

Sexuality, Gender, and Sport: Does Playing Have a Price?

BROOKE A. MCKINNEY

FRANCIS T. MCANDREW*

Knox College

Ninety-one undergraduate students (43 varsity athletes, 48 nonathletes) completed questionnaires assessing their attitudes toward homosexuality and their perception of stereotypes, sexuality, and values of athletes in various sports. The results indicated that attitudes toward homosexuality, sex of participant, and status as an athlete were predictors of the degree to which students were aware of and endorsed stereotypes about the values and sexuality of athletes. The groups had consensus regarding which sports had the largest and smallest proportion of gay participants for both men's and women's sports.

S PORT HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN A MALE DOMAIN that plays an integral role in socializing men and boys into traditional gender roles. Female perspectives or any values not consistent with a traditional heterosexual male sex role have not been easily integrated into the world of sports. Thus, participation in sports may have different effects for men and boys than for women and girls. For men, being an athlete may be an endorsement of traditional values and an affirmation that one is a "real man" in every way. For women, participation in sports goes against the grain of the traditional female sex role and may leave the extent of a woman's identification with traditional feminine qualities very much open to question.

Given this background, it is perhaps not surprising that men who embrace the traditional ideologies of sport are more likely to hold sexist and antihomosexual attitudes (Harry, 1995). This attitude has created difficulties for women as their participation in sports has accelerated over the past 20 years. Early written opinions on women and sports (See Cahn, 1996, and Griffin, 1992, for descriptions of these early opinions) were clearly intended to discourage women from participating in athletics. Women were warned that athletic activity could harm their reproductive

systems, masculinize them via deeper voices, more facial hair, and overdeveloped muscles, and create a tendency toward lesbianism. The risk of becoming less feminine or being perceived as a lesbian operated as one of many effective deterrents that delayed the participation of women in sports on a large scale (Griffin, 1998).

Fortunately, later research made it clear that female athletes can display traditionally male characteristics in sports without sacrificing femininity (Marsh & Jackson, 1986), and female athletes do not seem to experience any measurable role conflict between their identity as women and their identity as athletes (Allison, 1991). Nevertheless, negative stereotypes of female athletes as "mannish" lesbians may persist, and female athletes frequently adopt an almost apologetic

Author note. The authors would like to thank Stephen Davis and three anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript. This research was supported by a Ford Undergraduate Fellowship awarded to Brooke McKinney. McKinney is now in the Department of Sport, Exercise, and Leisure Sciences at the University of Iowa.

Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to Frank T. McAndrew, Department of Psychology, Knox College, Galesburg, IL 61401-4999. Electronic mail may be sent to fmcandre@knox.edu.

attitude about their participation in sports as a way of managing this lesbian stigma (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Felshin, 1974; Lenskyj, 1991). Several authors (e.g., Del Ray, 1977; Griffin, 1998) have described the pressures placed on female athletes and female coaches to publicly conform to a traditional heterosexual image. Female athletes are encouraged to wear long hair and makeup while competing, and female coaches often wear skirts and high heels in spite of the discomfort this might cause while coaching. Professional sports organizations such as the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) employ image consultants to help athletes maintain what they perceive to be a desirable (i.e., feminine) image for their sport. The media often focus on married female athletes, female athletes with children, and female athletes who have public relationships with men as a way of countering the lesbian stereotype often associated with sport. Women who are lesbians frequently report a fear that being open about their sexual orientation will expose them to harassment and discrimination and jeopardize their careers (Griffin, 1998).

The lesbian stereotype is more of a problem in some sports than in others. Women have participated in a variety of individual sports such as swimming, tennis, gymnastics, and figure skating for quite some time, and these sports have become more "acceptable" at least in part by virtue of the length of time that women have been involved as participants. Hence, these individual sports may not carry the same negative baggage for women that traditionally male team sports such as basketball would. A study by Del Ray (1977), utilizing the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1978), revealed that female tennis players and swimmers expressed more liberal and less traditional attitudes about the role of women than female softball and basketball players who were more likely to endorse stereotypically traditional views of women. Del Ray interpreted these findings as evidence that women playing traditionally male sports were more defensive and apologetic as a consequence of their choice of sport.

