

Kicking down barriers: gay footballers, challenging stereotypes and changing attitudes in amateur league play

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Recent years have seen much debate surrounding the lack of openly gay players in professional football, accompanied by growing speculation about when a gay player might emerge. The truth is that openly gay players have been participating in the sport for some time – at amateur levels. This paper looks at two teams – Dublin Devils FC and Glasgow's Saltire Thistle FC – that compete in both gay leagues and tournaments and local recreational leagues against teams that would not identify as being gay-friendly. Both teams are therefore in the unique position of being able to more directly challenge stereotypes of gay athletes by contesting the perception that gay men are not masculine enough to show an interest in, let alone compete in certain sports. However, whilst openly gay men participating in the sport certainly have the power to disrupt ideas about masculinity and challenge homophobia within football, gay athletes do not necessarily present a challenge the gender order as a whole. Rather, by accepting the masculine norms surrounding sporting behaviour, and 'playing straight' whilst on the pitch, they in fact serve to strengthen the central tenets of masculine behaviour and reinforce the notion that in order to participate in sport, and win, you need to behave in certain ways. Through interviews with players and coaching staff, this paper explores this paradox, looking at the way in which gay players on the football pitch simultaneously disrupt and reinforce norms; their bodies caught up in a web of power that sees them both challenging the way in which gay masculinities are conceptualized and affirming the central tenets of orthodox sporting masculinities at the same time. It also argues that despite the very real benefits gay leagues can bring to both individual players and gay communities, it is players like these, who openly compete within 'straight' leagues, that offer the best opportunity for challenging stereotypes and opening up spaces for gay players at all levels of the sport.

Introduction

On 15 February 2013, the American International and former Leeds United midfielder Robbie Rogers announced on his blog that he was gay, writing 'I always thought I could hide this secret. Football was my escape, my purpose, my identity. Football hid my secret, gave me more joy than I could have ever imagined ...'. In the same post, Rogers also announced he was retiring from professional football, writing 'Now is my time to step away. It's time to discover myself away from football'.¹

This retirement was to be short lived and in May 2013 Rogers signed with LA Galaxy, becoming the first openly gay player in over 30 years to participate in

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American team sport.² His return to football with an American team is perhaps telling. Rogers told *Sky Sports News* that ‘The football culture in England and the UK is a bit behind, a bit more homophobic and racist than it is here [in the USA]. I don’t know why that is, but I just felt that way’.³ This sentiment was backed up by his LA Galaxy teammate Robbie Keane who told the *New York Times* ‘I’m sure there are a lot of players over the years that have played in England, or wherever, that are too frightened to come out ... Maybe the fans are a bit more brutal in England than they would be here, but that shouldn’t be the case’.⁴

Whilst this last point is perhaps debatable, what is not up for dispute is the fact that, at the time of writing, there are no openly gay footballers playing at the professional level in either the UK or Ireland. That there are closeted gay players currently playing in those leagues is also not a major point of contention. On 5 May 2013, *The Guardian* published an article claiming that at least eight professional players have revealed to colleagues that they are gay, seven of whom said their refusal to go public was due to backlash that they feel is likely to come from fans.

Despite moves to tackle homophobia within the sport through initiatives like Kick It Out, The Justin Campaign and the Football Association (FA) backed ‘Football v Homophobia’, the perception that football is a hostile environment for gay players remains. Evidence from the National Centre for Social Research and the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that around 24% of gay men have actively avoided sports like football, as they perceive it to be unsafe.⁵ The FA found that 64% of people identifying as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) feel that homophobia affects their participation in the sport, whilst 70% have heard homophobic language used in football in the past five years.⁶ A report into homophobic abuse suffered by supporters of Brighton and Hove Albion by the Gay Football Supporters Network (GFSN) found that in the 2012/13 season fans had been subjected to homophobic abuse, which sometimes takes the form of chants such as ‘does your boyfriend know you are here?’ and ‘you’re just a town full of faggots’, in at least 57% of all their matches, including 70% of away games.⁷

As a result of this hostile environment, teams and leagues that openly welcome LGBT players have sprung up across the UK and Ireland. This move has been spearheaded by the GFSN, which was founded in 1989 with the mission ‘to promote the support and participation of LGBT men and women in football, and act as a medium for LGBT football supporters to get together’.⁸ However, with the exception of Jones and McCarthy’s study into some of the teams in the GFSN league,⁹ very little has been written about openly gay footballers playing at the amateur level in the UK and Ireland. This study, like theirs, is an attempt to redress this balance, contribute to important studies of homophobia and football and help to make visible openly gay athletes playing at this level.

