

Facing the Bogey: Women, Football and Sexuality

Barbara Cox and Shona Thompson

University of Auckland

Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

This article examines the implications for football players of the way in which women's sport is regularly framed within discourses of sexuality. It focuses on a premier league football team in New Zealand comprised of both homosexually and heterosexually identified women. Interviews with players reveal the extent to which homophobia is associated with women's experiences of football and is something that all players have had to confront. While homophobia within women's football can be reduced through the increased visibility of lesbian players and interactions with their heterosexual team-mates, homo-negativity from outside the team is experienced at two levels, based on irrational judgements and purposeful intimidating behaviour directed at sportswomen.

Introduction

'Do you play soccer, oh, you're a lesbian?'

Women who play football consistently encounter the assumption that their participation in this sport is an indicator of their sexual identity, and that identity is homosexual. These assumptions seem to be based on a fallacious logic positing that women who cross socially constructed gender demarcations, by playing a sport that has historically been dominated by men, must somehow be 'pseudo men' defined in sexual terms. This assumption is also laced with large doses of misogynist homophobia that becomes part of the culture of sport and the ways women experience football.

In this article we consider these experiences by focusing on the members of a premier-level women's football team in New Zealand comprising both heterosexual and homosexual players. We discuss the discourses of sexuality in the context of women's sport and how this is experienced by the football players, having implications for the ways in which they interact within the team and position themselves collectively as sportswomen. In view of the exponential growth of women's football, this discussion provides an understanding of the issues these women face and highlights how divisions in women's sport resulting from entrenched homophobia could be diffused.

Women's Football

With the gradual increase in the social and economic power of women, and increased opportunities brought about by liberal political agendas and equal

rights legislation, women's participation in football has increased throughout the world. Although the degree of their penetration into this traditionally male domain varies, greatest headway has been made within the new football nations, especially the United States where there is an estimated 7.2 million women players (Chadonic, 2000). As more and more footballing countries enter the FIFA Women's World Cup, women's football is also growing in popularity as a spectator sport. The final match between USA and China in the 1999 Women's World Cup, for example, attracted over 92,000 spectators and an international TV audience that exceeded 40 million. In response to the exponential growth, an inaugural U-19 Women's World Cup is to be held in Canada in 2002.

While the academic study of women in sport has grown steadily, it is only in the past five years that attention has been specifically paid to women's football. In 1997 Newsham compiled a socio-historical account of an exceptional football team, The Dick, Kerr Ladies Football team, who began playing in England in 1917 primarily to raise funds for various charitable organisations. During the following years they attracted crowds of up to 27,000, eventually earning the wrath of the English Football Association, which responded in 1921 by banning them from playing on club grounds. The Association stated, 'the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged' (Newsham, 1997: 49). Though the team continued to play, this ban effectively prevented the growth and development of women's football in the United Kingdom for the next fifty years.

Roy Cox and Jeremy Ruane (1997) and Sue Lopez (1997) published historical accounts of women's football in New Zealand and England respectively, followed by Jere Longman (2000), who focused on the United States women's football team around the time of the 1999 World Cup, describing their popularity as a 'cultural phenomenon'. Jacques Henry and Howard Comeaux (1999) examined co-ed football in North America as a means of studying gender egalitarianism. Sheila Scraton, Kari Fasting, Gertrud Pfister and Ana Bunuel, (1999) and Barbara Cox and Shona Thompson (2000) record the experiences of women playing elite football in Europe and New Zealand respectively.

It is not just in football that women's participation numbers are increasing. Since the 1970s, more and more women have begun to participate in a wide variety of sports and perceptions have broadened about what are 'appropriate' sports for women. With better access to facilities, training and coaching, female athletes are demonstrating that they can play sport with as much skill, athleticism, knowledge and enthusiasm as their male counterparts. Women who play 'like men' or, more precisely, who play sports that have traditionally been dominated by men, however, continue to challenge gender boundaries. Most challenging appears to be their participation in sports that are seen to epitomise a nation's vision of its masculinity. Sport has become a key

site where men 'do gender', thus women's sporting excellence challenges what it means to be male or female in society, thus endangering the balance of power in gender relations (Birrell & Theberge, 1994; Nelson, 1991; 1994).

