

Perceptions of Gender in Sports: Femininity, Masculinity, and Sexuality

Paige Stone

Wells College

Abstract

This paper discusses the many views on femininity and masculinity within athletics along with the issues of sexuality in sports. Women who play sports are often perceived as lesbians, especially if they are somewhat masculine, and men who are not muscular and play sports are commonly viewed as gay. A woman is often expected to be passive, proper, and ladylike, while an athlete has to be competitive, dominant, and aggressive. These definitions are opposites, causing female athletes to question themselves, and others to question that athlete's femininity. A man is usually expected to be brave, confident, tough, and powerful. These expectations can cause men who do not fit into those categories to be questioned on their masculinity. Because of these common male and female stereotypes, it can be difficult for an athlete to accept him or herself in the athletic setting and also gain the self-assurance and bravery to be open about their sexuality to their teammates and coach. Athletes who are gay or lesbian find themselves oppressing their true selves because of negative feelings towards gays and lesbians by their teammates and coaches.

keywords: femininity, masculinity, sexuality, gender, athletics

To be a feminine or a masculine person seems like a simple concept with clear definitions and boundaries. But what about being a male athlete who is feminine? Or a female athlete who is masculine? For some people, these terms may seem to clash when they are in the same sentence because of social expectations of men and women. Women who play sports are subject to being automatically stereotyped as lesbians, especially if they are even the slightest bit masculine (Clasen, 2001) and men who are not muscular and play sports are commonly viewed as gay (Steinfeldt, Gilchrist, Halterman, Gomory, & Steinfeldt, 2011). These labels can cause stress on the athlete and can ultimately affect his or her performance in competitions and life beyond the playing field.

Female athletes are expected to perform well on the fields, yet maintain a feminine charm off the pitch. In reality to be triumphant in competitions, women need to have masculine qualities such as assertiveness, power, and competitiveness to overcome their opponent (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004). Muscular female athletes can have body image issues such as concerns of being “too big,” which can lead to unhealthy behaviors that will ultimately compromise their performance (i.e. eating disorders) (Krane et al., 2004). In addition, female athletes have an added stress of people questioning their sexuality. Because playing sports is ultimately categorized as a masculine activity, people will often label women who play sports and who do not flaunt their femininity as lesbians (Zipp, 2011).

While female athletes are expected to stifle their muscularity, male athletes are expected to enhance their man hood and celebrate their masculinity. Men who do not participate in competitive sports or men who do but are more feminine in their build or personality are frequently viewed as gay (Steinfeldt, Gilchrist et al., 2011). These social pressures to be

masculine are positive in ways such as the athlete becoming a part of the group and negative in ways such as the athlete participating in more health risk behaviors (Steinfeldt, Gilchrist et al., 2011).

Beyond the playing field, being unsupportive and negatively stereotyping athletes who are gay and lesbian can cause psychological damage to the players. Gay and lesbian athletes who have experienced negative attitudes towards homosexuality from their own coaches and teammates are more susceptible to face psychological disorders such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety, low self-esteem, low confidence, stress, and suicidal thoughts (Wolf – Wendel, Toma, & Morphew, 2001).

Ideally, stereotypes need to be eliminated within athletics, but this goal is unrealistic for the immediate future. Change is possible if people start to take the appropriate steps towards acceptance and awareness of the issues of femininity, masculinity and sexuality within sports culture. Some simple adjustments such as being educated on the topic, using appropriate language and terms, creating a supportive environment towards gay and lesbian athletes, and achieving a better understanding of the feminine and masculine beliefs and stereotypes within athletics can help change attitudes in the world of competitive sport (Maurer – Starks, Clemons, & Whalen, 2008).

This paper will discuss the encounters of femininity and masculinity within men and women's sports teams as well as attitudes towards athletes who identify as gay or lesbian. I will examine this in four sections: issues of masculinity and femininity within female sports teams, issues of masculinity and femininity within male sports teams, views and psychological welfare

of gay and lesbian athletes, and steps to take to decrease stereotypes and negativity towards gay athletes.

