Creating an LGBTQ+-Affirming Locker Room

Education for Prevention

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Sport: The Last Frontier in LGBTQ+ Equality?

We are seeing a steady increase in the visibility of LGBTQ+[1] individuals in the public, and the general workplace is becoming, at least partially, more supportive, with increasing protections and benefits for the LGBTQ+ community. However, even with this progress, homophobia continues to run rampant in society, one area of which is team sport and exercise (Giuffre, Dellinger, & Williams, 2008).

Numerous studies have illustrated that in the general workplace, corporations continue to turn a blind eye toward workplace discrimination and that LGBTQ+ employees experience harassment more frequently than heterosexuals do (Colgan & Rumens, 2015; Day & Greene, 2008; Einarsdóttir, Hoel, & Lewis, 2015; Konik & Cortina, 2008; Trau & Härtel, 2007; Wright & Smith, 2015).

In this continued discriminatory and unfriendly work environment, it is not a surprise that many gay people, especially athletes, whether amateur or professional, choose to stay closeted for fear of ridicule and ill treatment. Owing to hypermasculinity in the sporting world (Hickey, 2008; MacDonald, 2014), the fear of being discriminated against is great, and the lack of "out" gay athletes is indicative of this fear (Demers, 2006).

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly (1948) stated that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (p. 2); however, heterosexual athletes and people involved in sports have been slow to accept differences in sexuality and gender identities that do not fit into their narrow-minded heteronormative and gendernormative ideologies. The lack of visible gay athletes across amateur and professional levels strongly suggests that staying in the closet is an accepted, and perhaps expected, aspect of playing sports and that to participate in athletics and be accepted, one must hide one's true self. The core reasoning for hiding one's sexuality may vary, but most, if not all, reasons are connected to discriminatory and unfair treatment. Some athletes, especially those who play in team sports, fear discrimination by fans, teammates, and coaching staff.

For example, this is exactly what rugby legend Gareth Thomas alluded to in an interview after coming out after retirement. Thomas mentioned that "many athletes around the world fear they won't be accepted by their teammates and others if they are honest about their sexuality" (Associated Press, 2014, para. 8). This fear also extends to anxieties over losing game time or being benched, even if the athlete is regularly performing well. For example, Nate Alfson (2014), a gay high school baseball coach, said the potential of being found out during his playing years led to a fear of losing his position and possibly facing diminished opportunities to play. He mentioned, "It was a daily fear that my coaches would find out and then I would lose my starting spot" (para. 11).

In addition to the fear of losing game time, there is also a fear of disrupting the team's chemistry and, consequently, the team's performance. For example, Graziano (2014) noted how sports often blame the gay athletes, making comments such as "Oh no, you can't risk having a 'distraction' around when you're about the serious business of trying to win football games" (para. 9). All of these concerns ultimately culminate in the trepidation of not being chosen, being fired, or, in the case of professional sports, not being hired and/or potentially becoming unemployed after coming out.

In addition to the aforementioned concerns, gay athletes often feel that they must hide their true identity to gain acceptance in the overly masculine sporting world, which can affect their personal lives and sport performance and lead to negative psychological effects. For example, Alfson (2014), the high school baseball coach, said, "When you aren't openly gay and you are an athlete or a coach, any subtle tell turns into an insecurity" (para. 4).

Seeking Equality

In order to address these fears and insecurities, inequality must have no place in athletics. As UN Human Rights Commissioner Navi Pillay plainly stated, it is "a shame, in this day and age," that people "have to hide who they really are" ("UN Official," 2014, para. 2).

Apart from the discrimination gay athletes can experience from coaches, teammates, and fans, they must also overcome the stigma of constantly being compared to heterosexual athletes. The common misconception, as Jay Claydon, a rugby player for the Sydney Convicts, Australia's first gay rugby union club, reveals, is that gay athletes are seen as less physically able and psychologically weaker than straight athletes. Claydon mentioned that "it's such a stereotype, but at most [teams] they see a gay guy and think you can't be sporty or masculine, they think that you're weak or you're not as tough as them" (Stark, 2014, para. 12).