The discourse of heterosexuality is heavily dependent on gender boundaries for its meaning. This discourse contributes to the assumption that, when women take on stereotyped masculine characteristics such as engaging in a traditionally male-dominated activity like playing sport, gendered boundaries have been crossed. The logic therefore follows that this activity, when played by women, challenges heterosexuality and therefore signifies lesbianism. Women footballers who have strayed into traditional male terrain consistently experience this assumption. Sportswomen who deviate from the 'norms' of heterosexual femininity by, for example, becoming serious athletes, having short hair, muscular bodies and/or not displaying significant relationships with men, are frequently challenged about their sexuality. Stigmatising strong, athletic women as 'pseudo men' (translated as lesbian) unless they show easily recognisable evidence of heterosexuality, is one way in which sport can be maintained as a masculine domain and not be seen as disrupting the dominant gender order. This presents a particular set of problems with which female footballers must deal, both within and from outside the sport.

Sexuality and Women's Sport

Heterosexuality has been analysed as an institution and an organising principle in social relations, theoretically separate from the sexual act (Rich, 1980; Richardson, 1996). Its application to sport has already been documented. For example, Shona Thompson (1999) detailed how institutionalised heterosexuality underpinned and organised the domestic labour done by women as wives and mothers that facilitated and serviced the sport played by men and children. Within sport, the conspicuous promotion of heterosexuality has influenced the types and forms of sport and physical education made available to women (Scruton, 1992). Helen Lenskyj (1986) documented how the heterosexist discourses of medicine, the media and sport contributed strongly to the way certain physical activities were framed as 'female-appropriate' because they were perceived to enhance women's heterosexual appeal and reproductive ability. Susan Cahn (1994) has shown how heterosexuality and homophobia determined how women's sport was historically organised in North America, particularly in the field of physical education. Liv-Jorunn Kolnes (1995) revealed how sportswomen may negotiate conflict between their athletic and feminine statuses, compensating for displaying the seemingly unfeminine trait of playing elite sport by actively emphasising symbols of heterosexuality, such as having long hair and dressing in deliberately feminine ways, especially when dealing with the media. Scruton *et al.* (1999) and Cox and Thompson (2000) illustrated how female football players continually negotiate the overlapping, and at times contradictory, discourses of sport, gender and heterosexuality.

Judith Butler (1990) used the term 'heterosexual matrix' to describe the way heterosexuality encodes and structures everyday life. Juxtaposed against heterosexuality, the norm for all social/sexual relationships, homosexuality is constructed as abnormal, deviant and, in some discourses, sinful. In a sporting context, homosexuality has always been stigmatised but the implications and effects of this differ between male and female athletes. Sport participation for men, as Michael Messner (1996) points out, is a normalising equation: athleticism = masculinity = heterosexuality. Sporting prowess epitomises masculinity thus all male athletes are assumed to be heterosexual unless proven otherwise. For women, however, no such normalising exists. Athleticism has not been aligned with femininity, and thus heterosexuality is questioned. The implications for women, therefore, are that unless 'proven' otherwise, that is displaying visible signifiers of heterosexuality or playing in traditionally female-appropriate sport, female athletes are frequently presumed to be lesbian.

When examining the experiences of women in particular sports that have not been considered female-appropriate, or have been traditionally associated with men, researchers have found that participants are regularly labelled 'butch', 'dykey' and 'unfeminine', terms used as derogatory synonyms for lesbian. Sportswomen have experienced this widely. Kevin Young (1997) found that Canadian female athletes in rugby, rock-climbing, wrestling, ice-hockey and martial arts had been labelled in these terms. Such experiences, however, vary according to different sports. From a study of European women participants in gymnastics, tennis and football, Kari Fasting (1997) reported that all the football players interviewed had encountered assumptions about being lesbian; only a few of the tennis players had experienced these assumptions but among the female gymnasts it was simply not an issue. From the US, Todd Crosset (1995) reported how *élite* female golfers felt considerable peer and organisational pressure to wear appropriate clothing and to use make-up and hairstyles to counter public perceptions of lesbianism. Similarly, Cox and Thompson (2000) found that many female football players in New Zealand, because of the unisex gear in which they play, deliberately selected hairstyles as a means of differentiating themselves, not only from male players but also from the stereotype of a short-haired lesbian player.