Female Athletes

Being a woman and being an athlete can be a difficult balance for some people. A woman in today's society is expected to be submissive, proper, and feminine, while an athlete has to be competitive, powerful, and aggressive (Ross & Shiner, 2007). These beliefs obviously clash and cause female athletes to often question themselves, and others to question the femininity, or lack thereof, of the female athlete. This chapter will focus on the female athlete and the struggle of overcoming social norms and negative stereotypes, gaining confidence and acceptance in what is considered a masculine pastime, and ways in which women express and emphasize their femininity within athletics.

Social Norms and Stereotypes

Body image is a major issue for females whether they are athletes or not. Female athletes are often muscular, and while this is useful on the playing field, it can cause worry and concern about fitting into the norm of having a certain feminine body type when put in a social situation for fear of being labeled as a "social deviant" (Krane et al., 2004). Krane et al. conducted their study on NCAA Division I university female athletes. There were participants representing many different sports such as cross-country, track, soccer, volleyball, gymnastics, swimming, basketball, softball, tennis, rugby, and ice hockey. Participants were interviewed in a group setting of four to five participants in each discussion group with one moderator. Once the interviews were done, the researchers transcribed and coded the discussions of the groups and found patterns within the conversations of the female athletes. The overall consensus from the

women was they liked their muscular body while playing sports because it helped them overcome opponents, but they felt a lack of femininity in social settings because they were more masculine than other women (Krane et al., 2004). Females who participate in sports often have apprehension of being viewed as overly muscular, and desire a slightly toned body, not an excessively built body (Greenleaf, 2002). The exploratory study that Christy Greenleaf conducted was comprised of six interviews of athletes who had previously competed at the college level. All six athletes involved in the study mentioned in their interviews having feelings of concern towards their athletic body type when placed in a social setting. This anxiety of keeping a feminine body image yet remaining strong enough to be a competitor can cause mental stress on an athlete, and this stress can eventually lead to the development of an eating disorder which can ultimately end an athlete's career and can cause lifelong problems (Krane et al., 2004).

A common stereotype that female athletes encounter is that if you are a woman and you play sports, you are a lesbian. This is a common misconception because the traditionally masculine culture of sports causes people to doubt a woman's femininity. Traditional masculinity and athletics have common traits such as power, toughness, and aggressiveness (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, & Steinfeldt, 2011). Many people associate being a lesbian as being overly masculine, or lacking femininity. While there are members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community who do participate in athletics, it is understandable that this generalization can be frustrating to those who are straight and involved in athletics. These beliefs of femininity and masculinity can cause stigmas to those athletes who are straight but do not fit in to a certain gender role (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008).

Perhaps another reason people have this belief of female athletes being lesbians is that there are more famous female athletes who have publicly announced their sexuality than male athletes. One current example of this is Megan Rapinoe who plays soccer for the United States Women's National Team. On November 12, 2012, Megan Rapinoe accepted the Board of Directors Award from the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center for her choice to publicly announce that she is a gay athlete. There have been no famous male athletes to date who have come out publicly announcing that they are gay while actively participating in the four major sports (basketball, baseball, football, and hockey), while there have been a number of instances where female athletes are open about their sexuality while still participating in professional athletics (Zipp, 2011). This may be the case because the environment in women's sports is more accepting overall than that of men's sports (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). There have been athletes of both sexes who have come forward about their sexuality after they had retired from their sport (Zipp, 2011).

Expressing Femininity

Because of the constant scrutiny of spectators commenting on the lack of femininity in women's sports, female athletes will try to do things that emphasize their femininity in certain ways. One common way this is accomplished is tying hair ribbons in ponytails and wearing makeup during competitions (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek et al., 2011). Some sports even allow athletes to wear jewelry. The use of ribbons, makeup, and jewelry give viewers visual proof of female athletes being feminine, thus eliminating thoughts of said athletes to be too masculine. An example of this in professional sports is soccer player Alex Morgan of the United States

Women's National Team who wears her long hair in pink pre-wrap and applies mascara and eyeliner before every game.

