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UPDATING THE OUTCOME

Gay Athletes, Straight Teams, and Coming Out in Educationally Based Sport Teams

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In this article I report findings from interviews with 26 openly gay male athletes who came out between 2008 and 2010. I compare their experiences to those of 26 gay male athletes who came out between 2000 and 2002. The athletes in the 2010 cohort have had better experiences after coming out than those in the earlier cohort, experiencing less heterosexism and maintaining better support among their teammates. I place these results in the context of inclusive masculinity theory, suggesting that local cultures of decreased homophobia created more positive experiences for the 2010 group.

Keywords: athlete; homophobia; coming out; gay; homosexual; sport

Competitive sport is a social institution that is principally organized around the political project of defining certain forms of masculinity as acceptable while denigrating other forms of masculinity (Anderson 2010; Crosset 1990; Messner 2002). Sports associate boys and men with masculine dominance by constructing their identities and sculpting their bodies to align with hegemonic perspectives of masculinist embodiment and expression. Boys in competitive team sports are therefore constructed to exhibit, value, and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity (Brackenridge et al. 2008).

Men's homophobia has also played an important role in an intramasculine stratification traditionally found among males (Plummer 1999). Accordingly, research has shown that organized, competitive team sports are highly homophobic in Western cultures (Anderson 2000; Hekma 1998; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990). This is because sports, particularly contact sports, have an institutional culture in which hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined: An athlete is thought to represent the ideal of

what it means to be a man—a definition that is predicated in opposition to what it means to be feminine and/or gay (Connell 1995; Messner 1992). As Messner (1992, 34) writes, *"*The extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering. Boys [in sports] learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one's heterosexual status is not acceptable." Likewise, Hekma (1998, 2) observes, "Gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise."

In 2002, I published in *Gender & Society* the first ever study of openly gay male athletes in mainstream, educationally based sports. These openly gay athletes were not verbally or physically harassed about their sexuality. However, because I could find only openly gay athletes who were exceptional athletes among their peers, it appeared that the ability to come out was dependent on maintaining high sporting, and therefore high masculine, capital. In other words, almost all of the athletes I interviewed were the best on their respective teams. Furthermore, I found very few contact sport athletes to research; most were swimmers, runners, or tennis players. Because I looked extensively for athletes, both on the Internet and by sending letters to tens of dozens of college athletic directors, I determined that the atmosphere of individual sports was more conducive for coming out than that of competitive contact sports. I found that about half of my participants played on a team with a culture of heteronormativity, a don't ask, don't tell culture in which both the gay athlete and teammates colluded in silencing the voices of gay men.

I theorized these results through Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity theory, suggesting that the athletes represented a "challenge" to hegemonic masculinity in the sport setting. This is because openly gay athletes were thought to disprove the myth that one had to be straight to excel at competitive sport. I then suggested that openly gay athletes had the potential to aid the erosion of hegemonic masculinity in the sport setting through their success, particularly in team sports. In this article, drawing on interviews conducted almost a decade later and with a more diverse group of athletes, I explore whether the climate has changed and whether these earlier findings still hold.

THEORIZING MASCULINITIES

The most prominent theoretical tool for understanding the social stratification of masculinities has been Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic

masculinity. From a social constructionist perspective, hegemonic masculinity theory articulates two social processes (Demetriou 2001). The first concerns how all men benefit from patriarchy. Connell describes hegemonic masculinity as a configuration of gender practices that embody the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy. The second process concerns the mechanisms by which an intramasculine hierarchy is created and legitimized. Connell argues that these two processes work interactively and simultaneously to produce a gender order—one where certain men are privileged over other men and all men maintain power over all women. However, Demetriou (2001) critiques Connell's work for a lack of focus on the interaction of these two processes, arguing that scholars tend to focus on just one of them (usually intramasculine processes) and that research rarely demonstrates how the marginalization of groups of men affects patriarchy (and vice versa). Still, the intramasculine component of Connell's theorizing, what Demetriou calls "internal hegemony," has been useful for gender scholars.

