

Rusty Lockers:

An American History of Homophobia in Sports from 1975-Present and
Why Gay Athletes Remain Marginalized in a Progressive Society

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Abstract

Throughout history, sports in the United States have been fairly progressive. With African Americans fighting for equal rights, Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in sports. Women's sports have also taken off, demonstrating gender equality ahead of the rest of American society. However, when it comes to gay athletes, the institution of sports is behind the times. This paper looks at how gay male athletes have been treated by American society over the past 40 years. Four case studies are used: Dave Kopay, Greg Louganis, Mark Tewksbury, and Jason Collins. Once they have been compared and contrasted, the topic moves to trying to answer the question, "Why do homosexual males feel the need to keep who they are a secret while playing?" High school athletics are looked at to determine that the reaction of teammates and coaches play a large role in an athlete coming out or staying in the closet. The role of homophobic language is discussed before finally going into a discussion about how the idea of masculinity is what ultimately prevents homosexuals from feeling welcomed in the world of sports. The paper reaches the final conclusion that while progress in terms of gay rights in sports can be seen throughout time, it does not reflect the values of the United States, even though in the past sports have always done just that.

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Introduction

When one thinks of the classic history disciplines, the fields that often come to mind are ones such as political history, economic history, military history and perhaps a few others. Rarely do people think of sports history as an important topic of study. However, this is slowly changing in our society today. Studying the institution of sports allows us to view the field as a microcosm of American life because of its tendency to be composed of the very fibers that the United States is made of. Sports are a direct reflection of society; the things we are proud of, the things we are ashamed of, the importance of various aspects of our everyday lives are all reflected in the sports that we watch on TV. They can influence us in ways that no other social institution is capable of, making us buy products we do not need, making us forget about all of the chores that need to be done, making us, for a reason that no one can quite understand, truly care about the results of a game when in reality what happens on the field or court has no impact on us at all. Sports, in its own American way, show us what society cares about.

Sports can therefore tell historians quite a bit about the time period that the games were played in. For example, Jackie Robinson's struggle to start his professional baseball career in a league without a single other African American reflects what was going on in the United States in the 1950s regarding racial equality. What historians often fail to look at, however, is how the institution of sports itself has changed over time and what factors contribute to that. Sports have evolved from an incredibly segregated form to one that includes people of all races and nationalities without question. The recent successes of women's sports have shown that barriers that often kept women from competing at a professional level are beginning to fall. Yet there is one group in America that has not been present in the sports world throughout history. These people have often been feared by the American public when it comes to sports, and members of

squads often express their concern that these people are among their teammates. They can be found at all levels, from high school all the way to professional, locally and around the world. Yet the public does not know about these people because they try to keep their identity a secret out of fear of what will happen if other people know about them. This all refers to, of course, gay athletes.

Sports as a whole does not accept homosexual males into its supposedly all inclusive membership. This can be seen throughout the history of the United States, but especially during the past thirty-eight years while the gay rights movement has been ramping up. Equality for gays has been accepted into many parts of American society, and one would be hard pressed to find a homophobic institution the size of sports anywhere in the United States. However, that is exactly what sports are. While the rest of the country has been moving towards homosexual equality, athletics has remained a sort of “last bastion” for old school, conservative homophobia.

In a study done by the USA network in 2005, the statement “What athletes do in their private life is their own business” was given to a random sample of the American public. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents believed that the statement was correct,¹ which is not all that surprising. The American public tends to ignore the things that athletes do off the field. Take Tiger Woods for example. He cheated on his wife with many women, and if he was not as famous, rest assured that the people that knew him would never be able to forgive what he did. However, few people seem to remember the moral lines that Woods transgressed because he is such a well known and loved athlete.² In the same poll, the statement “It would hurt an athlete’s career to be openly gay” was given to the same sample. Sixty-eight percent agreed with that

¹ PRNewswire, “Comprehensive Poll on Homosexuals in Sports Reveals Bias Against Gay Athletes,” poll conducted by USA Network, *PR Newswire* (April 12, 2005): <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/comprehensive-poll-on-homosexuals-in-sports-reveals-bias-against-gay-athletes-54278182.html> (accessed 4 April, 2013).

² Heidi Parker and Janet Fink, “Arrest Record or Openly Gay: The Impact of Athletes’ Personal Lives on Endorser Effectiveness,” *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 21 (2012): 70-76.

statement, while only twenty-one percent disagreed with it.³ This clearly shows at the very least that the general public understands that homophobic nature of sports, and at the worst that the public itself is homophobic when it comes to who plays the game.

Perhaps the most important statement that the poll gives is “Openly gay athletes should be excluded from playing team sports.” The vast majority of respondents, eighty-six percent, believed that this was an incorrect statement. Still, fourteen percent of the general American public, according to this source, believes that if an athlete is openly gay, they should not be able to participate in a team sport for that sole reason. This blatant homophobia is seen in a contemporary time frame when gay activists across the United States were beginning to pick up steam in their fight for equality. Yet in the institution of sports, it was clearly a very different story.

On this particular topic, sports do *not* reflect what is happening in the larger society. It goes against the general trend and remains socially a fairly conservative establishment. Why is that? What about sports makes it so prone to homophobia even when people are fighting across the nation for equal rights for gays and lesbians? This research paper will focus on how sports have developed throughout the past forty years in America when it comes to gay athletes and how they have been treated and viewed by the public and teammates across various levels of sports. Hopefully by doing this it will become less of a mystery as to why sports have lagged behind the rest of society in terms of treating homosexuals equally and give the historical world a better understanding of the progress that has or has not been made when it comes to sexual orientation equality in the athletic field.⁴

³ PRNewswire, “Comprehensive Poll.”

⁴ When talking about homosexuality, it is impossible to get away from the arguments that religions make against such a lifestyle. In this paper I made the conscious decision not to address such arguments. I fully understand that religion has a large role to play in how the public feels about homosexuals, and thus gay athletes as well. However,

Historiography

By generally looking at the study of sports history, it is made clear that the institution has been quickly advancing. Historical scholars have only just begun to take sports history seriously in the past two decades. The earlier history of sports works, from around the 1950s to the 1990s, rely heavily on primary sources.⁵⁶ The authors are almost all looking at newspaper articles and interviews, leading them to then make their own original arguments based off of the information that they found. Few secondary sources had been created at that time, driving the need to do this sort of basic research. However, out of this basic research came the possibility to open up many new doors. Little research had been done up until the start of the 1990s, making it an exciting time to be a historian. New information was coming to light on a regular basis, greatly expanding the knowledge in various fields of study.

As time has gone on, however, the focus of the sports history works, in general, has shifted from primary sources to secondary sources.⁷⁸ More contemporary sports historians have the ability to look at what other researchers have concluded in previous works, making more recent histories a synthesis of findings from up to twenty years ago along with critiques and expansion on various points made in those older works. This phenomenon makes sense, as the

if I were to do justice to the topic of how religious intolerance of homosexuality plays into the issue, I am afraid that this paper would be twice the size it already is. For this reason I am omitting how religion affects acceptance of gay athletes and leave the topic to further research. If you are interested in such information, a wonderful starting place is: John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁵ Janet Podell, eds, *Sports and America*, (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1986).

⁶ Frederick W. Cozens and Florence Scovill Strumpf, *Sports in American Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

⁷ Richard O. Davies, *Sports in American Life: A History*, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁸ Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game: The Epic Story of how Pro Football Captured a Nation*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2004, 2005).

more recent sports historians are building their arguments on the back of those that came before them. While it seems natural to do this, it is a rather strange occurrence because of the factor of time. Sports history has only been prevalent for around thirty years, and already the more recent work has been getting stale in its originality. They rely heavily on other people's findings, forgoing the opportunity to uncover novel and exciting discoveries contained within the still barely-scraped surface that is sports history. Without these fresh ideas, it is difficult to keep the field moving forward quickly. Hopefully by going back to the basic primary sources, this research paper can introduce new ideas based on newspaper articles, interviews, and autobiographies that have not been historically analyzed in much detail ever before.