This is an age-old but curious situation. Why are female athletes questioned overtly or covertly about their sexuality? Why do so many elite female athletes, both straight and gay, find it necessary to 'do heterosexuality'? The answer lies in the homophobia or homo-negativism that continues to surround women's sport. While the basis of homophobia is the fear of deviation from social norms, with the assumption that to be heterosexual is normal and to be lesbian is deviant (Hargreaves, 1994), the reason why this negativity has become associated with women's sport is founded in the ways sport has been instrumental in defining traditional gender boundaries and maintaining a masculine priority. Manifestations of these factors are seen in the homophobic

discourses that surround women's sport and the historical portrayal of the lesbian as the bogeywoman within (Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998). It is a problem common to women's sports in many various parts of the world, which Nancy Theberge (1995: 401) refers to as 'the image thing'.

The media is particularly influential in representing sport as a resource for 'doing masculinity' (Crosset, 1995: 126). Portrayals of female athletes have differed significantly from those of male athletes. Emphasis is typically placed more on women's physical appearance and domestic relationships than on their physical action or achievements (Duncan, 1990). It can also be instrumental in ensuring the institution of heterosexuality is safe-guarded through homonegative messages. For example, immediately after Martina Navratilova won her ninth Wimbledon singles tennis title, the main newspaper in Western Australia featured a large photograph of Margaret Court, an Australian former world tennis champion, with arms around her three daughters and an accompanying article in which she is quoted denouncing Navratilova as a bad role model for children. Continuing with the same theme, the next day's edition of the same newspaper carried the headline 'Youngsters lured by lesbians: Court' (*West Australian*, 1990: 108), with Court claiming that young female players on the world tennis circuit were being led into homosexuality by older players. This sensationalised criticism of a female world champion by a former one, juxtaposed with the powerful imagery of motherhood as the normative heterosexual experience, demonstrates how the media can be instrumental in perpetuating homophobic myths within women's sport (Thompson, 1999).

Jan Wright and Gill Clarke's (1999) analysis of the popular print media in both Australia and the United Kingdom show how female rugby union players are represented, through the choice of language and visuals, in ways that constitute them in terms of hegemonic versions of heterosexual femininity. This, Wright and Clarke (1999: 231) argue, serves to 'reassure the (primarily male) readers that these women are . . . no threat to the masculinity of male rugby players or their game'. Similarly, Angela Burroughs, Leonie Ashburn and Liz Seebohm (1995) documented the homophobic media coverage of women's cricket in Australia, which made much copy over claims that the sport was dominated by lesbians.

Throughout the past century, homophobia has been theorised in many disciplinary fields, from psychoanalysis to queer theory. Within women's sport, explanations for homophobia have usually been based on the assumption that it exists within a framework of 'compulsory heterosexuality' or a gender order that favours hegemonic masculinity (Messner & Sabo, 1990). Traditional definitions of homophobia have usually been phrased in psychological terms such as irrational fear, intolerance and hatred of behaviour that is perceived to be outside normative gender boundaries (Lorde, 1984). Psychological responses cannot, however, completely account for the pervasive and hostile nature of homophobia within and surrounding women's sport. Vikki Krane

(1996) suggests homo-negativism is a more appropriate term as it refers to the purposeful and deliberate, negative behaviours directed towards homosexuals. An analysis of homophobia in the context of women's sport should include an examination of attitudes towards lesbianism as well as the purposeful, negative and intimidating behaviours directed at all sportswomen, which are based on judgements surrounding sexuality.

The narratives of interviewed women football players reveal explicitly that homophobia operates on two levels, both within and outside of women's football. We explore the implications of this by examining the emergence of the lesbian stereotype in football and the construction of the lesbian player as the 'bogey' of women's football. Additionally, we report the ways in which both gay and straight players interact within discourses of homophobia, how they deal with questions of sexual identity and how their interactions can work towards greater understanding, tolerance and unity within the football team.

