SINGLED OUT:
A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION INTO SEXUALITY, SPORT, AND MASculinity

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ABSTRACT

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At the present time, gay men in sport are still a largely unexamined group. Currently, Jason Collins of the NBA is the only openly gay male athlete competing in the four major professional team sports in the United States: football, basketball, baseball, and hockey. Much of the research that does exist is based on Connell’s (1990) theory of hegemonic masculinity. This theory contends that society values a single form of masculinity over all others, and that sport in particular functions to reproduce this singular identity, valorizing traits such as strength, toughness, and aggression (Connell, 1990). This system creates hierarchies, with the most hegemonically masculine men at the top of the structure, and in a position to dominate over women and less masculine men (Anderson, 2005; Messner, 2002). Historically, homophobia has acted as the main tool to police the actions of men, especially in a sport context (Anderson, 2011; Pronger, 1990). Thus, it is an immense struggle for gay male athletes to come out and express their sexuality openly on their teams. New research is emerging that suggests the climate in sport is changing, and that greater social acceptance of homosexuality is making its way into the realm of sport. This qualitative, narrative analysis aims to provide a rich examination into the experiences and perceptions of gay male athletes. Eight current and former gay intercollegiate athletes were interviewed from a variety of sports. Through the use of a layered narrative approach, the participants’ stories were placed at the forefront of the analysis, allowing for unique and valuable new insight into the changing relationship between sport, sexuality, and masculinity.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

…I could say that we are as strong as you are, we are as fit as you are, but until they have been beaten by us and we are standing there holding the pot, it doesn’t quite hit home. It is a tightrope because equally—if we do badly—we reinforce the negative image of gay men (as) a bunch of ‘Marys’ who couldn’t quite cut it. (Owen, 2006, p. 142)

The athlete quoted here, in a study by Owen (2006), expresses one of the countless challenges that gay male athletes face on the sports field. In a world where boys grow up playing backyard games like “smear the queer” and graduate through youth sport programs that reward acts of dominance and aggression, it is no wonder that sport is an unwelcome environment for sexual minorities (Allain, 2008). The facets of hegemonic masculinity function to weed out and marginalize identities that do not, or cannot, conform to the characteristics associated with “manly men.” For one form of masculinity to be considered “hegemonic,” it must be valued above all others—held up high for all men and boys to aspire to (Connell, 1990). A hegemonically masculine male in today’s culture would be handsome, athletic, heterosexual, young, successful, and tough, among other privileged traits. With the addition of each characteristic, more and more men fall away, unable to meet these requirements. The fact that the majority of men fail to meet this standard does not lessen the power of the hegemonic ideal. As long as men continue to strive toward this image, and hold it in high esteem, hegemonic masculinity will continue to define what is acceptable behavior for men in today’s society.
(Connell, 1990). Thus, masculinity is linked to status, and men can accrue “masculine capital” by looking and acting in ways most associated with hegemonically masculine standards (Anderson, 2005).

Homosexuality and femininity (and the perception that the two are closely related) sit at the forefront of these standards, often perceived as the two identities real men dare not embody (Messner, 2002). When Connell (1990) conducted a life-history study of a champion “Iron Man,” she asked the star athlete what it meant to be a man. The first four words he uttered in response were “not be a gay” (p. 94). Traditionally, homosexuality and masculinity could not intermix (Anderson, 2008b). To be classified as one meant abandoning the other. When a man identifies as gay, he indicates more than a sexual preference. Such an admission to society instantly conflates that man with a feminine identity—one that is deemed as decidedly weaker and of less worth than its masculine counterpart (Bryson, 1990). These gendered power relations place women and gay men in a subordinate position, and sport, more so than perhaps any other vehicle, works to sustain them (Anderson, 2008a; Bryson, 1990).

Sport is often the single-most entity tied to masculinity for young boys (Adams, 2011). The type of sport participation and one’s level of playing ability are key elements affecting status among boys, especially in schools (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). The sports that are positioned as the most masculine are the gold standard—football, basketball, and baseball in most cases. The boy who chooses to enroll in sports viewed as feminine, such as gymnastics or dance, often faces ridicule, and bullying on the part of peers helps ensure that masculine-viewed sports maintain dominance (Gard, 2001). Physical education classes become breeding grounds for athletic dominance, and less
athletic boys are routinely humiliated in front of their classmates—and their suffering viewed as a normal part of growing up (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).

Indeed, children learn at an early age that there is a right way and a wrong way to be a boy (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). In high schools, male athletes often enjoy a higher status and inclusion into the “center of sport” (Messner, 2002, p. 29). These are the star athletes in the highest-profile sports, and typically the ones held in high esteem by other boys wishing to gain “masculine capital” through association (Anderson, 2005; Messner, 2002). The center of sport and its supporters sustain dominance through the subordination of others, namely women and men who are perceived as less masculine (Messner, 2002). Sport fosters this system of dominance through its strict and institutionalized gender segregation (Anderson, 2002). From an early age, boys are separated from girls in sport contexts. Such separation is rationalized through the belief that boys are inherently better, stronger athletes than girls, instilling a discourse of male dominance from the very onset of sport participation (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Messner (2002) and Anderson (2008a) argue that segregating sport and labeling it as a bastion of masculinity manufactures discourses that impacts cases of sexual violence and negative attitudes toward women.

The enactment of hegemonic masculinity affects all men, but can cause devastating amounts of psychological harm to boys and men who do not fit into the mold of proper gender performance (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Hegemonic masculinity is a game of status, in which one’s masculine “stock” can radically rise or fall depending on adequate or inadequate gender performance (Messner, 2002). In a high school setting where insecurity runs rampant, young men frequently relish the opportunity to call
attention to another’s masculine failings, upping their own masculine capital in the process (Anderson, 2005; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Messner, 2002). Boys who do not conform are often relentlessly bullied, and in some cases, driven to retaliate in the form of horrific acts of violence (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Kimmel and Mahler call attention to the ways in which gender norms and masculinity come into play in the realm of school violence. In an analysis of news coverage of school shootings from 1982-2001, Kimmel and Mahler found that every shooter (they were all male) recounted stories of being bullied, mocked, and gay-baited by classmates. Regardless of the shooters’ sexualities, each was tormented for inadequately performing masculinity, providing harrowing evidence of the damages that hegemonic masculinity can inflict on society (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003).

As previously stated, sport fuels this system of masculine hierarchies (Allain, 2008; Anderson, 2002). Its close association with hegemonically masculine ideals has made it prized territory, and the homophobic discourse surrounding sport makes it difficult for openly gay athletes to exist (Anderson, 2011). Currently, Jason Collins of the NBA is the only openly gay professional athlete competing in football, basketball, baseball, or hockey—the four major team sports in the U.S (Kian & Anderson, 2009). Through marginalization, and a close association with femininity, sport has maintained the notion that homosexuality and athleticism are incompatible (Butterworth, 2006).

Evidence of Dissociation

Multiple studies now suggest that the stronghold placed on men by hegemonic masculinity may be loosening (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As Anderson (2011) states, Connell’s (1990) original theory of
hegemonic masculinity was drafted in the late 1980s—a period characterized by a heightened state of homophobia in the United States. While the theory was reflective of attitudes and behaviors of men in that decade, the 1990s saw increased cultural acceptance of homosexuality, and gradually, the fear of being labeled as gay has faded in intensity (Anderson, 2011).

Adams (2011) and Short (2007) documented changes in men’s behavior on a collegiate soccer team and in the locker rooms. Adams (2011) backed Anderson’s (2008b) theory of “inclusive masculinity” as being characteristic of a collegiate soccer team in the Northeast U.S. Members of this team openly admitted to having close gay friends, as well as relied on each other for physical and emotional comfort (Adams, 2011). Homophobia, and the fear it creates, was not present in Adams’s (2011) findings. Short (2007) noted a sharp change in the behavior of young men in locker rooms in the past three decades. The locker room, once a haven of uninhibited masculinity, appears to have morphed into a less open environment, as young men observed by Short (2007) discreetly undressed behind towels. Short (2007) attributes this shift as an acknowledgement by many men that gay men share the locker room space, and it is no longer void of sexuality.

Anderson (2008b) indicates in his research that heterosexual male athletes are more accepting of homosexuality, and—to a lesser extent—partake in same-sex sex without identifying as gay. Several studies document the experiences of gay men who have come out in sport, concluding that sexuality is less of an issue to teammates and coworkers than once thought (Anderson, 2011; Cavalier, 2011; Gough, 2007). Others cite the media and sport fans’ apparent willingness to accept a gay male athlete in
professional sports (Campbell et al, 2011; Kian & Anderson, 2009). All of this research suggests that sport is slowly warming up to homosexuality, and that greater cultural acceptance is finally making its way into the world of sport (Anderson, 2011). This study contends that this is only partially true, and based on a common fallacy.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

While several studies indicate a greater acceptance of homosexuality in sport, I argue that this acceptance is limited. As homophobia decreased throughout the 1990s and 2000s, it allowed for more and more gay men to publicly come out. This, in turn, provided society with a clearer, less stereotypical view of homosexuality. Suddenly, gay men weren’t outcasts anymore. They were neighbors and coworkers and friends. Society began to understand that a gay man was no different than any other man. This realization paved the way for “straight-acting” gay men to move away from notions of femininity. Gay men could be soldiers, CEOs, bodybuilders, and even athletes. As a consequence of this repositioning, gay men who appear too feminine in looks or mannerisms are held in less esteem—left behind as more “masculine” gay men advance in society. In sport, I believe this will hold especially true, and I argue that while homosexuality may slowly be gathering more acceptance, the necessity to act “masculine” is still in place. I contend that the reevaluation of hegemonic masculinity has resulted in a new hierarchy—one in which straight-acting gay men are allowed to advance in sport, but those who are perceived as feminine, or express their sexuality too openly, are scarcely more welcome than in previous decades. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of gay male athletes recently competing on
collegiate sport teams, in order to gauge their perspectives on how homosexuality and femininity are received in sport.

Research Questions

1. How do gay male athletes perceive the climate in sport?
2. How do gay male athletes express their sexuality on their sports teams?
3. How do gay male athletes interpret the concepts of masculinity and femininity in sport?
4. How do gay males athletes characterize the locker room space?
5. How do gay male athletes navigate the coming-out process on their teams?

Research Design

A qualitative method, focusing on interviews and narrative analysis, will be employed to document the experiences and views of the athletes. The study is framed by a feminist cultural studies perspective, with an assumption that gay male athletes are a marginalized group, with an emphasis placed on gender and everyday occurrences in the lives of gay male athletes. Interviews will be semi-structured, with open-ended questions included in the interview guide. Reflexivity of the researcher will be important, in order to minimize the effects of personal views and perceptions on the study.

Significance of the Study

While a body of literature on the gay male experience in sport exists, grounded in Connell’s (1990) theory of hegemonic masculinity, recently Eric Anderson (2011) called for new research reevaluating the positions of masculinity and homosexuality within sport. As one of the most respected and influential scholars in his field, Anderson (2011) no longer believes that hegemonic masculinity reigns over the behaviors of men—a
notion that nearly all previous literature is based upon. Anderson (2011) and Cavalier (2011) specifically point to negative perceptions as the major motive keeping gay men closeted in sport. The negative backlash that so many closeted athletes fear may be more of an illusion than reality, according to these perspectives. My study is significant because it goes straight to the source. Through in-depth interviews with currently competing, or recently retired, gay intercollegiate athletes, this research will enable me to add to the ongoing discussion about homosexuality, femininity, and sport. At its conclusion, I will either be able to present additional research signaling a change in climate for gay male athletes, or provide evidence challenging the claims of Anderson (2011) and others. This study will continue to push the examination further.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The hierarchies of masculinity that function in sport have been well documented in existing literature (Allain, 2008; Anderson, 2011; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Plummer, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). The consensus among researchers is that masculinity is not an intrinsic characteristic born to all males, but rather a socially constructed characterization assigned to the male sex (Connell, 1990). At the highest echelon of this order is Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1990) defined hegemonic masculinity as “the culturally idealized form of masculine character (in a given historical setting), which may not be the usual form of masculinity at all” (p. 83). Here, Connell hints that hegemonically masculine standards can shift with time. In today’s society, the ideal hegemonically masculine man can be characterized as young, white, heterosexual, good-looking, educated, athletic, tough, with a good job, family, and physique, among other socially desirable characteristics (Anderson, 2008a; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003).

Sport is seen as an institution that harbors and serves to continuously produce a single, hegemonic form of masculinity (Anderson, 2011; Zipp, 2011). For young boys especially, participation in sports serves as a platform to learn which characteristics are most esteemed and, specifically, how to act like a man (Adams, 2011; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). These dominant characteristics—strength, aggression, stoicism, and others—come with prestige and are rewarded in sport and society at large (Allain, 2008; Connell, 1990; Messner, 2002; Zipp, 2011). The positioning of a dominant form of masculinity is immediately troubling because there is clearly more than one kind of man
present in society. Thus, the majority of men are marginalized in one way or another—as not white, not heterosexual, not athletic—and these men are assigned to a lower status (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). The more closely a man resembles the dominant model, the more “masculine capital” (Anderson, 2005) he is said to possess. That is, men who display more hegemonically masculine traits are of greater worth than those who have less.

While dominant expressions of masculinity are emphasized in multiple arenas, sport stands out as an institution that defines and reproduces hegemonically masculine standards, thereby “heterosexualizing” boys and men (Adams, 2011). The notion that sports have the ability to manufacture masculinity and, consequently, heterosexuality goes back to the early twentieth century, when sport was seen as the solution to the worry that boys were becoming weak and feminine (Adams, 2011). The linkage between sport and heterosexuality, as well as the near total opposition of sport and femininity, has created a social mechanism that constructs, polices, and reproduces a dominant and naturalized form of masculinity in sport. Understanding this structure provides context for, and is essential to, the discussion of gay men in sport.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Dominance

The concept of hegemonic masculinity centers on dominance over another—namely, women (Bryson, 1990). The contradiction of women competing in the masculinized world of sport has long impacted gender relations in athletic environments (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In no other domain is gender segregation more compulsory than sport (Anderson, 2008a), and the reasoning behind the distancing of women from sport has ranged from alleged biological incongruence (Markula & Pringle, 2006) to the
assertion that sport is incompatible with heterosexual femininity (Lock, 2006). The rendering of females as inferior athletes begins early, with youth sports teams that are separated on the basis of sex (Anderson, 2008a). This separation—based on the belief that females are significantly weaker than males—results in differential treatment of boys and girls in physical education classes and organized sports (Stuntz, Sayles, & McDermott, 2011) and awards a higher status to male participants (Anderson, 2008a). Bryson (1990) describes how the institutionalized “differences” between males and females constructs hegemonic principles of gender:

> Boys learn to defend themselves and others. Girls receive no such explicit training in the basics of physical attack or defense; thus is the message conveyed that females are not powerful and indeed are in need of protection—male protection. (p. 179)

Hegemonic gender roles insist that women are weaker and less athletic than men. If a woman does perform as well as a man—displaying high levels of athleticism, strength, and aggression—her sexuality is immediately brought into question, functioning to keep women within the acceptable boundaries of femininity (Bryson, 1990; Zipp, 2011).

In an analysis of male rugby players in New Zealand, Markula and Pringle (2006) documented the puzzled attitudes surrounding female participation in rugby. While the male players acknowledged that women should have the right to play if they want to, many questioned what would compel a woman to want to play a rough sport like rugby. Male participation was normalized, whereas female athletes needed a special motivation to join the ranks (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Interviewees expressed concerns that female bodies were less suited for rugby, and the risk of injury was a prevailing sentiment.
against female participation in rugby (Markula & Pringle, 2006). There was also a contention that women tackling each other and being aggressive was “unnatural” and that only “chicks who are dykes and butch” would be inclined to play rugby (p. 126-127). Furthering the perception that all female rugby players are lesbians was one player’s belief that the kind of woman he’s attracted to wouldn’t be play rugby, again placing heterosexual femininity at odds with contact sports (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

The notion that women are in need of protection (Bryson, 1990) is put to practice in the realm of sports, where explicit rules enacted in women’s sports dictate the type of experience that women are allowed to have in sport (Lock, 2006). Lock (2006) argues that there is a refusal to allow women to experience and express masculine, athletic pain. She notes that “playing sports that are painful undermines women’s categorization as people who avoid pain and need protection from pain wherever possible” (p. 164). Lock illustrates this resistance through an examination of women’s ice hockey in Canada. She points to the existence of certain rules, such as the penalty for checking another player, that are enforced in women’s, but not in men’s hockey (Lock, 2006). A similar disparity is found in relation to fighting, as female players who fight are penalized much more harshly than male hockey players, ensuring that rough, masculine acts of violence only occur on the men’s side (Lock, 2006). While these regulations limit aggressive violence to male hockey players, they also serve to condition female players to believe that imposing pain upon others is not an acceptable practice for women (Lock, 2006).

Lock (2006) goes on to explain how the desire to protect women from pain and injury only goes so far, and is intertwined with expectations of hegemonic femininity. The specific example Lock describes is an additional rule that requires female ice hockey
players to wear full facial shields, despite the fact that such equipment is linked to an increase in concussions (Lock, 2006). Lock postulates that pain is denied to women only when it contradicts their positioning as heterosexually feminine beings. Facial injuries that lessen a woman’s ability to be seen as physically attractive are prohibited, even at the expense of endangerment by way of a concussion. In this way, pain and gender are linked, and both are socially constructed so that women experience pain differently than men (Lock, 2006).

Associating females with certain types of pain, such as rape, reflects gender differences and establishes a pattern of male dominance (Anderson, 2008a; Lock, 2006). The discourse surrounding rape depicts women as helpless victims, subject to male domination, and once again, in need of outside protection (Lock, 2006). It also suggests that men have the inherent ability to sexually dominate women (Messner, 2002). Messner (2002) explains that common insults thrown around by young boys are loaded with social, sexual undertones:

Insults like ‘you suck,’ ‘blow me,’ or ‘fuck you’ smuggle into children’s and preadolescent groups a powerful pedagogy about sexuality, power, and domination…they teach each other that sex, whether of the homosexual or heterosexual kind, is a relational act of domination and subordination. The ‘men’ are the ones who are on top, in control, doing the penetrating and fucking. Women, or penetrated men, are subordinate, degraded, and dehumanized objects of sexual aggression. (p. 33)

The discourse surrounding sport clearly places men as dominant over women (Anderson, 2002). Multiple studies have also shown the potential of all-male sports teams to
facilitate harmful attitudes toward women (Anderson, 2002; Messner, 2002). For example, the degree of contact with members of the opposite sex is believed to be a factor in rape statistics and other incidences of men committing violence against women (Messner, 2002). Messner (2002) points to research surrounding the 1989 Glen Ridge, New Jersey gang rape case, as evidence of the damaging effect of highly sexualized, dominance social interaction among men. In this case, a group of high-status, high school sports stars sexually assaulted a female classmate. Six boys who disapproved of the events unfolding left the scene and yet, in a harrowing example of the power of homosocial male bonds, deemed it unnecessary to inform anyone of the ongoing assault. The boys most central in the assault were raised in homes without sisters, under the tutelage of an overbearing male figure. Not surprisingly, then, most of the boys who left had sisters (Messner, 2002).

Similarly, other demeaning views concerning women are linked to belonging to a homosocial male “in-group,” positioning women as physically weak, less capable than men, and as sexual objects (Anderson, 2008; Bryson, 1990; Messner, 2002). Messner (2002) discusses his personal experiences regarding the effect fighting for status among male teammates had on his relationship to his girlfriend:

Like many young men, I wanted to have sex. But the urgency of my desire was not driven simply by my attraction to my girlfriend. I genuinely and desperately wanted access to the sexual experience and knowledge that would put me on par with the guys on the team…this in turn had encouraged a tendency to see and treat my girlfriend more as an object of conquest than as a person with feelings, fears, and desires of her own. (p. 42)
In a climate that masculinizes domination over both women and other men, sex with women becomes a way to up one’s masculine capital—a performance of hegemonically masculine, heterosexual dominance—that acts to dehumanize women (Messner, 2002). Curry’s (1991) analysis of men’s locker room culture adds to the wealth of literature describing how homosocial settings (i.e., sport) assist in shaping negative attitudes toward women. Curry (1991) argues that locker room culture creates a skewed worldview for young men. The life lessons that men learn and express to each other in locker rooms—often surrounding how to get ahead in life or reach a higher degree of success—are learned in strictly gendered environments, creating the illusion that women do not share the same levels of drive and determination. These misconceptions carry over into the workplace and beyond, as many men grow up believing women are incapable of performing to the same standard as a man (Curry, 1991).

