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EXAMINING GAYS AND LESBIANS IN SPORT VIA TRADITIONAL AND NEW MEDIA

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In April 2013, basketball player Jason Collins became the first openly gay active athlete in any of the four major professional male team sport leagues in the United States: Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL). Only six athletes from these four leagues had ever announced they were gay or bisexual, none of whom were well known and all announcing after their careers were over (Kian and Anderson, 2009). However, it remains to be seen at the time of this writing whether Collins will become the first active gay athlete in the NBA and thus face the in-season media attention that would come with such standing.

Collins – a 34-year-old largely unknown reserve throughout his career at the time of his announcement – still has to sign a contract and make an NBA roster for the 2013–14 season to become the first gay male athlete to play in one of the four major US professional team sports. That may prove challenging, since Collins averaged less than 2 points per game during an injury-plagued 2012–13 season. Regardless, both traditional media and the Internet anointed Collins with historical significance following his announcement (Doyle, 2013).

Even if he never plays in the NBA again, Collins' announcement served as yet another historic accomplishment for the gay rights movement, one of many this decade. In 2010, the US Congress repealed the official "Don't ask, don't tell" policy of the US military, which prohibited openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals from serving in the armed forces. After being defeated every previous time a gay marriage measure was on a ballot in the US, gay rights advocates celebrated victories in all four states that cast votes on gay marriage in the 2012 election. These results coincided with the re-election of Barack Obama, who became the first sitting US president to publicly express support for gay marriage. More accepting views toward homosexuality and advancements in the gay rights movement have not been limited to the US in recent years, but instead have become commonplace in Western democracies. Public-opinion surveys showed continually increasing acceptance of homosexu-

ality among the adult populations in 27 of 31 countries each polled five times from 1988–2008 (Nemenov, 2011).

Until recently, though, sport remained one cultural institution where there had been less visible progress for gays and lesbians, particularly within professional male team sports, which have long received the vast majority of media coverage throughout the world (Duncan, 2006). However, the advent of the Internet as a dominant medium has thrust homosexuality and gay rights into the media spotlight. In 2012 a watershed moment appeared to break from the National Football League (NFL), which American media frame as rugged and masculine, and is by far the most popular and publicized of all professional US male team sport leagues (Anderson and Kian, 2012). The website for *US Weekly* was one of many online outlets that reported a former NFL player came out as gay (Ravitz, 2012). Soon the Internet was abuzz with news that Wade Davis, described as an “NFL star” by many reports, had told the gay-focused website *OutSports.com* that he went to great lengths to keep his homosexuality private while in the NFL (Zeigler, 2012).

Not only was Davis not an “NFL star,” he never actually played in a regular-season game or appeared on an NFL roster. Instead, Davis spent a few weeks on the Washington Redskins’ practice squad and had tryouts with two other NFL teams. His name does not appear in the extensive databases of past and present players on NFL.com or *ProFootballReference.com*. However, the list of gay athletes is so sparse that Internet blogs seized on this chance to report a significant outing while seemingly failing to fact-check the athlete making the declaration.

Davis’ self-outing, however, was essentially a non-story among traditional media, which is not surprising since media have long ignored male athletes who do not conform to ideal forms of masculinity (Lenskyj, 2013). It only became a news story due to the advent of the Internet, which – in part due to its unlimited space – has resulted in increased media coverage of athletes and sports largely ignored by the more traditional mass media (Kian, Mondello and Vincent, 2009).

The announcement by Jason Collins received coverage from all types of media. *Sports Illustrated* rushed to publish this story on its website, *SI.com*, for fear of another Internet site first reporting Collins’ decision to come out publicly (Haughney, 2013).

Other examples of the media treatment of gay athletes will be discussed later in this chapter. First we will define and explain the acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay (males), bisexual, and transgender community) before looking at possible reasons why most gay athletes remain closeted. We briefly outline the extensive research on the types of male and female sports receiving the most media coverage, which correlates with how media frame athletes in accordance with desired characteristics of masculinity and femininity. Finally, we examine the limited research on sport media coverage of gays and lesbians in sport, with a focus on new media and its potential to change the framing of LGBT athletes in the future.

Understanding LGBT

Historically, most researchers concluded that homosexuals composed less than 10 percent of individuals, although those identifying as gay men or lesbians tallied just 3 percent in the vast majority of surveys (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels, 1994). However, as society has become more accepting of homosexuality, a recent comprehensive survey showed that 8 percent of adult men and 7 percent of adult women in the US identified as gay, while 15 percent of US men admitted to having at least one gay sexual experience before the age of 50 (Indiana University Center for Sexual Health Promotion, 2010). However, a person’s sexual orientation is never absolute. Gender identity and sexual desires are fluid (Halberstam, 2005).

