

# Setting the Record *Straight*:<sup>1</sup>

## The Experiences of Lesbian Athletes

*Caroline Fusco*

### ABSTRACT

In my master's thesis "Lesbians and Locker Rooms" I interviewed eight lesbian athletes and concluded that lesbian realities in sport can be connected to a larger set of practices which assist in the construction of a heteronormative order. In this paper I have reinterpreted previous interview material in order to examine the performances of both (homo/hetero)sexual identities in their sports in relation to this heteronormative order.

### RÉSUMÉ

Dans ma thèse de maîtrise "Lesbians and Locker Rooms" j'ai eu des entrevues avec huit athlètes lesbiennes et j'ai conclu que les réalités des lesbiennes dans le sport peuvent être reliées à des pratiques plus larges qui aident à l'établissement d'un ordre hétéronormatif. Dans cet exposé j'ai réinterprété le matériel d'entrevues antérieures afin d'étudier les performances des deux identités (homo/hétéro) sexuelles dans leurs sports en les liant à leur ordre hétéronormatif.

A lesbian athlete who is interested in pursuing a sports career through an organized national, provincial or varsity program often experiences a system characterized by patriarchal and heterosexual hegemony (Bennett, Whitaker, Wooley-Smith and Sablove 1987; Lenskyj 1986, 1990, 1991). A handful of previous studies have reported on these experiences in sport (Baxter 1983; Kidd 1983; Goldstein 1983; Palzkill 1990; Zipter 1988) or physical education (Griffin 1989; Guthrie 1982). When I began my master's thesis work there was no study in Canada that specifically explored the experiences of lesbian athletes in high performance sports. High performance athletes are individuals with high level skills who are seriously committed to their sport. Often belonging to national, provincial and university organizations, these athletes spend a significant amount of time training, developing their skills and travelling to competitions. This lifestyle involves a commitment to intense training, team schedules and many hours living with a small group of people such as teammates and coaches.

The purpose of my master's thesis research was to give some lesbian athletes an opportunity to tell their stories, and explore whether they

experienced heterosexism and homophobia in their sports. I chose to explore the experiences of lesbians in team sports because of my own experiences as a lesbian athlete competing in a high performance team sport. I also believed that lesbian athletes in team sports would provide a unique perspective on how they experience their lesbian identities that would be different from their experiences as individuals at work and the experiences of other lesbians in individual sports or outside sports. First, lesbians in team sports are doubly stigmatized because they are women playing sports that have been historically reserved for men, and as lesbians they confront, head-on, the stereotype levelled at many women playing team sports: the stigma of the lesbian label (Blinde and Taub 1992). Second, in addition to road trips and long practice hours with their teams, athletes are together and see each other often in various states of undress; the potential eroticism inherent in locker rooms and shared hotel rooms may increase the potential for homophobic reactions from heterosexual teammates and coaches.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

You know what killed sports? Lesbians. This cost us in women's basketball. But I know there are not as many lesbians now unless I'm really blinded. We discourage it, you know. We put it under wraps. (Former basketball promoter, quoted in Rounds 1991, 43)

Attitudes such as those expressed by the basketball promoter have not only inadvertently legitimized the notion that lesbians "kill" sports but they highlight how the heterosexual image in women's sport is defended and maintained. Vivas (an ex-director of major league volleyball) states that "women athletes are looked at as masculine and get the stigma of being gay," and the public, in general, "has problems dealing with women athletes and strong aggressive females" (Rounds 1991, 43). To appreciate the power of homophobia in sport it is important to acknowledge that historically sport has been viewed as a male domain and athleticism has been equated with masculinity (Willis 1982; Birrell 1988). The historical exclusion of women from many sports was justified through promoting the notion that sport conflicted with women's "femininity" (Hall 1988). Theorists suggest that in reality the "femininity" reported in traditional studies about women in sport was a disguised word for "heterosexuality," and that the attention focused on woman athlete's "femininity" manifested the explicit and implicit fear that she may be lesbian (Hall 1988; Lenskyj 1986; MacKinnon 1987). Kyvallos (cited in Reed, 1994) stated:

If you are a confident athlete, men are threatened. If you are a confident lesbian athlete, they're even more threatened. The men who control sports would prefer that women were not gay. If they are, they want them to stay in the closet. That way, I think, in their heads they think they can still fuck them. (92)

It has been reported that heterosexual sports women also find lesbians problematic because their presence fulfills the stereotype (Blinde and Taub

1992). The lesbian image must be marginalized then if straight women are to compete without fear of the lesbian stigma.

