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Warming Up

THE LINK BETWEEN SPORT AND HOMOPHOBIA

Sport is theorized to be one of the last bastions of cultural and institutional homophobia in North America. The institution produces an orthodox form of masculinity that is rigid and exclusive for many types of men and most women. It is predicated upon homophobia and misogyny and is even theorized to be crucial to the reproduction of patriarchy in American culture.¹ In fact, sport remains so homophobic that many (ostensibly heterosexual) athletes maintain that the hyper-masculinity exhibited in sports nullifies the possibility of gays even existing in their space, even though they are well aware that gay men exist in large numbers in the culture at large. To them, homosexuality is synonymous with physical weakness and emotional frailty, and the term *gay athlete* therefore remains an oxymoron (although gay is often used as a synonym for homosexual pertaining to either gender, in this book I use gay to contrast with lesbian).²

But the presence of extreme homophobia in sport does not necessarily mean that gay boys and men would be driven away from competitive team sports. In his influential book *The Arena of Masculinity*, Brian Pronger said (1990, 4), "Not all homosexual men and boys avoid athletics because of its masculine significance."³ In fact,

Pronger theorizes that gay men might actually be drawn to sport because of the veneer of heterosexuality it provides gay males. Competitive team sports, he argues, are a great place to hide one's sexual orientation, as athletes are shrouded in a cloud of scripted heterosexuality. He even maintains that some gay athletes might be inclined to stick with sport in an attempt to continually rectify the feeling of femininity that comes with the stigma of homosexuality.

Gay men might also be drawn to competitive athletics because the sporting arena remains one of the most gender-segregated institutions in Western cultures. Men's sporting teams beam with young, toned, sexualized, and highly masculinized bodies. These bodies serve as a homoerotic enticement for gay boys and men, and Pronger suggests that they bring out latent homoerotic desires from heterosexual men as well. He suggests that, as an artifact of this extreme homogenization, homophobia may appear as a way to nullify the homoeroticism of the sporting arena. Extreme homophobia prevents men from acting upon their stigmatized desires.

Attitudes toward homosexuality, however, are quickly changing in North America. Indeed, data shows that between 1988 and 1991 only 14 percent of those surveyed said that "homosexuality is not wrong at all," but in 1994 that number dramatically increased to 23 percent.⁴ Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, Americans have steadily grown more aware that homosexuality exists, and by the late 1990s three-quarters of all Americans knew a gay or lesbian personally.⁵ This has helped reduce homophobia because studies show that the most effective way to reduce homophobia is by having a gay or lesbian acquaintance.⁶ Perhaps more significantly, there has been a well-documented and remarkable decrease in disapproval of same-sex relations since 1998 (Widmer et al. 2002, 349–65). Gary Gates, a demographer at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., says, "The stigma of being gay is disappearing. This is a huge change. Gay people in general are feeling more comfortable in society, and society is feeling more comfortable with gay people."⁷

Theoretically, the trend of rapidly reducing cultural homophobia may have a profound impact on both the American sex/gender system and the manner in which masculinity is constructed. If masculinity is predicated upon homophobia, and homophobia is the chief policing agent against behaviors coded as feminine, then the reduction of cultural homophobia would lead to a significant change to the manner in which masculinity is both constructed and maintained. For example, reduced policing of masculine boundaries should allow men to occupy feminized social space with fewer stigmas. In other words, the cultural reduction in homophobia may lead toward a softening of masculinity

through the less rigid policing of its gendered borders. Other research suggests that this may already be occurring in some contexts.⁸

In an exploration of masculinity-related issues throughout two hundred American cities, researchers found that American men aged twenty-one to forty-eight were in an emerging wave of men who chafed at the restrictions of traditional male roles.⁹ The data (focusing on masculine attitudes toward consumerism) show that men are increasingly buying products and services that are culturally perceived as feminine. For example, the findings demonstrate that heterosexual men are increasingly visiting day spas and buying designer clothing. The research received a great deal of media attention for introducing the term *metrosexual* into the lexicon. A metrosexual is said to represent a heterosexual male who permits himself to act in culturally ascribed "gay" ways. The tremendous popularity of the television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which features a heterosexual man being instructed by five queer men on how to groom, decorate, and entertain in a cosmopolitan manner, highlights the phenomenon.¹⁰

