Sexual Minorities in Sports:
Prejudice at Play

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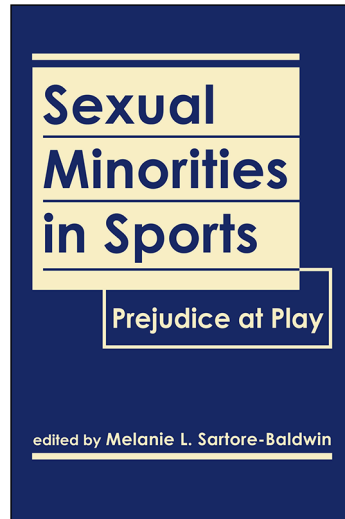
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Gender, Sexuality, and Prejudice in Sport

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Standing 6-foot 3-inches tall and weighing 226 pounds, professional athlete Gareth Thomas is a rugby legend. He has made the most appearances of any Welsh player, is one of the top scorers in the world, and serves as a leader to his fellow players and a hero to future players and fans. Thomas is particularly well known for his rough style of play that has led to him break many bones (both his own and others'), lose several teeth, and suffer a near-fatal neck injury that resulted in a mini-stroke and almost ended his career. His rough behavior has also been evident off the field. In 2005, Thomas was found guilty of assault after a drunken clash at a French nightclub. Two years later he was banned from rugby for four weeks after forcefully attempting to enter a fan seating area and engaging in hostile exchanges with fans during the 2007 Heineken Cup. Indeed, Thomas's physicality and demeanor communicate that he is big, strong, powerful, intimidating, and by all accounts the epitome of an athlete.

From the outside looking in, Thomas's life appeared to be perfect. He had an incredibly successful rugby career and was idolized by his fans. He was also adored by his wife, Jemma, whom he married in 2001. He was an accomplished athlete, a leader, and a doting husband—the quintessential man. In actuality, however, Thomas had been lying to himself, his teammates, his wife, his family, and the world about who he really was for nearly his entire life. No longer able to hide his secret and suppress his feelings, Thomas announced to the world that he was gay in December 2009. According to *Sports*

Illustrated (Smith 2010), Thomas is the world's only openly gay male professional athlete who is still currently playing a team sport.

Shortly after coming out, Thomas discussed his experiences as a closeted gay man in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC 2009). During this interview, Thomas stated that he had done whatever he needed to do to continue to play rugby and, as a result, had become a "master of disguise." Indeed, Thomas had learned from a very early age that if he wanted to play rugby, he had to be "like the rest of the boys." Thus, beyond possessing exceptional athletic talent, Thomas also needed to act like a rugby player—masculine and heterosexual. To do this, Thomas learned to "act" heterosexual by observing the behaviors of fellow players both on the field and off. For instance, he learned how to act toward women, how to engage in heterosexual locker room banter, and how to ultimately "pass" as a straight man.

Whereas passing as a heterosexual or performing heterosexuality may seem like a harmless way for sexual minorities to avoid persecution, it frequently results in negative physical and psychological consequences (Meyer 2001, 2003). Thomas spoke of feeling immensely guilty for not being honest with loved ones. He also experienced a great deal of confusion, sadness, and isolation as he carried on his charade, as well as suffered physically from the stress of denying his homosexuality to himself and hiding it from others. According to Thomas, the primary reason for enduring this turmoil was so that he could continue to play rugby, and for years the positive experience of playing rugby outweighed all of the negativity associated with remaining closeted. However, amid rumors and after years of hiding, he finally confessed to his wife and a close friend that he was gay. While coming out is different for each and every sexual minority, as are the responses that sexual minorities receive after coming out, Thomas's teammates were supportive of him and his decision to divulge his sexual orientation to the public. Thomas has received some taunting and disparaging remarks, but says that just having people accept him for who he is—a rugby player who happens to be gay, not a gay rugby player—has outweighed any negativity he receives (BBC 2009).