Much work in the area of sexualities and sport in recent years has demonstrated that institutional heterosexism and homophobia in sport has naturalized and (re)produced sexual binaries, thus demarcating homosexual and heterosexual identities (Birrell and Cole 1990; Lenskyj 1994; Messner 1996; Messner and Sabo 1994; Peper 1994; Pronger 1990, Sykes 1996). Given these studies I was interested in exploring how lesbian athletes in high performance sports experienced institutionalized heterosexism and homophobia. The starting point of the research was acknowledgment of a lesbian identity. In the light of recent poststructuralist and postmodern notions of multiple and competing identities and critiques of a "falsely universalized [lesbian] subject" (Messner 1996; Sykes 1996) it may be seen as problematic to describe or do research on lesbians' experiences in sport. However, it is important to acknowledge that the athletes interviewed identified as lesbian and therefore, experienced this lesbian identity as real. Rather than universalizing these experiences to all lesbians in sport (or describing an essential lesbian experience in sport), the aim of the research conducted was to provide some exploratory account of how these lesbian athletes subjectively experienced high performance sport.

At the time I was writing my thesis I was interested in how their lesbianism interrelated with their lives in sport environments where dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality prevailed. In this paper, rather than re-telling that story, I wish to highlight how the lesbian athletes experienced and interpreted the performances of heterosexuality engaged in by their coaches, teammates and other closeted lesbians. These heterosexual discourses were (re)produced through what Namaste (1994) describes as the "simultaneous exclusion and presence of homosexuality" (226).

## METHODOLOGY

The sample of athletes chosen for the research was a purposive one. I was interested in researching the experiences of athletes who

identified themselves as lesbian, who participated in team sports at an inter-varsity or elite level of competition, and who participated on teams that did not identify as lesbian. Participants were invited to join in the study by "snowball" and "friendship network" sampling. They were selected for participation based on their interest in the research, their ability to articulate their personal experiences, their willingness to participate in the research within the conditions I had set for confidentiality/privacy, and their willingness to be part of the on-going process of the research. Three athletes lived in Vancouver, one in Toronto, and four in Winnipeg. All the participants were white and university educated. They competed in basketball, field hockey, ice hockey, lacrosse and water-polo, with one to twelve years of experience in high performance sport ranging from provincial club to international competition. I have given each athlete a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality.<sup>2</sup>

A framework of questions was prepared to guide the interviews. I carried out 11 in-depth interviews with eight athletes over a period of 18 months. The interviews ranged from one to two hours. They were transcribed verbatim and were read several times during which I identified key phrases and words which assisted in determining what Glaser and Strauss (1967) described as "categories" and "properties." Thirty-three sub-categories emerged from the coding, these sub-categories were arranged in seven conceptual categories.<sup>3</sup>

Although the process was grounded in the women's personal experiences, I used a radical feminist framework to interpret these lesbian athletes' stories. This feminist analysis offered me a theory central to which lesbianism and heterosexuality are examined as political institutions (Kitzinger 1987). This analysis allowed me to concentrate on those pieces of the interviews that illustrated how heterosexism and homophobia worked in sport and the impact of these political constructions on the athletes' lives.

## LESBIAN AND SPORT BIOGRAPHIES

In order to establish a context through

which to explore the participants' experiences in sport I will briefly describe their lesbian and sport biographies. The four participants aged 25 and younger, Aoife, Dara, Tina and Kelly, had identified as lesbians between two to five years; for the four participants between 25 and 35, Sandra, Heidi, Meghan and Julie, it ranged from 9 to 17 years.