The present study had several goals, all of which were related to the ultimate end of extending what is now known about the relation between participation in sport and perceptions of sexuality. Although the study is primarily concerned with the perceptions of female athletes, we also collected data concerning perceptions of male athletes to provide a contrast. In this study, we directly measured attitudes toward homosexuality to see if they predicted other beliefs about the relation between sex and sport. Some of the specific questions of interest include the following: How do judgments about the sexuality of ath-

letes relate to one's attitudes about homosexuality in general? Are the alleged stereotypes of female athletes as lesbians and male athletes as heterosexual still real? Do they in fact differ from sport to sport? We predicted that the more a sport is a team sport traditionally played by men, the more likely women participating in that sport will be perceived as lesbians. In contrast, men involved with traditional team sports will be least likely to be perceived as gay. We pursued these questions by comparing the responses of male and female college athletes with other students who do not participate in sports.

Method

Participant

Participants were 91 undergraduates (29 men, 62 women) from a midwestern liberal arts college. Some participants were volunteers from introductory psychology classes participating for extra credit; others were volunteers from the student body who were recruited individually. Forty-three students (19 men, 24 women) were classified as athletes using the criterion that they had participated in at least one full season of a varsity intercollegiate sport in college. Forty-eight students (10 men, 38 women) were categorized as nonathletes.

