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Coaching Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Athletes: Needs, Challenges, and Fears of Top-level Coaches

This article builds on material published in the April 2006 issue of the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* entitled “Homophobia in Sport – Fact of Life, Taboo Subject” (http://www.coach.ca/files/CJWC_APRIL2006_EN.pdf), in which Guylaine Demers referred to the reality of homophobia as “the wall of silence.” Seven years later, she and her co-author, Bianka Viel, report having no choice but to acknowledge that progress towards the creation of a more inclusive sports world has been negligible. In undertaking the research for a master’s thesis, the authors were driven by the desire to understand why “the wall of silence” still exists in 2013.

As was noted in 2006, “the *Journal* is proud to be a forum for putting homophobia squarely where it belongs — out of the closet and into the open.” We continue to strive for a Canadian sport community that welcomes everyone, regardless of sexual orientation. — Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor

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Coaching Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Athletes: Needs, Challenges, and Fears of Top-level Coaches¹

by Bianka Viel and Guylaine Demers

The Research Project

Given that coaches are the first people responsible for creating the coaching climate, we questioned 11 top-level coaches, coaching athletes aged 17 to 26 years, about the presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) athletes on their teams. Specifically, we asked about their needs, fears, and challenges with regard to training LGBT athletes in one-on-one interviews. Of the 11 coaches, five said they had coached LGBT athletes; the other six suspected they had coached such athletes, although they were unable to provide confirmation. The sexual orientation of their athletes was therefore either known or presumed.

¹ This article is a summary of the master’s thesis of Bianka Viel (2013) entitled *Entraîner des athlètes gays, lesbiennes, bisexuels, et transgenres : Besoins et craintes d’entraîneurs québécois* [Coaching gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender athletes: Needs and fears of coaches in Quebec]. Her project was funded by the Coaching Association of Canada.

Statements of the five coaches who coached LGBT athletes

Coming out modalities

The modalities of coming out seem to be connected with the quality of the sport environment or a specific event in the life of the athletes. In fact, two moments favour disclosure of sexual identity. One is during a difficult time such as the end of a relationship. The other, and probably the most frequent, occurs at the end of a career most likely because the athletes have nothing to lose at that point.

Coming out to whom

It appears that athletes experience a difficult process involving several stages in coming out about sexual orientation, a sequence that involves a gamut of concerns and apprehensions. The coaches said LGBT athletes would first discuss their sexual orientation with one team member or with their coach, although the latter was rarer. If the reaction was positive, the athletes would then talk to others. Our interviews revealed that people in whom LGBT individuals confide seem to vary over a range (Figure 1).

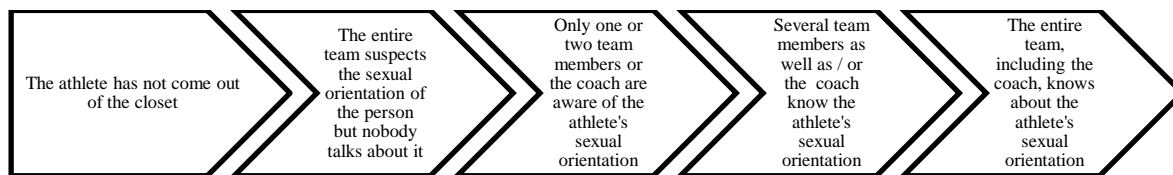


Figure 1. Continuum of disclosing sexual identity

Reactions

Reactions to an athlete's coming out were varied and could be placed over a continuum ranging from "not acceptable" to "no big deal", in which case the athlete was treated the same as other team members. However, the reaction seems to be more negative among males. The continuum also reveals a lack of understanding that could be related to the taboo nature of the subject. Thus, when the athletes feel misunderstood, they are less likely to disclose their sexual orientation. This creates a vicious circle because self-censorship with regard to sexual orientation reduces the probability of team members to be in contact with LGBT people. Such contact is necessary for the acceptance of sexual diversity. Indeed, the more contact a person has with LGBT people, the more she/he is inclined to discuss sexual diversity more openly and without judgement.

Why so few coming out situations?

Some coaches said they do not know any LGBT athletes, particularly males, who have come out. Given the non-inclusive environment in sport, it is understandable, according to the coaches, that athletes choose not to come out. They offered several possible reasons for this.

The first reason was connected to the fact that LGBT athletes do not want to live with discrimination or injustice because of their sexual orientation. Further, it is difficult for male athletes to admit to being gay. Some believe that by disclosure, the male athlete is no longer considered to be a "real man" given the general negative perception about gay men in sport or the perception that he practices only "feminine" sports such as figure skating. As there is physical proximity in sport that cannot be ignored such as embraces, showering together, and frequent and varied physical contact, when homosexuality is involved, it seems to cause awkwardness among men.

Second, it would be risky, in the opinion of the coaches, for athletes to come out. Because of strong social pressure, teens and young adults often choose to remain in the shadows. There is also real concern about what others think or say. One coach said that athletes are often considered as role models and would therefore feel the need to conform to what is expected of them, which in all probability does not include being homosexual.