Furthermore, some of my other research suggests that decreasing cultural homophobia has enabled the creation of an inclusive form of masculinity in highly feminized institutions. My (2004) work on heterosexual male cheerleaders and heterosexual male nurses shows that while a good number of men still establish their masculinity in opposition to homosexuality and femininity, an equal number of men have begun to construct their masculinity around a more inclusive model. These men do not base as much of their masculinity on homophobia or misogyny, and they are much more likely to associate with gay men and women. The form of masculinity they perform is also more inclusive to gay men.

Highlighting the affect that the cultural reduction of homophobia may have on attitudes within what Michael Messner calls "the center of sports" (team sports such as football, basketball, and hockey), a 1998 anonymous survey of 175 National Football League first-year players found that attitudes in the NFL are *not* monolithically homophobic, nor are all players resolute that their teams are entirely heterosexual.¹¹ While none of the 175 players admitted to being gay (and all think that less than 7% of the NFL is gay), 43.4% believed that there are at least some gay players on their teams, and 8.3% claimed to be aware (or reasonably sure) of gay players on their team. Five of the 175 first-year players even indicated that they were "friends with a homosexual player," a surprisingly high number when one considers that these were players who had only been in the NFL for a year and had therefore not yet been able to develop social networks of trust. Similarly, one closeted professional athlete told me that he had met at least eleven other professional gay hockey players in his career.

When one considers the high degree of homophobia that team sport athletes are reputed to maintain, it is astounding that 76.4% of first-year NFL players reported that they would have no problems playing next to a gay teammate. While the number decreases the more intimate shared space becomes (58% indicated that they would be comfortable sharing a locker next to a gay teammate, and 42.7% indicated that they would be comfortable sharing a hotel room with a known gay player), these statistics indicate that homophobia in the NFL may be on the same trajectory as homophobia in the culture at large—rapidly decreasing.¹²

If the softening of masculinity continues, the older conservative form of masculinity may be less alluring, and the masculinizing context of sport may have to adjust to the new version of masculinity or risk losing its effect on socializing boys and men in the culture as a whole. In other words, if everything changes around sport, sport will either have to change or it will lose its social significance and be viewed as a vestige of an archaic model of masculinity. I argue that our culture *may already* be seeing the beginning stages of this. I argue that although the institution of sport has lagged behind mainstream culture, it has been impacted by the larger social climate. In short, the research data disseminated in this book leads me to maintain that the hegemony sport once maintained over the production of orthodox masculinity is not seamless and that it is under contestation. Gay athletes represent that challenge.

As a sociologist, I examine all social arrangements with a critical eye. Questioning metanarratives, myths, stereotypes, and hegemonic processes of social matters enables sociologists to better comprehend sport and its relation to society—apart from whatever the dominant culture beliefs might be. I use social-feminist thinking, including viewing power and stratification as being embedded within institutions, in order to ask critical questions about the relationship between sport, gender, and homosexuality. Specifically, I am interested in understanding how homophobia operates within the institution of sport, how it is reproduced within the institution, and how gay men negotiate this homophobic space both in and out of the closet. I question whether the presence of openly gay athletes undermines hegemonic masculinity or whether the collective adherence to masculinity enables the institution of sport to resist gay male participation by instead masculinizing these men into complicity. I examine the relationship between homosexuality and sport so that we might better understand the variables that influence the concealment of homosexuality and the celebration of heterosexuality in sporting culture.

