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# **The Last Taboo in Sport: Menstruation in Female Adventure Racers**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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## **Abstract**

Recent media attention has been drawn to the 'last taboo in sport', menstruation in the competitive female athlete. This thesis delves into the domain of sport to understand why this taboo exists and how menstruation is constructed in the gendered sport of Adventure Racing. With its traditionally patriarchal structure, the presence of women on the sportsground has long been resisted. Adventure racing is interesting because it requires a minimum of one woman in each team, and thus provides a unique context within which to study menstruation.

The sporting literature has typically framed menstruation within a biomedical perspective, where sporting behaviour results in menstrual dysfunction and therefore as a threat not only to the athlete's wider health, also her traditional role as child-bearer. The ability to construct menstruation as a positive experience has been limited, especially as the voice of female athletes themselves has been notably missing from the literature.

Seven female adventure racers participated in this study to elucidate their experiences within training and competitive environments. Semi-structured interviews were held with each participant, and their dialogue interpreted thematically as to how they construct and manage menses within this context.

The major themes drawn from the women's voice include the woman as the compulsory piece of kit, as subordinate and weak, and as the caregiver. Despite the women's right to compete, this equal opportunity did not transfer to their positioning within the team. Their perceived inferiority worked to keep menstruation hidden and bodies silenced in attempts to emulate the idealised masculine sporting body. In general, menstruation was constructed as a tolerated annoyance; it was to be dealt with by the individual akin to any other illness or injury that one of their male teammates might need to manage. In this way the women were able to compartmentalise their menses as an entity that could be controlled. It was constructed as 'something' that happened to their body, and thereby distanced themselves from the bodily process. Menstruation remained absent from talk, concealed in dialogue and action, and absence of menses was welcomed, its presence preferred once off the sportsground. The taboo status of menstruation remains firmly embedded in this gendered sporting domain.

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