

Jose Arellano

GRPH 426

Thesis Proposal

09.23.19

### **Gay Athletes and the Culture of American Competitive Team Sports**

The culture of American competitive team sports and the hegemonic masculinity engrained in it has created a homophobic environment that has silenced and closeted male athletes who self identify as homosexual. Although the LGBTQ community has advanced substantially in other aspects of society, the representation of openly gay athletes in these sports has been a taboo. The praise and establishment of male hierarchy that comes with competitive team sports and the homophobic discourse constantly shared in playing fields and locker rooms play a huge part in preventing closeted athletes to live their true, out lives. Drawing from numerous resources to uncover the origins and details of this issue, I will develop an advertising campaign, supplemented by video, web, and print assets to tackle the issue of hegemonic masculinity in the world of competitive sports today.

Throughout high school, I was involved in numerous athletic activities, which included cross country, basketball and track. As a closeted young gay man during this time, I feared the judgement of my teammates and the entire school if they ever found out or had a slim thought that I was homosexual. Throughout my high school's history, there had never been an openly gay athlete competing in sports. For two years, I held a heterosexual relationship. This was in hopes to make myself and others believe that I was straight. It wasn't until my senior year of high school that I obtained a substantial amount of confidence in myself and in my friendships, which encouraged me to come out to my friends and family. After coming out, the environment around the school didn't seem to change, at least, not around me. My

brother had informed me of countless times when teammates continuously taunted me when I wasn't looking. Things they did included standing nude behind me as a display, and jokingly thrusting their pelvis in a sexual manner. Although I kept my sexuality to myself and amongst my closest friends, the word still managed to get around. My coming out grew into the new gossip topic at my high school. Being out for three years has allowed me to look back at my coming out process, in which I was able to link many aspects of it to my research.

Since coming out, my relationship with competitive sports has been everchanging. On one hand, sports have helped me get through the tough times of being a closeted gay man in a small, conservative town. I grew mental toughness and learned to push myself to my highest physical potential. I fell in love with competition. On the other hand, I considered myself new to the whole idea of "gay culture". Through this, I felt the need to hate sports, since every other self-identifying gay man seemed to do so. I could argue that I used competitive sports as a way to get the idea of being homosexual out of my head. These two clashing identities within myself inspired me to look deeper into the culture of competitive team sports in the country and how it has affected open and closeted gay athletes.

Sociologist Eric Anderson discusses the issue of hegemonic masculinity in the world of male competitive sports in his book, *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*. He defines the word hegemonic as "a form of dominance in which a ruling class legitimates its position and secures the acceptance from those classes below them". Hegemonic masculinity identifies masculine ideals and being a "real man" as something that is praised in the world of organized competitive male sports. Anderson emphasizes that it requires that men maintain 100% heterosexual desires and behaviors, or else they would be attributed to acting "feminine" or in ways that are associated with gay men. This brings about the issue of not only homosexuality in sport, but gender issues in a culture formulated and deep rooted around masculine ideals. A study by Michael C. Stuart takes a closer look at this issue within the world of college football, a highly praised masculine social institution. Real men have the expectation to be

heterosexual. They embrace and enact in a certain way that is the opposite of society's perception of femininity or homosexuality (Stuart, 2008). A way in which they prove to be "a real man" is by distancing themselves from the perception of being "feminine". This could be done by the bragging of heterosexual conquests, or the usage of derogatory homophobic language. This encourages the use of homophobic discourse and sexist remarks in the locker room, practice, playing field or any competitive sports environment.

As part of my research process, I conducted a short survey to learn about other people's experiences in the world of competitive athletics and its association with gay men. Through this, I learned that 100% of the men who took my survey indicated that they have heard the use of derogatory terms such as: gay, fag, faggot, sissy, etc., while partaking in competitive sports. This didn't come as a surprise to me, since the usage of these terms has become a norm in this sort of environment. It is used to encourage or discourage better performance from a teammate or opposing player. When asked about the usage of these terms and whether it was meant as a means to fit into a social group of athletes, most of the individuals that have taken part in their usage indicated that it was meant as a way to fit in, since others were doing it. I also asked about their level of comfort when these words are being thrown around. 72% of surveyed individuals indicated that the usage of homophobic discourse does make them uncomfortable. Could a large percentage of the use of this language in sports environments be done as a means to fit in to a social group of athletes searching for ways to prove themselves of being "real men"?

Among school aged boys, athleticism is associated as a primary indicator of masculinity. For generations, highly athletic individuals have had almost no suspicion of being homosexual. Being the fastest kid on the playground is praised among today's youth. So, the more athletic one appears to be (toned muscles and lean figure), the more masculine capital that person holds. I put this theory to the test by including the following question in my survey: if you were asked to envision the best male athlete of all time, what would that person's sexual orientation be? 40% of the individuals who took the survey

indicated that they would perceive this individual's sexual orientation to be heterosexual. This was with "I don't take sexual orientation into account" as one of the possible choices. With the other part of those surveyed indicating that they don't take sexual orientation into account, 0% indicated that their "best male athlete of all time" was homosexual.