Dublin Devils FC and Saltire Thistle FC

This paper draws on interviews conducted with members of two teams that can trace their existence back to this movement – Ireland’s Dublin Devils FC and Glasgow Scotland’s Saltire Thistle FC. Both clubs are the only gay-friendly football teams in their respective cities and both participate primarily in local recreational leagues against teams who do not identify as being ‘gay’ or ‘gay friendly’. Dublin Devils FC was founded in April 2005. Initially calling themselves ‘Men United GFC’ they changed their name in 2006. As there are no gay football leagues in Ireland, they

participate primarily in the Astro.ie 11 a-side winter and summer leagues, but also take part in the IGLFA (International Gay and Lesbian Football Association) World and European Championships and the Gay Games. In Glasgow, Saltire Thistle FC plays in the GFSN League as well as the Glasgow & District Sunday Football Championship.

Both clubs were chosen for this study as they play most of their football in non-gay affiliated local leagues in two cities that are not traditionally thought of as being 'gay friendly'. They are also one of only a handful of gay-friendly sports teams operating within their respective nations. Both teams therefore offer a good opportunity to examine some of the paradoxes thrown up by gay athletes and explore how gay masculinities are constructed within a sport that is traditionally unwelcoming and unaccommodating of sexual difference. This paper will use the experiences of the players in these two teams to argue that while certainly having the power to disrupt ideas about masculinity and challenge homophobic viewpoints, gay athletes do not necessarily present a challenge to the gender order as a whole. Rather, they simultaneously disrupt and reinforce norms, shoring up masculinities at the same time as challenging them; they are at once 'a productive body and a subjected body'¹⁰ caught up in a field of power relations that ensures that although they can challenge and certainly alter the way in which masculinity is conceptualized, their actions on the pitch mean they may even, consciously or not, serve to strengthen its central tenets.

Methodology

The data collected comes from a mixture of unstructured one-to-one interviews (Dublin Devils), an unstructured group interview (with the Scottish team) and informal conversations with players. I also observed training sessions and matches against local league 'straight' teams. Contact with both teams was initially made via email and once the nature of my research was explained there were no difficulties in eliciting support for the project or securing interviews. Although I have changed the names of players here, none of the players insisted on anonymity. The methodology used was informed both by the theory to be discussed below but also feminist methodologies that stress the importance of recognizing the role the researcher's own subject position plays in shaping the project. During these interviews, my sexuality (heterosexual) was not discussed. However, I do feel my gender identity as well as my nationality (American) did help at times to establish a rapport with the interviewees as I am perhaps not the kind of person one would expect to be conducting research into gay men's football teams in the UK and Ireland.

The findings of this research are contextual and reflect the views of the individual players who participated in the interviews and discussions. However, the fact that there were broad similarities with the Jones and McCarthy study would indicate that there are broad trends between teams across the UK and Ireland and points to an opportunity to widen the scope of this research and look at teams from a broader geographical spread.

Theoretical frameworks

Research into masculinity and sports has extensively utilized RW Connell's work and in particular the concept of hegemonic masculinity, 'the configuration of gender

practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'.¹¹ Within this overall framework of hegemony, Connell argues that specific relations of dominance and subordination exist between men, most evident in the subordination of gay men by those who are straight.¹²

Connell's framework is useful in that it allows us to move beyond a simple hierarchical model that sees all masculinities as occupying a favourable position vis-à-vis all femininities, and recognizes that relations within masculinities are also subject to power relations and hierarchies of their own. However, I would argue that it tends to downplay the possibilities for resistance within them that can bring about real change in masculine identities, however small, gradual and seemingly contradictory they might be.¹³

This paper therefore seeks to place greater emphasizes on power relations and the way in which identities are negotiated at both individual and group levels. It utilizes a theoretical framework that, whilst recognizing the importance of hegemony as a way to explain how certain behaviours become seen as the norm, also draws upon Foucault's concepts of power and sees the production of masculinities as more complex and contradictory process that Connell sometimes suggests.

Foucault's work still remains underutilized by sports scholars, although there is a growing body of work that utilizes his concepts, particularly those related to power, within a sports context.¹⁴ His ideas are particularly useful when looking at bodies that are viewed as 'other' within sport as their very presence on a football pitch represents a potential threat to what Butler calls heteronormative masculinities¹⁵ and the ideals that underpin them. As Foucault's work, like sport, places the body at the centre of any operations of power, Foucault's bodies are invested politically with meaning and 'relations of power and domination' while at the same time 'caught up in a system of subjection'. Looking at sport through this theoretical lens therefore allows us to see them as becoming useful as 'both a productive body and a subjugated body'.¹⁶

Gender, sexuality and sport

Sport is a key institution through which both heteronormativity and masculine privilege are secured in our culture. Although sporting culture has (slowly at times) opened up to previously excluded groups and included more marginalized bodies into the fold over time, this inclusion has not disrupted ideas surrounding the ability of sport to build character and promote 'manliness' in any substantive way. Many previously excluded groups who have made inroads into sports do not directly challenge the links between masculine values such as competition and aggression at the heart of sporting masculinities or represent a direct challenge to them. Black masculinities, for example, are often typified as athletic and highly (hetero)sexualized, while female athletes are often portrayed as being more masculine than their non-sporting counterparts.

