

John Amaechi: Changing the Way Sport Reporters Examine Gay Athletes

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In 2007, John Amaechi became the first former National Basketball Association (NBA) player to publicly announce he was gay. Former NBA star Tim Hardaway made a series of homophobic remarks a week later. A textual analysis was used to analyze narratives on Amaechi's revelation and/or Hardaway's comments published in 50 international newspapers. Four dominant themes emerged from the data. While most of these themes supported narratives that gay males remain unwelcome in men's team sports, all were challenged consistently, thus, showing the fluidity of hegemonic masculinity and the increasing societal acceptance of gays and gay lifestyles. Moreover, print media writers exhibited little homophobia and frequently called for more acceptance of gays, particularly within sport.

KEYWORDS *gays, lesbians, and homosexuals in sport, black homophobia, hegemonic masculinity*

Although there are various purposes and outcomes of organized sporting participation for men in Western cultures, a consistent finding is that sport has served as a resilient social institution principally organized around the political project of defining acceptable forms of masculinity (Connell, 1990; Crosset, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Kimmell, 1994; Messner, 2002). Contact sports have been particularly recognized as leading markers of masculinity,

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where participation is made near-compulsory through masculine peer culture and institutionalized play within school systems (Messner & Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990). Accordingly, from early youth and throughout young adulthood, boys and men are structured into a desire to be associated with hegemonic dominance by partaking in a sporting space that is used to sculpt bodies and construct masculine identities, both of which align with dominant perspectives of masculinist embodiment and expression (Anderson, 2005a; Pronger, 1990). Therefore, competitive teamsports exist as a microcosm of society's gendered values, myths, and prejudices about the variations between men and women, while simultaneously constructing boys and men to exhibit, value, and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity (Britton & Williams, 1995; Burstyn, 1999; Daniels, 2005).

Accordingly, highly competitive men's teamsports have traditionally been described as organizational settings that are near-totally intolerant of homosexuality (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Schacht, 1996). Messner (1992) wrote, "The extent of homophobia in the sport world is staggering. Boys (in sport) 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" (p. 34).

Pronger (1990) theorized this homophobic culture prevents sporting men from openly identifying as gay, something particularly useful in a culture where sexuality also constitutes gender (Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). However, Anderson (2005a) contended matters are rapidly changing for gay men in general within U.S. culture, and particularly for gay male athletes. He found heterosexual male athletes increasingly distancing themselves from homophobia, and that openly gay athletes were usually treated well by their peers regardless of the sport they played (Anderson, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). Despite this change, perceptions remain high that the four most popular professional men's teamsports in the U.S. (baseball, basketball, football, and hockey) exhibit higher degrees of intolerance toward gays than do other sports. Those perceptions may be changing.

A 2006 *Sports Illustrated* poll showed 60% of National Basketball Association (NBA) players said they would be comfortable with an openly gay player on their team. That number contrasted with the 80% of National Hockey League (NHL) players, who, in the same poll, said they would openly accept gay teammates. We theorize race to be the defining variable in the differences between the two leagues' acceptance level of gays, since 73% of the players on the 30 NBA rosters were Black in 2004 compared to just 12 total Blacks who played for the 30 NHL teams in 2007 (K. Allen, 2008; Lapchick, 2005).

HOMOPHOBIA IN BLACK CULTURE

Despite decreasing cultural (Loftus, 2001) and sporting (Anderson, 2005b) homophobia, researchers have found elevated rates of homophobia within

Black culture (Cohen, 1999; Harper, 1996; Heckman, Kelly, Bogart, Kalichman, & Rompa, 1999; Lewis, 2003; Waldner, Sikka, & Baig, 1999), where homosexuality is often viewed as a problem for and about White men (Froyum, 2007; King, 2004). Southall, Anderson, Coleman, and Nagel (2006) found this to be the case in U.S. college sports, and an informal 1999 survey by sport agent Ralph Cindrich (as cited in Anderson, 2005a) supported this finding at the professional level. From the 175 first-year National Football League (NFL) players Cindrich interviewed, 91.7% of White players said they felt comfortable playing with a gay teammate, compared to 60% of Black players. Similarly, 52.9% of White players said they would be comfortable sharing a hotel room with an openly gay player, compared to just 29% of Black players. When athletes were asked how they would react if a gay player were to sexually proposition them, 29.4% of Blacks indicated they would respond with "physical assault," compared to 5.3% of White players. Accordingly, whereas there exists a great deal of inquiry into the ways in which Black athletes are culturally, economically, and structurally discriminated against in the sport-media complex, no academic literature examining Black Americans as oppressors in sport could be found (Anderson, 1998).