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In contrast to these common stereotypes, gay athletes are in fact performing successfully at the highest level. For example, a news article described an ex-NFL draftee, Michael Sam, by saying, "If you led the SEC with 11.5 sacks and nineteen tackles for losses? If a gay person did that, I wouldn't call that person weak" (Campbell, 2014, para. 34).

Sport is often used as a tool and environment to promote equality, but in reality, such equality is accomplished with limited success; athletes on professional teams, who are role models for many children, are frequently caught using discriminatory slurs. Professional teams state that they support diversity, and athletes who discriminate are punished by being required to attend "diversity training." A prime example of this is Bud Selig, commissioner of Major League Baseball (MLB), who stated that

> we strongly object to all forms of discrimination. We welcome and support all individuals in our sport with ample resources in all circumstances. We have a working relationship with GLAAD to promote proactive messaging regarding tolerance and have disciplined personnel for insensitive actions or comments that are discriminatory. (Passovoy, 2013, para. 11)

Despite messages such as these from professional sports administrators, homophobia continues to pervade athletics. In a recent example in Major League Soccer (MLS) in 2013, cameras caught the captain of the San Jose Earthquakes, Alan Gordon, mouthing "fucking faggot" to an opposing player, causing an uproar in the gay soccer community ("Major League," 2013). In response to Gordon's horrific comment, MLS required Gordon to pay a fine and to attend "sensitivity training" as a punishment ("Major League," 2013).

The action taken by MLS is a prime example illustrating that what is supposed to be education to foster an environment of collegiality and acceptance from the onset is often implemented as a punitive measure that does nothing to prevent this type of situation from happening in the first place. Unfortunately, there are many instances of educational opportunities being used as punishment in the world of sports (see "Colorado State," 2013; Wine, 2014).

Participating in sports often promises character-building benefits. However, masculinity and the archaic ideology of what a man should entail unconsciously promotes sexism and homophobia (Harry, 1995). Although the reality is that a gay man is just as physically athletic and mentally strong as a straight man, he is, instead, judged by his (perceived) identity and not by his sports performance output.

The harsh judgments placed on gay athletes occur not only on the field but off the field, such as in the locker room. The locker room is seen as a place for "a bastion of privilege and a center of fraternal bonding" (Curry, 1991, p. 119; see also Anderson, 2010; Messner, 2010), and interviews with gay athletes on team sports reveal that many feel isolated in the locker room because of frequent homophobic jokes and comments, fueling homophobia and segregating LGBT people.

As one athlete noted, "football locker rooms lend themselves to being ripe with machismo and bravado, places where jabs involving one's sexual orientation are fairly commonplace—even if meant in a harmless manner" (Reed, 2014, para. 7). To further put this into perspective, if derogatory locker room comments were said in an office work environment, they would likely be seen as hate speech ("Homophobia in Football," 2014). Therefore it is in sporting environments that diversity education becomes paramount in order to increase the awareness of equality and discrimination.

Theoretical Foundation

Heterosexuality among male athletes is preserved and maintained through the use of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This power serves as a key aspect shaping the identity of many men who utilize their heterosexual masculinity and gender as a symbolic authentication of the power differences between them and women (Pronger, 1990). Within this hegemony is a hierarchy of masculinities constructed by society. Those at the top have the most power and, by consequence, the most cultural capital (Anderson, 2011; Bourdieu, 1986).

Connell (1995) argued that this hierarchy of masculinities is determined by a variety of factors, such as athletic prowess, the display of masculinity, and engagement in homophobia. Those who are perceived not to possess all of these characteristics are lower in the hierarchy, and those who are nonconforming to the cisgender heterosexual identity, or who are perceived to be nonconforming, are at the very bottom of the hierarchy.

Connell maintained that homophobia is used as an effective tool for preserving the dominant power that heterosexual men at the top enjoy. This is further supported by Anderson (2011), who found that calling men "fag" in sports is used as a means for motivating underperforming men or those who are perceived as not adhering to expectations of the dominant group within the hierarchy. When someone fails to meet the requirements of the top group, he is no longer seen as "masculine," having lost his hegemonic power over women, and is subsequently seen as "weak" and no longer capable of accomplishing stereotypical "manly" tasks, such as sports.