The dangers of high-status, homosocial group dynamics are easily fostered within an athletic team (Anderson, 2008a; Messner, 2002). The nature of elite sport isolates its participants, functioning as a near-total institution that controls every facet of an athlete’s life (Allain, 2008; Anderson, 2008a). Athletes on sports teams are isolated from many other social classes, and the high status associated with sport participation gives it an air of exclusivity (Allain, 2008). So great are the rewards given to athletes from society, that athletes want to continue in sport as long as possible—a goal that requires a considerable amount of conformity to the hegemonically masculine identity most valued in sport (Anderson, 2008a). For athletes to advance in sport, it requires more than outstanding athletic talent. Along the way, they must “limit who they befriend, shut out other cultural influences, and are therefore less exposed to those who do not fit orthodox masculine
requisites” (Anderson, 2008a, p. 266). The time constraints associated with athletic participation, including demanding practice schedules and traveling to competitions, contribute to the formation of other athletes as one’s dominant peer group. As the rigors of athletic participation increase with advancement in sport, so do the social restrictions (Anderson, 2008a). Young athletes are mentored by coaches who went through the same system of masculine reproduction, creating a system that is closed to influence from “outsiders” and marginalized identities—situating sport as an institution that is “closed to voices of dissent” (Anderson, 2008a, p. 267-269).

Anderson (2008a) interviewed former male high school football players who became cheerleaders in college, finding that although these men were socialized into athletic teams that encouraged sexist attitudes toward women, their opinions of women changed after competing on a mixed-sex cheerleading squad (Anderson, 2008a). A vast majority of participants reported a greater respect for women as athletes and leaders, as well as an increased value placed on female friendship as a result of competing alongside women. Anderson suggests that integrating men and women in a team sport context allows male athletes to interact with and rely on women in a way that they were not able to in sex-segregated sports teams. Such team settings require men and women to work together as equal members striving for a common goal, with less emphasis placed on gender differences (Anderson, 2008a).

Sport, specifically by way of the large gap that society draws between men and women therein (Anderson, 2008a), has become an arena in which men routinely exercise dominance over women through “superior” athletic performance (Anderson, 2002). Bryson (1990) contends that sport is so highly valued in society that athletic capabilities
often factor into the distribution of power in other areas. Hence, men who excel in sport are seen as more capable than women and non-athletic men in a multitude of areas—including the professional domain. Thus, a class system is created (Bryson, 1990). Sport contributes substantially to the relegation of women and non-hegemonically masculine men to a lower social status (Anderson, 2002).

The previous research places femininity as the antithesis of masculinity, and sport as a near-total institution that seamlessly reproduces orthodox masculinity (Allain, 2008; Anderson, 2008a). Bryson (1990) writes that “it is not by chance that men who do not measure up to hegemonic masculine criteria are likely to be redefined in feminine terms, as, for example, sissies or fairies” (p. 175). Sport locker rooms act as isolated strongholds, where men are socialized to smother and revile even the slightest expressions of femininity (Allain, 2008). Paramount among these expressions is homosexuality. Society has painted gay males as incompatible with hegemonically masculine standards (Anderson, 2002). Cultural stereotypes and myths construct gay men as a homogenous group of deviants and outcasts—feminine, weak, non-athletic, and even sexually predatory (Anderson, 2002; Cavalier, 2011; Gough, 2007; Plummer, 2006). As “failed men,” gay men are granted no space in sport (Cavalier, 2011; Plummer, 2006). The fact that gay men have existed in sport, and continue to do so, threatens the very fabric of hegemonic masculinity, in that it illustrates that men who are gay (and therefore, feminine) can also be strong, aggressive, and athletic on the sports field (Anderson, 2002).

 Culturally, gay athletes challenge the notion that sport only exists as a violent, macho arena in which hegemonically masculine men dominate over women and
feminized men (Anderson, 2002; Bryson, 1990). Hegemonic masculinity centers on this domination, and relies on homophobic and sexist discourse to uphold a gender-based hierarchy within sport (Bryson, 1990; Messner, 2002; Price & Parker, 2003). The exclusion of women from men’s sports teams has been institutionalized (Anderson, 2008a), but ensuring that gay men are shut out is not as feasible, as a fiercely heterosexist society has made it necessary that many gay men learn to seamlessly conceal their sexuality and “pass” as straight men (Pronger, 1990). Thus, a powerful tool—homophobia—is utilized to keep gay men away from sport, while also staunchly policing the behavior of all men, in an effort to achieve a single heterosexually masculine male identity (Allain, 2008; Anderson, 2008b; Gough, 2007; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Plummer, 2006; Zipp, 2011).

Homophobia in Sport

A 2006 evaluation of undergraduate students pursuing careers in sport management demonstrated the strong compulsion of men in today’s society to distance themselves from homosexuality (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey & Schultz, 2006). Students completed a questionnaire gauging their opinions and attitudes of certain minorities. Male respondents reported significantly more negative opinions of gay men than did females. Additionally, when asked to rate their sexuality using the Kinsey Scale, several men circled the option indicating that they were exclusively heterosexual multiple times, with some even writing in notes to assure that their heterosexuality was boldly understood (Gill et al., 2006). Gill et al. (2006) report that “no one made such efforts to make sure their gender, age, or race/ethnicity was so clearly understood” (p. 559). The need of the males in the study to over-emphasize their heterosexuality is an example of
the level of fear involved in being labeled as gay—a phenomena that Plummer (2006) has
dubbed “homophobiaphobia” (p. 134).

Historically and currently, homophobia serves as the main weapon to coerce men
(gay and straight) into conforming to a rigid set of acceptable masculine behaviors
(Anderson, 2011; Messner, 2002; Plummer, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003). Fear of being
ostracized is the main motivating factor that keeps boys striving to “act like a man”
males who don’t conform:

Boys and men who reveal themselves as vulnerable are subsequently targeted as
the symbolic “women,” “pussies,” and “faggots” on athletic teams…most boys
learn early to avoid at all costs offering one’s self up as a target for this kind of
abuse. (p. 35)

Calling someone a homophobic slur is equivalent to questioning his manhood and
demoting him to the position of lesser beings (women, gay men) (Kimmel & Mahler,
2003). There are few worse insults in the arena of sport than being told that one “plays
like a girl” (Allain, 2008, p. 465). To be viewed as a legitimate male in sport, all
expressions and behaviors must be in direct opposition to femininity (Kimmel & Mahler,
2003; Plummer, 2006). The attainment of a hegemonically masculine identity in sport
creates a powerful “in-group” of dominant masculine personalities, pitting the “real men”
against the outsiders (Messner, 2002). As Messner (2002) chose to phrase it: “we are
men; they are faggots” (p. 55). The formation of the “subordinated other” carries with it
the resultant fear that places limits on how any man hoping to avoid marginalization can
express his masculinity (Anderson, 2008b; Messner, 2002).
Homophobic insults do not solely police sexuality. There are a vast number of qualities and behaviors that can jeopardize one’s masculine capital, resulting in homophobic taunts. These include a lack of athletic ability, shyness, obeying adults, not objectifying women, wearing or not wearing certain clothes, showing emotions, being studious, and backing down to a fight (Plummer, 2006). Men who dip into “feminine” terrain, such as theatre or choir are also likely to have their masculinity questioned, and suffer homophobic attacks (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Lock’s (2006) discourses of masculine and feminine pain are again relevant, as stoicism and self-sacrifice in the face of athletic pain are socially rewarded masculine characteristics (Messner, 2002).

Conversely, male athletes who express their pain and seem unwilling to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of winning are likely to be met with calls of “pussy” or “faggot” (Messner, 2002, p. 58).

Additionally, participation in the wrong kinds of sporting activities can also negatively impact one’s masculine status (Plummer, 2006). Anderson (2008b) described how high school football players who became cheerleaders in college fought to retain their privileged positions in the masculine hierarchy, despite participating in the highly feminized sport of cheerleading. Although the men still identified as heterosexual and still conformed to most hegemonically masculine standards, involvement in cheerleading feminized them and lessened their status as men (Anderson, 2008b). Men in this position may resort to strategies of “defensive masculinity” in order to salvage some of their masculine capital (p. 108). In the case of the male cheerleaders Anderson (2008a, 2008b) studied, strategies included continuing to wear clothing and hats signifying their previous affiliation with “masculine” sports, as well as emphasizing the strength required to
perform stunts and sexualizing the female cheerleaders to lure other masculine men into the sport (Anderson, 2008a; Anderson, 2008b).

Activities like dance are highly stigmatized in society as a result of the assumption that men and women should move differently, in accordance with hegemonic masculine and feminine standards (Gard, 2001). Just as women who play aggressively on the sports field are pegged as lesbians (Bryson, 1990; Zipp, 2011), men who use their bodies to express grace and beauty are assumed to be gay (Allain, 2008; Gard, 2001). Gard (2001) explores the social discourse surrounding dance, and condemning it as a problematic hobby for “normal” boys. Traditional tactics to draw more boys into dance have aimed to market it as “boy-friendly,” highlighting the advantages of dance that can be applied to traditionally masculine sports such as football and basketball (Gard, 2001, p. 219-223). The problem, Gard (2001) finds, is that this furthers the belief that dance is inherently incompatible with masculinity, and only when partnered with athletic benefits will boys be interested in partaking. It reinforces that boys who want to dance for non-athletic reasons are not “natural,” exacerbating masculine power structures that pressure boys and men to think and act in harmful, homogenous ways (Gard, 2001).

For young boys in particular, proficiency in sports associated with masculinity is typically the chief qualifier in attaining a high social rank (Adams, 2011; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011; Zipp 2011). Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) illustrate the painful processes of marginalization at work in elementary and middle school physical education classes. The most harmful aspect of hegemonic masculinity is the assertion that there is only one proper way to be a boy (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). For school-aged boys, competence in athletics is a privileged attribute, molded and upheld through physical
education settings that establish dominance based on performance in athletic games and “winning” (p. 42). Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) found that “although teachers were aware of the unequal power relations, this dominance was viewed as normal and was, therefore, managed rather than challenged” (p. 39). Non-athletic boys, and boys who were less coordinated, less fit, or less interested in sport, became the “other” in the class, subject to repeated instances of public humiliation and shame (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Marginalization of boys and men who perform poorly in athletics occurs regardless of sexuality, although the non-athletic men certainly become feminized and suffer harsh social ramifications as a result of their poor performance (Plummer, 2006). Such examples provide evidence that in largely homophobic environments like sport, “effeminacy and gayness are essentially considered the same” (Anderson, 2002, p. 873).

As an increasing number of gay male identities have arisen, it is likely that this conflation is beginning to be challenged, opening up a space within men’s sports teams for gay men who transcend the feminine stereotype (Anderson, 2002; Gough, 2007).

Adams (2011) writes that sport was once thought of as a means of “heterosexualizing” boys, voiding them of the weakness, femininity that was associated with homosexuality. Given this history, it’s not surprising that homophobia still exists on today’s sport teams, acting as a defensive shield to prevent the threat of homoeroticism from emerging in such an intimate, homosocial setting (Pronger, 1990; Waitt, 2007). An unwritten book of rules exists in men’s team sports to ensure that close athletic companionships remain a symbol of heterosexually masculine capital, as opposed to being considered as gay (Price & Parker, 2003). To keep up the guise that athleticism and homosexuality are polar opposites, male locker room culture is overly homophobic,
overly misogynistic, and overly unsympathetic (Curry, 1991; Plummer, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003). Every movement is monitored in an environment this rigid, as insecure male athletes jump at the opportunity to expose a teammate’s sexual transgressions to protect their own status within the group (Plummer, 2006). Constraining the “male gaze” is crucial for these men, as despite the competitive nature of sculpting masculine bodies, admiring another man’s body too closely is forbidden (Allain, 2008; Owen, 2006; Plummer, 2006). Delicate is the line (in theory) between modeling one’s physique after hegemonically masculine idols, and lusting over them (Owen, 2006). Owen (2006) writes that “identity wish and identity experience are not the same as erotic wish and erotic experience, but they turn into one another, unless one prevents them from doing so” (p. 141).

The damaging effects of homophobic gender norms on adolescents in this country are consistently understated (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). In an analysis of school shootings in the U.S. from 1982-2001, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) shed light on the issue of hegemonic masculinity and marginalization as a precursor to adolescent male violence. They point to the public’s lack of attention to the possibility that unforgiving standards of masculinity, along with the harassment and homophobia thrust upon outsiders, contributed to the actions of otherwise unrelated, 100% male, school shooters (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). They describe the shooters as nearly all recounting memories of “being mercilessly and constantly teased, picked on, and threatened… it was not because they were gay (at least there is not evidence to suggest that any of them were gay) but because they were different from other boys” (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1445). Kimmel and Mahler’s analysis exposes once again
the shocking ways in which gender marginalization and gay-baiting among young males has been written off as normal, even warranted, in this country. Homophobic bullying and harassment based on gender performance can have dangerous consequences, as Kimmel and Mahler describe marginalized young men seeking revenge against tormentors, asserting their masculine identity, and “acting out in a blaze of overcompensating violent ‘glory’” (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1448).

Experiences & Perceptions of Gay Men in Sport

While hegemonic masculinity decidedly impacts all men, several studies have been centered on assessing and describing the experiences of gay men who have broken into the arena of sports (Anderson, 2002; Cavalier, 2011; Gough, 2007; Owen, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003; Pronger, 1990). The first-hand accounts and perceptions of gay men negotiating life in hostile athletic environments informs research on the barrier between homosexuality and sport, and the unique and often ironic position of gay men in sports. Several studies have focused on the prohibitive effect that homophobia in sport has on participation rates of gay and bisexual men (Plummer, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003; Zipp, 2011). Many openly gay men and others who fail to meet hegemonically masculine norms find “pockets of resistance” in the arts or other environments in which a wider range of masculinities are accepted (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1453; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Similarly, it has been suggested that highly closeted gay men are more likely to seek out roles in heteromasculinized sports settings as a way to stifle or compensate for emerging homosexuality (Anderson, 2011; Gough, 2007; Price & Parker, 2003). Gough (2007) describes sport as a safe haven for many closeted young men, whose involvement on sports teams can help alleviate suspicions from parents and friends.
that one might be gay, again alluding to the heteronormalizing power of sport (Adams, 2011).

Ethnographic accounts of gay sports teams recognize that the principle motivation for joining “all-gay” or “gay-friendly” sport organizations is the desire to play in an alternative sport setting that is more inclusive of a diversity of identities (Jarvis, 2006; Owen, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003; Wellard, 2006). Jarvis (2006) examined the potential of a gay softball team to perform transformative acts that stretch the boundaries of how masculinities can be expressed within a sports team. Jarvis observed the widespread use of language that highlighted the group’s gay identities, including jokes that referenced gay sex. Also present within the team was the uninhibited use of “feminizing” names for each other, such as “bitch,” “honey,” and “ladies” (p. 67-68). Players lusted over the bodies of other players, frequently expressing same-sex attraction to one another in the dugout. This kind of sexual desire, which historically has been stamped out of sports, was “an open and integral aspect of the cultural practices of many players” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 71). Jarvis recounted instances of players skipping between bases, kissing other players, and sharing in same-sex attraction to other men. While the players still exhibited typical sporting behaviors, such as competitiveness, playing through pain, and a desire to win, these qualities were imbued with a sense of playfulness and community that is largely deemed incompatible with team sports (Jarvis, 2006). While the existence of such a sporting culture certainly challenges the belief that athleticism is a strictly heterosexual pursuit, Jarvis noted that the gay men on this team did not characterize their participation as a means of overthrowing dominant sporting ideologies. Rather, the athletes saw participation in sport as a way to escape societal pressures and physically
engage with other gay men in their community. While such reasoning may seem apolitical, Jarvis notes that leagues like these are a means to publically work towards de-stigmatizing gay men in sport (Jarvis, 2006).

Several other studies identified the tendency of gay sport organizations to ultimately conform to heterosexist conventions (Owen, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003; Wellard, 2006). Price and Parker (2003) detail a gay rugby club in the United Kingdom and the challenges it faced in balancing its social purpose—to provide a safe and supportive environment for gay men interested in rugby—with some members’ aspirations for the club to achieve a higher level of competitive play (Price & Parker, 2003). Such pursuits involved recruiting more heterosexual players onto the team. The goal of gay sports teams often wavers between offering a sense of community for gay athletes of all skill levels, and acting as a grounds to prove that gay men are every bit as athletic as heterosexuals (Owen, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003). This need to “legitimize” gay athletes is contingent on performance and winning—a condition that many feel compromises the inclusivity of these clubs, and defaults to hegemonic notions of masculinity and conceptions of athletic dominance (Owen, 2006; Parker & Price, 2003; Wellard, 2006). A participant in Owen’s (2006) study of a gay rowing team alluded to the “tightrope” that gay sports teams competing against heterosexual men often walk, admitting that when gay athletes perform well, it serves to prove that they are not inferior athletes. At the same time, however, if they lose badly, they reinforce negative stereotypes, placing gay athletes abilities well under those of straight men. Legitimization practices often lead gay teams to value more highly those members who closely adhere to hegemonic standards of masculinity, and disparage masculinities that
are too “feminine” or deviate too far from hegemonic norms (Price & Parker, 2003; Wellard, 2006). Several gay rugby players expressed an aversion to gay men who flaunt their sexuality (Price & Parker, 2003)—referring to the much-maligned image of the “flamboyant gay man” that society finds so troublesome (Anderson, 2008b).

Wellard (2006) documented the evolution of a gay tennis club. In his study, he recounted the subtle changes to the club over the course of three years, illustrating how the need to fit in with “straight” tennis clubs changed its climate. The elimination of elements that were perceived to be camp, as well as an increased emphasis on competition, squandered the club’s appeal for women and marginalized masculinities. One such example was the addition to the club of a male player who was decently athletic, but took to modeling his tennis style (and eventually his attire) to that of Monica Seles. “Monica,” as he became known, came under fire as several members complained that his antics reflected poorly on the group and damaged its image as a mainstream tennis club (Wellard, 2006). The club’s committee members upheld the man’s right to play as “Monica,” but the pressures to tone it down eventually pushed him out of the group (Wellard, 2006).

A similar culmination took place over a club tradition known as a “mock Federation Cup,” in which gay male players competed dressed as their favorite female tennis stars (Wellard, 2006, p. 84). What began as a playful alternative to traditional athletic tournaments gradually gave way to orthodox standards of competition as the club strove to better its reputation as an elite tennis organization. The elements of the tournament that were considered “camp” were eventually “straightened out” as the event changed to emphasize winning. As a result of the club’s change in focus, less athletic
players became marginalized and eventually began to fade out of the club (Wellard, 2006). Wellard (2006) also depicts the sense of pride that many members showed when outsiders commented that the club operated just like straight tennis clubs, and that the “gay” aspect was hardly visible. This legitimization through a likeness to straight (i.e., normal) clubs “demonstrated how the gay club, and gay sports, were considered as inferior to mainstream (heterosexual) sport. A mark of success was the ability to appear like mainstream sport rather than contest it” (Wellard, 2006, p. 84-85).

The attitudes expressed in Wellard’s (2006) study correspond to other work describing the conflicting ideas of pride and shame visible among gay sport organizations. Davidson (2006) discusses this issue in her article about the Gay Games—a major LGBT sporting festival that mirrors the Olympics, while incorporating camp aspects of gay pride. A prominent example is the Pink Flamingo Race, a swimming relay that has evolved to include extravagant displays of gay pride, including participants showing up to compete in drag (Davidson, 2006). Davidson (2006) expressed confusion that camp expressions like this can exist within a competition that is basically “a shaming Olympics” (p. 100). Davidson ponders how gay pride can flourish in an arena that so closely emulates a highly competitive atmosphere like the Olympics—the kind of atmosphere that marginalizes gay identities. Similar to the plight of the tennis club, Davidson argues that the Gay Games may eventually have to choose a direction—one that either favors the expression of queer identities, or one that aligns itself with intense models of athletic competition.