Of course, issues like race come with their own set of stereotypes and exclusionary practices, and both black and gay men are subjected to many of the same exclusionary 'patterns of oppression'.¹⁷ But, 'unlike the power associated with black athleticism, participation for gay male athletes is associated with feminized terrain ... Whereas black athletes are perceived as thugs, masculinized by their sporting

space ... gay athletes are feminised by theirs'.¹⁸ Gay men, or so the stereotype goes, do not like sports or participate in sporting culture or activities in any great numbers. This particularly holds 'true' for team sports, as they tend to be more violent and 'masculine' than individual ones.¹⁹ When they do participate, there is the assumption that they veer towards 'feminized' sports (gymnastics, ice skating and cheer-leading) or non-aggressive sports such as swimming and running.²⁰

This idea is rooted in the way in which gender and sexuality are commonly conflated within our culture. Any organizational system that sees identity in binary terms necessarily relies on the idea of the 'other' and gender and sexuality are no different. What we see as 'masculine' is inherently connected to what is 'not feminine' and this masculinity is bound up with heterosexuality. As Messner argues, 'boys learn early that if it is difficult to define masculinity in terms of what it is, it is at least clear what it is not. A boy is not considered masculine if he is feminine. In sport, to be told by coaches, fathers or peers that one throws 'like a girl' or plays like a 'sissy' or a 'woman' is among the most devastating insults a boy can receive'.²¹ As gay men, by virtue of their not being attracted to women, are considered not to be 'real' men, it therefore follows that they must be more feminine and therefore weaker, less competitive and not 'naturally' inclined towards sports.

Through stereotypes like this, the institution of sports helps to shore up dominant masculine behaviour and favour certain types of masculine bodies; the displays of power and aggression serving not only to 'prove' that men are superior to women, but also attesting to the superiority of certain kinds of male bodies, most notably heterosexual ones. Gay athletes therefore potentially throw up a number of paradoxes with relation to the 'masculine arena of sport'.²² They are simultaneously 'not man enough' whilst participating in that most masculine of activities, and challenging notions of traditional masculinity whilst simultaneously embodying them.

'Football is all very well as a game for rough girls, but is hardly suitable for delicate boys':²³

The idea that gay men, are not 'naturally inclined' towards sport is not confined to members of the 'straight' community. Members of both of the teams I spoke to report that the reactions of some members of the gay communities in their respective cities also suggest that sport is not seen as a 'natural' stomping ground for gay men. Members of the Glasgow team, for example, have found that they are met with comments like 'the girls are just back from playing football' or 'let's hear it for the fairies' when returning from matches, while a member of the Dublin Devils coaching staff says that he spent most of his life involved in sport but that he 'thought, stupidly, that I was the only gay in Ireland who was interested in sport'.²⁴

However, while they might directly challenging the idea that gay men simply do not 'do' sport, gay athletes do not necessarily disrupt ideas about what 'kinds' of men play sport. Anderson argues that, like any other athletes, gay athletes have 'embraced the orthodox model of sport because the hegemonic underpinnings of sport have prevented them from critically examining the effect sport has on society and on the stigmatizing of homosexuality'.²⁵ The way they do this is often by displaying, adopting or embodying the kind of masculinity that by its very nature has sought to exclude them. But whilst Anderson suggests that this is often an unconscious move on the part of gay athletes, the players I spoke to suggested that there is a very real awareness at times that the ability to be almost more masculine, more

competitive and more talented than their (straight) competitors also seems to provide a measure of protection from sanctions their sexuality might otherwise trigger²⁶ and put their opponents on the back foot from the outset. As one Glasgow player explains, 'Certainly some of the first teams we played seemed quite shocked in the first 10 or 15 min that we weren't mincing around, that we were actually going in with crunching tackles and running past people. I don't know if some of these other teams had a perception of use being maybe a little bit softer and easily bullied off the ball which just wasn't the case'.²⁷

Whether as men participating in a traditionally feminine sport, such as those in Tagg's study of male netballers in New Zealand,²⁸ or marginalized male masculinities seeking inclusion in team sports, adopting the orthodox masculine behaviours demanded by these sports is one seemingly effective way to deflect criticism. Some of the players I spoke to admitted that sometimes they, consciously or unconsciously, behaved in certain ways to increase their masculine capital against opponents. 'Eoin' from the Dublin Devils remarked that the team had obtained a reputation in the local league for being a bit rough 'which surprised me ... I would have thought that we're very respectful..' and that this perhaps had been the result of the players seeking to redress the balance: 'it's not that we're rough in a disrespectful way, maybe it's an element of the team that almost overcompensated for being gay, tried to throw in an extra element of masculinity on the pitch in a kind of slightly more aggressive, challenging fashion'.²⁹

