



# AUTHORING JUSTICE

Capstone Project

Mattia Bastianelli Gambini

# Try

## Mattia Bastianelli Gambini

The familiar smell of mud and wet grass fills her nostrils, as Dorotea tries to inhale all the oxygen she can and stand up. Her mind is already projected onto the next action, but her vision is blurry from the hit and obstructed by one of her blonde curls that the mud and sweat have fixed to her face. Her knee aches – a token of the battles fought on less-than-ideal rugby pitches throughout Italy. Doesn't matter. After all, she's the captain of Romagna RFC, one of the only two women rugby XV's team in Emilia-Romagna, and they're playing on their home soil, in Cesena. She just can't afford to appear lazy.

Dorotea is a relentless rugby player. She's always looking for her next job on the field. After a pass, a tackle, a ruck, her experienced ice blue eyes will automatically begin scanning for information that allows her to plan her next move. Maybe there's a weak link in the defense line that her team can exploit. Or maybe she will notice that the opponent winger is screaming for the ball out wide. If you have presence of mind, that's what you always do. But when you play at home, something changes within. It's a sort of adrenaline rush that makes you more competitive, determined, fierce. You've got to stand your ground and defend your home from the 'barbarians' that want to invade it.

And so Dorotea musters every fiber in her body and stands up again, covered in dirt. It must be one of the last actions of the game and Romagna must make it count – the score is not in their favor. "I want the ball! Pass it!" Possessed by a hidden, aggressive side of her that only surfaces on a rugby field, she screams for the ball as her forward pack (the first eight players of the team, usually the heavier and stronger individuals) are carrying it inside the defensive line. On this chilly Sunday in February, the team hasn't been good in keeping possession of the ball for more than three or four phases: "Get it out, Luzia!" can be heard before the ball is lost under the pile of players that forms every time a player is tackled.

Dorotea is ready to receive the ball. As she sees it spinning out of the hands of her teammate towards her, time slows down. Her hands are reaching for the ball and her heart is pumping faster: in her freedom to express herself, a lucid euphoria pervades her and hunts away any fear to drop the ball down. The ball slips through her fingers and hits her chest, but she still manages to adjust it and turn around to pass it again. It's a good pass that meets her teammate running at an angle, but the defensive line has had time to push forward and the collision is imminent. A thud accompanied by the sound of compressed air being forcefully exhaled announces the physicality of the game. It's chaotic bodies in motion, wrestling, struggling for every inch, until the white oval-shaped ball squeezes out of the hands of the girl in the beautiful Romagna's daunting black jersey. Thick yet slightly elastic, it is made to withstand pushing and pulling. The number on the back lacks a name because it is not designed for a specific person, thus it often doesn't fit perfectly and players like Dorotea must tuck it in their shorts. In rugby, you don't own a jersey. The jersey owns you.

The ball is lost forward. Dorotea dives onto it, but it's more of a natural reflex at this point. She knows that once the ball is lost forwards, the possession goes to the other team. As she stands up she hears 3 whistles.

It's over.

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This time they won't be singing the victory song 'Romagna Mia' in front of the stands, but for them it's still important to go and thank their small audience regardless of the score. After all, "they are the engine of it all," as Dorotea is telling me, sitting at a table outside of one of our favorite cafes in San Marino. She puts down her exuberant sunglasses and lights up a cigarette.

"Those few supporters that keep showing up, the most attached to us, they give us a motive to keep pushing through... knowing you're not doing it just for yourself. It's not enough, but it's a stimulus."

Though she's usually reserved, Dorotea appreciates her family being there to support her. The adrenaline and tension disappear – at least momentarily – when they hug after a game and she can be off to address the team with a clearer mind.

When I wear the red Romagna jersey (there are at least 2), my view of the stands is different. I have the privilege of playing for the men's team of Romagna and, being a childhood friend of Dorotea, we often compare our experiences. It's not uncommon for a Romagna male rugby player to see red and yellow smoke emanating from the stands at the end of a game, only for it to clear out and reveal an almost packed stadium (albeit a very small one) cheering, chanting, and some even preparing 'Asado'. Dorotea doesn't have to squint her eyes to find the faces of her loved ones in the stands, nor is she distracted by the smell of grilled sausages as she's playing.