Method

The reported data came from research focusing on a women's football squad in Auckland, New Zealand. It involved participant observation and in-depth interviews with all sixteen members of the squad, who would be considered élite players in that they had competed in international competition and played in the City's premier football league. They ranged in age from 18 to 33 years. Ten of the sixteen players had completed tertiary education and all were in full-time paid employment. None had children. Eight were living in domestic/sexual relationships – five with men and three with women. Within the group, five players identified as nationals of other countries (China, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway). However, the majority were New Zealanders, two of whom were of Maori descent, the indigenous inhabitants of New Zealand. This cultural heterogeneity is not necessarily representative of the composition of women's football teams throughout New Zealand but more likely reflects Auckland as the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the country.

Barbara, one of the co-authors and a football player herself, was associated with the squad as manager and substitute player. As such, she attended the training sessions and weekly games throughout the football season, a period of nine months. The first stage of her research involved participant observation in the dressing room before and after matches, noting interactions among the players and their bodily practices. After four weeks of observations she was named in the starting line-up of the team to play that day. She noted: 'After I had played, I felt that the team as a whole (rather than just those players who had known me for many years) accepted me more as another team member rather than as an outsider who was researching them' (Cox, 1998: 22). From then on they seemed more accustomed to her presence as a researcher in the dressing room and were open and honest during the subsequent interviews.

After five weeks of observation Barbara began the second phase of the research, interviewing all sixteen players in the squad. These interviews took place before or after football training and generally lasted one to two hours. The players had the option of being interviewed individually or in groups, with most choosing to do so in pairs. This configuration proved to be the most satisfactory way of eliciting information as it allowed both players equal opportunity to speak, but they also typically ‘sparked’ off comments from the other and kept each other honest. While the completion of the interviews ended the formal data collection, for the remainder of the football season, Barbara’s continued informal interaction with the players was very helpful for clarifying and expanding on issues that became significant during the analysis process.

Amongst other topics, the interviews explored questions concerning sexuality, lesbianism and homophobia as experienced by the players within women’s football in New Zealand. Those interviewed were relaxed about discussing these topics and expressed a high degree of frankness. This could have been because of Barbara’s rapport with the group, but could also be attributed to the typical banter exchanged in the dressing room, frequently involving open discussions of sex. Note, for example, the following exchanges about underwear, in which the different meanings surrounding sports-bras and frilly/lacy underwear were explored. Kirsty explained:

I wear frilly underwear myself, sometimes, but I’ve always avoided it for soccer and part of it is not to get ‘eeh, eeh, eeh’ from the other girls in the dressing room. Because it was a code. In my old team everybody knew that when the frilly underwear came on there was a bit of ‘rumpty-pumpty’ [sexual activity] and you had a partner, otherwise there was no need to get frilly!

This code was widely understood. After one victorious game, Rowena held up for Barbara’s inspection a set of purple lacy underwear into which she was about to change, saying, ‘Look, no sports-bra today’. Quick as a flash one of the players responded, ‘She’s not going to get any tonight, what’s she worried about!’ To which Rowena replied, amidst laughter from the others, ‘Well, I’m all tuckered out from today anyway’.

The data discussed here derive from parts of the interview transcripts where sexuality within the context of football was the specific topic. Organised under several subtitles, this article deals with the major themes that emerged as players discussed the implications of playing a sport in which women’s participation is commonly assumed to be synonymous with homosexual identity. Further, we highlight the forms of interaction that take place within a football team comprised of players who represent a mixture of sexual identities.

Awareness and Warnings

In contemporary society, to be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who is outside the acceptable, routinised order of society, someone who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male and who is woman-identified, thereby representing a threat to the nuclear family and to male dominance and control (Pharr, 1993: 312). While this defines lesbianism within a broad context of social organisation, the ways by which the interviewed players defined a lesbian tended to be almost entirely sexual, that is, a woman who lives with, sleeps with, is attracted to and/or is in an intimate relationship with another woman. Nevertheless, within this definition were stereotypes about how such women looked and behaved. All the players interviewed, including those who had later come out as lesbian, had grown up clearly learning the stereotypes and the homo-negativism associated with them. Significantly, much of this learning was connected to their experiences in football.

