

Lesbophobia as a Barrier to Women in Coaching

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of female coaches in the heterosexual male-dominated institution of sport. The central contention is that homophobia, an irrational fear of and negative attitude towards homosexuals, and particularly lesbophobia, fear and negativity towards lesbians, impedes all female coaching careers. This investigation of homonegative barriers to women coaches stresses the importance of acknowledging and dismantling homophobia within a hegemonic sport culture in order to create safer, more equitable and more welcoming sports environments for women, regardless of sexual orientation.

Introduction

The emergence of Facebook as communication media has allowed me to re-connect with a high school friend I used to play softball with—Pat.¹ In the small, overwhelmingly White, middle class town of Gander, Newfoundland, Pat stood out as a rare deviation from heterosexual and gender norms. She donned boyish clothes, cropped her hair, and never applied make-up. Pat refused to conform to a societal expectation of femininity, no matter how much her mother pleaded and regardless of scrutiny she faced in our community. It was obvious that Pat struggled, internally and externally, with her sexual and gender identity, and I vividly recall the intensity of my empathy for her. Pat had few friends but she was athletic. In a single high school town, athletic talent was valued and so she was (perhaps reluctantly) welcomed, especially on the softball team. She “played like a guy,” with a long bat and a strong arm. She even walked and talked like a guy, with a certain swagger and a vulgar mouth. I think her male personification was her saving grace

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in sport; it is difficult to say how she may have been accepted or rejected without such redeeming “male” qualities.

In team and social situations, I acted as a buffer between Pat and the popular, “cool” jock girls who always came off as confident, beautiful and sexy, on and off the field. Makeup, hairspray and curls were abundant, regardless of practicality for sport performance. It was not uncommon to see high school athletes fluffing their hair or wiping sweat-smudged mascara from under eyes during time-outs or between innings. Looking back, I question how I was able to coexist in both social circles since my desire to be one of the beautiful, sexy athletic girls—attractive to the high school boys—was never overridden by my empathy for and friendship with Pat, and it was obvious that she was often victim to a homophobic environment. Teammates teased her to “just try a little makeup.” Road trips were uncomfortable when the popular girls grouped together for sleeping arrangements; Pat was often left with the other misfits... the uncool (sometimes myself included.)

Pat came out on Facebook. Many years later, I am forced to re-examine my role in either perpetuating or disrupting the homonegativism of our youth. Did I play a part in her struggle for identity? Was I aware, even subconsciously, of her marginalization? As I explore the social justice factors that affect me as a female coach in Canada, I am also forced to examine the impact of widespread homophobia in sport. It is evident that I am not only affected by sexism but also by heterosexism as unquestioned cultural standards. The term “lesbophobia” has emerged recently to encompass the double discrimination experienced by lesbians, due to their gender as well as their sexual orientation. This term highlights the difficulties encountered by lesbians in a society that is hostile towards both women and homosexuals, and is expressed in various forms of negativity, prejudice, discrimination, and abuse toward individuals, couples and social groups. Such manifestations of negativity towards lesbian individuals or groups are based upon a heteronormative ideal in which heterosexuality is presumed and normal whereas any other sexual relationship is abnormal, unnatural, and prohibited (Weiss, 2001).

Kumashiro notes, “society’s definition of normalcy, as with society’s understanding of common sense, teaches us not only to conform to an oppressive status quo, but also to actually want to conform” (Kumashiro, 2009, p. 52). Not only did I desire to fit an exalted image of the attractive female within my athletic role, but it is entirely possible that I secretly wished for my friend Pat to do so as well. While I supported her choices to sometimes conceal and sometimes reveal her sexual identity, how could I have more effectively contributed to challenging the broader issues that surround homonegativity and homophobia in women’s sport?

In this article, I will attempt to investigate homonegative barriers women experience in their coaching careers. Furthermore, the importance of acknowledging and dismantling lesbophobia within a hegemonic sport culture is stressed towards creating safer, more equitable and more welcoming sports environments for women, regardless of sexual orientation.