In conceptualizing intramasculine domination, Connell argues that one archetype of masculinity is esteemed above all others, so that boys and men who most closely embody this standard are accorded the most social capital. Gay men are at the bottom of the hierarchy, and straight men who behave in ways that conflict with this valorized masculinity are marginalized. Accordingly, in this model homophobia is a particularly effective weapon to stratify men in deference to a hegemonic mode of heteromasculine dominance (Connell 1995).

While this has been a model with great utility, hegemonic masculinity theory fails to accurately account for what occurs in a macro or even local culture of *decreased* cultural homophobia. Furthermore, the model permits only one form of masculinity to reside atop a social hierarchy; it does not explain the social processes in an environment in which more than one version of masculinity have equal appeal (Anderson 2005b). In their reformulation of hegemonic masculinity in this journal, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reaffirm that hegemonic masculinity presupposes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities and that it is predicated on *one* dominating (hegemonic) archetype of masculinity. While the attributes of this archetype can change, an essential component is that other masculinities will be hierarchically stratified in relation to it. Accordingly, hegemonic masculinity theory is incapable of explaining empirical research that documents multiple masculinities of equal cultural value (Anderson 2005b; McCormack 2010, 2011b). This inability to conceptualize varying masculinities in a culture of decreased homophobia arises from the fact that Connell's work has a limited engagement with hegemony theory.

Although Gramsci (1971) allowed for aspirational and positive forms of hegemony to prosper (Williams 1977), Connell's use of hegemony theory does not allow for positive hegemony to occur (Beasley 2008; Howson 2006; McCormack 2011a).

This was not an issue in the 1980s when Connell developed her work, or in the 1990s when it was widely taken up in the literature—all of which occurred during a highly homophobic zeitgeist, where gay men faced extreme social marginalization (Messner 1992). However, the inability for Connell's theory to recognize positive forms of hegemony became increasingly problematic as homophobia began to decrease across United Kingdom and in the United States (McCormack and Anderson 2010a, 2010b; Savin Williams 2005; Weeks 2007). With the decrease in cultural homophobia, Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory simply could not account for the varying masculinities that researchers found flourishing without hierarchy or hegemony in many settings (Anderson 2009a; McCormack 2011b). I developed inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2005b, 2009a) to provide a theoretical explanation of these changes.

INCLUSIVE MASCULINITY THEORY AND DECREASING CULTURAL HOMOPHOBIA

Inclusive masculinity theory situates hegemonic masculinity theory in its historical context. Defining *homohysteria* as the fear men maintain of being socially perceived as gay, I argue that Connell's theory holds only in periods of high homohysteria. In these times boys and men are compelled to express homophobic and sexist attitudes, to raise their masculine capital through sport and muscularity, and to raise their heterosexual capital through sexually objectifying women. They also avoid emotional intimacy and homosocial touch. All of this is to escape the stigma of being considered gay (Anderson 2008a). It is within this cultural context that Kimmel (1994) suggests homophobia *is* masculinity.

However, inclusive masculinity theory maintains that as homohysteria declines, multiple masculinities can be *equally* esteemed. This is an important theoretical difference: Inclusive masculinity theory situates hegemonic masculinity as the product of homohysteric cultures and enables the understanding of a horizontal alignment of masculinities in settings where men do not fear being labeled as homosexual. With hegemonic masculinity theory there is always a hierarchical stratification of masculinities, and archetypes of masculinity cannot exist without a struggle between them. In a culture of inclusive masculinity, however, not only

will multiple masculinities coexist harmoniously, but also fewer behaviors will be associated with homosexuality.