There are multiple reasons why Black men in U.S. society have elevated rates of homophobia. Black Americans are disproportionately represented in the lower socioeconomic classes and, for an otherwise marginalized group, homophobia is a way Black boys and men can raise their masculine capital by saying, "at least I am not gay" (Froyum, 2007). Poorer Black gay athletes might also feel compelled to remain closeted, so as not to disadvantage what they believe to be their route out of poverty through athletics (Anderson, 2005a). Furthermore, gay culture, gay support systems, and much of what can be described as a gay male identity, have been established in a culture that presumes Whiteness and elevated class status (Lewis, 2003). Finally, many Black athletes do not recognize the damage of homophobia to their own community, nor do they see the commonalities of gay and Black oppression (Anderson, 1998; Harper, 1996). This highlights the variance between Black (racism) and gay (homophobia) sporting oppression. Racism and homophobia are similar, but also very different types of oppression. When they are combined, the collective experiences of denied citizenship are more extreme.

Another part of this hostility toward gays in sports may be attributable to the oppression of Black males in U.S. society, which has resulted in many African-American males channeling energy into participation in sport and sexual prowess (Hoberman, 1997). Mainstream sport media often portray professional male athletes as exhibiting proscribed ideal masculine characteristics like aggressiveness, power, assertiveness, and heterosexuality (Connell, 1990; Messner, 2002; Trujillo, 1991). More important, these images are even more likely to be used to portray Black athletes, particularly since Blacks dominate the masculine-construed U.S. professional and collegiate

sports of men's basketball and football (Davis & Harris, 1998; Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006). This, in turn, helps reinforce hegemonic masculinity within U.S. Black culture. Accordingly, despite the gains of both the civil rights movement and the progress toward gay and lesbian social inclusion, the understanding in sport remains that Black athletes come in only one sexuality, and gay men in just one color.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Connell (1987, 2005) defined hegemonic masculinity as the configuration of gender practice that assures positional dominance of men who conform to accepted forms of masculinities and the subordination of women in society. Hegemonic masculine gendered practices are constantly challenged but rarely changed without the consent of the ruling group (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001). Many sport media researchers (e.g., Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008; Pedersen, 2002; Vincent, 2004) have used Connell's (1987) theory as a heuristic tool to analyze disparate media coverage provided to women's sports and female athletes compared to men's sports and male athletes. Often overlooked in sport media research, however, is how competitive team sports reify masculinity with heterosexuality among men and how this feminizes homosexual men. Anderson (2002) described team sports as arena in which "hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined, as an athlete represents the ideal of what it means to be a man, a definition that contrasts to what it means to be feminine and/or gay" (p. 860).

Still, because nearly all boys are socialized into sport from youth, Pronger (1990) suggested closeted gay men might be overrepresented in sport; gay men might also be attracted to sport because it provides them with both a homoerotic arena and the ironic veneer of heterosexuality. But while openly gay athletes exist (and are coming out in increasing numbers) at the high school and university levels of competition in U.S. sport (Anderson, 2005a), none have come out while actively playing in the four major U.S. professional men's team sport leagues: Major League Baseball (MLB), NBA, NFL, NHL. In fact, only six have announced they were gay after their careers: NFL players Dave Kopay, Roy Simmons, and Esera Tualo; MLB athletes Billy Bean and Glen Burke; and most recently, the NBA's John Amaechi (Knapp, 2007a). Interestingly, there is no known research that examines media reaction to any of these men's outings.