Another way female athletes try to convey their femininity is through sexualizing their image. By displaying themselves as sexual objects, women are able to feel confident with their femininity and are able to show audiences their lack of masculinity (Clasen, 2001). There have been countless times that iconic female athletes posed nude for magazines such as Playboy and ESPN Magazine, putting their body on display for the world to view it and ultimately form an opinion on it. Female athletes hope the opinion formed is that women who are involved in sports aren't as masculine as they are thought to be, and that they will be supported more in future competitions.

Sometimes expressing femininity through sexualizing the female athlete is not always a choice. Uniforms are often a topic of discussion when it comes to women's sports, especially when it comes to gymnastics, swimming, or volleyball. Female athletes often have to dress in uniforms that expose midriff, are uncomfortably tight, or emphasize the buttocks unwillingly (Krane et al., 2004). Women express the stress this can cause during performances and the unhappiness of being viewed as sexual objects rather than exceptional athletes (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek et al., 2011).

The stress of dealing with false labels, having to emphasize femininity, and becoming a sexual object rather than a respected sportsperson can have a negative impact on a player and her game mentally and physically. A female athlete is usually viewed as a contradiction in today's society because of the masculine traits that are involved in sports. In order to avoid being

labeled a social deviant in today's sporting world, women must understand the role of masculinity, femininity and sexuality in athletics.

Male Athletes

While participation in athletics creates an overarching homosexual perception by some towards women, men are heterosexualized through participation in sports (Zipp, 2011). A man in today's society is expected to be bold, confident, strong, and powerful. These expectations can cause men who do not have built bodies or who are quiet or passive to be questioned on their masculinity. This chapter will focus on the male athlete and the societal pressures to conform to the typical jock stereotypes, what it means to be a part of the world of men's sports, and issues of male hegemony within athletics.

Social Pressures

A major part of men participating in athletics is to gain social acceptance of peers and to make family members proud. The pressure from family and friends on boys to join a sports team can start at a young age (Schrack – Walters, O'Donnell, & Wardlow, 2009). In 2006, there were 4.3 million high school boys participating on athletic teams compared to only 3 million girls who were involved with sports (Whisenant, 2008). Men want to fulfill the "American hero" role and become recognized and applauded for their efforts and sacrifices on the field (Schrack – Walters et al., 2009).

Is the pressure to be muscular always negative? Male athletes often experience heavy pressures to maintain a built figure to convey intimidation, power, and strength on and off the field. While men experience a tremendous amount of pressure to have a certain body type, being muscular

and in shape can help with functionality and success on the field, and it can also help keep injuries at bay (Steinfeldt, Gilchrist et al., 2011). Masculinity is also viewed as being attractive to heterosexual females, which is another desirable aspect of gaining muscle for straight men (Steinfeldt, Gilchrist et al., 2011). By participating in sports and achieving muscularity, men are given the opportunity to be fit, attain recognition for success, and attract members of the opposite sex.

While conforming to masculinity can have the before mentioned positive outcomes, men can be pressured to participate in risk taking activities by trying to fulfill a masculine role (Steinfeldt, Gilchrist et al., 2011). To certain groups and individuals, being masculine in today's society means to be powerful, invincible, and indestructible. Often, young men will put each other up to tasks to prove their masculinity and to be accepted into a group. Binge drinking, sexually aggressive behavior, and violence are results of the peer pressure involved in conforming to masculinity (Steinfeldt, Gilchrist et al., 2011). The more a male athlete identifies to his role as an athlete, the more masculine he wishes to be, which causes male athletes to put themselves at risk more often to prove they are tough enough to fit in with their peers (Steinfeldt, Gilchrist et al., 2011).

Beyond the dangers of being pressured into risk taking activities by peers, psychological disorders can develop because of the wish to fulfill a certain body image type. The desire to attain a certain body type can cause an athlete to develop a psychological disorder called muscle dysmorphia (Steinfeldt, Carter, Benton, & Steinfeldt, 2011). When a person develops muscle dysmorphia, he becomes obsessed with the unrealistic idea of achieving the perfect masculine body and begins to try and obtain muscularity in any way possible (Steinfeldt, Carter et al.,

2011). A person with muscle dysmorphia will diet and lift weights excessively. He might experiment with anabolic steroids to achieve his ideal body type, which eventually causes long term health concerns such as high blood pressure, liver damage, and testicular atrophy (Steinfeldt, Carter et al., 2011).