The tendency of many gay sports clubs to adopt mainstream sporting doctrines that emphasize hegemonically masculine standards of athletic performance speaks to the
difficulty of contesting the dominant understanding of sport. The same bias that caused both the gay tennis and rugby clubs to privilege members who most exemplified orthodox masculinity also acts as the oppressive force that keeps gay male athletes closeted and restricts fluid interpretations of masculinity in sport (Cavalier, 2011; Gough, 2007). In an analysis of web postings detailing the coming out stories gay athletes, Gough (2007) outlines the experiences and outcomes of gay men who have come out as gay to their teammates. There was an absence of violence and blatant prejudice directed at the gay athletes; yet the dominant recollection is one in which gay athletes are effectively silenced when it comes to openly discussing their sexuality. Gough notes that garnering support from others, as well as indulging in shared experiences, functions as a key component in the “transformative experience” of coming out (p. 167). In the cases of these athletes, although teammates tolerated their sexuality, there was a lack of appreciation for their gay identity, characterized by expressions like “I still view you in the same way”—code for “I still view you as straight” (Gough, 2007). While statements like this seem supportive on the surface, they hint at heterosexist notions that homosexuality is something one must “get past” to see the true person within (Gough, 2007). Thus, many openly gay athletes exist amongst teammates and coaches that “support” them through a purposeful denial that their sexuality even exists, isolating these athletes and subtly reinforcing the notion that expressions of homosexuality have no place in competitive sport (Anderson, 2002; Gough, 2007). While Gough’s methods can be thought of as dubious, as the reliability of online web postings is questionable, the accounts that he describe correspond with Anderson’s (2002) findings when he interviewed gay male athletes a few years earlier.
Anderson (2002) suggests that athletes whose gay identities and experiences are diminished in sport settings begin to form “segmented identities,” wherein their athletic identities are accepted, while their gay identities are denied (p. 874). Owen (2006) recorded evidence of this occurring within a gay rowing team that identified as “rowers first and gay men second” (p. 139). The need to separate being gay from being athletic typifies the belief that homosexuality and sport exist in opposition to one another. Due to this belief, gay male athletes are regarded as “rare” and “extraordinary,” and thus are not seen as equal participants in the realm of sport (Gough, 2007, p. 166). A “culture of silence” develops around gay athletes, who are socialized into keeping quiet as their straight teammates engage in heterosexual banter, which is normalized in locker rooms (Anderson, 2002; Gough, 2007; Price & Parker, 2003). Anderson (2002) alludes to the “heterosexual hegemony” that exists, suggesting that:

Any proclamation of heterosexuality is ‘just’ and ‘right’ and never scrutinized, but the mere mention of homosexuality is perceived as being ‘in your face’...because it opens up a door to the development of a gay culture within sport or because it legitimates homosexuality. (p. 871)

Examples like this are a subtle, yet effective, means to maintain the order of masculinities in sport (Anderson, 2002). By enacting a system similar to the military’s former don’t ask, don’t tell policy, male sporting culture continues to function as a strictly masculine environment—despite the inevitable (and still highly obstructed) inclusion of gay men (Anderson, 2002). By stifling the expression of homosexuality from gay athletes, hegemonic principles of masculinity maintain their dominance, providing evidence for my assertion that men’s sports teams are not off-limits to all gay men—just those who
evoke “femininity” and threaten to overturn current conventions that sport is a strictly masculine terrain.

Of course, most gay men in sport do not come out to their teammates while competing (Campbell et al., 2011). Anderson (2011, 2002) and Cavalier (2011) both discuss the importance of perceptions in the experiences of gay men in sport. The perception that sport is hostile toward gay men plays a crucial rule in the decision of many gay men to stay in the closet (Anderson, 2011). While much research centers on the homonegative climate in sport, there is a recent sphere of studies that provide evidence that many concerns of homophobic backlash surrounding coming out are found to be unsubstantiated once one actually comes out (Cavalier, 2011; Gough, 2007).

Cavalier (2011) describes the experience of John, a gay man working in the NFL. John expressed considerable concern and anxiety about coming out to players and coworkers, despite the fact that he had revealed his homosexuality to approximately fifteen people and received positive reactions every single time (Cavalier, 2011). Cavalier argues that the perceptions of many gay men concerning coming out in the world of sport revolve around the horror stories of what “could” happen. These perceptions strongly influence their sense of reality, so that they continue to fear being exposed, even as their experiences negate such worries (Cavalier, 2011).

Perception is at play on both sides of the coin, though, it seems. While perception in Cavalier’s (2011) study clouded the views of gay men to positive influences around them, Anderson’s (2002) study illustrated how equally negative perceptions of the horrors associated with coming out rendered a sampling of openly gay male athletes unable to recognize the levels of discrimination they were facing. In opposition to
Singled Out

Cavalier’s (2011) findings, the positive reactions these athletes experienced lulled them into a false sense of acceptance, where they did not recognize the subtle inequities that were suppressing their gay identities (Anderson, 2002). Anderson (2002) writes that:

> While sociologists usually discuss people who compare themselves to others who have it better (Davies 1962; Tilly 1978), these athletes seemed to compare themselves to those who had it worse. It is often the fear of what might happen when gay athletes come out that enhances their sense of well-being, even if all was not well. (p. 868)

Regardless of the “how,” perceptions about the homophobic climate in sport and the consequences gay athletes could face in coming out hugely inform the actions and behaviors of gay men existing in that context. These perceptions also serve as another subtle way in which homophobia polices masculinity. As long as sport is perceived as a stronghold of anti-gay and anti-feminine sentiment, the more difficult it will be for those who wish to contest that supposition. Recently, more and more research has highlighted instances of “inclusive masculinity” in sport—heterosexual sportsmen who have rejected the polarizing principles of hegemonic masculinity (Adams, 2011; Anderson 2008b, 2011), widening the playing field to include, and accept, a multitude of masculinities.

**The Changing Scope of Masculinity**

This study comes as a response to Anderson’s (2011) call for new research addressing the evolving dynamics between masculinity and sexuality in sport. Anderson contends that Connell’s (1990) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which was conceptualized in the late 1980s—at the height of homophobia in this country—no longer reflects the current climate in sport (Anderson, 2011). At that time, society was so
homonegative that Anderson (2011) characterized it as a period of “homohysteria”—a cultural climate that is so hostile to gays that both gay and straight men strive to disassociate themselves with homosexuality (p. 568). The effects of such a climate drastically alter the behaviors of gay men (who are more likely to conceal their identity out of fear) and straight men alike. Connell’s (1990) concept of hegemonic masculinity works brilliantly under these circumstances, as the intense fear of being labeled as gay motivated men to act in any way necessary to fit the mold of a “real man,” including brash acts of sometimes violent homophobia (Anderson, 2011).

Anderson (2011) theorizes that hegemonic masculinity has become dated, as the culture has warmed to homosexuality, gradually allowing men to behave in ways that homophobia once coerced them into avoiding. As homophobia acts as the main policing agent of hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2011; Messner, 2002; Price & Parker, 2003; Plummer, 2006), a less homophobic society renders the fear of being thought “gay” a less powerful weapon influencing the expression of masculinities (Anderson, 2011). Anderson (2011) thereby calls for new inquiries into the relationship between sport, sexuality, and masculinity, pointing to a wealth of more recent literature that illustrates how a less homophobic culture at large has empowered young men (even athletes) to disregard the notions of male heterosexual domination that hegemonic masculinity theory was founded on (Anderson, 2011).

A principle study that evidences the formation of “inclusive masculinity” is Adams’s (2011) ethnography of a collegiate men’s soccer team in the Northeastern United States. Adams discovered that the heterosexual male athletes on this team did not abide by the strict rules that formerly governed heterosexual masculinity (Adams, 2011).
The masculinities that these players presented were much less confined, and included pro-gay attitudes, close associations and friendships with gay men, and the capacity to openly share emotions and concerns with teammates (Adams, 2011). The players also frequently embraced, and felt comfortable resting heads on a teammate’s shoulder during a bus trip—physical gestures that homophobia would likely have stifled, were it still as powerful a force as in previous decades (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2011).

The broadening of masculine expression also spills over into personal appearances, as Adams (2011) cites the rise in more “metrosexual” styles among men, including an acceptance of colors that were previously conflated with femininity and thus rejected. This is illustrated by the overwhelming positive (even envious) reaction to one player’s choice to wear pink cleats (Adams, 2011). While current players admired the pink cleats, older players and coaches still held negative views of the color pink, suggesting that the gendered meaning behind the color pink may be a generational issue—and one that is fading amongst today’s youth (Adams, 2011). While Adams’s (2011) study is significant, a recent news story casts doubt over whether the soccer team studied here is the exception, and not the norm. In October 2010, a high school football player in Mississippi was cut from the team for wearing pink cleats, indicating that some regions of the country may still hold tightly onto traditional standards of masculinity (Joyner, 2010). Adams’s (2011) study was conducted in the Northeast United States.

Donn Short found evidence that typical “macho” behaviors in locker rooms are also fading (2007). Short recounted his observation that young men no longer “stroll buck naked through the locker room,” robustly authenticating the space as one that is exclusively heterosexual (Short, 2007, p. 184). Young men nowadays, he contends, are
much more apt to discreetly undress beneath a towel, limiting exposure to the bare
minimum. Short also identifies this as a generational difference, as the compulsion to
cover up or hide one’s body would have been grounds for humiliation when he was a
youth. In addition to his own experiences growing up, he also notes that the modesty of
younger men stands in sharp contrast to the behaviors of older men in locker room
settings. For those above 40, it is as though nothing has changed (Short, 2007). Short’s
assertions are significant, as they not only show that expressions of masculinity are
changing, but also that they are *adapting* to fit a society in which homosexuality is more
prevalent and accepted. Most likely, young men are careful to expose their bodies
because they expect that gay men are sharing the locker room with them. This is strong
evidence of the normalization of homosexuality in today’s society (Short, 2007).

Previous findings have indicated that a rift is beginning to form between
homosexuality and femininity—two qualities that were once thoroughly intertwined
(Anderson, 2008b; Anderson, 2002; Price & Parker, 2003). Anderson’s (2008b) study of
inclusive masculinity within male cheerleaders further indicated that the association (and
necessity) between homosexuality and femininity is fading, paving the way for those
heterosexual men to dabble in same-sex sex without feeling that they are compromising
their “manhood” (Anderson, 2008b). Anderson’s accounts involve heterosexual male
athletes engaging in sexual encounters with other men, either as shared “conquests”
involving a female, or simply as recreational sex with another (sometimes gay) man
(Anderson, 2008b). Many of the participants held the attitude that “sex was sex” and that
sharing it with another man did not imply a loss of masculine capital, nor homosexuality
(Anderson, 2008b). Ironically, this transition to identifying homosexuality as compatible
with masculinity seems to have carried with it a sharp bias against certain “feminine”
gays, exhibited by one respondent, Jeff’s, view: “I have no problem with gay men. I just
don’t understand why some have to prance around like little girls. Being masculine isn’t
about who you sleep with; it’s about how you act” (Anderson, 2008b). In a move that
vaguely resembles the old adage “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,” some heterosexual
male athletes are in the beginning stages of removing the emasculating stigma from
homosexuality, characterized in Anderson’s (2008b) study by the willingness to engage
in same-sex sex. Consequently, a new bias is forming toward gay men who do not
embody typical masculine attributes, sexuality not included. Of course, Anderson’s
(2008a) own previous work on male cheerleaders highlights the transformative affect that
becoming a cheerleader had on heterosexual male athletes’ opinions of women, so it is a
stretch to assume that the experiences and actions of this group of men can be generalized
to male athletes participating in other sports.

The outer ring of sport may also be moving towards greater inclusivity, as studies
have shown increased acceptance of homosexuality in sport among fans and the media
(Campbell et al., 2011; Kian & Anderson, 2009). In a study measuring sport fans’
reactions to the possibility of a gay athlete on their favorite team, Campbell et al.
hypothesized that deep loyalties to one’s favorite team may work in a gay athlete’s favor,
as fans would most likely rally around a gay athlete who helps their team, while also
assuming the converse—that a gay athlete whose behaviors negatively impact the team
would be perceived more negatively than a heterosexual offender (Campbell et al., 2011).
Results indicated that fans were largely supportive of the fictional gay athlete, even more
so than his heterosexual counterpart. The hypothesis that a gay player would be further
shunned than a heterosexual player when acting as a liability to the team was proven false, as respondents continued to view the fictional gay player in a positive light (Campbell et al., 2011, p. 603). While the study admittedly may be skewed by the participants’ compulsion to provide a socially desirable answer, this study aligns with others that have presented a more inclusive image of sporting culture.

One such study is Kian and Anderson’s (2009) analysis of media coverage surrounding the coming out of former NBA player John Amaechi in 2007, and the homophobic response issued by fellow ex-player Tim Hardaway shortly thereafter, in which he stated that “I hate gay people…I am homophobic” (Kian & Anderson, 2009). This study addressed the common perception that the professional sports arena is an unsafe and unwise place to admit one’s homosexuality while active—a belief that is supported by the lack of current, openly gay players in the four major professional team sports in the United States (football, baseball, basketball, and hockey) (Kian & Anderson, 2009). Results served to challenge the notion that coming out as an active professional athlete would be unwise, due to a perceived negative response from the sports community—including the media and potential sponsors. The vast majority of sports media coverage surrounding Amaechi’s sexuality was supportive, while 100% of the coverage regarding Hardaway’s response disapproved of his homophobic comments (Kian & Anderson, 2009). While a minority of sources questioned the newsworthiness of Amaechi’s story, and even labeled him as opportunistic or cowardly, none expressed an aversion toward gays in sport, and many advocated that it was well past the time when a gay athlete should feel comfortable enough to come out in professional sport (Kian & Anderson, 2009). However, the attention that sexuality draws from the media can also
set sport farther back in ways, as was evidenced by the New York Mets catcher Mike Piazza’s response to widely circulating rumors that he was gay (Butterworth, 2006). In May 2002, Piazza announced in a press conference that was absolutely not gay, and that he dated women. While Piazza did not convey any hostility toward homosexuality, his need to make known that he was not in fact gay furthered the message that homosexuality is incompatible with baseball, and that “real men” need to distance themselves from any association it (Butterworth, 2006).

The evidenced support (and interest) of the media signifies another way in which homosexuality is gaining acceptance in the sports arena—a finding that is evidenced to allow a much greater flow of masculinities than what was common when Connell (1990) first theorized the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2011; Kian & Anderson, 2009). Kian and Anderson (2009) note that Connell herself has hypothesized that the original model of hegemonic masculinity would eventually be replaced by a more inclusive system (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and a wealth of studies confirm that ideas surrounding masculinity and sexuality in sport are steadily evolving (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Anderson, 2008b; Campbell et al., 2011; Kian & Anderson, 2009). A more fluid model is beginning to show itself; one that relinquishes the historically troubling conflation of homosexuality with femininity—easing the hostility toward gay male athletes and allowing straight men the freedom to explore a wider range of masculine possibilities. It seems, however, that the bias toward expressions of femininity in sport is slower to progress (Anderson, 2008b).

In this study, I contend that along with the necessity to rethink notions of hegemonic masculinity, previous depictions of gay men as a single homogenous entity,
which one either accepts or rejects, need to be abandoned as well. As less cultural
homophobia enabled more gay men to come out of the closets (Anderson, 2011), more
and more representations of gay men emerged, many of which (especially in sport) were
mostly in line with traditional masculine values (and athleticism). Thus, the dominant
and privileged ideal of the “straight-acting gay” came to fruition, embodying masculinity
despite homosexuality. What many researchers have long identified as a bias against
homosexuality is evolving into a bias against femininity—leaving females and “feminine”
gays scarcely better off than they were before. Such a schism is worthy of closer
examination, and in doing so I once again employ the experiences and perceptions of
current and former gay intercollegiate athletes, aiming to identify if such a bias against
femininity exists among gay athletes and how the fear of being associated with the
feminine “other” limits behaviors and expressions in a sport setting.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

To understand the lived experiences of gay males participating in college sport, this study will utilize a qualitative method. This type of method will allow me to interpret meanings drawn from the personal narratives of my participants (McMillan, 2012).

Research Design

The research design is a qualitative narrative analysis of gay male athletes, anchored in the collection and presentation of gay male athletes’ experiences and perceptions of collegiate sport participation. The study is grounded in both a critical theory and a feminist cultural studies perspective. A critical theory perspective assumes that a social injustice exists; in this case, that gay men participating in high-level sports are an oppressed group (McMillan, 2012). From this standpoint, researchers can attempt to document and understand the lived experiences of a marginalized population, and the insight gained can begin to foster social change.

A feminist standpoint places gender and its relation to power at the forefront of the analysis (Krane, 2001). The unique position of gay males within sport allows for divulgence into the impact of sexuality and gender expression on power hierarchies that revolve around masculine capital (Anderson, 2002). Due to an association with femininity, gay men are viewed as a subjugated “other” in sport (Krane, 2001). Homosexuality and athleticism are not seen as compatible, so the examination of gay males participating in high-level sport sheds light on the doctrines of masculine privilege at work in sport (Bryson, 1990). Additionally, a cultural studies perspective examines
everyday actions and occurrences that are taken for granted, and trace them back to
cultural influences (Krane, 2001). Thus, the focus of the study is on everyday situations
encountered by gay male athletes and routine aspects of intercollegiate sports
participation that promote and sustain a cultural climate that places tight limits on gender
expression (Messner, 2002). Emphasis on personal narrative guided the process, from
development of a semi-structured interview guide through the coding, organization,
analysis, and presentation of the athletes’ stories. The study was designed to allow
participants’ voices to extend to the reader.

Participants. Eight gay male athletes were interviewed for this study. All
participants self-identified as gay and had experience participating in competitive sport at
the collegiate level. Two athletes were currently on a college varsity or club team, while
five others had finished their sport careers within three years of being interviewed, and
one within five years. Seven of the eight participants identified as white, with one
identifying as Asian. Brief profiles of each participant are included in the results section.

Gaining Access. The relatively small sample size is due to the difficulties in
identifying and recruiting a population that is seldom visible to the public. The type of
qualitative design used in this study is grounded in a social constructionist point of view,
assuming that knowledge is contextual and reliant on interpretation. The interpretation of
such knowledge is influenced by the surrounding culture, so that each individual’s
perceptions are unique, and based upon one’s position within a society (Burr, 2003). For
example, this study acknowledges that the experiences of gay athletes will differ vastly
based on other societal markers, including race and class. There is no universal truth.
As a means to gain access to sensitive groups, a snowball sampling technique requires the researcher to utilize personal contacts that may serve as “ins” to a particular group (McMillan, 2012). Gay men on college sport teams are not abundantly visible, as many choose to conceal their sexuality from teammates in order to fit in with athletic norms. To find participants, I had to draw on key informants and my connections within various LGBT and intercollegiate organizations to help identify and recruit athletes for the study. Key informants were then asked to notify men they knew who fit the parameters for participation in the study. The scope of recruitment then “snowballed” to obtain the necessary amount of interviewees.

Data Collection Procedures. After contact was made with participants, interviews were scheduled. With athletes living across the United States, a face-to-face interview was not possible with any participant. Five interviews were conducted over the phone, while three others occurred via Skype. An interview was utilized to allow participants to share narrative experiences in their own voice (Markula & Silk, 2011). Fontana and Frey (2000) describe interviewing as “a means of contemporary storytelling (p. 647).” Through this means, the athletes were able to express their stories in rich detail. The study required one in-depth, audio-recorded interview with each participant, with an agreement for one follow-up interview if needed. An interview guide was completed prior to the interview, and acted as an open framework for the interview. I utilized a semi-structured interview structure, meaning that each participant will be asked some of the same questions, but will largely be given the freedom to express their thoughts and experiences with minimal guidance from the researcher (Markula & Silk, 2011). Likewise, the researcher has permission to probe further, encouraging the sharing
of specific instances and examples that may go beyond the scope of the interview guide (Markula & Silk, 2011). Interview questions will be open-ended, encouraging the participant to provide detailed responses. An example of this type of questioning would be asking an athlete to describe their normal interactions with their teammates. A question, phrased like this, allows the interviewee to respond without feeling like they are being led in any certain direction. The respondent can then freely express their experiences, without feeling the need to address any certain aspects of it. Compare the previous question to one that would be more leading, such as asking whether teammates are accepting of one’s homosexuality. A question like this is too specific for my uses, and eliminates the respondent’s ability to define their own experience.