Inclusive masculinity theory supersedes hegemonic masculinity in explaining the stratification of men because it is a more adaptable heuristic tool and is able to explain the social dynamics of masculinities in times of lower homohysteria. In inclusive settings with low homohysteria, heterosexual boys and men are permitted to engage in an increasing range of behaviors that once led to homosexual suspicion, all without threat to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities. For example, I found that fraternity members (Anderson 2008a), rugby players (Anderson and McGuire 2010), school boys (McCormack and Anderson 2010a), heterosexual cheerleaders (Anderson 2008b), and even the men of a Catholic college soccer team in the Midwest (Anderson, forthcoming) maintained close physical and emotional relationships with each other. More recently, McCormack (2010) shows that among English high school students at three different schools (lower, middle, and upper-middle classes) young men express physical touch and that homophobia (including homophobic language) is stigmatized.

While these studies point to positive developments in the organization and stratification of men in particular institutions, I argue that homohysteria is decreasing (although not uniformly) across U.S. and U.K. educationally based sporting teams. In more than a dozen ethnographic investigations of undergraduate sport teams, spread across both the United States and the United Kingdom, I found that attitudes toward homosexuality were positive among heterosexual teammates even though heterosexism often persisted. These findings are detailed in my book *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (Anderson 2009a). These ethnographic findings are supported not only through ethnographic accounts of others but also in surveys, including General Social Survey and British Survey of Social Attitudes data. Furthermore, Bush, Anderson, and Carr (forthcoming) show homophobia to be practically nonexistent among sporting men in a British university. Low levels of homohysteria among sporting (Anderson 2009a) and nonsporting students (McCormack and Anderson 2010a) is supported by a growing body of work documenting low levels of homophobia and increasingly positive experiences of openly gay youth (Adams and Anderson, forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b; Anderson, forthcoming; Harris and Clayton 2007; McCormack 2010; Pringle and Markula 2005; Savin Williams 2005; Southall et al. 2009; Taulke-Johnson 2008).

In my explication of inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009a), I theorized that this cultural shift, from homophobia to a stigmatization of homophobia, was the result of multiple influences: the Internet, the media,

decreasing cultural religiosity, the success of feminism, the success of gay and lesbian social politics, and the influence of the increased number of gay and lesbians coming out of the closet. Interestingly, these changes have frequently occurred against the desires of their coaches or other influential males (Adams, Anderson, and McCormack 2010; Anderson and McGuire 2010; McCormack and Anderson 2010b). In this article, I examine the contemporary experiences of gay athletes to examine the extent to which an increasingly gay-positive culture is affecting their sporting lives and not the effect this might have on patriarchy.

METHOD

I designed this qualitative research to involve interviews with a group of openly gay male high school and university athletes, comparing the findings to those of my original sample of gay athletes collected between 2000 and 2002 (Anderson 2002). By using the same semistructured interview schedule used in my 2002 study and the same number of interviews, my newer sample should illuminate differences in experience.

Participants

This is a very specific group of gay athletes. They are primarily white, they are known to be openly gay by the other members of their teams, and they were all able to be located—or they located me—through the Internet. I collected data from these 26 men between 2008 and 2010. They represent the same racial, class, and age demographics of the men I studied in my 2000–2002 research (Anderson 2002).

There are, however, two important differences between these groups. The first is that it took considerably more effort for me to locate the participants of the 2002 group than the 2010 group. With both groups, athletes sometimes contacted me. However, with the second group I found stories of athletes on Outsports.com and used snowball sampling from there. I did not contact athletic directors as I did with the first. It is important to note that, as with the 2002 research, the athletes I interviewed for the 2010 research were either comfortable enough to be on Outsports.com or comfortable enough to contact me. It is therefore probable that this group of participants represents elevated levels of confidence over the average openly gay athlete.

As with my previous research I did not include athletes from recreational or club-level sporting teams, athletes who identified as heterosexual or bisexual, or athletes who identified as being heterosexual but have sex

with men. Also, because this research is on the experience of openly gay male athletes, I excluded closeted gay male athletes from this sample. Athletes self-identified as gay, and I judged them to be out of the closet on their teams if they had explicitly told most of the members of their team or if team members had knowledge about their sexuality from some other source. This too is consistent with the previous research. I included interviews of athletes only if they were actively playing or if they had played within the previous year. Finally, as with my original study on gay athletes, I limited the sample of high school athletes to those older than 18.