Most people identify as heterosexuals, including the majority of those who acknowledge having homosexual experiences with others (Laumann *et al.*, 1994). However, it may be most difficult for bisexuals to reveal their orientations due to not only *homophobia* (the fear and intolerance of gays and lesbians), but also *biphobia* (an aversion toward bisexuality), the latter of which is prevalent within some gay circles (Griffin, 2012).

Professional journalists and academics often incorrectly utilize the terms “sex” and “gender” synonymously. Historically *gender* differentiated between men and women, who were thought to be easily distinguishable through biological traits (i.e. the binary contrast). But gender implies an identity that can easily be altered, whereas one’s *sex* is commonly believed to be biologically determined at birth (Halberstam, 2005). *Transgender* is the newest classification in LGBT. Not surprisingly, it is the group least likely to be protected through anti-discrimination policies and the most discriminated against by both heterosexuals and gays (Lucas-Carr and Krane, 2012). Transgender means that an individual’s gender identity does not match their biological sex (Halberstam, 2005). Transgender individuals could conceivably change their gender identities throughout each day. In contrast, *transsexuals* consistently identify with a gender opposite of their biological sex, with some undergoing medical procedures in efforts to alter their sex (Devor, 1997).

There is confusion about these terms. Of the two, more media coverage has centered on transsexuals in sport, perhaps most notably Renee Richards, who tried to continue her professional tennis career but was initially prohibited from entrance into the 1976 women’s US Open Championships after legally changing her name from Richard Raskind and undergoing sexual reassignment surgery (Birrell and Cole, 1990). The New York Supreme Court, allowing her to resume a professional career on the female circuit, eventually overturned Richards’ denial by the United States Tennis Association. More recently, media often report mixed martial arts fighter Fallon Fox as transgender. Fox, who was born Boyd Burton, had gender reassignment surgery and now identifies as a woman. Her attempts to fight as a woman have generated tremendous controversy (Gregory, 2013). South African female track star Caster Semenya has also been a major news topic, with a few stories wrongly identifying Semenya as transgender or transsexual (Ellison, 2012). Semenya – like some other muscular, athletic women with masculine physical characteristics (Sykes, 2006) – has been dogged by innuendo that she was a man. The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) ordered her to undergo gender verification tests. The IAAF did not release specifics but did announce three months later that Semenya was “innocent,” clearing her to compete as a woman (Ellison, 2012).

Athletes in the closet

The closeting of gay male team sport athletes has not been just an American problem, but a global phenomenon. Soccer is the world’s most popular sport, evident by an estimated 2.2 billion television viewers of the 2010 FIFA World Cup (FIFA, 2011). However, no openly gay past or present footballer competed in the Barclays (English) Premier League (EPL) or the Spanish La Liga, which are ranked as the world’s top two leagues by the International Federation of Football History and Statistics. The most prominent team sport professional athlete to come out during his career was probably Justin Fashanu, who was more recognized for being the first Black soccer player in the United Kingdom to sign a contract worth at least a million pounds (King, 2004). Fashanu’s career faltered after he publicly revealed his homosexuality in 1990, before the EPL’s creation, subjecting him to scorn from fans and fellow soccer players, including some of his teammates (King, 2004). Other former gay professional European footballers came out after retirement, but none were well known among casual fans.

Robbie Rogers became the first openly gay male athlete to play in US Major League Soccer (MLS) in 2013. Rogers had played professional soccer in the US and UK before revealing that he is gay and subsequently retiring from the sport at the age of 25 (Grautski, 2013). However, he decided to return to soccer a few months later as a member of the LA Galaxy. Welshmen Gareth Thomas, a rugby star, came out publicly in 2009 near the end of his athletic career but while still a professional. Orlando Cruz, a boxer from Puerto Rico, came out in 2012 and still competes professionally. Brittney Griner, a 6-foot-8-inch American basketball superstar, said she was asked to hide her lesbianism while competing at the college-level for a religious-affiliated institution, Baylor University (Hill, 2013). Griner, however, came out publicly since joining the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Whereas the number of athletes who publicly disclose that they are gay is sure to increase, the likes of Cruz, Griner and Rogers remain relative rarities, because few gay athletes come out publicly while active in their sports. Homophobia has historically been so entrenched in male team sports that former MLB pitcher Kazuhito Tadano publicly claimed he was heterosexual and apologized to teammates for his past "mistakes" after it was anonymously revealed on an Internet message board that he engaged in homosexual acts while filmed in pornography in his native Japan (Hancock, 2009). Of course, Kazuhito only came to the US to compete after his acting history was uncovered, resulting in his apparent blackballing by all Japanese professional teams (Hancock, 2009). The few famous openly gay male athletes (e.g. figure skater Rudy Galindo, diver Greg Louganis) competed in individual sports that media have historically construed as more appropriate for women (Messner, 2002). Whereas certainly not in abundance, there have been more known lesbians in high-profile sport. For example, tennis legends Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova revealed that they were lesbian while ranked among the sport's top players. The vast majority of academic scholarship on LGBT in sport has focused on lesbian athletes and coaches (Lenskyj, 2013).