The pressure to do well in athletics comes from family, friends and society, but the athlete experiences most of the demands to achieve and succeed from his teammates, coaches, and the athlete himself. When an athlete is especially talented at a sport, he can experience pressure from his teammates and his coaches to perform well and make an impact on the team (Schrack – Walters et al., 2009). Some people are unable to execute tasks well under such high expectations, and this sets some athletes up for failure. The feeling of constantly disappointing teammates and coaches can affect a player's overall mental state. Athletes usually take their role seriously and can over analyze themselves. The desire to help their team and play well can hurt the athlete mentally if he does not perform as well as he wanted or planned to (Schrack – Walters et al., 2009).

Being Accepted

Camaraderie and bonding with teammates is also an important aspect of athletic participation. When asked to describe their teammates, men often use words such as “brother” and “family” (Schrack – Walters et al., 2009). Athletes seem to develop a strong relationship with each other because of the time they spend with one another and the ups and downs they experience together. Playing a sport is very time consuming and between practices, games, and other team events, a person can find themselves spending much of their time with their teammates, causing a strong relationship to build. Also, when a team experiences an important win or a difficult loss

together, it can bring a team closer together. Teammates are always there for each other, and through this loyalty and faithfulness, a positive bond can develop between each other.

Male Hegemony in the World of Sports

The presence of men's sports on television or in magazines out numbers women's sports by far. This could be attributed to the fact that on average, men will select mostly male athlete role models, while women will have a mixture of both men and women athletic role models (Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, & Knight, 2007). This is slowly beginning to change, especially with the recent success of the United States Women's National Soccer Team in the Olympics and World Cup in the past two years, but not to the point where major changes in television or magazines are made. Another possible reason men receive more media attention than women when it comes to sports is that the masculine presentation of sporting events has become a social norm. For example, professional female basketball players are a part of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), while professional male basketball players participate in the National Basketball Association (NBA), not the Men's National Basketball Association (MNBA) (Buysse, & Embser-Herbert, 2004).

Another example of male hegemony in athletics is the prevalence of male athletic directors and coaches in high school athletics. Whisenant's study used a national list of coaches in the United States to determine how many males and females were coaching high school sports. He then coded the coaches and the athletic director of each school into male and female categories, and through this list of coded individuals, determined that the gender of the athletic director can have an impact on the sex of head coaches that are hired; a woman is more likely to hire more female head coaches, while a man is more likely to hire more male coaches

(Whisenant, 2008). The main problem with this is there are more men who are athletic directors because there is often a dual job certification for the athletic director title in most schools; being the athletic director also includes being the head football coach. Since football is a sport that is populated with mostly male players and male coaches, this leaves little room for women to have the skills or abilities to coach a football team, making it more difficult to become the athletic director in schools with football programs (Whisenant, 2008). Because of this problem of male hegemony in high school athletic director positions, it leaves college athletic director positions even more male dominated because there is little room for women to move up the ladder in this field.

Sexuality in Athletics

Because of the male and female stereotypes that are mentioned before, it can be very difficult for an athlete to accept him or herself in a sports setting and also gain the confidence and courage to be open about their sexuality to their teammates and coach. Athletes who are gay or lesbian find themselves stifling their true identity because of negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians by their teammates and coaches. This chapter will discuss the stereotypical masculine and feminine sports, gays and lesbians in athletics, and ways coaches and administrators can help athletes who identify with the LGBTQ group feel safe and secure in a team setting.

Masculine vs. Feminine Sports

As if stereotyping the athlete him or herself is not stressful enough on an individual, he or she also might experience stereotyping of the actual sport itself. Sports are usually categorized into masculine, feminine, or neutral groups. An example of a masculine sport would be football

because it is predominantly played by men and it is a very aggressive game. An example of a feminine sport is figure skating because its primary participants are women and it is viewed as an elegant and graceful sport (Schrack – Walters et al., 2009). A neutral sport would be cross country running because there is not an emphasis on masculinity or femininity within the sport. Out of 68 different sports, 30 were categorized as masculine, 12 were placed in the feminine group, and 26 were ruled as neutral (Whisenant, 2008).