Hegemony in Sport

In order to analyze the impact of sexism and heterosexism in sport, it is important to understand that society is stratified in significantly deep-rooted ways. Inequality exists because society divides social groups along lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality and ability (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). In all instances, a dominant group controls social, political and institutional power, and the privilege associated with this power becomes normal and acceptable to most people in society over time, including those who do not belong to the dominant group (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). The dominant group maintains power through control of the ideology of a society; “according to Gramsci’s hegemony theory, cultural leaderships are secured through the naturalization and articulation of ruling ideas into the mass consciousness and the willing consent of those disenfranchised by ideologies” (Norman, 2010, p. 92).

Sport, like many other aspects of society, has historically been a male-dominated institution. The construction of masculinity, male identities, and heterosexuality is achieved in powerful and pervasive ways in the community of sport (Meân & Kassing, 2008). Sport, in effect, has been designed to establish what it means to be a man, and to maintain such a privileged perception. Griffin (1998) outlines sport as maintaining presumed male superiority through five social functions:

- (1) defining and reinforcing traditional conceptions of masculinity,
- (2) providing an acceptable and safe context for male bonding and intimacy,
- (3) reinforcing male privilege and female subordination,
- (4) establishing status among other males, and
- (5) reinforcing heterosexuality. (p. 20)

Women’s integration into the sporting world has been met with considerable resistance, and continues to pose a threat to male hegemony (Bryson, 1994; Griffin, 1998; Meân & Kassing, 2008). Female participation in sport has called into question the “natural” meanings of gender roles and hence the exclusivity of sport as part of the masculine realm (Griffin, 1998). Attempts to impede this challenge have been made throughout history: medical professionals claimed that females were physically unable to participate in competitive sport, for fear of disrupting reproductive function; sport was seen as having a masculinizing effect on women, so female athletes were required to uphold an image of femininity; and sexologists defined female friendships as morbid and homosexuality as pathological, attaching a severely negative social stigma to lesbian identity (Griffin, 1998; Klasovec, 1995; Lenskyj, 1986; Norman, 2010). The fear of homosexuality among female athletes grew as an effective method of masculine hegemonic control; heterosexism as an extension of sexism therefore became a way to further maintain male dominance.

The lesbian label is a political weapon that can be used against any woman who steps out of line. Any woman who defies traditional gender roles is called a lesbian. Any woman who chooses a male-identified career is called a lesbian. Any

woman who speaks out against sexism is called a lesbian. As long as women are afraid to be called lesbians, this label is an effective tool to control all women and limit women's challenges to sexism. Although lesbians are the targets of attack in women's sport, all women in sport are victimized by the use of the lesbian label to intimidate and control. (Griffin, 1992, p. 258)

While it is evident that all women are affected by the negative social stigma of lesbianism, it is also apparent that women internalize sexist and homophobic values and beliefs (Griffin, 1992). Forbes, Stevens and Lathrop (2002) assert, "years of socialization in which homonegativism is tolerated and homonegative practices are common and often not punished lead to desensitization and denial of the problem" (p. 34). An example is the negative usage of "gay" and "that's so gay" in North American conversation; such derogatory expressions have been unchallenged and have instead become so common that youth accept them as part of their language, regardless of sexual implication or not. It is termed slang and therefore "normal." Similarly, all female athletes are pressured to demonstrate overt signs of femininity and heterosexuality, thus compensating for their athletic ability (Griffin, 1992; Klasovec, 1995). Lesbian athletes who internalize the negative societal stereotype placed on them are forced to "conceal, segregate, or 'normalize' their sexuality in order to protect their sporting careers" (Klasovec, 1995, p. 64). Heterosexual athletes attempt to further distance themselves from the lesbian image and project instead the traditional standards of femininity, restrict close friendships with other women, and consciously promote their own heterosexuality (Griffin, 1992). Similarly, women do not address feminist issues in sport because feminism is seen as too political and also associated with being a lesbian (Meân & Kassing, 2008). Griffin (1992) suggests that these strategies and non-actions work against women in sport.