Anderson's research has shown time and time again that male athletes who self identify as homosexual have a hard time coming out during the time in which they are participating in competitive sports. This is a recurring pattern, even in my survey. When asked about knowing anybody who has come out as gay while *actively* partaking in a competitive sport, 64% of those surveyed indicated that they do not know anybody who met that criteria. After being asked if they know anybody who has come out as homosexual after *no longer* taking part in competitive sports, 67% of those surveyed indicated that they did. It is no question that this environment of toxic masculine ideals has negatively affected closeted gay athletes and their coming out process.

Since this discovery, I began to question the reasons in which gay athletes have chosen to wait until after no longer taking part in competitive sports for their coming out stories to be heard. Professional examples such as Jason Collins in the NBA, Billy Bean in the MLB, and Robbie Rogers in the MLS have come out during retirement or have waited at least a year to retire after their coming out stories are shared. Currently, there is only one active athlete who openly identifies as homosexual while playing in any major professional sports league (NBA, NFL, MLB, NHL and MLS). While the conversation of having a gay athlete playing in the professional world of sports seems almost untalked about, we have seen the number of student athletes in high school and college who choose to come out gradually increase within the past couple of years.

In today's day and age, a majority of athletes who choose to come out face a lack of physical hostility and huge support from teammates, friends, and family, but are still challenged with the mere mention of their identities amongst their social groups. After coming out in high school, I saw a

noticeable change amongst the group of heterosexual friends that I spent my time with. Although they knew I was gay and accepted my identity, it was hardly ever acknowledged. There's a recurring pattern of heterosexual men accusing their gay teammates as throwing their gay identity "in their face" when the mention of their sexuality is brought up. This is linked to a lot of "don't ask don't tell" policies in the military, prohibiting gay individuals from discussing their sexualities amongst their social groups and encouraging the idea of "staying in the closet". The identity of the gay athlete as an *athlete* is largely accepted after coming out, but their identities as *gay* men easily take the back seat and are encouraged to stay silent. Today, it has become easier for high school and college level athletes to feel confident enough to come out publicly, but in professional sports, it's a whole different case. What is keeping these athletes from coming out? Statistically, there should be a much larger number of gay athletes in professional sports leagues, if you take the percentage of the general population who are gay (Anderson, 2002). The factor holding these individuals back isn't fear of physical repercussions, but the effect it may have on their social and professional lives.

According to Anderson's book, there is a very low chance for gay athletes to face physical repercussions for coming out. In his studies, he indicates that "fears are spawned and reproduced by the constant bombardment of extraordinary rare events that are made to seem ordinary when they are portrayed repeatedly in the media." An event that has fed this sort of fear is the case of Matthew Shepard, a homosexual student at the University of Wyoming who was beaten, tortured and left to die by a group of heterosexual men. The Washington Post article, *Do LGBT Athletes Owe the Public A Revelation About Their Sexuality? Straight Athletes Don't*, highlights the pressure that closeted professional athletes face to publically declare their sexual orientations. The platform that gay pro athletes have is huge, especially since they are seen as role models for young LGBTQ+ individuals. The founder of Outsports, an LGBTQ sports website, faced backlash when he declared closeted athletes as those who "choose cowardice over courage", according to the article. This serves as an example of the pressure these athletes face to come

out. With the general assumption that male athletes are straight, and the fact that a professional athlete's career spans for a shorter amount of time, closeted athletes may feel like they are temporarily able to hide a part of themselves in order to earn a living. It is typical for an openly gay athlete to retire or not be offered a contract after publically indicating their sexual orientation. This, along with shame and being ostracized or ridiculed serve as general reasons for the lack of openly gay professional athletes today.

The socially constructed, self engraved level of hegemonic masculinity in male competitive sports has negatively impacted homosexual athletes. In a time where gay athletes feel more public pressure than ever to come out, their hostile athletic environments prohibit them from doing so. The accepted use of homophobic discourse and gay slander in these arenas serve as a constant reminder of their expectation to be heterosexual, only because of their identity as an athlete. Fixing this issue will take a lot more than the yearly display of a homosexual athlete in a pride month advertisement campaign. It's going to take a huge discussion about sports as a whole. Sports fans, athletes, and consumers must welcome the idea that we must progress from the deep rooted, masculine ideals that exist in sports culture today. Through this advertising campaign, I plan to use video, web, and print assets to tell the story of gay athletes today, in hopes to spark public discussion about this unspoken issue.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Advising Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Student Athletes.” *NACADA > Home*, [nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advising-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-and-Queer-Student-Athletes.aspx](http://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advising-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-and-Queer-Student-Athletes.aspx).