In preparing the interview guide, any questions that served to label or assume any aspect of the participant’s experience as a gay male athlete were not utilized. This strategy, emphasizing personal narrative, attempts to limit the expectations of the researcher, by eliminating questions that may possibly lead the participant in any one direction (Markula & Silk, 2011). It also leaves room for athletes to express their own unique standpoints based on race, gender, class and other socially important aspects of identity that may otherwise be neglected or left out entirely if too much of the interview is directed by the researcher (Fontana & Frey, 2000). I also conducted a pilot test of the interview guide, which ensured that the questions were effective and the interview flowed well.

Before each interview, participants were asked to confirm that they had read and understood the informed consent form (Appendix B) that had been sent via email. Participants were asked to confirm that they were over the age of 18 and if so, to provide
consent to be involved in the study. Each athlete was also reminded that they could withdraw participation or choose not to answer a question at any time. Participants were reminded that the interview would be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription, and that only my committee members and myself would have access to the original transcripts.

The interviews began with a series of background questions, functioning to break the ice, gain contextual information, and allow the participant to settle in to the interview and become comfortable with the researcher (Markula & Silk, 2011). Along with initiating trust, these first questions allowed the participant to describe the sports he plays, his role on the team, and how many years of experience he has in his given sport. Those questions were followed by a series of questions asking each participant how they chose to identify in terms of sexuality, gender, race, and religion. They were also asked about relationships with family, close friends, and about their interests and hobbies outside of sport. Next, the athletes were asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their experiences in collegiate sport.

Topics included relationships with coaches/teammates, the climate on their team for LGBT individuals, the locker room environment, advice they would offer to other gay athletes, and perceptions of masculinity. Participants were given the opportunity at the end of the interview to share any aspects of their collegiate sport experience not previously covered, and then were thanked for their participation in the study. Interviews ranged in length from thirty to ninety minutes, with most lasting approximately one hour. Two athletes, who spoke in great detail, interviewed for 90 minutes, while one athlete, who went into less detail, spoke for thirty minutes. Each athlete also consented to a
follow-up interview, but one in-depth conversation was all that was deemed necessary. Upon completion, each interview was transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. At this point, each participant was given a pseudonym to protect his identity that was used throughout the remainder of the study. Interview transcripts were then shared with my committee members.

Data Analysis. Once the interviews were fully transcribed, a process of open coding was used to identify themes from each interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Patton, 1990). This process involves drawing out interview statements that can be categorized under a certain subject matter, such as “relationship with coach” or “leadership experience.” This is an inductive research method, meaning that the analysis does not begin with a conclusion in mind, but rather allows the data to reveal its own meanings (McMillan, 2012). The emergent themes can then be compared with those from other interviews, and common themes identified. The process of coding continues, as themes can then be further categorized. For instance, examples that speak of a relationship with one’s coach can be sorted based on whether the instance relates to a positive or negative coaching influence, and so on. Through this process of open coding, similarities can begin to emerge between interviews and I, as the researcher, can begin to draw theories based on the responses of my participants (Markula & Silk, 2011).

To present the data obtained through the interviews, I used a narrative approach, examining the stories from the athletes to derive personal and social meaning (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). According to Smith and Sparkes (2009), analyzing and interpreting participants’ narratives is “an important and vibrant means to develop our understanding of people’s lived experiences of their sporting and everyday lives” (p. 10). Presenting
data in this way places an emphasis on “relatedness,” highlighting the ways in which human beings interact with each other (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 6). This approach recognizes that human beings do not exist separate from the society that surrounds them, and that there is no emotion independent from relationships with others (Denison, 2006). Through the sharing of narratives, meanings can then be interpreted (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

The narratives in this study were created using direct quotes from the athletes. In most cases, the stories are presented in their original form. However, some narratives were created through combining two separate, related passages from the same athlete’s interview. A method of layered narrative was also adopted, allowing myself as the researcher to interpret meanings and inject my own voice in with those of the athletes through theoretical analysis and “meaning-making” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 4). This technique takes the “emotions, thoughts and interpretations the events provoked in the narrator” and assigns social and theoretical implications (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 138).

Trustworthiness. A unique challenge present in this type of research is establishing the trust needed to gain access to gay male athletes who may not make their sexuality publicly known. From the onset, I worked to establish this necessary trust to conduct research with such individuals. An assurance of confidentiality was made clear to each participant at time of recruitment, in the consent form, and during all early communications with participants.

Measures taken to ensure confidentiality included removing or coding any information in printed transcripts that could link participants, their sport team, their athletic department, or their university to this research. I assured participants that all
electronic documents would be stored on a password-protected computer, and upon completion of the project, every audio-taped session and original transcript would be shred (physically or electronically). The building of trust was aided by the snowball technique, as mutual contacts can vouch for the validity of the study and the researcher. As a gay male, I also shared personal information about myself and my sexuality at the beginning of each interview, in an effort to gain common ground with participants and allow them to feel that they could openly express their thoughts and experiences to someone who they perceived could relate to them.

In a qualitative study like this one, the primary instrument is the researcher, and all the data is, therefore, filtered through my own personal lens. As the researcher, it is vital that I understand and identify the theoretical framework of my research, and also accept that I am not objective in this process, and that the results of this study will be shaped by my own interpretations of the participants’ dialogue (Krueger, 2007). A carefully constructed interview guide served as my tool in collecting data, but it is not a fully objective means. Rather, it can be seen as an extension of the researcher, and vulnerable to reflect my own personal stances. This is unavoidable when conducting this type of qualitative research.

While the research is based in feminist cultural studies, it will be interpreted through the eyes of a 24-year-old white, gay, middle-class male. I have a background in both social causes related to LGBT issues and sport interest and participation, so the topic of this research is one of personal relevance and importance to me. My close association with both gay men and sport enables me to have an insider’s perspective into this area of
research. Having this perspective, it is important that I employ reflexive strategies; constantly being aware of the effects my own perspectives can have on the research.

One strategy I instituted to combat this was a reflexive journal, in which I have been able to document my own perceptions and expectations during the research. I also conducted a reflexive self-interview, as a way to further uncover my own thoughts about being gay in the realm of sport. Further, I employed the assistance of three “critical friends” to guide and challenge me throughout, helping me become more aware of my own perceptions, and increase the trustworthiness of the research. These critical friends are the three members of my committee: Dr. Amanda Koba, Dr. Vikki Krane, and Dr. Sungho Cho. Employing such reflexive techniques allowed me to confront my own opinions and beliefs as to what it means to be gay in the realm of sport. In doing so, I hoped to both acknowledge and limit the effects my personal thoughts would have on the research.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Detailed descriptions of the gay male athletic experience resulted from the interviews, from which five narrative sections were derived: *In the Closet, Coming Out, Being “The Gay One,” The Problem of the Locker Room, and Discussions of Masculinity.* Brief profiles of each athlete are included below to familiarize readers with the personal background of each participant. In particular, their history in collegiate sport is detailed, along with an explanation of how open they were with their sexuality while competing.

All athlete names used in this study are pseudonyms, created to protect the identities of the participants.

Participant Profiles

*Brandon*

Brandon was a college baseball player at the NAIA Division I level. He played from 2007-2012, twice transferring schools. He started at a junior college (two years) before transferring to his first four-year university (one year), before ultimately finishing his career at his third school (two years). Brandon did not come out to any teammates at his first two schools. At his last school, he came out to “three or four” close friends on his team during his junior season.

*Clyde*

Clyde is a college gymnast competing in the NCAA Division I ranks. At the time of his interview, he was in his third year participating on his team. He came out to his teammates towards the end of his freshman year and his sexuality was well known on his team.
Paul

Paul was a swimmer at the NCAA Division I level. He graduated and left his team in May 2012. Paul came out to his teammates at the end of his sophomore season and his teammates and coaches were all aware of his sexuality.

Jackson

Jackson was a club hockey player at a large university in the southern United States. He initially competed from 2005-2008, but at the time of his interview he had rejoined the team as a graduate student at the university. Jackson was out on both teams.

Sean

Sean was a tennis player at the NCAA Division I level. He competed on his team from 2006-2009 and came out to his teammates and coaches during his freshman year. He was involved in LGBT causes and events on campus, and his sexuality was well known on his campus.

Jeff

Jeff played volleyball at the NCAA Division III level. He competed from 2008-2012 and was captain of his team his senior year. He came out to his team at the end of his sophomore year and in his senior season, he organized an “It Gets Better” video involving his school’s entire athletic department.

Beau

Beau was a club volleyball player at his university from 2006-2010. For much of his career, Beau was still figuring out his sexual identity, but at the end of his senior year he and another member of his team came out to each other. He was not out to any other teammates.
Austin

Austin was a swimmer at the NCAA Division III level. He swam on his team from 2004-2007. During that time, he was questioning his sexuality, but did not come out to any members of his team.

In the Closet

Of the eight gay male athletes interviewed, all of them began their collegiate sports careers in the closet, concealing their sexuality from their teammates and coaches while trying to come to terms with it themselves. The process of coming out can be a difficult and painstaking ordeal for a young person, and the fears and anxieties abound when entering onto an all-male intercollegiate sports teams (Gough, 2007). For Jackson, a club hockey player, the worries began years before stepping onto the ice at his university.

When I was in high school I was always kind of worried. Matthew Shepard had happened and there were some movies that came out. I saw those movies and they had a pretty big effect on me. I was worried that if I came out in high school I could end up like that. There was definitely some of that that carried over to college. I was still really worried that I would end up like Matthew Shepard if I came out to a college sports team.

While the tragedy of Matthew Shepard’s murder may have been a product of the period of “homohysteria” in the late 1980s and early 1990s described by Anderson (2011), the nationwide attention and dialogue surrounding the hate crime made an impact on young people like Jackson and gave a lasting impression of what it meant to be gay in the
United States. His comments are a reminder of the unfortunate truth that coming out in today’s culture is still seen as a “risk” that many are too fearful to take (Cavalier, 2011).

Of course, it is more than a fear of physical harm that kept the athletes in this study closeted. The social pressures of fitting in on a college sports team and preserving the so-called “team dynamic” raise very real and critical concerns for closeted gay athletes, who spend hours each day practicing, working out, studying, traveling and socializing with their teammates. Clyde, a gymnast on a team known for the closeness of its athletes, feared that coming out early in his career might alienate him from his teammates.

In general, the school is known for having a really close group of guys for our team. It’s what a lot of other teams look at us and see and that’s what we try to emphasize, because it’s important to be really close to your team and to be able to trust your team and everything. I don’t know if it’s healthy or not, but we pretty much only hang out with each other. Pretty much anytime anyone parties or goes out it’s with the whole team. We’re always together. It’s hard not to be when you work out six days a week for three or four hours or whatever. We all have very similar schedules and we all live together. So I guess there was the fear that teammates wouldn’t be so accepting of me. I mean, as a freshman you’re always nervous about how the team’s going to react to you. You’re new; you’ve never really experienced a team like a college team. And all of a sudden you’re thrust in with guys that are all very close to each other and you don’t even know who they are. So you want to fit in and so I guess I just didn’t want to have anything making it harder to fit in.
Clyde’s example highlights one of the greatest challenges facing gay male athletes hoping to come out on their college teams—navigating the class structure. Coming in as a freshman, newcomers join a team at the bottom of the social pile. This inherent inequality is a major impediment to coming out, as new players are conditioned to stay back, learn the ropes, and earn others’ respect. Where in that equation is someone like Clyde supposed to find the support he needs to be honest about his sexuality?

College sport is not just a hobby for these athletes, but a way of life that largely determines their schedule, their peer group, and—in many cases—the ways in which one should express themselves (Anderson, 2008a). Staying closeted in a group that most participants described as their “best friends” took a toll on the athletes, particularly Sean, a tennis player who struggled daily to conceal his sexuality and felt that his game ultimately suffered under the stress.

I was very tense and I was kind of grumpy and felt very isolated from the team. I didn’t feel like I could be open—that I could be honest. Not being able to express and be open with my feelings I think really had a toll on me emotionally. And I couldn’t necessarily perform at my full potential. It was really tough emotionally, you know, just being a freshman and trying to assimilate to the culture and the school and the work and the stress and all the playing.

Jackson experienced a similar feeling of being closed off from his teammates, and describes the mental burden he felt during interactions with teammates while closeted:

Everyone was always laughing and joking around and I was kind of careful to not say the wrong thing, something that a lot of closeted people do. You know, you censor every word that comes out of your mouth and you think about the tone in
which you would say something and how that might be perceived and so you have
to self-censor such a great deal. And terms like “fag” still get thrown around in
the locker room from time to time. And whenever you’re in the closet, you know,
you’re censoring yourself, and so you kind of think about ”well what’s my
reaction? What’s my facial reaction going to be to that?” And whenever you’re
constantly censoring every word that you say, you’re not experiencing the
moment. You can’t open up to people, you know? And you can’t relax at all. So
it’s not a fun situation to be in because your brain’s working overtime to try and
compensate for all that stuff. They probably thought I was a bit standoffish or
something like that for the first couple years, or that I was just really quiet and
shy.

What Jackson describes is one of the most harmful byproducts of hegemonic
masculinity—self-doubt. When one form of masculinity is valued above all others, it
causes men to constantly “check” their behaviors, making sure they’re in line with what
is considered “manly” and “normal” (Connell, 1990). What Jackson experienced was
uncertainty regarding his performance of masculinity, a theme that came up over and
over in the interviews. Uncertainty and doubt of this kind places an enormous strain on
closeted athletes, as Sean described in sharing how the closet affected his mood, his sport
performance, and his emotional wellbeing.

Many athletes reported that they wanted their talent and skill in sport to speak for
itself, and not become muddled by how others perceived homosexuality. The consensus
was that it was beneficial to stay in the closet and become familiarized with teammates
and coaches before coming out. Below, Jackson discusses another troubling issue that athletes are faced with when making the decision whether or not to come out.

Another thing I was a bit concerned about—I had kind of felt like it was maybe an unreasonable concern, but still a concern—was playing time. The coach is the final person who decides who starts and who doesn’t, and I didn’t want there to be any reason that he wouldn’t start me if I was ready and able to start. And so I was a little apprehensive about him knowing because I didn’t know exactly what his personal feelings about that would be. I guess there’s always the concern that once that cat is out of the bag, there’s nothing you can do to lock that back. So it’s kind of the finality of it. I can’t explain this away; there’s no going back in the closet. So I guess that’s the real concern, that whatever happens when you come out is a permanent thing. It’s a life-altering thing.

Here, Jackson hints at the magnitude of coming out in the lives of LGBT individuals. The athletes interviewed each felt that the decision to come out extended far beyond sport for them. It is merely the backdrop for a larger experience of self-discovery.

While closeted athletes described altering their appearance, their actions within sport, their voices, their interactions with others and more to blend in with the other members of their team, several indicated that gradually they came to believe that teammates were figuring it out. Brandon, a baseball player, relied mostly on the invisibility of gay athletes on his team to keep him safely in the closet, as he felt uncomfortable lying to his teammates or making up stories about being with women.

I mean, I kind of had an idea that people questioned it because I never went after girls or anything like that. You know, college sports teams, they always talk about
girls and who they hooked up with and stuff and I tried to never talk. I didn’t want to make up stories. Like, you could tell when someone made up stories about him and some girl. So I don’t know, maybe that put people off and showed people that “oh he may be homo.” But I tried to not put an act on in that way. Maybe I tried to be tougher, like “ok, I can get through this injury.” Or “I can run more than this guy” or “I can probably throw harder” or whatever. Like, if I can show them I’m tough here, then I’m less gay.

Brandon’s narrative illustrates a compulsion to “prove himself” as an athlete, indicating that his “masculine capital” would decline if his sexuality were uncovered (Anderson 2005; Owen, 2006). By exhibiting traditionally masculine features such as strength, toughness, and perseverance, Brandon believes he can become “less gay” and move away from the feminine stereotype associated with gay men. In this way, he tries to regain the positive social status awarded to those who are the most hegemonically masculine (Messner, 2002).

Several athletes came out in other areas of their lives before sport, telling friends and classmates outside of their team. This often created a conflict, as time passed and the two groups slowly began to merge. Jackson describes an incident that he feared would result in him being forced out to his teammates:

There was one guy who was a volunteer staffer for the team. I knew him through one of the gay organizations on campus and he saw me in the locker room one day. I looked over and saw him and I was like “oh crap! I know that guy!” And he was totally cool. He didn’t out me or anything. He didn’t say anything; he just
kind of nodded and said “what’s up?” and then went about his business. But yeah, that was definitely a shocker.

The athletes’ narratives provided a vivid description of life in the closet. Their stories support previous research (Anderson, 2011; Cavalier, 2011) on the role of negative perceptions in keeping athletes’ closeted. Some athletes, like Jackson, based these perceptions on events like the murder of Matthew Shepard in the late 1990s. Others experienced high levels of social anxiety, compounded by the “class” element of collegiate sport. As freshmen, this structure acted as an impediment to coming out, as athletes referenced the importance of “fitting in” with the masculine and heterosexual norms on their teams. For athletes who feared being perceived as gay, it was even more important to overcome this image through deliberate performances of masculinity, on the sport field and otherwise.

Of all the experiences athletes shared involving the closet and the factors of life on a college athletic team that kept them there, the storyline told most was one of regret. Looking back on it, I wish that I would’ve just been able to be stronger and come out earlier because I just feel that I would’ve been a happier person and I could’ve had an even better time if I could’ve just been honest with myself and with everybody the whole time. I think really one of my only regrets was not coming out the second that I knew, just because it’s hard to not be able to live the life you think you’re supposed to.

Accounts like this one from Beau, a club volleyball player, are evidence that sport is indeed changing, and slowly the fear that once kept players in the closet is turning to regret that “I didn’t do this sooner.”
Coming Out

Six of the athletes interviewed ended up coming out to members of their teams while they were competing. Two others indicated that although they felt same-sex attraction during their sport careers, their sexuality wasn’t yet developed to the point of self-acceptance. It is here that Gough (2007) draws a distinction between coming out as an internal struggle and coming out to others. He writes “coming out to self is depicted as a struggle between personal experiences relating to feeling ‘different’ and the social devaluation of homosexuality, which will be internalized to some extent. As a result, there is denial of a gay identity, and distraction tactics may be deployed, such as heterosexual dating or immersion in intellectual or work activities” (Gough, 2007, p. 167). This analysis accurately depicts the situations described by Austin, a swimmer, and Beau, a club volleyball player, who came out shortly after finishing their college sport careers.

Previous research on coming out characterizes it as a difficult and emotional process associated with a fear of negative consequences and rejection by loved ones (Gough, 2007). Traditionally, research in coming out has focused on the family unit. It is important to note that all six of the athletes that came out on their teams indicated they had full or partial support from their families regarding their sexuality before coming out to their teams. Coming out has also been seen as varying in importance, with some gay men preferring to have their sexuality explicitly known to those around them, while others view it as an issue of privacy and aren’t as forthcoming to outsiders (Cavalier, 2011). Jackson, a club ice hockey player, came out to the members of his team, but also
felt it wasn’t important to him to have his sexuality known to everyone around him at all times.

The act of coming out—I’m not a “wear it on your sleeve” type of guy normally. Not that I’m ashamed or anything like that, it’s just not the biggest part of my personality at all, if that makes sense. But yeah, I came out over the summer on Facebook when I updated my profile to indicate interested in men. And this was back in the days before the activity feed, so it didn’t just show up on everybody’s feed. They would have to discover it and be looking at my profile, so I figured it was a kind of safe way to test the waters a little bit, and from what I understand, one person on my team found out and then everybody knew. But it was kind of interesting because those first few months nobody wanted to say anything and they were all kind of waiting for somebody else to say something first, or me to say something first. So nobody said anything for the first few months, and I was kind of wondering, “have they found out? What’s the story here?”

And then someone mentioned something one evening when we were all hanging out after a game. I think somebody said “I heard this about you and I think it’s totally cool and fine.” And then I kind of realized that everyone knows this. And then a few weeks after that a couple of my teammates came and hooked me up with one of their friends who was gay. It was like, people were talking to me about dating and it was not a taboo subject anymore. I even had some guys come up to me and say “hey man, remember that time I said ‘fag’ in the locker room two months ago? Well yeah, I didn’t mean anything by that.” Yeah man, I know. It’s locker room talk; it’s totally not political. You’re not making a
legitimate argument about homosexuality with that. But at the same time I’m like “yeah, knock it off still.”

