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# Changing the Game: Sport and a Cultural Shift away from Homophobia

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## *Introduction*

Since the foundation of organised sport in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century within the Western World, sport has traditionally served as masculine preserve. It has maintained the purpose of turning young boys towards a hegemonic perspective of male heterosexuality; one distanced from femininity and homosexuality. The construction of a dominating form of heterosexual masculinity was accomplished through multiple mechanisms, including socialising boys into the physical violence, sexism and homophobia indicative of organised, competitive sport (Anderson, 2009). Adams *et al.* (2010) add that to construct an esteemed and ‘acceptable’ masculine identity, it is not just necessary to display one’s heterosexuality, but also to ‘police’ the gendered behaviours of one’s peers. Policing is conducted through specific discourses used to question men’s heteromascularity. Epithets such as ‘fags’, ‘sissies’, and ‘poofs’ are often used to emasculate and feminise those who do not comply with supposed traditional hetero-masculine norms.

With sport’s traditional function of masculinising and heterosexualising boys—and subsequently marginalising effeminacy—it is unsurprising that homophobia and anti-

femininity have been commonly employed among athletes in the construction of gender-normative performances (Anderson and McGuire, 2010). This was particularly true of the purpose of sport (in the Western world) in the 1980s. Here, sport took on renewed importance for boys and young men as it was a central tool in heterosexualising men in a culture that Anderson (2009) calls 'homohysterical'.

In describing the construction of masculinities, Anderson (2011a) describes a culture of homophobia as a 'homosexually-panicked culture in which suspicion [of homosexuality] permeates' (p. 83). He argues that in order for a culture of homophobia to exist, three social factors must coincide: 1) the mass cultural awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation within a significant portion of the population ; 2) a cultural zeitgeist of disapproval towards homosexuality; 3) and disapproval of men's femininity or women's masculinity, as they are associated with homosexuality.

Anderson (2011a) describes homophobia as a concept to analyse the history of one's own culture, or for making cross-cultural comparisons. Either way, he describes three conditions that a culture (might) move through. The first is pre-homophobia. Here, the culture is highly homophobic, but the citizens do not readily believe that homosexuality exists as an immutable sexual orientation of a significant portion of their population. Exemplifying this condition, Anderson argues that in much of the Islamic world today, as well as throughout much of Africa, homosexuality is thought to be 'only' a Western phenomenon (Frank et al., 2010). In contrast, in a homophobic culture, there is widespread awareness that a significant percentage of the population can be gay (even if closeted) and if this culture also looks poorly upon homosexuality, the stage for homophobia is set.

Exemplifying this last position, Anderson suggests that homophobia manifested in the United States during the 1980s because of the increased awareness of the growing normalcy and frequency of homosexuality, alongside extreme homophobia. Anderson adds

that, in the United States, homophobia was heightened by an increasingly noisy fundamentalist Christianity that was opposed to and consequently demonized homosexuality (Anderson, 2011a), which was made culturally salient through HIV/AIDS and the large percent of even gender-typical men who acquired it through same-sex sex. In this homophobic culture boys and young men (particularly those who were unmarried) needed to establish and re-establish themselves as heterosexual by aligning their gendered behaviours with idealized notions of masculinity. This is something that Kimmel (1994) describes as 'masculinity as homophobia'. It is especially between the years 1983 to 1993 that Anderson argues that boys in Western cultures needed to use sport in order to prove their *heteromascularity* (Pronger, 1990). This is because, Anderson (2009) suggests, homosexuality is not readily visible (like gender or race): ostensibly, anyone can be gay.

Anderson continues to explain that because men's masculinity is/was associated with heterosexuality in western, industrialised cultures, boys in a culture of homophobia are/were required to elevate their display of masculinity to prove that they are/were not gay. In other words, they used culturally-endorsed sports to distance themselves from what Anderson (2009) calls 'the spectre of the fag':

Men attempt to associate with masculinity and disassociate with femininity. They self-segregate into masculine enclaves within the larger feminized space and perceive that excluding women and gay men from their peer circles raises their masculine capital (p. 51).