All of the players interviewed learned of the term 'lesbian', and its sexual meaning, during their early adolescent years, mainly from television programmes or from conversations with school friends. Invariably, however, it had been associated with their introduction to football. Patricia, for example, learned about lesbianism from her junior national team coach in Denmark, who had explained to her that, as she would be in female company almost exclusively, there was the possibility she may become a lesbian. Patricia said:

When I was 14, I played for the U/16 National team and the girls came together all the time and the first time I went, the coach said to me '[You] know what this can mean, because there's a lot of you together five times a week and you play a game in the weekend. You only see these 18 girls, you're not seeing anybody else, you can be intrigued, it's probably not going to be mentioned outside. . . '. Yes, he was a man and he knew, cause it had happened before, however, he just wanted [me] to prepare for it. A few people couldn't take it, then you just had to come up and talk to him about it. We had two girls that didn't want to be in the team cause they were scared. Nothing was ever said – they just say there's a possibility that you can go to that side.

Involvement in football came with warnings, usually homophobic, about the behaviour of other women. When Tania, a New Zealander, was about to join a football team at age thirteen, her brother's male friend told her mother to 'watch out' because that particular team was 'all a bunch of dykes'. Similarly, Rowena's mother did not want her to play football for a particular team because she had heard that they were 'a bunch of lesbians' and feared they may influence Rowena into 'becoming one'.

Most of the players interviewed encountered lesbians for the first time, or those they assumed to be, within the football environment. These first encounters often fed into a framework of stereotypical assumptions, contingent upon who they had seen or known, which later formed the basis for future judgements used to categorise other football players. Jannica, who was straight, explained that the lesbian members in the women's teams for which she had played previously all had short, spiky hair and that this was her perception of a lesbian football player. Donna said she expected lesbians to have shaved heads, which was reinforced when watching her sister play against an all-lesbian team:

It's just the association with being a stereotype. Like when Holly played against [name of club], I went and watched. I was surrounded by big, fat lesbians with shaved heads and dogs, kissing each other behind the trees. I thought, ooh . . . it's right. I did expect lesbians to have shaved heads.

Although the description of lesbians as 'fat' does not match with the image of sporting lesbians as muscular and athletic, being 'butch' was a common description that many of the players associated with being lesbian, particularly those who played sport. Females who had short, cropped hair, who did not look conventionally feminine, always dressed in jeans and 'acted like men' in the way they held themselves and walked, all qualified for being labelled as 'butch' or 'dyke' (the terms were used interchangeably). Donna revealed how this was commonly associated with women playing football:

When I was 13 there was a boy in my class at college and he said to me 'Do you play football?', and I said 'Yes', and he said, 'You must be butch'. And I thought, 'butch' meaning a dog being butch. . . . I only found out a year afterwards that he meant lesbian. But when he said 'butch', I actually thought he was calling me a dog, and I was really insulted.

Holly also recalled meeting a guy from a rugby club when she was about twenty, who said to her, 'Do you play soccer, oh, you're a lesbian?'

Being Labelled

Most players had been labelled in some way within the context of women's football, at first with the seemingly benign name of 'tomboy,' but later, as they grew older, this became translated to 'butch,' 'lesbian' or 'dyke', all used derogatorily. Patricia described how the best team in her home country, all lesbian players, were treated by opposing team players, including herself:

Go back to my country where we had one women's team, it was the best team in the League but the whole team was lesbian and people say, 'yeah, now we have to play against them'. Even before I knew what I was [lesbian], I was still one of these people who said yuk and I didn't want to play against them. I thought they were yuk. I think it is because they were lesbian, that word does something and that's why people don't like to use that word – it's either gay or bi-sexual. A lot of people we know here don't call us lesbian, because everybody around lesbians says, 'ooh, ah yuk!'

Jenny and Patricia both refer to themselves as bi-sexual in the attempt to avoid the stigma that they perceive is attached to being labelled lesbian.

The interviewed players discussed the strategies they had used to avoid being labelled, which included deliberately managing their appearance, such as the length and style of their hair. Many players associated spiky, short hair with the stereotypical image of lesbianism. All players, except Patricia, wore their hair long or medium length and in a conventionally feminine style, some explaining they did this because they felt it was more feminine.