So after I came out I just felt a lot more included in the group—like I was a greater part of the group than I was before. And I mean, you think about it and you weigh the options and it’s definitely a positive thing to do for you personally. It’s the only way to live, honestly, because it gets you out of survival mode and gets you into a much better life. I think I benefitted from the first time around [being in the closet], because everyone got to know me to some extent before they knew I was gay, so they didn’t have a chance to reject me beforehand. But still, I was prepared that summer whenever I came out on Facebook to walk away from the hockey team if it wasn’t going to be a good environment.

Jackson’s initial method of coming out via social media to “test the waters” is a popular approach, and demonstrates how coming out is changing in a post-Facebook society. Three of the six athletes said they used Facebook to aid in the coming-out process. Social media allowed Jackson to publicly share his sexuality, without bearing the full brunt of the social anxiety that is associated with coming out to someone face-to-face. In a culture that teaches men early to shield their emotions (Adams, 2011), it is important to consider the social obstacles faced when coming out. While fear of rejection and negative backlash still permeate the discussion, an increase in coming out through social media provides evidence that the “action” may be feared along with the “reaction.” Frankly, it isn’t easy for athletes who have internalized the qualities of masculinity to have a personal, emotional, and often embarrassing conversation about sexuality with their teammates, even if they are confident the teammate will be supportive. Jeff, an
NCAA Division III volleyball player, shared Jackson’s sense of anxiety when it came to
telling his teammates about his sexuality.

I really only came out to like, three people individually. And then I left it up to
them, I guess, to tell the rest of the team. I came out to the three closest kids on
my team—two guys that were in my class and then one guy that was older than
me. That was all near the end of my sophomore year when I told those three
guys. And so we had like a month or so left in the season where just those guys
knew. And apparently they were telling other guys, but it wasn’t really talked
about yet. I was also gay on Facebook by that point, so I would post things [about
being gay], and people that I hadn’t come out to on my team would “like” it and
stuff. So I knew that they knew or whatever.

The last guy I came out to [personally], he was my age, and I actually
grew up with him. He played volleyball with me throughout high school and
throughout junior high we played in the same club. And so I was actually really
nervous to come out to him because I had known him since I was 13 and that
entire time I was “straight” or whatever. And you know, it was just weird
because he’d been much more of a teammate than any of the other guys on my
team were. I’d just known him so many years. And so we were at a bar visiting a
friend and I was so nervous. Like, I wanted to tell him on the car ride up but I
was too scared. And like, I had already come out to two people and it went well,
but I was still too nervous. So I was like, “yeah whatever, I’ll just wait until we
get to the bar and then get drunk.” And so we got drunk and then I told him.
They all knew my boyfriend by that point, so I was like “oh I’m dating that guy
and I’m gay.” And he was like “oh that’s cool. Whatever.” But then our friends came and I wasn’t out to them so I stopped talking about it and we didn’t talk about it until we were driving home the next day. And we didn’t even talk about it for the first hour and a half of the ride. We were just trying so hard to talk about anything and everything else. And then finally when we almost got home he was like “so yeah, are we going to talk about what you said last night?” And I was like “yeah I guess.” And then we talked about it and then it was all good.

And then they kind of told everyone else on my team.

The strategy of “sharing the burden” was also popular amongst the athletes interviewed, as several chose to tell select members of their team, who they asked to act as “messengers,” spreading the word to other teammates. This eased some of the social pressure and, like Facebook, was a less personal way to come out to each member of a team.

Paul, an NCAA Division I swimmer, further characterizes the struggle of coming out after being raised in a home that emphasized heterosexuality and masculinity. Paul’s experience coming out to his teammates also highlights the social challenges that arise when an athlete opens up to their team about their sexuality.

I had always known that I was different. When I was a kid, I knew—I felt like I was gay. I had been messing around with guys since I was in middle school and I just didn’t want it to be true. My family raised me to raise a family, you know, to have that white picket fence and life. And I didn’t want it to be true because I felt like I couldn’t have that life and still be gay.
Sophomore year of college I had been dating the same girl for three years. We were planning on getting married. I mean, there was talk—nothing serious. Then some of my friends in college started getting frustrated with me and they sat me down and talked about—not about being gay, but at the very end of that conversation, one of my teammates who was there said “I have one more thing to ask you.” And he sat me down and said, “I think you’re gay, but you’re trying to hold on to being straight.” So of course I denied it and then for two weeks I couldn’t get it out of my head. And then two weeks later I decided to come out.

After I came out, [my teammates] stopped talking to me on a deeper level for about two weeks. I think they weren’t sure how I was handling it and they didn’t want to touch on anything that was going to hurt me. I mean, they never stopped thinking I was their teammate; they just didn’t know how I was taking it and nobody wanted to be that person who broke the ice. I mean, we had an out lesbian on the team and she and I were good friends, so I mean she of course was still talking to me. But as far as the guys go, they just didn’t want to be that guy.

Then I was in the locker room and I mean, no one had really been talking to me for a couple of weeks, and then one senior just sits down on the bench in our locker room and goes “so Paul, I hear you like to suck a mean dick.” And so the other guys in the locker room start laughing—one of the guys spit up his drink—and from then on it was awesome. Like, they accepted me completely. That might’ve had something to do with, you know, most of them liked me, if not all of them to my knowledge. Or it could have been that they just didn’t really
care. They just accepted it. Nothing changed really, and I liked that. I liked that nothing changed.

The swim team never factored in to that decision [to come out]. I figured if they didn’t like it that I would just quit. I didn’t want to quit swimming, but I wasn’t—my life is more important and I really don’t care what other people think as far as that goes. But I mean, I had a really good coming out experience. Everyone accepted me. Everything was fine. A lot more people celebrated the fact that I was being honest with myself. And my team was fine; there was no discrimination.

While Paul eventually found support from his teammates and felt he wasn’t the victim of any discrimination, his story illustrates the difficulty for young male athletes to seriously breach the topic of homosexuality. The period of withdrawal he felt from his teammates and their reluctance to “break the ice” indicates that homosexuality was still considered taboo on his college team (Gough, 2007). The strategic use of humor—a crude joke—to start the conversation indicates awkwardness and unwillingness on the part of Paul and his teammates to openly discuss the matter. French philosopher Henri Bergson (1914), in his analysis of humor and laughter in the early twentieth century, wrote that “the absence of feeling” is something “which usually accompanies laughter” (p. 746). Paul and his teammates utilized humor to dodge a topic that may otherwise have forced them to share feelings with each other about an emotional issue—something that masculinity teaches men not to do (Plummer, 2006). Because of the emotion inherent to the process, when one teammate comes out, everyone’s masculinity is challenged in some way.
With his story, Paul also discussed having intentions to quit his team if it wasn’t going to be accepting of his sexuality. Three athletes—Paul, Jackson and Sean—all indicated that continuing in their sport would not be worth it if they found themselves in a hostile environment on their team. Sean, an NCAA Division I tennis player, describes how his coach’s reaction to learning he was gay almost prompted him to leave his team.

I actually came out to an English professor of mine first and she referred me to a chaplain that was here on campus. She told me that he was very open-minded and he would be a great resource for me if I need to talk to anyone else, so I began to see the chaplain once or twice a week just to talk about like, team-related issues and how I felt—like, I still felt like I was hiding even though I was out to my parents. And I think he suggested that I should talk to my coach about it. I agreed that it was a good idea, rather than tell my teammates, because I was still nervous and had lots of fears. And I still hadn’t told anyone that was a student that I was gay.

So I guess I felt logically that I should just talk to the coach about it because he might be able to give me some insight about whether to tell the team or anything like that. So I was really nervous to talk to the coach. I scheduled a meeting with him, but I didn’t tell him I was bringing the chaplain. And so when I showed up, the chaplain was there and I told the coach I had asked the chaplain to be here for support. And so we had this conversation. And the conversation—it did not go in the direction that I thought it would have. I thought he would be really supportive, but he basically told me that he wanted to wait until the end of the season, which went all the way up until school ended, to tell the team because
he didn’t want to disrupt team chemistry. And I was really taken aback by that—almost kind of offended. But I said “ok, that’s fine” and I agreed to it. And so we kind of left it there for a couple of days.

So when I left that meeting, I got on the internet and I started looking at the admissions process for transferring schools. I think I would have quit the team, to tell you the truth. I think that if I wasn’t allowed to be myself, then I didn’t think that playing tennis was worth my happiness. I thought that, you know, we were going to wait until the end of the school year. And I needed to get prepared that I didn’t want to wait. I didn’t feel like I wanted to go back in the closet. And so I was fully prepared to just stop playing tennis and transfer.

And then he called me back into his office a couple of days later and said “I think we should tell the team after practice this afternoon. What do you think?” And then I agreed and he asked me if I wanted to tell the team myself or if I wanted him to tell the team. And I said “you go ahead and tell the team” because I would not be able to handle that. I was very emotional; I cried at everything at that time. And to this day I don’t know what made him change his mind so quickly. I think he was kind of taken aback from what was said initially and I don’t think he was really sure what to do, so he said sort of like the first thing that came to his mind. After [I came out], I just had this full support from my team. You know, being a freshman and just coming in, everyone actually went out of their way and gave me a phone call and told me how supportive they were and that I was a heck of a tennis player and that it didn’t change anything.
Sean’s experience is representative of the “permanence” of coming out. When his coach reacted in a way that he felt was not supportive, it was no longer an option for him to stay on the team. Fortunately, it wasn’t long before his coach reconsidered his position and took an active role in helping Sean come out to his teammates, who immediately comforted and encouraged him.

While Sean went into his situation blind, others had an example to follow when coming out on their teams. The effect a role model can have in the decision to come out has been documented in previous research, and as Gough (2007) writes “the impact of learning about other gay sportsmen cannot be underestimated” (p.167). While closeted, the athletes interviewed in this study indicated a feeling of being alone—shut off from the rest of the team. Two athletes, Clyde, a gymnast, and Brandon, a baseball player, both became familiar with an older teammate who had previously been out on their teams, which made an impact on their coming-out experience. Clyde didn’t know his teammate was gay when he joined the team, but their shared experience helped him out of the closet.

When I came freshman year I was still guarded. I was very of the mindset that I needed to hide it from people, even though I’m pretty sure most of the team already had an idea. There was an older guy on my team before me who was here two years while I was here and he was also gay, so it wasn’t really anything new for the team. I think that kind of helped and also made it easier for me to come out to everyone because I knew there had been someone else before me who was gay and everyone was still friends with him. So it was easier for me to talk to him about it, because he’s one of the people I talked to throughout my recruiting
process just for advice in general and stuff. Then I was talking to another friend from a different school that was telling me people were asking if I was gay, and it concerned me at the time. So I talked to my teammate here about it and he told me “look, the kid who is telling you about the rumors is gay himself and I’m gay.” And then I told him that I was gay, and I don’t know—it just became easier for me when I knew that he was gay to tell him I was gay. Then he just became the person I could talk to.

From there, I just started telling people. I guess, individually, not so much. I didn’t have like a big coming out thing. I didn’t say “hey team I’m gay!” I would just rather tell some people and tell them I don’t care who knows and just have everyone find out. It’s just easier than telling everyone individually or telling everyone as a group. So I guess people heard from a girl on the gymnastics team or my roommate that I have a boyfriend. So then people would start asking me “when do we get to meet your boyfriend?” And so it was never—I didn’t even get asked by many people “are you gay?” because they all just found out, I guess, when I wasn’t hiding it anymore. People really didn’t have a problem with it; I’ve never had any issues with anyone. And I was definitely much happier when I was open about it with all my team.

Clyde’s ability to relate to his older teammate helped him navigate what it meant to be out on his team and was something that spurred him out of the closet. Brandon’s relationship with a gay older teammate also brought him out of the closet, but under different circumstances, as he was “outed” without his knowledge or permission.
I was very closeted. All the way to like my third year in school I was. By then, a lot of my close friends knew that I played baseball with and they didn’t care at all. No big deal. I just didn’t need to advertise it, so I didn’t make them uncomfortable, and me uncomfortable. I guess I took it as more of like, a protective thing for them and myself.

There was actually a guy that played there previously that was gay and that was out and he was friends with [my teammates] too, and I had talked to him. And he was like “oh they won’t care,” because they knew about him. And so he actually told them without my permission one night when he had been drinking. So the next night I saw them we were watching TV and that “don’t ask, don’t tell” thing was real big on TV. And at the time I was hoping to be in the military if everything worked out with my orthopedic injuries, which never worked out, but I was like “wow, really need that to pass. Wish we could get rid of that.” And they laughed like crazy. And it was just cool from then on out.

Unlike Clyde, Brandon didn’t come out to his entire team. He said he told only “who I thought should and other than that I just kept it to myself.” For Brandon, his sexuality wasn’t something he felt was relevant to his team, and he was keenly aware that his teammates may not feel comfortable sharing the field with a gay teammate.

I mean, if you’re gay, I wouldn’t be—I would never say to not be open, but I don’t know if I would say to be so, like, advertising about it. If you tell people about it, fine. I just wouldn’t flaunt it to their face. I think everyone’s going to be okay with you, especially as you get older. Like, for freshman it may be a little harder, just because you’re going to be in that freshman class and they’re going to
be a lot more resistant. But when people get a little bit older they’re going to start to not care. So if you’re cool with it right as you’re going in to college, I’d say it’d be okay to have people know, but you need to be there a couple weeks just to see how things run and not just kind of jump in there and say “hey look at me.” So I guess just don’t put it in their face and let them get comfortable with it. I mean, it took us a long time to get comfortable with it, so you gotta let other people get comfortable with it.

Brandon’s advice describes the unwritten “code of conduct” that exists for many gay male athletes. While Brandon sees these rules as acts of self-preservation for himself, they also serve to protect the guidelines of masculinity that limit expression of male athletes (Connell, 1990; Messner, 2002). As Gough (2007) described in his research, gay men are often accepted on their teams under the condition that they don’t insist on “acting gay” (170). Examples like this show ways in which homosexuality is making progress toward acceptance on men’s sports teams, but femininity does not have the same momentum.

Brandon also felt that it was easier to come out when he was an older member of the team, which relates back to the issue of status and the effect of “class” in college sport. Jeff shared the view that it was easier to be out as he got older, which he attributed more to his own personal growth and self-acceptance than any other factor.

I think personally I just grew and I became more comfortable in my own skin. And I don’t think I was realizing it, but that was directly affecting how teammates were reacting to me. I must’ve been giving off a different vibe of like “this is
who I am” you know? Like, even though I’d been doing that for a year, I must’ve been better at it or something.

As he became more and more comfortable expressing his sexuality on his team, Jeff documents that his teammates followed suit. This is a powerful example of the change that can be made by making a deliberate attempt to influence the climate on a team. Jeff’s ability to be proactive with his teammates was aided by a supportive and involved coach, who took an interest in Jeff’s safety and wellbeing on the team, and eventually helped him organize an “It Gets Better” video involving the entirety of his school’s athletic department.

He was like “so how’s it in the locker room? It’s all good, right? Nobody’s giving you shit or anything, right?” And like, right then in that meeting he just covered all the bases, just doing all this stuff and making sure I was okay. And I was like “yeah, everything’s cool.” And he was like “okay good. Because that’s my job to make sure that you feel safe.” So, it was really beautiful.

Essentially what he did was he made sure when I came out to him that nothing was an issue. And even though he knew that I was gay, he wasn’t going to say anything to me until I talked to him. Because he’s really big on, like—a person needs to come out to him. He would never come up to me and be like “you’re gay, right?” He would never ever do that, because that’s a horrible thing to do to a gay person that isn’t ready to come out, you know what I mean? And so he was like “I was just waiting for you to come out to me” and that’s really what it was. And then I found out that he talked to the guy I grew up with—the kid who was captain with me that year, and he followed up to make sure it was all
okay. So that was kind of it and then his job is just to coach us in volleyball. But I would always tell him before—like, I sat the team down my senior year and told them “no one’s going to say ‘faggot.’ Don’t say it to the teams that we play. Don’t say it outside of volleyball. Just try to live your life like that.” And he knew I was going to say that, so he like, talked to them before and backed me up. Stuff like that.

My coaches my last year were a big reason why my volleyball career was such a success because, like, knowing that your coaches have your back—it’s just so much easier. And when your teammates know your coaches have your back, there’s like no fucking around, because you can get in trouble with the coach and that’s the last thing you want. So when you have the coach’s support I think that is like, such a big deal. And like, people respect you as a captain or as the starting person on the team, but at the end of the day people respect the coach the most because they have the authority. So when someone in that authoritative position tells you “don’t do this” you’re way more likely to listen than someone who’s not.

At my school, all it took was someone saying, you know, “this kid is gay. It upsets him if you’re saying ‘faggot’ so don’t say it.” That was all that was needed. I mean, most of the time someone just needs to start the conversation. Someone just needs to be like “I’m gay.” Or “that’s a gay athlete and you can’t say this shit and don’t do it, because you’re an asshole if you do.” And so they don’t do it and then it becomes part of the culture of the team, the program, the athletic department—everything. It just becomes part of what it is. And I’m hearing things back from school now, like teammates and other athletes that are
telling me, like, you don’t hear “fag” anymore and it’s a very serious thing. And with all of the new freshmen coming in, like, that’s one big thing, that we don’t use homophobic language. So it just leaves a lasting impression.

While Jeff’s situation at a supportive university with a fostering coach is certainly not representative of many gay male athletes’ environments, he is an example of an athlete who defied the social norms on his team and, in doing so, changed the climate of an entire athletic department for LGBT athletes. Above all, his story is an example of how important it is to create change on the institutional level and bring in coaches who are trained with an awareness and appreciation for sexual minorities.

What can’t be understated in the discussion of coming out is that all six of the athletes reported being much happier after opening up to teammates. Despite expressing initial fears of being openly gay to their teammates, none of the athletes interviewed regretted coming out, and there was a consensus that, overall, it was more important for the athletes to be able to live openly than to continue playing their sport. Sean, more so than other participants, felt free to express alternate forms of masculinity once he came out, particularly as it came to his style of playing tennis.

You hear people say about a weight being lifted off their shoulders. And that’s totally what I felt. I just felt relieved and like I could totally be myself. That really turned the page for me and I was able to focus way more on tennis and school and not feel like I was hiding anymore. Because I used to think that to play tennis a certain way, that people would think that I was gay. Just because the game is totally different between men and women. Women tend to hit through the ball and hit a lot flatter, and guys tend to hit with a lot more topspin because
they tend to be stronger. And so I would tend to hit flat and straight through the ball, just like a girl would. So to counteract that, I would adjust my stroke to being more masculine and hit with more topspin. Another thing is grunting. In the game almost everyone grunts when they hit the ball; it has a lot to do with timing. But my grunt if I wasn’t thinking about it would tend to be more high-pitched than say, a guy would. So I would consciously think of how I would need to grunt at a lower pitch and I’d constantly be thinking of that. Like, if I was to grunt higher, people would think I was gay because I had a higher voice like a girl. So yeah, I would be thinking of everything else besides how I need to win this tennis match. And it totally messed me up.

But after I came out it was sort of like all that went out the window and I didn’t really care. And that’s when I got to playing my best, because I didn’t think about anything except what was on the court. I didn’t think about “am I playing tennis too gay?” or “am I hitting the ball like a girl would?” or all these different things that I used to think about while I was playing tennis to try and hide my sexuality. So it definitely helped me improve, being out, and actually, we as a team grew closer.

In essence, the coming-out stories of these athletes reflect a changing societal landscape in this country with regards to homosexuality. There were no horror stories, and hardly any instances where athletes felt they were receiving unfair treatment. An increase in technology, specifically social media, has changed the way athletes come out to their teams and eased some of the anxiety surrounding disclosure. The value of athlete role models, and coaches who make it their business to create a supportive environment
on their team, cannot be overstated, as both have shown to be pivotal resources for athletes before and after coming out. What hasn’t changed is the alarming impact of masculinity on young men in today’s sports culture. Through these athletes’ experiences, it is clear that masculinity is at the heart of what is keeping gay male athletes closeted—and once they’re out, what is limiting their expression and marginalizing their sexual identities.

**Being “The Gay One”**

Throughout the interviews, participants provided examples of how coming out as gay affected their experience as an athlete and relationships with teammates. The narratives were rich in accounts of how teammates and coaches perceived an openly gay athlete and how the team, the athlete, and the administration responded to the changing climate. Paramount to the athletes’ stories was a realization that the gay athlete is not “normal” and several recalled multiple instances where their sexuality resulted in being “singled out” on their team in ways that heterosexual athletes were not. Jeff explains the feeling of being different in this excerpt:

> I always say that I was the gay athlete on the team, but like, I’m not saying I was “the gay one.” But like, on face value I was. Like, at the end of the day I can say “oh I’m defined by so much more!” Which I am, but at the end of the day I was still the only out person on my team. So it’s impossible to not be kind of grouped and not be singled out—not in a bad way, it’s just like, you’re different. You’re different from everybody. And that’s not a bad thing, it’s just—it’s true.
Many athletes were aware of perceptions that positioned gay men as unskilled athletes (Butterworth, 2006). Upon coming out, Sean described feeling a sense of pride in performing well in his sport, knowing he was defying commonly held stereotypes.