The other area of study that must be looked at is that of homosexual history. Without taking into account how history has treated homosexuals as people, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to see how gay men in sports have come to be treated the way they are in contemporary society. The written history of gays can be said to begin in the year 1883, when British historian John Addington Symonds published a study of Greek homosexuality. He was executed for doing so and copies of his book and other books that mentioned his work were bought out by the executioner.⁹ Racing ahead to the mid-1950s in the United States, the ONE Institute for Homophile Studies in Los Angeles was generally ignored by historians who were more concerned with the developments of the Cold War.¹⁰ This all changed, however, when the gay movement began to pick up support and power. The movement enabled a more progressive environment to form within the world of historical study, thus enabling historians to create work relating to gay history, often the historians who were part of the movement itself.¹¹ These works

⁹ Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr., *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1989), 1.

¹⁰ Duberman, *Hidden From History*, 1.

¹¹ Duberman, *Hidden From History*, 1-2.

began coming out in the mid-1970s, beginning a new era of homosexual study in regards to historical work.¹²

At the beginning of the 1970s, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders II (DSM) still classified homosexuality as a mental disease,¹³ something that could be cured using information found in the field of psychology. This belief reflected the attitude of the time period in the United States of homosexuals being “unnatural” or “sinful.” This changed, however, at the same time historical works were being released regarding gays and lesbians. In the next version of the DSM, worked on throughout the late 70s and published in 1980, homosexuality is absent.¹⁴ Historical works continued to be created by scholars that were part of the movement, but professional historians were slower to begin writing about gay history for several reasons. The biggest one was that they did not want to associate themselves with gay history for the fear of losing their credibility¹⁵ due to the institution viewing the topic as extremely controversial.

Progress continued to march on, and in the 1980s, lesbian and gay academic work became a formalized field of study in the United States, along with Canada and various other European countries.¹⁶ Study of gay history continued to grow throughout the 21st century,¹⁷ creating many original secondary sources, and the field continues to expand at the time of this capstone. New works are being created at an amazing rate, greatly contributing to the diverse and

¹² Duberman, *Hidden From History*, 2.

¹³ Somogy Varga, “Defining Mental Disorder: Exploring the ‘Natural Function’ Approach,” *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine* 6 (January 21, 2011): 1.

¹⁴ Alix Spiegel, “The Dictionary of Disorder: How One Man Revolutionized Psychiatry,” *The New Yorker* (January 3, 2005), accessed on 10 October, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/01/03/050103fa_fact

¹⁵ Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr., *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1989), 2.

¹⁶ George E. Haggerty, *The Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*, vol. 2, “Introduction,” New York: Garland Publishing, 2000, XI.

¹⁷ Haggerty, *The Encyclopedia*, XI.

often complicated history that belongs to not only the homosexual community, but to humankind as a whole. Without gay history, there can be no human history.

Case Studies

Where the fields of sports history and homosexual history collide is where this research paper takes place. There are many different dates that people could use to indicate the beginning of controversy over homosexuals in sports, yet this study uses the year 1975. This date is far from random. Rather, it is the year that former NFL running back Dave Kopay came out of the closet.¹⁸ Months before that, a reporter named Lynn Rosellini wrote a series of newspaper articles claiming that there were prominent athletes in the NFL who were gay, and that there were many other less prominent players who were also closeted. This assertion created quite an uproar with the sport-loving public. Furious letters were written to Rosellini confronting her about her apparent “lies.”¹⁹ This firestorm of intolerance prompted Dave Kopay to come out of the closet, stating that there were many other NFL players with the same sexual orientation as him.²⁰ This previously unheard of display of courage showed that Rosellini’s information was indeed accurate, but the public still did not want to hear it. Football fans claimed that Kopay did

¹⁸ Brian Garner and Richard W. Smith, “Are There Really Any Gay Male Athletes?: An Empirical Survey,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 13, No. 1 (February, 1977): 22.

¹⁹ Garner, “Are There Really,” 22.

²⁰ Garner, “Are There Really,” 22.

it for the attention, that he was not really a homosexual, just a drama queen. Besides, how could any American athlete be “queer”?²¹

Dave Kopay was figuratively dragged out of the closet because of Lynn Rosellini’s articles. He was not able to sit idly by and let the American public think that gay athletes did not exist in the NFL, but instead came out to prove a point. The implications of this decision are still being felt today as it is slowly becoming more acceptable in the eyes of the public to be a gay



Dave Kopay with the helmets of the various teams he played on throughout his career.
<http://andreikoymasky.com/liv/fam/biok3/kopay01/kopa1b.jpg>

athlete. What makes Kopay’s journey unique is one, the fact that he was one of the first athletes to come out to the public and two, the public’s reaction to his coming out. No other moderately well-known NFL player before Kopay had come out of the closet, even after his career, making Kopay a trailblazer. He did not follow in anyone’s footsteps, but rather made the decision to create his own path to accepting who he really was, even if the rest of the nation was not ready to do the same.

As previously stated, the sports-loving American people in general did not react positively to Kopay’s decision, but rather with disbelief and anger. The beginning of the 1970s

²¹ Garner, “Are There Really,” 22.

was a time of great strides in human rights, but sadly not in the realm of homosexuality. While African Americans were getting the basic civil rights that they absolutely deserved, gays were left out to fend for themselves. This would slowly change as the gay rights movement began to pick up steam towards the end of the 1970s and into the 80s, but as far as Dave Kopay is concerned, the timing of his revelation was a difficult one due to the hostile view the sporting public, and even the common American public, had when it came to homosexuals, especially in the masculine world of sports.

The American public could not believe that the sport they loved, that the entire nation loved, contained people who had different sexual orientations than they. For some reason, gay men seemed to threaten their sport in a way that no other group of people were capable of doing. The debate stemmed additional research as to the prevalence of gay men in athletics, and according to a study done by Brian Garner and Richard W. Smith, they were well established in at least the college level during the mid to late 1970s.

Studying four universities in the Western United States, Garner and Smith came to the conservative conclusion that approximately six percent of the athletes in a team sport (the name of the sport was not given due to fears of negative repercussions) had participated in a homosexual act with another male in the past two years at a college level.²² This result, while keeping in mind that not every male that participates in a homosexual act is gay, clearly proves to those who read the article that in 1976-77 there was a good sized population of gay athletes within a given sport. This finding was likely met with frustration on behalf of the public, yet that would not make the concrete data any less true.

An interesting phenomenon should be noted regarding this point in time and its relation to homosexual athletes coming out of the closet. Kopay came out in the 1970s, and it will soon

²² Garner, "Are There Really," 23-28, 33.

be discussed that several well-known athletes came out in the 1990s, but what about the 80s? There is a suspicious gap of about fifteen years between Kopay and other athletes announcing they are gay. While no concrete answer can be found,²³ looking at what was going on in the American society outside of athletics may provide an interesting hypothesis. The fear of HIV became a large part of life in the United States starting in 1981.²⁴ Due to a lack of understanding, the American people came to the conclusion that gay men were the cause of the virus, and that it was their fault that people were dying across the world. Needless to say, it was not a safe time for homosexuals.

The fact that the United States was run by conservative politicians added to this problem. More liberal ideas, such as believing that homosexuals should have the same rights as heterosexuals, were then brushed under the carpet. While HIV/AIDS forced the homosexual community to organize in order to protect itself from the rest of society, thus furthering the gay rights movement,²⁵ gay athletes were still not willing to come out of the closet to face a scared and accusing public. It was not until a recognized diver came out in the next decade and announced he had HIV that it was again safe for gay athletes to show the nation who they really were.²⁶

There have been many well-known gay athletes that have come out after their playing career, but in today's society those names, for various reasons, have been forgotten. On the female side of sports, we have athletes such as Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King, arguably two of the greatest women tennis players to ever live. They came out to the public and

²³ After going to various sources in order to find a reason, including simply "Googling" the topic to see if anyone with access to the internet had a theory, this author has come to the conclusion that there are no references that have come up with a concrete cause regarding this occurrence.