As long as our energy is devoted to trying to fit into models of athleticism, gender, and sexuality that support a sexist and heterosexist culture, women in sport can be controlled by anyone who chooses to use our fears and insecurities against us. . . . To successfully address the sexism and heterosexism in sport, however, women must begin to understand the necessity of seeing homophobia as a political issue and claim feminism as the unifying force needed to bring about change in a patriarchal culture. (Griffin, 1992, pp. 258-259)

It is important to acknowledge here that it is not the existence of homosexuality in sport that limits women in their endeavours for equality—"it wouldn't matter if there were no lesbians in sport" (Griffin, 1992, p. 259). Rather, it is the use of the lesbian label as a means to intimidate and control that enables male, heterosexist privilege to remain in athletics (Griffin, 1992). By focusing on sexism, heterosexism and homophobia in sport, is it possible to disrupt athletic hegemony? "We have the ability to challenge power, but first we must see and understand how power works" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p.53.)

Homophobia in Women's Sport

Norman (2011) cites numerous authors who have documented that the sporting context is a homophobic environment for sexual minority groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). Sexual discrimination emerges in sport as discriminative language, derogatory initiation rituals and hazing, promotion of a heterosexual ideal, and prejudiced hiring practices by athletic departments, among other practices that serve to marginalize groups and individuals that deviate from the institutionalized norm (Griffin, 1992; Griffin, 1998; Norman, 2011).

In Canada, sexual minorities have full equality of rights and mainstream society frequently discusses lesbian and gay issues; however, similar issues in sport remain silent (Demers, 2006). According to the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity, Canada is a world leader in promoting equality of minorities and, more specifically, a "sport environment that is safe and welcoming" (Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity [CAAWS], 2006, p. 3). Sport in Canada has become more inclusive, evidenced by increased participation by females, people with a disability and members of visible minorities; however, such inclusiveness does not exist to the same extent for LGBT individuals (Demers, 2006). Why do extreme stereotypes of sexuality and widespread discrimination of LGBT athletes persist in the world of sport? What allows these stereotypes to persevere, and why are we afraid to afford LGBT athletes equal access to a safe and welcoming sport context? Is it even possible to group lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals into one minoritized category for sport when there are physical and biological differences to consider beyond sexual preference? What are the implications of competition involving transgender individuals? (This is an issue that is obviously worthy of much discussion, and is beyond the scope of this paper.) What purpose do stereotyping, discrimination and homophobia serve in women's sport?

Women's participation in sport has been affected by homophobia since sexologists marked same-sex relationships as pathological in the early 1900s. Heterosexual women were deterred from traditionally male sports for fears of being labelled a lesbian, and homosexual women in sport risked disclosure and violence (Lenskyj, 1992). Those who did participate experienced immense pressure to project an attractive image of femininity, and the most acceptable female athletes were those who displayed heterosexual beauty and sex appeal as they were the least likely to betray their gender role (Cahn, 1994). Even today, evidence of the pressure for women in sport to demonstrate their femininity and heterosexuality is pervasive in uniform regulations, advertisements, sponsorships, and media portrayals. The glorification of heterosexuality inevitably leads to the devaluation of any form of non-heterosexuality, which is not only harmful to LGBT individuals, but to everyone. An inequitable environment is certainly negative; entitled individuals constantly feel threatened by the under-valued and need to reaffirm their social status, and

the under-valued feel attacked or segregated by the entitled and have little hope of ever attaining a more positive social standing.