When I asked them in the interview, "how would you define your sexual identity and what words are you most comfortable with describing your sexuality," I got a range of responses. Seven of the participants identified as "lesbian," Dara identified as "queer." Heidi, Tina and Kelly initially responded that although they now identified as lesbian they preferred to use the word "gay" to describe themselves. When I asked if they were "out" to anyone in their sports career, all the participants responded that they did not come out to either their coaches or teammates when they were first acknowledging their lesbianism.

Aoife was the only athlete who had explicitly come out to her coach. Julie recalled that even though her most significant relationships were always with women, "it wasn't until I got out (of sport), that I came out!" I also asked if they were out in their lives outside sport. In their lives as teachers, workers, students they also had difficulties in coming out.

The athletes I interviewed were at various stages of sports participation; however, in their stories they described sport as being the "most important thing in life." It was central to them, essential to how they defined themselves:

My athletic career started when I was seven. I was a jock, I was completely immersed in sport...Yes, I was completely immersed, lived and breathed sport. Thinking about it in some ways, I knew nothing else. I was good at it. I liked it, I loved the camaraderie, the team. I loved being physically active and being able to push my body farther, that's still something I enjoy doing. (Julie)

This account echoes many elements of the participants' athletic biographies. Heidi recalled that

her sports career "all started when she was kicking in the womb;" for others sport was the "biggest focus" in their lives and from what they remembered sport was the "best part" of their childhood. Many of them felt that coming out would hurt their sports careers:

I talked to my other friends outside [my sport] and I said to them like, "I *can't* tell anybody on [my team], I *can't!*" (Dara)

Their desire to stay in the closet in their sports, of course, went beyond their personal feelings about being lesbian. They had a sense that it was not acceptable to be a lesbian in society or in sports. How did they know this? What were the explicit and implicit signs that indicated their sports resisted a lesbian presence?

### SPORT - FOR THE RECORD

They [my teammates] wanted everybody *to be straight* so that everybody can be close, pal around, go out for beers, talk about guys and put down the *dykes* on the team. (Kelly)

Generally, in every sport there were hostile attitudes displayed towards lesbianism. This hostility was reflected in Kelly's team motto, a motto which explicitly suggested that only heterosexuals were welcome to participate: "If you're straight, you can skate!" In team sports, where there is an expectation of sameness and cohesion, the team is like a family (Therberge 1995), and the consequences of not fitting can be great. Two significant groups of individuals affected the experiences of these athletes - their coaches and their teammates (both heterosexual and lesbian). The athletes had worked hard in their sports to impress coaches, to demonstrate that they were competent in the tasks they were assigned, and to show that they could reach their potential. Yet they believed that as lesbians they would have to be among the strongest and best athletes to remain in the program:

Aoife: I felt really under a lot of pressure

to perform very well in my third year especially in order to prove to myself that I was really happy as a lesbian. "Look how happy I am, I have so much confidence, let me play!" I felt I had to prove myself.

Caroline: Do you think that any of the other straight players on the team feel that they have to prove themselves?

Aoife: Some of them do, but not for the same reasons, that's for sure!

Most of these athletes felt that their coaches and teammates "did not need to know" that they were lesbians. While the athletes could achieve some space away from their coaches, it was more difficult to achieve this space between teammates. Although teammates may not possess the power to influence the path of an athlete's career that coaches do, teammates do have power to sanction sexualities. They can do this in ways that are unique because of their closer access to their teammates. Yet both coaches and teammates played a dominant role in maintaining an environment dominated by homophobic and heterosexual hegemony and it was apparent, throughout the athletes' accounts, that the common sexual identity expected on their teams was a heterosexual one.

In the next section I want to show how the coaches' and teammates' sanctioning of sexualities went beyond expressions of negativity towards lesbianism. In fact, their coaches and teammates engaged in both implicit and explicit performances of (hetero)sexuality, where in essence they (the coaches and teammates) required the "exclusion and presence" of lesbianism in order to assert their heterosexual status.