Anderson, Eric. *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*. State Univ. of New York Press, 2005.

Anderson, Eric. *Openly Gay Athletes: Contesting Hegemonic Masculinity in a Homophobic Environment*. Dec. 2002, [journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1012690215597651?journalCode=irsb](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1012690215597651?journalCode=irsb).

Hutto, Holly. “#EveryFan Campaign Calls Out LGBT Discrimination In Sports.” *Medium*, The Cauldron, 11 Mar. 2016, [the-cauldron.com/everyfan-campaign-calls-out-lgbt-discrimination-in-sports-c6afa5909aec](http://the-cauldron.com/everyfan-campaign-calls-out-lgbt-discrimination-in-sports-c6afa5909aec).

Lati, Marisa. “Do LGBTQ Athletes Owe the Public a Revelation about Their Sexuality? Straight Athletes Don't.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 5 Sept. 2019, [www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2019/09/06/do-lgbtq-athletes-owe-public-revelation-about-their-sexuality-straight-athletes-dont/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2019/09/06/do-lgbtq-athletes-owe-public-revelation-about-their-sexuality-straight-athletes-dont/).

Menke, Donna, et al. “Advising Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Student Athletes.” *NACADA*, 2015, [nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advising-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-and-Queer-Student-Athletes.aspx](http://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advising-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-and-Queer-Student-Athletes.aspx).

Rankin, Susan, and Genevieve Weber. “Mind, Body and Sport: Harassment and Discrimination – LGBTQ Student-Athletes.” *NCAA.org - The Official Site of the NCAA*, 18 July 2017, [www.ncaa.org/sport-science-institute/mind-body-and-sport-harassment-and-discrimination-lgbtq-student-athletes](http://www.ncaa.org/sport-science-institute/mind-body-and-sport-harassment-and-discrimination-lgbtq-student-athletes).

Stewart, M. C. (2008). *Constructing masculine and athletic identities: the case of college football players*(dissertation).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **In the Game: Gay Athletes and Cult of Masculinity, Eric Anderson**

This book presented me with a lot of insight on hegemonic masculinity, and how the deep-rooted masculine culture of male competitive sports has affected gay athletes. Eric Anderson, a sociologist, displays the results of his study, which included interviews with over 50 closeted and out gay athletes in high school, college, and the professional level. Anderson digs deep into the issue of masculine ideals and how they've come about. He touches on the relationship between gay athletes and sport, coming out in sport, and hegemonic oppression.

### **Constructing Masculine and Athletic Identities: The Case of College Football, Michael C. Stuart (2008)**

This dissertation by Michael C. Stuart focuses on masculine identities in the world of college football. This report chooses to focus on how the effect of masculine and homophobic tendencies in college football affects women and gay men. He touches on how "real men" have a societal expectation to be heterosexual and how sports are a form of social institution. In this reading, he mentions that football provides a place for men to distance themselves from "the other" by suggesting that women and gay men fail to measure up physically or psychologically.

### **Openly Gay Athletes: Contesting Hegemonic Masculinity In A Homophobic Environment, Eric Anderson (2002)**

This dissertation by sociologist Eric Anderson compares how ignoring an athlete's gay identity and the acceptance of his athletic identity can be compared to "don't ask don't tell" policies. The mere mention of



homosexuality is sometimes seen as it being “in your face” by heterosexual peers. This reading expanded on things he mentioned in his book, *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*.

### **Mind, Body and Sport: Harassment and discrimination – LGBTQ student-athletes, NCAA**

This article by the NCAA looks to educate others about collegiate LGBTQ athletes. It touches on the fact that harassment places queer and trans spectrum individuals at high risk of alcohol and drug use/abuse. It also notes that binge drinking is more prevalent amongst LGB individuals than their heterosexual counterparts. Studies have shown that despite the existence of diversity on college campuses, coaches, administrators and student-athletes still exhibit heterosexist and homophobic attitudes. The article notes how athletic departments can help LGBTQ individuals through the power of language, support, and awareness.

### **Advising Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Queer Student Athletes**

This article focuses on how a student athlete’s inability to be open about who they are poses a serious threat to their emotional and psychological health. It criticizes college athletics for forming a subculture that prioritizes athletic performance over academics.

### **Do LGBTQ Athletes Owe the Public A Revelation About Their Sexuality? Straight Athletes Don’t.**

I found this Washington Post article interesting, since it mentioned an issue posed on LGBTQ professional athletes. It mentions the idea that LGBTQ athletes can feel forced to come out and face public pressure to do so. Do they owe the public this? A professional athlete coming out is seen as transformational for others, especially LGBTQ youth. Perhaps professional athletes would like for their

professional lives to only revolve around their athletic performance. It mentions how coming out could take away their individuality, by being known as “the gay teammate”.