

Gay Jocks: A Social History of Gay Men in Athletics

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This paper examines the historical conditions which contribute to the unique experience which gay men may have of athletics. Three major areas are discussed: the historical and theoretical background, the experience of gay men in mainstream sports and gay community sports.

The theoretical aspects of this study are concerned with issues in the history and definition of homosexuality and the possibility of a distinctive gay sensibility which shapes the experience which gay men have of athletics. The current gay historical debate which pits historical constructionism against essentialism is addressed. The historical period studied extends from the 1950s to the present – this is generally considered to be the era of the North American gay liberation movement and its immediate predecessors.

Because gay men grow up in a society which assumes heterosexuality and because they are frequently not identified as being homosexual, they are often poignantly aware of a discrepancy between reality and appearance. This can predispose gay men to a sensibility which is essentially ironic. It is argued that masculinity, heterosexuality, health and good citizenship are popularly equated with athletics. The history of homosexuality, which has seen homosexuality categorized by religion, medicine and the law as sinful, pathological, effeminate, and criminal has produced a popular image of the homosexual that is in sharp contrast to the popular image of the athlete. The juxtaposition of these popular images in the experience of gay athletes presents gay athletes with the possibility of a unique ironic understanding of athletics. Many gay men are aware of this irony and it is very important in shaping their experience of athletics, especially when they are involved in the mainstream athletic milieu.

With the advent of the gay liberation movement there has been a flourishing of gay culture. One of the manifestations of gay culture has been the development of gay sports clubs and organizations ranging from local baseball and bowling leagues to International Gay Games attracting as many as 3500 lesbian and gay male competitors in 1986 at San Francisco. Some examples of North American gay athletic clubs and sports governing bodies are presented. The political and ideological significance of gay community athletics is discussed.



"Bennett's bunch" at lunch



Chuck Chalberg's Teddy Roosevelt enthralled his audience.