While the amount of spectators is not the sole measure to assess a sport-category in its entirety, it can be a good indicator of the attention it can harness and the investments it receives. We cannot think that the amount of people that show up to watch a game depends solely on how spectacular it is. The low visibility of women's rugby in this region is a symptom of larger issues. "People can't see us, we are not enough." Dorotea knows strength is in numbers and numbers are a big factor in rugby.

It's a complex sport that requires a large and diverse pool of players with different competencies on the field. Each team has fifteen players on the pitch, plus seven or eight on the bench, and these are the bare minimum for a team that wants to compete. You need even more to get through the season. Romagna used to gather the best female players from the southern half of Emilia-Romagna, but after COVID-19 the players' base was reduced and it had to unite with another club from the area around Bologna, further north, in order to survive. Now they are left with about 20 players that are actively part of the last standing rugby XV's women team in the area.

Coming from different cities, from Bologna to San Marino, each one travels up to 50 minutes to the training grounds. Commute alone can represent a barrier for many young girls wanting to play the sport, and while travel allowances (and in

some cases even stipends) are granted to many men players at the level of Serie A and Serie B (first and second league in Italian non-professional rugby), the same cannot be said for our colleagues.

“I’d rather not look at how much I must spend just to be able to play this sport,” - Dorotea says with a patient smile, “but not everybody can afford the same luxury and this might cut them out.”

But this is just one of the barriers to accessing rugby for women. The biggest challenge is overcoming the prejudice about rugby being a “men’s sport” and the stigma around being a female rugby player. “People think that if you play rugby, as a woman, you’re either a tomboy or lesbian.” Dorotea is not new to these kinds of comments, and she’s not alone. The Italian Rugby Union recently released a video showing some of the most recurring insults that professional rugby players receive online. Many of those targeted at women were purposefully attacking their femininity, alleged sexual orientations and, ultimately, their dignity.

Dorotea has delicate features, a tight waist and small hands. “They say: ‘It doesn’t look like you play rugby.’ and when I ask them how I should look, they usually reply ‘bigger, fatter, more ‘macho.’ And they start posing and grunting [like cavemen], implying that that’s what we should look like. It’s a distorted and ignorant vision.”

These prejudices, which too often prevent girls from trying out this sport, are even perpetuated within the family and in the school environment. It is even worse when women practicing rugby face discrimination and frequently abandon sports altogether because of it. A survey carried out in Italy with rugby girls aged 10-13 and 14-18, as part of the Erasmus+ Sport Woman in Rugby project, found that while almost half of girls aged 10-13 enjoyed the friendships created thanks to this sport the most, 40 percent of them were discouraged from playing it, largely by peers and family. When looking at girls aged 10-18, the survey found that more than a quarter felt discriminated against because of rugby, mostly in school and by friends.

Stereotypes represent one of the biggest barriers to the development of women rugby. Girls that might want to express themselves in this sport, but are discouraged by the stigma around it, are missing out on ways to express and – for some – fulfill themselves.

“You’ve got to be willing to get muddy, to sweat, to mess up your hair, and get bruises and scars. These things are harder to deal with for girls because of societal expectations,” Dorotea tells me as she takes another puff of her cigarette. She wears the marks on her skin with pride, they are stories to tell from the times when she feels most alive.

Her passion transpires beyond the rugby pitch and she knows that “All these prejudices disappear when people actually go to the field and find out what it really is about. Yes you get hurt, you get dirty, but they never show all the good that it has done to people like me.” In this, our experiences align perfectly. Rugby can be deeply engaging on an emotional level and allow for a self-discovery journey that makes you grow as an individual and find confidence in sides of you that you didn’t know you had.

“As a person, rugby has mutated me and my parents have fallen in love with it by seeing what it has done to me. This is what should be communicated to those who are outside the fanbase. We should display how warm the community is, how much fun it is, how many friendships are created, how much of what you have inside can be unleashed, and how your self-esteem benefits from it. This sport is more than just brute force. This sport unites people even if they don’t play it.”

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On a typical training day, around 20:00, Dorotea and I would see each other from afar at the pitch in Cesena. In winter it would be dark already, but during the summer this place treats you with some beautiful sunsets. Men start practicing earlier and take possession of the whole artificial training ground. Sometimes we would hear a loud roar coming from the nearby football stadium and, in turning around, we would see the women’s team starting to warm up in a small patch of land that they’ll use until we’re

finished on the artificial ground. Dorotea would be there almost all of the times, discussing with her teammates on how to make some sharper movements and plays. The captaincy requires that she addresses the team's weaknesses, while setting a positive mindset in preparation of the next game.

