At a recent State Championship soccer match between two New Orleans private school teams, the girl who scored the winning and only goal bought herself a yellow card for an action that would have been perfectly in keeping with the way boys play, and are expected to play, soccer. She pulled off her jersey and ran ecstatically around the field. No, she was not cited for displaying flesh, for copying Brandi Chastain’s muscle-y revelation of her sports bra, never mind the fact that the sports bra has been outerwear for years at any road race in an American city. She was wearing a T-shirt under her jersey on which, in an amazing act of foresight, she had penned a message to her boyfriend: “This goal’s for you.” So what foul did she commit? Excessive celebration. That yellow card underscores the feeling I have had for years now: Girls’ soccer is a radically different game from boys’ soccer, despite the Women’s World Cup victory and Title IX rules. In their hairstyles, their dress, and their style of play, soccer girls represent a “dunning-down” of male flamboyance, with coaches and referees reinforcing this unwritten rule. Only in their language, borrowed intact from male coaches, do these female players approximate the males.

Hair

Part of the reason I have always liked soccer is that it differs so radically from the buzz-cut militarism of football, a game that celebrates brute power, ganging up, physical size, and mindless motion. Soccer,
by contrast, is individualistic, based on skill instead of size, and on quick decision-making by the player instead of set plays. This difference manifests itself most obviously in hairstyles. Male soccer celebrates hair. It rejects male norms for over-the-top, gender-bending styles: the pony tail, the dreadlock, the long, greasy freestyle of the Italian national team players, the shaggy goateed look of Alexi Lalas, the Mohawk of Curtis Mathis. Locally, our boy players mimic the pros. Recently, at a regional tournament in Oklahoma City, a New Orleans Under-15 club team bleached their hair platinum. The dreads became even more outrageous; the redhead looked bizarre; the black striker approximated Dennis Rodman. But the same club’s Under-13 girls’ team, who had won the State tournament in the Under-14 age group, and had more cause for celebration, looked like female players everywhere: plain. They slicked their hair back into ponytails, just like the Women’s World Cup players did, exposing bare, healthy, sun-tanned faces. Female players are marked by their lack of adornment, in direct opposition to the males. Our girls wear only sunscreen on their faces, vaseline for chapped lips, plain elastics around their pony tails—no makeup, no face paint, no dyed hair or flashy styles. They look like “girls next door.” Some girls’ high school teams wear matching hair ties in their ponytails, but when they do they call up images of dance teams and pep squads—conventional outlets for female athleticism—not of soccer teams, famous for their flash.

Dress

In their dress, it’s the “tame game” all over again. While the boys strut around between matches, shirtless, with shaved legs and even sometimes arms—earrings and neck chains commonplace—the girls keep covered and demure. They’ll switch from cleats to soccer sandals, remove socks or switch jersey for tee shirt, but an unwritten rule bans female flesh. In soccer, sports bras remain undergarments. And on the field, girls may roll their shorts one waistband up. But a self-imposed rule forbids more than that. One hot spring tournament in Baton Rouge I saw the unthinkable: A girls’ team, in response to the heat, was playing with shorts up at least two rolls, jerseys tucked up under sports bras, leaving midriffs wonderfully bare. The girls stopped to gawk. “I can’t believe it. What team is that?” one of them asked. “The Soccer Sluts,” another answered. In this freest of games, the girls still follow a pre-Madonna dress code. The boys bend gender rules; the girls embrace them.