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Boobs vs Brawn: The TV debut of 'Lingerie Football'

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Boobs vs Brawn: The TV debut of 'Lingerie Football'
7mate will broadcast the first season of the new Australian Legends Football League beginning in December. While the name might make you think that retired footy greats are strapping on their boots again, it’s actually the less overtly sexist guise of what was formerly known as the “Lingerie Football League”.

After exhibition matches in 2012, Australia now has its own league of female gridiron players who only just happen to be wearing uniforms that resemble bras and underwear. The garter belts and lace that were part of the “lingerie” uniform have been dispensed with, but the promotional images suggest that lashings of baby oil and spray tans remain.

There is no doubt that many of the women who have been recruited for the teams are extremely fit and athletic. One new Australian LFL recruit, Elise Chapman, who wrote a letter in defence of the league, played state-level volleyball, for instance.

Looking through promotional photos of the LFL on various sites sees few compliments on the players’ skills, but many references to how “hot” or “beautiful” they are. None of the women have stockier, muscular builds that are common in women’s rugby teams selected purely on athletic suitability for a contact sport.

It is not surprising that 7mate, a free-to-air channel aimed at male viewers under 50, has signed up to air the LFL.

A US LFL match

The concept originated in “Lingerie Bowls” that were broadcast against half-time Super Bowl entertainment. Assistant Coach of one of the new Australian teams, the Queensland Brigade, Regan Webb, described the original incarnation in 2004 as “a half-time gimmick. Mitch [Mortaza, LFL founder] teamed up with Hugh Heffner [sic] and had the playmates dress up and pretend to play football”.

The sporting credentials of the players has improved since the first experiment with combining two hallmark interests of stereotypical masculinity: football and looking at scantily-clad women. Yet the commercial attention afforded to officially recognised women’s sports has remained dismal.

The sport played by the greatest number of Australians is netball, with 1.2 million participants. Yet netball is not a popular spectator sport in the same way as the two major football codes. This disparity, and the resulting lack of media attention and sponsorship, no doubt owes something to netball’s comparatively lesser status as a sport that primarily women play.

Where sponsor dollars, broadcast rights, and ticket prices rise exponentially in the major football codes, the trans-Tasman netball league was this year dumped from Channel 10’s schedule. These netball games are now shown on Fox and a “match of the round” live on SBSTWO. There is not room for even one women’s team sport to receive commercial airtime.

Inevitably there are arguments that women’s sport is uninteresting, slower, and less spectacular than clashes between Adonis-like men. Yet for sports that are regularly televised in somewhat equivalent fashion for both sexes, such as tennis and Olympic events including swimming and athletics, these alleged factors don’t seem to hamper public interest to the same degree.

It is therefore disappointing, but predictable, that a sports oriented station like 7mate has chosen to make its first ever female “sport” the LFL. It is a variation of football that was invented as something of a joke, has no established body of players in Australia, and which requires a uniform that is totally unsuited to the game.
Chapman, a WA Angels player, claims that in her years as a state-level volleyball player that there was little commercial or media interest in her sport. The LFL, she argues, is a chance for female athletes who have financed their low-profile careers to enter the spotlight and for their sporting prowess to be beamed across the country.

Regular television broadcast plays a significant part in popularising and maintaining public interest in individual sports. When the National Basketball League lost commercial coverage from the late 1990s to 2007 it had a major affect on its profile and commercial viability.

Televising the LFL will do little to promote recognised women’s sports and nothing to increase the likelihood that they will be picked up for broadcast. It will only reinforce the small-minded view that women’s sports are uninteresting for viewers unless the competitors look like they could pose for a men’s magazine.

While there can still be a place for “hot” female footballers on television, why can’t we also see women’s netball, AFL, cricket, and hockey games on commercial television? And how about regular reporting of results on the news and panel shows devoted to analysing them, as for the AFL and NRL?

Stations might suggest that they’re only working according to audience demands, but this ignores the role the media plays in contributing to perceptions about what kinds of sports, and which kinds of athletes, are important and worth watching.