You know, I think that, in the back of my head, there was still something to prove, being a gay athlete, that you’re just as good as any one of the straight athletes. People think that you can’t compete at a high level and you get to prove them wrong, that you’re just as capable, just as able, just as strong, just as smart as everyone else and I think it breaks down a lot of stereotypes. There’s definitely a confidence boost when you beat someone and them knowing that you’re a gay male.

In describing how things changed for him after coming out, Sean reported that his coach began treating him differently in practices. He believed the shift in coaching came as a reaction to his sexuality.

I think the coach tried extra hard to make it seem like he wasn’t playing favorites because I was a gay player. And so he kind of made things harder on me during workouts. But it was never anything so great that I felt like I was being discriminated against. It was kind like being the son of the coach. He didn’t want it to look like he was playing favorites so he kind of pushed me to do more, which I kind of enjoyed, actually, because it really helped me.

Sean’s example reveals how a coach’s support of an athlete’s sexuality can be misconstrued as “favoritism.” While Sean’s coach supported him and helped him through the coming out process, he was wary of how his sensitive approach to Sean was being interpreted by other players. Thus, his treatment of Sean during practices changed as an
attempt to “make up” for his previous actions and avoid accusations of “special treatment.”

While all athletes acknowledged that their sexuality made them feel different, Jeff felt certain that it was “impossible” for his teammates to look at him and see only his sexuality. The hours spent in the company of teammates, he said, assured that he could not be dismissed by his teammates as one-dimensional.

At the end of the day I think it’s impossible for a teammate to look at you as just a single-faceted person. You know what I mean? I think it’s impossible for a gay person to come out on our team and just be a gay person, because there’s so much more to you as an athlete and as a teammate. That’s why I believe athletics is so powerful, because nothing can overlook how you act on the court. How you act off the court. How you act when you win and how you act when you lose. Those are real things that define who you are as a person. So if a gay athlete came out and were afraid of their teammates seeing them as just another gay person, I would totally dispute that because they see you on so many different levels and environments, that there’s no way they could just see that alone about you.

Jeff’s narrative illustrates the transformative aspect of being part of a team and shows why gay men in sport are seen as a significant challenge to hegemonic masculinity within athletics (Anderson, 2002; Bryson, 1990). A gay athlete, like Jeff, forces the idea of homosexuality into a space where traditionally it has not been involved (Butterworth, 2006). In doing so, perceptions and myths concerning homosexuality can begin to dissolve as multi-dimensional gay and bisexual identities appear in sport.
Sean also acknowledged that his teammates saw him for more than his sexuality, but that gradually, they ceased recognizing his identity as a gay man altogether.

And my team, they didn’t really see me as a gay man; they just saw me as a great player and an asset to the team. And I don’t think there was any kind of weirdness about me being an athlete, but it was always very strict business. Like, this is all about the sport; this is not about your sexual orientation.

The athletes unanimously likened participating in sport to a job, and there was a strong sense of wanting to keep their sexuality “separate” from what was happening on the field and in practice. As such, several athletes saw their sexuality fade into the background after coming out. Sean compared his situation to the military’s former policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Brandon said his sexuality was “personal” and felt it wasn’t relevant to his day-to-day work as an athlete. With the exception of Jeff, all of the athletes described their athletic departments as neutral when it came to homosexuality. As Sean stated, “If you’re there to work, you’re there to work. If you’re not, you’re not.”

The silence reported from college athletic departments is without doubt a contributing factor to the marginalization of gay athletes in intercollegiate athletics. It is not unreasonable that Sean, Brandon, and other athletes’ tendencies to downplay their sexuality comes as a response to administrations that act as though these athletes don’t exist on their teams. Some, like Jeff, are affected enough by supportive coaches and teammates that they are driven to raise awareness at an institutional level, through projects like an “It Gets Better” video. But the majority of athletes interviewed seemed to adapt to their surroundings, where homosexuality was ignored more often than it was acknowledged or legitimized.
Of course, there were examples where athletes felt immense appreciation from their teammates and their coaches. Jackson, for example, described a moment when his team elected for him to lead them onto the ice at a major tournament—an experience he thought of as recognition for what he had been through as a gay athlete.

Everyone on the team kind of knew what I had gone through with regards to coming out and the difficulties of dealing with that. And I had improved significantly. I went from barely being able to skate to being able to be a college hockey goaltender and even though I wasn’t starting the game, they had me lead them out on the ice. It was a spotlight introduction and I just remember the adrenaline pumping through my veins and skating around in a circle as you step out onto the ice. Everyone’s cheering and screaming and I just remember kind of not being able to breathe a little bit. I remember thinking “man, I may have to stop and catch my breath—this is kind of unreal.”

Sean reflected on a moment when he felt he was being bullied, and his teammates stepped in to defend him.

And if they felt like I was being picked on because I was gay, they were like, right there behind me. One time I remember we were at a party and this guy was kind of picking on me a little bit. I can’t really remember the exact situation or what was said. All I can remember is my teammates like, getting behind my back, like “do you need me to beat anyone up? Because I got your back.”

For Jeff, knowing his teammates were behind him gave him a unique sense of confidence and helped him get past moments of adversity.
I consider myself really lucky because I had such a strong bond with my teammates and I had a great group of friends and my family accepted me—I was just in an all-around pretty good position as a gay person. I had all that support to lean back on, so whenever I heard somebody say “fag” it hurt, but it didn’t like, debilitate me. Like, there was just no way that anything would bring me down by that point in my senior year, you know? I just had this total confidence. It was like, no slur—nothing can touch me.

All six of the athletes that came out on their teams described feeling support from their teammates. Paul characterized the attitude of his teammates toward his sexuality as “if you’re part of the team, you’re part of the team. They won’t shun anybody for [being gay].” None of the athletes reported any instance where a teammate reacted negatively or violently towards them during or after the coming-out process. Several athletes did mention experiencing discriminatory or threatening behavior, but it never came from a teammate. Sean had the word “fag” written on the door of his dorm, while Paul recalled a strength coach calling him and his teammates “pussies” and specifically asking Paul “what, are you gay?” when he wasn’t performing well during a strength session.

These are typical examples of homophobic behavior that athletes report are still occurring at the university level, albeit infrequently. Overwhelmingly, the athletes described feeling safe both on their campuses and within their athletic departments.

One of the most frequent ways in which homosexuality was talked about on teams was through humor and making jokes. Athletes felt that so-called “gay jokes” were a natural part of the “culture” on their teams. Clyde explains why hearing his teammates joke about being gay didn’t bother him.
Obviously there are the gay jokes, but none that seem hostile. They’re gay jokes that make me laugh, and I figure if they make me laugh they’re not offensive. I mean, they don’t joke exclusively about gay people. They would joke about them as easily as they would joke about anyone else.

They’ll joke about themselves being gay a lot of times. Like, they’ll joke about “smashing” which is a slang term for having sex, and they joke about doing it with one of the other guys on the team. And obviously they’re not serious about it, but they say it to be funny. And they’ll talk about like, “oh that guy looks good, right?” They’ll say something like that to me. And some of them will comment on my underwear sometimes and say “dang those are hot” or something like that. I don’t know; they almost pretend to hit on me or something I guess, but in a joking manner. And they’re very comfortable getting physically close too. Even a lot more physically close than you would expect straight guys to get. And sometimes they’ll half-seriously, half-kiddingly ask me about my sex life. Some of them will get very interested and want to know a lot and they’ll ask sometimes very funny questions that seem odd to me, but they really have no idea what’s going on so they’re logical to them, I guess.

Similar to Paul’s coming-out experience, Clyde describes his teammates’ reliance on humor to breach the subject of his homosexuality. While his teammates never made Clyde feel unwelcome or discriminated against, his sexuality—and homosexuality in general—were very literally treated as a “joke” on his team. While Clyde didn’t feel the jokes were offensive or homophobic, his sexuality appeared to have been a source of
amusement for his teammates on many occasions, contributing to a devaluing of homosexuality on his team (Krane, 2001).

Other athletes also attempted to explain the abundance of “gay jokes” on their team. Brandon stated that the jokes his teammates made about homosexuality weren’t meant to be taken seriously.

I mean, when you’re in the locker room, you hear every vulgar term on earth—just disturbing things that some of the guys will say and some of that will be making fun of gay [people] or maybe inadvertently making fun of it, or whatever. It’s just—all college teams you make fun of each other constantly, so it’ll be nothing mean, like “I hate you because you’re gay.” It’s just “I want to make fun of you.”

Jeff also defended the joking that occurs between teammates, but drew more explicit boundaries than the other athletes as to what was acceptable and what was not.

There were jokes, but not malicious jokes at all, and it wasn’t jokes at me or about being gay. It’s hard to explain. Like, teams have inside jokes. Everybody has jokes with one another. And like, an anti-bullying campaign, an “It Gets Better” video, isn’t trying to stop teams from having jokes. That’s not the message. The message is that obviously certain words like “faggot” or “homo” or anything like that are not acceptable.

Overall, the athletes were steadfast in their belief that the jokes their teammates made, even those with punch lines involving homosexuality, were not indicative of negative or antigay attitudes. Even Clyde, who described being the target of jokes about
homosexuality on multiple occasions, said he couldn’t imagine his team being more supportive of gay athletes.

Like jokes, listening to teammates telling accounts of their heterosexual relationships and encounters was viewed as a normal aspect of the locker room. Several athletes recalled their teammates regularly involving them in these discussions, asking about the details of their dating lives and relationships with men. Athletes interpreted this as a symbol of their team’s acceptance and a sign that the “transition” of becoming accustomed to sharing the locker room with a gay teammate was complete. Sean described his team as “really open,” but soon noticed that there were limits to what he could talk about in the company of his teammates.

Like, they would always ask me if I was seeing anyone or how my boyfriend was doing, stuff like that. But as soon as it went toward something sexual, they weren’t very open to talk about sexual things like they did about their girlfriends. If I got anywhere close to talking about like, sex with a guy, they were like “whoa whoa whoa whoa!” And it was weird. I could talk about the relationship, but I couldn’t talk about all of it. Even though they could talk about their relationship with their girlfriend and go into very explicit detail, I couldn’t do the same.

Sean’s narrative describes the “limits” teammates enacted as far as what they would discuss regarding his sexuality and his sex life—limits that did not exist for his heterosexual teammates. The subject of gay sex was more than foreign to the members of his team; it was off-limits. This inequity was not the only time Sean felt as though his teammates treated him differently because he was gay. When they stayed overnight
while traveling to competitions, Sean described again becoming aware of his teammates’ limitations.

Like, we had to share hotel rooms—probably four guys in a hotel room with two queen-sized beds, so obviously I would have to share a bed with someone. And I never wanted to make anyone uncomfortable so I just always said, “hey, who’s comfortable sleeping in the same bedroom?” So I had to find someone that didn’t care that they shared a bed with me. And it’s kind of funny, we never really like, accidentally rolled over or anything like that, but there was definitely—like, changing in the hotel room, getting out of the shower, they were really shy. Whereas when they’re with their regular straight friends they would just let it bare all, but since I was around they were somehow more conservative about it. I think that straight men have this stigma that since they’re a guy that we’re all automatically attracted to them. And it was that kind of thing. It was like they didn’t want to undress in front of me for the fact that they might think that I found them attractive and, like, wanted to see them naked, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

These incidences made Sean aware that he was treated differently by his teammates because of his sexuality. Specifically, he was uncomfortable that his teammates may have thought he was attracted to them, based on their reluctance to share a bed or undress in front of him. This behavior is similar to what Short (2007) observed in locker rooms—men are becoming more modest, in what he characterized as a shift in traditional “locker room culture” happening as a result of greater cultural awareness of homosexuality.
Paul also touched on the issue of physical attraction, and remembered a time when his teammates actually confronted him about it.

One time at a party when it was just the guys, one guy asked me, “who do you find attractive on the team?” And I would just look at them all and be like “none of you.” And you know, it’s not just that I didn’t find any of them attractive, but I didn’t—I would never sleep with any of them and I would never try to do anything like that. I think that violates a lot of stuff. Because they’re my team, they’re not just some random guy. And they knew that. They knew deep down that that was true.

Paul and Sean touch on one of the chief challenges for gay men entering onto all-male athletic teams—the fact that homosexuality is characterized by an attraction to men. While athletes did not report any harassment or hostility experienced while sharing intimate spaces with their teammates, these narratives confirm that the issue of “attraction” is something that is thought about by both gay athletes and their teammates.

The narratives of the athletes communicate a diverse and often challenging representation of what it meant to be “the gay one” on their sport teams. At the core of the athletes’ stories was an understanding that their sexuality made them decidedly “different.” The athletes’ described instances where they felt disparate, but not discriminatory, treatment from teammates and coaches as a result of their sexuality. This included the enactment of “limitations” that functioned to keep homosexuality as an “othered” behavior and maintain the heteronormative status quo (Krane, 2001). The differential treatment also included “gay jokes” being told in the locker room, sometimes directed at gay players. Several athletes also discussed concerns that teammates felt that
gay athletes were sexually attracted to them, especially when sharing hotel rooms or
showering in the locker room (Short, 2007). Athletic departments were shown as taking
no stance on homosexuality, a possible contributing factor to many athletes’ feelings that
their sexuality wasn’t relevant on their team, and thus they kept quiet about it. Feelings
of legitimization came from teammates and occasionally coaches, but never from the
university’s athletic department.

Athletes were also aware of stereotypes surrounding homosexuality and several
expressed a desire to overcome associations with femininity and poor athletic
performance (Bryson, 1990; Messner, 2002). Perhaps most unanimous among the
athletes was a feeling of support from their team and a confidence that teammates “had
their back.” All six athletes felt comfortable on their teams and while many indicated
they considered quitting before they came out, none expressed those concerns after
coming out to their teammates.

Many felt their experience paved the way for future athletes to feel comfortable
coming out on their teams. As Sean expressed, the feeling of setting an example was
worth any struggle that he faced coming out as a gay athlete.

I mean, here I was an out gay male who played a college sport and I think it
helped to broaden people’s horizons to see someone who was open and athletic
and not afraid to show it. And I had sort of come to the realization that, you
know, I might be a target for being an out gay athlete on campus. But I’m willing
to make that sacrifice so that people after me can be open and play the sport and
be accepted. Athletes may have to come out and be almost like a target of bigotry
to pave the way for other athletes to be able to be out and accepted within those sports. It’s sort of like sacrificing themselves for the future.

Sean’s sentiments show an understanding of his and other athletes’ role in changing the traditionally homonegative climate in sport (Anderson, 2011). Several athletes also discussed being aware of the significance of their situation, and expressed a sense of reward and responsibility in breaking new ground.

The Problem of the Locker Room

There is no space in athletics that is more heteronormative and masculine in nature than the locker room (Curry, 1991; Plummer, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003). Prior research has noted how locker room culture serves to propagate negative attitudes toward femininity and homosexuality, and the athletes unanimously classified the locker room as the area of sport that most worried them and caused the greatest strain between them and their teammates. Jeff, a volleyball player, placed it at the forefront of what is keeping gay male athletes closeted and discusses the terrifying and troublesome nature of the space for sexual minorities.

The biggest problem, and every gay athlete I’ve talked to has said this as well, that the biggest worry they have with coming out to their teammates is the shower—the locker room. Like, on a stationary level, no matter how cool the guys on your team are, at the end of the day, like, you get naked with these men and shower together. And change. And like, then you look at straight people and you’re like “what if a straight guy was in the locker room?” This is what straight people say, like, “what if I was in a locker room with all women? Wouldn’t that be weird?” And it’s ok. You can talk about these things. This is a real issue. I
think that it’s almost, like, issue number one. But for me that was my biggest thing. I was like, “how would I ever face these guys?” Because, like, I have to shower after practice. You’re dirty. All you care about is getting clean. Especially after a long practice, you just want to get the hell out of there anyway. And you just want to go in the shower and clean off, and go back and put your clothes on and leave the locker room. And, like, that’s what I think of the locker room.

And you know, that whole “straight panic” of like, gay men in the locker room like checking them out and all this stuff, I just think that that’s not the case. And every gay athlete I talk to says so. We all say the same thing. We just want to get in and get ourselves clean and get out like everyone else in that room does. And so for me it was really hard to wrap my head around that and being that gay guy in the locker room. I was petrified of what that would mean. And in our locker room, it wasn’t just our team. I mean, it was men’s basketball, men’s wrestling, men’s track and field. Like, all the athletic teams shared a locker room. And a shower room. So that was another thing I was worried about. Even if I came out to my team, other athletic people would find out and how would they react? Because there was no—or at least to my knowledge at that point there was no other out gay male athlete. So that was my number one reason, really. I didn’t know how to face that. I didn’t know what people would think. It really wasn’t having a conversation or hanging out on the weekends with the team or the bus rides or on the court or anything like that. It was the locker room that was my biggest concern.
But like, there was no malicious homophobia towards me at all. None of that stereotypical stuff you see in movies or TV shows. That wasn’t my situation. My situation was me really only being close with my teammates because those are the people you’re hanging out with most of the time. So I felt very close to them, obviously, and they were very close to me. So there was no issue. But you still hear the other teams. Like, when they’re in there, somebody will call somebody a “fag” or something. And it’s not the norm. I could probably count on my hand how many times that’s happened when I was in there. But I think sometimes whoever said it would, like, catch it and see that I was in there and immediately shut up or change the subject or be very, like, “oh shit I shouldn’t have said that.” But at the same time no one ever came up to me and said “oh sorry for saying that.” That never happened to me from someone other than who I was close to. So that’s kind of like—it’s not a slap in the face. I understand that. But like, that’s the casual homophobia that needs to stop in locker rooms.

And you know, I can’t remember that first day that I had to take a shower after coming out. Maybe that says something that it wasn’t that big of a deal to me. But the thing is, you know, weeks would go by and I just wouldn’t even think about it because you’re conversing with your teammates the entire time. And this is another thing most gay athletes—male athletes—will agree with. You all go in the locker room together when practice is over. So on the way to the locker room you’re going through the hallways and talking and laughing. Then you go into the locker room and unlock your locker and you’re still talking and having a conversation and like, you know, laughing and stuff. And so that conversation
carries on through the shower, through drying off, through putting your clothes back on, through dropping your clothes at the laundry, and through walking out the front door of the gym. It’s like one big hangout session, you know?

So when you’re in the middle of that hangout session you’re just thinking about what you guys are talking about and laughing and stuff like that. But I guess in the days when I wouldn’t be in that conversation—because you’re not always in it—like, then I would be thinking about it I guess a little bit more. But I don’t remember being, like, frozen the first time that I was in the locker room with everybody. I actually think some of my teammates tried to be—like, they obviously had thought about it. But they didn’t want me to know that they had even thought about it, and so they were even overtly, like, chill and, like, cooler, you know what I mean? And that was mostly during my junior year. But then by my senior year [my sexuality] was like openly talked about in the locker room. I honestly think the gay athlete reaches the full level of acceptance when your teammates are asking you about your boyfriend and asking you about who you’re dating. And not in an inquisitive manner, but in a “I want to know about your life” manner. That kind of stuff—that’s locker room talk. And so that’s kind of when it came full circle for me.

Jeff and the other openly gay athletes interviewed realized that when inside the locker room, their actions became “marked” (Brechus, 1996). While other athletes (even closeted ones) can move about the locker room showering, changing and socializing without anyone giving it a second thought, the gay male in the locker room is viewed as unnatural, and his behaviors take on different meaning than the heterosexual “unmarked”
individuals’ (Brechus, 1996, p. 512). Jeff described this phenomenon as “straight panic”—the propensity for straight males to suspect that they are being sexualized by gay men. Jeff discusses being “petrified” of how his teammates would view his presence in the locker room once he came out. His and other athletes’ perceptions raise serious concerns about the heteronormativity of athletic locker rooms, and the threat such a fiercely gendered space poses to the goal of making sport more inclusive of sexual minorities.

