s jerseys (or shorts if players are allowed to play without shirt) must be numbered 1 and 2.

4.3.3.1 The number must be placed on the chest (or on the front of the shorts).

4.3.3.2 The numbers must be of a contrasting colour to the jerseys and a minimum of 10 cm in height. The stripe forming the numbers shall be a minimum of 1.5 cm wide (FIVB 2013-2016).

power as women, and their bikini-clad competition apparel proudly demonstrates their femininity for the world to see. So long as this is a genuine choice they make as adults (even if the choice was media influenced while they were young), what could possibly be morally problematic with it so long as women beach volleyball are not required or otherwise coerced to wear bikini bottoms? That many heterosexual males and perhaps several lesbians enjoy watching such athletically talented women compete in the sand wearing bikini bottoms can be a reason only for the prudish to think that women beach volleyballers who compete in bikini bottoms are doing something wrong. But it is also prudish to object to the commercialization of sexiness that is consensual among adults. And we must require a far better reason why (given the newly modified rule about women's beach volleyball competition apparel) it would be problematic for women to opt for the bikini gear instead of more, say, 'military' issue gear during competition.

If the argument is that women beach volleyball players choosing to wear bikini bottoms or short shorts is offensive to some, then perhaps a very brief lesson in U.S. constitutional law is in order. Partly because of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which guarantees a wide range of freedom of expression, merely offensive expressions are protected, while harmful wrongdoings are prohibited (Feinberg 1990). So unless those who are offended by the wearing of the said gear can demonstrate that it is also a harm either to self or to others, there seems to be little to complain about. How can it amount to such a harm, assuming that by 'harm' is meant the setting back of a legitimate interest?² If the wearing of revealing athletic gear by women beach volleyball players offends some, so be it. Those who are offended need not watch the sport, they can always look away or not tune into the broadcasting of it, or not purchase tickets to the events. There are indeed a myriad of ways to avoid being offended as it has not become mandatory in the U.S. that anyone be forced to watch such athletic contests. The fact is that, while many think they have an interest in not being offended, no one has a *legitimate* interest in not being offended. Thus given the nature of a harm, no one is harmed by their merely being offended. Many of us are offended, though unharmed, by those who are offended over women beach volleyballers wearing bikini bottoms during competition. But that hardly justifies somehow sanctioning those who offend us.

But for those who cannot help but be offended by women beach volleyballers competing in bikini bottoms even if they themselves are not witness to them, perhaps something deeper is going on. Those of a certain prudish ilk might take a particular history lesson before they reveal just how racist some of them might be, intentionally or not.³

² This definition of 'harm' is found in Feinberg (1984).

³ That racism can be unintentional is found in Corlett (2003, 75-78).

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While it is hyperbolic to think that it was the prudishness of Puritans that fully explains the genocidal acts of racism by many European invaders against indigenous peoples of the Americas, it is unwise to deny that it had nothing to do with it. Puritanism was one of the complex array of motives for the ‘whitening’ of American Indians in Indian Boarding Schools throughout the United States. And this included the deprogramming of young Indians and reprogramming them into Puritanical Christianity⁴ with its particular take on human sexuality. So one had better take care that one is not a cultural racist when one objects to this or that practice being ‘sexy’ or a matter of ‘sexual exploitation’ lest one inadvertently betray a kind and level of racist arrogance toward many women of color whose sexual mores differ from the prudish mores. And while it might not necessarily be racist for some to object to women beach volleyballers who are not prudish and who choose to wear bikini bottoms in competition, it is a sign of hard paternalism to attempt to thwart the autonomy of women who want to conform to the current sport’s norm regarding competition gear. So even if the complaint that women beach volleyballers who wear bikini shorts in competition, whether voluntarily or not, does not reflect a kind of prudish racism, it suggests a morally problematic version of paternalism that robs such women of their fundamental right to choose, within the rules, what they want to wear during volleyball competitions. One would think that respecting women entails at the very least respecting their right to wear what they choose within the rules of fair play and safety during athletic competitions.

Perhaps it makes some sense to take such a paternalistic position on this matter if the issue at stake was girls’ clothing during athletic competition, or even girls’ clothing in general as many parents are justifiably concerned about such matters. But such regulations are out of place when it comes to women and what they choose to wear, absent voluntariness-reduced circumstances. But such circumstances do not, as far as I know, exist in the context under discussion with women beach volleyballers. Because such women are mature enough to choose to wear what they desire within the rules of the game, it would constitute an instance of hard paternalism to argue that it is somehow wrong for the IOC or the FIVB to require them to compete wearing bikini wear. However, hard paternalism, whether of the legal or moral variety, has no place in this arena as it violates the rights of women to freely choose to compete in the Olympics as volleyballers. Furthermore, whatever might justify soft paternalism must do so for over-riding reasons of safety or fairness for the athletes.⁵ But prudishness hardly grounds considerations of athletic safety or fairness.

Nor will it do for one to argue in a Kantian fashion that the old rule requiring women beach volleyballers to wear bikini wear was wrong because it

⁴ Of course, not all Christians are puritanical. I am referring to those who are influenced by the historical settlement of the Americas by many Puritans who were Christians, at least in name.

⁵ For discussions of hard paternalism and why it is generally problematic, see Dworkin (1995, 209-219, 219-223), Feinberg (1973, 45f), Feinberg (1984), Feinberg (1990).

