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Give Us a Twirl: Male Baton Twirlers' Embodied Resistance in a Feminized Terrain

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It is the final round of the National Twirling Championship. A nine-year-old contestant parts the folds of a thin blue curtain to reveal two judges waiting with fixed smiles for the next round of routines to begin. This is the culmination of a summer of gruesome daily practices full of sore muscles, lively pep talks, and jagged, broken nails from missed catches. Finding a spot under the lights on the gymnasium floor, the contestant strikes a pose indicating readiness. As music begins to blast out of the speakers at a steady tempo, in a flash of chrome, *he* winds up for *his* opening trick.

There is a persistent perception that baton twirling is only for girls. This insight is not unwarranted because more often than not, audiences only see girls twirling. Baton twirling, however, is *not* exclusive to girls; boys twirl too.

In this chapter, I explore how the participation of men and boys in the sport of baton twirling exemplifies forms of embodied resistance. In defiance of more masculine and male-dominated sports, men and boys who twirl exhibit embodied resistance in three key ways: through their

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participation in this feminized sport, by redefining components of twirling to downplay gender, and through choreography involving contentious body movements. Through their participation in a sport in which they are the minority, men and boys' presence in twirling works against more traditional notions of what sports they "should" play. Within competitive twirling, male twirlers reduce certain body movements in an attempt to "undo" their feminine nature (Deutsch 2007).¹ Finally, there is resistance in the ways the free hand (the hand not twirling a baton) is used, with twirlers rejecting judges' and coaches' suggestions to form a fist, a gesture associated with masculinity and power. The twirlers instead prefer to use the free hand for personal expression. Within these forms of embodied resistance, tension is ever present and surfaces in questions such as "What is too feminine?" "When is masculinity conformity?" and, "Can gender in twirling be 'undone'?"

Background on the Gendered Nature of Twirling

The origins of baton twirling can be easily traced through military drum majors leading marching bands. Eleven years after the first baton twirling contest at the Chicagoland Music Festival in 1935, the first major baton twirling organization, the National Board of Technical Advisors (later renamed the National Baton Twirling Association), was formed in 1946 and an official score sheet debuted in 1947 (Sartell 1965). The formation of other competitive baton twirling organizations quickly followed. Post WWII, known as the "Band Craze" era (Robison 1980), audiences became accustomed to seeing thousands of military bands around the United States. Today, countries around the globe compete in Olympic-style competitions.

As the sport of baton twirling evolved, so too did the gendered nature of the sport. There is some discussion about the redesign of the baton and females' entrance into baton twirling. Some speculate that as the batons got lighter during the 1930s and 1940s, they also became easier

1. I acknowledge the term "male" refers to a biological sex category rather than gender. However, in this chapter I use it when referring to men and boys who twirl for a number of reasons. First, it is language the participants use themselves (none identified as transgender). Second, these adult men are reflecting on their experiences as boys, and "male" encompasses both phases of life. And third, many understood sex and gender as interchangeable concepts and conflated the terms in interviews.

for females to wield (Miller, Smith, and Ardman 1980; Orr 1981; Sartell 1965). Up to the end of the 1940s, however, men made up the majority of baton twirlers (Sartell 1965). It is likely, in a phenomenon parallel to cheerleading, as men left for war, spaces previously considered too masculine for women opened up (Hansen 1995). Ultimately, as the popularity of the sport increased among young women, twirling became a symbol of feminine grace rather than the masculine leadership it had represented among drum majors.

The differences between the drum major, a leader of the marching band, and majorettes, the drum major's female counterpart, can be seen in the style of their movements. Drum majors retain a sharp, militaristic style and use their batons or maces in ways that would traditionally signal in which direction ranks of band members should move. Early majorettes, who learned their twirling skills from drum majors, added their own flowy, feminine grace—characteristic of an activity “appropriate” for young ladies.

As baton twirling became a competitive sport, however, routines became increasingly difficult, particularly as dance technique became a requirement. As men further culturally distanced themselves from dance (Craig 2014), baton twirling too fell out of favor among men. Additionally, as numbers of female twirlers grew, they became the faces of twirling, making it the effeminately stereotyped activity we know today. Thus, it is young women many people associate with baton twirling and whom new twirlers, whether male or female, model themselves after.