Alternatively, Jeff’s narrative also demonstrates that a gay male athlete can move toward acceptance and inclusion from teammates in the locker room and that “straight panic” can be overcome through education and activism. As mentioned earlier, Jeff was very vocal within his school’s athletic department about creating a climate that was supportive of LGBT individuals. Those efforts carried in to the locker room, where he described teammates being careful not to make him feel like an outsider in a typically homophobic space. Several athletes, including Jeff, also saw “locker room talk” expand to include heterosexual, as well as gay, contributions, with straight athletes taking an interest in the personal dating lives of gay teammates, something that would’ve been unheard of in the hey-day of hegemonic masculinity theory (Anderson, 2011; Connell 1990).

Discussions of Masculinity

One of the key aspects of this study is examining the perceptions of gay male athletes regarding masculinity. Traditionally, gay men have been at odds with masculinity, as a powerful linkage to femininity has limited their ability to fit in with hegemonically masculine ideals (Connell, 1990; Messner, 2002). Gay male athletes are
seen as uniquely positioned to interpret masculinity, as they combine two qualities—homosexuality and athleticism—that many once saw as incompatible (Butterworth, 2006). The eight athletes interviewed were each asked how they would define or describe “masculinity,” as well as how important they considered the concept to be.

What is ‘masculinity?’

Trying to define masculinity tripped up almost all of the athletes initially. Sean, a tennis player, admitted that he could only think of stereotypical descriptions.

For some reason only, like, superficial things are coming straight to my head. Like very structured features; a very square jaw line. You know, very rugged, very aggressive, very low speaking. I really can’t think of anything other than what’s opposite of feminine.

Clyde, the gymnast, also seemed to focus on physical characteristics in his definition of the term.

I guess just the typical thing. A deeper voice, more strongly built maybe. Hair can play a big part; shorter seems to be more masculine. I guess using things like “dude” and ‘bro’ and stuff like that more often. But I think the most distinctive quality is usually someone’s voice—whether it’s high- or low-pitched, and just the way of speaking. Typically athletes are all in really good shape, depending on the sport, so I guess that’s kind of a physical characteristic that they automatically have.

Besides listing off physical attributes, the most popular response was indicating that masculinity was decidedly opposite of what is feminine. Paul, a swimmer, built his definition around what masculinity isn’t.
Masculine to me is not acting effeminate. You don’t dress in tight, tight clothes. You’re not concerned with fashion—you see that as like an overall feminine concern. I guess you’re less emotional; you have less outbursts. That’s just what it is in my family I know. The women are emotional; the men are stoic. You’re good at sports. You know stuff about cars. You know, all the classic stereotypical guy things. That’s my interpretation of masculinity, but I also think that’s changed a little bit since I came out because I know some really masculine guys that wear dresses from time to time.

To me the gender role for a man is to be strong—kind of harder. And I mean, when my dad and I were talking after I came out, he was like, you know, “men are hard—rougher, tougher, able to stand more. And women are softer; they bring the emotional factor.” This is when he was trying to convince me that I needed a woman in my life. And to me sports are a place to be rough, tough and show that you are physically more fit than the next person. So to me, that is a very masculine trait. Whereas women to me celebrate the group and aren’t about competing and destroying your opponent at all cost.

Sean, Clyde, and Paul’s definitions are representative of the common, stereotypical view of masculinity that is present throughout society. It is the belief that men act like men; women act like women (Bryson, 1990; Zipp, 2011). Similarly, this definition interprets masculinity and femininity as gendered terms that differentiate what is “male” and what is “female” (Adams, 2011; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). It is physical traits—strong, tough, muscular, aggressive, petite, delicate, dainty, unathletic—that illustrate these differences.
Other athletes took a less stereotypical approach to defining “masculinity” and one that went beyond physical characteristics. Beau, a club volleyball player, defined it as such:

When I think of someone who’s masculine I just think of someone who is confident, outspoken, and very, very sure of themselves. And I guess going along with that comes some arrogance or cockiness, but not always in a bad way. I do think that it’s possible for a gay man to be masculine. It’s not necessarily a manly man, or you know, grunting or really aggressive. It’s just, you know, confident and kind of sure of what they’re doing and always on top of their game.

Jeff, another volleyball player, shared Beau’s emphasis on self-confidence, and expanded the definition to include discussions of character.

What it means to be masculine? I really think that it’s how you react when you lose, how you react when you win, how you react to your coach when he’s yelling at you and you’ve done nothing wrong. What do you do? Do you just sit and take it because you know that they’re your coach, or do you fight back and be an asshole? You know? It’s these little things I think that prove masculinity. Like, being masculine at the end of the day is being strong and being sure of yourself and definitely letting people see who you are on a certain level. But don’t lose your shit.

Like, if you play a team sport and it’s a really big game and it’s really close and everybody’s working really hard and putting everything in it and there’s a lot at stake and you lose…the last thing you want to see is another teammate freak out, because you want to freak out too. Because you already feel bad. And
then when you see somebody else freak out, you feel even worse. So if you can realize what your actions do to other people and you can control your actions based on the people around you, because you know that it will help them, I think that that’s like, the masculine way. And the thing is, I don’t think it’s more masculine. It’s just an adult thing to do; it’s mature. And I think being masculine means being mature and becoming a better man. And always own up to your stuff. That’s a cliché, but it’s true. Always own up to what you did and stuff.

Brandon, a baseball player, and Austin, a swimmer, used their sport as the basis for their definitions. Brandon described his teammates and what he viewed as “extreme” forms of masculinity.

Some people take it to a real extreme. Like “I’m never hurt, I’m tough, I’m blah, blah blah” you know? You’ll get that character on a baseball team—the one that’s like, “I’m going to fight you if you don’t work hard and I’m gonna punch you,” whatever. I don’t know if that’s any more masculine than the left-handed pitcher who’s tiny.

Austin illustrated how masculinity played out on his team through competition, and provided some unique interpretations that transcend traditional norms.

On my team, I would say mostly it would follow within what you could do in the pool—competitive stuff. It wasn’t necessarily “I have the biggest muscles” or “I have the hottest girlfriend” or like “I have the fastest car.” It wasn’t any of those traditional things. I would say we were competitive in three areas at times. It was sports, then it was grades, and then drinking was the extracurricular competitive comparison sometimes. Like, the masculinity of “I can drink more than you, or I
can drink this disgusting drink and you can’t” and pretending to like it or actually liking it. But mostly, for the team itself, I would say masculinity showed itself in the competitive nature of the sport—trying to prove that I could be better than somebody else and I think competition is something that maybe does fall a little bit under masculinity.

I almost look at masculinity as task specific. Like, masculinity within a task, more than necessarily masculinity within a society. Looking at swimming, there’s sprinters—those that are considered good sprinters are generally more muscular and built. Whereas distance athletes are more slim and lean. But I wouldn’t consider either one as any more masculine than the other. It’s just a different performance type. So I would consider both of those things masculine.

Finally, Jackson, a former club hockey player, discussed his reluctance to define the term for political reasons.

I guess I would probably shy away a bit from trying to narrow down a definition of masculinity because I take a political issue with trying to define gender and sex like that. I could certainly say that traditional masculinity—it’s obvious that society has an opinion about it and there are a lot of traits that are considered masculine, but again from a political standpoint, I don’t like to buy into any of that stuff.

The athletes provided a wide array of different viewpoints of what comprises “masculinity,” with five general themes emerging: 1) Masculinity as appearance, 2) masculinity as gender, 3) masculinity as character, 4) masculinity as performance, and 5) masculinity as a social construct. Along with the common references to physical fitness,
strength, and toughness, masculinity was linked to a person’s character and performance in sport most often. Several athletes recognized masculinity as an act or performance, and the term was associated with confidence, assuredness, competitiveness, maturity, and honesty.

Athletes were then asked to classify the importance of masculinity—to themselves, to their team, or to society in general. Prior research has positioned masculinity as carrying extra significance on male sports teams, as athletes strive to achieve heightened status through performance of hegemonic masculinity and gain entrance into the “center of sport” (Messner, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Connell 1990). Recently, research has emerged that suggests traditional definitions of masculinity may be fading from the world of sport (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2011).

How important is masculinity?

According to research, gay male athletes challenge the masculine standards that exist in sporting culture, weakening the notion that sport is the domain of hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes dominance over the feminine “others” (Allain, 2008; Anderson, 2002). In order to understand how gay male athletes challenge the dominant culture of sport, it is necessary to gauge their own perceptions of masculinity, and the role it plays on their teams and in their own lives.

Sean provided a progressive opinion, with a belief that more fluid interpretations of masculinity are beginning to find a place in society.

It doesn’t really matter to me because I think that sexual orientation, or any kind of gender identity, is a huge spectrum. So you could be a really masculine, like, rugged, low-talking, straight-walking guy, but then I also think you could be a
much more feminine guy and there’s nothing wrong with it. I don’t really care about masculinity in a wider sense like that. Now, if we’re getting more personal, I tend to find people who are more masculine more attractive. But I don’t think that people that identify with the gender “male” have to be masculine or have masculine features.

I think society is slowly moving towards a direction of knowing that masculinity isn’t a certain stereotype. That masculinity can come in all different forms and, you know, especially with men, masculinity is a huge spectrum. Like, people fall within a range and I think society is slowly coming to that realization that there is more than one kind of person—that there’s all different kinds of people.

Sean rejects traditional notions of masculinity, preferring instead a more inclusive model not often expressed in the sports arena (Adams, 2011).

Several athletes felt that the significance of masculinity in their lives changed over time, particularly after they came out. Austin, an NCAA Division III swimmer who did not come out while competing in college, reflects on what masculinity meant to him before he was secure in his identity.

Back then, because I wasn’t entirely sure who I was, holding up the illusion of masculinity or the traditional ideals, was a little bit more important to me because I was trying to be kind of—it was self-preservation a little bit, of preserving who I was so I could figure out myself and figure out things internally. Parts of [masculinity] are traditionally male-identified and not necessarily female-identified, and because I identify as a male, I think I would like other people to
identify me in that way. So expressing maybe some of those concepts of competitiveness and the work ethic that comes with it comes more to me and do register as important.

But the ability to prove that I’m more macho than you or that I’m king of the mountain wasn’t really all that important [on my team]. Because we were a Division III team at a smaller institution, anybody that wanted to be on the team could be on the team. So we had kind of an open-door policy of “come swim, come be on the team.” And I think that may have helped suppress some of the other masculinity things that I had seen in high school a little bit of “you want to be on the varsity team? Well you have to hit these standards, and you have to prove that you’re willing to put the work in and willing to be better than other people.”

Austin’s example also highlights inclusivity on his team, based upon the level of athletic prowess displayed. His story draws a relationship between exclusivity and masculinity, with masculinity taking on more significance in areas where athletic skill and competition are heightened. He also demonstrates an understanding of the benefits that come with embodying masculinity, specifically mentioning associations with “competitiveness” and “work ethic” that are valued in society (Anderson, 2005; Messner, 2002). Jackson echoed Austin’s sentiment that masculinity took on added importance while he was in the closet, serving as a camouflage to fight off any suspicion that he might be gay.

I can definitely say that as I was first starting to play, before I had come out to anybody on the team, I certainly internalized a lot of the traditionally masculine characteristics and tried to wear those as much as possible. And after I came out
it was probably a little bit less so. And there is probably some overlap in my personality with what is considered to be traditionally masculine and just what I kind of naturally feel. But yeah, these days I’m certainly not trying to wear that mask anymore. I’m really just trying to do and be what feels naturally to me.

I would say that it probably helped out a lot that that was my sort of personality in that it just helps me fit in a little more. If I were extraordinarily flamboyant, you know—genderqueer or stuff like that I probably would’ve had a tougher time. And the guys probably would have had a tougher time relating to me.

Like Austin, Jackson understood the social benefits of being viewed as masculine. For him, certain traits seen as “masculine” by his teammates came naturally to him, allowing him to blend in with the other personalities on his team. He also indicates that feminized identities—those that are “flamboyant” or “genderqueer” would likely endure a less-privileged status on his team.

Brandon’s response also pegs masculinity as more important for athletes, drawing on examples of teammates whose emphasis on performing masculinity puzzled him.

I think it’s definitely more important in the college sports realm, like “that guy’s really tough” and you know, “he’s a work horse.” And you know, you have a lot of guys that don’t want to show any weakness, but I don’t think I ever was part of that. Some people get really insecure about not being the toughest guy or not being the heaviest lifter or whatever. That’s really important to some guys in college.
But my close friends, some of them were real big into working out and they thought they had to have this certain kind of body—I don’t know what was wrong with them. But they think they need to be all “I’m like, sculpted and look at my bulging muscles” and all that. Except they were really like, sensitive guys, too. So it made them sort of less badass and more just kind of like, vain. You know?

Like, I like to make fun of it. Like, “I’m strong as a damn ox” or “oh man, look at me. I’m a man.” But that’s what me and my buddies joke about all the time. Like “oh man, I got my tools out. I’m such a man” and stuff. Like I never really cared that someone thought that I’m a badass or anything like that. I guess I just was whatever I was.

I did get a little bit of a reputation for fighting, just because I got in a couple of fights that were not really provoked by me—I just helped. And then I got like a “don’t fight him” reputation kind of thing. I wasn’t ever trying to start anything. But yeah, [my teammates] did take it as more masculine. I don’t know why. Because it’s really just foolishness—it’s just dumb. And I was just being an idiot.

For Brandon, he saw masculinity stressed by members of his team for mainly shallow reasons—attempts to gain more “masculine capital” through optimal performance of traditionally “macho” conventions (Anderson, 2005; Messner, 2002). Alternatively, Brandon described a point of view where striving to be hegemonically masculine was looked down upon—describing his weight-lifting teammates as “vain” and sharing how societal measures of masculinity became jokes between him and his friends. Brandon
also mentioned how a reputation for fighting elevated his status on the team, possibly making it easier for him to disparage traditional ideas of masculinity, while simultaneously enjoying some of their benefits. Brandon’s narrative illustrates the changing relationship between homosexuality on masculinity, as he was able to be “out” to several members of his team and still retain a masculine image.

Paul covered similar territory, discussing his mission to prove that feminine stereotypes surrounding sexuality—in his case—didn’t stick.

For me it’s important because I don’t tie my masculinity in with my sexuality, and I actually actively try to fight when someone thinks of gay guys as all feminine, because that’s not me. I view myself as very masculine. You know, I played sports. I’m not a thin-framed guy, and I tend not to show emotions a lot.

For Paul, expressing masculinity was a way to break the binds that society placed on him as a gay man. Dissimilar to other athletes, Paul’s concept of masculinity became even more important after coming out, allowing him to dispel what he saw as a feminine myth surrounding homosexuality. Paul’s “fight” enabled him to shed stereotypes, but it also characterizes a larger bias that exists in sport, and a belief that feminized individuals are less suited to athletics and overall less capable than those who are able to achieve “masculinity” (Anderson, 2002; Bryson 1990).

Jeff also saw masculinity as being important on his volleyball team, but for a different reason.

Masculinity I think is very important. I mean, because I’m gay I’m attracted to like, men. So I guess I’m a little bit attracted to masculinity because all men are masculine in some way. So I guess that automatically puts it on a level of
importance to me. And for a male athletic team, I think it’s really important. Even like muscles and working out and being physically fit is really important for an athletic team. Even those weird ideals that we think masculinity is, they’re kind of important for a team because if you’re playing someone and you’re faster and stronger and in better shape than they are, even if they’re better than you skillwise, you have a better chance of beating them just by being in shape and outlasting them in whatever sport you play.

Here, Jeff draws a distinction between what “society” views as masculine and what he sees as practical and necessary to outmatch an opponent in athletic competition. In his view, the goal of embodying masculine qualities such as strength, toughness and aggression is not to achieve status, but to perform well in his chosen sport. While status and athletic performance are linked in our culture, Jeff is able to differentiate between the athletic and societal consequences.

Both Beau and Clyde felt that the importance of masculinity hinged on how their sport was “viewed” by society. Beau, who played club volleyball, felt that the expectation of masculinity was not as high in his sport, thereby rendering it less important to the players.

I mean, I think that for a lot of people—a lot of guys that I know, just, even straight guys, are not as masculine as I think they would like to be. And I probably put on a bit of a front back then. I mean, the guys on the team weren’t—it’s not like we were playing football; we were playing volleyball, so it’s not the manliest sport out there. But I mean, I do feel that I am a relatively masculine
guy, but it’s not really something that I focus on or try to work on. I think I’m just fine the way I am.

Beau describes his personal journey, wherein initially he emphasized his own masculinity, despite the fact that the sport he played wasn’t the “manliest.” After he graduated and came out, Beau became less concerned with being considered masculine.

Clyde expressed the importance of masculinity by contrasting it with the feminized view of gymnastics in society, exploring the relationships between femininity, sport, and sexuality.

It’s kind of important, especially in a sport like gymnastics where we’re already sort of pegged as a more feminine sport just because of the nature of our sport. I think people think of gymnastics and they think women’s gymnastics and all that it entails with the floor music and the dancing and balance beam and stuff like that. And in our sport it’s supposed to be artistic, which can come off as less masculine I guess. I think there’s just kind of—not quite an expectation, but a lack of surprise maybe when there’s a gay gymnast. I think people find it more surprising when we find a gay football player, so that’s where the more feminine reputation of gymnastics makes it’s easier [to be gay]. But I think because of that, that’s kind of what makes some of the straight guys that are maybe less secure with their sexuality, or just less secure with themselves in general, want to try harder to present their own masculinity.

I think straight guys care a lot more about whether they come off as masculine or not. And then, I don’t know, I just think it varies. Some gay guys don’t want to seem very feminine and some don’t really care. Some try to seem
feminine. So I guess a gay athlete may try to seem a little more masculine in order not to stand out and not to feel like he’s treated differently for that reason. Because in a sport you want to do well or you want to do poorly based on your performance and nothing else. You don’t want to be pegged for being good or bad based on your sexuality or masculinity.

Obviously, as I’ve gotten more comfortable with myself, I’ve gotten less concerned about whether I seem super masculine or not, because I’m not trying to hide the fact that I’m gay anymore. But I definitely do still make an effort to seem masculine, just because I don’t want to seem too feminine. Like I said, I don’t try to hide it from anyone, but I don’t want it to be my defining characteristic. I’d rather people see me for other things than “oh, he’s that really feminine gay gymnast.” I don’t want them to think “feminine” before they think “gymnast,” or “smart,” or “well-mannered,” or something like that.

Clyde felt that the public’s perception of gymnastics as a more “feminine” sport made it easier to come out as gay, as those in athletics find it less surprising to see a gay male gymnast as opposed to athletes in other sports. While he acknowledged this perception as being somewhat helpful in his process of coming out, he expressed a desire to distance himself from the word “feminine,” citing fears that a strong association with femininity would affect his standing on the team and make it difficult to fit in with his teammates.

The discussion of masculinity shows an understanding amongst the athletes that masculinity is something that is “valued” and can be advantageous when trying to fit in on an athletic team (Anderson, 2005; Connell, 1990; Messner, 2002). Particularly for athletes in the closet, expressing traditional masculine behavior helped them blend in on
their team until they were ready to come out. The embodiment of masculinity also
helped athletes transcend feminine stereotypes after coming out. Just as masculinity was
linked to status, an association with femininity was viewed as less desirable to the
athletes, both on a personal level (many indicated a physical attraction to more
“masculine” men) and in sport. Masculinity became significant as a way to distance
oneself from those feminine ties.

Masculinity was also discussed as relative—taking on more or less importance
based on how a sport is viewed by society. Volleyball and gymnastics, traditionally
viewed as women’s sports, were described as areas that allowed for more diverse
expressions of masculinity. In spite of this, athletes in those sports still felt pressure to
avoid acting “feminine” on their teams. Masculinity was also tied to skill level and
exclusivity, as teams with more inclusive rosters reported less emphasis placed on
masculinity within their teams. The athletes’ narratives support prior research indicating
the controlling power of masculinity in sport, negative impressions of femininity and an
emphasis on not “acting gay,” regardless of one’s sexuality (Anderson, 2008a; Gough,
2007; Lock, 2006; Messner, 2002).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study adds significant detail to a growing body of research on the gay male experience in sport. In addition to providing rare, first-hand accounts from recently active gay male athletes in intercollegiate sport, participants from a variety of sports were involved in the research, adding a multiplicity of perspectives into the changing relationship between sport, sexuality, and masculinity. The athletes’ narratives provide powerful insight into the troublesome experience of being gay in the heteronormative setting of a men’s athletic team. Among the significant findings of this study are several new developments not visible in previous research, including the welcoming of gay male perspectives into often-heterosexualized locker room discussions, as well as an increased use of social media to aid in the coming-out process for athletes who are uncomfortable discussing sexuality with their teammates face-to-face.

