

# Gay Games or Gay Olympics?

## *Implications for*

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*Depuis 1982 les Jeux gais ont été organisés par des lesbiennes et des gais comme un festival sportif et l'occasion de se donner du pouvoir. La tendance récente vers le modèle de l'industrie olympique avec son emphase sur la compétition d'élite et sa dépendance auprès des sponsors corporatifs, menace le principe d'inclusion pour les lesbiennes et les minorités.*

When the first Gay Games, at that time called the “Gay Olympic Games”, were held in San Francisco in 1982, they were hailed as an empowering sporting and cultural celebration organized by and for lesbians, gays and their allies on the principles of inclusion and participation.<sup>1</sup> From their inception, discrimination based on “sexual orientation, gender, race, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, political belief(s), athletic/artistic ability, physical challenge, or HIV status” was prohibited; the Purpose of the Gay Games Sport and Cultural Festival was “to foster and augment the self-respect of lesbians and gay men ... and to engender respect and understanding from the non-gay world” (Federation of Gay Games). Since their modest beginnings in a San Francisco football stadium, the Gay Games have grown into an international sporting spectacle and business enterprise, with more than 20 core sporting events, a high level of competition between bidding cities, budgets exceeding \$US7m, corporate sponsors, and more participants than most Olympic Games have attracted.

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### **Organizing for social change**

For many Canadian and American lesbian and gay activists in the early 1980s, an enterprise such as the Gay Games represented a radical departure from their usual political work, in that it was primarily a proactive initiative—a sport and cultural festival designed to celebrate lesbian and gay existence. Unlike activists lobbying for legislative or policy change, Gay Games founders were less interested in reforming the mainstream than in creating an alternative, inclusive model of sporting competition. Although, for many, the Games

represented a reaction to homophobia in mainstream sport, significant numbers of participants with little prior sporting involvement were attracted by the principle of inclusion and the promise of community that the Games offered.

### **Gay Games organizing and the principle of inclusion**

The first two Gay Games were organized by San Francisco Arts and Athletics, a group founded by former Olympic decathlete Tom Waddell in 1981. By 1989, this organization had become the Federation of Gay Games (hereafter the Federation) and included board members from a number of participating countries outside North America. Gender parity in committee structures was a key principle from the outset. The year 1990 marked the first Gay Games held outside the USA, with the Metropolitan Vancouver Athletic/Arts Association (MVAAA), Canada, hosting the event with 29 sports and over 7,000 athletes. It is noteworthy that the words *lesbian* and *gay* were not part of the names of these first organizing groups, an omission that at least one critic viewed as an attempt to blend into the mainstream (Syms).

The 1994 Gay Games in New York, with 11,000 athletes from 45 countries, marked the first time that there had been competition between two bid cities; for the 1998 Games, there were three bids, and for 2002, five. The total cost of all five bids for the 2002 Gay Games exceeded the budgets for the first two Gay Games themselves (Boson, 1998), an indication of the growing trend towards emulating the Olympic model.

In the early 1980s when Waddell and others first began organizing the Gay Games, the principle of inclusion had different connotations—different for Waddell, a closeted gay man for much of his athletic career, and for most lesbian and gay athletes. Billy Jean King’s experience of homophobic backlash and her loss of commercial endorsements amply illustrated the safety of the closet for competitive athletes, particularly women. Similarly, jobs in coaching, sport administration and physical education were in jeopardy if sport leaders’ lesbian or gay identities became public knowledge, while athletes at every level risked harassment and ostracism if they came out (Lenskyj 1991). Twenty years later, with sport still representing the last bastion of sexism and homophobia, legislative and

# Lesbian Inclusion

policy changes are addressing some—but certainly not all—of the problems of discrimination facing lesbian and gay athletes.

Gay Games founders sought to provide an opportunity to participate in an openly lesbian and gay sport festival. As Waddell explained, “the message of these games goes beyond validating our culture. They were conceived as a new idea in the meaning of sport based on inclusion rather than exclusion” (cited in Coe 7). He envisioned the Gay Games as a way of raising consciousness and enlightening people both outside and inside lesbian and gay communities (Messner). Participation in the Games would challenge homophobia in the heterosexual world, and sexism, ageism, racism and nationalism among lesbian and gay people. He hoped that his dream of an “exemplary community” would be achieved through inclusive policies and practices: age-group competition, recruitment and outreach to ethnic minority athletes and those from the developing countries, and social and cultural events to break down the barriers of gender, class, ethnicity and dis/ability among gays and lesbians. Two decades later, there are continuing debates about the realization of these goals.