²⁴ Leslie Roberts, "HIV/AIDS in America," *Science* 337 no. 6091 (July 2012): 167.

²⁵ John D'Emilio, "Homosexuality," in *The Reader's Companion to American History*, eds. Eric Foner and John A. Garraty (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), 513-514.

²⁶ Joseph Orser, Office Hours Discussion, University of Wisconsin: Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI, October 22, 2013.

made themselves role models to lesbians around the world who had been struggling with their sexual orientation in the arena of sports. However, that big name athlete has yet to come out of the closet on the men's side of sports. That is not to say, however, that some moderately well known athletes have not done just that. Greg Louganis comes to mind. Perhaps the most recognizable gay athlete, Louganis was a diver who won multiple gold medals in both the 1984 and 1988 summer Olympics.²⁷ His accomplishments in terms of diving are many, but perhaps what he is remembered most for is his revelation that he is gay. In 1994, Louganis attended the Gay Games, a special Olympic-like event that only gay athletes can compete in and announced for the first time that he was indeed a homosexual.²⁸ Obviously the crowd at the Gay Games cheered and appreciated his coming out, but the general public response was more of a mixed bag.

A factor that complicated the public's opinion of Louganis's coming out was that in 1995, he announced in his book *Breaking the Surface* that he was also HIV-positive.²⁹ This was especially important because during one of his dives at the 1988 Olympics, he hit his head on the diving board, producing a bleeding cut. He then fell into the pool, in theory infecting the water with HIV.³⁰ Upon his admission that he had AIDS (his HIV developed into AIDS), there was a public outrage that the other Olympians diving into the same pool after Louganis were put at risk of contracting HIV, and that Louganis, who knew by that time that he had the disease, should not have continued competing and let officials know about his condition. The newspapers at the time

²⁷ Greg Louganis and Daniel McSwiney, "About," *Greg Louganis* (2011): <http://greglouganis.com/about/> (accessed 9 April, 2013).

²⁸ James C. McKinley Jr., "GAY GAMES; Louganis Still Performs Like Gold Both Off the Board and on the Mike," *The New York Times*, 21 June 1994, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/21/sports/gay-games-louganis-still-performs-like-gold-both-off-the-board-and-on-the-mike.html?ref=greglouganis>.

²⁹ Richard Sandomir, "DIVING; Louganis, Olympic Champion, Says He Has AIDS," *The New York Times*, 23 February 1995, accessed April 9 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/23/sports/diving-louganis-olympic-champion-says-he-has-aids.html?ref=greglouganis>.

³⁰ Sandomir, "DIVING."

wrote extensively on how dangerous HIV was, thus spreading the concern that the other divers could have gotten the illness.³¹ This pandemonium, however, brought forward many different doctors assuring the public that there was almost no risk of the other athletes from Louganis's cut, thus quelling the initial fear.³²

The public reaction to Greg Louganis's coming out was overshadowed, at least at the time, by the HIV scare. He was highly criticized for not revealing he was HIV-positive at the time of the accident, with all of his sponsors dropping him after his announcement (except for Speedo) and he was shunned by the USA Diving team in the years to come.³³ These occurrences can both be contributed to the HIV scandal, but the more likely explanation is that the sponsors and the USA Diving team did not want to be associated with an openly gay athlete. Look at Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe. Both publicly announced that they had HIV, yet they were seen as heroes in their sports (basketball and tennis respectively).³⁴ The difference between the two is that Greg Louganis is openly gay, while the other two athletes are/were heterosexual. This occurrence is critically important to understanding the homophobic world of sports. It makes it clear that it is not just the people directly involved in sports that show signs of homophobia in an increasingly more tolerant society, but also the people who watch and follow sports. The public were the ones that made Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe heroes, not the sporting world. That means it was also the public that made Greg Louganis a controversial figure as a gay athlete.

³¹ Mark Sears, "Misguided Coverage," *The New York Times*, 19 March 1995, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/19/sports/l-misguided-coverage-414595.html?ref=greglouganis>.

³² Lawrence K. Altman, "OLYMPICS; AIDS Transmission Risk In Sports Is Virtually Nil," *The New York Times*, 24 February 1995, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/24/sports/olympics-aids-transmission-risk-in-sports-is-virtually-nil.html?ref=greglouganis>.

³³ Rebecca Shore, "Flying with Ease," *Sports Illustrated* 117, issue 2 (9 July 2012): 102-104.

³⁴ Madelynn Rigopoulos, "Those Who Criticized Greg Louganis Missed the Point," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 March 1995, accessed April 9, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-26/news/ls-47138_1_hiv-status-disclosure-sports-world.

One might say that it was not the fact that Louganis is gay that made the public react to him the way they did, but rather the blood in the pool controversy. However, this is not entirely the case. It is valid to say that Louganis gained criticism when he decided not to tell the Olympic officials that he had AIDS, but that alone would unlikely have created as much outrage. There was clearly another factor that contributed to the public's feelings about the diver, his being gay the most probable cause.

One must keep in mind that all of this happened after his professional career. However, Louganis actually had an easier time than most gay athletes with coming out. Because he came out post-career, there was no danger of getting kicked off of a team or having fellow athletes refuse to work with him due to his sexuality. Also, diving is an individual sport, removing the possibility that teammates would not accept him for being gay. This does not change the fact that Louganis faced an immensely difficult challenge in coming out to the people of the world. It is clear that the public and especially the institution of sports were not receptive to his sexual orientation, and he risked his entire legacy when coming out. This just goes to show how hard it is to come out in sports under the best circumstances, emphasizing that it is even harder to come out under different ones, such as being part of a team, or especially if someone is still an active athlete.

Louganis revealed he was gay almost twenty years after Dave Kopay did, and the passage of time clearly made a difference. When Greg Louganis came out to the public, he celebrated it. It was a proud moment in his life and one that allowed him the freedom to be who he really was. That is not to say that Kopay did not view his coming out as a proud moment. However, Louganis came out on his own free will without being pushed to do so by an outside source; he

wanted to celebrate his sexuality for the whole world to see.³⁵ Ultimately, it was his drive to support fellow gay athletes that led him to do what he did. In Kopay's case, there was the drive to help defend other gay athletes and prove a point that people like him existed in the NFL during the mid-1970s. It was less of a celebration of who he was and more of a necessary act that was done to defend his and millions of others' lifestyle.

The public reaction that Louganis received was also unique. He came out to a crowd of about 15,000 gay and lesbian athletes at the 1994 Gay Games in New York.³⁶ The Gay Games was first hosted in 1982³⁷, seven years after Kopay came out, meaning that he did not have a chance to receive the support of an active and public homosexual athletic community. Observably, the American public at the time Louganis made his announcement was not as forward thinking and accepting of him as a crowd of gays and lesbians was, but the fact that the Gay Games existed gave Louganis an incredible support system that was not available to Kopay.

Seeing the creation of the Gay Games as a step forward in terms of gay rights is important to understanding this argument. In the 1970s, it would have been unthinkable that a public group of thousands of gay and lesbian athletes would be celebrating who they were for the entire nation to witness. However, attitudes changed (and continue to do so today). The homosexual community was willing to push for an Olympic-like event to showcase the spirit of the people, and the United States allowed it to happen. Taking this news as a sign of quick progress, on the other hand, would be a mistake. The Gay Games received plenty of criticisms when it was created. Most notably was the controversy of the name in 1980. The founder of the Gay Games, Tom Waddell, believed that the name of the event should have been "Gay

³⁵ Greg Louganis with Eric Marcus, *Breaking the Surface*, (Naperville: Sourcebooks Inc., 2006), 274.