Sports and Society

The story of Gareth Thomas is both unique and common. It is unique in that Thomas is an openly gay professional rugby player who has

continued to play his sport since coming out. Other professional athletes have also come out, but have done so toward the end of their careers or after retiring (e.g., Justin Fashanu, John Amechi, Esera Tuaola). Thomas's story is common in that it refers to several historically based cultural and contextual constraints within the context of sport. From its inception, sport has been a site where traditional gendered roles are embraced (Messner 1992, 2002). Relatedly, sport has long been a context in which members of certain social groups or categories possess more power and status than others (e.g., Knoppers et al. 1990, 1991; Messner and Sabo 1990). As a result, the wants and needs of members within these groups have been and continue to be the most valued and privileged. What is perhaps most fascinating about this phenomenon is that even though society's definition of sport has evolved and changed over time (Coakley 2009), the groups driving these changes have changed very little. A brief discussion of the history of sport highlights this claim. While a complete history is beyond the scope of this chapter and book, a great deal of insight can be gained from a few examples. Indeed, "the person who studies sport without studying its history will never truly understand any given state of sport or the forces operating to change it" (Sage 1998:7).

It is common knowledge that the first Olympic Games were dedicated to the Greek god Zeus. The celebration incorporated games and events that resembled the socially acceptable behaviors and activities of young, able-bodied males who were often wealthy and affluent (Coakley 2009). Women, older men, persons with disabilities, and all others who had lower social standing were viewed as inferior and were not allowed to compete. In fact, women were not even allowed to attend or view the games, which thus reasserted and maintained their subordinate status. While the Olympic Games have evolved into something much more inclusive, a great number of the original traditions were carried over to the first "modern" Olympic Games, in 1896. Women, for example, were not allowed to officially compete until 1932. To this day, athletes with physical disabilities are still differentiated, as they compete in a separate Olympic event, the Paralympics.

As another example, within ancient Roman society, sport took the form of dangerous fights between Roman gladiators and wild animals. Watching and placing wagers on gladiator events also became a form of sport, as it was a source of mass entertainment. The gladiators were not generally willing competitors, however. They were

often criminals or property of the wealthy and were forced to fight animals and other Roman gladiators to the death. Even female slaves were forced to compete against wild animals. Women of affluence, however, were not forced to compete but were allowed to attend and cheer. Perhaps most important, all of the decisions about what events comprised the Roman spectacles and who competed in and attended them were made by government leaders as a way to control other segments of Roman society. Indeed, the Olympic Games were constructed and used in much the same way.

Many of the ideas that surrounded ancient sport still surround modern sport, which to a large extent remains stratified by and structured around ideological belief systems. The story of Gareth Thomas illuminates how the ideologies surrounding sport, gender, and sexual orientation can result in stigmatization, prejudice, and discrimination (e.g., Anderson 2005a, 2009; Sartore and Cunningham 2009a, 2009b; Cunningham, Sartore, and McCullough 2010). The purpose of this book is to explore these constructs within the context of sport from a variety of vantage points. First, however, an introduction to the concepts of sexual stigma and sexual prejudice is necessary.

Sport and Sexual Prejudice

Sport has long been utilized to socialize and reinforce traditional gender roles for men and women of all ages (Griffin 1998; Harry 1995; Pronger 1990). Because of this, challenges to patriarchal ideals through the crossing of gender boundaries have historically elicited negative attitudes toward the presence of nonheterosexuals in sport (Anderson 2002, 2005a; Griffin 1998; Krane 1997). The presence of females, femininity, and nonhegemonic forms of masculinity within sport highlights the perceived mismatch between the sociocultural gender stereotypes found within the sport context. Almost certainly, female and male athletes who do not conform to the idealized standards of femininity and masculinity are not only devalued but also stigmatized (Connell 1987, 1995; Griffin 1998; Kolnes 1995; Krane and Barber 2003; Shaw and Hoeber 2003).

