

Jessica Martin

### **Identity and Positionality in the World**

My identities haven't changed much since I came to Clark in Fall 2018. Before Clark, I attended a small high school in a small town called Winthrop, Massachusetts. Winthrop is a predominantly white town, comprising mostly of middle to upper middle class residents. Since this was the major demographic of my town, I fell into the identity of being a white female and the identity of belonging in the upper middle class. Constantly being surrounded by people who were the same race and socio-economic status as me made me realize that this was an identity. I only learned that this was an identity when I was 18, as this wasn't something I wasn't really aware of until I went to college. In high school, I would have described myself as a middle-class, white female as that was the major identity for most of the students who attended my high school. In college, I would still describe myself as a middle-class, white female, but being surrounded by many different people, I still tend to find myself associating myself with people who have very similar identities, similar to the people I went to high school with.

Diversity isn't really seen in my town and especially not in my high school. My high school was predominantly white, everyone who went to my high school was a resident of Winthrop. If there was any diversity at my high school, it was because someone transferred to my high school from a nearby surrounding town. Usually, the students that transferred to Winthrop High School were Hispanic, as there is a large Hispanic population in the towns surrounding Winthrop. Outside of Winthrop, most of the surrounding cities and towns are mostly composed of people of color who belong to the lower class or the working class. These cities and towns are much larger than Winthrop and have many more residents with a wide variety of socio-economic status families. I only really saw diversity once I got to college and being in

classes with people from all over the country and all over the world. There was such a variety of people from different backgrounds and socio-economic statuses just in my classes alone. It made my identity of being a white woman in an upper middle-class family grow stronger as there was such a blend of different statuses and identities at Clark.

Another identity of mine is being a student athlete. Ever since I started playing sports at the age of 5, this is an identity that has evolved through the different sports I have played. Being in high school and playing on multiple sports teams made me truly understand and inhabit that identity. Constantly being surrounded by my teammates from many different teams and dedicating years of my life to sports made the identity something that has always been a constant in my life. The identity continued to grow stronger and resonate more when I committed to play softball at Clark and has only grown stronger since I started playing collegiate level softball. Being a student athlete is a major identity for me as that has been an identity that has been with me since I was 5 years old and I'm almost 21 years old now, a grand total of 16 years with this identity.

Being a student athlete affects the way I interact with others. I tend to usually interact and associate with the other student athletes as it is a shared identity and something everybody can relate to. In conversation, performance in games, practices, or statistics get brought up and are usually thoroughly talked about. As a student athlete, that seems normal to me and happens in most of my conversations with other student athletes. When I meet new people for the first time, it usually does not take long for them to know that I am a student athlete as it usually comes up in conversation at some point or I am wearing Clark softball apparel. I wear Clark softball apparel around campus, and I am on the executive board for SAAC, making it well known across campus that I am a student athlete.

Throughout my high school experience my identity of being a student athlete was all over the place. When I played basketball from 8th grade until I quit my senior year of high school, each basketball season would make me question why I was a student athlete. My freshman year of high school was when basketball started to go poorly. I was a starter on the JV team for my high school. Not only was I playing basketball during the winter months, I was also playing winter softball as well. During one of my softball games, I had severely sprained my ankle sliding into a base. The next day I went to practice on crutches with my left ankle in an air cast, the JV coach immediately took me into the coaches room and proceeded to scream at me about my injury. After that meeting, the varsity coach had a meeting with my mother and I and proceeded to scream at both of us about my injury as well. It didn't make me feel good as I already felt bad that I had gotten injured in season, but the way the coach handled it was even worse than me getting injured.

The incident that made me finally walk away from basketball all together was senior year. I had already had issues with the varsity coach the year prior, but I tried to put it behind me. The rule that all high school sports need to follow is that all seniors make varsity regardless of skill level. After playing basketball for 4 years, I assumed I would have my spot again on varsity as I was on varsity the previous year. After the 2 days of tryouts, the coaches pulled each player into a room one by one to tell them what team they made. I already had a bad feeling after the first day of tryouts that something was going to go wrong. I was the last person called into that room. The bad feeling I had was right, I made JV, as a senior. Once I got told that, I felt my heart drop. They looked me in the face and told me that because I was going to be a starter, they weren't breaking any rules. I left the room to all my teammates standing around wondering why I looked upset. I told one of them what had happened and burst into tears. After that practice, I

walked out of the school for the last time as a basketball player. Horrible coaches and horrible basketball teams made the identity of a student athlete miserable, making me want to walk away from sports on many different occasions. These horrible coaches can destroy the passion that many players' have for their sports instantly, once the passion is gone, it is hard to get back. Once the passion is gone and a player walks away from a sport, the identity of being a student athlete is gone as well.