SPORT, MEDIA, AND HOMOSEXUALITY

By most standards, John Amaechi was a mediocre professional basketball player who received little media coverage during a five-year NBA career in

which he played for the Cleveland Cavaliers, Orlando Magic, and Utah Jazz. After his rookie season with the Cavaliers, Amaechi's NBA career was interrupted by his two-year stint of playing professionally for teams in France, Italy, Greece, and Great Britain. After attaining his most professional success with the Magic and Jazz, Amaechi retired from professional basketball in 2003 after his NBA contract was traded from the New York Knicks to the Houston Rockets; but he was not invited to play for either team.

Although a largely unknown basketball player, Amaechi received worldwide media attention in 2007 after he revealed his sexual orientation as gay. It began when Amaechi's publicist, Howard Bragman, said that his client is gay and Amaechi officially came out four days later (February 11) during an interview on the ESPN television show *Outside the Lines*. This strategic outing kicked off a speaking tour to promote the release of his autobiography, *Man in the Middle* published by ESPN in 2007.

It is significant to note that media attention given to Amaechi's announcement subsided significantly, that is until former Miami Heat star point guard Tim Hardaway made a series of homophobic remarks about Amaechi during a radio interview on February 14. "I hate gay people, so I let it be known," Hardaway told WAXY-AM in Miami. "I don't like gay people, and I don't like to be around gay people. I'm homophobic. I don't like it. It shouldn't be in the world or in the United States" (Banks, 2007). After Hardaway's comments, several major newspaper columnists wrote about the current place and status of gays in sport.

Amaechi's decision to leave the closet shortly after retiring from basketball is particularly interesting for several reasons. First, he is the first former NBA player to declare he is gay. Basketball has long been considered one of the most masculine team sports in U.S. culture (Baroffio-Bora & Banet-Weiser, 2006; Rader, 2004). Thus, by their mere presence, openly gay men in professional basketball challenge hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2002). Also, the NBA has long been dominated by African Americans (Andrews, 1999). In addition to the elevated rates of homophobia within the African-American community (for reasons earlier stated; King, 2004; Waldner et al., 1999), basketball players are deemed among the highest role models within U.S. Black culture (Hoberman, 1997). This creates a form of double hegemony for Black athletes; whom are expected to uphold orthodox standards of achieved variables (toughness, stoicism, and sacrifice) as well as the ascribed variable of heterosexuality. The consequences for breaking either of these orthodox conscriptions might be higher for Black athletes than White.

Amaechi, however, also comes out in a unique point of American history. Since the early 1990s, both qualitative (Barrett & Pollack, 2005; Pascoe, 2005) and quantitative (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Loftus, 2001; Ohlander, Batalova, & Treas, 2005; Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 2002; Yang, 1997) studies have shown a significant decrease in

cultural and institutional homophobia within North American and British society. This is something Anderson (2002, 2005a, 2005b) and others (Price & Parker, 2003; Southall et. al., 2006) also found among teamsport athletes. Supporting an increase in societal acceptances of gays and lesbians, a May 2007 Gallup poll revealed an all-time high of 46% of U.S. citizens supported gay marriage. This was particularly true for younger adults (the cohort of which the vast majority of professional basketball players belong). Among 18–34 year olds surveyed, just 23% disapproved of gay lifestyles, compared to a 51% disapproval rate amongst U.S. citizens aged 55 and older (Gallup, 2007). Thus, attitudes in the U.S. toward gays are changing, and changing rapidly. It is uncertain, though, if those changes are evident in sport media coverage, since sport media are run mostly by and for men (Hardin, 2005; Kian, 2007).

Lapchick, Brenden, and Wright (2006) surveyed more than 300 U.S. daily newspapers, finding men comprised 95% of sport editors, 87% of assistant sport editors, 93% of columnists, 93% of reporters, and 87% of copy editors/designers in sport departments. This masculinization of reporting have lead media to overanalyze the issue of lesbians in sport (Crosset, 1995; Duncan, 1993) and underanalyze gay men in sport (Knight & Giuliano, 2003; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). Still, no academic research has examined the issue of how sport reporters address gay men who come out in sport. This research seeks to examine whether the positive shift in attitudes toward gays and gay lifestyles in the broader U.S. culture has had an impact on the sport media complex.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a textual analysis of newspaper articles on Amaechi and on Hardaway's comments toward Amaechi published in February 2007. A textual analysis was selected because it is an unobtrusive and nonreactive tool used to measure communication messages (Macnamara, 2003; Sparkes, 1992). This type of methodology is, however, both interpretative and subjective (Gunter, 2000; Harris & Clayton, 2002). Because multiple interpretations of the same text are possible (McKee, 2001), two researchers coded themes from the articles separately in the search for narratives. Working independently, the two researchers each read and wrote notes on all of the 190 articles in the population (Martin & Turner, 1986). They then compared and discussed coding of dominant themes for agreement (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995).