Here, whilst it is clear that the players involved are serving to reinforce the idea that in order to succeed at sport, they must be just as, if not more, competitive and aggressive as their straight opponents, their reasons for doing so are perhaps motivated by a keen awareness of how gay men are traditionally seen within sporting circles and a wish to break those perceptions down. 'Brendan', a coach with the Dublin teams sees this competitiveness and aggression as working to break down stereotypes of gay athletes and the barriers to their participation in sport: 'that's what we want, these guys to forget that we're gay guys playing football and just take us as a football team ... they're men on the pitch. They're men full stop. It's not a gay team'.³⁰

Within a footballing context, Adams et al. found that what they called 'masculinity establishing discourse'³¹ – strategies like reinforcing the idea that football was a sport for 'men' played 'by real men' or using language that linked poor performance on the field to femininity and less commonly, homosexuality – was used by coaches and players as a strategy for both motivating players and regulating their behaviour. Players also sometimes modified their in-play behaviour in response to this kind of discourse and 'used the football field, to demonstrate, when challenged that they were in fact 'real men'³² as well as to save face and retain their position in the team.

Interestingly, there is evidence of these practices at work in 'Brendan's' management style of the Dublin Devils FC, albeit with very different aims in mind. He told me that in order to achieve a sort of parity with the other teams, he felt it was necessary to stamp out the behaviours that he saw as damaging to his team's image: 'Some of the things the guys would say on the sidelines ... I had to eliminate. Like, messing about, they would say 'well done girls', this kind of stuff. And I would say to them 'Stop this. If you want to be respected as a football team ... you don't do this. You know, don't leave yourselves open to these guys to have a go at us because we're gay' ... so the sort of giving credence to this thing that gay guys are sort of limp wristed and a little bit wimpish, you would do that by saying things like 'come on girls', 'well done girls', that sort of stuff ... So I eliminated that'.³³

Here 'Brendan' is clearly of the view that his players may be perceived as less manly by some opponents, therefore opening themselves up to abuse and/or criticism. The player's banter on the sidelines also suggests that they too are acutely aware of how they are seen by some other men, their use of words like 'girls' is clearly intended to be ironic and to neutralize the power of such terms. What is interesting here is that, in common with the coaches in the Adams et al. study,³⁴ 'Brendan' is also using the threat of femininity to motivate his players to act in a certain way. The processes here are different; in that being 'gay' clearly does not carry the stigma it might to other men, and 'Brendan' is encouraging his players to adopt certain masculine behaviours to avoid being stigmatized rather than to marginalize. But the connection between 'real' masculinity and certain sporting behaviours remains.

Here, we can see echoes of Foucault's systems of subjugation at work,³⁵ with players being encouraged to internalize certain ways of being and to adopt those traits which, at times, can serve to marginalize them. But there are also signs of resistance at work here too and these overt displays of aggression on the pitch might be a temporary strategy for some players, their 'playing straight' a performance that keeps open the possibility for subversion later on:

I think that if we got enough confidence we could even go full circle and beyond 'acting straight' to having real confidence that we can win something while at the same time being as flamboyant or expressive as we can but I think to get there ... we have to mimic the other team ... I think it would be great craic to see the day we can actually do the hokey-kokey and ... some guys ... might try to snigger at us and we can go 'hold on, we beat you',³⁶

'Does your boyfriend know you're here?'

Both teams see their potential to challenge stereotypes as an important part of playing in the recreational leagues and agree that this happens most effectively when they are in a winning position. They say that opposing players have found it difficult to be beaten by a gay team, and this is where the vast majority of homophobic comments and incidents have cropped up. As 'Brendan' sees it, 'you can make yourself more vulnerable when you're losing. It's easy because we're gay people, if you do something that seen as ... or if you fail at something, it's easier for people to slag you off and use that as the reason why you've failed'³⁷ and recalls one incident in which the opposing team knew they were about to face a gay team:

We got the comments at the early part of the game, you know 'these are a pack of fairies' and all this and we got stuck in and we beat them 4-1. There was total silence at the end of the game. There was no more slagging, there was no more having a go at us or anything like that. We had destroyed them on the pitch. So, they literally wimped away and the guys got great satisfaction out of that.³⁸

'Eoin' has also noticed that tension rises more towards the end of a match if his team are winning as no-one wants to lose to the gay team', presumably as it confirms suspicions that gay men are lesser athletes. But he adds:

I'm sure it's a very good thing because it challenges their perceptions. There's a lot of guys out there I'm sure ... who have possibly never met a gay guy before or they've only heard different stereotypes and suddenly those stereotypes are being challenged head on because ... we've got a very strong team ... I think it's good that there's

straight guys out there actually going ‘fuck, this is a gay team’. So it’s actually just bringing the issue to the fore, it’s bringing it out into the open, which is a good thing’.³⁹ This is backed up by members of the Glasgow team, with one player commenting on their entrance into the local league, ‘on the whole it’s been good ... to challenge the stereotypes ... and it makes it even better when you beat the teams as well’.⁴⁰