Stereotyping the actual sport can negatively affect the participants in a variety of ways. Men who participate in athletics that do not show off their toughness and quickness but instead highlight their fluidity and control are often labeled as gay (Schrack – Walters et al., 2009). Women who play traditionally masculine sports that involve contact and displays an athlete's strength and agility can be labeled as a lesbian. These labels can negatively affect a person because they are used in a derogatory manner and are meant to belittle the athlete. The stereotypes that go along with certain sports can cause those who are straight to feel the need to constantly defend themselves and prove their heterosexuality, and on the opposite side of the spectrum can cause gay and lesbian athletes to withdraw from the team and to doubt themselves (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001).

Athletics and the LGBTQ Community

There is a common belief in today's society that gay men are less likely to participate in sports and lesbians are more likely to partake in athletics (Zipp, 2011). This belief might stem from the fact that overall, women are more accepting than men when it comes to LGBTQ issues (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). Gay boys and men can be bullied out of sports because they do not feel supported in the athletic environment. Professional male athletes, for example Jeremy

Shockey (NFL), Reggie White (NFL), and Scott Brosius (MLB), who have been recorded making public homophobic remarks, have not helped gay athletes feel comfortable in coming out (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008). While women might be more accepting than men, both gay men and lesbians who participate in sports can experience negative attitudes towards their sexuality. These negative attitudes can cause psychological damage to athletes who are openly gay, and also to those who are not as open or comfortable about their sexuality (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001).

In 2006, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recorded 219,744 male athletes and 164,998 female athletes participating in college athletics (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008). With the college athletic population nearing 385,000 athletes in 2006, using statistics from a national level, 10% of the college athlete population would categorize themselves as gay or lesbian. This would mean that in 2006, there were 38,500 college athletes who identified with the LGBTQ group (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008).

A gay or lesbian athlete who is experiencing negative exposure towards gays and lesbians by their teammates or coaches are susceptible to psychological damage (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). The world of athletics should be a place where people are supported and encouraged no matter what the person's background is, but for athletes who identify as LGBTQ, this is sometimes not the case (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008). When teammates and coaches are openly not supportive of the gay community, it can cause those teammates who are gay or lesbian to experience anxiety, depression, feelings of isolation, fear for their safety, suicidal thoughts, low self-esteem, low confidence, substance abuse, and can ultimately stunt the individual's personal development (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). Young people who identify with the LGBTQ group

are three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual people (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008). Beyond these psychological issues a person might experience, their overall athletic performance can deteriorate from the negativity towards homosexuality as well (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001).

When a gay athlete feels like they cannot trust their team enough to expose their true identity, he or she is missing out on the valuable aspects a team experience can give to an individual. By feeling the need to withdraw from the team atmosphere, the athlete will ultimately feel left out and unaccepted (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). The athlete will exclude him or herself and will miss out on interactions between teammates, working together to achieve a common goal, and using each other's strengths to work towards achieving success in the sport he or she is participating in (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). Bonding with teammates is a positive aspect of being on a team because of the friendships that are made and social skills that are gained.

Having a coach who is not understanding or supportive of the athlete and his or her sexuality can hurt the athlete as well. A famous example of this unsupportive behavior is former Pennsylvania State University head women's basketball coach, Rene Portland. Rene Portland used negative recruiting, i.e. telling recruits that the team from another school the athlete is looking at are all lesbians or the coach from another team that is recruiting the athlete is gay or lesbian, and discriminated against her own players who she perceived as lesbian. One player who was constantly discriminated against by Portland, Jennifer Harris, finally stood up to Portland and pressed charges against her for harassment. Jennifer Harris ended up leaving her dream school of Pennsylvania State University and transferred in to another school to play

basketball under a coach who would accept her as an athlete and not discriminate against her because of her sexuality. This is only one example of an athlete who had to change her entire life and make different plans because she was experiencing stress and anxiety from her unsupportive coach.