Homophobia affects every man and every woman, whatever their sexual orientation. Fear and misunderstanding about sexual orientation lead to harassment, uneasiness, anxiety, isolation, and violence. Behaviour and feelings of these kinds create unsafe environments that impede learning, adversely affect friendships, and hurt teams, athletes and coaches alike. (Demers, 2006, para. 9)

Griffin (1992) explored silence, denial, and apology as defensive reactions to the intimidating lesbian label. Rather than risk the lower social status and tougher social struggle associated with homosexuality in the athletic world, women prefer to ignore homophobia as an issue in sport. According to Griffin (1992), “women live in fear that whatever meagre gains we have made in sport are always one lesbian scandal away from being wiped out” (p. 253). She attests that refusing to talk about homosexuality, denying its existence, and using a feminine, heterosexual image to blanket the negative stigma of women’s athletics are survival strategies “in a society hostile to women in general and lesbians in particular” (Griffin, 1992, p. 253).

Homophobia is also manifested in women’s sport in expressions of attack and rejection such as discrimination, harassment, loss of leadership or other employment opportunities, and negative recruiting practices where athletes are discouraged from choosing rival schools with lesbian staff or athletes (Demers, 2006; Griffin, 1992; Lenskyj, 1990). “Athletes thought to be lesbian are dropped from teams, find themselves benched, or are suddenly ostracized by coaches and teammates” (Brownworth, 1991, as cited in Griffin, 1992, p. 255). This is difficult to comprehend in a competitive North American society where sport is often a venue to “win at all costs.” Why would the negative image of homosexuality weigh heavier than skill and performance of an athlete who may contribute to team success? Would coaches and teammates risk losing before homosexual affiliation? More recently, Demers (2006) indicates that lesbians are most often well accepted when they are open to teammates about their sexual orientation, as long as the information remains within the team. There continues to exist a need to “protect the team’s image and reputation” (Demers, 2006, para. 15). This demonstrates a double standard with regards to sexual identity: homosexual athletes are bullied into silencing their personal identities while heterosexuals are encouraged to flaunt their feminine roles as girlfriends, wives and mothers. “Although heterosexual athletes and coaches are encouraged to display their personal lives to counteract the lesbian image in sport, lesbians are intimidated into invisibility for the same reason” (Griffin, 1992, p. 259). Concurrent to homophobic views about personal lives is a dangerous presumption of the definitions of family and family values. In recruiting practices, coaches of “heterosexual” programs highlight an environment that is “family focused,” subtly implying the existence of a patriarchal married head coach, heterosexual assistants, and young players in the image of children. This is contrasted to an implied unwholesome image of rumoured homosexuality within other

programs. Even legendary Tennessee basketball coach Pat Summitt is not immune to such negative recruiting by opposing schools (Cyphers, 2011). In terms of wins and championships, Summitt is the most successful coach in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball history—what athlete would *not* want to be part of Summitt's unparalleled accomplishment? Interestingly, Summitt gave birth to a son during a 27-year heterosexual marriage and is nevertheless subjected to immense scrutiny regarding her sexual orientation. Her personal life actually reflected such assumed "wholesome family values" that male head coaches represent; yet they did not hold the same weight because she is female. Her sexuality has been widely questioned. Is this because she did not flaunt heterosexual femininity in her appearance or mannerisms? Is it because she coached aggressively and passionately, and therefore like a man? Given her resounding success as a female coach, why do these considerations even matter?