For an outside observer, the view would tell the tale immediately: on the main training ground, they would see a group of about 35 men, wearing the same training kit branded with the golden rooster holding a 'Caveja', a typical symbol of Romagna; while on a small field to the side, there would be 15 to 20 women with little in common, except for their passion.

That's because even when barriers to access are overcome, the idea that rugby is not a sport for women translates into less investments and resources allocated to their sector. This can be seen at the national level, with only the top 24 female players being put under contract by the Italian Rugby Union since 2022, but it's even more obvious for local teams: "We don't have physiotherapists that take care of us as you do, nor a training kit or a bag, very basic things," Dorotea tells me. It must be said that Romagna provides the only opportunity for these women to play rugby XV's in the region and does not ask for a subscription fee from their athletes, unlike other teams.

However, what is generally asked of a female athlete is much more. "What I feel is discriminatory is that I cannot afford to be 'just' a rugby player, like you can. I need to be the best athlete on the field, as we all do, and on top of that I must take care of keeping the team together, bringing more girls and visibility to the team by doing extra activities without any support, because we need them and there is no real dedicated recruitment project. I would just like to be a rugby player, but I can't and it stresses me out. I need to take energies away from practicing my passion and devote them to all those aspects that revolve around it: from managing the team, to planning for the immediate future with the staff. I would like to pack my bag and go home after training, but for us it's not that easy."

But Dorotea and her teammates, like many other rugby girls elsewhere, are determined to chase their ambitions at all costs, even by taking on responsibilities that would usually befall

on the managers. In doing this, they must sacrifice their time, which they take away from their studies, jobs, families, partners, and generally their personal lives. It goes to show the amount of passion, dedication, and perseverance that is required of a woman in rugby. It's not unusual to see self-managed social media profiles for these teams – this way they can tailor their communications to their audience and fight prejudices in their own words. “We even created a team Tinder profile so that more people know we exist!”

This feeling of being left alone in maintaining the team, counting only on your own resources and energies, undermines any attempt at creating a feeling of belonging to the same colours – of pride in wearing the same jersey. In the long run, it can be debilitating. “We're always thinking of whether there would even be a team next year, there's a constant uncertainty that affects our experiences.” The regret starts surfacing. “I love this sport, it's part of who I am, but it has hurt me so much. It gives me a feeling of something unresolved; that I haven't achieved all that I could have, because I could have given more, but without the opportunities, the support, the platform, it's impossible. And when girls ask for equal conditions, we are seen as pretentious.”

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It's May. A peaceful sense of belonging quiets all the apprehension for the weeks to come. Dorotea has made sure that everything is in order for the departure of San Marino's national rugby 7s team, which will compete at the 2023 Games of the Small States of Europe in Malta. She sighs, making peace with the side of her that wants everything to be perfectly arranged for others, and which too often pushes her to load an unfairly heavy weight on her shoulders. She sits on a bench facing the rugby field outside the clubhouse, the home of rugby in San Marino, her home that she contributed to build. She takes in the clean air that only a place so surrounded by trees and hills can provide and then she lights up a cigarette.

Dorotea watches us practicing in the field, knowing that now it's up to us. Hoping that we can understand and live up to

the opportunity we're given. When you come from a micro-state, sometimes you forget of how difficult it is for other people to represent their nation in sports, the fierce competition, the sacrifices...

In San Marino, our hometown, our involvement in rugby differs slightly: Dorotea has an active and crucial role in the Sammarinese Rugby Union and, while she takes care of the development of rugby in our little country, her main focus is making sure that the men's national team can compete on the international stage every summer. I am one of the beneficiaries of Dorotea's efforts, and just recently became involved in women's rugby development in San Marino

Despite the strong mutual support that such a small community can enable, there's very little opportunities for her here. Just last year we were able to re-create a grassroots women's rugby team, held together by the coach's and the players' dedication, passion, and friendship, but the numbers are still low. Dorotea is almost 30, she has a job and rugby has been taking a lot from her; she doesn't know how long this will last. Despite everything, as if she could conjure more hours than a day is actually made of, Dorotea shows up at these local training sessions too. When I ask her why she gives so much, while receiving so little back, she replies: "I live off of the adrenaline that it gives me to see you playing. That adrenaline that I'd feel if I were in your shoes during these tournaments, I can put it to work so that at least you can feel it first-hand. I do what I do hoping that, one day, I'll also experience this."