With lesbian-related words being used as a form of derision, coupled with warnings issued to young players from family and friends about supposedly predatory lesbian behaviour, homophobic attitudes become perpetuated as part of the culture of all-female teams. Within this environment it is hardly surprising that heterosexual football players, concerned about being perceived and labelled as lesbian, attempt to construct mainstream images of femininity in order to deny such allegations (Hargreaves, 1994). Some of the older, straight players interviewed disassociated or separated themselves from the company of lesbians to avoid the possibility of being labelled lesbian. Marlene said she 'didn't mind' them 'doing it' as long as they didn't 'hang around her'. Jannica thought 'they should keep to themselves,' and Lynn explained how she tried to avoid being in their company. The gay players were well aware of surveillance and judgement. Patricia said of her partner, 'At first, Jenny was too scared to hold hands in public, in case people were watching'. In her discussion of lesbianism, Jenny had agreed that there was a popular stereotype of what a lesbian looks like, but she added that she felt it required a strong, independent woman to portray herself in such a way, 'like an image that doesn't hide what you are'.

The players' narratives revealed that much of the construction of the lesbian player as the 'bogey' in football is centred around an assumption, borrowed from their experiences of heterosexuality, that, because a lesbian is sexually attracted to women, she will exhibit 'male-like' predatory behaviour amongst other women and be sexually aggressive. It is this myth that players, especially younger ones, bring with them into women's football. The effects of this belief are most evident in the dressing room.

Fear and Mystery

In a heterosexual culture where the circulation of idealised femininity is tailored to benefit the supposed desiring gaze of the heterosexual male, the same conventions of looking and desiring becomes superimposed upon lesbians. That is, constructed as ‘pseudo-men’, the lesbian gaze is perceived as ‘masculine’, and one with predatory intent. Of the fears that football players, particularly younger ones, bring with them into the dressing room, one is a fear of the lesbian gaze because it is similarly constructed as predatory. The assumption is that the gaze is both sexually desiring and indiscriminate, that is, a lesbian will be aroused by the sight of any naked female body. The fact that most straight players believed this to be ‘normal’ underlies the power of the homophobic construction of lesbians as locker room ‘peepers’. Marlene’s comment, for example, demonstrates her perception of the lesbian gaze as having the same characteristics as that of heterosexual men. She said, ‘It is just like having a guy in the room because they [lesbians] are looking at you differently, with different eyes’.

Such issues arise around the convention in team sports of showering communally. While young girls are commonly uncomfortable about undressing in public, several of the interviewed players recalled, when they were around fifteen or sixteen years old, feeling shy about showering after games in case players whom they presumed to be lesbians were looking at them. As Patricia said, ‘I think people are scared cause they think, Oh shit, she purposely likes me, she’s going to look at me all over – that’s what people are scared of and they don’t want to get changed’. While Tania explained that she thought it was just part of the stereotype that lesbians would ‘jump’ girls, Kirsty gave an example of the extent to which this was a common belief when she described being quizzed about the possibility of sexual advances in the dressing room:

The public, which would be usually guys, would say, ‘Isn’t it strange to go into the showers with people who are lesbians? Don’t they attack you in the showers?’ [But] it was totally different [from their perceptions] and I couldn’t comprehend that people’s thinking was so wrong.

Although several straight players talked of being unconcerned about the lesbian gaze in football dressing rooms, lesbian players were well aware that heterosexual players might think that their gaze was sexually predatory which was, for them, an intimidating situation. Rowena highlighted this when she explained how her partner, who played for another team, did not like showering in front of her team-mates because she was afraid that other players would think she was looking at them with sexual desire.

Another source of fear and mystery concerned team travel. Two straight players recalled, when they were younger, being particularly nervous about

travelling with lesbian players when there was the possibility of having to share bedrooms. With very limited resources, players travelling abroad to compete in national representative teams are often accommodated four to a room, which usually requires sharing a double bed. As Melissa said to Marilyn:

Do you remember in Australia, there was a double bed in one room and two single beds in the living room and you said to me, 'Whatever you do, you're in this double bed with me. You're not letting me end up with [name of another player]!

Paradoxically, by choosing to share a double bed, Melissa and Marilyn had not considered that other team members might question their relationship. Both were more concerned with the threat that players they suspected were lesbian might 'come on to them'. Although they later acknowledged their concerns were ridiculous, it still did not allay their fears at the time. For these two players, homosexuality was not acceptable, an opinion endorsed by their families and close friends. Melissa described her father's likely reaction to her being gay, highlighting a common assumption that homosexuality is a choice in the sense that as you choose it, so can you 'unchoose' it. She explained, 'I mean, if I said to my father, I'm gay, he'd probably go 'yeah, bloody right you are. I don't think you're going to be anymore'.