### HETERO PERFORMANCES

The straightness of [my university], it was always there, always in your face, especially on the team. Everyone talked about boyfriends and laughed, joked, and teased when a new fellow appeared at the game. No one ever did that when a woman came to watch me even though they knew *exactly* what she was there for. (Aoife)

There were two categories of hetero performances observed: avoidance of lesbianism and lesbians altogether, and explicit acknowledgment of lesbianism and lesbians. These performance tactics, although oppositional, work together to create a paradoxical sports environment in which absence and presence of lesbianism is required.

One athlete recalled that disrespect towards lesbians was not always explicitly evident because often "lesbian sexuality was never talked about" openly on her team. Meghan commented that she never really knew whether the heterosexual players on her team knew she was a lesbian because "nobody's ever asked [her] if [she] was." Also, Julie recalled that even when it was known that her two coaches were lesbian there was silence surrounding the issue: "Nobody talked about their relationship openly...Nobody." I would suggest that this verbal avoidance is an implicit performance of heterosexuality, as is physical avoidance of suspected lesbians. Physical avoidance occurred when these lesbian athletes were in close quarters, in hotels or locker rooms, with other team members. Teammates often stayed away from suspected lesbians:

Like in the shower, they'd all shower up quickly and leave if a couple of the girls (lesbian) were in the shower...you knew they weren't really comfortable with themselves. They wouldn't express it but deep down they would kind of stay away, *especially* in the shower, you can tell by who would take a shower and who wouldn't. (Kelly)

In contrast to this avoidance there were also frequent explicit references to lesbians, lesbianism and homosexuality in their sports. One athlete labelled this phenomenon "homo-curiosity." It appeared that often teammates appeared to be "fascinated with it [lesbianism];" they *really wanted* to know "who's what and who's together!"

I was told right off the bat, as soon as I made the provincial team - I think it's something that all the new little people get

told. Like "so and so's a dyke, so and so's a dyke. And so is she, and so is she. And she's living with her!" (Aoife)

This curiosity or what has been labelled "lesbian-baiting," allowed teammates to target lesbians for ridicule and more importantly to demonstrate that they, even though they were curious, were not "one of *them!*"

My teammates were saying about [a certain player], "well, we don't *know* if she *is* one [lesbian] but we have our reasons to believe so we're going to stay away. We know *we're* not!" They're not going to take their chances, there's one girl in particular who if anyone [lesbian] was around, she didn't want anything to do with them. (Kelly)

Despite the "fascination with the spectre of abjection, a certain preoccupation with the figure of the homosexual as spectre and phantom" (Fuss 1991, 3), homo-curiosity was usually accompanied by wails of laughter, eye-rolling and groans of disgust. The wails of laughter presented the overwhelming impression of teams' opposition to lesbianism, secured teams' collective (hetero)sexual identity and thus maintained a homo/hetero binary. Although it was usually their heterosexual teammates who initiated the homo-curiosity or lesbian-baiting sessions, some closeted lesbians also engaged in these performances to deflect suspicions from themselves:

One of the girls on our team, she's gay, just came out with it and said to a couple of girls, "well [Tina] is gay and so is [another player]." (Tina)

As well as teammates, coaches also engaged in heterosexual performances. As coaches are in positions of power over athletes (in terms of place selection, playing time etc.) the effect of a coach's opposition to lesbianism, in terms of providing a safe environment for lesbians to come out, cannot be underestimated:

[My coach] enjoyed making people know on the team that she wasn't lesbian, and in no uncertain terms! You know, stuff like "hello, I've been sleeping with (some guy)." (Sandra)

I had a jean jacket on over top of a white T-shirt and my track pants. And I think I was wearing a baseball cap. . . I came into her [my coach's] vicinity. And she said "oh, you look like those women [lesbians] over there. Take your jacket off and your hat off, and spruce yourself up a bit." The coach said "they look like hell, and I don't want that *type* of woman reflected on our team." (Aoife)

Here the coach's heterosexual identity is clearly demarcated (in the form of appearance and sexual experiences) from a lesbian identity. All these "performances" sent strong messages that a lesbian identity would not be sanctioned on their teams.