Ways to Work towards Acceptance

Throughout history, there have been people who have discriminated against certain races, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic backgrounds. In sports, these issues are for the most part resolved and a person's race, class, or where they are from does not influence how that person is viewed or treated in a team environment. Homosexuality, on the other hand, can still be discriminated against in athletic settings today, but there are steps that players, coaches, and athletic administrators can take to work towards embracing and accepting gays and lesbians into the athletic world (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008).

If a gay or lesbian athlete is exposed to a negative environment that is unsupportive of their sexuality, their personal development will be stunted. On the other hand, a supportive and encouraging environment will help the athlete grow and develop (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). There are many steps a coach and team can take to help lessen the negative views on gays and lesbians within athletics. The main approach a coach or teammate can take is to be supportive and listen to the athlete's problems, issues, concerns, and feelings (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). Interaction with the athlete is important in forming a trusting and open bond that the athlete feels comfortable with. Another step that can be taken to try and eliminate negative attitudes towards athletes who identify with the LGBTQ group is to hold an open discussion by an outside speaker that educates players, coaches, and athletic administrators about stereotypes that gay and lesbian

athletes experience and ways to avoid stereotyping teammates who could possibly be gay or lesbian (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001). Educating the team, as well as coaches and athletic administrators, on a person's identity development, avoiding stereotypes, assisting athletes in the progress of their personal development stages, and encouraging active support to those who identify as LGBTQ can help resolve the issue of negativity towards gay and lesbian athletes (Wolf – Wendel et al., 2001).

Discussion

An athlete's femininity, masculinity, and sexuality can all play a role in his or her sporting experience. Research has shown that some women feel the need to emphasize femininity as to not look too masculine while participating in sports while men feel they have to stress their masculinity to prove their heterosexuality (Leavy, Gnong, & Ross, 2009). These stereotypes and pressures can cause psychological damage to individuals who feel the need to hide their true sexuality.

It seems as if it is more socially acceptable for women to act more masculine while playing sports than it is for men to act more feminine while playing sports. The atmosphere of women's sports is generally more accepting than men's sports, giving women some comfort and support to be themselves. In general, it seems as if society is slowly starting to accept the fact that there are gay men who participate in athletics, but it might take years to break the stereotypes and treatment of gays who participate in sports.

The journey of the fight for gay and lesbian rights in today's society is comparable to the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's. Gay and lesbian couples are gaining more rights in our country and with acceptance and support, the oppression of gay and lesbian people will

lessen just as the discrimination of African Americans has lessened after the civil rights movement. Our recent national and state elections have proven that Americans are ready to take steps forward in the fight for gay rights. On November 6, 2012, Maine, Maryland, and Washington voters helped pass laws that allow same-sex marriage. These states now join New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, New York, Iowa, and the District of Columbia in allowing same-sex marriage.

While people are doing their part in politics, athletics is a place where people can set examples of acceptance of the LGBTQ group. If more famous athletes begin to come out and ask for the support of their fans, the issues some people might have about gay and lesbian people may be resolved. When famous athletes publicly announce their sexuality, they inspire other athletes to be themselves and feel comfortable with their sexuality. Just as Jackie Robinson gained respect and recognition for becoming the first African American to play baseball and paved the way for other African Americans to gain success in sports, Billie Jean King is a role model to many gay and lesbian athletes, as she was the first professional athlete to admit publically that she was a lesbian. If more famous LGBTQ athletes like Billie Jean King, Megan Rapinoe, and Sheryl Swoopes come forward and choose to become leaders in the fight for gay rights, the acceptance of gays and lesbians, whether they participate in sports or not, would rise significantly. Maybe with the rise of professional women athletes publically announcing their sexuality, the first professional gay male athlete will come forward and join the front line in the fight for LGBTQ equality.

Campuspride.org is a website that encourages colleges to become a safe environment for LGBTQ students. This organization empowers student leaders to develop a positive setting for

gay and lesbian students and LGBTQ allies to build their leadership skills by developing campus groups and expanding campus networks to reach out to those who might need help with issues relating to sexuality (Windmeyer, 2012). Campus Pride has recently developed a project specifically for student-athletes in college. “Out to Play” is a project that raises awareness of the negative slurs and behaviors towards gay athletes and embraces positive solutions to these issues. Inclusion in the classroom and on the field is an important mission in this project. The mission statement for “Out to Play” states that athletes deserve to know if their athletic programs respect them, no matter what their sexual orientation is (Windmeyer, 2012). While the list of participating schools is small, the “Out to Play” project is slowly growing and gaining recognition.