Sport, like much of the rest of society, is becoming increasingly more accepting of gays and lesbians as well as alternate forms of gender identity. Recent scholarship and surveys on athletes from all levels of sport (Anderson, 2011; Fink, Burton, Farrell and Parker, 2012; Wertheim, 2005), coaches (Adams, Anderson and McCormack, 2010), administrators (Cunningham, 2010), advertisers and marketers (Vincent, Hill and Lee, 2009), and fans (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011) have shown increasing rates of acceptance for LGBT and non-traditional gender identities. The four major US professional male team sport leagues all added sexual orientation to their non-discrimination policies in the past decade (Griffin, 2012). The NBA launched a public service campaign against the use of gay slurs, highlighted by several Internet advertisements and a television commercial featuring then-Phoenix Suns star Grant Hill.

A few other notable athletes have spoken out for gay rights, including Hill's former teammate, Steve Nash, who campaigned for marriage equality in New York, and Baltimore Ravens football player Brendon Ayanbadejo, who served as a key public speaker on behalf of the successful 2012 gay marriage equality vote in Maryland (Himmelsbach, 2012). The NFL's Chris Kluwe, an outspoken and heterosexual gay-rights proponent, posed shirtless for *Out*, a magazine catering to gay men. These are just three of the most active among the rapidly increasing number of athletes who use Twitter and other forms of social media to support gay rights to thousands of followers. However, at least until this decade, mainstream media have been slow to report on changes within sport culture, maybe because of a lack of openly gay athletes, or possibly due to a culture within the sport media workforce that is resistant to social change.

Hegemonic masculinity

In her analysis on gender power relations, Connell (2005) noted that multiple femininities and masculinities co-exist in a socially constructed hierarchy that generally favors men. Connell (1987, 2005) defined *hegemonic masculinity* as the configuration of gender practices that assist in maintaining and strengthening the societal dominance of men over women. Hegemonic masculinity rewards those who exhibit the most desired masculine traits and qualities such as power, assertiveness, independence, and aggression (Connell, 2005). At or near the bottom of the hegemonic masculine social hierarchy are openly gay men, who challenge traditional definitions of masculinity through their sexual orientation (Anderson, 2002). Many authors theorized that mass media and sport are two of the primary forces helping to maintain hegemonic masculinity in Western societies (e.g. Kian, Fink and Hardin, 2011; Vincent, 2004). Men have long dominated both the ranks and power positions within all realms of the sport media industry throughout the world (e.g. Capranica and Aversa, 2002; Claringbould, Knoppers and Elling, 2004; Lapchick, 2013). The dominance of men in covering sport extends to Internet journalism, both at the most popular sites (Kian and Hardin, 2009) and smaller blogs (John Curley Center for Sports Journalism, 2009). The proportional dominance of men in the industry may explain why a hegemonic male culture is pervasive within many sport media outlets (Gee and Leberman, 2011; Pedersen, Whisenant and Schneider, 2003; Schoch and Ohl, 2011).

Women who compete in sports like gymnastics receive more media attention than male athletes in those sports, which media generally frame as inappropriate (not masculine enough) for men (Billings, Angelini and Duke, 2010; Bruce, Hovden and Markula, 2010). Male athletes in gender-inappropriate sports are often framed as effeminate through the limited mass media coverage they do receive (Adams, 2011). In turn, men and women in gender-inappropriate sports are suspected of being gay by many, whereas those in gender-appropriate sports are generally assumed to be heterosexual (Anderson, 2005). Women who have more masculine physical characteristics (such as large size), but compete in feminine sports are the prime exception, in that they receive less coverage than men in the same sports (Griffin, 1998). Duncan (2006) concluded that when female athletes "appear to have mannish qualities, the threat of lesbianism is greater so heterosexuality must be defended that much more vigorously" (p. 241).