Despite the tensions that are clearly evident on the pitch, both teams say that there have been very few incidents that are outwardly homophobic in nature. A player from the Dublin Devils remarked that ‘we find that there’s very little issue on the pitch, if any. Very occasionally, there’s ... a remark ... and it’s always covert but you can sense it ... and it’s only coming from a minority of players generally. On the whole, most people are fine and there are no issues’.⁴¹ Backing this up, the Glasgow team also says that they’ve faced very little in the way of homophobic comments from other teams or supporters and that ironically one of the incidents that stand out involved homophobic abuse being directed at one of the team’s straight players. Interestingly, when Saltire Thistle FC has encountered homophobic comments from their straight opponents, they have preferred to handle the issue themselves, rather than contact the league or other authorities. As one player explains ‘We didn’t want to fall into the stereotype of ‘they’re getting bullied, they’re going to create a drama’ so we’ve tried to deal with it ourselves, rather than telling tales. But the league were very good in supporting us ...’.⁴²

This belief amongst players that the work they do on the pitch when playing in the local leagues directly confronts stereotypes also leads to some soul searching about the power of gay leagues to transform attitudes towards gay players. As Drury points out ‘sports spaces are both constructed by, and productive of, social relations, and should therefore be understood as sites where power is operationalized’.⁴³ Gay sporting cultures, she writes, have an inherent tension in them as they are caught between the potential they have to transform social relations and their tendency to at times to reproduce existing norms surrounding gender. This is something also stressed by Jones and McCarthy who note that within the GSFN league ‘the challenge to masculine hegemony has to be tempered by the recognition that there is, to an extent, a sense of a gay ghetto with many teams playing exclusively in a gay league’.⁴⁴

Furthermore, gay sports teams have at times been seen by members as adopting their own exclusionary practices and marginalizing members of the LGBT communities who fail to conform to their own norms regarding appropriate behaviours and practices.⁴⁵ This is something that both teams in this study are aware of, both in terms of how the competitive nature of the teams might exclude players who simply want an informal kick about, or non-gay players who feel that the club might not be for them. Both teams however stress that they are not an exclusively gay club, but a gay-friendly one, and welcome anybody. A member of Saltire Thistle stresses ‘we’re not even a gay team, we’re a LGBT friendly team and open to different friends and players and anyone who shares our ideas and values’.⁴⁶ Whilst the Glasgow team does have straight players on the team, the Dublin one at the time of interviews did not although there had been in the past.

Amongst the players that I spoke to, the reasons for wanting to play for a team that identified as gay-friendly were fairly straightforward. One of the founding members of Saltire Thistle FC, now involved in the management of the club, explained that a key advantage to setting up a gay-friendly team was that ‘you could be who

you wanted to be, you could just turn up with who you wanted to be with and go 'this is my boyfriend'. You couldn't do that in [the other teams I had played for], I wouldn't even dream of doing it'.⁴⁷ Another one of the players on the team echoed his sentiments, explaining that he had played football 'until the age of 24 but then I had eight or nine years out, simply because it coincided with the point at which I came out as being gay and couldn't fit that in kind of naturally ... People would turn up and you couldn't introduce them to your mates in football, it just didn't feel like it was that kind of environment. So when Saltire started up, it was an ideal opportunity to get back into football ... for that just being yourself element'.⁴⁸

A league of their own?

The above quotations highlight an important difference between gay-friendly and other teams – the ability to be open about those non-sporting aspects of your life that challenge heteronormativity should you choose to do so, something those men had not felt comfortable doing previously when playing for straight teams. Football teams that identify as gay or gay-friendly, therefore serve an important function as safe social spaces where gay men can 'be themselves' and not have to hide their sexuality.⁴⁹ As sexuality is a non-issue (both teams I spoke to indicated that sexuality is rarely discussed apart from run of the mill conversations about partners, etc.), the teams provide a welcoming space where there is no danger of being 'discovered' or excluded by virtue of their sexuality on or off the field.

But there does remain a level of ambivalence with regards to the leagues themselves. In Dublin, 'Brendan' is firmly opposed to the idea of a gay league forming in Ireland, saying that he believes competing against non-gay teams 'will achieve more. For gays to be accepted in the game for what we are, for who we are, I think you have to compete ... The gay leagues are a way of gaining confidence ... but the biggest way to get confidence is by playing with straight teams'.⁵⁰ 'Eoin' also says that he has mixed feelings on the prospects for a gay league in Ireland and feels that whilst it would be positive in terms of the prospects for travel and social activities, on the other hand 'I would rather see a situation where it isn't an issue for a gay player to play on a team – neither for the team, or the supporters, or the players themselves'.⁵¹