The Lexis Nexis Academic search engine was used to locate the 190 relevant articles in the population. In February 2007, the Lexis Nexis Academic service available to U.S. universities listed 50 active publications as major newspapers that publish in English. A majority of the newspapers

($N = 30$) were based in the United States, with the remaining 20 newspapers from Brazil (1), Canada (2), China (1), Great Britain (5), Ireland (1), Israel (1), Japan (1), Malaysia (1), New Zealand (4), Scotland (2), and Singapore (1).

Since Amaechi had been retired for three years and was never a star player, it was readily assumed all articles published on Amaechi during the search parameter of February 7 (the day Amaechi's publicist revealed his client was gay) through February 25 were due to his going public with his sexual orientation or in response to Hardaway's February 14 comments toward Amaechi (and all gays). Byline articles (name of authors included) or editorials with or without bylines were located and included for examination. Articles without bylines, such as those generated from the Associated Press and Reuters, were not included due to the likelihood of the same articles being published as news briefs by multiple newspapers in the search engine. Byline articles originating from news services and published in these papers were, however, included because such byline articles are more likely to be features, columns, or substantive stories that are less likely to be mass published like short blurbs.

A total of 190 byline articles, columns, or editorials on John Amaechi published over a 17-day period were collected. 87% ($n = 133$) were published in the 30 newspapers based in the U.S., and 13% ($n = 24$) were from other countries. *The Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* (two Canadian newspapers) published 67% ($n = 16$) of the articles from non-U.S. newspapers; perhaps because the Canada-based Toronto Raptors is the only NBA franchise housed outside of the United States. A total of four articles came from newspapers in Amaechi's native Great Britain, while newspapers from Australia ($n = 2$) and New Zealand ($n = 2$) published the remaining articles. No articles on Amaechi or Hardaway's subsequent comments were published in the remaining nine newspapers from Brazil, China, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Scotland, and Singapore.

RESULTS

Four dominant themes emerged from our data analysis:

1. Sport reporters maintained that the locker room is still no place for gay men.
2. Sport writers commented on whether sport was less inclusive than the mainstream culture, and whether sport thus served as a social anchor on issues concerning men's homosexuality. This particularly focused on comparisons of the Black Civil Rights Movement and the integration of sport for openly gay men.

3. Sport reporters commented on whether Amaechi was a coward for not coming out while playing and whether he was simply taking advantage of a capitalist system to promote his book.
4. Finally, reporters noted respect for who Amaechi is, and for his bravery in outing himself.

The Locker Room Is No Place for Gay Men

The most dominant narrative reinforced notions that sport, and in particular the men's teamsport locker room, will be one of the last venues to accept gay males as equals. Thus, even though no U.S. professional sport team or league explicitly denies homosexuals from rosters, it was the writers' collective opinion that the dominant culture of U.S. men's teamsports excludes openly gay male teammates. One reporter from the *San Francisco Chronicle* reflected this narrative:

An openly gay man can't survive in the testosterone-rich, mentally impoverished environment of a pro locker room. Football, baseball, and basketball players define themselves by the most traditional, narrow versions of masculinity. Their world is the last vast frontier of intolerance. (Knapp, 2007b, p. D1)

Other articles conveyed writers' assumptions that any openly gay athletes in these sports would face constant physical threats from opponents and even their teammates:

As much as we may think society has moved on and become more tolerant of lifestyles, the male sports world of football, basketball and perhaps baseball would stop spinning [if a current athlete came out]. Those are the sports that embrace the whole macho image and strict code. . . . Those are the sports that, in various ways, would make life uncomfortable for any athlete perceived as a threat, not so much on the field, but in the shower. (Powell, 2008, p. A73)

Within narratives of articles, there were occasionally justifications given for this intolerance within male teamsport lockers. Livingston (2007) suggested NBA players' religious beliefs promoted bigotry toward potential openly gay male teammates by writing, "At best, 'gay' is a pejorative term, implying weakness and not 'playing like a man.' At worst it is considered a sin. The former view probably outnumbers the latter in the NBA" (p. C1). Furthermore, just because writers indicated they believed sport was not ready for a gay athlete, they did not necessarily mean to imply that was their desire.