Another project that was developed in 2002 by the combined efforts of the Women’s Sports Foundation, the NCAA, An Uncommon Legacy Foundation, Astraea, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, the Ms. Foundation, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights is “It Takes a Team: Making Sports Safe for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Athletes and Coaches” (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008). This project was designed to educate coaches and administrators by providing them with a DVD and manual that teaches them about the issues gay and lesbian student-athletes encounter and how homophobia is present in the sports world today (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008). Coaches and administrators also receive posters and stickers that are symbols they can display in their offices of their acceptance and understanding of the LGBTQ community, making gay and lesbian athletes feel more welcome and comfortable to talk to them if needed (Maurer – Starks et al., 2008).

Organizations like Campus Pride, and projects such as “Out to Play,” and “It Takes a Team” can be extremely useful tools for colleges to use to raise awareness of the issues that gay and lesbian student-athletes face. The psychological damage a college athlete can endure because teammates and coaches don’t accept their identity can be irreversible. One important step that institutions can take to minimize the chances of psychological issues an athlete may develop is to educate the entire athletic department and all of the players on how to accept gays and lesbians and dismiss common stereotypes of gay and lesbian athletes. Education is the key to changing the negative attitudes towards athletes who identify with the LGBTQ group and reduce the risk of gay and lesbian athletes developing psychological disorders.

Future research should be done on the mental status of individual sport athletes, such as swimmers, ice skaters, wrestlers, and cross country runners versus team sport athletes; i.e. soccer, basketball, softball, and volleyball players, when it comes to issues of sexuality. Are men and women who do not rely on each other in a sport more or less susceptible to the stereotypes of gay athletes? Is there more pressure to be heterosexual in team sports than individual sports? Do gay and lesbian individual sport athletes experience the same psychological damage as team sport athletes? My hypothesis would be that team sports place more pressure on athletes to be a certain way and individual sport athletes do not experience as much pressure to express a specific sexuality. The level of competition would play a role in the results as well. I would expect high school athletes would feel less comfortable overall coming out to their team because these athletes are young and possibly unsure of their feelings or sexuality at this point of their lives. College athletes might feel more secure with their identity, making it easier to express their sexual preferences to their teammates. With team sports, every player relies on one another

and works together to reach a common goal while in individual sports, there is no teamwork or reliance on one another, therefore creating an environment with less interaction and leaving little room or care for judgment of athletes and their sexuality.

Another topic that deserves more research in the area of gay and lesbian athletes is attitudes towards a coach who identifies with the LGBTQ group. Do athletes show the same, more, or less respect to gay or lesbian coaches than heterosexual coaches? Are gay or lesbian coaches also susceptible to the psychological repercussions that gay or lesbian athletes are susceptible to; i.e. depression, anxiety, low self esteem, etc.? I would hypothesize that this would be difficult to research because in my experiences, coaches do not share personal information with their players, therefore players do not learn the sexuality of their coaches, making it hard for them to form an opinion based on the sexuality of the coach. If this was a topic that could be researched, I would assume that overall, athletes would show less respect to a coach who is gay or lesbian in today's society than they would a straight coach, especially if it is a gay male coach who is coaching a men's sport. I would also hypothesize that coaches are also prone to psychological disorders because of negative attitudes from their players, assistant coaches, co-workers, or bosses, but it is hard to say whether they would be more or less at risk than their players.

Through participation in sports, athletes acquire a second family and friends who they should be able to trust and rely on. By bonding with teammates and coaches, an athlete should ultimately feel comfortable enough to be themselves and not be ashamed of their sexuality. This is only possible through a supportive community surrounding the athlete. When an athlete does not have this positive experience, the psychological issues he or she might encounter can affect

the player's ability on the court or field. An athlete's performance and mental health can be affected by the team's attitudes and beliefs and that alone should be a main reason for coaches to want to support their players.

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