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Homophobia in Sport — Fact of Life, Taboo Subject

By Guylaine Demers

Much is whispered; little is said outright. Behind the silence are many stories of sadness, shame, secrecy, and stigma. Frank and factual, “Homophobia in Sport: Fact of Life, Taboo Subject” is a long-overdue assessment of a situation that should and must be discussed if our sport world is ever to become an environment that welcomes everyone, regardless of race, colour, creed, or sexual orientation. Pulling no punches, Guylaine Demers writes of the reality she calls “the wall of silence”. She tells us what academic literature has to say on the subject and then brings it to life with moving commentary by gay and lesbian athletes and coaches. Finally, she proposes common-sense, practical solutions that could erase homophobia from sport — not overnight, of course, but the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching considers this discussion an essential first step.

The Journal is proud to be a forum for putting homophobia squarely where it belongs — out of the closet and into the open. It is our hope that Guylaine’s article achieves her goal of helping to create “welcoming sport environments for all homosexual athletes and coaches.” It is far too important an issue to be ignored any longer. — Sheila Robertson

Preamble

Before we get into the article proper, we need to have a common understanding of what the word “homophobia” means. The Oxford Canadian Dictionary defines it as “a hatred or fear of homosexuals or homosexuality.” Thus, the title of my article suggests that the sport world is not a particularly welcoming place for homosexuals. In my view, not only are they not welcome, but people also ignore the facts, taking the easy way out by pretending that there are no homosexuals in sport. This is not the case.

Lesbian and gay rights regularly make the news in Canada. In the world of sport, however, people seem to be suffering from tunnel vision — they do not see the issue or recognize that homosexuality exists. The subject of homosexuals in sport is clearly taboo, and the deafening silence reflects prejudice against homosexuals, who stay “in the closet” out of fear of reprisals that can take many forms. The purpose of this article is to break down the wall of silence and openly discuss the reality of homosexuals in sport, because it concerns all those involved in the sport community.

Most of my remarks focus on homosexual women, but I devote a section to gay men because some of you may be coaching male athletes. A separate section is necessary, because lesbian and gay experiences of sport differ in several respects.

When I agreed to write the article, I set myself three goals: (1) review the literature on homophobia in sport to gain a clearer understanding of the issue, (2) relate what I found in the literature to specific cases (experiences of athletes and women coaches), and (3) suggest some ways of moving beyond criticism and devising practical solutions. Ultimately, the challenge I have set myself is to help create welcoming sport environments for all homosexual athletes and coaches.

Introduction

Canada enjoys an international reputation as a country that respects human rights and where every person is entitled to live in peace and security. Recently, Canada asserted its position as a world leader in this area by recognizing the legal rights of homosexuals, including the right to same-sex marriage. However, the openness of Canadian society in general has yet to be embraced by the world of sport.

Canada has taken huge strides in making sport more inclusive, as shown by the fact that girls, people with a disability and members of visible minorities are increasingly able to participate in sports. Yet homosexuality remains a taboo subject for the sport community, and lesbians and gays are not always welcome. The Journal's editorial board agreed that it was time to talk about homophobia in sport, to encourage reflection and discussion on the issue, and to prompt people to take very specific measures to make sport more welcoming and safer for all homosexuals, including coaches, athletes, officials, and administrators.

Why be concerned about homophobia in sport?¹

Homophobia affects every man and every woman, whatever their sexual orientation. Fear and misunderstanding about sexual orientation lead to harassment, uneasiness, anxiety, isolation, and violence. Behaviour and feelings of these kinds create unsafe environments that impede learning, adversely affect friendships, and hurt teams, athletes and coaches alike. For example, players' locker rooms have often been associated with sexist and homophobic behaviour; female athletes are often called lesbians in an attempt to cast doubts on the validity of their performances and discourage them from competing; lesbian, gay, and bisexual coaches and athletes are victims of harassment and discrimination. The goal in opposing homophobia is to create a sports world into which all women and men are welcomed with open arms and in which they are protected against all forms of discrimination. A number of studies have shown that gays and lesbians who decide to come out reap such benefits as less stress and anxiety, more social support, and greater self-esteem as a gay or lesbian.

What does the literature tell us?

I found no single study that gives a profile of the knowledge about homophobia in sport, so, at this stage, it is impossible to get a clear idea of the extent and scope of the problem.

