

The Sexual Politics of Women in Sport

A Survey on "Lesbophobia"

by Sylvia Klasovec

Il existe peu de documentation sur la sexualité dans les sports et sur la discrimination auquel font face les athlètes lesbiennes. La lesbophobie

continuera d'exister dans les sports tant et aussi longtemps que les femmes ne feront pas un effort conscient pour tenter de l'enrayer.

The early medical communities warned against the "masculinizing effects" of athleticism.

From the late nineteenth century to the present, sexual discrimination in women's sport has been an issue of primary concern in a seemingly endless battle of the sexes. The devaluation and stigmatization that female athletes face has its roots in the early medical communities which warned against the "masculinizing effects" of athleticism. Fearing that women would adopt masculine mannerisms, deeper voices, and overdeveloped bodies, scientific experts, by way of medical studies, were determined to prove that women's participation in sport also impaired their reproductive capacity and jeopardized their sexual identity (Lenskyj 1986; Cahn 1993; 1994; Griffin 1992). Thus, talented sporting females were characterized as "muscular amazons" by the media, calling into question their femininity as well as their sexual preference (Cahn 1994). Moreover, critics of women's sport claimed that female athletic competence was unfeminine and unattractive to men: "The amazonian athlete might be not only unattractive but unattracted to men—she might prefer women" (Cahn 1994:165).

Women have been successfully challenging sexism and heterosexism in sport since the 1970s, when lesbian/gay rights gained much support

(Lenskyj, 1986). However, sexuality issues in sport have had a very short history in feminist scholarship. Helen Lenskyj argues that

...although the issues of femininity and heterosexuality have long been central to women's sporting participation, it has been in recent years that they've been discussed in explicit terms. (1986:105)

Indeed, only a small proportion of theoretical feminist analyses concerning lesbians in sport exist. Specifically, theories around sexuality in relation to women in sport remain a neglected area of study in the lesbian-feminist literature. Unless the existence of a lesbian identity and subculture in women's sport is included in all sport studies, women's struggle for gender equality and acceptance in sport will continue to be trivialized.

"The lesbian threat"

According to Helen Lenskyj (1986), sporting ability was not compatible with women's traditional subordinate role in a patriarchal society where sport functioned as an all-male domain. As Susan Cahn describes it, "the maleness of sport derived from a gender ideology which labelled aggression, competitive spirit, and athletic skill as masculine attributes necessary for achieving true manliness" (1993: 344). During the early 1900s, there was much public debate about whether women's athleticism would masculinize women, or conversely, whether women would "feminize" sport. In an emerging sexualized economy that emphasized femininity and heterosexual ideals, the most acceptable women athletes were those with beauty and sex appeal which compensated for their athletic ability (Cahn 1994a; b).

With the increasing popularity of sexological discourse in the 1930s, athletic women became highly suspect of their sexual preference despite their conscious efforts to project an attractive image of femininity. Athletic women were labelled as mannish, failed heterosexuals whose gender nonconformity was manifested by tomboyish behaviour (Lenskyj 1986; Cahn 1993; 1994). This link between mannish athleticism with lesbianism is further explored by Palzkill who asserts that a woman who is active in this male domain of sport, pays a very special price:

...the price of the denial of her own sex, and her personal definition as a neutral being. Her behaviour and whole person is described as masculine, and her sexuality as a woman is denied. (225)

Since the 1950s until the present, this stereotype has pressured women athletes to demonstrate overt signs of femininity and heterosexuality. As same-sex activities among women became publicly scrutinized in fear of "the lesbian threat," women athletes were discouraged from participating in team sports, and instead were encouraged to engage in individual activities such as tennis, golf, archery, bowling, and horseback riding (Cahn, 1994b). Women's athletic organizations emphasized sexy and feminine dress codes for all women competitors, and placed restrictions on their clothing, hairstyles, and behaviour. For example, in an attempt to secure the heterosexual image, boyish haircuts were forbidden and women athletes were encouraged to introduce their boyfriends to the public.

Organized sport is still today viewed as a male controlled structure which serves as a cultural arena of ideological battles over patriarchal gender re-

lations (Messner). When women are represented, they are often depicted as sex objects, as in the case of Katarina Witt's alluring figure skating performance in the 1988 Olympics. However, women's participation in sport over the past decade has challenged the ideological bases of male domination. By demonstrating their athletic competence, athletes such as hockey player Justine Blainey and rower Silken Laumann have contested

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the long associated athletic qualities of aggression, competitiveness, and strength with masculinity. These two women athletes have proven that men and women can compete equally in

traditionally male-dominated arenas such as hockey and rowing. In fact, Nelson argues that despite women's inaccessibility to early sports training and college scholarships, women are gaining on men. "It's as if Woman and Man are running a race; he has a head start, but over the years her speed increases and his stays relatively constant" (54). For example, in 1989, Ann Trason was the first woman to win an open national championship, with a national record-setting distance of 193 miles (Nelson). As Messner has noted, it represents a quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and for self-definition.