Via their sexual orientation alone, gay male athletes are gender inappropriate when measured by the most desired notions of masculinity, with heterosexuality ranking at or near the top of that list (Kian, Clavio, Vincent and Shaw, 2011). Their lack of coverage is significant, because the most prominent gay male athletes compete in sports that are commonly framed as feminine, such as gymnastics and diving (Lenskyj, 2013). Only one published scholarly article has examined attitudes of sport journalists toward homosexuality. A majority of newspaper sport reporters surveyed by Hardin and Whiteside (2009) agreed that homophobia is a problem within sport. But most respondents disagreed with the notion that a gay professional male athlete would be accepted if he came out during his playing career.

Media framing

In the only published survey on sport journalists' attitudes toward gays and lesbians, 74 percent of respondents either *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, "I do not think it is appropriate to ever ask an athlete about his or her sexual orientation" (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). Only 1 percent *strongly disagreed*. The authors theorized that these attitudes are a key reason why there are so few well-known gays in sport, concluding, "reporters are likely to help athletes stay in the closet" (p. 67). This "don't ask, don't tell" media approach toward LGBT athletes helps

keep society ignorant about issues of importance toward LGBT in sport and society (Plymire and Forman, 2000; Staurowsky, 2012). Calhoun, LaVoi and Johnson (2011) provided a stronger denunciation, contending that by ignoring the personal lives of gay and lesbian athletes, media reinforce *heteronormativity*, which affirms heterosexuality as natural and creates a culture where gays and lesbians are not respected as equals. Lenskyj (2013) noted this is further strengthened by hypersexualized media images of female athletes

While criticizing media, these scholars may ignore the fact that prominent athletes are not willfully coming out. They direct blame at media for not covering what – at least on the surface – is not news. They also may not account for journalistic ethics and respect for individual privacy, which call for a wall of separation where most reporters do not dig into athletes' personal lives without due cause. This distinguishes legitimate reporters from the paparazzi, although that line is deteriorating with Internet blogs becoming more prevalent while the newspaper industry struggles in countries like the US (Kian and Zimmerman, 2012).

In his ethnography on female professional golf, Crossett (1995) was critical of media for delving into the sexual orientations of suspected lesbians, which he attributed largely to male writers' jealousy of the golf skills of these women. However, more researchers found media either ignored or did not report on relationships of known or suspected gay athletes (Dworkin and Wachs, 1998; Wright and Clarke, 1999). For example, although she initially denied its veracity, the allegation that Billie Jean King was a lesbian first surfaced in a civil suit brought forth by her former secretary and lesbian lover, which occurred while King was in a heterosexual marriage and after she attained fame for defeating Bobby Riggs in the famous "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match (Nelson, 1984). Despite television cameras regularly showing images of athletes' celebrity wives or girlfriends, the sporting press rarely investigates the personal lives of most heterosexual athletes, thus supporting Kramer's old-but-still-poignant (1987) contention that "there is a vast difference between digging up dirt and reporting on the dirt dished up by the athletes themselves" (§ 16).

Until 2013, the two biggest US media sport stories related to the sexuality of athletes were based on rumors of prominent athletes being homosexual. The ongoing Skip Bayless–Troy Aikman feud serves as a cautionary tale: Bayless, a former sportswriter, indicated in his 1996 book on the NFL's Dallas Cowboys that Aikman – then the star quarterback for a squad that had won three Super Bowls in four years – was gay. Bayless offered no factual evidence, but speculated that Aikman was gay since he was among the most eligible bachelors in Texas but remained unmarried (Bayless, 1996). Aikman, who later wed a woman and fathered children with her, denied the report. Bayless capitalized on the attention to help launch a career as a combative sport talk-show host. Meanwhile, widespread rumors in popular culture have centered on Aikman's sexual orientation since Bayless' report, intensifying after Aikman filed for divorce from his wife in 2011. Aikman recently implied he might physically injure Bayless if he saw him in person, while also insinuating that Bayless is gay (Buzinski, 2011).

The other major media story surfaced after Brendan Lemon, an editor at gay lifestyle magazine *Out*, wrote that he had an affair with an unnamed professional baseball standout, adding that the player would come out publicly (Butterworth, 2006). Talk-radio and Internet message boards quickly centered upon then-New York Mets catcher Mike Piazza. Piazza called a press conference to proclaim his heterosexuality but attempted to deflect away the newsworthiness of an athlete's sexual orientation. However, newspapers framed Piazza as effeminate after he did not initiate a physical altercation upon being beamed with a pitch by the Los Angeles Dodgers' Guillermo Mota (Butterworth, 2006).