Whereas the term "homophobia" has long been employed to describe negative attitudes toward homosexuals, contemporary theorists and researchers have begun to stray away from its usage. Homophobia was first defined by psychologist George Weinberg as "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals—and in the

case of homosexuals, self-loathing" (1972:4). This clinical definition is limited in that it centers on an "intense fear" of homosexuals, focuses only on the individual level, overlooks societal-level prejudices, and focuses primarily on homosexuality, specifically gay men, rather than sexual orientation as a larger spectrum (Herek 2000, 2004). In light of these shortcomings, Gregory Herek advanced the term "sexual prejudice," which comprises "all negative attitudes based on sexual orientation" (2000:19), as a more appropriate way to refer to negative attitudes toward sexual minorities.

Sexual prejudice is manifested from one's internalization of society's negative regard for sexual minorities, or sexual stigma (Herek 2009). A stigma reflects culturally shared knowledge about members of a specific social group and comprises labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination (Link and Phelan 2001). Stigma establishes power differences between groups that maintain and even enhance the in-group/out-group distinction and maintain social hierarchies (Sidanius et al. 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Stigma legitimates the power and status differentials that exist within society (Link and Phelan 2001). Because sexual stigma encompasses both gender and sexual orientation, it is evident across all social institutions and therefore reinforces the profound presence of sexual prejudice.

Sexual prejudice is a negative *attitude* held toward individuals, groups, and communities based on perceptions of nonheterosexuality (Herek 2000). It is not an emotion or a behavior but rather a response to cognitive information about sexual minorities. This information usually takes the form of stereotypes that have been formed in relation to gendered heterosexual norms (Herek 2009). Heterosexuality has long been constructed as the norm and subsequently embedded as such across numerous social institutions (religion, law, sport, etc.). Referred to as heterosexism, or the social ideology that characterizes nonheterosexual behaviors, identities, relationships, and communities as deviant and abnormal, this structured form of sexual stigma reaffirms the devaluation of nonheterosexuals by promoting the assumption of heterosexuality (Herek 2009). Heterosexism also maintains the stigmatization of sexual minorities by upholding the differences in status and power possessed by nonheterosexuals relative to their heterosexual counterparts (Herek 2009; Link and Phelan 2001).

Several researchers have identified the realm of sport as a heterosexist institution organized by heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity (Anderson 2002; Connell 1995; Hargreaves 2000; Sartore

and Cunningham 2009a, 2009b). Given this, sexual stigma is therefore present in sport. Sexual prejudice has also been identified and has been found to influence the behaviors of both heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals in the context of sport. George Cunningham and I (Sartore and Cunningham 2009a), for instance, have found that sexual prejudice influences the decisions of athletes and their parents regarding participation in sports. Athletes rely heavily on stereotypical beliefs, formed on the basis of heterosexist gender norms, when explaining their participation decisions. Specifically, they rely on negative stereotypes of gays and lesbians.

Stereotypes

A stereotype is a "set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people" (Ashmore and Del Boca 1979:16) and can serve to communicate a level of devaluation associated with specific social identities (Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Davies, Spencer, and Steele 2005). Negative stereotypes can therefore be determinants of negative attitudes (i.e., prejudice) toward specific groups (Allport 1954; Dovidio et al. 1996; Fiske 1998). Additionally, the very nature of stereotypes suggests that simply being aware of them serves to bias the interactions with and behaviors toward members of stereotyped and stigmatized groups (Devine 1989). This is not to blame individuals for stereotyping, however, as the process itself is highly efficient and functional. When one is presented with a target person or persons, cognitive resources are conserved through the activation of automatic, contextually relevant categorizations and stereotypes (Devine 1989; Fiske 1998; Rush 1998). Recall of additional information, once activated, is likely to be congruent with stereotypes.