Third, LGBT athletes often fear that their sexual orientation would distract their teammates and affect team chemistry. Athletes care about the success of their teams and the idea that they could create a problem would cause them to conceal their sexual orientation.

The final reason is connected to the coaches' own reactions. In fact, coaches told us they don't want to know their athletes sexual orientation. They never ask their athletes to disclose their sexuality because they do not wish to focus on the differences between their athletes. One coach admitted: "It seems to me that it is easier for a coach when he or she does not have to deal with the issue."

Coaches' limitations

Four coaches talked about what they described as their personal limitations when it came to coaching LGBT athletes. The feelings included reluctance to intervene, as they considered sexual orientation an aspect of the athlete's private life. Consequently, they saw a certain line between personal and professional lives that could not be crossed. There is also a degree of unease in dealing with demonstrations of homosexual affection and the disclosure of sexual orientation. They seemed to have trouble talking directly to an LGBT athlete. Knowing how to act when an athlete has not come out yet also seems to be a challenge. "Should I talk about it with the athlete or not?" Coaches seem uneasy about how to handle sexual orientation and obviously do not know where to start. The limits described by the coaches curtail their chances of initiating an action and do not facilitate disclosure of the LGBT athlete's sexuality, but rather emphasizes their invisibility.

Coaches' fears, apprehensions, and questions

Coaches' concerns were mainly regarding team chemistry. In fact, the coaches said sexual orientation issues could potentially break existing team cohesion. They also worried about couples forming within the team, and the additional management such relationships would entail. Assigning hotel rooms or the discretion required from the athletes when it came to showing affection during training or competition, seemed to worry the coaches. Some feared using inappropriate language accidentally. They also said that the interview had made them realize that they are unprepared for dealing with an athlete's sexuality. Some were concerned about how others might view their actions. Still another concern was the possibility that other coaches or athletes might harm an athlete with unconventional sexuality given his or her vulnerability. One coach admitted not being inclined to approach known LGBT athletes to ask questions in order to better understand their situation. Overall, the coaches seem to have various concerns and apprehensions, which, according to us, constitute a problem.

Elements facilitating the coaching of LGBT athletes

The coaches identified five key elements that help them deal with the issue of sexual orientation with their athletes: 1) their academic training and knowledge, 2) contact with LGBT persons among family and friends, 3) their sporting context (open and diversified environment), 4) the climate they create, and 5) the presence or access to an LGBT role model or spokesperson.

Conclusion

In creating an environment that promotes optimal personal development and sporting excellence, the coach is in direct contact with the athletes. Since coaches lead the activities and are responsible for creating conditions that ensure as many participants as possible have the opportunity for a positive experience, they can undoubtedly prevent a heterosexist, homophobic and hostile environment from developing. The coach's actions, language, and attitude go a long way towards making the athletes feel safe and able to be themselves by, for example, disclosing their sexual orientation in the sport environment in which they are developing.

A coach must strive to establish rules of acceptance of differences that are inclusive of athletes of all sexual orientations along with a zero-tolerance policy towards those who do not abide by such rules. If athletes decide to come out, the reaction of their coach or confidante will be a decisive factor in their life. Given that coming out is extremely difficult, a negative reaction, or inaction on the part of the coach, will send very clear messages to the athlete with consequences that could be disastrous. Moreover, LGBT athletes understand that coming out may result in losing friends or training partners, exclusion from the team, isolation, and financial problems caused by the loss of sponsors. The coach's actions or inaction will have a bearing on the sporting environment, and consequently he or she must set an example.

Unfortunately, most coaches remain passive in the face of issues connected with sexual orientation and do not consider discussing the subject in their sport environment. Such inaction reinforces gender-based stereotypes and also a faulty perception of masculinity and femininity in the training environment. Consequently, the subject of sexual orientation remains taboo. It should be pointed out that none of the coaches have been trained to adequately deal with LGBT individuals within the sport framework. Let us ask ourselves the following question: Are we doing everything necessary to provide a welcoming environment for our LGBT athletes, an environment that allows them to develop their full potential?

About the authors

Bianka Viel has a bachelor's degree in sport intervention and a master's in psychopedagogy from Laval University. Her research interests cover holistic development through sports and situations of discrimination and inequity in sports. A former amateur athlete, she recently returned to coaching figure skating in the Côte-Nord of Quebec. She is also a research assistant in the Department of Physical Education at Laval.

Guylaine Demers, PhD, has been a professor in the Department of Physical Education of Laval University since September 2001. She is the director of the Baccalaureate in Sport Intervention. Her particular interests are issues of women in sport, coach education, and homophobia in sport. She was actively involved in the development and implementation of the competency-based National Coaching Certification Program. She is the chair of Égale-Action, the Quebec association for the advancement of women in sport and physical activity, sits on the board of CAAWS, and is the president of the CAC's Coaching Research Committee. In 2007 and 2010, she was named one of Canada's most Influential Women in Sport and Physical Activity. She coached basketball for more than 15 years.