My identity as a student athlete was different when it came to basketball and softball. Basketball made me want to leave the identity because basketball made me miserable. Softball would bring the identity of being a student athlete right back as my passion for the sport is immense. The passion I have for softball reminds me that being a student athlete is the most joyous experience in the world. When I played hockey my senior year the same passion was as strong as softball in a sport, I never thought I would play as I had no experience playing hockey. Some sports made the identity grow stronger while other sports made the identity weaker.

The identity that is the most salient to me is the identity of being a student athlete because that is what a lot of people use to describe me as a person. This identity is very known among people and has also been a way that I describe myself to others. When people see me on social media most times it is because of sports through either being on the Student Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) or because of something that happened during a game or practice being highlighted by Clark Softball or Clark Athletics. Many of the connections I have made in the Clark community or outside through other communities have been through athletics and many of the connections I have made have gotten me to where I am today. I don't know where I would be in the world if I never played sports and had the identity of a student athlete, but I do know that my life would be very different.

Being a student athlete, especially at a college, comes with the stereotype that we don't try hard and that we came to college to play our sport. This more applies to division 1 athletes more than division 3 athletes, but it still applies to all athletes. The stereotype is that we don't try hard in classes because we focus solely on our sports. The stereotype is also that athletes are not smart and that they simply got into college because they are good at sports. I think these stereotypes are more seen in male sports and are more seen at the higher division schools. This isn't really seen at Clark too much, rather it is more of a generalization I have heard. Clark is not a school that profits off sports like larger schools that turn a game day into a sporting event that brings in major profits. The stereotype gets instantiated into the world through non-student athletes observing athletes in a non-sport setting. These are simply stereotypes that do not apply to every single athlete.

My team specifically has very high standards when it comes to classwork and grades. Our coach is constantly checking in with us about our grades and how classes are going. If we have class during a practice time, we are told to go to class with no consequences for missing practice. This emphasizes the importance of class. As student athletes, we are constantly reminded that we are student athletes and not athlete students, emphasizing the point that our grades are more important than our sport, and if we cannot keep our grades up, we cannot play our sport until our grades improve. At Clark we have reconstructed the identity of the student athlete, proving that we can be successful both on the field and in the classroom.

### **Theory of Social Inequality**

I started my athletic career playing baseball at the age of 8. I was one of a few females playing in the entire little league when I started. As the years went on, I eventually became the

only female in my age division. Once I reached the age of 11, I moved up into the higher division, due to my age. Before the coach even saw me play, being a female signaled an assumption that I wasn't as good as the male players on my team. Throughout many seasons with different coaches, I faced many instances of inequality due to my gender.

There were many games where I was batting at the bottom of the order, if I was even in the lineup at all. If I miraculously ended up playing in the field, I was playing in right field. In little league terms, playing right field meant you were horrible, but due to league rules, coaches had to play each player on the roster for a minimum of 3 innings each game. So for many games, I was in right field for 3 innings as in his eyes, there wasn't a chance I could play as hard or as well as the boys.

In those same games, when I would get on base due to the pitcher not throwing any strikes, causing me to get walked or getting a hit, the second I stopped at any base, my coach would immediately call time out and get a male on the team to run the bases for me. He had no confidence in my base running abilities, this was again due to the recurring theme that I could not run as fast or as smart as the boys on the bases. Not only did players on my team notice the coach repeatedly had male players on the team run the bases for me, but other teams and parents noticed it as well. No matter what players did to change the coach's opinion, it still continued to happen, as he made no efforts to change his coaching style.

I, along with many others, view baseball as a male sport. Females have the similar sport, softball, being modified for female athletes with similar rules and fields despite a few changes. Due to the fact that my own was not affiliated with a softball organization, my options were limited. I was forced to either play in the baseball little league or leave my town to find a softball league I could participate in. Many girls would play in the lower divisions as they played when

they were little, and as time went on, many of the girls would quit or transition to softball. These baseball coaches for the higher division teams rarely dealt with girls or rarely saw them play. It makes total sense as I see baseball as a male dominated sport and that I assume male coaches know how to coach male players better than female players.

Another aspect that impacted my experience was the age of my coach and his patriarchal beliefs and values. I assume he had the belief that men were the breadwinners while women stayed home and cooked, cleaned, and took care of the family. He also did not have any daughters, he only had sons, making it understandable that he would have trouble coaching a young female player without having any experience dealing with any female children of his own. I didn't agree with this sentiment, but I had to learn to accept it. He also presumably never had the opportunity to learn from female players' experiences with him as a coach and continued his coaching style without any adjustments.

