

Locker room talk: How male athletes portray female athletic trainers

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A college quarterback coming into the locker room with a dislocated shoulder wouldn't care whether the athletic trainer taking care of him is male or female -- or would he? A study from North Carolina State University examining male football players' perceptions of female athletic trainers - and their comfort level in being treated by females - shows that the quarterback would most likely prefer a male, unless the dislocated shoulder made him depressed.

"Previous research had shown that male and [female athletes](#) overall feel more comfortable with treatment by same-gender athletic trainers for gender-specific injuries and conditions," says Dr. Heidi Grappendorf, assistant professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at NC State. "We wanted to specifically examine football players' comfort level by same and opposite sex athletic trainers for gender and non-gender-specific injuries - while seeing if [gender stereotypes](#) influenced opinions."

The study showed that male [football players](#) were more comfortable with treatment by a male athletic trainer for both gender-specific injuries - such as sports hernias - as well non-gender-specific injuries - like a dislocated shoulder. When it came to general psychological conditions, there were no significant differences between a preference for a male or female trainer. For the treatment of depression, however, there was a significant preference for female trainers. Data were collected through questionnaires given to football players in two National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I programs.

Because there is a [social stigma](#) associated with depression, the potential exists that football players could be viewed as "weak" if they divulge that information to male athletic trainers, the researchers say. Also, because of their prescribed ideas about gender rolls, football players may find more comfort in talking to female trainers about depression.

"Over half of our participants described female athletic trainers using communal terms consistent with gender roles stereotypically attributed to women - such as caring, nurturing and affectionate," says Caitlin O'Connor, who co-authored the paper while finishing her master's degree at NC State. "Clearly, we can see some prejudice based upon the gender of athletic trainers."

Researchers believe there is an incongruity between the stereotypical gender role of women and their presence in the male-dominated football environment, suggesting that there could be a backlash against women in the locker room.

"It is plausible to suggest that the football athletic training room could be viewed by football players as an 'inappropriate' place for women - regardless of their education or experience," says Grappendorf.

"Additional research needs to be done to see if the presence of female athletic trainers could actually reduce the likelihood of male athletes reporting injuries."

More information: The study, "Division I Football Players Perceptions of Females in the Athletic Training Room: Utilizing Role Congruity Theory" was published in the July/August issue of the Journal of Athletic Training.

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