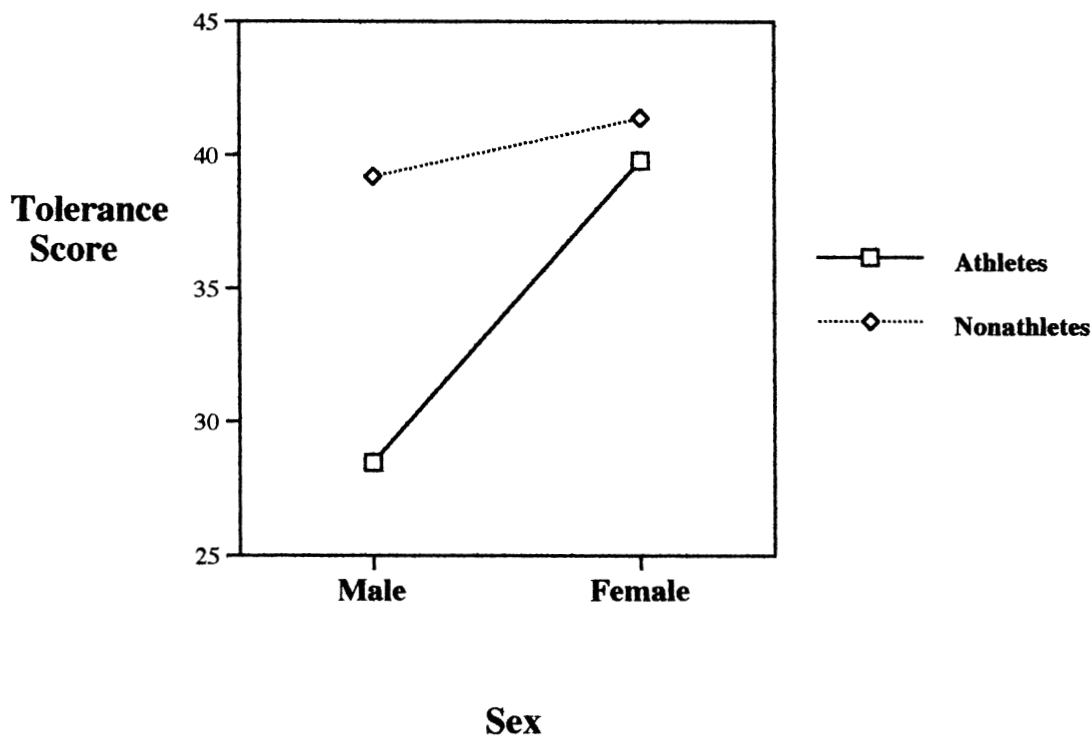
Materials and Procedure

All participants completed an eight-page questionnaire. The first 10 questions were selected from Herek's (1984) 38-item Condemnation-Tolerance Scale of attitudes toward homosexuality. We selected items on the basis of their relevance to college-aged people and issues of interest in this study. The participants rated statements such as "Homosexuality is a sin" or "I would like to have gay friends" on a 5-point Likert scale with the higher end of the scale corresponding to the more positive attitude (tolerance) toward homosexuality. We summed scores from the 10 statements to provide an "attitude toward homosexuality" score that could range from 10 to 50, with 10 reflecting a condemnation of homosexuality and 50 being an extremely open tolerance of homosexuality. The Condemnation-Tolerance Scale was followed by a series of filler items that concealed the specific focus of the study. On these filler items, the participants rated the religiosity, political leanings (liberal/conservative), and femininity/masculinity of themselves, female athletes, and male athletes on separate 7-point scales, with a score of 1 indicating *not religious, politically conservative, or feminine*, respectively.

Next, participants indicated the extent of agreement with 11 statements pertaining to the sexuality

FIGURE 1

Tolerance of homosexuality by athletic status and sex.



of athletes, homophobia, and beliefs about athletes (e.g., “Female athletes are often stereotyped as lesbians” and “I feel that looking and acting masculine is important so others don’t think I am gay”). Agreement with each statement was measured with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 indicating *strongly disagree* to 5 indicating *strongly agree*. Then, the participants ranked 12 sports according to the proportion of athletes in that sport who are probably gay/lesbian, with a rank of 1 assigned to the sport with the greatest proportion of homosexual participants and 12 assigned to the sport with the smallest proportion of homosexual participants. Participants ranked sports for men and women separately. The final six items on the questionnaire were for the athletes only, and they addressed specific issues relevant to athletes (e.g., “I believe that others question my femininity because I am an athlete” and “I would be comfortable with a gay teammate”). Some of the questions in this portion of the questionnaire were answered only by men, others only by women.

Participants from introductory psychology classes filled out the questionnaires in a group during class time. The participants completed all questionnaires

anonymously, and they signed a separate form at the end of the study to receive credit for participation. Participants from outside of class filled out the questionnaire individually and anonymously and either returned it to the experimenter in person or sent it to her mailbox.