## Media representations of the Gay Games

In most written accounts of the Gay Games, lesbian and gay commentators seemed just as eager as their non-gay allies to *normalize* this sporting spectacle and its participants. There was a consistent emphasis on similarity rather than difference: “we” (lesbian and gay athletes) can break “their” (heterosexual) records; we can produce one of the biggest international sporting spectacles in the world; we can organize events that are officially approved by their international federations.

In the extensive lesbian and gay media coverage, there is a clear emphasis on using conventional sporting practices to counter homophobic stereotypes and to achieve lesbian and gay visibility and empowerment. In *The Story of Gay Games II*, Roy Coe described them as:

an important demonstration of our love for each other and our presence in the world community. Our statement as a minority group was clearly made through the wonderful spirit of camaraderie and friendly competition. (7)

And, in the 1990 photojournal of Gay Games III, the editors stated that the Games:

symbolized for thousands of gay men and women one more step along the road of self-discovery. And for one astounding week in time it was a road they could travel without ever having to apologize for their existence, or even having to suffer the strain of maintaining an appearance alien to their very nature. (Forzley and Hughes 110)

Although the emphasis on empowerment is valid, to reduce the idea to simply “being oneself” and publicly showing “love for each other” is to overlook the sociocultural diversity of lesbian and gay communities. The choice whether to “be oneself” or to “pass” as a member of the dominant group is not available to lesbians and gays who are Black, or to those who have disabilities, for example. Liberal individualistic notions of self-discovery and self-expression are insufficient for authentic, universal empowerment, because they overlook the double or triple oppressions suffered by minority members of lesbian and gay communities. Furthermore, simply bringing together diverse groups of lesbians and gay men in sport does not in itself guarantee “love for each other,” and it is naive to hope that sexism, racism, ableism and other entrenched forms of discrimination that divide communities will simply evaporate during Gay Games. On a more grandiose scale, Olympic industry rhetoric calls for peace and harmony, and presents Olympic competition as a transcendent human experience, at the same time ignoring the labour practices and human rights abuses of its multinational sponsors, its impact on low-income and homeless people in host cities, and countless other negative social and environmental impacts (Lenskyj 2000).

Although lesbian and gay community newspapers are an obvious forum for Gay Games debate, they face competing pressures. On one hand, they are expected to generate support for upcoming bids and games, to congratulate organizers and partici-

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pants, and to celebrate the event as a success story in a homophobic world. On the other hand, since they are the most accessible source of analysis and critique of the Gay Games movement, they will fail in that role if they avoid controversy and self-criticism.

A brief review of selected newspaper coverage of Gay Games III in Vancouver shows few differences between mainstream and lesbian/gay media. *Kinesis*, a Vancouver feminist newspaper, published a supportive information article in July and a five-page, mainly favorable report in September; in Toronto, the coverage in *Xtra*, the major gay and lesbian paper, was mostly positive. In both papers, the only serious criticism was reserved for the homo-

phobic Christian fundamentalists who picketed sporting and cultural events, and threw bottles at Gay Games participants. The American gay and lesbian magazine, *The Advocate*, was similarly uncritical. Mainstream Canadian newspapers, such as the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail* and the University of Toronto student paper, *The Varsity*, were largely supportive of the Games and critical of rightwing backlash (Brunt; "MP praises Gay Games as 'rainbow' of diversity"; "UBC condemns homophobic ad in daily papers"; "Vancouver Holds the Third and Largest Gay Games").

One of the most obvious attempts to support MVAAA at all costs was Esther Shannon's commentary published in *Kinesis*. Discussing some anecdotal accounts of the Games, she wrote:

A friend of mine told me about ...getting a politically correct earful from two British lesbians ... according to them, the Games were nothing more than an appalling white, middle-class North American spectacle. My friend ... knew these earnest criticisms were valid but she kept thinking, "they're missing the point." [Vancouver] Gay Games organ-