Prevailing cultural stereotypes are evident at very young ages and have been found to influence personal interactions and general attitudes throughout one's life (Aronson 2004; Rowley et al. 2007). Thus they influence the prejudices people possess. For example, stereotypes of gays and lesbians have been found to be highly influential in the formation of homophobia and sexual prejudice (Bernstein 2004; Herek 2000, 2009). The often undifferentiated relationship between homosexuality and pedophilia (Plummer 2006), and stereotypes of gay males that revolve around beliefs of sexual obsession, promiscuity, femininity, flamboyance, and perversion (Bernstein 2004; Simon 1998), are quite damaging. Equally unfavorable, stereotypes of lesbians embody beliefs of sexual seduction, unwanted predatory

advances, masculinity, aggressiveness, and harmfulness toward children (Eliason, Donelan, and Randall 1992). Indeed, both sets of stereotypes provoke sexual prejudice in some and reinforce it in others (Herek 2009).

Historically, male heterosexuality has been assumed and rarely questioned in sport, while the opposite has been true for females (see Griffin 1998). The preservation of male dominance and power in sport through the imposition of gender-appropriate behaviors for both men and women has, to a large part, maintained this dynamic (Kolnes 1995; Krane 2001; Messner 1992). From the masculine ideal of the athlete (i.e., pure power, strength, and assumed heterosexuality; see Messner 1992) to the prototypical identity of the sports coach (i.e., white, Protestant, able-bodied, heterosexual male; see Fink, Pastore, and Riemer 2001), those who participate within the realm of sport bear no resemblance to the gender-based, stereotypical notions of homosexuality. While recent research has suggested cultural shifts (e.g., Adams 2011; Kian and Anderson 2009), there remains incongruence between the meanings and beliefs surrounding nonheterosexuals and the heterosexist cultural norms within sport.

Stigma

The heterosexist structure of sport and sport organizations suggests that sexual stigma is not only present but also somewhat sanctioned. Several investigations within the sport context support this supposition and suggest that men and women, heterosexual and nonheterosexual, all possess some level of awareness and expectation in relation to sexual stigma (Anderson 2002, 2005a; Sartore and Cunningham 2009b, 2010). Research has demonstrated that this expectation of negativity or prejudice, referred to as "felt stigma" (Goffman 1963; Herek 2009), can be detrimental to one's overall health and well-being (Smith and Ingram 2004) as well as influential within one's work and personal life (Brooks 1981; Crocker and Major 1989). Research also suggests that when persons hold expectations of prejudice and discrimination, they may adopt identity management strategies and coping mechanisms in an effort to avoid the effects of being stigmatized (Beatty and Kirby 2006; Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Major et al. 1998; Pinel 1999; Pinel and Paulin 2005).

While the invisible nature of one's sexual orientation may allow sexual minorities to escape physical violence and verbal assaults, the stress of being stigmatized and the fear of confirming negative

stereotypes can be both psychologically and physically harmful (Brooks 1981; DiPlacido 1998; Dworkin and Yi 2003; Meyer 2003; Lewis et al. 2006). Research has consistently demonstrated that identifying as a sexual minority can lead to stress, referred to as "minority stress," that is harmful to health (Meyer 2003). Ilan Meyer (1995), for instance, reported that the gay males in his study, as targets of societal discrimination, experienced negative mental health outcomes. A more recent meta-analysis revealed that sexual minorities were 2.3 times more likely to suffer from a mental disorder than their heterosexual counterparts (Meyer 2003). Behaviorally, minority stress may also result in substance abuse, suicidal tendencies, and depression for sexual minorities (DiPlacido 1998; Fingerhut, Peplau, and Gable 2010; Meyer 1995, 2003). Minority stress can also threaten one's performance as a result of the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's social group (Aronson 2004).

As Herek (2009) noted, "stigma consciousness" is one manifestation of felt stigma. Stigma consciousness is the response to a devalued identity and its domain-relevant stereotypes being made salient (Pinel 1999). More specifically, it is the degree to which persons focus on their own stereotyped status within given contexts. Within the United States, numerous societal stereotypes exist. For instance, African Americans are likely aware of negative stereotypes regarding their purported intellectual inferiority and aggressive dispositions (Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998). Likewise, the prevailing stereotypes revolving around women's purported excessive emotionality, poor math skills, and leadership abilities are not likely to escape the consciousness of females (Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Davies, Spencer, and Steele 2005). Sport-related gender stereotypes also exist and have been found to be salient and influential in the participation decisions made by young boys and girls (Schmalz and Kerstetter 2006, 2008). Specifically, it has been shown that young boys are acutely aware of the necessity to exude masculinity while engaging in sport and, as such, feel confined to behave in a masculine manner. Girls, on the other hand, perceive more freedom in their behaviors and thus behave in both feminine and masculine ways. These findings are consistent with other research identifying sport as a heterosexist institution in which stigma and stereotypes inform behaviors and actions (Griffin 1998; Harry 1995; Messner 1988; Zipp 2011).