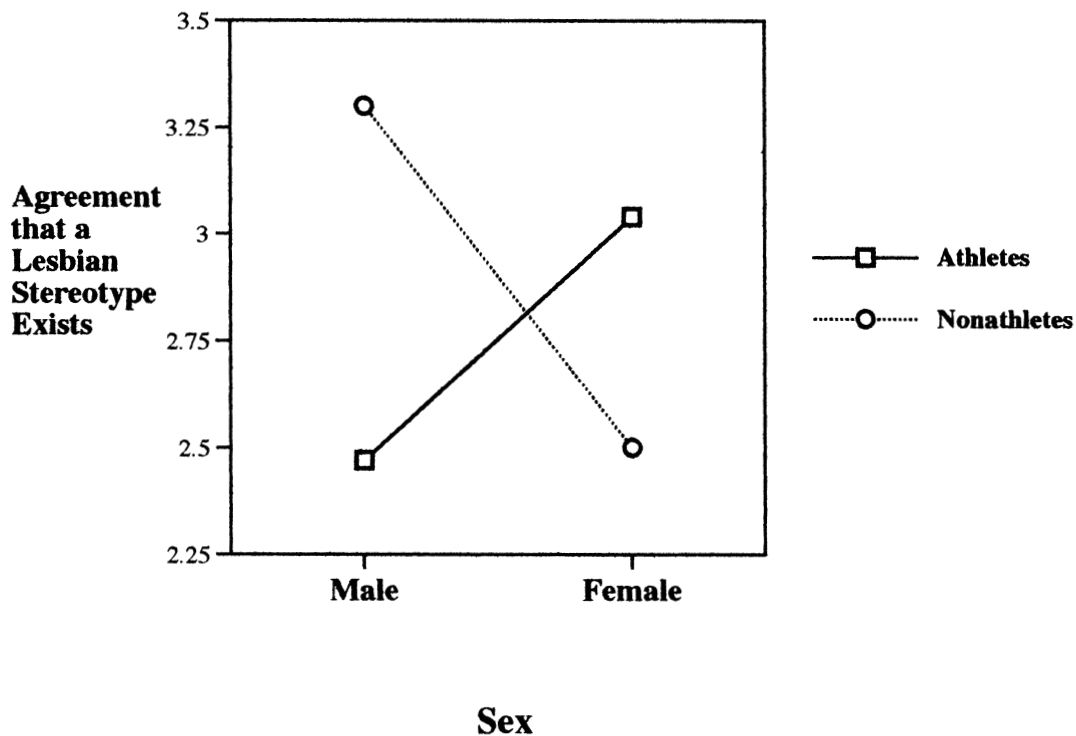
Results

We used the traditional alpha level of .05 to determine the significance of the results of all statistical tests, although the actual obtained level of probability is reported for each analysis. We conducted a series of 2×2 analyses of variance to determine the effects of participant athletic status and sex on ratings related to attitudes toward homosexuality and stereotypes of athletes.

Regarding attitudes toward homosexuality, significant main effects were found for both athletic status, $F(1, 87) = 16.47, p < .001$, and sex of participant, $F(1, 87) = 19.79, p < .001$. Nonathletes ($M = 40.94, SD = 5.67$) had significantly more positive attitudes toward homosexuality than athletes ($M = 34.79, SD = 9.16$), and women ($M = 40.77, SD = 5.68$) had more positive attitudes than men ($M = 32.17, SD =$

FIGURE 2

Belief that a lesbian stereotype exists for female athletes by athletic status and sex.



9.38). A significant interaction between athletic status and sex is illustrated in Figure 1, $F(1, 87) = 9.02, p < .003$. This interaction indicates that being an athlete is more strongly related to attitudes toward homosexuality for men than it is for women, as a Tukey test revealed that male athletes were significantly ($p < .05$) less tolerant of homosexuality than any of the other groups, $HSD = 5.65$.

An analysis of the statement "Female athletes are stereotyped as lesbians" yielded no significant main effects for athletic status, $F(1, 87) = .37, p > .05$, or for sex, $F(1, 87) = .24, p > .05$. There was, however, a significant interaction, $F(1, 87) = 8.48, p < .02$. The conservative Tukey test failed to reveal exactly which differences between means were significant, $HSD = 1.09$. However, this interaction, pictured in Figure 2, reveals that athletic status had opposite effects for men and women, with male nonathletes and female athletes more likely to believe that a lesbian stereotype exists for female athletes.

Regarding the stereotype of male athletes as heterosexual, significant main effects were found for athletic status, $F(1, 87) = 5.60, p < .02$, and sex of participant, $F(1, 87) = 3.87, p < .05$. Athletes ($M =$

1.35, $SD = .48$) were even less likely than nonathletes ($M = 1.71, SD = .74$) to think that male athletes would ever be stereotyped as gay, and men ($M = 1.28, SD = .45$) overall were less likely to think so than women ($M = 1.66, SD = .70$). There was no significant interaction for this variable, $F(1, 87) = 1.06, p > .05$. Along these same lines, two questions assessed the belief that there is a smaller proportion of gay males among athletes than there are in the population at large. One question was "I believe that there is a higher proportion of gay males among athletes than in the general population" (Item 4), and the other was "I believe that very few male athletes are gay" (Item 6). The analyses of both of these items revealed a significant effect for athletic status, with athletes endorsing the heterosexual male athlete stereotype more than nonathletes, $F(1, 87) = 11.77, p < .05$; $F(1, 87) = 9.63, p < .05$. A significant interaction between sex and athletic status was found for each of these questions, $F(1, 87) = 3.54, p < .05$; $F(1, 87) = 3.94, p < .05$, indicating that male athletes in particular endorsed this stereotype more strongly than either male or female nonathletes (Item 4— $HSD = .80, M = 3.95, 3.42, 2.70, 3.05$; Item 6— $HSD = .77, M = 3.74, 3.08, 2.60, 2.76$ for male

TABLE 1

Rankings of Male Sports According to Perceived Proportion of Gay Participants

Sport	Rank			
	Male athlete	Male nonathlete	Female athlete	Female nonathlete
Figure skating	1	2	1	1
Gymnastics	2	1	2	2
Swimming	3	3	3	3
Tennis	4	7	4	4
Track	5	10.5	8	7
Volleyball	6	9	5	5
Golf	7	6	6	6
Soccer	8	8	9	10
Baseball	9	4	10	9
Basketball	10	12	11	11
Wrestling	11	5	7	8
Football	12	10.5	12	12