Procedures

I conducted the 26 interviews over the telephone. While the interviews ranged between 30 and 60 minutes, most lasted nearly the hour. Discussions centered on the athlete's socialization into sport, what factors led to his decision to come out, and how he negotiated cultural stereotypes in the production of his own gendered and sexual identity. I also asked about how his teammates, coaches, peers, and parents reacted to his initial coming out and how they treat him today. Finally, I asked about how the athlete may have attempted to mitigate the stigma of his sexuality through playing sport. I followed all ethical procedures, including making anonymous all names and institutions.

Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, I coded them for themes relating to the players' views about their relationship to homosexuality, sport, and their perception of their teammates' relationship to homosexuality, homophobia, and sport (Clayton and Humberstone 2006). I began looking for the same themes as with my earlier research, but I also examined for additional themes. Then, after coding the entire set of transcripts, I compared major themes to my 2002 study and cross-verified codes using interrater reliability sampling. To do this, I asked another researcher to examine and code five of my transcripts. After examining them for internal consistency with the 2010 interviews, we next examined for consistency relating them to the 2002 study. There were no notable differences between our codings of these transcripts.

Limitations

The results of this research cannot be generalized to all sporting teams. As with my previous research (Anderson 2002), these men represent only

those who are openly gay at the high school or university level of play. Inclusive masculinity theory is grounded in the experience of 18- to 22-year-old white undergraduate men. Therefore, this research may not reflect what occurs for openly gay men of other demographics (in recreational or professional teams). Furthermore, these results do not predict what will happen when gay men come out to their sporting teams in other locales as individuals make informed choices about coming out of the closet after assessing their local culture's level of homophobia, choices that also consider their support network and human capital (Anderson 2005a).

I cannot make definitive conclusions about the participants' class and how this might relate to their sporting experience as gay athletes because I did not inquire about their class background. However, because 16 of the 26 participants were university students, and because I called 8 of the 10 high school students on their cell phones, it can perhaps be suggested that this sample (as with my last) reflects a middle-class bias. Also, the sample contained only two athletes of color. This is not because I specifically desired to study white athletes but because the majority of athletes who contacted me were white. Thus, there is not enough evidence to draw general conclusions about the intersectionality between race and sexual orientation with this particular research.

Finally, I did not interview women, nor do I draw any conclusions about the intersections among heterosexism, homophobia, and sport for women. There exists a gendered assumption concerning athleticism and masculinity in Western cultures (Schwartz and Rutter 2000); this translates into an assumption of homosexuality among women athletes in a number of masculinized sports (Clarke 1998; Griffin 1998). While this highlights the fact that women can exhibit masculinity, it also means that women are associated with homosexuality for possessing it. Accordingly, although football heterosexualizes men, it conversely homosexualizes women.

RESULTS

Coming Out

Neil is an openly gay soccer player at a small Catholic college in a rural Midwestern state. "My teammates are very supportive," he said:

> I think it's good that we played together for a long time. So they got to know me before I came out. But they have been amazing. Absolutely nothing has changed since I came out . . . I should have come out earlier.

Like Neil, none of the other athletes I interviewed had any substantial difficulties on their teams after coming out as gay. Just as with my first study of openly gay male team sports athletes (Anderson 2002), no gay athlete I interviewed was physically assaulted, bullied, or harassed by teammates or coaches.