Occasionally their heterosexual teammates subverted their (hetero)sexuality by engaging in dialogue or performances which might have suggested that in fact they were open to the lesbian presence:

One rather eccentric individual on our team, very outspoken, always playing up to the guys whenever she could and coifing herself, would say the odd comment to another player, "Oh, look at *her*, *she's* pretty cute!" It would be a kind of an off the cuff kind of comment. The same individual though would have *real* problems being identified as being on a team with a lot of gay athletes, so it's kind of a contradiction, a tremendous contradiction. (Heidi)

Although teammates engaged in this subversion it was clear they knew that their place in the "hetero/homo hierarchy" (Fuss 1991) was secured because their usual actions (playing to the guys for example) were recognizable to the team as (hetero)sexual norms. In fact queer theorists suggest that "an articulation of nonheterosexuality

bolsters the centrality of heterosexuality itself" (Doty quoted in Namaste 1994, 225). Ironically then, the exclusion and presence of lesbianism operated simultaneously and was necessary because ultimately the category "lesbian" was used to signal the existence of the team's (hetero)sexuality.

It may be useful at this juncture to provide a context as to why performances of heterosexuality were engaged in, apart from achieving distance from the lesbian "spectre." As the behaviour of women athletes is often interpreted to violate gender norms, women athletes are frequently stigmatized and devalued. One means that is often used to discredit women who violate gender norms is to label them lesbian and, as previously stated, sport is a particularly susceptible arena for lesbian labeling due to the historical links between athleticism and masculinity (Birrell 1988). The athletes interviewed were very aware of this:

The first thing people do when they see a really muscular woman is say, "she must be a lesbian," or some woman who really enjoys sport especially like a contact sport, a physical sport, is "she must be a lesbian." (Sandra)

Women coaches and players are acutely aware of the possibility of being labelled lesbian, and this possibility escalates when there are lesbian players on their teams: "We heard later what people said about us, you know, that 'you're all a bunch of lesbians because you play for one, you must be of course!'" (Sandra). However, mixed messages about muscularity in women's sport persist. In the last decade the proliferation of the fitness industry has sanctioned women's pursuit of fitness and health. The emphasis remains on projecting one's heterosexuality; therefore, particular sports and fitness exercises (read more feminine) are usually sanctioned (Lenskyj 1994).

Throughout their stories it was observed that one sexual identity (hetero) was continuously privileged over the other (homo) through manifest and implicit performances of heterosexuality. In this way heterosexuals could construct lesbians as "other" and affirm their heterosexuality:

There was a core of women who were very protective of their own identity, sexual identity to a point where they would blurt out on many occasions - how so and so from whatever team - "gosh, she looks *so gay*." You know? "Look at *the hair cut*, look at the size of *her*, look at the way *she* walks." (Heidi)

Avoiding and yet acknowledging that lesbians do exist in sports provides heterosexuals with the opportunities to continually construct their (hetero)sexuality in ways that differentiate them from lesbians, thus maintaining the "homo/hetero hierarchy" (Fuss 1991) on their teams.

### SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

I knew we [my partner and I] had this incredible connection through this sport that could be validated...*even though* in some areas there was a stereotype that some of the heterosexual players tried to disregard and negate, there were a lot that said "heh, you're who you are, enjoy, you seem really happy together, go for it!" (Heidi)

Incidents of acceptance, like the one reported above, were of great importance to the individual athletes. However, the *individuality* of these incidents is key here because it appeared from their accounts that acceptance was not demonstrated uniformly to other lesbians in sport or society but just to these individual players. For Dara her team accepted her difference because they interpreted her as something other than lesbian:

Like people on the basketball team thought I was punk...they go "okay [Dara's] punk." [...]. So for some of them - even if they knew - that's how they made up for it in their brains. Like, you know, "that's just [Dara], she's strange anyway?" (Dara)

Yet her teammates had no trouble targeting other homosexuals:

It was the time when there was that big earthquake in San Francisco? And [one player] turned and said, "do you know what I *really* wish? I *really* wish there was a whole bunch of fags underneath a bridge and it came crashing down and killed them *all*." (Dara)

For some of these lesbian athletes there was a degree of acceptance; others were "just tolerated." This tolerance usually occurred when teammates thought someone was a good enough player *even though* she might be a lesbian. It seemed that often teammates chose the "less attractive [lesbians], the ones that fit the stereotype to talk about;" those who "predominantly had *really* short hair and weren't classified as attractive were treated differently than those who fit with a more heterosexual image" (Aoife).