Enabling other people to chase their dreams, while you don't know if you're allowed to dream in the first place is hard enough, but Dorotea doesn't falter. "I give my contribution because we rejoice together for what we can achieve with such a small group of people. This can resonate with others and hopefully bring bigger results than a win in a game of rugby. Hopefully, one day, there will be someone to give me the same opportunities."

Once the Games are concluded under the hot Maltese sun, it's time for the awards ceremony. It was the first time that San Marino had played against other national teams of such a high

level, and the results were not in our favor. Even in defeat, these experiences fill your heart to the point that you smile and are content regardless. Being able to travel, confront yourself with other players, tackle them, score tries to other national teams far better than you and most importantly, express yourself freely, all while representing your nation on the international stage sparks a feeling so liberating and empowering that it's very hard to put down in words.

Anyway, it's a very emotional moment now, especially for Dorotea: it's the women's national teams' turn to receive their awards. As she watches them smiling, taking in all the applause, walking towards the event director, ready to shake their hands, she can feel her dreams hitting the wall of the harsh reality that San Marino is not ready to allow her to be there, to be proud of herself as a player and of her teammates, to be recognized for the way that she expresses herself on the field. And in that moment a tear breaks through her proud eyes. "I will never be able to experience this": that's what's pounding in her head as she watches her peers cheering.

Dorotea is a rugby player, a very good one too, one of those who will keep showing up week after week for years, who will withstand injuries, who will intentionally switch on her 'rugby-brain' before entering the pitch to be better than last time. She has ambitions and she knows she'd deserve to see them fulfilled. She knows she would enjoy herself competing at that level, if given the chance.

It's a bitter tear the one that's falling. "Despite all the work in any capacity, all the sacrifices, all the dedication, I will never get there, even though I know I could be one of them. To me, dreaming causes sadness and disillusionment because I know that the times are not ripe for me to have the same opportunities, there aren't enough players in San Marino." The next tear though is somewhat sweet and hopeful, it's the tear of a player that stands up after being tackled in the mud and looks for the next opportunity:

"You guys need to give it your all, because what you do is inspiring to others. If there's just a remote possibility that I can do the same in the next years, I'll break my bones to get there."

Although women's rugby is slowly becoming more popular and normalized worldwide, there are still barriers to its fulfillment. The prejudices and stigmas around girls playing rugby come in various forms: from online hate speech, to discouragement from peers and family. Discrimination takes shape in a continued under-investment in the women sector, because rugby is still considered a sport for big, strong, primitive men; with management paying little attention to the very basic requests that players like Dorotea have. Yes, it's more difficult to play rugby as a woman. It requires commitment, passion, perseverance and the courage to go against the world.

But Dorotea has hopes for the future: at some point the turnover of the people in power will bring decision-makers that are more sensible to their participation in sports and things will start to change. Girls that are currently playing will grow up to be the ones who take the lead in providing better and equal opportunities for the next generations.

"I wish I could give more. If I didn't play, I could transfer my passion in a more constructive manner to other people. Right now I'm so frustrated that sometimes I forget why I'm here, doing what I'm doing. I would like to find that healthy passion again and really communicate it to girls new to rugby. Maybe even build something 'serious' in San Marino." Rugby needs these people and it will keep failing and missing out on them until Unions worldwide do not take concrete steps to eradicate stereotypes and renew the public image of rugby.

But fighting discrimination is not enough. Resources should be allocated based on effort and needs. If we keep giving more to the same categories that have benefitted from the status quo for years, the gap with more vulnerable ones can only increase and women rugby players will have to run more and more to reach their try-line.

Dorotea puts down the cigarette and looks in the distance, projected into the future.

"I wish to conclude my career with satisfaction, leaving something positive behind and knowing that even if I stop playing, the team will go on and it will be in a better place than before."



*This year, the Global Campus of Human Rights debuted an exciting new online course called "Authoring Justice." The course focuses on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about issues of human rights and social justice – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers, affecting change around the world. This first iteration included lessons from award-winning authors and human rights leaders, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Justice Albie Sachs, Casey Gerald, Kao Kalia Yang, Jemma Neville, and Joel Rickett.*

*The inaugural cohort of students are human rights advocates, lawyers, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from peace mediation in Ukraine to equitable access to technology in Nepal and beyond. The previous pages feature one selected example of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.*



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