I examine sports that are considered to be at the center of masculine production (such as football and basketball), those in the semiperiphery (such as soccer, tennis, and track), and those at the periphery of sport (cheerleading, bowling, and figure skating) in order to see if homophobia operates differently throughout the stratification. Also, in order to better understand the operation of homophobia throughout the institutional progression of sport, I interview athletes from high school, college, and the professional ranks. As Michael Messner (2002) has theorized, the more competitive the sport, the less elbow room there is for variable conceptions of athletic masculinity. But because I was not able to locate and interview enough professional gay athletes from which to generalize, in chapter 9 I draw upon a number of secondary sources in order to better understand the operation of homophobia in professional team sports.

METHODS

I used qualitative methods to analyze the institution of sport from an institutional, interactional, and gendered perspective. Using grounded theory as a way of generating theory from qualitative data, I analyze the relationship between the hegemonic process of masculinity and the social realities created by human actors.¹³ I interviewed a total of sixty gay male athletes from North American high schools, colleges, and professional sporting teams, intentionally limiting the study to school-based and professional sports. I obtained informants through convenience and snowball sampling. About half of those athletes came to me after visiting my website devoted to gay athletes, www.EricAndersonPhD.com, and others came to me through a posting on www.OutSports.com. I used snowball sampling to acquire more informants from some of these contacts.

Athletes included in this study were actively playing or had played within one year of the interview. I did not include athletes from recreational or club-level sporting teams, athletes who strongly identified as bisexual, athletes who identified as heterosexual, or athletes who identified as being heterosexual but have sex with men. All athletes were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five with the exception of the professional athletes, and most were middle class. The sample contained only nine athletes of color, not because I specifically desired to study white athletes, but because white athletes were the majority of openly gay athletes that I was able to locate. Because of the small numbers of athletes of color, there may not be enough evidence to draw general conclusions about the intersectionality between race and sexual orientation, but a thorough discussion of the intersectionality of race with homosexuality is presented in chapter 8. All athletes' identities have

been protected, regardless of whether they were original or secondary sources, with the exception of those who are public figures (such as professional athletes who have publicly revealed their homosexuality).

The sixty interviews sometimes occurred in person but most often were telephone (taped and transcribed) interviews that lasted from 60 to 120 minutes. In these interviews I questioned athletes about their socialization into sport, what variables have led to their coming out or remaining closeted, how they negotiated cultural stereotypes in the production of their own gendered and sexual identities, and how they may have attempted to publicly mitigate the stigma of their sexual identity. Of these sixty athletes, forty were out of the closet on their teams, meaning that they had either explicitly told (at least three) members of their team or that there was an assumption about their sexuality from some other method of public declaration. Openly gay athletes represent all hierarchical levels of sport, although there were fewer informants that were out of the closet in college than high school and very few who were out of the closet as professional athletes (and all from marginal or peripheral sports).

The remaining twenty closeted athletes were also represented by sports from throughout the masculine and institutional hierarchies of sport, including two active professional team sport athletes (football and hockey). These athletes were interviewed to better understand the social circumstances that led some athletes to come out to their teams and to understand the operation of fear in the self-silencing of gay athletes.

I also used dozens of secondary sources to acquire data about the experiences of gay male athletes in sport, as well as a number of interviews with heterosexual athletes, coaches, and female athletes. I read autobiographies by ex-professional athletes, articles written in popular press books or magazines, articles written on Outsports.com and other gay athlete websites, and accounts of the experiences of gay athletes from several other academic investigations. Also, in order to better understand the institutional effect on homophobia in athletic culture, I conducted three hundred hours of participant observation in the sport of cheerleading, where gay male athletes are represented in large numbers (approximately twenty percent).

The compilation of data from interviews, participant observation, secondary sources, and popular press has given me a better understanding of the complex relationship between homophobia, masculinity, sport, and gay male athletes. In the chapters that follow, the reader learns to view this relationship in a more nuanced perspective, seeing that sport is not monolithically homophobic and understanding under what conditions a gay athlete is given more leeway in a highly masculinized arena.