As a result, men's participation is stigmatized in much the same way it is for men in cheerleading (Grindstaff and West 2006), dance (Craig 2014), or figure skating (Adams 2011). In other words, it creates for participants “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman 1963, 3), and, therefore, male twirlers today must use certain techniques of resistance and justification to justify their presence in a space that is now a feminized sport rather than in a masculine, “tough” “blood sport” (Drummond 2016) like football or basketball.

“Doing” Baton Twirling

On a daily basis, we make intentional decisions regarding how to perform gender in order to influence how others may determine our sex, thus informing how they treat will treat us. In this way, we are accountable for our sex category transmission and membership (West and Zimmerman

1987). Any uncertainty in interpreting sex or gender leaves some observers confused and unsure as to how to interact. Performance of gender is also related to sexual expression wherein the gendered body regulates the performativity of sexuality (Butler [1990] 2008). By not participating in sports deemed “masculine,” like baseball or football, male twirlers challenge the roles set forth by their ascribed sex category and by the rules of heterosexuality, in turn challenging gendered power dynamics (Drummond 2016; Messner 1992). Indeed, men’s bodies are not “blank slates,” but are rather “arenas for the making of gender patterns” on which the goals of a hegemonic masculinity may be embodied (Connell 2002, 163–64). Alongside this traditional masculinity also comes heterosexuality, a valued practice of masculinity. By performing a sport now typically associated with women and femininity, boys and men in baton twirling are thrust into a category of sexuality (i.e., homosexuality) that may not be an accurate representation of their self-identified sexual orientation. It is at this intersection that male twirlers demonstrate a form of embodied resistance.

Following this idea, the notions of not only “doing,” but also “undoing” gender arise (Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987). Deutsch (2007) is critical of the “doing” of gender, suggesting that the semiotics of “doing” construct difference; thus, she asks, if someone “undoes” gender, are they deconstructing it? By “undoing” gender, one behaves or exudes the characteristics of a gender opposite of that expected by their sex as a form of deconstruction and resistance. For example, drag queens’ application of feminine behaviors, mannerisms, and dress to a male body is a helpful way to see how men perceive femininity. On the other hand, it is this “crosscontamination” of a gendered performance that challenges the social definition of what it means to be male (Butler [1990] 2008). Indeed, male twirlers are perceived as having created a conflicting gendered performance simply because they are twirling a baton (something that females more typically do). By twirling a baton, men and boys replace associations of power and dominance granted by traditionally masculine sports with weakness and femininity (Drummond 2016; Messner 1992; Whitson 2002).

As I describe in my findings, though the baton acts as a feminized symbol for baton twirling, the accompanying bodywork is also gendered. Here I use Gimlin’s (2007) description of bodywork as the production of the body through work environments or, in this case, the sport of baton twirling. Williams (2002), for example, considers how adolescent girls “try on” gender in varying contexts based on the nature of local gender

regimes. These gender regimes are patterns of gender relations, a concept borrowed from Connell (1987; 2006), within an institution in which they may be reproduced or deconstructed. To elaborate, Williams (2002) describes adolescent girls who experiment with gender regimes by testing the boundaries of femininity through resisting thinness norms, aspiring to be police officers, or asking boys to dance. Such actions, as predominately masculine practices, go against local gender regimes and are also forms of resistance. This ability to “try on” gender emphasizes the fluid nature of gender and bodywork based on social time and place.

In a similar vein, previous research suggests that men’s ability to “take on” and “take off” certain forms of embodiment speaks to reflexivity (Adkins and Lury 2000; Gimlin 2007, 364; McDowell and Court 1994), a privilege of masculinity. Twirlers enact a form of bodywork in which they interpret the gender regime within baton twirling, negotiate meanings attached to bodywork, and assess their embodied experiences. It is in this discussion of the embodiment and undoing gender that I embed my analysis.