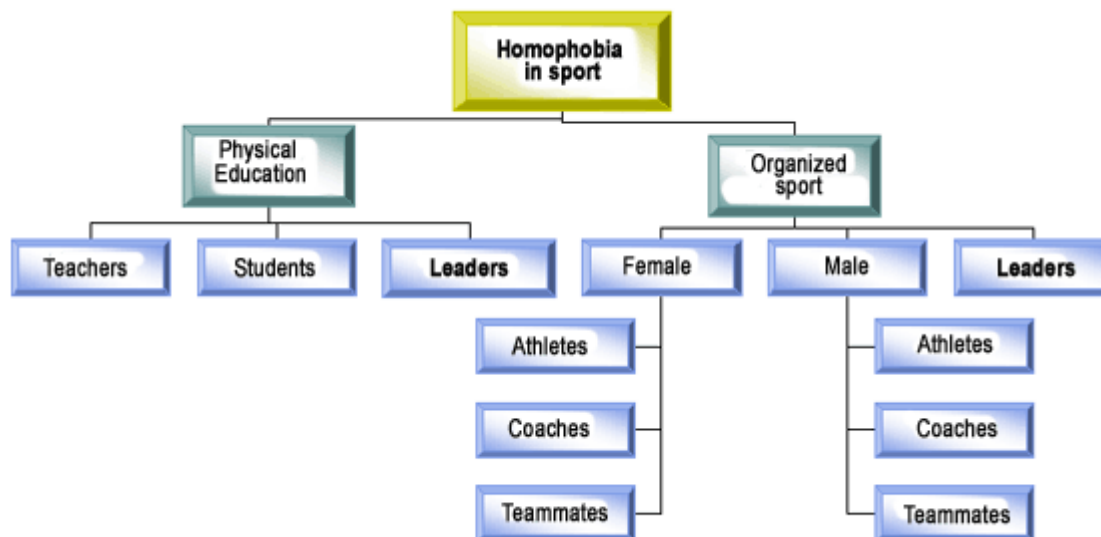
That being said, there can be no doubt that the problem exists, that it is found in all sports, that it is experienced by both men and women athletes, and that it also affects coaches and sport administrators. Most authors agree that the proportion of homosexuals in sport must be at least as high as the proportion generally attributed to society as a whole, which is one in every 10 people. The vast majority of studies on homophobia have been small scale, which is understandable when you consider that it is a taboo, highly sensitive subject. The results pertain to just one team or a small number of athletes or coaches. However, if we look at the studies as a whole, we soon realize that the experiences reported in

them have many similarities. Thus, although we cannot quantify homophobia in Canadian sport, we can describe it in some detail and use the information as a springboard for devising some potential measures to help eradicate the problem.

¹ Based on the introduction to the document “It Takes a Team”.

Themes identified

My review of a number of books and articles on homophobia in sport enabled me to identify a range of themes:



First, the studies fall into two groups: those conducted in the education sector and those conducted in an organized sport context. The first group includes studies on homosexual teachers and students as victims of homophobia and on the role of leaders in the education system in combating homophobia. In the second group, there is a major difference between studies on female sport and studies on male sport, and most of them focus on athletes and teammates, with only a small proportion dealing with homosexual coaches. As in the education sector, a number of studies focus on the role of leaders in the sport community in combating homophobia.

Organized sport for women: the athletes' situation

In women's sports, the words "female athlete" and "lesbian" are often uttered in the same breath. Researchers attribute this to the process of socialization of girls, which even today perpetuates the cult of female fragility and delicateness. It is not considered normal for a girl to exhibit athletic qualities such as strength at a very high level. When a girl does exhibit such qualities, she is immediately labelled as not very feminine, and suspicions arise about her sexual orientation. By definition, sport and sporting attributes are a male preserve. A number of studies have shown that the source of homophobia in women's sports is the desire to discredit performances by female athletes and discourage them from participating in sports.

This perspective on athleticism is one of the major differences between homophobia as experienced by women and homophobia as experienced by men. A female athlete exhibiting several athletic qualities, such as strong physical abilities, is often automatically labelled a lesbian. It follows that female athletes may feel that they have to prove that they are not lesbians. As a result, many of them lend considerable importance to their physical appearance in asserting their femininity and, by extension, their heterosexuality by using make-up and wearing “feminine” clothing. Many girls and young women drop sports because they do not want to be branded as lesbians.