Much of the internal turmoil and anxiety that I found with the 2002 athletes is absent from the 2010 men's narratives. Athletes in the 2010 group came out without the same struggle over whether they thought it would be appropriate or disadvantageous for them. For example, Tom, a high school runner, had no real fear in coming out to his teammates. "I knew it wouldn't be a problem. Why would it be?" he asked of me. When I expressed to him that athletes did not always think that way, he replied,

> There are at least a dozen openly gay kids at my school. None of them have problems, and so I knew I wouldn't either. It just doesn't make sense to be homophobic today, everybody has gay friends. You might as well be racist if you're going to be homophobic.

Charlie, a college soccer player in California, came out through a different mechanism: He was never in the closet. "It's hard to say how they found out I was gay," Charlie said referring to his teammates:

> It says that I like men and women on my Facebook profile, but I think it was the first week [of college] when I was making out with a guy at a party. I've never bothered to be anything other than out. And nobody, I mean nobody has cared.

Like these men, most of the athletes I interviewed did not expect that there would be homophobia from their teammates. Neil said that his teammates were "an excellent group of guys" and that he did not expect that any of them would have a problem with his coming out. "None. No. I knew they would be fine with it."

These narratives reflect a different experience than the narratives of the men in my 2002 research, where I found athletes sometimes viewed their sports as being highly homophobic social spaces. In my 2002 research, most (but not all) of the athletes I interviewed feared violence, bullying, discrimination, and/or harassment from their teammates. Some of this is because they had heard their teammates discussing homosexuality negatively. With the 2010 group, however, none expected bullying, harassment, discrimination, or violence. This, they suggested, was because their peers were not overtly homophobic, both inside and outside of sports' boundaries. When I asked Neil if he ever heard his teammates speaking

negatively of gay men, he answered, "No. never. Not before or after I came out." However, this research might also partially reflect the bias of a more confident group of men. Unlike in my previous research, these are young men who found me, as opposed to me finding them.

In the 2002 research all athletes heard frequent use of the word *fag* and phrases such as *that's so gay*. However, athletes in the 2010 study heard it less often, and many athletes reported that these words and phrases were not used at all. Furthermore, athletes in the 2010 research who did hear such language interpreted it differently. In 2002, I determined that half of the athletes judged levels of homophobia on their teams through the amount of homophobic discourse their teammates used. This half of the 2002 sample suggested that the term *that's gay* and the use of the word *fag* were indicative of homophobic attitudes among those who used them; the other half argued that this was not the case. In the 2010 sample, however, athletes did not judge the level of their teammates' homophobia through the use of this language. Neil explained,

> Gay doesn't mean gay anymore. And fag doesn't mean fag. You can't say that because someone says "that's so gay" or "he's a fag" that they are homophobic. I guess they could be, but you know when someone is using those words as a homophobic insult and when someone's not.

Like Neil, all the players in the 2010 sample who heard use of the words *gay* and *fag* argued that these phrases were not homophobic. Scholars have traditionally argued that athletes dismiss this language as homophobic because it occurs so frequently (Hekma 1998; Price 2000). However, in 2005 Pascoe developed her concept of "fag discourse." This conceptualized a gendered form of homophobia that did not always necessarily intend specifically to stigmatize same-sex desire. For example, Pascoe (2005, 336) writes, "Some boys took pains to say that 'fag' is not about sexuality." More recently, however, scholars have argued that the reason athletes and others dismiss these terms as homophobic insults is that the social context of this language use has changed (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; McCormack 2011a; McCormack and Anderson 2010b). More specifically, the word *gay* has become a homonym; it is a word with two discrete meanings. *That's so gay* describes something disliked, whereas *gay* means *rubbish* and is independent from usage of *gay* when it refers to sexuality (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007). It is this conceptualization of language—which I call "gay discourse"—that is supported by athletes in the 2010 cohort. For example, Tom said,

> You hear [*fag*] now and then, but what everybody says is "that's so gay" now . . . and it has nothing to do with sexuality either. You can't judge homophobia that way. If you do, you'll think everyone is being homophobic, including me. . . . I say "that's so gay" all the time, too. The word has different meanings, and most of the time it's not got anything to do with gay.