Overt displays of heterosexual femininity have even progressed to new, extreme levels in recent years. Media portrayals of female athletes are shockingly sexual—*heterosexual*—in nature (Griffin, 1992), to the point where viewers might imagine that these athletes could be pin-up models. Examples include Anna Kournikova's appearance in boyfriend Enrique Iglesias' music video, Serena Williams' flaunted cleavage, and Florence (Flo Jo) Griffith-Joyner's exceedingly ornamented finger nails. Male athletes rarely call attention to themselves in the same ways. Kournikova has never won a Women's Tennis Association (WTA) singles title and has never been ranked higher than eighth yet she has been touted as one of the best known tennis stars in the world due to her appearance and celebrity status. As tennis players, Serena Williams and her sister Venus Williams have experienced much more success, however, their professional debuts and much of their careers have been enshrouded by commentary regarding their looks. Venus' hair, in colourful beads, was consistently part of any conversation regarding the talented young tennis prodigy. In other sports, appearance is dictated by uniform regulations as in the case of beach volleyball, a recent and popular addition to the Summer Olympic Games. For the 2012 Olympiad in London, the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) relaxed their bikini rule to permit players to wear shorts and sleeved shirts, but the heterosexual cultural standard of the sport remains prevalent. The FIVB and its players want to garner attention to the sport, and hetero-sex appeal seems to be the way to do it (Krupnick, 2012).

Concurrent to calling women's sexuality into question is doubt surrounding their competence (Kilty, 2006; Norman, 2010). This is evident in "ambiguous hiring practices" (Norman, 2010, p. 101) and a widespread preference for male coaches (Aicher & Sagas, 2010). Many athletes, parents, and athletic directors believe that men are better coaches than women, with little evidence beyond gender and lesbian stereotypes (Griffin, 1992). While there are many other factors influencing the disproportionately large number of men coaching women, homophobia is perhaps among the least explored.

Lesbophobia as a Barrier for Women Coaches

There has been much exploration of the under-representation of women in coaching (for example Anderson & Gill, 1983; Hums & Yiamouyiannis, 2007; Knoppers, 1987; Marshall, 2010; Reade, Rodgers, & Norman, 2009; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Werthner & Callary, 2010; Wilkerson, 1996). Among the various approaches, some have focused on gender-role meanings, stereotypes and social construction as influencing female capacity for coaching (Cunningham, Doherty, & Gregg, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Within a patriarchal society, women respond to oppressive social and sport ideology with self-limiting behaviour (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007) and display less intention, interest and efficacy to become head coaches (Cunningham et al., 2007). Kilty (2006) revealed external barriers such as unequal assumption of competence (male coaches are automatically assumed to be more competent than female coaches), homologous reproduction (male leaders hiring from a principle of similarity), homophobia (an irrational fear of and negative attitude toward homosexuals), and a lack of female mentors (heterosexual or otherwise). Internal barriers are also identified in female coaches' inclination for perfectionism, a lack of assertiveness, an inhibition to promote personal accomplishments, and high stress associated with balancing work and personal life (Kilty, 2006).

Krane (2001) criticizes a focus on the individual and argues the need for a much broader examination of societal influences that impact an individual's cognitions and behaviour. She explores women's experiences in sport through the interaction of feminist standpoint, queer theory, and feminist cultural studies as complementary perspectives of social power and hegemony that serve to disempower minority social groups (Krane, 2001). Gender is constructed and naturalized in society, and specifically in the work of women coaches as a perpetuation of women's marginalization and men's hegemony (Theberge, 1993).

Krane and Barber (2003) assert that beyond research exploring the heterosexist culture of sport, there is a need to further understand certain aspects of lesbian experiences in sport. More specifically, Norman (2011) has identified within the literature a lack of documented experiences of lesbian coaches, including reference to their personal lives, and suggests that the homophobic environment of the coaching profession accounts for the absence of such research. The existence of homophobia in women's sport has been claimed as the strongest deterrent to women joining or remaining in coaching positions (Veri, 1999). Norman (2011) therefore proclaims the necessity for understanding the process of homophobia and how it affects lesbian coaches. Additionally, understanding lesbophobia in the sporting world is important as it affects all women, regardless of sexual orientation; lesbophobia remains a barrier to the empowerment of all females in athletics.