Players from Saltire Thistle, who unlike the Dublin Devils, participate in the GFSN League along with 20 other teams in the UK, acknowledge that whilst gay leagues are possibly not the best forums for directly challenging stereotypes, they do provide an important function for the team members. 'I think the thing about the gay league and the thing that's appealing for us ... it's the fact that you move around the country as well, it's a national league. It has the whole scope that the local leagues ... can't give us'.⁵² And this social aspect, as well as the safe space that leagues like this provide certainly have their place, and provide a space in which gay men can begin to navigate sporting activity without fear of sanctions. Most of the players and coaching staff acknowledged that gay leagues have a very important role to play in the community in encouraging gay men to take up and participate in sport openly. They also see them as providing a means through which men can come out as gay and start to interact with the gay community in a way that may be less threatening than gay bars and clubs. 'Eoin' recounts how when he moved to Dublin and 'began to come out of the closet ... I didn't really know that many gay people and I know one way of getting to know people was through the

clubs and pubs but that wasn't really the best way for me ... I heard about the gay football scene and I joined'.⁵³

Interestingly, whilst Jones and McCarthy found most interviewees denied any sense of political motivations in their playing for gay leagues,⁵⁴ both teams I spoke to did see the teams as serving a wider political function. This was especially the case for 'Eoin', who spoke of the important political function that gay teams and leagues can have, particularly in regions that are more socially conservative and less accepting of gay men in general:

Some people would argue that there isn't a need for a gay football team ... I'm from Northern Ireland and it's described as the most homophobic region of the UK, and I know Edwin Poots of the DUP⁵⁵ and a few DUP members described the gay rugby team ... as being, was it a 'partisan?' Sorry, it was 'sporting apartheid'⁵⁶ ... I would like to see a day in the future when homophobia isn't an issue in sports whatsoever but I would still like to think that a lot of gay men can still actually come together in a sport environment and actually enjoy themselves and the social activities.

It also gets a lot of gay people out of the pubs and clubs, which isn't a bad thing either, it gets them out of the environment where drink and I suppose even other substances are sometimes the norm. It's giving a lot of younger people role models that they can look up to and hope that they can actually go on and live much more contented and happy lives. And be much more accepted and comfortable in their own shoes and be much more responsible towards society and actually have an understanding of what it's like to be discriminated against and have an understanding of how other people feel when they're marginalised as well.⁵⁷

Homophobia in football: potential lessons from amateur leagues

It is clear from the comments of both players and management that these teams play important roles not only within the gay communities in their respective cities but also society at large. But whilst gay leagues certainly have a role as safe spaces in which gay men can participate in sport and serve an important social function, they do not necessarily change attitudes and may even serve to ghettoize gay sport further. But teams like Saltire Thistle FC and Dublin Devils FC, teams that allow openly gay men to compete in sporting contexts against straight ones do offer a very real opportunity to change the perceptions of gay sporting masculinities. It is therefore here, at the grass roots level of local football leagues that changes in attitudes towards gay players are really happening. Both the players and management staff I spoke to also feel that in addition to initiatives aimed at eradicating homophobia and creating a more inclusive environment within the Premiership, emphasis should also be placed on building gay-friendly teams who compete at the local grassroots level and move up through the ranks.

The players from Saltire Thistle like to imagine a situation in which a gay team moves up through the local ranks and eventually reaches semi-professional status, and point to English teams like Stonewall FC who currently compete in the FA Middlesex County League as something to aspire to. In Dublin, 'Eoin' thinks attitudes in football will continue to mirror changes in wider society's and hopes that one day all teams will be, by default, gay friendly – 'you can see in football there's little segments ... beginning to look beyond it ... there's a mountain still to climb. But it'll get there. I'm confident of that ... there's great changes taking place at the grassroots level, local communities. But I think we're going to see something [at the opposite] end in the next couple of years'.⁵⁸

It is this opposite end of the game where most attention on change seems to be directed and where things appear to be a little more complex. Whilst great strides have clearly been made at grassroots level, professional football seems to be stuck in a kind of chicken and egg scenario with gay players feeling as if they are unable to come out due to homophobia or the fear of abuse. There does seem to be a real fear that the first openly gay player in the Premier League will find himself subjected to a torrent of abuse from the terraces, however, it does also seem much of this abuse continues to be thrown at players at the pitch simply because there are no gay players to directly offend; an idea backed up by many of the fans in Cashmore and Cleland's study⁵⁹ who attributed the persistence of homophobia in football to the lack of gay players. The authors write that 'the longer the sport endures what is becoming an embarrassing lack of openly gay players, the more it allows fans to engage in raillery that is, or at least sounds homophobic, while at the same time exonerating themselves from prejudice'.⁶⁰

This idea also echoed by the players I spoke to, who feel like homophobic abuse is easily ignored at a professional level as it's seemingly not hurting anybody directly: 'It's hard to do anything about that when there's no one there to focus on'; 'racism is something you can see because obviously there's a black player. Gay players you cannot see so it's easy to block that one out'.⁶¹ There is, however, a real hope that a player in the Premier League will come out soon and a belief that the event will not cause as much of a stir as everybody assumes. As one player put it, 'I think it's a bit like your own coming out process. You are in a total blind panic about it half your life and then when you make that step and say 'I'm gay' ... it's a bit of an anti-climax for your own feelings because you've stressed out about it and it all just levels out at once'.⁶² They also point to the coverage in the media that followed Rogers' announcement and also to experiences of rugby player Gareth Thomas as signs that any attention will be overwhelmingly positive and soon die down.

