

Lesbians and Locker Rooms

Challenging Lesbophobia

by Caroline Fusco

L'auteure donne aux athlètes lesbiennes l'occasion de raconter leurs expériences sportives. Ces femmes nous disent comment elles ont dû lutter pour combattre et rejeter la norme hétérosexuelle.

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cause that wasn't there people were hiding. And when you see people hiding, they're afraid. And you know, it's because it's so damn homophobic...

(Research Participant)

Lesbians in sport do not escape the discrimination which reflects the systemic intolerance of sexual diversity in our heterosexist culture. The institution of sport is a microcosm of society, "a dynamic social space where dominant ideologies are perpetuated" (Messner 198) and contributes to the perpetuation of values that sustain "heteronormativity" (Hennessy). Sports associations and governing bodies rarely address or acknowledge the existence of lesbian athletes, indeed there seems to be an unwritten yet understood agreement among associations, governing bodies, and athletes to avoid direct discussion on lesbian issues (Peper).

Bennett labeled this avoidance of addressing lesbianism in women's sport "a silence so loud it screams" (qtd. in Nelson 139). Although lesbians have not overtly been denied access to participation in sports or active living, the heterosexual image of women in sports persists and is encouraged. The lesbian label is still used to intimidate lesbians and un-

dermine attempts by all women to challenge constructed gender relations in sport. Griffin states:

Women's athletics is, in fact, held hostage to fear of the "L-word." As long as women's athletics continues to deny that there are lesbians in sport [...] we will never control our sporting lives and will be forced to waste energy defending a counterfeit heterosexual-only image that we all know is a lie. (qtd. in Nelson 142)

The purpose of my research was to give a small sample of Canadian lesbian athletes the opportunity to talk about their experiences in sport, and how the challenge to reject and resist "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich) affects their lives. I specifically addressed the experiences of elite lesbian athletes and explored how lesbian athletes construct and describe their realities in sport.

All the athletes in the research identified themselves as lesbian. Only two of the participants acknowledged that they were totally "out" in their sports and other environments; yet all had disclosed their lesbian sexuality at some point in their lives as athletes, students, teachers, and workers to at least one other team member, colleague, family member or friend. The study was limited to lesbian athletes who participated in team sports at an inter-varsity or elite level of competition and who participated on teams that are *not* all lesbian. I conducted in-depth interviews with eight lesbian athletes in the following team sports: basketball, field hockey, ice hockey, lacrosse, and water-polo. Their ages ranged from 18 to 35 years old. All of the participants were white.

All the participants spoke about the centrality of sport in their lives:

My athletic career started when I was seven. I was a jock, I was completely immersed in sport, lived and breathed sport. Thinking about it in some ways, I knew nothing else. I was good at it. I liked it, I loved the camaraderie, the team. I loved being physically active and being able to push my body farther, that's still something I enjoy doing...

Sports represented the "biggest and best" part of the participants' lives and none of them wanted to "jeopardize [their] sport career in any way." This affected their lives as lesbians in their sports and provided a context for their experiences.

You would think a lot of teams would be a kind of haven. That there would be a lot more people accepting of that kind of thing. But, you know, it could have been way better for us, it really could've. It could've been a much more positive experience for us. You would think that it would have been. I know people must look at it and say, "oh it's ideal, you're on a sports team. Isn't that what you guys like?" But it just wasn't as positive as it could've been. And I say that at the same time as saying it was one of the best times that I ever had. It was wonderful. But it could have been more positive...

The athletes reported that lesbianism rarely received positive acknowledgment in their sporting environments. From an early age many knew that talking about "homosexuality" was "taboo" and persistent questions about "boyfriends" conveyed the expectation of heterosexuality.

The straightness of [my university], it was always there. Always in your face, especially on the team.

Everyone talked about boyfriends. And laughed and joked, and teased when a new fellow appeared at the game. No one ever did that when a woman came to watch me. Even though they knew exactly what she was there for...

One woman recalled how heterosexuality was valorized by her team's motto: "If you're straight, you can skate..." Another remembered being

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told that lesbianism was "abnormal and unnatural." Many had overhead conversations where lesbianism was referred to as "sick" and "such a disgusting thing." Often the "topic of the day" was "who was and who wasn't [lesbian]" which generally precipitated a "rolling of eyes" and "groans of disgust." One athlete talked about her best friend's reaction to her disclosure:

It was a really hard time for me and I thought she would be there for me. And I said, "you know, I'm lesbian." And she said, "what did you say?" I said, "I'm gay, I'm lesbian." And she said, "oh! I'm shocked! I'm horrified! Oh my god, I can't believe it!" Her head was in her hands and she just kind of got up and walked away. She said, "well, you can't justify yourself, you can't explain this, can you? It's all mental..."