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sought to use such women as mere means to the ends of commercialization and sexual objectification. I am sure that this is what is at the bottom of such reasoning, philosophically and ethically speaking. However, it would constitute an insult to such women if it is insisted that they are unable to choose for themselves whether or not they wish to place themselves in a position to be exploited in such ways. Indeed, it is an insult of paternalistic proportions to do so. For there may be over-riding reasons why such women might seek to compete even under such circumstances. Indeed, it might be the case that such circumstances of exploitation bring greater viewership and crowds to watch women's beach volleyball, which might be a primary goal of the competitors as it tends to bring greater prestige to their sport. And if such women are not the prudish types (undoubtedly they are not as they not become beach volleyballers to begin with and are quite used to competing in such gear), they might well construe there being competitors in beach volleyball as an opportunity to display their genuine femininity as defined in traditionalist terms in what some refer to as a 'patriarchic society.'

One might be prepared to argue that such women are deluded into thinking that such a competitive context that I describe is one in which the freedom of women to display their femininity can thrive. But this too reveals an attitude of hard paternalism, one that reduces women's freedom to those defined by the prudish. Yet this is precisely part of what caused the backlash against feminism a few decades ago when many feminists informed women that genuine womanhood entailed not being a stay at home mother in the traditional sense, but rather becoming an independent career woman instead. It is that kind of hard paternalism that must be set aside in order to permit women to exercise their freedom to explore their options and become the greatest they can be at whatever they choose to become in life. And we men ought to do all that we can to not obstruct but rather support them in their choices. And this includes their choice to compete as bikini-clad beach volleyballers. So what is wrong with the very idea of and former rule requiring women beach volleyballers to compete in bikini shorts is *not* that the shorts are revealing. What is wrong with the former rule that required them to compete in bikini bottoms is something else.

What is Wrong with Requiring Women Beach Volleyballers to Wear Bikinis during Competitions

What was genuinely morally problematic about FIVB's and the IOC's previous requirement about the competition gear of women beach volleyballers is not that it was sexy and offensive, but rather that it *required* a kind of gear that was not even necessary for the sport. As was proven at the beach volleyball tournament of the 2012 London Olympic Games due to some inclement weather at the venue, it is not necessary for women to perform well that they wear bikini bottoms. Because of the cool weather and at times precipitation during some of the matches, some of the competitors wore long-sleeved tops and lengthy (what

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appeared to be below-the-knee spandex or lycra) bottoms to combat the cold and rain.

It is the *required* nature of the unnecessary gear that violated the athletes’ autonomy as athletes, as the requirement seemingly had nothing to do with safety, fairness, etc. This problem brought with it a culturally exclusivistic element in that women of some cultures could not compete in beach volleyball because of the *requirement* that such athletes wear the skimpy gear. Setting aside the prudishness of certain cultures and how that ought not in itself to be a good reason to revise rules of international sports if the gear is otherwise a matter of safety or fairness, it is generally important to devise rules that are not exclusive of certain cultures out of fairness to all. However, while this is an admirable goal, it might not always be possible to accommodate every culture’s ways of being.

Imagine a culture that refuses to permit its competitors to wear proper athletic shoes to compete in track events. But if one wears other foot gear, that foot gear would permanently damage the surface of the track in costly ways and cause dangers to other competitors. In such circumstances, members of that culture will simply be shut out of the sport until their cultural mores permit them to run track with proper foot apparel that does not damage the track’s surface or endanger other competitors. Reasonableness ought not to give way to foolishness – even cultural foolishness. Sometimes, one’s own culture locks one out of participation in certain events. Inclusiveness and diversity have their limits. We must be ever careful to not exalt them to the status of absolute behavioral norms.

Indeed, some United States television commentators noted that the sand at the 2012 London Olympic beach volleyball venues is a special type that does not stick to the skin, probably for the comfort of the athletes both male and female. Perhaps also of assistance along these lines might be the wearing of tops and shorts made of spandex or lycra that would help prevent sand from creating discomfort for the athletes under their skin as they dive, dig, and fall in the sand, though it is imaginable that very short tops and shorts might suffice along these lines depending on their fit and the athlete’s body type. So it is unclear that comfort during competition necessarily means less revealing gear. Wearing less revealing gear might translate into more comfort, at least for some athletes.

But also noted by some of the media was the possibility of commercial disaster for that venue should that venue’s weather prohibit the donning of bikini gear for the women competitors. This is a recognition of the fact that many heterosexual men (being a primary commercial target group) enjoy viewing women’s beach volleyball in part because most of the women wear bikini wear or short shorts, weather permitting. But even if one takes this as an empirical datum, what is especially wrong with that, especially if there is a strong recognition of the athleticism of the female competitors? Is there something wrong with one’s watching Serena Williams play tennis and recognizing her incredible beauty as well as her unprecedented talent? Indeed, a perusal of her

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own website makes it clear that she is proud of her physical beauty (and should be!). Is it so wrong even for the media to recognize both the athleticism and the sexuality of women beach volleyball players? After generations of prying much of U.S. society somewhat from the shackles of Puritan culture and mores, are we not entitled to celebrate the distance we have evolved from that atrocious culture? Ought one not to be free to overcome it as one pleases? If many who watch women's beach volleyball do so without the recognition of the female athletic skills involved, is that not a reflection of those individual's (perhaps) sexist mores? Why should prudishness win out on this issue over a healthier anti-Puritanical culture simply because of the sexism of some or even many spectators?

Conclusion

To be sure, the main point of women's and girls' sports, including beach volleyball, is for female persons to demonstrate their prowess as athletes. It is not primarily about their looking or being sexy. And throughout the years women have made enormous strides in the quality of their performances in a wide variety of sports: tennis, basketball, swimming and diving, track and field, volleyball, among many others. Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that such progress will continue into the future for all of us to continue to support and celebrate. But if it turns out that the rules of beach volleyball no longer require female competitors to don short shorts or bikini wear, then those women who freely opt to wear them are at worst offending merely the prudish. And for that alone they ought to be awarded a medal: gold, silver, or bronze.

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