Another difference between male and female homophobia is the greater openness of women toward lesbian team members. Lesbians who are open about their sexual orientation to other team members are well accepted most of the time. Some studies show that female athletes prefer everything to be out in the open and people to be clear about their sexual orientation. Heterosexual women on the team no longer fear that they will be labelled as lesbians for practising their sport. Because of the spirit of openness, lesbians can talk about their partners just as their heterosexual teammates talk about theirs. These statements do have to be qualified, however. Team members accept lesbians coming out as long as the information stays within the four walls of the locker room. They insist on this in order to protect the team’s image and reputation. Some researchers also report that teammates react in a variety of different ways when a lesbian comes out: Some refuse to share a room with a lesbian on a road trip, while others feel uncomfortable changing in the locker room.

Here are some common findings and conclusions of a number of authors:²

- Many coaches, sport activity co-ordinators, and parents use their own fear of homosexuality and unfair stereotypes of female athletes to dissuade girls from participating in sports.
- Since the early 1980s, the media has more frequently discussed the association between lesbianism and sport. Every two or three years, another lesbian story briefly grabs public attention and then fades away — the case of tennis player Amélie Mauresmo is a good example. Many people, including journalists, made veiled references to her sexual orientation, so she decided to be proactive and stated publicly that she was a lesbian. At the same time, she made it clear that being a lesbian was part of her private life and had nothing to do with her status as a professional tennis player. She came out primarily to quash all the rumours.
- Sport organizations avoid talking about lesbian participation in their sport because it could affect public relations, sponsorships, recruitment, and the image of women in the sport.
- The old association between women’s sports and lesbianism puts many women on the defensive about showing their athletic prowess. They put a great deal of energy into ensuring that they are perceived as being heterosexual. This sensitivity to “lesbian” as a negative label creates a climate of hostility, causing many lesbian athletes and coaches to hide their sexual orientation so that they can continue to participate in their sport.
- The most revealing picture of homophobia in women’s sports was painted by Pat Griffin in her book, *Strong Women, Deep Closets*. The very title highlights the contradiction between the fact that some women are strong, talented athletes and that, at the same time, feel they have to conceal details about their love life and personal life in order to stay in women’s sports.
- The survival strategies used first and foremost by lesbian athletes and coaches are to “live with their secret” and to “be as invisible as possible”. The need to protect themselves in this way is an integral part of the history of lesbians in sport.
- One of the most effective ways of controlling women’s access to the world of sport is to question the femininity and heterosexuality of female athletes. This forces them to prove their heterosexuality constantly.

Organized sports for men: the athletes' situation

In the case of men, the issue of homophobia in sport revolves around the social role assigned to men in North American society. It is considered perfectly normal and desirable for a boy to play several sports. In contrast, suspicions are raised when a boy shows no interest in sport. Playing sports is considered part of the normal process of development from boyhood to adulthood. In fact, boys are socialized to become male by avoiding all references to femaleness and homosexuality. Curry (2001) cogently explains the process: "The reasoning may be seen as follows: (a) "real men" are defined by what they are not (women and homosexual); (b) it is useful to maintain a separation from femaleness or gayness so as not to be identified as such; (c) expression of dislike for femaleness or homosexuality demonstrates to oneself and others that one is separate from it and therefore must be masculine" (p. 67).

Whereas a girl is labelled a "lesbian" if she shows fine athletic qualities, a boy will be considered "one of the guys" if he has all the attributes of an athlete and performs at a high level. A male athlete is automatically considered heterosexual because sport enables him to define himself as a man.

² See references at end of article.

Furthermore, boys' participation in several sports is associated with the development of their manliness, competitive spirit and strength of character; in short, with their masculinity. In such an environment, many gays with the requisite athletic abilities can belong to a sport team without giving away their sexual orientation.

Another distinguishing characteristic of male sport team locker rooms is the language used in them. A number of studies draw attention to the extremely homophobic and misogynistic statements made by male athletes and coaches. It is not surprising that, in such circumstances, gays try to remain invisible.

Male athletes are hostile to the presence of gay athletes among them, and gays who come out become the victims of considerable violence and rejection. Violence is another factor that sets the male sports context apart from the female sports context.

Another common finding relates to "male bonding" on sports teams. Sport gives many men an opportunity to experiment with homoeroticism. Life in the locker room enables them to have physical contact with other men such as slaps on the buttocks, hugging, and kissing on the cheeks in a context where such behaviour is totally acceptable. The surprising fact in all this is that none of the men on the team associate the behaviour with homosexuality. At the same time, adopting the same behaviour outside the locker room would trigger the "gay" label immediately.