Lesbophobia was manifested when people were "not as comfortable" with lesbians as they were with heterosexuals. Lesbian athletes were often physically avoided when in close quarters, hotels, or locker rooms with other team members. One athlete remembered that "people were really reluctant to be in the same room alone with [her]" when they heard that she was a lesbian. She labeled this "the locker room effect." Disassociation from lesbians was exhibited by both heterosexual and les-

bian individuals. In fact, lesbian teammates often used other lesbians as "scapegoats" to deflect suspicion from themselves:

There were a core of women who were very protective of their own identity, sexual identity, to a point where they would blurt out on many occasions, "gosh, she looks so gay! Look at the hair cut, look at the size of her, look at the way she walks"...

In addition, lesbian issues were verbally avoided. Discomfort with lesbianism was often reflected when "something was not said" or in an "unspoken tension." There was rarely "openness" or "massive discussions" about lesbians. One athlete figured that "enough of [the team] knew [she was lesbian] just because of conversations they didn't have!" and spreading rumors about "who was and who wasn't lesbian" was "rife." Rumors were spread maliciously without any recognition of the consequences for the "suspects:"

I was told right off the bat, as soon as I made the provincial team—I think it's something that all the new little people get told. Like "so and so's a dyke, so and so's a dyke. And so is she, and so is she. And she's living with her. I got all this information and some of it was lies. Total gossip..."

This kind of speculation may have persisted because lesbians were physically and behaviourally stereotyped. "[The] lesbian stereotype, as perceived by straight people... [is someone with] short hair, doc's [shoes], softball player, aggressive, not attractive to men, no make-up..." Many derogatory comments were directed at "what lesbians do!" The perception was that lesbians were sexual maniacs, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting heterosexuals at every moment. "People used to make comments about our coach. Their first response was 'I think you'd better watch your step around this coach...'" Many athletes stated that

"suspected" lesbians were ostracized, their social lives rarely validated, and treated differently from heterosexuals.

Incidences of verbal bashing, whisper campaigns, homophobic jokes, slurs, and derogatory comments were identified. Many of these athletes had overheard "condescending comments" about lesbians which they described as "anti-gay" and "destructive."

I had a jean jacket on over top of a white T-shirt and my track pants. And I think I was wearing a baseball cap. And I came into [my coach's] vicinity. And she said "oh, you look like those [lesbians] over there. Take your jacket and your hat off, and spruce yourself up a bit." The assistant was very good and she said to the coach "I hardly think that's appropriate to say something like that." And the coach said "well they look like hell, and I don't want that type of woman reflected on our team"...

Athletes were cognizant that lesbianism should not be "flaunted" or "talked about." The often explicit animosity resulted in, as one participant described, a "pretty poisonous environment" for lesbians in sport.

It was the time when there was that big earthquake in San Francisco. We were in the changing rooms. It was after practice. And someone was saying, "oh yeah! Did you hear about the earthquake? It cut out the baseball game." And [another player] turned to whoever was talking and said "do you know what I really wish? I really wish there was a whole bunch of fags underneath that bridge. And it came crashing down and killed them all..."

One strategy for coping was to mask their lesbian identities. Athletes talked about physically withdrawing from hostile environments, remaining silent and secretive about their lesbian lives, passing as heterosexuals, and normalizing their lesbian identities. However, many

also chose to ignore the risks involved in being stereotyped or identified as lesbian, deliberately challenging "hetero-normativity" and notions of femininity. For these athletes in particular challenging stereotypes was an important way to assert their identities as strong and independent sportswomen. Others chose to confront discriminatory attitudes towards minority groups, attempting to promote knowledge of

diversity. One athlete was viewed as the "language police" on her team:

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I was strongly opinionated when it came to things that were sexist, racist or

homophobic. And that's something that, although I wasn't out, I would not put up with. I would not listen to someone say the "blond jokes." If someone said "hey, you, fag!" I would call people on that. And even though I wasn't out, I would call people on language. And I would use the excuse—not the excuse—I'd use the reasoning "why say this, when there are so many other words to describe how you are feeling..."

Some of the athletes disclosed their lesbian sexuality. The desire to let others know "what was going on in their lives" was inexorably tied to their confidence in themselves and their sexuality.

I've developed an "in-your-face" attitude that I've never had before and things don't affect me the way they used to. I think the most important thing that I've learned to develop is my self-assurance and confidence. And the knowledge that I'm just as good as everybody else. I think that is so important. You want to learn that...

Identifying with a lesbian community is an essential part of their coping mechanisms.

I've surrounded myself with a lot of gay and lesbian friends. So it's really easy to be out, and hang out, and go to all sorts of gay establishments, restaurants and bookstores. You can become kind of exclusive in who you hang out with...