Based on my own experience and my reading of the world, many female athletes have experienced gender inequality in sports. There are a variety of reasons that might account for this. Some towns do not have the female version of a sport resulting in females having to play on male teams with male coaches. Male coaches treat female athletes differently due to the lack of knowledge of how to coach female athletes. Some schools give more funding to male sports in terms of equipment, uniforms, and fielding conditions. My high school softball team didn't have a softball field to play on; instead the only option we had was to play on a baseball little league field. The baseball team had a brand new field built because they wanted to move it 20 feet forward away from the new school that was built. The baseball team also had many different nets and screens to hit into whereas the softball team had to borrow whatever nets the little league left

behind at the field. Gender inequality is enforced by schools by not providing equal funding and equal access to resources to the women's teams.

Based on my own experience, younger female athletes feel inferior when they experience gender inequality in sports. In many instances, they walk away from sports entirely. Gender inequality is a tough thing to experience at a young age, especially when you don't understand why it's happening. I mainly hung out with the boys and played predominantly male sports when I was younger. Since there was no female softball little league in my town, playing in a female league required leaving town as my town didn't have enough players to support an entire league. Gender inequality has been something that has fascinated yet bothered me as young female athletes are facing gender inequality at such a young age.

My praxis site is the Abby Kelley Charter School and my project is working with the high school softball team. My research project is exploring the topics of teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, and identity through high school female athletes, specific to the sport of softball. I hope to learn from the girls as developing female athletes and as a future coach, through reflective writing and assisting during practices. I hope this research project helps coaches be able to support their athletes in terms of team building, leadership, and a sense of self-confidence around being a female athlete -- opportunities I never had as a girl growing up.

### **Theory of Social Change**

Gender inequality is a tough thing to experience at a young age, especially when you don't understand why it's happening. I mainly hung out with the boys and played predominantly male sports when I was younger. Since there was no female softball little league in my town, playing in a female league required leaving town as my town didn't have enough players to



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Baseball for me at a young age was an outlet, but bad coaches pushed me away from the sport. Bad coaches are considered bad coaches by making decisions that negatively affect the team, they don't listen to players' concerns, or overall have poor team management. Every time I went to a game, I thought things would be different, but unfortunately, each game I still left the field in tears. Many parents tried to make changes to make my experience better by talking to the coach about his actions, talking to league directors, and having other coaches call out his actions, but nothing seemed to help. Each game felt the same, consisting of batting last, if I was in the line up at all, and playing right field for 3 innings as that was the minimum requirement for each player to play each game. Talking to the coach led nowhere, the same empty excuse of trying to improve a random aspect of my game would come up in each conversation. I was never given a chance to prove what I could do, all based (in my view) on my gender and the coach's low expectations based on gender stereotypes or prejudice.

Addressing the issue of gender inequality in sports is a difficult challenge, but by coaching softball teams, I want to inspire female athletes to push themselves to be the best softball player they can be. I want to demonstrate that the phrase "you throw like a girl" can be seen as a compliment rather than an insult to females. I've wanted to coach softball for as long as I could remember, a major part of this thought was due to poor baseball coaches I have had prior to switching to softball. I don't want female athletes to face the gender inequality I faced at such a young age. I believe that no athlete, regardless of gender or skill level, should ever face this inequality ever. Coaching will be able to combine the skills I have learned as an athlete and the lived experiences of playing to inspire and coach the next generation of future female athletes.

Coaching and teaching in my eyes are the same. Both use similar skills of being able to convey knowledge in a way that other people can understand. Both also have a passion for creating change and inspiring future generations. I knew I wanted to be a coach before I knew I wanted to be an educator. My coaching style would utilize my experience with different coaches along with coaching techniques from previous coaches that I felt worked best for me. My techniques would change as I got more experience coaching through feedback from the players on my team. The main idea behind my coaching would be empowerment, showing these young girls that they are capable of doing anything as long as they put in the time and the effort to achieve their goals. This philosophy can also be applied to teaching as well. Every player and every student is different and techniques are going to have to be adapted to ensure that every student or every player can succeed both on the field and the classroom.

Athletics are a way for people to connect and create strong relationships while also learning skills necessary to play the sport. Sports are also an outlet to relieve the stress of the outside world. Sports for children are a fun way to make friends and learn skills, different from the friendships and skills learned inside the classroom. Athletics are for everyone regardless of gender, race, and sexual orientation, but people are still judged based on their gender.