Another manifestation of felt stigma is "stereotype threat," or the risk of confirming the negative stereotypes about one's social group

through one's own behavior (Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1999; Steele and Aronson 1995; Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002). Accordingly, the higher one's awareness of stigma and associated stereotypes, the more likely that stereotype threat is to occur. Stereotype threat can result in both acute and chronic behavior modifications with the intent of disconfirming stereotypes and avoiding stigmatization (Conley et al. 2002; Crocker and Major 1989; Major and O'Brien 2005; Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002). It can also be characterized as a hypervigilant state whereby dedicating mental and physical attention to the disconfirmation of salient stereotypes can result in diminished performance. In their study of gay men, for example, Jennifer Bosson, Ethan Haymovitz, and Elizabeth Pinel (2004) demonstrated a performance detriment when sexual orientation was made salient. Specifically, in their experiment comparing the childcare skills of gay and heterosexual men, gay men whose sexual orientation was made salient performed poorer than gay men whose sexual orientation was not made salient. Bosson and colleagues concluded that performance differences were the result of stereotype threat. Specifically, the gay men whose sexual orientation was made salient were trying to avoid the stereotype of gay male as sexual predator (Freedman 1995; Plummer 2006). While unfounded, this stereotype has also informed attitudes toward gay men as teachers of young children (King 2004). The same stereotype could also be evoked when a male sport coach is identified as gay (Sartore and Cunningham 2009a). Because of this, sexual minorities within the sport context often choose to manage the extent to which they disclose their sexual orientation (e.g., Sartore and Cunningham 2010). The story of Gareth Thomas provides an example of such identity management.

Outline of the Book

The subsequent chapters in this book explore and explain the complex relationships between gender, sexual orientation, and sport from different vantage points. In Chapter 2, E. Nicole Melton adopts a multilevel perspective and draws upon several areas of literature to discuss the ever-present lesbian stigma found in sport. In Chapter 3, Eric Anderson, Mark McCormack, and Matt Ripley discuss gay males in sport. Specifically, these authors explore the evolution of homophobic language in the sport context, as it relates to changing

attitudes. They identify homophobic language as a reason for challenging the notion that the realm of sport is the last bastion of homophobia and sexual prejudice. In Chapter 4, Erin E. Buzuvis discusses the transsexual and intersex athletes. With an emphasis on policy, she highlights the manner in which the individual's right to self-define his or her gender identity has long served as a stigmatizing force in sport. In Chapter 5, Nefertiti Walker explores the multiple minority status of African American sexual minorities. Recognizing that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual African Americans possess both visible and invisible characteristics that are devalued in the heterosexist environment of sport, she addresses the need for a better understanding of the effects of confounded prejudices.

The next two chapters discuss both practical and theoretical ways in which prejudices have been broken down and how sexual minorities have been empowered in the sport context. In Chapter 6, Caroline Symons provides a detailed historical account of the Gay Games and discusses how they have become a site where both diversity and unity are valued. She provides several accounts from Gay Games participants and organizers that highlight the effect of the games on the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual community. In Chapter 7, George B. Cunningham discusses the benefits of sexual orientation diversity within sport organizations. Drawing upon the social categorization framework (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987) and various literatures, he presents an integrated framework that highlights the processes necessary for sport organizations to benefit from and provide a benefit to sexual minority employees. Finally, in Chapter 8, I conclude the book offering suggestions for the future of sexual minorities in sports.