Anderson suggests further that participation in organised team sports is less important for the construction of heterosexuality in a culture where homosexuality is not believed to exist as a significant demographic of the population. He uses Iran as an example. While homophobia is intensely high in Iran, in 2007, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed that, '...in Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country'. Anderson suggests

that homophobia is so high in Iran that few people come out of the closet, leaving the perception that homosexuals constitute too small a proportion of the population to raise suspicion that one's friends or family members could be one of them. Accordingly, boys in Iran will have less need to distance themselves from cultural suspicion of homosexuality. It is this mass denial that homosexuals exist in large numbers which permits Iranian men to walk together in public holding hands.

Finally, homophobia cannot exist in a culture that is not homophobic. In contemporary western culture for example, and particularly for youth, a large body of research has shown that homophobia has dramatically decreased (Anderson, 2009, 2012; Keheler and Smith, 2012; Loftus, 2001). Consequently, the gendered behaviours of boys and men are likely to be radically different if/when they no longer fear being culturally homosexualised (McCormack, 2012). This is something that Anderson (2011a) describes as post-homophobia.

Evidencing the Western shift into post-homophobia he focused in his research on sport team initiation rituals in the United Kingdom, where he monitored behaviours over a seven year period (Anderson et al., 2011). During this time, same-sex activities as part of these imitations were phased out in line with the decrease in cultural homophobia. Early in the study, male athletes were forced to kiss one another as a form of doing something that was normally stigmatised in order to prove their worth, loyalty, and desire to be on the team. But by the end of the study, team members willingly engaged in same-sex kissing, not as a form of hazing, but as a mode of homosocial bonding and support. Thus, Anderson argues, (for male adolescents) Britain has moved from a disposition of pre-homophobia, into homophobia, and then into post-homophobia. And while Anderson's notion of homophobia proves a useful heuristic tool in understanding cultural shifts that lead *men* to

fear association with homosexuality, his concept has yet to be applied to the experiences of women in sport. That is the purpose of this chapter.

### *Homophobia in Women's Sport*

Because sport has been defined as 'the last bastion of male domination' (Burton Nelson, 1994: 6), it has created not only a problem for effeminate and/or gay men, but also for women. Although women challenge traditional gender boundaries in sport by simply taking part, only certain sports are seen as feminine-appropriate; mainly those not requiring physical contact. Writing specifically about rugby, Wright and Clarke (1999) suggested that women's participation 'could therefore be expected to challenge fundamentally what it means to be a male and female' (p. 229). Hence, women playing male-dominated team sports, such as football and rugby, face particular confrontation and questioning about their involvement.

Wright and Clarke's research was, however, carried out in the 1990s, and the sporting terrain has changed for women since that time. In the UK, the Football Association launched the Women's Soccer League, with international sponsors such as Umbro and Vauxhall ([www.thefa.com](http://www.thefa.com)). Football has the largest female participation rates of any team sport in the UK with 1.38 million women of all ages regularly playing ([www.thefa.com](http://www.thefa.com)). Similarly, women's rugby has seen an increase in players: '2,000 players in 1988 to 8,000 players by 1998, to near 15,000 in 2008' ([www.rfu.com](http://www.rfu.com)). The media have also begun to cover women's sport; ESPN TV, in the US, covers the Women's Soccer League, and covering sport around the world, Sky Sports shows the Women's Rugby World Cup live.

In this chapter, we highlight that despite social science research into the relationship between sportswomen and sexuality in sport during the 1980s and 1990s (Cahn, 1994; Griffin,

1998; Hargreaves, 1994; Lenskyj, 1986, 1995), there remains a need for a comprehensive theory to explain the sporting arena's historical relationship to homosexuality.

Hargreaves (1994: 171) argued that when women participated in male-dominated sports they faced 'the greatest criticism and exposure to ridicule'. Lenskyj (1986: 95) summarised that the central issues concerning women's participation in sport were that, 'femininity and heterosexuality [were] seen as incompatible with sporting excellence: either sport made women masculine or sportswomen were masculine from the outset'. Griffin (1998) argued that in order to limit controversy about their participation, women have been shown to promote heterosexual images (heterosexu) and use overt homophobia as a way to socially distance themselves from being thought lesbian. Even early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Cox and Thompson (2001) found that female footballers were assumed to be lesbian because of their choice to play a traditional male team sport. Shire *et al.* (2000) describe the behaviour of heterosexual women within one hockey team, saying, 'They joked about the lesbian women in order to reinforce their heterosexuality to others' (p. 49).