Research that has been done in this area has focused on how lesbians manage their identities when faced with homophobia in sport. Griffin (1998) identified a

continuum of identity management strategies used by lesbian US collegiate coaches, ranging from 'completely closeted' or complete concealment of their lesbian identity in their athletic environment to 'publicly out' meaning their lesbian identity is revealed to everyone in the athletic context. Between the two extremes, lesbian coaches utilize decision-making processes and a variety of strategies to either disclose or hide their identity, depending on the specific circumstances (Griffin, 1998). Some of these strategies include promoting themselves as heterosexual, avoidance and covering of lesbian identity, and using language that implies homosexuality (Griffin, 1998).

In *Sexual Stories as Resistance Narratives in Women's Sports: Reconceptualizing Identity Performance*, Iannotta and Kane (2002) criticize studies by Griffin (1998), Krane (1996) and Riemer (1997), among others, for assuming a linear, progressive development of sexual identity whereby lesbians "come out". Although these scholars acknowledge differences between individuals and their reactions to diverse situations, "they nevertheless conceive of coming out as a step-by-step process in which various points—or stages—of "outness" can be identified" (Iannotta & Kane, 2002, p. 351). This conceptualization of "coming out" and "being out" within the context of homophobia in women's sport then becomes the goal, and is characterized by linguistically naming oneself as lesbian. The use of explicit language is in turn seen as a significant political act by which social change may occur through education and promotion of tolerance. Iannotta and Kane (2002) claim that this produces a hierarchy or "levels of outness" and "individuals who are more out are viewed as effective agents of social change, while those employing alternative strategies are not" (Iannotta & Kane, 2002, p. 353). Furthermore, this implies the concept of victimization among those lesbian coaches who are lower on the continuum and therefore not empowered to create social change (Iannotta & Kane, 2002). Iannotta and Kane (2002) propose that other forms of resistance to homophobia are possible, including alternative strategies of coming out and being out. They include the use of silence as an effective strategy in that what is not said—non-linguistic actions—also contribute to one's identification as lesbian, and can also affect social change (Iannotta & Kane, 2002). In other words, communicating who you are by being who you are is powerful; it is not necessary to say, "I'm a lesbian" for people to understand that homosexuality is part of one's identity.

Krane and Barber (2005) further presented strategies used by American college coaches who identified as "coach" and "lesbian" within their homophobic athletic environments. They demonstrated how lesbian coaches continually monitored, managed and negotiated their sexual identity in their coaching settings, revealing that the motivations, actions and concept of self were linked to the social norms within specific contexts (Krane & Barber, 2005). This is consistent with the social psychological theory of social identity and suggests that these coaches were at least partly responsible for maintaining a heterosexual ideal within sport (Krane & Barber, 2005). This also implies that amalgamation of the "coach" and "lesbian"

identities is difficult at best, and lesbian coaches have needed to separate these two essential parts of self in order to find success in the world of sport. Compounding this struggle is the fact that they are also women and therefore experience a double minority status within the coaching context (Gedro, 2006). This is interesting because, while individuals may identify with different social groups, Norman (2011) suggests, “not all identities may develop or be sufficiently strong to push for social change” (p. 7). This begs the question: What is a “strong enough” identity to inspire change in social status? What does that look like, and how is it attained?

The pervasive hegemony of heterosexual masculinity is obviously a huge obstacle to the equitable contribution of women in coaching. Perpetuation of the masculine standard exists in the representation of male coaches in women’s sport, despite arguments for the benefits of positive female role models for female athletes (Knoppers, 1987; Mowery, 1997). It has been argued that, based on education and playing experience, women may actually be *more* physically, technically and tactically qualified than their male counterparts to coach female athletes (Mowery, 1997). However, men have been “hired to coach women’s teams specifically to change a tarnished or negative (read lesbian) team image” (Thorngren, 1991, as cited in Griffin, 1992, p. 257) or to at least impart an appearance of heterosexuality to a women’s team (Griffin, 1992). The existence of sexist beliefs leads to a preference for a male head coach (Aicher & Sagas, 2010).

Perhaps most disturbingly, it has been noted that lesbian coaches are seen as sexual predators (Griffin, 1992). Griffin (1998) states that while parents and athletes fear sexual harassment by lesbian coaches, the same fear does not exist towards heterosexual male coaches.