With this structured hierarchy that exists among male athletes to preserve their hegemonic masculinity, there is pressure not to deviate from the dominant group's expectations or, at a minimum, to appear not to deviate from these expectations. Consequently, the locker room serves as a proverbial closet where athletes must conceal their true identities to maintain their place within the hierarchy. The locker room as "the closet" illustrates Sedgwick's (1990) notion that "the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression" (p. 68).

Finally, when considering notions of punishment, we would be remiss not to consider how Foucault's ideas of punishment fit into our analysis. In particular, Foucault (1975) offered a series of criteria that must be met for a penalty to be effective: Punishment should be (a) directly connected to the offense having been committed, (b) sufficiently unpleasant to make the offender not repeat the offense, (c) temporal, (d) a deterrent to other potential offenders of the same offense, (e) immediately enacted, and (f) carried out such that the offender is not seen in any favorable light.

When using education as a form of punishment, rather than as a means of preventing homophobia, not only are these criteria insufficiently addressed but education is also seen as a form of punishment rather than as an opportunity to learn, grow, and become better colleagues and teammates.

Masculinity/View as Athlete

Heterosexual "manliness" has been influenced and promoted by archaic sport ideologies, creating an environment that promotes a skewed relationship of power between the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexuals (Connell, as cited in Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2013). Homophobia and the ideology of hegemonic masculinity are learned and passed on, especially in masculine team sport environments. This ideology then spills into society and is formed into a binary image of what it means to be a man, where gays serve as a point of comparison

to reaffirm the ideal heterosexual athlete (Lehne, 1976), whether this be athletic or nonathletic, masculine or feminine.

One could conclude that "homosexuality has been essential in creating the ideal heterosexual masculine identity" (McGivern & Miller, 2017, p. 11). In the world of sports, hegemonic masculinity creates "an ideal type of manliness that is hierarchically positioned at the apex" (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2013, p. 105). Consequently, anyone who is perceived as not falling within this "ideal manliness" is scrutinized and placed on a lower level in the hierarchy.

In other words, this masculinity serves as a form of "rejection and denigration of what they consider to be feminine attributes or behavior that often serve as markers of homosexuality in the policing of ascendant forms of masculinity" (Martino, 1999, p. 244). Power is gained and maintained through the enactment of practicing masculine traits, and the pressure for closeted LBGTQ+ athletes to avoid being perceived as not masculine can lead to a greater lack of authenticity and living a double life.

This was fittingly illustrated by Dr. Vincent Pompei, the director of the Youth Well-Being Project at the Human Rights Campaign, when he commented that "our society kind of tells us, especially in a sport like [American] football, that you have to hold on to your masculinity, you have to be homophobic because that means you're masculine" (Crabtree, 2014, para. 16).

It is therefore important to requestion the idea of what it means to be "masculine." Through diversity education, heterosexual athletes can learn to understand that "one socially constructed form of masculinity is not the epitome of manliness or athleticism" (McGivern & Miller, 2017, p. 19) and that with the increasing number of elite athletes coming out, the stereotype of a successful athlete will be challenged.

The development of clear diversity educational procedures at professional sport organizations, universities, and other educational institutions will help to increase diversity awareness for a safer and more welcoming sport environment where all LGBTQ+ athletes can feel secure and be respected.

Guiding Principles for Effective Anti-Homophobic Educational Programs

In our recent study (McGivern & Miller, 2017), we conducted a discourse analysis to examine how media report the coming out of athletes. In our analysis, we found that universities and professional teams have responded to public homophobia of teammates through "diversity" or "sensitivity" training as a form of punishment. These institutions, rather than using education as an opportunity to foster respect and collegiality among teammates from the beginning, only use education in reaction to a discriminatory action.

We propose that athletics in educational settings should establish an active educational program that is used to truly educate athletes to prevent discrimination rather than as punishment after such an incident takes place.

Although each educational program should be established according to the individual needs of the institution, we propose that these programs be based on eight principles that were inspired by Banks et al. (2001). Banks' original 12 essential principles were created in an effort to encourage improvement in policies and practices in educational settings in terms of their relationship to racial/ethnic diversity.

The focus of these principles was K–12 schools and general applicability related to these schools. However, with some revision to fit this context, we propose a similar set of principles as a guideline for athletic programs in educational settings, both secondary and tertiary institutions, to create an environment that is welcoming of LGBTQ+ athletes.