³⁶ Louganis, *Breaking the Surface*, 269-274.

³⁷ "History," *Gay Games*, accessed on 8 October, 2013. <http://www.gg9cle.com/gay-games/history/>

Olympics.”³⁸ The U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) sued Waddell over the use of the word “Olympic,” winning the case and forcing the name to be changed to “Gay Games.”³⁹ However, various other athletic groups were using the word “Olympic” in their title and they were never sued by the USOC. There were the Nebraska Rat Olympics and the Police Olympics, yet they were allowed to keep their names.⁴⁰ It seems as if the Gay Games were singled out because of the politically and socially charged topic of homosexuals in society. The USOC did not want to be associated with gay athletes, leading to the conclusion that while attitudes had changed between Kopay and Louganis, sports were still not accepting of gay athletes in 1994 when Greg Louganis came out to the public.

Jump ahead to the year 1998. Olympic champion Mark Tewksbury of Canada has come out of the closet to several people, but has made no formal public announcement. He is done with his swimming career, but he is still traveling the world as an inspirational speaker. Tewksbury had a twelve-stop speaking circuit set up for a financial institution (not named in the source). In late 1998, Tewksbury received a phone call from his speaking agent informing him that the circuit was cancelled because the institution thought that he was “too gay.”⁴¹ This was



³⁸ Joe Clark, “The Glo
<http://joelclark.org/g>

³⁹ Clark, “The Glory.”

⁴⁰ Clark, “The Glory.”

⁴¹ Mark Tewksbury, /

er, 2013.

Canada, 2006), 151.

the final straw. Doing a one-man show live on stage in December of 1998, Mark Tewksbury finally, after living a life of a closeted athlete, announced he was gay for the whole world to hear.⁴²

The reaction to Tewksbury's announcement was enormous. He was trying to be booked by every news agency in Canada, everyone wanted to hear what he had to say. Holding a press conference two days after his coming-out, already the accusations were pouring in. "Who cares" was a common phrase; unfortunately for Tewksbury it was in the context of "Who cares, he's only doing it to further his career."⁴³ Others asked "Why do we have to talk about it?" It was as if the world did not actually want to hear about his sexuality, but instead hear about his reasoning behind his actions.⁴⁴ This all sounds a little too familiar. It had been twenty-three years since Dave Kopay came out of the closet, and yet here was Mark Tewksbury answering the same questions that hounded the famous NFL star.

To say that nothing had changed would be untrue. While Dave Kopay did receive support for his announcement, it was not to the extent to which Tewksbury received approval.⁴⁵ Also, Greg Louganis received incredible support from the gay community, but the general public did not show that same appreciation. Tewksbury, on the other hand, got an amazing amount of letters congratulating him on his achievement, and many phone calls of admiration.⁴⁶ Clearly there *has* been positive change in accepting gay athletes for who they are. Yet, as Tewksbury clearly states, "Of course, not everyone liked the news, but at least for many small-minded people, gay now had a face. I posed a problem for them because on one hand they admired what I stood for

⁴² Tewksbury, *Inside Out*, 164.

⁴³ Tewksbury, *Inside Out*, 164.

⁴⁴ Tewksbury, *Inside Out*, 165.

⁴⁵ Jim Buzinski, "Moment #1: Dave Kopay Comes Out as Gay in Newspaper Interview," last modified October 4, 2011, accessed September 18, 2013, <http://www.outsports.com/2011/10/4/4051948/moment-1-dave-kopay-comes-out-as-gay-in-newspaper-interview>.

⁴⁶ Mark Tewksbury, *Inside Out: Straight Talk From a Gay Jock*, (Mississauga: John Wiley & Sons Canada, 2006), 165.

as an athlete and Olympian, and on the other hand my announcement disgusted them.”⁴⁷

Dissecting that comment, it relates to the fact that homosexuality did not have a part in society back then. People clearly admired Mark Tewksbury for his athletic achievements and for his Olympic performance, yet because of the single fact that he is homosexual, much of the public could not accept him. Their homophobia when it came to sports outweighed their love of the same institution, creating an uncomfortable mix for them and forcing them to bemoan the state of their beloved athletics.

In regards to today’s contemporary athletes, sports history has the example of basketball player Jason Collins, the first active male athlete to come out as gay at a professional level in the United States. On April 9th, 2013, Collins came out in an issue of *Sports Illustrated*.⁴⁸ Comparisons were immediately made between him and Jackie Robinson, and praise quickly arose. Perhaps the most stunning and special support to Collins came from former President Bill Clinton in a statement. He said,

“Jason’s announcement today is an important moment for professional sports and in the history of the LGBT community. It is also the straightforward statement of a good man who wants no more than what so many of us seek: to be able to be who we are; to do our work; to build families and to contribute to our communities. For so many members of the LGBT community, these simple goals remain elusive. I hope that everyone, particularly Jason’s colleagues in the NBA, the media and his many fans extend to him their support and the respect he has earned.”⁴⁹

To have a former President of the United States make a statement about someone coming out of the closet while still an active member of an NBA team makes it quite obvious that it is a rare and incredible happening. Something else was also said by Collins in the *Sports Illustrated*

⁴⁷ Tewksbury, *Inside Out*, 165.

⁴⁸ Ross Forman, *Windy City Times* (Chicago), 01 May 2013, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Forman, *Windy City Times*, 38.

interview that needs to be brought to the center of discussion. He is quoted as saying, “I wish I wasn't the kid in the classroom raising his hand and saying, ‘I'm different.’ If I had my way, someone else would have already done this. Nobody has, which is why I'm raising my hand.”⁵⁰ This quote shows that yes, Jason Collins had enough courage to be his true self, yet there was a huge amount of hesitation in his decision. He was thinking of coming out back in 2011,⁵¹ but it took him two years to work up the nerve to go through with it. That is not so say that it is his fault that he waited so long. Rather, it is the fault of the institution of sports being so homophobic that makes it so difficult for an athlete in any sport to come out in the United States. Another part of that quote deals with the fact that no one had done what Collins just did. There has not been a single professional male athlete to come out in the four major US sports (football, basketball, baseball and hockey). Ever. Something is especially strange about that fact. Jason Collins, keeping in mind how sports mimic American society as a whole, should not have been the first athlete to do this. It is a huge step for a former athlete to come out, there is no doubt about that, but the statistic remains that Jason Collins was the first to do it while still actively playing in the year 2013.

The experience Collins had while coming out it again different than those that had come out before him. The most obvious one is that he was able to come out while still playing in the NBA. No athlete in a time period before him had been able to come out while still an active player. This means that the athletic public is not as blatantly homophobic as it was thirty-eight, or even fifteen, years ago. In the case of Jason Collins, he also received support from fellow players in the NBA, the most notable being from LeBron James when he said, “I think it’s very noble on his part. I think it’s a strong thing to do, and I think as NBA players, we all offer him

⁵⁰ Jason Collins with Franz Lidz, “Why NBA Center Jason Collins is Coming Out Now,” *Sports Illustrated*, May 6, 2013, <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/magazine/news/20130429/jason-collins-gay-nba-player/>.

⁵¹ Collins, “Why NBA Center.”

our support.”⁵² Looking at Louganis and Tewksbury, they are both members of individual sports. Because they were both in the Olympics, they were technically part of a national team, however Louganis dives alone, and Tewksbury swims alone. Both did not have teammates to worry about when they came out. Dave Kopay, on the other hand, was a member of a team sport. If he had come out during his playing career, his teammates would have likely shunned him or had a problem being in the locker-room with him. That was likely a driving force behind his decision to not come out during his playing career, and instead wait until retirement when his teammates’ opinions did not affect him. Jason Collins participates in a team sport, yet came out while still an active player. Clearly the institution of sports, or at least the NBA, has changed enough where some members of the gay community feel comfortable being themselves while playing sports.