A few scholarly articles have analyzed media content after athletes publicly revealed their homosexuality. Two studies on media framing of former NBA player John Amaechi's decision

to come out while promoting his autobiography found both international and US sport coverage highly supportive of Amaechi's decision (Kian and Anderson, 2009), or at least not expressing overt homophobia (Hardin, Kuehn, Jones, Genovese and Balaji, 2009). Media also positively framed the announcement of bisexual basketball star Sheryl Swoopes and lesbian golfer Rosie Jones, although Swoopes received significantly more attention since she was pregnant at the time with a child that she said was conceived through sex with a man (Chawansky and Francombe, 2011). Other recent research showed sport media supportive of LGBT athletes (Nylund, 2004) while denouncing homophobia as archaic (Hardin and Whiteside, 2010). However, even while they professed support for LGBT athletes and gay rights, these sport journalists still framed heterosexuality as the norm or basis of comparison for all sexual orientations (Hardin *et al.*, 2009; Nylund, 2004).

New media

Because of its vast potential for content creation free from corporate constraints and traditional ideology, much of the Internet has emerged as more hospitable for coverage on men and women in what media historically construed as gender-inappropriate sports, as well as openly LGBT athletes (Kian and Clavio, 2011). For example, Newhall and Buzuvis (2008) found that former Penn State women's basketball coach Rene Portland was eviscerated on Internet blogs and message boards for her homophobic, anti-lesbian policy. Traditional media followed suit in their condemnation of Portland, which resulted in Lenskyj (2013) wondering "why these progressive media professionals had been relatively silent from 1980–2007" (p. 143). In an analysis of European soccer message boards, Cleland (2013) found most anonymous posters rejected homophobia, instead accepting more inclusive forms of masculinity.

Athletes, such as Robbie Rogers, and coaches have recently started using the Internet and social media to publicly come out as gay. The defense attorney for Kwame Harris, who last played in the NFL in 2008, acknowledged his client is gay after Harris was charged for allegedly assaulting an ex-boyfriend. In an article titled, "Kwame Harris is gay. It's OK, you can say it," *Outsports.com* co-founder Cyd Zeigler, Jr. (2013) noted that traditional media did include the "ex-boyfriend" in stories. However, Zeigler pointed out that "none of them talked about the fact that Harris is gay," (¶ 4), adding that the ESPN Internet network left out that Harris was charged with domestic violence against another man in its headline. Most of the stories on Harris' sexual orientation came from websites outside of the mainstream.

The future for research

There is minimal research on LGBT in sport, in part because so few notable athletes have come out. That will change due to recent announcements of notable athletes such as Collins and Griner. Public acceptance of homosexuality and support for gay rights has increased dramatically over the past two decades in most Western societies, thus propelling the LGBT community into the mainstream. Whereas sport media largely ignored LGBT issues until very recently, homosexuality and gay rights have been covered extensively by news outlets over the past decade and instilled into popular culture via television sitcoms like *Will and Grace* in the US.

Cultural changes may have material benefits for gay athletes. Whereas King lost most of her sponsorships after allegations surfaced that she was a lesbian (Griffin, 2012), recent research indicates that marketing openly gay sporting women or female athletes with more masculine physical characteristics does not affect consumers' perceptions of products (Parker and Fink, 2012). Moreover, openly gay athletes are likely to earn more money in endorsements due to

the affluence of the LGBT community and gay rights advocates (Anderson, 2011; Butterworth, 2006). Thus, the time is right for more gay athletes to come out on their own volition, which will generate media coverage. That content, in turn, would lead to needed scholarship on the framing, images, and effects of sport media coverage of LGBT in sport.

However, great challenges still exist for LGBT in sport, which should also be examined by scholars. Anti-gay ordinances and rampant homophobia are becoming more commonplace in Russia and other former Soviet-bloc countries, making the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, likely a chilly place for LGBT athletes (Nemenov, 2011; Whiteside 2013). This chapter largely focused on lesbians and gays due to the scant academic research examining bisexual athletes in sport media coverage and because scholars have essentially ignored coverage of transgender athletes in sport media. However, that will likely soon change, especially after *Sports Illustrated* published an in-depth series of articles on the future of transgender athletes (Torre and Epstein, 2012). Regardless, early research indicates that societal acceptance of bisexual, transgender, and transsexual athletes and coaches will be even slower than for gays and lesbians, including among gay and lesbian sport fans (Griffin, 2012).

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