Some athletes experienced acceptance *precisely* because they were among the best players *and* because they were not explicitly out, often passing as heterosexual. Their lesbian identity (if it was known) although incongruent with their team's hetero identity was tolerated (mostly through denial and silence) and thus their sports appeared open and accepting. Their athletic identities were privileged and accepted over their homosexual identities; in that way the team could accept them without explicitly accepting them as lesbians:

"...okay, maybe she [Tina] is gay but she comes here to play hockey. You don't have to party with her or spend time with her after hockey but she comes and she works with the team and is a team player." (Tina)

The knowledge that their sports were not entirely safe spaces for them as lesbians coupled with the apparent implicit and explicit heterosexual performances in sport obviously had an impact on these athletes' performances of a lesbian identity in sports. For these lesbian athletes their athletic identity and the performance of their athletic self often assumed precedence over their lesbian identity and its performance. It appeared that these athletes overwhelmingly engaged in an athletic

performance because their sports were so important to their sense of self that they were prepared to subvert their lesbian identity in order to continue to pursue their athletic identity. This subversion could be traced to the place of sport in their lives:

Something I love so much, my sport, I don't want it to be taken away - I'm all for this gay lib thing but some people don't understand or aren't accepting in that particular sport - so I don't want to jeopardize that. (Tina)

Performances of their lesbianism were rare in their sports. In fact the most explicit performances of their lesbian identities were done outside their main sport careers: these involved being seen with lesbian friends, and going to lesbian bars and/or cultural events such as the Gay Games. Their accounts demonstrate how they often tried to keep their lesbian identities from overlapping with their athletic identities while participating in sport:

...when you're an athlete it just seemed that you get put into a position where sports become so much of your life, especially if you are an elite athlete. You usually have started sport early in your life and sport is your life. Friends are in your sports and school is tied into that. And I guess for me, I felt that if you tell someone that you're a dyke...part of what you've grown up knowing, which is sport, the competition and everything, you just feel because it is so homophobic, you feel that whole part of your life can be taken away from you and if your not careful, you can just be harassed out of the sport... and then you lose your life, something that is so important to you, something that you've worked so hard for. (Dara)

Concentrating on performing one identity (athletic) exclusively over another identity (lesbian) allowed them not only to concentrate on their sport performances but to ignore and cope with both the implicit and explicit performances of heterosexuality in their sport environments.

Separating these competing identities was probably the most important "identity management strategy" or "selective performance of gender" (Sykes 1996) that they engaged in as high performance athletes who also identified as lesbians. The vision here is not to wish for these athletes a total unified identity; in fact these athletes may have enjoyed just being an "athlete" as opposed to being a "lesbian athlete." However, their (heterosexual) teammates and coaches could implicitly and explicitly be, and perform as, athletes and heterosexuals in sport; whereas these lesbian athletes were required to be athletes only. They were prevented from performing their (homo)sexual identities. In this way lesbianism remained regulated, the "hetero/homo hierarchy" (Fuss 1991) prevailed and the team's (hetero)sexual record remained untarnished.

## CONCLUSION

These athletes were certainly not prevented from participating in their sports. In fact it may have appeared from an outsider looking in on their sports (as it did even at times to the athletes themselves) that they were free to fulfill their sporting potential as athletes. Each athlete had participated in her sport to an elite level and because sport was, and is for some still, a central focus in their lives. They were all driven by a motivation to succeed in each of their activities. My premise, however, is that they were not free as lesbian athletes to acknowledge their lesbianism because their sport worlds vehemently protected and portrayed a heterosexual image. The hetero norms so blatantly valorized in their sports extend obviously beyond individual relationships with coaches and teammates to a heteronormative order which is continually (re)constructed in sport. In sports, "heteronormativity," a process by which "heterosexist normalcy normalizes itself through making homosexuality deviant" (Martindale 1995) continually reproduces and recreates itself because it "can never fully ignore the close psychical proximity of its terrifying (homo)sexual other" (Fuss 1991, 3). Whether these athletes chose to challenge this heteronormative order was somewhat mediated and shaped by their own experiences, age,



their social milieu and how they thought about their athletic and lesbian identities. As athletes they were in control of how they performed in their sports physically and mentally; as athletes who identified as lesbians, their stories highlighted how their performances of lesbianism and athleticism were mediated by a sports world that prides itself in defending its *straight* record.