Keeping in mind the four athletes discussed above, their individual stories and experiences can be put together in order to make the argument that the arena of sports is slowly moving towards becoming accepting of gay male participants. Dave Kopay was almost forced to come out of the closet, he initially did not want to reveal that personal fact, but journalism required him to do so. The sporting public reacted unkindly and even with hostility and disbelief. They did not want to hear about gay men in sports, with some instead choosing to believe that Kopay was lying and that there were not gay men in their land of masculinity.

Greg Louganis then came out and received wide support from the gay and lesbian community, but still not from the American public. They viewed his HIV scandal along with his sexual orientation as grounds to dislike him as an athlete. Also, the other divers he competed with, along with the organization of the USA diving team, did not view him as a member of their close-knit team.

⁵² Joseph Goodman, “Miami Heat Players Support Gay Colleague Jason Collins,” *Miami Herald*, May 1, 2013, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/05/01/3373727/miami-heat-players-support-gay.html>

Similarly to Louganis, Mark Tewksbury came from an individual sport; when he came out, there was not a fear of hostilities from former teammates. The public's reaction was more of a mixed bag than it was with Louganis, some of them accepting him for who he was and others afraid of what kind of changes an openly gay former athlete would bring to conservative sports. It is clear, though, that he had more public support than did Louganis or Kopay. It is important to note, however, that Tewksbury came out and lived in Canada, which is typically more liberal than the United States. The reaction to Jason Collins lends credit to the belief that if Tewksbury had come out in the U.S. he would have received much of the same support as he did in Canada, but it is still important to keep that variable in mind.

Finally, Jason Collins came out in a time when it is becoming much more acceptable to be a gay male. It would be foolish to think that the entire sporting public appreciated and celebrated his coming out, but he received significant support from the American people, the media, and fellow players.

This progression towards acceptance of gay male athletes in the United States is clear based on these case studies, but it does not change the fact that while gay rights have been moving quickly in other social settings, such as the institution of marriage, it has been a late start and a slow crawl when it comes to sports. Why is that? Why does the institution of sports, which usually reflects the attitudes of the United States public, remain behind the times on this particular subject? Why are so many sport fans, coaches, and even the players themselves against gay athletes coming out? What is the root cause of all this homophobia in the world of male athletics? Why do homosexual males feel the need to keep who they are a secret while playing? These are the ultimate questions that need to be answered.

Pressures Keeping Gay Athletes in the Closet

To think that there is one specific factor that creates a hostile environment for gays in sports is at best naive, and at worst harmful. There are a vast array of reasons that gay athletes feel pressured to stay silent about their homosexual identity, ranging from the reaction of teammates to the repercussions it has on endorsement deals. There are also many societal forces that control the difficulty of coming out, oftentimes preventing athletes from doing so at all levels of sport. The fact of the matter is, at the professional level, these pressures are too much. Athletes, being paid thousands, even millions of dollars do not risk getting cut from the team based on their sexual identity.

However, at lower levels, especially high school, there are far more instances of athletes coming out. Various studies have been done at this basic level of sports in order to understand the reasoning behind their decisions, and extensive interviews have been conducted with both openly gay and closeted athletes. The results show, unsurprisingly, that every athlete has a different reason from coming out or staying in, and that it is often a blend of these reasons that ultimately form the rationale behind their decisions.

If there is one single argument that is most commonly made against openly gay athletes being part of a team, it is that his teammates would be uncomfortable in the locker room. "If he's gay, then I don't want to be around him when I'm naked, he might come on to me," they say. While these people certainly exist, it would surprise many to see that in most contemporary cases at the high school and college level, the majority of teammates are supportive of the gay athlete. According to various interviews done by sociologist Eric Anderson in his book *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*, teammates are generally accepting. John, a Native

American high school basketball player, was found to be gay (he was seen making advances on a teammate). At first, there was a primary period of awkwardness, “I mean, they avoided me for a while, especially that next day. Nobody wanted to sit near me, and there were some initial comments about me not wanting girls and stuff.”⁵³ However, attitudes quickly changed. John began to blend in with the rest of the team, and his sexuality was never brought up again.⁵⁴

Another openly gay athlete, Ryan, was a nineteen year old college coxswain for a rowing team. When he came out, he, “...was a bit nervous at first” but he later realized that the team did not care. “It wasn’t an issue. We didn’t even talk about it.”⁵⁵

While these stories show that many teammates of gay athletes do not have a problem with differing sexualities, they bring up a thought-provoking point. It is understandable that a recently outed athlete would not want to draw even more attention to himself and be a possible target for bullying, yet it is perplexing that his teammates did not want to talk about it. Anderson calls this phenomenon a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.⁵⁶ Similar to how the United States military once did not allow gay men to announce their sexuality, the locker room has a similar structure. A team may suspect that an athlete is gay, but they are not likely to ask the individual about it for fear of it being true and changing the dynamic of the entire team. When an athlete does come out, some may be aggressive opponents, but most of the teammates will likely accept the news and never talk about it again.⁵⁷

This unwritten rule at first seems like a fair compromise between a gay athlete and teammates that do not fully appreciate the homosexual lifestyle. Still, it brings up some

⁵³ Eric Anderson, *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 110.

⁵⁴ Anderson, *In the Game*, 110-111.

⁵⁵ Anderson, *In the Game*, 95.

⁵⁶ Anderson, *In the Game*, 109-117.

⁵⁷ Anderson, *In the Game*, 110-116.

unfortunate side-effects. High school males talk about only a few things, those being video games, cars, sports, and girls. While a gay athlete would be able to participate in the first three discussions, when it comes to girls he is left out in the cold. In the locker room, young males often talk about their relationships with women and if they find a particular woman to be attractive or not. What does not get discussed is if a gay athlete finds a man to be good looking. Homosexual athletes are in general treated as equals in terms of their athletic prowess, but they are unequal in the social and public sphere. The heterosexual athletes are free to be who they really are, to have a true and uncompromised identity, while gays are relegated to second class citizens in the society of sports.⁵⁸

While the situation of don't ask don't tell is not ideal in terms of changing the way the public views gay athletes, it pales in comparison to what happens when teammates are overtly hostile to people they deem different, or even inferior. Dale, a high school football player, remained closeted for all of high school because the team he was on was dangerously homophobic. They would say things such as, "fucking faggots should all be shot."⁵⁹ Dale was afraid that if he came out, he would be physically beaten, or worse. These reports, while not in the majority, are still common in American society, and because of that many gay athletes are afraid of coming out. Closeted team members across the United States are proud of coming out and receiving support from their teammates, but the horror stories are still out there, keeping the closet door tightly shut and trapping gay athletes solely with the power of words.

Another factor keeping sports behind the rest of society in terms of acceptance of homosexuals is coaches. Where some teammates can be homophobic and gay athletes can still play the sport they love, if a coach is homophobic, gays are in a more difficult situation. High

⁵⁸ Anderson, *In the Game*, 116.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *In the Game*, 83-84.

school teacher and football coach Bob Grisham was suspended for making derogatory remarks about homosexuals, saying, “I don’t believe in queers. I don’t like queers, I don’t hate them as a person, but what they do is wrong and an abomination against God.”⁶⁰ A gay athlete would not be able to be open about his sexuality if he had a coach like Grisham. Someone so against homosexuals would not and do not tolerate openly gay men on their team, making it impossible for a gay athlete to come out of the closet. Thankfully, the majority of coaches are more tolerant. Eric Anderson, himself a gay coach, was very supportive of attempts to start a gay-friendly organization at the high school where he coached. Gay people began coming out when Anderson himself did, leading by example. A member of the track team that Anderson coached finally felt safe enough to come out as a gay athlete, all thanks to a supportive coach.⁶¹ This instance shows just how much of an impact a coach can have on the lives of both straight and gay athletes. Coaches can keep athletes in the closet, or they can help them come out.