Being Tested

While derogatory labelling of sportswomen mainly came from outside the team environment, within the team, players talked about how they needed to know about the sexual identity of other team members and would put each other through 'tests'. This regularly happened to newcomers to a team. The expectation in a team of predominantly straight players is that the new player would 'prove' heterosexuality, such as displaying a boyfriend or husband or demonstrating an interest in men generally. As Jessie explained:

And even the suspicion that surrounds you, if you look a certain way or don't play along with the little games, it's like being guilty until proven innocent...You're suspected of being lesbian until you prove yourself to be heterosexual and hence, one of 'us', safe, non-threatening.

Once players had 'passed' the test, then behaviour such as hugging or touching fellow players was never questioned. Most of the interviewed players agreed that they did indeed test other players if they did not know them very well. They gave a variety of reasons for doing this. Tania explained how she preferred a direct approach:

I would never put myself in the situation that I was unsure of – if I was unsure about someone’s sexuality I would go up and ask them. You know, in more of a public forum, and especially if I thought they were hitting on me. I’d just ask them flat. I mean, what have you got to lose?

Several players justified needing to know someone’s sexuality to avoid saying something that could be considered offensive. As Jannica explained:

I remember from last year, like coming to this team, and someone was saying don’t say something about so and so in front of so and so because she’s trying to get friendly with her, or something like that, so then you immediately think is that person ‘that’ [lesbian] or are they not? You just don’t know. Maybe because you want to know what you are dealing with. Because if you know that someone is queer, okay, you’re not going to slag off somebody that comes by – well not that you would.

Within the team setting, testing is likely to be more covert as players do not wish to offend team-mates but, when applied to members of an opposing team, it becomes much more openly discussed, usually pejoratively. In effect, the process of this ‘testing’ divides players into ‘us’ and ‘them’. As Jannica, a straight player stated, ‘We’re different’. Having created these divisions, heterosexual players employ defensive strategies, partly to diminish the possibility of receiving unwanted sexual advances but also to disassociate themselves from the possibility of being perceived as lesbian by association.

The interviewed players applied these disassociating strategies in various ways, and there were differences between younger and older players. Marilyn, a younger player, felt quite confused and nervous when she found out that a team-mate with whom she had spent considerable time was lesbian. Her description of this shows her awkwardness. She explained:

Trying to say you’re straight without saying it. I’m sure I didn’t mean to do it but every time I was talking to her – I was sort of mates with her – then I found out she was lesbian. It didn’t really worry me but, oh wow. Anyway she used to hang around with me quite a bit and I thought, oh God, I don’t really want people to think I am [lesbian]; I got a picture of this guy [and said], isn’t he yum yum, and stuff like that. Of course it never entered anyone’s mind that, you know, but you feel more comfortable because you think, cool, they know I’m straight. . . .Yep, they’re [lesbians] not a threat, they’re never a threat anyway. So it was basically doing extra things that you wouldn’t think, but it was because she was a

lesbian, oh shit, oh yeah, in the end, I love men, but oh god, they don't like them [men] and then you think – and you start saying silly things.

Marilyn did not have a repertoire of experiences to draw upon to help her deal with the concept of lesbianism in this situation, resulting in her acting foolishly. While most women grow up learning how to deal with all the nuances of heterosexual intimacy, they do not have the comparable knowledge regarding homosexual intimacy because of its closeted nature.

Breaking Down Divisions

Divisions between gay and straight women can be helpfully dismantled through positive interaction and openness. Clarissa described how she had changed her attitude toward homosexuality through her relationship with a gay friend:

A close friend of mine is a lesbian and since I've known her, and I've been around her a long [time], I've definitely accepted it, yeah fully now – well, a lot more than I did before because I was very naive. I have never been around it and it's always, like, lesbians, ooh, you know, it's not natural, that sort of thing. Whereas now I'm comfortable with it and I'm close to her and she's aware that I'm not attracted to females. I know she is, but we've got a good friendship and I'm not uncomfortable when she touches me or anything like that because it's like a guy, a good friend, and once you've established that understanding there is no difference for me to have a guy as a good friend or a lesbian as a good friend.