Just as playing sport permitted men some cultural transgression of rigid masculinity norms (Anderson, 2005), the promotion of a feminine image allowed women playing men's sports to do so with less lesbian suspicion. Griffin (1998: 68), wrote that 'femininity has become a code word for heterosexuality', just as Kimmel described that masculinity was heterosexuality for males (1994). Thus the conditions described by Anderson of homophobia for men in sport, also existed for women in sport. Just as a 1980s and 1990s culture of homophobia presented a problem for both gay and straight men, the homophobia of women's sport also created a problem for both lesbian and straight women. Women were understood as being pressured into presenting an image of hyper-feminine heterosexuality in order to gain and maintain public support of their new found sporting freedoms (Lenskyj, 2003). This can either be understood as a form of denial, or it might also be viewed as a

survival strategy to compete without homosexual suspicion and the discrimination that comes with it (Lenskyj, 1995). Either way, the silence and denial of lesbianism in sport permits stereotypes and discrimination to continue unopposed (Krane and Barber, 2003).

The erasure of lesbianism through the promotion of femininity and heterosexuality is known as the 'apologetic'. Apologetic behaviour occurs because women are participating in a male domain. Felshin (1974) argues that: 'because women cannot be excluded from sport and have chosen not to reject sport, apologetics develop to account for their sport involvement in the face of its social unacceptability' (p. 36). Scholars explain that apologetic behaviour occurs in numerous ways: creating a feminine image, or apologising for on field behaviour, such as aggression (Davis-Delano *et al.*, 2009; Ezzell, 2009). So while it seems that homophobia is falling in men's sport, it remains rife within women's sport.

#### *Decreasing Homophobia for Men in Contemporary Sport*

The increased awareness of homosexuality (made visible through HIV/AIDS) led to homophobia hitting an apex in 1988. During this epoch, the 1987 British Social Attitude Survey reported that 63.6% of the population thought homosexuality was wrong, a sharp increase in relation to results of the same survey in 1983. A similar trend has been shown in the American social attitude surveys (Anderson, 2011a).

Scholars of this time (Clarke, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990) described men's sport as an arena for the development and emphasising of men's masculinity, with heterosexual athletes, 'unwilling to confront and accept homosexuality' (Wolf-Wendel *et al.*, 2001: 470). Indeed, Hekma (1998) argued that, 'gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise' (p. 2). This has been predominantly shown by the use of homophobic discourse and derogatory name-calling. For example, Hekma (1998) described



how, when a member of a team looked gay and missed the ball, his teammates immediately called him a 'dirty queer' (p. 4).

Surprisingly, however, in 2002 Anderson found that none of his sample of openly gay male athletes was derided or verbally abused when they came out. Indeed, the reception the athletes received when coming out was either neutral or positive. Since this time, other research has shown that gay men are increasingly accepted within competitive sport (Adams, 2011; Adams et al., 2010; Anderson, 2005, 2009; Cashmore and Cleland, 2011, 2012; McCormack and Anderson, 2010a). In his research on gay athletes in (2011b), for example, Anderson found that, regardless of the sport played, when athletes came out to their team they were not treated any differently. Participants were surprised at the inclusivity they experienced from their teammates, many regretting not coming out sooner.

Anderson (2005) even shows that in the context of American university cheerleading, traditionally perceived as a female activity, it is acceptable for gay participants to portray a feminised image. Additionally, there is also a belief that some straight men can still exhibit effeminate behaviours without being socially perceived as gay. In other words, the corpus of this research shows that men's masculinity is softening and becoming more inclusive of homosexuality: Men in many sporting contexts are culturally aware of homosexuality existing, but they are no longer concerned or show objection to it. Greater acceptance of homosexuality therefore permits straight men to modify their behaviours, too. Effeminate behaviours once stigmatised are now considered a normal operation of heterosexual masculinity; all without homosocial suspicion (Anderson, 2009; McCormack and Anderson, 2010b). This can be described as an epoch of post-homophobia.