While all three of these experiences are those of either high school or college students, it is not difficult to relate them back to Kopay, Louganis, Tewksbury and Collins. When Kopay came out in 1975, it was after his career was long over. He was a member of a team sport, with teammates that, during that time period, would likely have reacted poorly to his revelation. He was not willing to put his playing career at risk by announcing his sexuality and having his teammates, or even coach, strive to get rid of him. He also did not want to put his endorsement deals at risk, which they certainly would have been.⁶² It is no surprise, then, that Kopay did not come out during his career, and was still hesitant before finally being pushed out by the public’s belief that there are no gay athletes in American sports.

⁶⁰ Lisa Singleton-Rickman, *Times Daily* (Alabama), “Teacher Linked to Gay Slurs at School,” 30 May 2013.

⁶¹ Dan Woog, *Jocks: True Stories of America’s Gay Male Athletes*, (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1998): 7, 11-12.

⁶² Heidi Parker and Janet Fink, “Arrest Record or Openly Gay: The Impact of Athletes’ Personal Lives on Endorser Effectiveness,” *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 21 (2012): 70-76.



Greg Louganis being helped out of the pool after hitting his head on the diving board during the 1988 Olympics.
<http://www.standard.co.uk/incoming/article7793788.ece/ALTERNATES/w460/Greg-Louganis-2.jpg>

Louganis had a different experience because he was a member of an individual sport. He did not have to worry about what his teammates would think because he did not have any. Still, as previously stated, once he came out, he was shunned by the United States diving team,⁶³ showing just how challenging coming out was even in the best of circumstances. Louganis's coach, Ron O' Brien, was accepting of Louganis and knew all about his homosexuality and HIV.⁶⁴ He was surrounded by people that supported him, and yet when he came out, Louganis still received public criticism to go along with the criticism he received from the very organization that he had represented in the Olympics. The disapproval did not amount to nearly as much as Kopay received, but the difference can be accounted for by keeping in mind that American society had changed drastically between Kopay and Louganis, and that their sports were different as well. Kopay had teammates and coach to worry about, while Louganis had no teammates and an understanding coach, leaving only the public to worry about.

⁶³ Rebecca Shore, "Flying with Ease," *Sports Illustrated* 117, issue 2 (9 July 2012): 102-104.

⁶⁴ Greg Louganis with Eric Marcus, *Breaking the Surface*, (Naperville: Sourcebooks Inc., 2006), 176.

Tewksbury was also part of an individual sport, so he dealt with many of the same factors as Louganis. In his autobiography, Tewksbury does not talk about how his former coaches took the announcement that he was gay. This shows that, unlike Louganis, Mark Tewksbury did not have a close relationship with his coach Deryk Snelling, the man who coached Tewksbury when he won Olympic gold.⁶⁵ It is likely that Snelling had an idea that Tewksbury was gay; however the fact that he is not mentioned in the autobiography leads to the conclusion that the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of a coach did not have an impact on Tewksbury's decision to come out post-career. Also similarly to Louganis, Tewksbury did not have teammates to worry about when he decided to announce his homosexuality. However, while Louganis was shunned by the United States diving team, Tewksbury was not. In fact, in 2012 he was named Canada's "Chief de Mission" for the Olympic Games in London. This means that Tewksbury represented the entire nation for the whole world to see.⁶⁶

So while Louganis was removed from the spotlight when it came to diving, Tewksbury was made into a poster-boy for Canadian athletes. While this could certainly be an effect of the fact that Louganis lived in the United States while Tewksbury lived in Canada, one must also keep in mind the time difference between the two athletes. Louganis came out in 1994 during a time that was more socially conservative than in 2010, when Tewksbury was made into Canada's Chief de Mission. When he first came out in 1998, Tewksbury, as previously discussed, received quite a bit of support from those close to him, former teammates included. It was members of the general public that took it upon themselves to make the announcement into a problem, not those

⁶⁵ Swimming Canada, "Deryk Snelling," accessed 5 November, 2013, <https://www.swimming.ca/DerykSnellingbioEN>.

⁶⁶ Giuseppe Valiante, "Tewksbury Named Team Canada 2012 'Chef de Mission'," *Calgary Herald*, 5 August, 2010, accessed on 5 November, 2013. <http://www.calgaryherald.com/health/Tewksbury+named+Team+Canada+2012+Chef+Mission/3362316/story.html>.

who knew Tewksbury well. Again, a change can be seen in attitudes towards homosexuals in sports, yet it still remained that many sports fans had a problem with Tewksbury being a gay athlete, keeping consistent with the belief that when it comes to homosexuality, sports do not necessarily reflect larger society.

Jason Collins gives this research a drastically different case to study. Not only did he come out while still active in athletics, he is part of a team sport. When he came out, the social media site Twitter exploded with support for Collins. In addition to big names like Kobe Bryant, present and past teammates voiced their support.⁶⁷ One of his coaches, Randy Wittman of the Washington Wizards, came forward as supporting Jason Collins after he came out, stating that, “How I think of him doesn’t change.”⁶⁸ There are many clear indications that the world of sports within the United States is much more accepting to gay athletes than it was 40 years ago,⁶⁹ and that is clearly the case. However, making such a clear cut conclusion would be a mistake.

As Eric Anderson discussed at the high school level, there is clearly a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy put in place by society in team sports. When Collins came out of the closet, teammates such as Bradley Bean, a rookie guard for the Wizards in 2013, said,

“It’s a shock. To me and probably everybody else as well, because you would never think that, that him being the guy he is, that he would be that way. I only see him as a great player first, and a

⁶⁷ “Ex-Teammates, Fans React to NBA Player Jason Collins Announcing He’s Gay,” *NBC News*, 29 April, 2013, accessed on 5 November, 2013, http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/04/29/17971332-ex-teammates-fans-react-to-nba-player-jason-collins-announcing-hes-gay.

⁶⁸ Michael Lee, “Jason Collins Coming Out Met by Wizards Teammates with Surprise and Support,” *The Washington Post*, 29 April, 2013, accessed on 5 November, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/wizards/jason-collins-coming-out-met-by-wizards-teammates-with-surprise-and-support/2013/04/29/2c84721e-b11f-11e2-9fb1-62de9581c946_story.html.

⁶⁹ Michael Rosenberg, “Reaction to Jason Collins Shows How Far Public Opinion has Shifted,” *Sports Illustrated*, 29 April, 2013, accessed on 5 November, 2013, <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/nba/news/20130429/jason-collins-gay-nba-future/>.

great asset to our team and a guy who really helped us out... His sexual orientation has nothing to do with the game of basketball.”⁷⁰

While this quote is supportive of Collins as a basketball player, it also points out the fact that he believes that his sexual orientation is not something that should be talked about. Bean believed that Jason Collins was straight because of the way he acted. Reading between the lines, the statement reveals that Bean thinks that there is some way to tell if a man is gay, such as being more feminine. Collins is a strong athlete, so it seems odd to Bean that such a well built, physical basketball player is gay because he goes against the stereotype that gay men are weaker than heterosexual men, especially athletes.

It is clear that Bean is uncomfortable with discussing homosexuality when one looks at his comment, “His sexual orientation has nothing to do with the game of basketball.” He may very well be comfortable around Jason Collins but, judging by his statement, he would not actively ask Collins questions about his personal life. In the locker room, just as at the high school level, Collins would be left out of the conversation because he is “different.” While his teammates accept him and are proud of him, he is still ostracized simply for being a homosexual athlete because he does not relate to some of his teammates common experiences.