The production of bodywork can be seen among men in feminized sports as well. Men in sports like figure skating (e.g., Adams 2011), cheer (e.g., Grindstaff and West 2006), and dance (e.g., Haltom and Worthen 2014) emphasize the masculine components of certain movements, tricks, or other technical aspects to make them more “macho” (Fisher 2007). By highlighting the athleticism of higher jumps or leaps, pushing for more spins, and showcasing feats of strength, men in these second string, fringe, or marginal sports can better justify their involvement (Adams 2011; Craig 2014; Grindstaff and West 2006; Haltom and Worthen 2014). When dance is performed solo or for the sake of artistry (as is the case with twirling), however, men run the risk of feminization (Craig 2014). To avoid this process, male figure skaters use manly movements like hip thrusts, snapping their fingers, or putting their hands into fists (Adams 2011). Men in these feminized sports appropriate recognized forms of masculine embodiment (strength, toughness, aggressiveness, etc.) in attempt to distract from a soft label (Bordo 1999; Drummond 2016).

Race and class also act as distractions from feminization. In Pascoe’s (2012) study of high school students, African American boys were allotted freedom to dance and dress well due to their lower social, economic, and institutional power. Indeed, belittled embodiments like dance are granted exemption for lower classes, women, people of color, and gay men—all of whom are often reduced to their bodies (Craig 2014). White, middle-class men “adopt stolidity and physical reserve as habitual forms

of embodiment” in contrast to these disadvantaged groups (Craig 2014, 190). The masculine “physical reserve” of drum majors marks their difference from baton twirlers and their feminine movements. In this way, men who twirl undo gender by resisting cultural assumptions that emphasize difference through defining “socially appropriate bodies” (Gimlin 2007, 364).

Methods

Between August and September of 2014, I conducted and recorded thirty retrospective, semi-structured, in-depth interviews via phone, Skype, or FaceTime. The interviews lasted between a half hour to just over two hours. As a current competitor and coach, I was able to recruit through purposive sampling by contacting competitors, coaches, judges, and administrators via e-mail and social media using a recruitment advertisement and script. I transcribed and thematically coded the interviews using Atlas.ti and used line-by-line coding in order to extract pertinent themes. In the findings section below, I use pseudonyms to preserve participant confidentiality.



Figure 1. Left to Right: _Richie Terwilliger, Jeffrey Matiash, Jonathan Burkin, Matt Freeman, and Joel Claudio receive their awards. Photograph by Tim J. Glore

The male twirlers represent seventeen states and seven decades of baton twirling. Participants' ages at the time of interview ranged from nineteen to seventy-eight years with an average of forty-one years. Competitive ages ranged from starting at three and retiring at thirty-one years old with the average twirling career lasting fourteen years. On average, the males in my sample began twirling around nine years old. Most of the men were white (twenty-seven). Nineteen participants self-identified as gay, seven as heterosexual; four identified as bisexual or chose not to answer. The population of twirlers as a whole is difficult to estimate as only one American organization requires membership and not all twirlers compete (for instance, they might twirl recreationally or in clubs). Nevertheless, as of March 2016, fewer than 2 percent of the competitors, coaches, and judges registered by the United States Twirling Association (USTA) were men or boys (57 men in contrast to 2,923 women). I estimate that there is approximately one male twirler for every one hundred female twirlers.

Findings

Men and boys who twirl demonstrate embodied resistance in three ways: through an association with twirling, by undoing gender in descriptions of twirling, and by choreographing controversy. Mere participation in baton twirling goes against the expectation that boys play more traditionally masculine sports. As a result, male twirlers experience stigma for their association with twirling. To manage this stigma, male twirlers struggle with how to undo gender when it comes to bodywork and rationalize that certain movements are perhaps gender neutral or androgynous. Moreover, because the free hand, the hand not manipulating the baton, is a point of contention between twirlers and judges, formation of the free hand for self-expression permits another opportunity for resistance.

Coming Out of Left Field: Resisting Masculine Sports

In a culture dominated by rough-and-tough sports, men and boys who twirl resist by "coming out of left field." That is, they break expectations of masculinity by twirling. While several participants dabbled in more traditional sports early on, twirling ultimately became their sport of choice. A minority were made to twirl by "stage parents" who in some

way lived vicariously through their children. Regardless of how these men and boys became involved in twirling, their participation exemplifies a form of embodied resistance which resulted in experiences of stigma for many. The stigmatized attribute, in this case baton twirling, is one that does not fall in line with the tenets set forth by either traditional sports or masculinity. Some were lucky enough to avert this discretization through associations with accepted sports or athleticism.