Here, for men's sports, are some common findings and conclusions of a number of authors:

- Gay athletes are terrified by the prospect of coming out of the closet because of the potential consequences — rejection by their coaches or negative reactions on the part of teammates ("Will they think I'm going to try to seduce them?").
- In an attempt to deny their homosexuality completely, some gays will become extremely violent toward gays and lesbians, particularly during their teenage years.

- Homophobia is part and parcel of male sports, because to be “one of the guys” is, by definition, to be homophobic.
- Team sports give boys and adult men an opportunity to engage in homosexual behaviour without being perceived as gay.

Organized sports for women: the coaches’ situation

Although very few studies specifically examine the situation of lesbian coaches, I was able to identify two common conclusions on the subject:

- Impact on coaching career: Being a lesbian dramatically limits career options and adversely affects hiring opportunities at the assistant coach and head coach levels. Taking on a coach who has been labelled as a lesbian is a major concern for an organization intent on protecting the image of its sport program.
- Impact on athlete recruitment: Often, prospective athletes, their parents, and their current coaches will try to find out whether there are any lesbians on the team or among the coaching staff. Insinuating that there are lesbians on opposing teams is a common recruitment tactic.

Organized sports: the leaders

Studies examining the role of leaders in the world of sport in combatting homophobia all conclude that it is the responsibility of each sport administrator, coach, and parent to create a safe sport environment for all athletes, whatever their sexual orientation. I found no studies that reported on the evaluation of anti-homophobia initiatives. However, Appendix 1 contains information on two programs designed to combat homophobia in sport: one is American and the other Australian, and they target all types of leaders in the sport community.

Real-life cases: athletes’ experiences of homophobia

In conducting research for this article, I had the good fortune to meet some lesbian athletes and coaches who were willing to share their stories with me, and I am grateful for their openness, spirit of sharing, and the trust they placed in me. I was able to draw on their experiences to illustrate the findings and conclusions of the literature on homophobia in sport with concrete examples. Note that all the women were involved in team sports and that they all insisted on anonymity.

In this section, I tell their stories by focusing on the points they share. Homophobia has changed over the last 30 years or so. I met women who were high performance athletes in the 1980s, others who were performing at a very high level in the 1990s, and some who are currently top-flight university athletes.

The coming-out of female athletes

The interviewees who were competing in the 1980s and 1990s never dared to come out publicly. Just as the findings of the literature show, they were extremely afraid of what their teammates would think of them. A number of times they referred to the fear of rejection, the fear of damaging — or being accused of damaging — team unity and spirit, and the fear of causing teammates to change their attitude toward them by becoming more distant, for example. Some interviewees had shared their secret with

teammates whom they really trusted, and none of them had suffered from this selective coming-out. This fact confirms the conclusion drawn by researchers that athletes are quite receptive to team members who come out as long as the information stays within the four walls of the locker room.

One particularly interesting fact that emerged during the interviews was that two athletes came out by confiding in their coaches, not their teammates. They told me that having a female coach was a major factor in their decision to share their secret with that person. They also referred to their coaches' values and the fact they were centred on respect for the individual. They were thus fairly confident that the coaches would react positively, and they were right in their assumption because the coaches reacted with total respect. Both athletes reiterated how significant and decisive a factor their coaches' reactions were at that moment in their lives. They were able to continue their season with one less weight on their shoulders.

Coming out selectively was a considerable relief for the athletes. They had at last found somebody who would lend an ear as they recounted the highs and lows of their love life. In contrast, staying in the closet is a heavy burden to bear, as the following anecdote illustrates. One of the interviewees told me that, one day, she came to the gymnasium sad and unmotivated — her heart had been broken for the first time. At one point during the training session, she broke down and started crying. She told the team and her coach that "Richard" had left her, when in fact it was Louise. The story speaks volumes about the heavy burden lesbian athletes have to bear when they stay silent about their sexual orientation.

Notwithstanding a few sad stories about women who never dared to come out, the situation facing lesbian athletes has changed. Some athletes who are competing today told me that all their teammates know they are lesbians even though they have never officially announced the fact. It was left unspoken and unsaid, and all members of the team seemed at ease with the situation. None of the interviewees reported any unpleasant or disturbing events in connection with their sexual orientation. Some even told me that teammates joked with them about it and that their orientation was well accepted. For example, another player would say, "We know you're not interested in bar hopping with us and finding some good-looking guys!" The interviewees told me they did not feel the need to make an official announcement because the other players and the coach were aware of their sexual orientation. They have never broached the issue openly. They feel no pressure from their teammates and are very happy with their love life.