Clearly, teammates and coaches can shape the experiences of high school and college athletes, and this clearly shows that no matter what level of sports is being analyzed, the same interactions can be seen. Kopay, Louganis, Tewksbury, and Collins all dealt with the same issues that younger, less professional athletes face. Why is that? Due to the fact that the same sort of homophobia can be seen at all levels throughout history, the most logical explanation is that the institution of sports, as a whole, is not as tolerant as the rest of American society. Kopay did not

⁷⁰ Michael Lee, “Jason Collins Coming Out Met by Wizards Teammates with Surprise and Support,” *The Washington Post*, 29 April, 2013, accessed on 5 November, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/wizards/jason-collins-coming-out-met-by-wizards-teammates-with-surprise-and-support/2013/04/29/2c84721e-b11f-11e2-9fb1-62de9581c946_story.html.

come out during his playing career partially because he was afraid of how his teammates would react (among a myriad of other factors of course). Louganis did not come out while actively diving because of the public's lingering fear of HIV and their intolerance of a gay community. Tewksbury did not come out during his swimming career because he was afraid of losing endorsements and how the Canadian public would react to his announcement, anticipating negative reactions. All of these reasons, no matter the sport or level, could belong to any one athlete in the United States in the past forty years. They are universal. Jason Collins broke the barrier for openly gay active athletes at the professional level in the tolerant year of 2013, yet people were still not ready to fully accept and be comfortable with who he really is.

While gay athletes struggle with their identity and how they fit into a heteronormative society to this day, it is important to reiterate that progress is being made. Collins was clearly treated better than Kopay was, and younger athletes are finding it increasingly easier to come out to their teammates and coaches. Action is being taken against those who discriminate against gays in the sporting world and support for a peaceful and more accepting sports environment is growing stronger and louder. The rest of American society, however, is still ahead of the game. Gay marriage is becoming legal in states across the nation, laws are being changed in terms of protecting the rights of gay and lesbian couples, and even in popular media are seen positive examples of homosexual couples fitting in with the rest of the nation. Sports is usually a leader of progressive action⁷¹ as can be seen with Jackie Robinson as well as with women's sports. Nevertheless, when it comes to homosexuality and acceptance of openly gay members, the club that is sports remains outdated in this one specific instance. One final question needs to be answered to fully understand why this is. What is the basic characteristic in regards to sports that

⁷¹ Michael Rosenberg, "Reaction to Jason Collins Shows How Far Public Opinion has Shifted," *Sports Illustrated*, 29 April, 2013, accessed on 5 November, 2013, <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/nba/news/20130429/jason-collins-gay-nba-future/>.

has supported centuries of homophobia that is only now slowly being chipped away by the enlightenment of the human experience and what it means to be yourself? The answer is the idea of masculinity.

Masculinity

To be masculine, according to an online edition of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is to have “qualities appropriate to or usually associated with a man.” While this definition is correct and accepted in our society, a gay athlete would have a hard time fitting in perfectly with this belief of what it means to be masculine. Bringing the source *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity* by Eric Anderson back into the discussion is an excellent way to discuss this point. In the book, Anderson writes extensively on the subject of masculinity and how it is one of the most powerful aspects of sports that makes it difficult for gay athletes to feel comfortable with who they are.

When it comes to sports, it is important for a male athlete to appear as masculine as possible. In our American society, being a masculine athlete is all about being strong and dedicated. Coaches push athletes to ignore their own bodies when they are injured, to play through the pain.⁷² If they do not, they are seen as weak and unable to play a sport at the highest level. Additionally, sports propagate a violent society. In order to be successful in sports, one forcefully takes away victory from an opponent through the use of violence, such as tackling, making the opponent not as masculine. When doing so, the victor puts himself at a higher level of masculinity than the loser. It is this fact, that not everyone can be at the same level of

⁷² Eric Anderson, *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 110.

masculinity, that promotes the practice of marginalizing others in order to raise yourself up to a higher level of masculinity,⁷³ one step closer to reaching the socially-created prototype of a perfect, masculine man.

Gay athletes are one of those marginalized groups. To many athletes as well as the American public, homosexuality is synonymous with physical weakness and emotional frailty.⁷⁴ For this reason, homophobic slurs are often thrown about by athletes at all levels in order make someone else seem less masculine, while at the same time making themselves appear more masculine by their ability to move up the “masculine ladder.” Calling someone a “faggot” also has the effect of proving to those around you that you are not gay yourself.⁷⁵ The reasoning is that if you were gay, you would never call someone else a faggot, so that must mean that you are straight. While only half of the people that call someone a faggot contextualize it as a purely homophobic remark,⁷⁶ that shows that homosexuals have become so ingrained in the society of sports as inferior athletes that faggot has become synonymous with weak, or non-masculine.

Calling someone a fag is so necessary in some sports to prove how tough you are, that closeted gay athletes feel pressured to call others fags to move the scrutiny away from themselves, even though they understand how harmful such language can be. For example, “Dale” was a football player in high school who seemed to have it all. He was popular, had a lot of friends, and was good enough at football that he gained a scholarship to play for a U.S. Military College. What nobody knew, however, was that he was gay. He was forced to play football by his dad in order to grow up into a “real man.” Dale heard the word fag tossed around a lot whenever someone messed up, and nobody thought anything of it. Nevertheless, Dale found

⁷³ Anderson, *In the Game*, 33.

⁷⁴ Anderson, *In the Game*, 13.

⁷⁵ Anderson, *In the Game*, 22.

⁷⁶ Shawn Meghan Burn, “Heterosexuals’ Use of ‘Fag’ and ‘Queer’ to Deride One Another,” *Journal of Homosexuality* vol. 40 no. 2 (October, 2008): 1-11.

it unbelievable that such homophobic language was so ingrained in the sport. As time went on, even Dale himself was calling people faggots. He was ashamed of himself, but he felt like he had to call the swimmers and runners gay because if he did not, guys on his team might have thought he was gay. Dale had to call people fags, even though he knew how wrong and harmful it was because otherwise, he would be called a fag instead.⁷⁷

All of this homophobic language can be traced back to heteronormatively constructed ideas of masculinity. No matter how masculine a sport seems, however, the fact remains that many sports are quite homoerotic. Take basketball for example. Throughout the game men are rubbing against each other on a regular basis, creating many instances of intimate contact between two straight men. Then, after the game, thirty men go back to a locker room, undress in front of each other and maybe even take a group shower. All of these homoerotic aspects combine to create an uncomfortable environment for heterosexual athletes. They combat these aspects of sport with homophobic language,⁷⁸ making it clear that they are not homosexuals and that they would not be comfortable with sharing their space with openly gay athletes.

A study by Brian Fair looks at high school wrestling and how homophobic language is often used in order to remove the stigma that wrestling itself is a homosexual sport. In wrestling, there is an incredible amount of physical contact between two men. The goal is to pin the opponent on the ground using your body, which leads to an intermingling of bodies and can often result in sexually suggestive positions. So while wrestling is seen as a highly masculine sport, the homoeroticism of it brings many to believe that wrestling is a “gay sport.”⁷⁹ Due to

⁷⁷ Eric Anderson, *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 19-20.

⁷⁸ Anderson, *In the Game*, 44.

⁷⁹ Brian Fair, “Constructing Masculinity Through Penetration Discourse: The Intersection of Misogyny and Homophobia in High School Wrestling,” *Men & Masculinities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 492.

these facts, it is interesting to note that Fair found that the word “fag” was almost never used by wrestlers, but instead was replaced with “pussy.” The men that are in a winning position of a wrestling match are often seen as the dominant ones (the men). This means that the men in the losing position are the dominated (women). Fair calls this “penetration discourse,” meaning that the men on top are doing the penetrating (akin to sexual encounters) while the men on bottom are being penetrated. These men are called pussies, which is slang for vaginas, because they are being penetrated by the winning wrestler.⁸⁰

All of this is not to say that homophobic feelings are not present in wrestling. In regards to adolescences, the sport is often seen as one of the most homoerotic around. Wrestlers feel like they must continually fend off accusations that their sport is gay.⁸¹ By using the word pussy to describe a teammate who is not as aggressive as he should be or that they perceive as weak, they are saying that he is gay and not fit to wrestle because he is not masculine.⁸²

Keeping in mind the fact that non-masculine men are labeled pussies in homoerotic sports such as wrestling, it is important to note another phenomenon that goes on in the locker room. Athletes talk about all sorts of things within the walls a locker room, but possibly the most common topic is women. Men talk about who they find attractive as well as brag about their heterosexual conquests.⁸³ It is not much of a stretch to compare the fact that some athletes use the word “pussy” to describe a weaker athlete to this sort of locker room talk. Many athletes view men as the dominant gender and talk about having sex with women in order to prove not only their masculinity through dominance but also their heterosexuality. If a man has sex with a

⁸⁰ Fair, “Constructing Masculinity,” 494.