Of course this homonegative reference to homosexuality (whether intended or not) still highlights that school-based sports (and schools in general) are not a gender or sexuality utopia. I argue that gay discourse continues to frame homosexuality negatively, but what is important here is that the athletes in the 2010 study talk about this use of language qualitatively differently from those from 2002. Whatever the implicit and insidious effects of this language, the athletes in the 2010 sample are markedly less affected by it.

Positive Discussions

The improved experience of those in the 2010 cohort compared to those in the 2002 cohort is further evidenced by the manner in which gay athletes discuss homosexuality with their teammates. All but two evaded the culture of *don't ask, don't tell* I found in half of the athletes I interviewed in my first study. In 2002, athletes reported that teammates simply did not discuss their sexuality; it was as if they did not know that their teammate was gay. Gay athletes often upheld this heteronormative standard through self-silencing, permitting heterosexism to dominate team culture and nullifying a gay identity as a variable in contesting hegemonic masculinity.

Conversely, men in the 2010 sample told me that their heterosexual teammates discussed their homosexuality openly. Gay athletes were asked about the types of guys they liked and even asked about which teammates they thought were attractive. "Of course we talk about my sexuality," Mark said. "We talk about it all the time." He added,

> I think it's fair to say that I'm known as "the gay hockey player" at my high school. I'm the only gay athlete who is out, even though I suspect a few more. . . . It's funny, I'll be at a party, and meet someone new and they will be like, "Hey, I heard of you. You're the gay hockey player, huh?"

I asked Mark what type of reception he received after having these start-up conversations. "Oh, it's always something positive. Like, 'that's cool, man' or whatever. . . . No. I never have a problem. . . . In fact my teammates will sometimes introduce me as their gay friend."

However, Joey, who is an openly gay wrestler at his high school in a state known for its religious conservatism, says that while he has no difficulties, even with his fundamentalist teammates, they do not all talk about his sexuality. "Yeah, they all know. It's just not a big deal." But Joey added,

> I try not to make a big deal about it. . . . There are a lot of [religious guys] on my team, and they never say anything about it, but at the same time I try not to put it in their faces. . . . Other guys on the team talk about it, but I just think that it's an interesting mix of people on the team. So yeah, some of the guys talk about it with me, and like sometimes we make jokes when practicing, but the [religious] guys don't so much.

I asked Joey if there are ever difficulties when the more conservative boys have to wrestle with him in practice. "No," he said. "They just wrestle me. It's not an issue, really. They are still my friends, we still hang out together after practice, but we don't really discuss my sexuality much." Joey's statement reflects the type of *don't ask, don't tell* narratives that existed among half of the men in my 2002 research.

However, among these men Joey's statement is an outlier; the rest *did* talk about their sexualities to their teammates. Tim, for example, said that his swimming teammates joke about his sexuality all the time:

> They love it. I mean do you have any idea how much shit I get for it? Not like bad stuff, I mean, it's always guys pretending to be interested in fucking me, or guys bending over in front of me. That sort of thing. They laugh, I laugh. Everybody just has fun with it. It's like, we joke about it, daily.

I wondered whether this repartee might also be a method for venting internalized homophobia. I therefore asked Tim if they had more serious conversations about his sexuality. "Not serious," he said. "Not like, 'Oh man, you're gay, wow, that's serious.' But yes, we talk about it." I asked him for an example:

> We were driving to an away meet once, and the entire time we were talking about what makes people gay and stuff like that. . . . The guys thought it was cool that I was so open with it and we just talked about it for like an hour. . . . We talk like that other times, too. Like we have talked about it so much that when others ask [nonteammates], like my teammates can just carry on answering for me. They got it down; like little gay ambassadors or something.