Primary amongst the findings is new information into the evolving relationship between sexuality and masculinity in sport. As previous research suggests, there is a change in landscape taking place in sport, resulting in an increased level of acceptance regarding homosexuality (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Cavalier, 2011). However, the narrative analysis I’ve conducted provides less evidence to suggest that a change in masculinity has occurred. While many athletes were openly gay on their teams and felt that their teammates supported and, at times, appreciated their sexuality, there still exists a barrier of expression propped up by notions of hegemonic masculinity (Allain, 2008; Anderson, 2008b; Connell, 1990; Gough, 2007; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Messner, 2002; Plummer, 2006; Zipp, 2011).
In his 2011 study, Anderson contends that Connell’s (1990) theory of hegemonic masculinity is no longer dominant in sport, making way for greater acceptance of gay athletes and the advent of “inclusive masculinity” (p. 570). While my study supports a bettering climate for gay men in sport, the bias towards femininity displayed supports the assertion that a new kind of hierarchy is becoming apparent, one where masculine gay men are able to achieve higher status than their more feminine counterparts. A desire of gay male athletes to distance themselves from associations with femininity indicates a culture in which homosexuality is moving towards greater acceptance, while femininity is still discredited.

This study recognizes a dissociation between the concepts of sexuality and masculinity in sport. It suggests that cultural shifts in the acceptance of sexual minorities in sport have yet to yield much evidence of a lessening of importance in the performance of masculinity amongst gay male athletes. This is evidenced not only through the narratives in this study, but also in previous research into gay sport leagues which found that sport clubs organized to be especially inclusive of sexual minorities were often found to marginalize members whose identities strayed too far from culturally accepted, “masculine” behavior ((Owen, 2006; Price & Parker, 2003; Wellard, 2006). While progress is steadily being made, the idea of inclusive masculinity does not appear to be as widespread in sport as previous research has suggested (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2011).

As suggested in previous research (Anderson, 2011; Cavalier, 2011) negative perceptions surrounding the coming-out process impeded many athletes from opening up about their sexuality to teammates until later in their careers. Those same perceptions may be at play with regards to certain behaviors and expressions as well. Every athlete
interviewed described a negative attitude towards behaviors viewed as “feminine” and a fear of being associated with that term. Due to those perceptions, the athletes did not feel comfortable stretching the bounds of what was acceptable “masculine” behavior on their teams. The one athlete, Sean, who described embodying a more feminine playing style (in tennis) after coming out encountered no negative response from his teammates or coaches in doing so. While athletes were clearly afraid to challenge behavioral norms on their teams, it is not conclusive whether doing so would have resulted in any actual negative consequences. Again, the role of perceptions has a powerful effect on gay male athletes, making it difficult to know for certain how attitudes towards femininity in sport may be changing. Certainly, without any challenge, change will be difficult to arise.

Implications

Through these narratives, it is evident that certain topics and behaviors, such as openly discussing gay sex, were off-limits to the athletes, and many illustrated the strategic use of humor and “gay jokes” to devalue homosexuality, however innocently. The components of hegemonic masculinity were supported within the narratives by a desire to “fit in” with other teammates, and several athletes articulated a fear that being perceived as too “feminine” would make it difficult to relate to their teammates. Likewise, many athletes demonstrated a desire to distance themselves from femininity, recognizing that the more masculine they appeared, the higher level of status they could obtain (Anderson, 2005; Messner, 2002).

The narratives also revealed overall positive associations with masculinity from the athletes, who likened it to “competitiveness” and “work ethic,” tying the term not only to athletic prowess, but also to character traits valued in society. This is evidence of
masculinity continuing to occupy a role of value within athletics. Several narratives illustrated less stringent standards of masculinity in sports viewed as more feminine in nature (such as gymnastics or volleyball), or sports that were less competitive (and more inclusive) in nature. These associations of masculinity with exclusivity and high levels of performance support Messner’s (2002) “center of sport” theory, demonstrating how certain sports are situated as the most masculine (and most valued), while the most elite athletes in those sports enjoy increased status in society (p. 29). Through a recognition that masculinity remains dominant and privileged in sport, many athletes described performing masculinity as a method of blending in while closeted, and then as a way to win back the “masculine capital” lost after coming out, therefore being viewed as “less gay” (Anderson, 2002).

Among the stories, there were also examples that demonstrated a more inclusive form of masculinity that has recently emerged in research by Adams (2011) and Anderson (2011). Sean’s struggle to hide his natural, “feminine” tendencies while playing tennis consumed him before he came out. After sharing his sexuality with his teammates, he no longer felt any pressure to play tennis or “grunt” in a way that was viewed as masculine. In fact, his teammates supported him, commending him for his talent. Of course, Sean played better and won more matches after he stopped worrying about his style of play, which may have influenced his teammates’ opinion of his “feminine” expressions on the court. Additionally, Brandon discussed joking with several teammates and finding humor in the typical “macho” attitude that he saw as artificial and laughable. He also described his teammates who obsessively lifted weights as “vain.” Brandon’s narrative relays a perspective that places strict adherence to
hegemonic masculinity as the butt of the joke, something not seen in previous research. These challenges, however, are small compared to the overwhelming instances where femininity was devalued and actively avoided by athletes in the narratives.

The narratives shown in this study also highlighted the effect that masculinity has on the coming-out process, as athletes expressed a deep discomfort with the emotion and vulnerability that characterizes the act. For athletes conditioned to shield their emotions, the awkwardness of opening up to teammates and coaches caused the athletes considerable anxiety. To ease this stress, athletes utilized social media such as Facebook to publicly come out without the embarrassment of a face-to-face conversation. Paul’s experience coming out to his teammates also demonstrated the reluctance of men’s sport teams to seriously discuss homosexuality. When Paul first came out, his teammates stopped interacting with him for two weeks, before someone finally broke the ice with a crude joke. This situation is evidence of a concern that an athlete’s coming out will “feminize” the whole team by forcing them to share in an emotional conversation about homosexuality. Relying on humor enabled Paul’s teammates to avoid that situation.

While there was abundant evidence of increased acceptance for gay athletes in the locker room, the athletes still expressed uneasiness and uncertainty in such an intensely heteronormative space (Short, 2007). Several athletes stated that their teammates often included them in “locker room talk,” asking about their dating life and relationships with men. Stories like these are a strong indicator of the steps toward normalization of homosexuality taking place on sport teams, as prior research suggests (Anderson, 2011). Yet the overwhelming opinion of the locker room was one of discomfort and exclusion, as gay athletes expressed concern over how teammates perceived them and their
“marked” behaviors after coming out (Brechus, 1996, p. 512). While evidence is beginning to suggest change in this traditionally homophobic space, the athletes’ narratives still position the locker room as being the center of their fears.

The athletes’ stories also present unwillingness on the part of athletic departments to discuss issues of sexuality and masculinity. Only one athlete noted any kind of support or acknowledgement of sexual minorities from his university’s athletic administration. That athlete, Jeff, was aided by a supportive and involved coach who took it as his responsibility to provide a safe environment for athletes like Jeff to come out. Jeff’s situation was the exception, however, as most athletes expressed an athletic department that made little to no effort to promote inclusion of sexual minorities in sport. Coaches, for the most part, were characterized as being unsure of how to “deal with” gay athletes, and thus, many chose to ignore and avoid issues concerning homosexuality.

This study is evidence of a drastic need for institutional and administrative action to make sport more inclusive and to recognize and protect sexual minorities competing at the collegiate level. As society continues to progress in its acceptance of homosexuality, it remains the responsibility of athletic and educational administrators to foster a climate that is aware of, and sensitive to, the needs of sexual minorities. The experiences of the athletes featured in this study illustrate the profound positive impact that supportive role models, coaches, and institutional leaders can have on the wellbeing of gay male athletes. The athletes’ stories also show the negative effects that come into play when institutions and coaches are silent on the issue of sexuality in sport. Fear and uncertainty abounded in the athletes’ narratives. It is past time for more athletic departments take a stand in creating a safe and welcoming climate for LGBT athletes.
If sport is to become more inclusive, the myth that there are no gay men in sport needs to be permanently dispelled. Athletes who are gay or questioning need to know that they have allies and support from their athletic department. It is important for sport organizations to reinforce acceptance and diversity as part of its greater mission. Too often in the narratives, the issue of homosexuality was not addressed on a team until after an athlete came out. Coaches and athletic administrators need to be trained to discuss issues of sexuality and promote inclusivity amongst the athlete population. It should not be left to the gay athlete to change the climate on his team, or to alert his administration that there is inequity.

Several efforts within sport are already helping to make sexual minorities more visible in athletics, including Athlete Ally, a resource community for LGBT athletes, the Fearless Project, a photography and video campaign that features LGBT perspectives in athletics, ESPN Ally, ESPN’s effort to foster education and respect for LGBT individuals within its offices, and the well-known “It Gets Better” campaign, which has seen involvement from college and professional sport teams. These resources represent the start of increased awareness and support of LGBT individuals participating in sport. The onus still falls on individual athletic administrators and coaches to start the discussion on their teams. Continued silence on the part of athletic organizations will only slow progress and create climates of uncertainty, as opposed to acceptance.

Reflexivity

This research has greatly expanded my view of how sexuality, gender, and sport intersect and the challenges gay athletes face in coming out in the realm of sport. I realized very early into my reflexive self-interview, that I really didn’t understand as
much as I thought I did. I had participated in high school sport as a cross country runner, but I since I came out in 2007, I’ve always instinctively avoided associating with people and groups who I felt wouldn’t be supportive of my sexuality. In that regard, I realized that I couldn’t even begin to imagine the hardships faced by the athletes I would be interviewing.

As qualitative research and narrative analysis are reflexive processes, I tried to document and be aware of my personal feelings and perspectives regarding the research I was conducting. I performed a self-interview before beginning research to become aware of some of the assumptions I held. I also recorded my thoughts in a reflexive journal, which I shared with my three critical friends and committee members throughout the research. The issue of reflexivity troubled me because, as a gay man, I felt so much in common with the athletes I was interviewing. A major challenge for me was to not project my own troubles, my own insecurities, and my own beliefs onto the athletes. For that reason, my journal took on a very personal role in the research, as I used it as a means to vent about what I was feeling, and then to critique and challenge those thoughts.

At one point during the research, I was considering eliminating two interviews from the study, as I questioned whether the athletes’ experiences were relevant. I entered into interviews with two former athletes who were gay, but what I had not been aware of beforehand was that these athletes were not fully developed in their sexuality during their years in college sport. They were aware of same-sex attraction, but had not acted on it. Instead, they dated women during college and it was until later that their sexuality—and the desire to come out—became clear to them. It was a challenge for me in deciding whether or not to include these athletes’ accounts in the study, as they could not discuss
coming out, or relationships with teammates and coaches, or the climate on their teams in the same capacity that the other athletes’ had. In the end, I decided to keep those interviews as part of the study. While I was able to see value in their narratives, it was something I grappled with throughout the entirety of the study.

Moments like this illuminated the importance of reflexivity and recognizing that I, as the researcher, will leave an unavoidable impression on the research I’ve conducted. In working and sharing with my committee members, I attempted to openly and honestly confront my own, deep-rooted, perspectives about homosexuality, fear, masculinity, society, sport, gender, and much more. In practicing reflexivity, I hoped to limit the effects of my own interpretations on the research I was conducting.

**Constructing the Narratives**

The narrative approach has proven to be a valuable tool for qualitative researchers, and a compelling method of interpreting how individuals characterize and perceive reality (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). Phoenix et al. wrote “it is in and through stories that we live our lives” and that stories “are a reflexive way of encouraging people to think critically about their habitual worlds, and can engage and move people emotionally and cognitively” (p. 3). Looking at my research from a critical theory perspective, which assumes that gay men in sport are an underprivileged group, the narrative style stood out to me as a powerful means to tell the stories of the athletes I had interviewed.

In constructing the narratives, I tried to include as many direct passages from the interviews as possible, allowing the athletes’ stories to speak for themselves. The five narrative categories emerged after examining and reexamining each interview transcript.
and picking up on themes and commonalities between the athletes. Throughout this process, I tried to continually challenge my interpretations and practiced reflexive techniques to stay aware of my role as gatekeeper in the narrative process. When the time came to construct the layered narrative, and add theory on top of the athletes’ stories, my hand in shaping the research intensified, as I engaged in a process of qualitative “meaning-making” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 4). By routinely going back to the raw transcripts, I did my best to accurately depict the experiences and perceptions of the gay male athletes whose stories I had collected.

Final Remarks

The athletes featured in this study demonstrate a changing culture in intercollegiate athletics regarding homosexuality. Each of the athletes who came out on their teams described a feeling of acceptance and safety among their teammates, some sharing powerful stories of support and affirmation. While it is evident that uncertainty and negative perceptions still loom, the athletes felt overwhelmingly that coming out was a positive and rewarding experience for them. Each athlete also recognized the significance of his position and what it meant in terms of challenging the dominant notion of sport as devoid of, and incompatible with, homosexuality (Anderson, 2002; Bryson, 1990). Less of a shift was evident in terms of masculinity, as athletes described an aversion to femininity and an overall agreement that the embodiment of masculinity was an important means of fitting in on their teams.

Absent from this study are any athletes participating in football or basketball—arguably the two most popular (and most masculinized) sports in the United States. As a likely consequence of these sports’ status at the “center of sport” and the increased
associations with hegemonic masculinity, it is extremely rare for athletes in football or basketball to come out while playing (Messner, 2002). It is imperative that future research examines the culture and climate of these sports, and that efforts to increase inclusivity reach athletes participating in them. The athletes in this study represent only a small portion of gay and bisexual men competing in athletics. While the majority of athletes interviewed felt secure in coming out on their teams, it is important to recognize the many athletes are still struggling with issues of sexuality—some who may never feel safe enough to come out in their sport. It is for these athletes that we must continue to strive to create change and open up dialogue concerning homosexuality in sport. Athletic departments and other sport organizations must take an active role in changing the climate of their teams. Athletic administrators, coaches, fans, and individual athletes must come together to break the silence.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Semi-structured Interview Guide

“Before we begin the interview, I need to ask for your verbal consent to participate in this study. Previously, I e-mailed you the consent form. Have you read this document? (If not, researcher will allow time for participant to review it). Do you have any questions about the procedure, confidentiality, or anything else? Are you over 18 years of age? Do you willingly consent to be a participant in this study?”

“Thank you. I also want to remind you that you may choose not to answer or respond to any question.”

A. Background Information
   1. What sport do you currently compete in?
   2. What drew you to that sport?
   3. What year did you start participating in your sport?
   4. How many years have you played on your current collegiate team?
   5. Why did you choose your current university?

B. Identity
   a. How do you describe your identity in terms of your sexuality?
   b. How do you describe your identity in terms of gender?
   c. How do you describe your racial identity?
   d. How do you identify religiously?
   e. Describe your relationship with your family.
   f. Describe your close friends outside of sports.
   g. What are your interests outside of sports?

C. Experiences in Sport
   1. Tell me about your experiences in collegiate sport.
      a. Relationships with teammates
      b. Relationships with coaches
      c. Interactions with sport medicine personnel
   2. How would you describe the climate of your team for gay/bisexual men?
   3. Can you talk about the climate of the locker room?
   4. How would you describe the climate of your athletic department for LGBT individuals?
   5. What advice would you give a freshman who you knew was going to become a member of your team?
      a. Why?
      b. Who would you consider allies within your team or athletic department?

D. Masculinity
   a. I am interested in your perceptions about masculinity and sport. First, how would you define or describe masculinity? How important is masculinity?
E. Are there any other aspects of your experiences as a collegiate athlete that you’d like
to share that I have not asked about?

COMMON PROBE QUESTIONS:
How?
Why?
Can you give me an example?
Can you tell me a story about a situation in which that occurred?

Follow-Up Interview

The specific questions will be developed after reading the transcript of Interview #1.
Topics will include:
- Further perceptions of masculinity
- Further perceptions of being a college athlete
- Level of acceptance among teammates and coaches
- Importance of fitting in with teammates
- Specific examples of [something said in previous interview]
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT AND INFORMED CONSENT

My name is Danny Sierra and I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University studying Sport Administration. I am currently looking for participants to take part in a research study examining the experiences of gay male athletes competing in collegiate sports.

I am interested in interviewing male collegiate athletes who identify as gay or bisexual and who are either currently competing or who have recently completed their eligibility. Participation in the study will involve 1-2 interviews focused around understanding gay male athletes’ experiences and perceptions of sport. Participants can choose to interview in-person, via Skype or by telephone. All participant information will remain strictly confidential.

To better understand the experiences of gay male athletes, it is imperative to go to the source. Involvement in this study will allow participants to add their unique insight to this important field of research. If you are interested in participating or learning more about the study, please contact Danny Sierra (615-308-1523, dsierra@bgsu.edu). If you know other athletes who may have interest in this study, please forward this message to them.

Thank you for taking time to consider this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Danny Sierra, Graduate Student, Sport Administration
Informed Consent Form

Project Title: The Experiences of Gay Men in College Sport

Researcher: Daniel Sierra, Graduate Student, Sport Administration

Study Purpose and Procedure

You are being asked to participate in a research project that I am conducting as my thesis at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, OH. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of gay male athletes in college sport. As more is learned about the gay male experience in sport, this information can be used to develop strategies to that reinforce inclusive sport climates.

Your involvement in this study includes participating in 1-2 interview sessions. The first session will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will focus on your experience as an athlete. This initial interview will be audio-recorded and will occur in person, via Skype or by telephone. You have the choice of which is more convenient and comfortable for you. Please be aware that electronic communications may not be 100% secure.

Within one month of completing the first interview session, you may be contacted again by the researcher for a second interview. This follow-up session will allow time to clarify and elaborate on what was discussed in the first interview and to ensure your story is being understood as you intended. This interview will last 30-60 minutes.

Confidentiality of all information you provide in the interviews will be protected to the best of my ability. Your coaches and/or any members of your team, athletic department, or university will not receive any information about your participation in this study. Though each of the interview sessions will be transcribed word-for-word, any mention of your name, the names of other people, and any other information that could identify any participant or the university will be removed or coded in the printed transcripts. As a result, any information that may identify you, your team, other people you mention, or your university will not be included in any papers or presentations associated with this study. My advisor and I will be the only ones listening to the audio-recordings and reading the original transcripts. The consent forms, audio-recordings of the interviews, and printed transcripts will all be secured in a locked office throughout the study. Electronic documents will be stored on a password-protected computer. And, upon completion of the project, every audio-taped session and original transcript will be shred (physically or electronically).
**Additional Consent Information**

As a participant in this study, your involvement will allow me to learn more about the experiences of gay male athletes competing in collegiate athletics. You also may benefit from being able to openly discuss your own involvement in athletics and related sporting encounters.

Risks of participation are minimal and do not exceed those which may be experienced during everyday life. Our procedures are designed to safeguard your confidentiality. As mentioned previously, any information that could identify or link you, your sport team, your athletic department, or your university to this research project will be removed and coded in printed transcripts and any written products from this study. Should topics arise in the interviews that make you feel uncomfortable, you may choose not to respond and to move on to the next question. Further, you may withdraw your consent or end participation at any point during the project. The decision to terminate partaking in this research study or to decline participation altogether will not negatively affect your relationships with the researcher or Bowling Green State University.

Additional questions or concerns about this study may be directed to me, Danny Sierra (615-308-1523, dsierra@bgsu.edu), or my advisor, Dr. Amanda Paule-Koba (419-372-7229, apaule@bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact, the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716, hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you are 18 years of age or older and you have been informed about what is expected of you as a participant in this study, the confidentiality procedures, and that your participation is entirely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty.

______________________________  __________________________
Signature                        Printed Name
APPENDIX C: HSRB APPROVAL

DATE: May 7, 2012

TO: Daniel Sierra

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [331261-2] The Experience of Gay Men in Sport

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: May 5, 2012

EXPIRATION DATE: April 28, 2013

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please add the text equivalent of the HSRB IRBNet approval/expiration date stamp to the "footer" area of the electronic consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to
initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 15 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on April 28, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.