Anderson (2002) contended that alongside many forms of Christianity and the U.S. military, competitive teamsports are one of the three primary

institutions that support and reinforce homophobia in U.S. society. However, this analysis showed this is more than just an American issue. The narrative that the locker room is hostile toward gays was also dominant in international coverage. One article (which included an in-depth interview with Amaechi) published in Britain's *The Daily Telegraph*, reiterated a common stereotype about gay male athletes. "There is also, if we are brutally honest, a sense in which some big strong men who play sports would feel their personal sexual safety invaded if a gay man also inhabited their locker room" (Mott, 2007, p. 10).

Conversely, there were several strong counters to the notion that teams would not accept openly gay players. In some articles, writers either contended that athletes' sexual orientation is generally unimportant to their teammates, or at least one's orientation would not matter if an openly gay male athlete was a star on the field. Burwell (2007) supported Anderson's (2005a) contention that many professional athletes already know gay teammates anyhow, and that this awareness had no negative effect on team morale. Burwell wrote, "Gay athletes may have been in the closet, but no one was dumb. It just didn't matter that much. That's how much the locker room has changed" (p. DI).

Still, more writers argued that gays are not only pariahs now, but that they will never be fully accepted within the men's team sport locker room. The narratives of these articles articulated that male athletes learn certain characteristics through sport at a young age. These included assertiveness, aggressiveness, courage, boasting about heterosexual conquest, and the exhibition of homophobia. Supporting this, Hughes and Coakley (1991) suggested that athletes rarely contest the sporting and cultural values taught to them by their coaches and that instead, they over conform to norms in order to win their coaches' favor and matriculate to the next level of play. Thus, sport serves as one of the primary sources for homophobic attitudes because sporting men are afraid to speak against it for fear of repercussion. Anderson (2005a) suggested that these views were negated by the increased acceptance of gay men in lower levels of sport. In fact, many writers in this study thought that sport was a good place to learn tolerance.

The Utility of Sport for Social Inclusion

Amaechi's declaration (followed by Hardaway's homophobic diatribe) also influenced a wider debate concerning the role of sport in contemporary society and its relationship to homosexuality. Scholars have contended sport lags behind the dominant culture concerning social inclusivity toward homosexuality (Anderson, 2002; Griffin, 1998; Messner, 1992). Still, several journalists in these articles maintained the acceptance of openly gay male athletes in professional team sports would be more difficult with the mainstream media than by teammates and opponents on the field of

play. “. . . it’s clear no active player would dare come out—because the press would turn his life into a living hell. Whether his teammates would care remains to be seen. In Amaechi’s case, no one is too upset” (Heisler, 2007, pp.6). A column in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* went as far as arguing that professional male teamsports would provide a more tolerant culture for openly gay male athletes than society at large does. “I just wonder if anyone really understands that the real battle for acceptance isn’t inside the locker room. It’s outside, where public acceptance is certain to be slow, knuckle-dragging, cruel, intolerant, and unforgiving” (Burwell, 2007, p. D1). Mitch Albom (2007), a best-selling novelist and syndicated sport columnist based out of the *Detroit Free Press*, wrote a column highly critical of Hardaway following his comments: “The reason locker rooms were once segregated was hate, and the reason gays hide their sexuality today is hate. And hate is the first thing for which we should show intolerance” (p. A9).