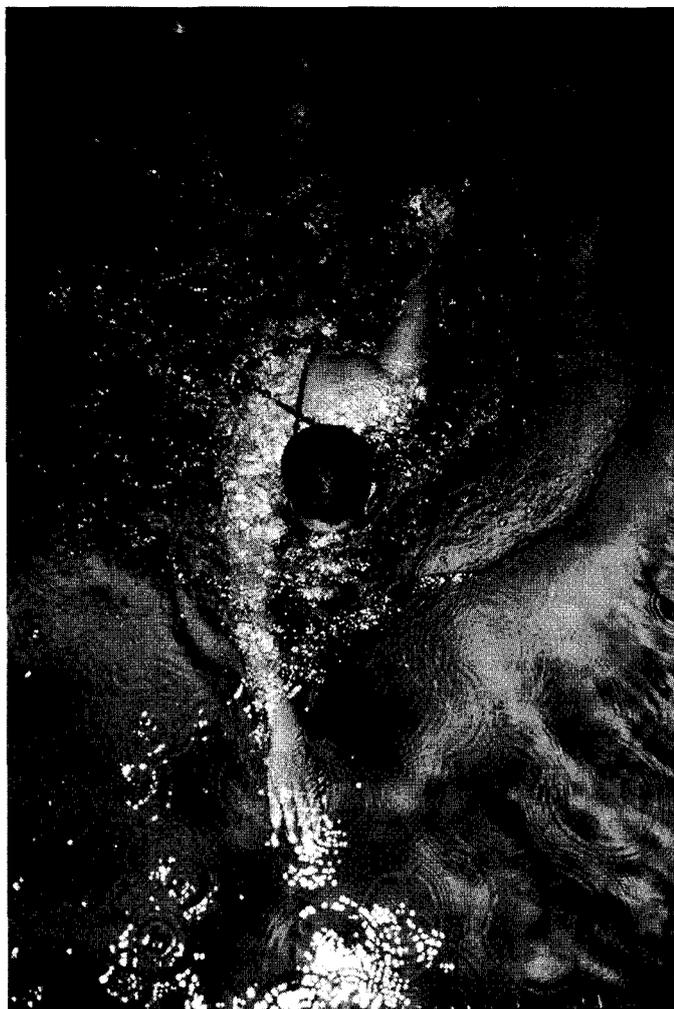


Photo: Marlene Hielema

izers are at pains to keep "politics" out of the Games ... [They] kept public debate on the Games' shortcomings to a minimum (Shannon 13).

One might argue that, in the face of the rightwing backlash, a public united front was crucial to the success of the Games. However, the naive aim of keeping "politics" out of sport—also popular notion among Olympic boosters—is especially inappropriate in relation to a sporting event that is by its very nature political.

*Rites*, a Toronto lesbian and gay newspaper, published some of the few critical commentaries. Anne Vespry, a *Rites* collective member, and Shawn Syms, an athlete, identified a number of organizational problems that

threatened the Games' commitment to inclusion and visibility. Syms was critical of the composition of the MVAAA board: seven white, university-educated members, four men and three women (Syms). Vespry focused on the shortcomings of the cultural events, including access problems for people with disabilities, failure to subsidize tickets for low-income participants, and underrepresentation of people of colour (Vespry).

Both Syms and Vespry targeted the MVAAA's assimilationist approach to advertising: its "straight looking, straight acting" board members, they claimed, opted for a "puritan image," and rendered lesbian and gay people invisible by omitting the words *gay* or *queer* from advertising in mainstream media. Although MVAAA might have argued that their low-key advertising and sanitized public image were justified in light of virulent rightwing opposition, Vespry and Syms are persuasive in their argument that the Games' principle of inclusion requires, at the very least, unequivocal solidarity with openly lesbian and gay members of the community, including the large numbers who reject assimilationist strategies (Syms; Vespry).

Given the increased levels of competition among bid

cities, pressure on community media to limit negative commentary will be especially strong during the Gay Games bidding process. There was evidence of this trend in Sydney's major gay and lesbian newspaper, the *Sydney Star Observer*, which published mostly positive articles, and encountered criticism from Team Sydney (the Sydney Gay Games bid committee) whenever it didn't, or when the timing of a particular article (e.g. Boson 1997b) did not "suit" Team Sydney's purposes. This did not prevent the *Star's* sport reporter, Mary Boson, from writing, among other critical articles, an insightful piece titled "Are we cheap dates?" in which she identified the danger that lesbian and gay organizations like Team Sydney would abandon their social justice agendas in the rush to get government and corporate funding, and in their efforts to demonstrate the power of the (gay male) "pink dollar" to the non-gay world (Boson 1997a, 1997b). Given the double economic disadvantage experienced by lesbians—as women and as members of a stigmatized sexual minority—Boson's warnings were particularly persuasive.