That being said, some lesbians do not dare come out even though they know other lesbians on their team. I met two such athletes. They told me that they had not yet informed their parents and they preferred to keep their secret until they felt ready to disclose their sexual orientation.

The coming-out of coaches

I met only one coach who is officially "out," and he coaches a male team. He came out at 37 years of age. He had been coaching in the same place for 10 years when he decided that he had had enough of all the pretence. Like most homosexual coaches, he had preferred to stay silent for all those years out of fear of his employer's reaction, of athletes refusing to play for him, and of being considered a sexual predator, especially when he was coaching at the youth level. His situation is fully consistent with what is reported in the literature. Coaches believe that coming out will cause more problems and pose more risks than concealing their sexual orientation.

Two female coaches I met have not yet come out to their athletes. One coaches a women's team sport and the other a mixed individual sport. Both are in long-term relationships. They believe that the athletes harbour suspicions about their orientation, but that they are not at all uncomfortable with it. They have never broached the issue officially with the athletes and do not feel the need to do so. However, after the interview, it became clearer to them that they might have to assume some responsibility for combatting homophobia in sport. It is my understanding that they are now considering coming out in order to help lesbian athletes feel that they can openly and safely confide in their coach or tell their teammates about their sexual orientation if they so wish.

So what do we do now?

From the outset of this endeavour, I was determined to propose potential solutions and outline ongoing projects that are achieving positive results. As coaches of athletes who may be gay or lesbian, you need to be aware of how important your role is in combatting homophobia. When an athlete confides in you, your reaction will be a decisive factor in that person's life. It is very difficult to come out if the person in whom the athlete confides reacts negatively, because the consequences may be disastrous. Remember: The suicide rate for homosexual teenagers is 10 to 12 times higher than the rate for heterosexual teenagers, and suicide is the leading cause of death among homosexual males aged 14 to 29 years. So you must take action, and to help you, I have drawn up a short list of practical measures you can take. I also outline two programs designed specifically to eliminate homophobia in sport.

Practical measures

- Take the time to read up on and learn about homophobia and homosexuality in general.
- Do not tolerate disparaging remarks about gays and lesbians.
- Use inclusive language: Do not assume that all your athletes are heterosexual.
- Find out about neighbourhood homosexual support groups, peer help groups on campus, telephone help lines for homosexuals, and peer help groups for parents with homosexual children.
- Take your cue from programs such as "It Takes a Team" to launch awareness-raising activities in your community.
- Make it clear to the people around you that you are open to diversity in all members of your team.
- If you have gay or lesbian friends, ask them how you can help to combat homophobia.

Anti-homophobia programs

I found two programs designed specifically to combat homophobia in sport. One is "Harassment-free Sport: Guidelines to Address Homophobia and Sexuality Discrimination in Sport", and it was developed by the Australian Sports Commission. You can download the program document from www.ausport.gov.au/ethics/docs/homo_sexuality.pdf. The guidelines include how to stop discrimination, hypothetical situations and solutions, and more.

The second program, developed by the Women's Sports Foundation, is entitled, "It Takes a Team." You can download the program document from www.ittakesateam.org. It is an exhaustive, well-thought-out

program containing a host of ideas that you can put into practice very quickly. In my view, it is the best sport-specific anti-homophobia program. One of the authors is Pat Griffin, the leading expert on homophobia research. I highly recommend her book, *Strong Women, Deep Closet*, which gives a very clear and detailed picture of the situation facing lesbians in sport.

Conclusion

My conclusion is straightforward. I hope you become advocates for gay and lesbian rights in a world that is still very homophobic — the world of sport.

*In the summer of 2006, Montreal will host the first world Outgames, an international sporting event for lesbians and gays. For more information, go to

www.montreal2006.org/home.html

About the Author



Guylaine Demers, PhD, has been a professor at the Department of Physical Education of Laval University since September 2001. She takes particular interest in issues of women in sport, sports education, and competency-based training. She takes an active part in the NCCP as a Learning Facilitator and a Master Learning Facilitator for the Competition – Introduction context and was actively involved in the development and implementation of the new competency-based NCCP. She is vice-chair of Égale Action, the Quebec association for the advancement of women in sport and physical activity. She sits on the Coaching Association of Canada's Coaching Research Committee. Guylaine was a coach for nearly 15 years and was also a technical director of the Quebec Basketball Federation. She wore Laval's red and gold in basketball from 1983 to 1988.