International articles primarily reinforced the narrative that sport severs as a social anchor for gay and lesbian issues. *The Daily Telegraph* is Great Britain’s most heavily circulated newspaper and one of its columnists cited the U.S. presidential candidacies of Democratic senators, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, to show how far gays lag behind women and minorities in terms of broad acceptance within U.S. society:

Yet in America they are talking about the possibility of a woman president in the 21st century, they are talking about a black president. A gay president? Amaechi just laughed. So did the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a hollow laugh, at the thought of pro sports seeing the error of its covert homophobic ways. (Mott, 2007, p.10)

While many authors presented a narrative of sport as being slow in accepting gays, the majority of columnists, in both U.S. and international articles, argued sport should be more progressive in support of gay rights, with some drawing parallels with the Civil Rights Movement for African-American integration into U.S. society. Two of these authors used the case of Jackie Robinson (who broke the MLB color barrier in 1947) as an impetus for the potential for sport to unify (P. Allen, 2007; Zirin, 2007).

It may come as a surprise to some readers that some of the columnists who drew the strongest parallels between the modern-era gay rights movement and African-Americans’ historical struggle for civil rights rank among the most recognizable African-American sport writers and newspaper columnists in the United States. Leonard Pitts (2007), a syndicated news columnist was highly critical of Hardaway’s comments on Amaechi, “Like segregation before it, homophobia is still for many people, still socially respectable. So one hopes that the byproduct of Hardaway’s outburst is that it will become less so” (p. A7).

Michael Wilbon, an African-American sport columnist for *The Washington Post* who also serves as the co-host for the popular ESPN television show, *Pardon the Interruption*, cited the struggles of African-American coaches in sport as an analogy for the lack of acceptance of gay athletes in teamsports. Wilbon specifically pointed to the success of Black NFL head coaches, Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts and Lovie Smith of the Chicago Bears, both of whom led their teams to the Super Bowl in 2006, as an example of social progress that should be emulated for gay athletes:

Just as it would be a relief to arrive at the place in time when the color of the coaches in the Super Bowl matters not one bit, it would be fabulous to reach the day when a male athlete in a teamsport doesn't have to worry about the reaction of declaring his homosexuality. (Wilbon, 2007, p. E01)

None of the 24 international articles directly mentioned the African-American civil rights movement in the United States. However, the *Sunday Mail*, a Scottish tabloid, did reference the influence of sport on social constructions of race. "Sport has been an agent for social change, particularly on matters of race. It is not as far along in matters of sexual preference" (Skolnick, 2007, p. 87). Whereas international articles were light on comparisons between the Black and gay experience, they were more critical of Amaechi's intentions.

Amaechi and Capitalism

The next major narrative to emerge from Amaechi's outing centered on skepticism of his motives for coming out publicly, four years after retiring from the NBA and shortly before the release of his autobiography. *The Toronto Star* implied Amaechi's revelation was in his financial interests. "Amaechi is embarking on the business of selling his story. His Valentine's Day TV appearance coincides with the release of his book" (Feschuk, 2007, p. D2). Canada's *The Globe and Mail* was more direct in questioning the timing of Amaechi's outing. "A look at the calendar shows the announcement will be made just days before the NBA all-star game, thereby garnering Amaechi as much publicity as possible" (Maki, 2007, p. 53).

The U.S. press also noted Amaechi's potential of benefitting monetarily after his announcement. "Amaechi is no hero. And he knows it. He is a gay businessman who has wisely recognized an opportunity and seems positioned to exploit a marketing niche" (Morris, 2007, p. B9). But some in the U.S. press used their strongest criticisms to question Amaechi's courage in coming out after retirement, and, thus, these narratives subtly called into doubt his manhood. "Bravery in this context is reserved for the first athlete to come out today and go to practice tomorrow. It's not coming out from

across the pond—Amaechi lives in England—four years after retirement” (Shaw, 2007, p. D1). Morris (2007) concluded, “I see nothing heroic about Amaechi’s memoirs. He is a coward. He is a coward for not ‘coming out’ in the locker room” (p. B9).