Note. Ranks with a decimal indicate a tie. A rank of 1 represents the sport thought to have the greatest proportion of gay participants; a rank of 12 represents the smallest proportion of gay participants.

athletes, female athletes, male nonathletes, female nonathletes, respectively). There were no significant main effects for sex on either of these items, $F(1, 87) = .17, p > .05$; $F(1, 87) = 1.4, p > .05$. There were two corresponding items concerning the belief that there was a “higher proportion of lesbians among athletes than in the general population” and the belief that “most female athletes are lesbians,” but we found no significant main effects or interactions for these items.

Statements that were applicable to athletes only were analyzed via t tests. The analyses revealed that female athletes would be significantly more comfortable than male athletes with a gay teammate, $t(40) = 2.90, p < .007, M = 4.29$ versus $3.39, SD = .86$ versus 1.09 , or a gay coach, $t(40) = 3.36, p < .002, M = 4.33$ versus $3.17, SD = .82$ versus 1.3 . Male athletes were significantly more likely than female athletes to think that they would get a negative response from coaches and teammates if they were openly gay, $t(40) = 3.75, p < .001, M = 4.11$ versus $2.96, SD = .83$ versus 1.16 .

We conducted correlational analyses among 26 variables separately for each of the four groups (male athletes, male nonathletes, female athletes, female nonathletes). The filler items were included in this analysis on the chance that they might provide interesting relations with other variables. Because of the large number of analyses and in the interest of read-

ability, we present only the most relevant, interesting, and significant relations. Although nonsignificant findings may occasionally be quite revealing in the test of a hypothesis, none of the nonsignificant correlations seemed particularly enlightening, and hence they are not reported here.

The primary variable of interest in these analyses was the attitude toward homosexuality score; one goal of this study was to uncover what other variables might be predicted by this variable. Not surprisingly, positive attitudes toward homosexuality predicted higher levels of comfort for a gay coach or a gay teammate for both male (coach: $r[17] = .69$; teammate: $r[16] = .70, p < .001$) and female athletes (coach: $r[22] = .67$; teammate: $r[22] = .78, p < .0001$).

Female athletes and female nonathletes shared three common correlational patterns. Both groups displayed a significant tendency for low tolerance of homosexuality scores to be related to a concern for acting feminine so that others would not think they are lesbians (athletes: $r[22] = -.72, p < .0001$; nonathletes: $r[36] = -.48, p < .002$). Both female groups also showed a significant relation between positive attitudes toward homosexuality and a perception of male athletes as politically conservative (athletes: $r[22] = -.44, p < .03$; nonathletes: $r[32] = -.40, p < .02$). Similarly, women who exhibited positive at-

TABLE 2

Rankings of Female Sports According to Perceived Proportion of Gay Participants

Sport	Rank			
	Male athlete	Male nonathlete	Female athlete	Female nonathlete
Rugby	1	3	1.5	1
Softball	2	4	3	5
Field hockey	3	6	1.5	2
Basketball	4	2	4	3.5
Soccer	5	5	6	3.5
Golf	6	9	5	6
Volleyball	7	1	7	10
Swimming	8	7	10	8
Track	9	11	8	7
Tennis	10	10	9	9
Gymnastics	11	8	11	11
Figure skating	12	12	12	12

Note. Ranks with a decimal indicate a tie. A rank of 1 represents the sport thought to have the greatest proportion of gay participants; a rank of 12 represents the smallest proportion of gay participants.

attitudes toward homosexuality rated themselves as politically liberal (athletes: $r[22] = .65, p < .001$; nonathletes: $r[36] = .57, p < .0001$). Finally, male athletes, $r(17) = .73, p < .0001$, and female nonathletes, $r(36) = .47, p < .003$, who believed that female athletes are stereotyped as lesbians also believed that there is in fact a higher proportion of lesbians in sports.