Ideology in action

The lesbian stereotype attached to women athletes affects the behaviour of all sportswomen. In their fear of discrimination and harassment, heterosexual sportswomen oblige themselves to prove their femininity, and thus their sexuality, while lesbians are silent about their sexuality and feel driven to pass as straight. By using the lesbian label to intimidate, divide, and silence women in sport, women's sport as an institution is controlled (Lenskyj 1987; Blinde and Taub 1991; Griffin 1992; Griffin 1993).

As a result, most lesbian athletes internalize the negative societal stereotype placed on them and accept the negative connotations of lesbianism (Blinde and Taub 1992; Blinde and Taub 1992b; Griffin 1993). Cobhan claims that unless women athletes overcome this internalized homophobia, "any lesbian who comes out will do so alone at a great personal cost" (182). As proclaimed by Martina Navratilova, "I know why sometimes I get boos on the tennis court from some people. They're booing my lifestyle, rather than me as a human being" (qtd. in Nelson 149).

Roberta Bennet has stated that it is this silence, "a silence so loud it screams" about homophobia and lesbians in sport that allows discrimination and fear to thrive (qtd. in Nelson 139). Lesbian athletes either conceal, segregate, or "normalize" their sexuality in order to protect their sporting careers (Blinde and Taub 1992). The rule in women's golf and tennis, as in other sports, is to "play it but don't say it" (Cahn 1994: 187). Two of the most influential women in modern tennis who defied the heterosexual imperative in women's sport are Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King. Having publicly acknowledged that they are lesbians, the cost of their disclosure was high. Both of these professional athletes have lost much support from their sponsors and the media (Nelson; Cahn 1994a).

In reaction to the prejudice and isolation experienced by lesbian athletes, Kidd describes the formation of sports clubs and associations for lesbians across Canada which are not lesbian-only, but where, for the women involved, sexual preference is not a decisive factor. She also advocates that

...by making the lesbian existence in sport visible, the division among women may be further prevented and the fight lesbian and heterosexual women make against compulsory heterosexuality will be acknowledged." (65)

As Palzkill maintains, "a lesbian

existence offers a chance to overcome being torn between the sportsperson and the woman" (229). Thus, in spite of the lesbian stigma that beset women's athletics, lesbians find that sport can become a social arena for woman-to-woman bonding; to explore their sexual identities; and for camaraderie (Lenskyj 1986; Nelson; Cahn, 1994). In fact, women's individual and team sport provides not only protection and security, it is a space for lesbians to gather and build a shared culture.

Lesbians could not publicly claim their identity without risking expulsion...and loss of social networks that had become crucial to their sense of well-being. But expressed through a walk, a tone of voice, or a manner of dress, the gay culture of sport was available to women attuned to its' physical and emotional cues. (Cahn 1994:205).

Although "athletics provided a point of entry into lesbian culture for young women 'coming out' from their closet and searching for companionship," it does not mean that their sports participation caused them to become lesbians (Cahn 1994: 190). Rather, Nelson argues that a sporting experience gives women courage, strength, and independence to respond to their feelings, whether sexual or intellectual, toward other women.

Gender inequity in sports

In a world of sport where men control the majority of the paid jobs in coaching, sport administration, and physical education, women have yet to achieve equitable status. They are the targets of sexual and verbal harassment, and occupy few positions of power (Lenskyj 1990; 1991; Griffin 1993). As "masculinity and femininity are not valued equally, nor are heterosexuality and lesbianism/homosexuality" (Lenskyj 1990: 240). This confirms the assumption that gender inequity will never be achieved if lesbian athletes become public (Coakley). For example, Kidd writes

about the loss of opportunities experienced by lesbian sportswomen in Canada, whereas Lenskyj argues that lesbian sportswomen, coaches, and administrators are not selected for teams or jobs or are fired because of their sexual orientation (qtd. in Hargreaves). In 1982, the case of Betty Baxter, a fired head coach of the Canadian women's volleyball team, illustrates this point. The Canadian Volleyball Association did not

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mention her lesbian lifestyle in the official version of her dismissal, but as Betty Baxter contests, "qualifications had nothing to do with it" (Ormsby B2). In her continuing battle against sexual discrimination in Canadian sport, Betty Baxter established the National Coaching School for Women, and worked on the staging and preparation for the 1990 Gay Games in Vancouver (Ormsby).

The existing barriers used against women's participation in sport have been taken up by both the liberal and radical streams of the feminist movements (Lenskyj 1991). Whereas liberal feminists have generally looked traditionally to legislation as a route to sex equality, radical feminist perspectives on women and sport have explored the specific ways in which the institution of compulsory heterosexuality have affected women's lives (Lenskyj 1990).