These types of personal criticisms directed at Amaechi drew the sharpest counters among the four dominant themes emerging from the data. *Newsday* columnist Johnette Howard (2007) praised the courage of any gay individual who publicly comes out:

Hardaway’s remarks—and the widespread denunciations of them that quickly followed—underscored why coming out is one of the most important things gays and lesbians have done in the past 30 years. Reasonable people can differ about their comfort level or moral views of gays. But there is no disputing this: By rejecting generations of thought about homosexuality and refusing to remain in the closet that gays have been shoved into forever, by becoming visible and acting as if being called gay is not an insult or a slur, gays who have come out in all walks of life have helped re-situate the argument. (p. A91)

International articles also offered rebuttals to those who criticized Amaechi for not coming out during his career or announcing just before his book release.

The aftermath [of Amaechi’s coming out] produced the usual criticism. He was a journeyman, so who cares? Why didn’t he come out while he was playing, instead of waiting to cash in on a book? Well, he doesn’t need the money. The biggest reason, left unsaid, is probably because of Amaechi’s greatest passion—because basketball wasn’t a passion. It was a means to an end. (Myles, 2007, p. D5)

Whatever side one takes on the issue, Anderson (2005a) has theorized that whoever comes out of the closet as America’s first openly gay (active) professional player will instantly be showered with lucrative book, television, and movie offers. Amaechi’s increased publicity and subsequent capitalist gains (even four years after retiring) help prove the financial viability of coming out in professional sport. This counters notions that gay athletes should not come out for fear of loss of sponsorship. Clearly, media exposure of Bean, Tuaolo, and now Amaechi show media are now hammering for stories of athletes coming out. This not only reflects the novelty of the gay experience in sport, but it highlights that men who come out and contest hegemonic masculinity in sport are increasingly met with admiration.

Respect

Conservative pundits and anti-gay interest groups regularly point to what they perceive as “liberal bias” on the part of mainstream U.S. media when

covering political and social issues such as gay rights (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Writers who expressed their personal opinions on homosexuality overwhelmingly exhibited calls for progress, equality, and acceptance for one's sexual orientations. In contrast, no writer or columnist in any of the 190 articles questioned the morality of homosexuality or claimed gays should not be accepted in sport due to their sexual orientation. “. . . tolerance—the word we so often use when discussing people different from us—is too low a standard. We should be aiming for respect” (Blount, 2007, p. 1C).

Hardaway's homophobic rant generated more denunciations of his views and thus more writers called for respect for gays. Howard (2007) wrote, “Support for gays is not unanimous. But it's never been more robust. After the swift smackdown of Hardaway, straights who think like him have to feel shoved a bit further into a new sort of closet themselves” (p. A91).

Ironically, one of the strongest calls for the acceptance of gays in sport came from *The Daily Telegraph*, which is considered one of the more conservative newspapers in Great Britain.

It seems ridiculous to contemplate this being such an issue when Sir Elton John is practically synonymous with the royal family in Britain and when English football has tolerated French players for years. It is all about what you get used to and sport is a wonderful vehicle if it can grind out of homophobic first gear. (Mott, 2007, p. 10)

While no newspaper narratives criticized homosexuality as a sexual orientation, some writers/columnists did mock the newsworthiness of Amaechi's announcement. It could be argued these commentaries reinforced the “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy that gay athletes at the lower level of sport help maintain (Anderson, 2005a; Hekma, 1998). This is a cultural condition largely impacted by the U.S. military's official policy toward enlisted gay and lesbian personnel of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” (Britton & Williams, 1995). Supporting this notion, many individuals (who claim to have nothing against gays) “just” do not want to see or hear about gay couples or gay issues. Smith (2007) reinforced this ideology by writing on Amaechi's coming out, “Has there ever have been more fuss over a nonissue?” (p. 5E). A *Denver Post* column exhibited the “who cares” narrative about Amaechi's sexual orientation in a column mostly focusing on news that New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady had broken up with his then-pregnant girlfriend, model Bridget Moynahan. “I would rather keep tabs on my center's rebounding average or the number of picks thrown by the quarterback than memorize the names of their sleeping partners” (Kiszla, 2007, p. D1).

These varied narratives all share one thing in common—they lack overt homophobia. While many of the authors articulated a fair degree of heterosexism and pessimism on the acceptance level of athletes, none of the writers for the 190 newspaper articles or editorials came out and said that

gays do not belong in the locker room. Thus, none shared in Hardaway's feelings. For a highly masculinized profession and sexist group of mostly men (Hardin, 2005; Kian, 2007), this seems to be a considerable finding; one that Nylund (2004) suggested is happening in sport radio broadcasting as well.