Masculine sports are so deeply embedded in American culture that the decision to focus solely on twirling rather than another sport is often met with resistance from family members, and particularly from fathers. While some were lucky enough to have their dad's support and encouragement, others were not. In many cases, fathers were silent wallets begrudgingly paying for lessons. Two dads went so far to make comments: "You know people are starting to talk," and "When are you going to quit that damn thing?" The twirlers not only challenge notions of masculine sports, but also avert the homosocial bonding and father/son time that accompanies them.

Iterations of other competitive team sports sneaked their way into the twirler's lives through an emphasis on athleticism, however. When in the presence of basketball players, Hayden felt he needed to frequently practice his "big" tricks in order to gain credibility as an athlete under the notion that if he impressed them, they would respect him in return. In college, Zeke got a scholarship for twirling and, as other athletes do, used it as a comeback when his fraternity brothers would try to put him down. "I had to brush it off and do my own thing. It was my meal ticket. It was like kiss my ass, I've got to go practice." In two rare cases, Brian's and Victor's fathers stepped in to help their sons' practice, saying if they were going to twirl, they had to be the best. Victor's father would analyze tricks to see why they were not working if Victor dropped the baton too much, and Brian's father put Brian on a strict practice and workout regimen. As if necessary because of the feminized reputation of twirling, components of traditional sports worked their way into baton twirling as mechanisms of legitimization. However, not all the twirlers were so lucky to receive such a pass.

Being forced to twirl was something that added fuel to an already tumultuous fire. That is, the reproach male twirlers experienced was made all the worse when they continued to twirl only due to their parents' influence. Consider Chuck, whose countercultural parents enjoyed seeing their names next to his accomplishments and, according to him, lived vicariously through him and his siblings who also twirled. Because of

twirling, Chuck was teased and bullied extensively. For example, during one football game, fans dumped popcorn and soda on him while he twirled. Repeated negative experiences affected him to the extent that he delayed attending college until his thirties to avoid his high school peers. He also refused to walk in his high school graduation and quit three jobs because of his fear of being recognized as a twirler.

Similarly, Uri's mother pushed him to twirl despite teachers and students alike tormenting him with epithets such as "fag" or "fucking homo." In his senior year of high school, he quit twirling for a more traditional sport: wrestling. In his words, "I traded up [from] doing a completely effeminate sport [and] getting called a homo, to doing a sport where you wear like less costuming than you did twirling baton to wrestle guys in a heap. . . . [All] to prove that I'm not gay . . . I'm going to wrestle dudes." Uri was cognizant that his association with twirling was a violation of masculinity and heteronormativity, yet he found irony in his new setting. Much like baton twirling, wrestling is another sport that is questionably sexualized not just because of the required uniforms (a form-fitting spandex singlet), but also due to the same-sex bodily contact.

Like Uri, Hayden was also subject to various forms of name-calling and torment. On several occasions, he found his locker taped shut or epithets scribbled on surfaces with permanent marker. These experiences are all exemplary of how men's association with the effeminate is met with intolerance and results in negative repercussions for those who step outside of the boundaries of stereotypically male sport norms. Interestingly, Uri now appreciates the life lessons twirling taught him and, as a performer, is able to find humor in his twirling past. Chuck, after an almost fifty-year hiatus from twirling, is now back as a judge.

In sum, all the twirlers I interviewed were aware they were going against the grain by twirling. In addition, they all experienced forms of stigma that manifested in physical bullying, name calling, and vandalizing. In twirling, the embodied gender practice of these men and boys is antithetical to notions of gendered sport and comes "out of left field" because twirling is a sport for girls, and boys' participation is unexpected. Some twirlers, however, were spared in limited ways through athletic association. Nevertheless, the strain many twirlers felt was a product of resistance to the expectation that they play traditionally masculine sports; because they did not, they were left to deal the consequences of that resistance. In competitive twirling, however, they deal with this stigma by attempting to undo gender in bodywork.