Chris is an NCAA Division I football player at a southern university that highly esteems football culture. He says he is out to his teammates, his coach, and his friends in college. Not only is he accepted by the players, and not only do they discuss his sexuality with him, but they symbolically show their acceptance through touch as well, hugging him and giving him high fives as they do other players:

> One time I told one of my teammates [about being gay], and I was sort of on the fence about whether he'd accept it or not. . . . Anyhow, so I told him in [restaurant] and there are like students everywhere. I said, "I'm gay," and he paused just a second and then got up came to my side of the table, gave me a big hug and said, "You're my boy. End of story." Like ever since then he gives me longer hugs than others. It's just his way of showing love I guess.

Nullifying Athletic Capital

Compared to the 2002 sample, the athletes in the 2010 cohort are more accepted by their teammates; teammates discussed their sexuality and touched them in a show of homosocial inclusion. Furthermore, whereas most of the athletes in my 2002 sample had high sporting capital—they were stellar athletes who used their athletic ability to buy resistance against homophobia—the athletes in the 2010 sample did not match this characteristic. Of the 26 men I interviewed, only six reported being among the top athletes on their teams; most described their athletic performances as average.

"I wouldn't say I was the best," Joey said. "I'm a good wrestler, but certainly not the best." John, a university swimmer, maintained that his ability had nothing to do with his positive experience being out: "Maybe being better would be good, but not because I think my teammates would be any cooler with it. I think it would just be more fun." Unlike Joey and John, Mark is one of the top players on his high school hockey team:

> Yeah, I'm good. But that's not why my teammates accept me. They accept me because I'm Mark. I don't think my skills have much to do with it. They liked me before I came out, why wouldn't they like me now?

These attitudes are remarkably different from those I previously documented with the 2002 group. In the previous study I found athletes came out only once they had achieved a particular standard of ability, and thus importance, to the team. While it may be the case that athletic capital

matters in homophobic settings, for the men in this particular group it was not a variable of importance. Their positive experiences appear to be largely independent of their athletic abilities.

Cohort Differences in Social Support Networks

The homosocial bond between members of sports teams bridges many arenas of their social lives. Teammates often spend large parts of their days together practicing, attending school, and (in the case of most collegiate and professional athletes) living together, in what I describe as a near-total institution (Anderson 2005b). This has traditionally created a rigid and tightly policed bond between team members in accordance with the mandates of hegemonic masculinity. Accordingly, in my 2002 research I stressed that, in this narrow social world of hyper-heterosexuality and hyper-masculinity, the presence of an openly gay male athlete creates dissonance where there was once masculine homogeneity. Gay athletes remind their teams that athleticism does not necessarily imply heterosexuality.

However, the athletes in the 2010 group maintained that being out to one's peers was the same as being out to one's teammates. These athletes suggested that the delineation between friends and teammates was not a factor in their experience of being out, that it was their perception that their teammates were not more homophobic than nonathletes, and that there was not a clique or cluster of homophobic athletes at their school. Neil found that when he came out it actually drew him closer to his teammates. However, he did have difficulties with adults. One of the athletic directors asked him, "Why don't you just choose to be straight?" It was, Neil said, "only adults" who had a hard time with his sexuality.

Grant had support from his friends, too. Yet, like many others, Grant feared coming out to his parents: "My dad is a major homophobe." He added,

> He's always bitching about my gay uncle. He says things like, "Bob is making an issue out of things." He won't say it in person, but after he leaves he does. It's really awkward and uncomfortable. . . . I have to be careful that when my friends come over they don't say anything.

Joey attributed his teammates' silence to their parents. "I don't think they have a problem with it, actually. I think they don't want their parents to know [that Joey is gay] because *they* will have a problem with it!" There is often a real disconnect between many of these young men and (at least some) of the adults in their lives. John said, "It's a whole

different thing coming out to old people. Some will be fine with it I'm sure, but like is it really worth it? They are from a generation who just doesn't get it." Thus, from the perspective of the athletes interviewed in this research, decreasing homophobia is an uneven social phenomenon.