There is a still a fear, however, that should a player come out and not play well that this failure to perform on the pitch will be tied to his sexuality. As Chris Basiurki, chairperson of the GFSN told *The Guardian*, 'The danger is what happens when a player comes out and gets loads of support and attention, but then starts playing badly. The worry is that fans will start getting on their backs and they may lose the confidence of their manager and it could be connected to their sexuality'.⁶³ This has led some to speculate that it might be a top-level player nearing the end of his career to that breaks the silence first as they might have less to lose than a younger player. But if the experiences of other athletes are anything to go by, and if Cashmore and Cleland⁶⁴ are right, a coming out – although it will no doubt be difficult for the player concerned – will at the very least make homophobic abuse on the terraces less acceptable to other fans, forcing clubs to adopt a more proactive and punitive approach to fans found to be using homophobic language and paving the way for others to follow.

Conclusions

The relationship between gender, sexuality and football is clearly filled with paradoxes and contradictions that highlight the political, personal and social meanings attached to the sport. The inclusion of gay players in amateur league football challenges the prejudices of some men who see gay masculinities as somehow weaker or less competitive. However, paradoxically this process is more likely to occur

when gay players embody those traditionally masculine traits and behaviours that have previously been used to exclude them. Some of the players and coaches I spoke to do seem to feel a need to justify their inclusion in the sport by proving they are just as 'masculine' as the other men. This creates something of a dilemma. Whilst there is no doubt that many gay men (and straight men for that matter) identify with, and are happy to embody the kinds of masculinity shored up by sport, this same masculinity has for years excluded many men, gay and straight, who cannot, or do not want to compete. The adoption of those traits clearly does nothing to disrupt either the wider gender order or the traits associated with hegemonic masculinities and paradoxically serve, ultimately, to perpetuate them.

Gay athletes are therefore in many ways caught in Foucault's⁶⁵ systems of subjugation, embodying both power and resistance, shifting, but not overturning the norms governing masculine behaviour. They have, as Butler argues, 'a fundamental attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent'⁶⁶ for their identities. However, at the same time, their actions on the field shore up the more orthodox types of masculinities commonly associated with sports, their physical presence on the field does challenge stereotypes, breaking down barriers and making the issue of sexuality obsolete for a lot of opponents. It is also clear from speaking to the players and coaches that the best results in terms of challenging notions of gay masculinities and disrupting gendered norms is best done when openly gay players compete within the recreational (i.e. 'straight') leagues. Gay leagues do have their place and serve many important political, social and sporting roles, however, the players generally do not feel that they ultimately go very far in directly confronting prejudice, and may in fact serve to reinforce the idea held by some that gay players simply aren't up to competing alongside straight ones. As Elling et al. point out, 'Gay and lesbian sport clubs and events possess possibilities for 'queer resistance' and 'integration of sexual difference', but their existence can also lead to more resistance by 'the public', instead of greater acceptance of the gay and lesbian community'.⁶⁷ If attitudes towards gay athletes are going to continue to challenge perceptions of gay masculinities at all levels of sport, it's clear that the best place to do this is through inclusion and integration within 'mainstream' leagues and competitions as it is here that their presence is impossible to ignore.

Homophobia clearly remains a problem at all levels of the sport. However, the experiences of men playing in these amateur leagues suggest that homophobic comments from opposing teams and supporters are not as commonplace as one might expect and when they do occur, they are normally dealt with quickly and effectively by team management and the league. Whilst football certainly remains a highly masculinized environment, and whilst homosexuality is clearly used as a byword for weakness and femininity, it does not necessarily follow that homophobia is a bar to any player coming out at a higher level or that, as Sol Campbell recently alleged on the BBC, 'football isn't ready' for a gay player.⁶⁸ Rather, evidence from the players I interviewed and studies suggest that homophobic abuse in the terraces⁶⁹ or banter in the locker rooms⁷⁰ persists in part because there are no openly gay players on the pitch to render it unacceptable.

At both the club and grassroots levels, things therefore do appear to be changing. In amateur leagues in particular, the very presence of gay players, playing openly with the backing of management and league officials, does seem to be the obvious way forward in terms of reducing homophobia on the pitch and in the stands and creating an environment in which gay players feel comfortable revealing their

sexuality. But it is clear this can only be done with the support of teammates, coaching staff and management, and through moves by the FA and professional teams to proactively stamp out homophobic abuse in the terraces and to encourage an open and inclusive environment lower down 'the pyramid' to ensure that for players coming up through the ranks, sexuality is not an issue.