The "selective performances" of heterosexuality engaged in by their coaches and teammates outweighed the explicit incidences of homophobic harassment towards the athletes in their sports although these performances in themselves may constitute homophobia because they sanction (hetero) norms. Through these hetero performances, in the sphere of "high performance" sport, we see particularly acute example of how:

...heterosexuality secures its self-identity  
and shores up its ontological boundaries

by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachment of its contaminated other, homosexuality.

(Fuss 1991, 2)

Further work needs to be done to examine how performances or scripts of (hetero/homo)sexuality are "constructed within the constraints of a socially organized (institutionalized) system of power and pleasure" (Messner 1996, 233), and how this system of dominant discourse "constructs and constricts" (Sykes 1996) the performances of lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual identities in sport. It is apparent throughout these athletes' accounts that their lives as lesbians in sport are clearly influenced by a sports environment that, by turns, resists and requires, tolerates and vilifies the lesbian presence.

## ENDNOTES

1. Thanks to Beth Jackson for providing me with this title.

2. The participants were as follows (names are pseudonyms):

"**Kelly**"- an 18 year old student who had competed at club provincial and national championships in her sport;

"**Tina**" - a 20 year old student who had competed at club provincial and national championships in her sport;

"**Aoife**"- a 22 year old student who had competed at a provincial, national and CIAU (Canadian Intervarsity Athletic Union) level in her sport. She had also been identified as a potential national team prospect.

"**Dara**"- a 24 year old student, sales assistant and writer for her university newspaper. She had competed at club provincial and national championships in her sport.

"**Sandra**"- a 30 year old teacher. She had competed at CIAU level in her sport.

"**Meghan**"- a 32 year old teacher. She had participated provincially in a number of sports but in her main sport she had competed for Canada at international competitions including two World Cups.

"**Julie**" - a 33 year old research co-ordinator. She had competed provincially and nationally in her sport. In addition she had competed for Canada at international competitions including a World Cup and pre-Olympic qualifying competition.

"**Heidi**"- a 33 year old teacher. She had competed provincially and nationally in her sport. In addition she had competed for Canada at international competitions including a World Cup and pre-Olympic qualifying competition.

3. The seven descriptive categories were openness, resistance, tolerance, uncertainties, compromises, defiance, and consequences (Fusco 1995).

## REFERENCES

Baxter, Betty. "Lesbians in Sport: the Dilemma of Coming Out," *Kinesis* (Summer 1983), pp. 19-20.

Bennett, Roberta, et al. "Changing the Rules of the Game: Reflections Towards A Feminist Analysis of Sport," *Women's Studies International Forum* 10 (1987), pp. 369-79.

Birrell, Susan. "Discourses on the Gender/sport Relationship: From Women in Sport to Gender Relations," *Exercise and Sport Science Reviews*. K. B. Pandolf, ed. New York, MacMillan, 1988, pp. 459-502.