Principle 1

Schools and athletic organizations should establish professional development programs that are implemented regularly, rather than punitively, to help coaches understand the characteristics and needs of LGTBQ+ athletes.

More often than not, those in head coaching roles are generally older in age than the athletes they are instructing and therefore may tend to have dated ideologies of sport, masculinity, and the LGBTQ+ community (Norman, 2016). It is important for coaches to understand their own attitudes and biases toward sexual minorities through acquiring knowledge about the histories and differing perspectives within the LGBTQ+ community (Banks et al., 2001).

It is also pertinent for coaches to become familiar with the ways in which stereotypes within schools and athletics are perpetuated and acquire the knowledge and skills to create and implement coaching strategies that support LGBTQ+ athletes and challenge those stereotypes (Banks et al., 2001).

Principle 2

School athletics must ensure that all team members have equal opportunities to train, develop, use equipment and sporting facilities, and be provided with equal time engaged in the main sport activity during training and competition sessions.

An athlete must be judged strictly based on athletic performance and not by sexual or gender identity. As we found in our initial study (McGivern & Miller, 2017), many male athletes who have come out have experienced or fear being placed on the sideline or valued less.

In addition, the school institution must create a safe environment that is free of bullying and harassment and provide equitable opportunities for all teammates for training and performance (Banks et al., 2001). This begins with the coaching quality stated in Principle 1 regarding experience, preparation, participation in professional development and familiarity with LGBTQ+ communities.

Principle 3

Training programs should help students understand that notions of masculinity and femininity are social constructs that reflect social and political contexts, and they should educate athletes about the stereotypes related to these terms that are consistently perpetuated in athletics.

Discussions should include examples of athletes who challenge these stereotypes and who happen to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community to illustrate that sexual and gender identity is fluid and not a binary that society attempts to perpetuate. Athletic program staff should carefully review how the system continues to privilege heterosexual and cisgender athletes while simultaneously silencing and ignoring others (Banks et al., 2001).

In our previous study (McGivern & Miller, 2017), we found that in many cases LGBTQ+ athletes faced or feared facing scrutiny of their athletic ability simply based on their sexual identity. A fairly well-known case is Michael Sam, who, despite his award-winning performance in college, struggled to make it onto a professional team after publicly coming out and kissing his partner on national television. It was then reported that team administrators and coaches feared he would be more of a "distraction" than a contribution to the team (Campbell, 2014).

Principle 4

Schools and athletic programs should provide all athletes (and all students) with opportunities to foster relationships across all sexual and gender identities.

Research has shown the benefits of extracurricular activities in fostering stronger connections among peers (Banks et al., 2001; Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014). One approach to creating stronger relationships is through athletics gay–straight alliances (GSA).

An example of this type of athletic-oriented GSA is the University of Warwick men's rowing team's (http://www.warwickrowers.org/) charity called Sport Allies (http://www.sportsallies.org/), a program based in the United Kingdom to combat bullying, homophobia, and low self-esteem among youth. The rowing team donates proceeds to Sport Allies from their popular naked calendar series.

In addition to creating alliances, athletic programs must establish policies to actively ensure that LGBTQ+ athletes are specifically sought, welcomed, and recruited to sports teams.

Principle 5

Athletes should be taught about the common stereotypes and misconceptions targeted at the LGBTQ+ community and the negative psychological effects such stereotypes have on society as a whole and on LGBTQ+ individuals in particular.

Being a member of the LGBTQ+ community is unrelated to one's athletic ability; therefore an athlete should solely be judged by his or her athletic performance, not by other characteristics that make up who the individuals are off the field. Athletes should learn about the commonalities regardless of one's sexual or gender identity.

Ironically, sport has the power to create a common ground and interest among athletes and should instead be leveraged to create a safe and welcoming environment rather than a judgmental and divisive milieu (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014).

Principle 6

Coaches and teachers should help athletes develop the ability to effectively communicate and interact with members of the LGBTQ+ community (and vice versa).

Lessons should include how to understand each other and respond to each other's differences in positive ways. This should include learning language that does not perpetuate stereotypes or binary labels and understanding that sexual and/or gender identity is only one characteristic of who we are.