Lenskyj suggests that only by combining these two perspectives can the existence of lesbians in sport give rise to celebration (1990: 302). Best exemplified by the International Gay Games, lesbian and gay athletes were given a chance to celebrate athleticism in coexistence with their sexual identity (Griffin, 1993; Nelson). The International Gay Games also gives lesbian and gay athletes the opportunity to control their own sports arenas where lesbianism is positively accepted. But most importantly, it enables women athletes to pursue

these activities and exhibit integral personality characteristics (Griffin, 1993).

Addressing homophobia and lesbianism in sport

The isolated experiences of lesbian athletes fighting alone against compulsory heterosexuality should account for an important yet neglected chapter in the history of women's sport (Cahn, 1994). According to Kidd, "very little writing about sport addresses sexuality, while much of mainstream feminist writing has little to say about sport" (62). Lenskyj (1990; 1991) claims that academic and sport circles have only recently given attention to lesbians in sport. Magazines such as *Ms* or *Women's Sports* rarely address the issue of lesbianism, "except to acknowledge that dyke-baiting exists" (Cobhan 181). One such example is documented in a recent issue of *Sports Illustrated*. During a radio interview in New York, Ila Borders, the first woman to pitch for the Division 1A Southern California Men's College Baseball team, was asked "Are you a lesbian?" (Smith).

The most powerful statement regarding the lack of research on lesbians in sport is from Cobhan who declares that lesbian-feminists themselves have not made any attempt to address the theme of lesbian athletes. From her experience in a physical education department, the reason for this non-support from lesbian-feminists is this: "until those athletes are willing to come out publicly, we don't owe them anything" (181). Conversely, lesbian athletes expect lesbian-feminists to fight their battles for them (Cobhan). These attitudes only serve to further divide, rather than solidify, the relations among all women in sport, and as a result strengthens the silence surrounding lesbianism.

Criticisms by Lenskyj, Nelson, and Cobhan, with respect to the lack of research on homophobia and lesbians in sport, do not stand alone. Sport feminist Pat Griffin (1993) argues

that until 1982 there were no attempts to investigate homophobia in physical education. "Given the limited research, little is known about how the lives and sport experiences are affected by the accusations and innuendoes of lesbianism" (qtd. in Blinde and Taub 1992b: 152). Furthermore, Nelson alleges that in the mid-1980's, women who had reached college had no information or acknowledgement of the presence of lesbian coaches or athletes in physical education programs. Thus the neglect of the lesbian topic in women's sport has perpetuated homophobia" (qtd. in Blinde and Taub 1992b: 152). I share the perspective taken by Lenskyj, Griffin, and other sport feminists that the lesbian identity in sport is a subject that remains to be more fully explored. Very few works exist in anthologies of feminism concerning this issue, and no essays or entries were found in the Lesbian Periodicals Index. Furthermore, the theme of visible minority lesbian athletes who face additional forms of discrimination has yet to be confronted, by either the feminist or lesbian communities.

Therefore, I presume that as we move into the twenty-first century, the "L-word" will continually disempower women athletes until the issues of lesbianism in women's sport are redefined (Blinde and Taub

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1992b). By breaking the silence against the social taboo of lesbianism in sport, we can envision a world of sport where heterosexuality is not the only form of sexuality. If women are afraid of being called lesbian, this label will only be used as a powerful political weapon to control and intimidate all women in sport (Griffin 1992). Thus, lesbian athletes must

strengthen their challenge against sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and the way in which they define sexuality. This requires not only for lesbian athletes to affirm their existence with pride, but for society to begin reconceptualizing the traditionally accepted notions of gender and sexuality.

As Cahn concludes,

The demand for opportunity and equality in the athletic world involves more than asking men to move over and make room for female competitors. Women's athletic freedom requires that attributes long defined as masculine—strength and physical dominance—become human qualities and not those of a particular gender (1994:279).

It is essential to note that this article does not account for the hidden experiences of all lesbians in sport. Additional effort must be made by researchers from the lesbian, feminist, and sociology of sport circles to examine further the issues concerning lesbianism in sport. It will offer women athletes a chance to tell their story and make their existence visible.

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MARIE-CLAUDE JULIEN

Dénuement

Le vent dans les feuilles
Souffle la mort qui s'en vient
Je voudrais recoller toutes
Les feuilles aux arbres
Quand le vent pèrçant
Sifflera à mes oreilles
À travers les branches nues

Quand l'hiver cruel et fou
Frappera à la fenêtre
Je voudrais les recoller toutes
Les feuilles aux arbres
Quand à travers les branches
Surgira un ciel pâle, effrayé
Plaquant comme un froid
dans le dos

Marie-Claude Julien est historienne, voyageuse, voyageuse, curieuse des gens. Elle a visité plusieurs époques et quelques pays. Elle rêve d'un monde exempt de frontières et de préjugés.