⁸¹ Fair, “Constructing Masculinity,” 496.

⁸² Fair, “Constructing Masculinity,” 498.

⁸³ Eric Anderson, *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 22.

women, that man is not homosexual, or at least that is how many athletes at various levels think.

This is not always the case. A retired closeted NFL player, Terry, tells Eric Anderson that,

“With Steve I was the most mellow, and silly, and cuddly. It was a total different side of me. Then at practice I’d tell the guys on the team that I was fucking Tiffany. I wasn’t; I hadn’t even had sex with a girl, but you know you can’t say that.”⁸⁴

Gay athletes clearly feel pressure to make others believe that they are heterosexual by claiming to dominate women and have sex with them. If they do not do this, many feel like attention will be drawn to them and teammates may think that they are gay because they are not showing their masculinity by asserting their dominance. Like when wrestlers call people pussies, meaning that they are women and able to be dominated, other athletes protect against that by claiming to be the dominating one, the masculine one.

Masculinity is what drives sports to be a conservative institution in the face of a liberalized contemporary society. Athletes are taught from a young age that in order to be successful, they need to be masculine. And by masculine, they mean not like a girl. Homosexuals are seen as frail and weak, unable to withstand the rigors that sports demand of its participants. Of course, this view is false as can be seen with the examples of Kopay, Louganis, Tewksbury and Collins. They were some of the fittest, strongest, most dedicated, and skilled athletes in their sports. They were not frail or weak at all, and it is because of that that the sporting public was so unaccepting of them. Those professional athletes, because of their announced homosexuality, did not fit into the stereotype of a successful and capable sportsman.

The public was shocked when Kopay came out because he was an all-star football player, an athlete that was the epitome of masculinity. The fact that he was gay flew in the face of everything the sporting public was taught to believe by society ever since they themselves began

⁸⁴ Anderson, *In the Game*, 63.

playing sports as children. Growing up believing that feminine men could not succeed in such a physically demanding arena, they could not understand how such a perfect athlete could actually be gay. It challenged their worldview in terms of athletes and homosexuals being two completely separate categories with no overlap.

Greg Louganis came out to a very accepting crowd at the Gay Games. The fact that the Gay Games existed at the time shows that the sporting world was making progress towards acceptance. The straight public was quite a bit harsher. After the HIV scare of the 1980s, sporting public was not yet willing to accept that a gay man could accomplish such amazing physical feats. They were supposed to be weak and dainty like a woman through the eyes of a chauvinist. He dominated the diving world as a person that society says should have been the one being dominated. Louganis turned the tables on homophobic athletes and fans across the United States using three simple words, "I am gay."

The fact that Mark Tewksbury's announcement was met with general acceptance after his



Jason Collins, the first openly gay athlete in a major American sport.
<http://i.huffpost.com/gen/1110638/thumbs/o-JASON-COLLINS-COMES-OUT-facebook.jpg>

retirement once again speaks to the progress that was made through the gay rights movement. Even though he was gay, the sporting world understood that he was still masculine and that not all gay men are delicate beings unable to withstand the rigors of competitive sports. Still, there were many who disapproved of his homosexuality because of the repercussions it had in changing how sports were viewed not only in a conservative part of Canada similar to some parts of the United States, but around the world as well, through his participation in Olympic Committees.

Finally, Jason Collins came out while still an active player in the NBA and the sport itself, including his teammates and other players, supported his bravery. The public now has an active example of a gay athlete and everyone can see that even though he is gay, Jason Collins is clearly masculine and capable of fully participating in the sporting world. Such a stereotype is no longer possible to hold onto now that Jason Collins is out in the public proving that such ideas of masculinity and how it relates to homosexuals are irrefutably false. Gay athletes have not changed over the past thirty-eight years. Rather our society, and to a certain point sports within that society, has changed.

Conclusion

Gay athletes are everywhere. They are in every sport, from rugby to figure skating, and at all levels, from little league to the big leagues. Ever since the beginning of sports, homosexuals have participated in secret and out in the open. It is impossible to ignore the fact that gay athletes are real. However, the American public is still uneasy about this truth. Openly gay athletes were clearly frowned upon in the 1970s, and even though advancements in gay rights have occurred across the nation, the social institution of sports has trailed behind. A once progressive construction that previously brought racial and sexual equality to the foreground of the American social landscape has faltered in the historical drive for equality and tolerance. No one will bat an eye when they see a black baseball player, or a woman basketball player, but if you are an openly gay athlete in the United States, you must be ready to receive criticism and develop a thick skin to fend off the intolerance of the sporting public.

In one hundred years, openly gay athletes will not be called just that. They will instead be called athletes. Just as no one calls a black tennis player a “black tennis player” today, referring to an athlete as a gay athlete will be an unnecessary qualifier. It is clear that this will happen because of the progress that has been made in the past forty years. In the 1970s it was considered unacceptable to be a gay athlete, and now in the year 2013 it is considered standard by many to be who you are. In only 38 years, the homophobia in sports has diminished greatly.

Is it gone? By looking at all of the evidence presented in this paper, the answer is a resounding no. There are only a handful of active openly gay athletes playing professional sports at the moment, and while the numbers are certainly higher in lower levels, gay athletes are still afraid to come out because of how they think others will react. If a closeted athlete believes that his teammates will not tolerate his sexual orientation, he will likely not come out of the closet. If a gay athlete’s coach uses homophobic slurs or allows such language to be used, it is another barrier to his ability to express who he truly is.

The base cause of such fears come from the idea of masculinity and that homosexuals are weaker than heterosexual men. When Dave Kopay came out in 1975, he did not fit into this socially constructed idea, leading the public to outrage. Louganis and Tewksbury began to force the public to reconsider their notions of gay men and masculinity. Now, Jason Collins is an active example that traditional views of masculinity, manliness, or toughness are far outdated and frankly untrue. Yet, homophobic language is still used across all levels of sports. Whether it is used to make fun of someone for their weakness or to remove suspicion that you yourself are not gay, slurs and insults have permeated sports. Steps are being taken, however, to end such a practice. Coaches are sometimes fired if evidence of such activities is found, and gay athletes, along with others, are standing up to others that use such language to marginalize homosexuals.

At the same time, the same kind of coaches get away with similar actions every single day, and even gay sportsmen themselves are pushed to use homophobic words in order to keep their secret hidden from intolerant people.

There will come a day when gay athletes can be exactly who they are without being questioned or harassed, but it is not now. The history of homosexuals in sports within the United States leads us to the conclusion that while advancements have been made in how the sporting public treats gay athletes, there is still a long way to go. American society has made great strides in the acceptance of homosexuals across the country with actions such as the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy in the military, the legalization of gay marriage in 16 states,⁸⁵ and large-scale celebrations revolving around the gay lifestyle. Nevertheless, the institution of sports remains behind the rest of American society due to the fact that the idea of masculinity and stereotypes regarding homosexuals are at odds with one another. The American sports-loving people will soon have to face the fact that they have been wrong for decades.

⁸⁵ Reuters, “Gay Marriage in the U.S.: A Look at States which Allow Same-Sex Marriage,” *Huffington Post*, 11 November, 2013, accessed 26 November, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/21/gay-marriage-across-the-nation_n_4313018.html.

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