Running Interference: Resistance and Undoing Gender through Bodywork

For male twirlers, resistance did not end with participation. Indeed, in reaction to stigma, twirlers “run interference” by the ways they define and perform certain bodily movements and baton tricks. They attempt to undo gender in certain tricks and body movements, preferring instead to define them as “gender neutral” or “androgynous” in nature. In this way, the men reduce the movement so that it becomes less feminine, but still not masculine—a tactical redistribution of gender.

When asked if any baton twirling tricks are specific to men or women, few could come up with any that are exclusively masculine or feminine except one. Rather, they referred to embodiments of gender that revolved around the dance and bodywork that accompany the baton. Hayden removes gender in his explanation: “You know, I mean twirling a baton doesn’t make you any less masculine than, you know, playing volleyball or playing ping-pong or wrestling with guys in spandex on a mat. I mean, let’s put it in perspective. What’s so feminine about twirling a baton? I don’t see it, you know? . . . I never saw it in the same light that everyone else did.” Here, Hayden grapples with justifications as to why the baton and baton twirling, both effeminate symbols, have been labeled as such by society. To him, twirling baton is no different than playing any other sport and the gender of the player should not matter.

Only in one instance was there agreement on the gendering of a certain “boy trick”: the floor bounce—a trick that requires spinning the baton as fast as possible while angling it toward the ground as it is released. Upon hitting the ground, the baton then bounces back up toward the twirler to be caught. The trick requires a high speed of rotation in order to generate the rebound necessary for it to bounce off the ground high enough to catch (remember Newton’s third law of motion: every action has an equal and opposite reaction).

While “boy tricks” may exist, male twirlers often resisted these labels. Nate’s coach tried to teach him some of these “boy tricks,” but he deemed them “stupid”: “[My coach] was one of the major pioneers of twirling . . . he would try to teach me what I call the usual boy tricks; I always thought they were stupid. . . . I didn’t want to use the same tricks that people had already done.” Rather than worry about the gendered nature of a trick, Nate was more concerned with developing his own style within twirling; for him, gendered characteristics of tricks or movements did not matter. As I illustrate shortly, the claim of self-expression and

personal style over the femininity of twirling is also a strategy that applies to the “free hand.”

Even though some of these boy tricks “did not look good on girls” at the time Gary was twirling in the 1950s and early 1960s, he admits to teaching some of them to his female students more recently. For example, a split-leap pullout is when the twirler jumps into the air with his or her legs spread apart in a split and catches the baton under the legs. While originally categorized as a boy trick because of the athleticism involved and the “unladylike” jump, both females and males perform it now. This speaks to the reflexivity of tricks and how their gendered association can be undone over time.

Along with undoing gender by redefining specific tricks, many twirlers also emphasized dance technique. When asked if he thought there were any tricks that were specific to men or women, Hayden instead mentioned dance and compared male twirlers to male dancers:

“I don’t think tricks are based on masculine or feminine [characteristics]. Like if you have an amazing *sissonne* [a type of leap], you’d be stupid not to put it in [your routine], you know? ... I mean that’s like saying male ballet dancers shouldn’t leap. Well, then why are they ballet dancers? You know? So, no, I don’t think tricks are gender-specific.”

Isaac too mentions leaps as potentially gendered bodily movement when talking about the intersections of sexuality and gender presentation.

“You’re always supposed to have a fist. You’re always supposed to be powerful. I don’t think just being gay and having people know that you’re gay would have an effect on how you twirl. Maybe you care a little bit less about being masculine or feminine so you may end up being more androgynous in it and if you’re going to do a leap, do an awesome leap. Who cares?”

Both Hayden and Isaac emphasize that, to them, none of these movements are particularly gendered, and in fact should probably be labeled gender neutral. Either way, both agree: Who cares?

Steven echoed this point and compared twirling to other feminized sports that stigmatize male participants by saying,

“You look at figure skating or rhythmic gymnastics or gymnastics and whatnot, I think it’s the same thing. ... Even male gymnasts are required to do pirouettes and do them technically and on balance and whatnot.”

In this appraisal, Steven attempts to legitimize dance in other artistic sports similar to baton twirling as a way of further justifying its use and thus also redefining the gendered connotation. Gary put this notion to rest using the example of a tour jeté, a leap in which the dancer jumps off of one foot, turns in the air at least half a rotation, and lands on the other foot:

Gary: Well, I think the role of dance now is great in baton twirling. It wasn’t that much when I was twirling.
 Interviewer: And you don’t have a problem with that even for the boys?
 Gary: Oh no, absolutely not. A tour jeté is a tour jeté ...