- \_\_\_\_\_. and Cheryl Cole. "Double Fault: Renee Richards and the Construction and Naturalization of Difference," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7 (1990), pp. 1-21.
- Blinde, Elaine, and Diane Taub. "Women Athletes As Falsely Accused Deviants," *The Sociological Quarterly* 33 (1992), pp. 521-33.
- Cahn, Susan. *Coming on Strong. Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-century Women's Sport*. New York: Free Press, 1994.
- Fusco, Caroline. *Lesbians and Locker Rooms: the Subjective Experiences of Lesbians in Sport*. Master's thesis. University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada, 1995.
- Fuss, Diana. "Inside/Out," *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. D. Fuss, ed. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Glaser, Barney, and Anselm Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Press, 1967.
- Goldstein, Judith. "Women Striving: Pursuing the Physical Challenge," *Parks and Recreation* 17,1 (1983), pp. 71-81.
- Griffin, Pat. "From Hiding Out to Coming Out: Empowering Lesbian and Gay Educators," *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet. Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers and Curricula*. K. Harbeck, ed. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1992, pp. 167-96.
- Gutherie, Sharon. *Homophobia: Its Impact on Women in Sport and Physical Education*. Master's thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 1982.
- Hall, Ann. "The Discourse of Gender and Sport: From Femininity to Feminism," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1988), pp. 330-40.
- Kidd, Dorothy. "Getting Physical: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Sport." *Canadian Woman Studies* 4,3 (1983), pp. 62-5.
- Kitzinger, Celia. *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*. London: Sage, 1987.
- Lenskyj, Helen. *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Power and Play: Gender and Sexuality Issues in Sport and Physical Activity," *International Review for Sociology of Sport* 25 (1990), pp. 235-43.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Combating Homophobia in Sport and Physical Education," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8,1 (1991), pp. 61-9.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sexuality and Femininity in Sports Contexts: Issues and Alternatives," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 18 (1994), pp. 356-76.
- MacKinnon, Catharine. "Women, Self Possession and Sport," *Feminism Unmodified. Discourses on Life and Law*. C. A. MacKinnon, ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. 117-24.
- Martindale, K. "What Makes Lesbianism Thinkable? Theorizing Lesbianism From Adrienne Rich to Queer Theory," *Feminist Issues: Race, Class and Sexuality*. N. Mandell, ed. Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Canada, 1995.
- Messner, Michael. "Studying Up on Sex," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 13 (1996), pp. 221-37.
- Messner, Michael, and Don Sabo. *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports: Rethinking Masculinity*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1994.
- Namaste, Ki. "The Politics of Inside/out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and A Sociological Approach to Sexuality," *Sociological Theory* 12,2 (1994), pp. 220-31.
- Palzkill, Birgit. "Between Gymshoes and High-heels - the Development of A Lesbian Identity and Existence in Top Class Sport." *International Review for Sociology of Sport* 25 (1990), pp. 221-33.
- Peper, Karen. "Female Athlete = Lesbian: A Myth Constructed From Gender Role Expectations and Lesbophobia," *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*. R. J. Ringer, ed. New York: New York University Press, 1994, pp. 193-208.
- Pronger, Brian. *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Reed, Susan. "Unlevel Playing Fields," *OUT* (June 1994), pp. 92-6.

Rounds, Kate. "Why Men Fear Women's Teams," *Ms. the World of Women* 1,4 (January/February 1991), pp. 43-5.

Sykes, Heather. "Constr(I)(U)cting Lesbian Identities in Physical Education: Feminist and Poststructuralist Approaches to Researching Sexuality," *Quest* 48 (1996), pp. 459-69.

Therberge, Nancy. "Gender, Sport and the Construction of Community: A Case Study From Women's Ice Hockey," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12 (1995), pp. 389-402.

Whitson, David. "Sport and the Social Construction of Masculinity," *Sport, Men and the Gender Order. Critical Feminist Perspectives*. M. Messner and D. Sabo, eds. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1990, pp. 45-54.

Willis, Paul. "Women in Sport in Ideology," *Sport, Culture and Ideology*. J. Hargreaves, ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 117-35.

Zipter, Yvonne. *Diamonds Are A Dyke's Best Friend*. Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1988.

---

## the morning after my first dyke experience

you looked like a dyke in that truck,  
suddenly. i pulled myself up into it,  
thought how strange to see you  
in another context. who'd you borrow it  
from, i wonder. you're just a  
stranger in a borrowed pick-up.

you're my closet girlfriend  
stored back in my musty brain.  
it feels like i never think anymore

but suddenly my mind can't stop placing your  
dyke hand which rests on the gearshift  
on the back of my neck & suddenly i can't stop  
placing us back in your bed last night.

you're my dyke girlfriend in a borrowed pick-up.  
the morning light hurts my eyes  
and i squint it all away.

*Jenna Capeci*