The mean ranking of each of the 12 male sports and female sports was computed and ordered from 1 to 12, with 1 being the sport with the most gay participants and 12 being the sport with the fewest gay participants. The rankings for the male sports are displayed in Table 1, and the rankings for the female sports are displayed in Table 2; the ranks were fairly consistent across the four groups. Participants ranked the traditionally female/individual sports, such as figure skating, gymnastics, and swimming, as having the fewest lesbians, and team sports such as rugby, softball, and basketball as most likely to involve lesbians. Even team sports that have been primarily played by women in the United States, such as field hockey, were perceived as having a fairly large lesbian contingent. Remarkably, the rankings of the male sports were almost a mirror image of the female sports, with individual sports such as figure skating, gymnastics, and swimming perceived as the sports with the greatest

number of gay athletes and team sports such as football and basketball perceived as having the fewest gay athletes.

Discussion

It appears that the stereotypes of individuals who cross traditional gendered sporting lines are alive and well among college students, at least under some circumstances. Women participating in team sports, and men competing in individual sports considered acceptable for women, are more likely to be perceived as homosexual than are athletes who stick with more sex-role traditional sports. Male nonathletes and female athletes were most aware that a lesbian stereotype exists for many women's sports, but male athletes and female nonathletes were most likely to believe that the stereotype was true if they were familiar with it. The four groups of students were unanimous in their rankings of figure skating, gymnastics, and swimming as the "most gay" male sports and basketball and football as the "least gay" male sports. For women's sports, participants perceived figure skating and gymnastics as least gay and rugby, basketball, and other traditionally male team sports as the most common sporting outlets for lesbians.

Attitudes toward homosexuality proved to be an especially salient variable for predicting concerns about

being perceived as gay, and for athletes it was an excellent predictor of reactions to gay teammates or coaches. There was also support for the belief expressed by other researchers (e.g., Harry, 1995) that sports reinforce traditional heterosexual sex roles for men, as male athletes in particular displayed very traditional thinking about perceptions of sport and gender roles. They also displayed relatively little acceptance of homosexuality. In short, the results of this study are consistent with much of what earlier researchers have proposed about the relation among sex, sports, and broader attitudes toward sexuality. In some respects, this result is especially disheartening given the relatively liberal (politically speaking) nature of the population from which this sample was drawn.

In spite of the success that women are currently experiencing in a wide variety of sports at all levels of competition, psychological barriers remain even as legal ones have been lifted. The problem may be especially difficult to deal with because the data from most research to date indicate that the men most involved with sports also seem to have the most traditional attitudes about the relation between sex and athletics. The present study indicated that these attitudes are part of a much more extensive schema of attitudes involving other issues such as homosexuality; future research must attempt to uncover the na-

ture of the relation that attitudes about sports has to other sex-role issues.

References

- Allison, M. T. (1991). Role conflict and the female athlete: Preoccupations with little grounding. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 3*, 49–60.
- Blinde, E. M., & Taub, D. E. (1992). Women athletes as falsely accused deviants: Managing the lesbian stigma. *The Sociological Quarterly, 33*, 521–533.
- Cahn, S. (1996). So far back in the closet we can't even see the keyhole. In B. Zimmerman & T. A. H. McNaron (Eds.), *The new lesbian studies: Into the twenty-first century* (pp. 215–222). New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York.
- Del Ray, P. (1977). In support of apologetics for women in sport. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 8*, 218–224.
- Felshin, J. (1974). The triple option . . . for women in sport. *Quest, Monograph XXI*, 36–40.
- Griffin, P. (1992). Changing the game: Homophobia, sexism, and lesbians in sport. *Quest, 44*, 251–265.
- Griffin, P. (1998). *Strong women, deep closets: Lesbians and homophobia in sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Harry, J. (1995). Sports ideology, attitudes toward women, and anti-homosexual attitudes. *Sex Roles, 32*, 109–116.
- Herek, G. M. (1984). Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men: A factor analytic study. *Journal of Homosexuality, 10*, 39–51.
- Lenskyj, H. (1991). Combating homophobia in sport and physical education. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 8*, 61–69.
- Marsh, H. W., & Jackson, S. A. (1986). Multidimensional self-concepts, masculinity, and femininity as a function of women's involvement in athletics. *Sex Roles, 15*, 391–415.
- Spence, J. T. & Helmreich, R. L. (1978). *Masculinity and femininity: Their psychological dimensions, correlates, and antecedents*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.