### *Decreasing Homophobia for Women*

While Griffin noted in 1998, ‘the winds of change can be heard in the comments of some young lesbian athletes’ (p. 161), there has been a dearth of research examining the experience of lesbian athletes since that time. Outside a few post-structuralist pieces with small sample sizes (Krane, 1996; Krane & Barber, 2003), there has been no empirical investigation of the experiences of lesbian athletes on ostensibly heterosexual teams.

Still, there is evidence for some cultural progress toward the acceptance of lesbianism in sport. More women are coming out, and it is likely that their experiences are better than those of lesbian athletes who came out in previous years. For example, most are familiar with Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova, who both had a hostile reception when they were ‘outed’ in the 1980s in the sport of tennis (Hargreaves 2000), however, significantly more lesbian athletes have been open about their sexuality in more recent times without disastrous consequences: Amelie Mauresmo (tennis) came out in 1999, WNBA players Michele Van Gorp came out in 2004, Sheryl Swoopes in 2005, and Seimone Augustus in 2012.

However, while there are more openly lesbian athletes today, on the whole, elite sportswomen still seem reluctant to come out. Fortunately, more positive results have been found within collegiate environments (Fink et al., 2012). College athletes noted the importance of trailblazers and greater numbers of players coming out compared to the findings of previous research. Fink *et al.* (2012) conclude that teammates come out not to make a political statement, nor to bring about change, but simply to ‘be themselves’ (p. 92).

It is clear that more research needs to be carried out to discover if there have been widespread changes within Western women’s sporting cultures, as Anderson’s body of work has shown among men (Anderson, 2009). Although Fink *et al.* (2012) show some positive changes, they only interviewed 11 lesbian participants and three bisexual athletes. So while Anderson has systemically demonstrated a lessening of homophobia male sports, more detailed and extended research is needed to see if this is also the case for females.

### *Discussion*

Anderson (2009) has suggested that the 1980s were a unique period for men and sport in Western cultures—ushering in a period of unprecedented homophobia. He demonstrates that heterosexual and closeted gay men used competitive team sport in order to bolster their masculine capital and therefore stave off homosexual suspicion. Anderson argues further, however, that homophobia has rapidly reduced within men's team sport in recent years; evidencing this with both qualitative and quantitative work (2009). However, the application of Anderson's notion of homophobia has yet to be applied to women's sport.

The myth that female athletes (particularly those in masculinised sports) are all lesbians might remain an enduring misconception, suggesting cultural differences between men's and women's sports. With Anderson's (2002, 2005, 2011a, 2011b) research suggesting that sport is ready to accept gay athletes, more research is required to monitor changes in acceptance for lesbian athletes. Just because homophobia and homophobia have decreased on men's teams does not necessarily mean that the same is true for women's teams. Making this point salient, Anderson (2005) argues that whereas a gay male athlete coming out to his soccer team does not call the other players' heterosexuality into question, a lesbian coming out to her team does.

We can speculate that homophobia has decreased to some extent for women in sport. This is because Anderson has argued that the change to men's sport has not come from sport itself, but instead from the larger cultural milieu surrounding sport (2005). Unless women's sports are immune from changes to youth culture, it holds that there should also be linear improvements since the 1980s.

However, there remains one other condition that might impact upon the levels of homophobia and homophobia within women's sport: there is deeply ingrained sexism that surrounds women's participation in sport, and most women's sports remain controlled by men. For example, the majority of coaches in the American collegiate system are men, and there has been a significant increase in the number of male coaches who coach women's sports teams (Acosta and Carpenter, 2010). Most sports administrators are men; and the members of the sports media are also dominated by men. Furthermore, Lapchick and colleagues (2011) show that 94% of sports editors in the United States are men, as are 90% of assistant sports editors, 90% of columnists and 89% of reporters. This male-controlled media provide a sexualised view of female athletes. Lack of control of their own image, means that women are somewhat hindered in making changes to their own sport culture. This is perhaps one reason why Lenskyj (2003) argues that, 'although advances have been made... since the 1980s the situation for women, especially lesbians, in mainstream sport has remained stubbornly woman-hating and homophobic' (p. 33). Unfortunately, the scarcity of contemporary research in women's sport leaves us unable to make definitive statements about the level of homophobia in women's sport today. More research is required.

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