DISCUSSION

By analyzing international media print coverage concerning Amaechi's coming out, and Hardaway's ensuing homophobic comments, this article highlighted the changing nature between sport, the sport media complex, and the issue of gay athleticism. This research is unique for two reasons. First, it was the first to examine media attitudes toward gay male athletes. But more important, our findings suggest that as Americans (Loftus, 2001) and U.S. athletes (Anderson, 2005b) are rapidly losing their homophobic sentiment, so are ancillary members of the institution of sport. It, therefore, appears to be the case that while men throughout the institution of competitive, organized teamsport were once described as being a social anchor toward gay and lesbian cultural equality (Burstyn, 1999; Pronger, 1990), increasingly this may no longer be the case. Decreasing homophobia on the part of sport media is yet another indicator of the rapidly changing zeitgeist toward homosexuality.

We argue that if our culture were to value homosexuality differently, a shift would likely occur in the way masculinity is carried out and valued in sport. This would explain some of the popularity of soccer star David Beckham and other "metrosexual" athletes (Price & Parker, 2003), and this is something that Connell herself recently commented on, suggesting that the changeable notion of hegemonic masculinity means that the current archetype may at some point be replaced by a less oppressive means of being masculine (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). We suggest that this is precisely the case, in that inclusive masculinity is fast becoming the norm for White, middle class men; both inside and outside of sport and that this shift is now reflected in the narratives presented by ancillary members of the sport media complex.

In this research, sport reporters rejected the domineering, homophobic behaviors and attitudes of orthodox masculinity, even though some attributed this attitude toward others, particularly in basketball players. Thus, we are not suggesting that male sport reporters have completely redeveloped orthodox masculinity, but instead that have made it more inclusive. Taken with accounts of athletes, who are increasingly shown to value emotional intimacy (Pringle & Markula, 2005), racial diversity (Anderson, 2008a), and homosexuality (Anderson 2005b, 2008a), they are more likely to alter the meanings associated with homophobic discourse (Wilson, 2002).

Collectively, these studies lead us to conclude there is a very rapid shift in what is considered an acceptable, desirable, and even hegemonic status among teamsport athletes in America.

Part of this may be attributable to sport being increasingly viewed as a workplace environment. Accordingly, the often unwritten, nondiscrimination policies that apply to many other employers also apply to sport. But we suggest it mostly has to do with the changing culture within sport. Ethnographies of American football players (Anderson, 2005b, 2008a) and even fraternity members (Anderson, 2008b) all show that an inclusive, less homophobic form of masculinity is on the rise. Therefore, this may be a case in which the dominant society's more inclusive attitudes influence sporting men's gendered accounts, instead of it being the other way around (Connell, 1987; Messner, 1992).

Results of this research also suggest that narratives produced by African-American sport writers are helping to reverse elevated rates of homophobia that exist within U.S. Black culture, and are often strengthened through sport (Cohen, 1999; Harper, 1996). It is significant that prominent African Americans in the sport industry are beginning to stand alongside some key Black religious and political leaders (including Reverend Jesse Jackson and President Barack Obama) in calling for an end to the elevated rates of homophobia that exist within the African-American community.

More central to sport's place in society, this research adds more evidence to Anderson's (2005a) contention the world of professional sport is ready for an active gay athlete to come out. In his research on openly gay athletes, Anderson (2005a) noted preconceptions about what type of environments closeted gay athletes thought they would face are unrepresentative of what actually occurred after coming out. In other words, gay athletes often felt they would come out into a world of discrimination, but that did not happen once they did come out. This study leads us to believe that an active gay teamsport athlete who publicly came out would be treated well by print media.

Still, this does not mean we believe an openly gay athlete will come out anytime soon. There are far too many other variables at play, including gay men who matriculate through high school and universities without coming out establish a habitus of not coming out (Anderson, 2005a). Professional teamsport athletes may also fear the ensuing media attention that their coming out would gain. However, this research shows that sport, and in particular sport media, is at least growing more accepting of gays and gay lifestyles.

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