For Steven and Gary, when dance technique like the tour jeté is incorporated into baton routines it is just that, a dance step without gendered connotation. Steven and Gary acknowledge both sides of the story: They admit to the feminization of dance and therefore try to downplay it through their detachment. But simultaneously they realize that an attempt to make dance very masculine is futile given the feminized context (a gender regime). In this way, the men attempt to undo gender when it comes to bodywork by reducing the threat of dance while also accepting that it is an essential part of twirling.

Faced with assumptions that baton twirling is a “girl’s sport,” male twirlers instead enlist the tactic of undoing gendered parts of twirling and dance elements. In doing so, they attempt to legitimize their participation in this otherwise effeminately stigmatized sport in which their presence is contested. This strategy, however, is not limited to dance technique, but is also reflected in the ways male twirlers position the free hand.

Hand Check: Management of the Free Hand

In a baton routine, a good portion of the time one hand is not in use. This hand is referred to as the “free hand” and incorrect formation of it results



Figure 2. Jonathan Burkin poses during a routine at the National Baton Twirling Association's national championship. Photograph by Tim J. Glore

in an unofficial “hand check” foul. Among male twirlers, coaches, and judges, there is debate as to whether, in order to appear more masculine, a twirler should make a fist of their free hand or not. Female competitors almost never fist their free hand because it would be too masculine. Thus, for men, doing so aids in making their routines that much more “macho” (Fisher 2007); in other words, it's a matter of style and technique. This contentious negotiation of free hand formation—male twirlers' refutation of the fist—acts as a form of embodied resistance.

Paul, now a judge, is a huge proponent of the fisted free hand because it emphasizes the musculature of the male body:

When you make a fist, it's going to make our bicep, girl or a guy, punch out, you know, pop out. When you do a soft hand, it's making the line and the muscle relax which is then having it appear softer, and so if a guy's twirling with more of a balletic hand without making the tension in the hand strong, it's not going to pop the muscle that makes it look very male or very masculine and so the feminine style of a guy twirler is more softer [sic].

Anatomy aside, in Paul's explanation, the tension created in the arm when the hand is in a fist and punched out is the epitome of the masculine free hand. If any part of the arm is relaxed, he sees it as too feminine or "soft." Paul goes on to say that a guy who uses a softer free hand might also do "a lot of tricks that the girls do that accentuate the strength of the female body type versus doing the tricks that will accentuate the male body type." To Paul, they go hand-in-hand: fists and boy tricks, soft hands and girl tricks. Not all twirlers share this ideology, however.

Aaron's knowledge of dance has influenced how he sees the use of the free hand. After he was given a comment on a score sheet to fist his free hand, his coach told him to ignore it. Aaron "cannot stand" the fisted free hand: "It bothers the crap out of me because if they were to go to a dance class you would never see a guy with a fist for a free hand. Ever." Victor agrees by calling the fist "ridiculous," stating that he prefers a dancer's style of movement of the arms and hands. Indeed, because of the infusion of dance into twirling, both Victor and Aaron see no use for the free hand as an identifier of masculinity. These twirlers undo gender because they see dance as an artistic form in which both men and women perform similar movements, despite feminized perceptions (see, for example, Craig 2014).

What is suggested in lieu of the fist? Certainly not a "limp wrist" (Steven, Tim, Walter, Zeke), a "break in the wrist" (Jason, Walter), a "flip" (Gary), or "flex" (Nate) of the wrist, nor what Jason calls "wings." All of these terms refer to a bend in the wrist (whether up or down), which has an effeminate connotation. Though a majority of the twirlers identified themselves as gay (63 percent), avoidance of these effeminate hand positions may additionally be linked to an avoidance of homosexuality, a devalued social identity. According to Jason, Quinton, Hunter, and Nate, their response was to place the free hand in a "blade" formation with fingers straight out and thumb tucked under. Overall it was important to these men was that the free hand be neither too masculine (a fist), nor too feminine (limp).