Banks et al. (2001) recommended bringing the group together, in this case both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ athletes, asking the LGBTQ+ athletes to openly share how stereotypes, labels, and discrimination affect their lives. Auerbach (2012) found that this type of open discussion between two groups is very effective.

Another approach is to ensure that GSAs have full support of the administration and to make them very visible and active in the school; taking such measures will foster a stronger sense of community in the school as a whole (Seelman, Forge, Walls, & Bridges, 2015).

Principle 7

Schools should provide opportunities for LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ athletes to interact socially in situations designed to minimize anxiety and fear.

Creating interactions such as these may foster greater understanding and help to reduce irrational biases. Providing "safe" environments for all athletes to interact can give individuals the confidence needed to interact with others they may have otherwise avoided to establish new friendships.

Banks et al. (2001) suggested that although the goal is social interaction, these interactions also require sufficient structure and an equal number of both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ athletes to minimize creating a hostile and aggressive experience. This type of interaction could involve the open communication suggested in Principle 6, but it could also comprise a host of other events organized by the athletics program or the school at large.

Principle 8

Schools, and specifically athletic programs, should strive to foster a caring learning environment among all athletes.

By creating an environment where team cohesiveness is strong, the team dynamic is likely to improve, creating a bond that is necessary to be successful both as athletes and as people (Filho, Tenenbaum, & Yang, 2015). Such a goal is achieved by ensuring that the voices of all members of the community are heard.

One way to give all members of the community a voice is to disrupt the traditional top-down approach that athletic administration typically takes with its team. It is essential that each member of the team have a voice and know that his or her voice will be heard.

Banks et al. (2001) recommended making sure such interactions are structured in a way that they include equal numbers of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ individuals and that the interactions be structured so that communication is peaceful.

Conclusion

As we have noted throughout this article, there is a tendency within athletics to use "diversity" or "sensitivity" training as a tool for punishment or as an afterthought once an athlete says or does something egregious. Taking this type of approach is too little, too late, and has no effect on changing the way athletes think; it simply silences them. We have proposed here eight principles that, if adopted meaningfully into athletic programs, may foster a positive environment for all teammates regardless of gender or sexual identity.

It is not enough simply to create "diversity" or "sensitivity" training, because, as Banks et al. (2001) noted, "whenever diverse groups interact, intergroup tensions, stereotypes, and institutionalized discrimination develop. Schools must find ways to respect the diversity of their students and to help create a unified nation to which all citizens have allegiance" (p. 203).

This message extends to the athletic programs, which must also find ways to foster respect for each team member and the skills he or she brings to the team. Furthermore, this type of education should be deliberate, systematic, and consistent—not a form of punishment.

As we have discussed, implementing these principles must begin with the administration, which must consistently seek professional development to ensure full awareness of the struggles of LGBTQ+ athletes and to gain new insights into fostering a sense of respect and collegiality among team members. Athletic administrators must find ways to implement education on a regular basis that promotes an understanding of all members of the team and that challenges the stereotypes and preconceived ideas that athletes may have about their LGBTQ+ teammates.

Furthermore, athletic program staff can work to create additional opportunities to interact off the field through alliances and other nonathletic activities where

athletes can learn more about each other in informal ways. If coaches and other athletic program staff take a proactive approach to welcoming LGBTQ+ athletes to their teams, they "will engender feelings of allegiance among diverse groups" (Banks et al., 2001, p. 203).

Although these principles are based on solid research found in the field of multicultural education, there is a need for research to explicitly examine how athletic programs work to foster a positive environment for all of their athletes. What measures have these programs taken to promote an LGBTQ+-friendly environment? To what extent do they work? What are their shortcomings? To what extent are the needs for gay, lesbian, and transgender athletes similar and different? How can athletic programs meet these needs most effectively? These are questions that remain unanswered and for which empirical evidence is still needed.

We have learned through our analysis of reports on discrimination in athletics that education is usually offered as a form of punishment after an offense has taken place rather than as a means for changing the climate of the sport. To create an environment in which all athletes are welcome, athletic programs must change their approach. By implementing this set of principles, we believe that athletic programs can move in the right direction and create teams that focus on strengthening the athletes' abilities instead of silencing members of the team

Note

[1] We use the term LGBTQ+ to represent all gender and sexual minorities.

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