The irony is that, given recent reports of sexual misconduct by male coaches and male athletes and the statistics on sexual harassment in general, young women athletes are at far greater risk of being sexually harassed, hit on, or raped by their heterosexual male coaches or by heterosexual male athletes than by lesbian coaches or teammates. (Griffin, 1998, p. 191)

In fact, society’s unequal gender dynamics are compounded by unequal power dynamics in a coach-athlete relationship, therefore rendering female athletes more susceptible to coercive sexual relationships with a male coach (Griffin, 1992; Lenskyj, 1990). Griffin (1998) comments:

Even if an athlete consents to a sexual relationship, coach-athlete relationships are based on huge differences in power that make the ability of a young athlete to give “consent” questionable. Athletes often revere and trust their coaches in a way that makes it both flattering to receive sexual attention from them and difficult to reject this attention. (p. 199)

Regardless, there are countless examples of coach-athlete sexual relationships—both homosexual and heterosexual in nature—and yet homophobia continues to be used to exclude females from coaching positions. Are we to believe that it

is more acceptable for athletes to fall victim to heterosexual male coaches than to homosexual female coaches? By using sexual predation of lesbian coaches as an ungrounded and perverse excuse, the many benefits of having women in the coaching world are overridden.

Conclusion

Sport in Canada has become a more inclusive environment; women and girls are participating in sports programs in record numbers. However, masculine heterosexuality remains the dominant ideology and females are simply finding ways to “fit” into the male athletic world. Sport ideology, as it continues to thrive, must be challenged in order for participation to become equally available, welcoming and safe to every individual, including those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

In teacher and coach education programs, naming sexual discrimination as an issue and discussing widespread implications is important. As argued previously, discrimination based on sexual orientation not only affects gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals, but everyone within a homophobic environment. Particularly, teachers and coaches should enter careers with an awareness of oppressive yet normative assumptions of female athletics. Not everyone on a women’s hockey team is a “dyke” and not everyone on a women’s volleyball team is a “girlie girl.” Leaders within schools and athletic programs should be taught skills to challenge such assumptions and provide safe, inclusive, and just environments for all females in sport.

Norman (2011) stresses the importance of illuminating the “everyday, discrete and even taken-for-granted discriminative behaviours and social practices” (p. 3) in women’s sport. Obvious examples include continuous debate over sexual orientation of individuals that do not necessarily fit a heterosexual mould, as in the case of coach Pat Summitt, and media frenzied reactions to athletes and coaches who do choose to come out. When it ceases to be a “big deal” to be non-heterosexual in sport, more individuals will feel liberated to be who they truly are, rather than disguising or denying a part of their identity. When it ceases to be a “big deal,” lesbophobia will no longer be a weapon against athletic females. In this way, lesbian visibility can play a powerful role in social and cultural change. There is a need to dispel negative social stigma attached to the lesbian label, and to recognize and reward the positive contributions of these women as athletes, coaches, administrators and role models.

As an athlete and a coach, I stress the importance for all women to acknowledge the pervasiveness of male, heterosexual hegemony and to evaluate our roles in perpetuating dominance of such ideology. A university volleyball teammate was once accused of being a lesbian because she did not date any of the varsity men, and had not had a boyfriend for several months. Veteran athletes hazed rookies by forcing them to dress in repulsive, asexual outfits while they donned skimpy, reveal-

ing ones, making them even more attractive by comparison. The soccer team with whom we shared a locker room refused to use the communal showers after hockey practice—they did not want the women hockey players to hit on them. Prejudice, discrimination and oppression of homosexual women negatively impact us all, and there is much to be done to effect change in Canadian sport society. “It is the experience of oppression that authorizes someone to speak about it, and to lead the struggle for change. The personal is the political.” (McCaskell, 2007, p. 36)

Note

¹ Name has been changed.

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