### Gay Games or Gay Olympics?

Since their inception, Gay Games have involved a number of sport celebrities and former Olympic athletes, including Tom Waddell, Betty Baxter, Bruce Hayes, Martina Navratilova, and Greg Louganis, and the biographies of Federation representatives and bid committee members usually include their athletic credentials (except for those organizing the cultural festival). The liberal notion of lesbian and gay celebrities serving as "role models" appears to hold sway in the Gay Games movement, and undoubtedly their positive examples and personal courage are inspirational to many. At the same time, however, this emphasis serves to entrench the mainstream competitive



Photo: Marlene Hielema

sporting ethos modelled on the Olympics, rather than to promote genuinely alternative and inclusive visions of sporting participation, where winning is less important than participating.

Research studies on lesbian and gay community sport demonstrate that it is difficult for those who have been socialized into the ethos of mainstream sport to abandon their often unexamined acceptance of competition and the "no pain, no gain" mantra for an alternative model that values fun, friendship, and the pure pleasure of bodily movement. Socialized gender differences make it somewhat easier for women than men to embrace a new ethos of cooperation rather than competition in sport contexts (Lenskyj 1994a, 1994b). Greater involvement of feminist women in lead-

ership roles would no doubt help the Gay Games movement to achieve its original radical goals. One troubling trend remains: only 25 per cent of Gay Games III and about 36 per cent of Gay Games IV participants were women (Verry). This increased to 45 per cent for Gay Games V in Amsterdam, largely as a result of the Women's Outreach Committee and direct marketing efforts.

From 1982 to 1986, when Gay Games organizers were engaged in a lengthy and unsuccessful court battle against the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) to keep their original name, the Gay Olympic Games. Ambivalence over the key political question, "Gay Games or Gay Olympics?" was evident when Sara Lewinsein (Waddell's partner) told the press, "The perception has been created that somehow gays hate the Olympics... we love the Olympics. We just don't like the dumb bureaucrats who run the USOC" (Waddell and Schaap 234). She went on to cite the improved sport facilities that would result from a successful Olympic bid.

In light of these early events, it is somewhat ironic that Sydney hosted the Summer Olympic Games in 2000, two years before Gay Games VI. In fact, according to Sydney's Gay Games bid book, most events would be using facili-

ties constructed in the 1990s for Sydney 2000. Equally important, widespread popular support for Sydney 2000, achieved in large part by the Olympic Bid Committee's pressure on the mass media to suppress any negative reports (Booth and Tatz; Lenskyj 2000) helped pave the way for lesbian and gay community efforts to win Gay Games VI. The Gay Games bid book stressed the excellence of the Olympic facilities, and stated that the New South Wales government would provide these venues either free of charge or with major subsidies (Sydney 2002 57). One section, however, presented an unexpected critique of the Olympic Games: "The [Gay] Games' ideals and prominent sporting participants will be used to contrast the elitism of the modern Olympics and to gain [media] coverage in the run-up to Sydney's Olympic Games in 2000" (15).

The Gay Games represent an alternative to the Olympic Games, but they are modelled in large part on an international sporting competition with over a hundred years of checkered political history (and, in the last five years, a seriously tarnished image; see Lenskyj 2000). From the outset, Gay Games' winners were named and recognized, medals were awarded, records were kept, and some events were "sanctioned" (conducted according to international federation standards); highly trained and talented athletes whose careers had been impeded by homophobia now had their own "Olympics." Only a minority of commentators problematized these trends.

## Conclusion

The issues examined here confirm that tension remains between the radical view of the Gay Games as an alternative, inclusive and empowering lesbian and gay community event, and the liberal goal of mounting an income-generating, international sporting spectacle modelled on the Olympic Games. The key principle of inclusion, particularly in relation to lesbians, low-income people, participants from developing countries, and people with disabilities, is unlikely to be realized if organizers allow the Olympic model to dominate. However, if leaders can maintain an uncompromising political stance on the issues of inclusion, participation, and accessibility, the Gay Games movement has transformative potential.

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<sup>1</sup>The Gay Games are open to participants who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and heterosexual, but the terms most often used in reference to the Gay Games-related communities are *gay* and *lesbian*. Since most of the discussion concerns events of the 1980s and

'90s, the terms *gay* and *lesbian* are historically appropriate.

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