All the athletes, at some point in their lives, socialized at lesbian bars, participated in all-lesbian/gay events, or joined teams where the majority of the players were lesbians. Three athletes had competed at the Gay Games in 1990, and 1994. Although these events do not gain extensive exposure outside the lesbian and gay community it was often difficult for them to conceal what they were doing because, as one woman said, in elite sport "everybody knows every intimate detail of what you're doing and if they're not asking, they're too afraid to ask." "Finding a niche" in a lesbian community allowed them to confirm and celebrate their lesbian identities.

Now that I'm in the community more, and I feel more comfortable about it [being lesbian]. I realize, "yeah! That this is what I am and this is what I like. And I don't think I'm going to change..."

If they played on all-lesbian teams, "it was such a release," and "a wonderful relief." They could talk openly about their lives and "wave at [their] honey without having to worry about what people think."

It was wonderful, the first time I was ever exposed to a community of lesbians when I realized there were other gay women out there. It was incredible. It was like a huge load had been lifted off my shoulders because now I could enjoy the sport and love it, and play to my hearts content. And also know that I didn't have to cover everything anymore...

Reversing the discrimination helped to offset some of the consequences of lesbophobia.

It would help if [my coach and teammates] were more tolerating of the way I was. But you know, I don't really care anymore. They are going to have to tolerate me because I am here. And, you know, I'm putting up with them, so they'll have to put up with me...

Oh, people just have the most hilarious perceptions. It's so funny. And they say, "oh, we accept you." And that's wonderful. But, well, too bad, "I don't accept you..."

Sport is not free from heterosexism and homophobia. Lesbians have been silenced and discredited on their teams while heterosexuality has been vehemently upheld as the "norm." As a decade of studies have demonstrated there is a price, in terms of emotional energy and self-esteem, for having to be silent about one's lesbian sexuality (Woods and Harbeck). However, despite the systemic harassment that these athletes experienced their love of sport was evident. They all succeeded in their sports, some achieving honours at the highest level possible. There is room, therefore, for lesbian athletes to resist patriarchal and heterosexual gender relations in sport and to use sport as a means of empowerment. These lesbian athletes have refused to be victimized in sport.

The lesbian athletes' experiences

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articulated here are subjective, not representative or generic. This research acknowledges that we are all differently positioned and privileged, therefore, conclusions cannot be generalized. However, the research recognizes that these lesbian athletes' experiences constitute legitimate knowledge and provide a vital commentary on our understanding of the

sports world as a heterosexist institution in which lesbianism challenges the status quo of the inter-relationships between sport and sexuality. This research is committed to a vision of a more equitable and affirming sports world and recognizes that all individuals are entitled to the privileges which are controlled by a dominant white, heterosexual society. Lesbians athletes and other marginalized peoples should not be denied either access to active living or the celebration of their empowerment through sport.

Caroline Fusco has played international field hockey for Ireland at both junior and senior levels. She has recently completed a Master's in Physical Education at the University of Manitoba. Her research interests are feminist methodologies, heterosexism in women's sport, and lesbian experiences in sport.

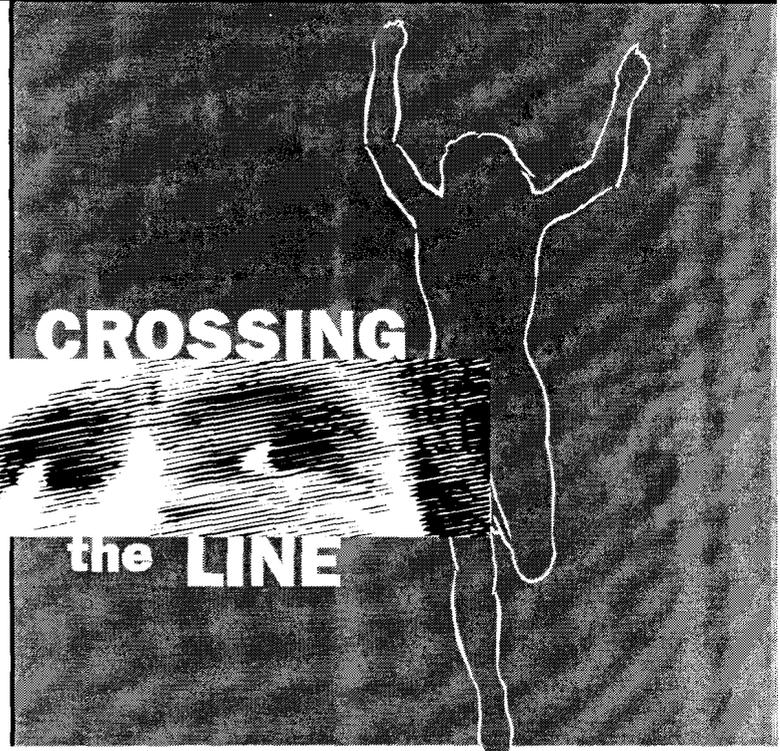
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