DISCUSSION

In this study I compare the findings from my 2002 research on gay male athletes with the experiences of gay male athletes I interviewed in 2008–2010. Compared to the athletes in my 2002 study, these athletes (who represent the same class and racial demographics) did not fear coming out in the same way or to the same degree as the 2002 athletes. Unlike the men from the 2002 study, they did not fear that their coming out would result in physical hostility, marginalization, or social exclusion (either on or off the field). Athletes in the 2010 cohort were a more diverse group; those in the current study play football, rugby, hockey, lacrosse, and wrestling. This is perhaps a result of my sampling procedures, but it might also indicate decreasing homophobia among team sports athletes in the local cultures where these particular athletes reside. This latter proposition is supported by recent quantitative research showing no difference in attitudes between individual sports athletes and team sports players on quantitative measures of homophobia in one university setting in the United Kingdom (Bush, Anderson, and Carr, forthcoming).

Another significant finding is that athletes in this study evaded cultures of *don't ask, don't tell* that characterized the experiences of athletes in the 2002 cohort. For example, in 2002 I argued,

> In the absence of the ability to ban openly gay athletes from sport, heterosexual athletes within team sports, both contact and non-contact resisted the intrusion of openly gay athletes through the creation of a culture of silence around gay identities. Although publicly out, the informants in this study were victimized by heterosexual hegemony and largely maintained a heteronormative framework by self-silencing their speech, and frequently engaged in heterosexual dialogue with their heterosexual teammates. (Anderson 2002, 874)

Conversely, athletes in the 2010 group found their sexualities accepted by their teammates. With the exception of Joey, men talked about their sexualities frequently, and none reported that their teammates tried to publicly or privately heterosexualize them.

However, it is important to note that these findings do not suggest that all athletes, in all sports, at all levels or locations would have equally as supportive coming out experiences as the men in this study. As with my previous study, it is possible that these men evaluated their social situations well enough before coming out, helping ensure a positive experience. There is a complex web of variables that most athletes use to make such decisions: team climate, social networks, the attitudes of their coach, and a host of other identifiable and unidentifiable factors (Anderson 2005b). Thus, these results speak only to these athletes, men who have made informed choices. They might also reflect that there are more gay-friendly local cultures in the United States now than previously. However, the recent teenage suicides of American gay youth remind us that not all cultures are supportive. It is also important to remember that this research reflects a bias toward white, middle-class athletes. There exists no empirical work concerning the influence of class on the experience of openly gay athletes in sport.

Even with these limitations stated, there are important implications of this work for assessing the changing relationship between homosexuality and sport. Because the social demographics of the two cohorts studied in 2002 and 2010 are alike, these results suggest some tentative conclusions. Either sport in America has "learned" from pioneering openly gay athletes or (much more likely) cultural homophobia has decreased among the local cultures that the 26 men of the 2010 sample inhabit, compared to the local cultures that the 26 men of the 2002 sample inhabited. It is possible that the changed sampling procedures meant that I located men from more supportive cultures, with the difference in local cultures being an artifact of this. However, I suggest that the existence of local socially inclusive cultures speaks at some level to inclusivity in the broader culture. At least for the men in this study homophobia seems to be losing its utility as a tool for the establishment of masculine acceptability among peers (McCormack 2010; McCormack and Anderson 2010a). The treatment of gay men as equals on and off the sporting field also indicates that hegemonic masculinity theory, with is emphasis on intramasculine stratification, does not capture the social dynamics at play for these men.

This is not to suggest that all is equal in the gendered world of gay male athletes; after all, men are still heterosexualized by sport's heterosexualizing standards—particularly in contact team sports. However, this research shows that at least these gay athletes are being accepted for who they are. The results of this research suggest that the experience of gay men on these teams is better, not because some gay men have previously

challenged hegemonic masculinity but because middle-class white youth in these particular locale cultures are adopting more inclusive versions of masculinity—they no longer use overt homophobia as a weapon of inter-masculine stratification, even if some elements of heterosexism and covert mechanisms of homophobia prevail.

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