Notes

1. www.robbehrogers.com.
2. The first, baseball player Glenn Burke played for the Los Angeles Dodgers and Oakland Athletics in the mid-1970s. He spoke openly of his sexuality to owners, teammates and sportswriters but it was not publicized.
3. Quoted in NBC Pro Soccer Talk.
4. *New York Times*, March 29, 2013.
5. The Football Association, 'Football v Homophobia Toolkit for Professional Clubs'.
6. Ibid.
7. Gay Football Supporters Network (GFSN), 'A report into homophobic abuse at Brighton & Hove Albion'.
8. The Gay Football Supporters Network, <http://www.gfsn.org.uk/about.html>.
9. Jones and McCarthy, 'Mapping the landscape of gay men's football'.
10. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 26.
11. Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.
12. Ibid., 78.
13. This is a criticism that was taken on board by Connell in his later (1999, 2005) reworking of the concept and he does offer up a revised model that allows for greater agency on the part of marginalized and subordinated groups than his original work, as well as acknowledging a process of incorporation and oppression in the construction of masculinities.
14. See Andrews, 'Desperately Seeking Michel'; Drury, 'It seems really inclusive in some ways ...'; Pringle and Markula, 'No Pain is Sane After All'; Pringle and Hickey, 'Negotiating Masculinities via the Moral Problematisation of Sport'; Rail and Harvey, 'Body at Work'; and Wright and Clarke (1999).
15. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.
16. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25–6.
17. Anderson and McCormack, 'Comparing the Black and Gay Male Athlete'.
18. Anderson and McCormack, 'Comparing the Black and Gay Male Athlete', 145.
19. Anderson, *In the Game*.
20. Anderson and McCormack, 'Comparing the Black and Gay Male Athlete', 145.
21. Messner, *Power at Play*, 35–6.
22. Anderson, *In the Game*, 43.
23. Oscar Wilde.
24. Interview with Dublin Devils FC coach, October 30, 2011.
25. Anderson, *In the Game*, 37.
26. Anderson, 'Openly Gay Athletes'.
27. Interview with Saltire Thistle FC player, July 13, 2013.
28. Tagg, "Imagine, A Man Playing Netball!"
29. Interview with Dublin Devils FC player, October 30, 2011.
30. Interview with Dublin Devils FC coach, October 30, 2011.
31. Adams et al., 'Establishing and Challenging Masculinity'.
32. Ibid., 288.
33. Interview with Dublin Devils FC coach, October 30, 2011.
34. Ibid.
35. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
36. Interview with Dublin Devils FC player, October 30, 2011.
37. Interview with Dublin Devils FC coach, October 30, 2011.
38. Interview with Dublin Devils FC coach, October 30, 2011.
39. Interview with Dublin Devils FC player, October 30, 2011.

40. Interview with Saltire Thistle FC player, July 13, 2013.
41. Interview with Dublin Devils FC player, October 30, 2011.
42. Interview with Saltire Thistle FC player, July 13, 2013.
43. Drury, 'Discourses of Gender and Sexuality in a Lesbian-identified Football Club', 422.
44. Jones and McCarthy, 'Mapping the Landscape of Gay Men's Football', 169.
45. Elling et al., 'Gay/Lesbian Sport Clubs and Events'; and Drury, 'Discourses of gender and sexuality in a lesbian-identified football club'.
46. Interview with Saltire Thistle FC player, July 13, 2013.
47. Interview with Saltire Thistle FC player, July 13, 2013.
48. Interview with Saltire Thistle FC player, July 13, 2013.
49. Jones and McCarthy, 'Mapping the Landscape of Gay Men's Football'.
50. Interview with Dublin Devils FC coach, October 30, 2011.
51. Interview with Dublin Devils FC player, October 30, 2011.
52. Interview with Saltire Thistle FC player, July 13, 2013.
53. Interview with Dublin Devils FC player, October 30, 2011.
54. Jones and McCarthy, 'Mapping the Landscape of Gay Men's Football'.
55. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is the largest political party in Northern Ireland and socially conservative. As health minister within the Northern Ireland Assembly, Poots has been an outspoken opponent of gay rights.
56. Poots is quoted by the BBC as saying: 'It would be unacceptable to produce an all-black rugby team or an all-white team or an all-Chinese team. To me it's equally unacceptable to produce an all-homosexual rugby team and I find it remarkable that people who talk so much about inclusivity and about having an equal role in society would then go down the route of exclusion'.
57. Interview with Dublin Devils FC player, October 30, 2011.
58. Interview with Dublin Devils FC player, October 30, 2011.
59. Cashmore and Cleland, *Glasswing Butterflies*.
60. *Ibid.*, 427.
61. Interviews with Saltire Thistle FC players, July 13, 2013.
62. Interview with Saltire Thistle FC player, July 13, 2013.
63. *The Guardian*, May 5, 2013.
64. Cashmore and Cleland, *Glasswing Butterflies*.
65. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
66. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 7.
67. Elling et al., 'Gay/Lesbian Sport Clubs and Events', 452.
68. BBC Radio 5 Live, March 11, 2014.
69. Cashmore and Cleland, *Glasswing Butterflies*.
70. Magrath et al., 'On the Doorstep of Equality'.

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