Because there were three 'out' lesbians in this football team, many of the straight women have changed their attitudes towards the lesbian women. For the most part, the interaction through football between the gay and straight members of the team allowed the straight players the opportunity to move beyond stereotypical and negative views of lesbians. As Tamara pointed out, 'If you don't know any lesbians, you do have stereotyped ideas but I have such a range now to choose from'. Furthermore, the dismantling of divisive prejudices meant that this social environment, especially within the team, became one in which the gay players felt a level of safety not perceived in other environments. Rowena highlighted this when she explained that, although she was out at football, she had not told anyone at her workplace that she is gay because she did not want to be faced with possible prejudice there.

The decision, however, by the three lesbian players to be out in this predominantly heterosexual team represented a considerable act of courage. Their acceptance was perhaps assisted by two factors. First, they were all in long term relationships therefore considered 'safe,' they were not perceived as

‘predatory’; Second, they ‘passed’, in that they did not look or behave in ways that matched the heterosexual players’ negative stereotypes of a lesbian, nor did they present themselves in a manner that would have had negative implications for the collective image of the team. In other words, the team as a unit could also ‘pass’ under public scrutiny. The importance of passing had an economic imperative. At least one player described how she had deliberately dressed ‘feminine’ to meet a potential financial sponsor. All players were regularly reminded of the delicate line of gender order they walked as female footballers, and the consequences of homophobic reaction towards sportswomen. As Rowena recalled:

I got really pissed off when we were playing [name of club] and I heard some guy on the sideline yell out when Patricia went and complained to the referee. This guy just yelled out, ‘Shut up, you dyke’, and I thought that’s just wrong, because we’re people.

Conclusion

A homophobic climate within and around women’s football in New Zealand is clearly evident in the interactions and recounted experiences of members of this team. All women players are affected by this climate in the ways that their sporting lives are constructed and judged. Homophobia and homo-negativism surrounding most women’s sports has put pressure on, or actively encouraged lesbian athletes to pass as heterosexual (Fusco, 1993). It has also pressured heterosexual players to disassociate themselves from lesbian team-mates and to self-police their image to conform to dominant constructions of femininity based on conspicuous heterosexuality.

In many ways, the inclusion of out lesbian players within this team has allowed all the players to explore some of the issues surrounding women’s sexuality in the context of football, as well as examining their own feelings, behaviours and attitudes towards others. It gave the heterosexual players the opportunity to reduce their internal homophobia by demonstrating how irrational and negative their attitudes were towards lesbianism. Certainly by the end of the football season, there was a noticeable reduction in the divisive ‘us’ versus ‘them’ attitude that prevailed at the beginning of this study, an observation that supports Pat Griffin’s (1992) belief that increased lesbian and gay visibility is one of the most effective tools to counteract homophobia. While the potential for this may be great amongst players within women’s sports teams, eliminating homophobia and heterosexism surrounding women’s sport generally is a much more difficult task, given its entrenched insidiousness and the unwillingness by many to accept diversity of sexual identity in sport and in the broader social realm (Griffin, 1992).

The implications of this to women’s football are not insignificant. As long as sexual identity is an issue in women’s sport, and lesbian players are

painted as the bogeywoman to be feared, those involved in women's football will continue to be faced with the need to deal with the consequences. These consequences are far reaching. They include: young women as potential players being 'scared off' football and perhaps off all competitive team sports, meaning they are denied the advantages and joys available through such participation; players being inhibited in team interactive situations, particularly regarding the dressing room and showering which has implications for player hygiene, health, comfort, team morale, social interaction and female collectiveness; players experiencing impediments, abuse and physical danger as a consequence of misogynist homophobia surrounding their participation in football; sportswomen generally suffering from the pressure to conform to a narrow and restrictive image predicated on heterosexually-inscribed femininity, which serves to retain marked gender boundaries, restrict and contain women's behaviour, and limit their power and autonomy. Despite several countries establishing professional football leagues for women (USA and Japan), or planning to (England), questions of sexuality in women's football remain an issue. Until they are irrelevant, and female athletic prowess is unchallenged and unchallenging, women's football will remain disadvantaged compared with its male counterpart, and with other more 'feminine' women's sports.

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