Nate and his mother finally decided that the fisted free hand, much like the "boy tricks" discussed earlier, was "stupid":

We were so worried about, "Oh well you don't want him to look like a girl when he's twirling." So I always had to hold my free hand while I was twirling as a fist and so I did the fist thing for a while and I just didn't like doing it. I felt stupid so I eventually opened my palm up and I asked them ... "Does that look too effeminate?" and they said, "No, it looks fine," and so from then on, I just kept my hand open.

In the end, the gendered association of the free hand was no big deal to Nate who instead chose to position his hand as a blade, palm up. Elaborating on his previous point, Nate was more interested in creating his own style and did not let criticism get in his way. Nate's insistence that he not use a fist free hand is a clear form of resistance to the fist as a symbol of power, violence, and masculinity, but there remains the risk that the flipped free hand could be read as weakness, passivity, and femininity. The blade was a middle ground. His stance that the free hand be used to aid in the development of his twirling style coincides with others' opinions that the free hand today is much more emotive than ever before. Despite more variation in free hand formation, the fist remains hegemonic among judges and coaches: it stands to create difference between the girls who twirl and the boys who twirl.

In sum, even the smallest detail like a free hand can be a form of embodied resistance. Calling out the simplistic use of a hand, when the manipulation of the baton is the focus of the sport, emphasizes how critical even minute details become. Male twirlers become critically self-conscious because of their minority status and, as a result, feel they must undo certain gendered features as a form of resistance. By justifying undoing gender in free hand formations, the men lessen the risk of being associated with femininity, but also fall short of embodying masculinity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I exemplify the ways in which male twirlers enact forms of embodied resistance. Men and boys' participation in baton twirling comes "out of left field" because twirling is counter to sports men and boys are *supposed* to play. By choosing baton twirling over other, more masculine sports these men and boys refute the idea that their gender identity requires that they play these sports. Moreover, the stigma they face as a result of their contested presence causes them to "run interference" by adapting and justifying their presence through forms of resistance. They do so by undoing gender within bodywork by attempting to label it as gender neutral and, at times, emphasizing technique over gender. Male baton twirlers are policed through "hand-checking" the free hand, making sure neither to make it too "macho" as a fist, nor too femme when it is flipped. It is also in establishing this middle ground that they undo gender.

These findings provide a look into the case of how embodiments of gender are negotiated and are ultimately undone through resistance

among men and boys in a feminized terrain. Deutsch (2007) suggests that situations in which gender differences are reduced or deconstructed should be referred to as instances of “undoing” gender, and this is the model these twirlers follow. An archetype for men and boys in twirling is not only to resist the notion that the sport itself is a feminized gender regime, but also to resist embodiments of that femininity and, at times, masculinity. Simultaneously, the men attempt to distance themselves from body movements stigmatized as effeminate and therefore potentially “gay.” In this environment, the ability to choose aspects of choreographed movement allows male twirlers to demonstrate forms of resistance. Despite the pushback, however, embodiments of hegemonic power structures, such as the fist, remain steadfast.

With this work, I use baton twirling as a case to demonstrate how men and boys strategically negotiate their place in a feminized terrain. As a limitation and area for future study, the largely white sample may speak to privileged intersections of race, class, and gender within baton twirling. In addition to being predominately white, a majority (83 percent) of the sample attained some education beyond high school, perhaps indicating a middle-class standing. Baton twirling is also not cheap when considering the cost of batons, costumes, lessons, contest entry fees, and travel expenses. Greater racial diversity may be better represented in groups of noncompetitive or club-based twirlers. Moreover, the limited representation of twirlers of color of any gender exemplifies how baton twirling is an elite sport that reifies larger race, class, and gender inequalities. The work of Craig (2014) and Pascoe (2012) also highlights the ways in which the body is policed such that middle-class, heterosexual white men have more to lose by twirling, whereas women, people of color, and gay men are already disadvantaged by their lower social statuses. In this case, the narratives of white, gay, middle-class men I present are examples of the maintenance required when both privileged and disadvantaged identities intersect. The lesson here is nevertheless clear. Though the twirlers enlist various strategies to justify their participation in twirling, notions of gender do not always predict what men and boys *should* do. Sometimes, resistance and deconstruction are necessary.

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