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Out in the Bleachers:
Sexual Identity and Women's Sports Fans

This paper examines the following question: how does sexual identity affect sports spectating? Sports scholars have written about how shared identity - be it one of nationality, ethnicity or race - can form the basis of a bond between spectator and athlete. Considering sexual identity offers a different take on spectator/athlete identification. While national, ethnic and racial identities are public, the sexual identity of gay professional athletes remains hidden for the most part.

Using evidence gathered during ethnographic fieldwork with three women's professional sports teams in the United States, I argue that the process of identification is rescripted in at least two ways in the case of lesbian fans. In the absence of publicly gay female team athletes, some lesbian spectators look for very broadly defined "lesbian-like" traits to identify with. The actual sexual orientation of the athlete is not central but rather a certain enactment or performance of gender is. By being strong, active and aggressive, female team athletes can present a visible expression of alternative gendered behavior, of the different ways one can be female. In the silence around gay players' identity, certain gender enactments become the thing that can be spoken and applauded. Thus any player - straight, gay or bisexual - can exhibit "lesbian-like" traits and behaviors. Secondly, many lesbian spectators believe that their own sexual identity and presence at a women's sporting events should be publicly acknowledged by the leagues and by the media. Spectator identification, in the case of lesbian sport fans, focuses less on the athletes and more on the spectators themselves, many of whom strive to be "out" in the bleachers.

In conclusion, sexual identity diverges from other types of identities around which sports spectators might form bonds of identification. Since national, ethnic and racial identities are public, spectators can identify with athletes on the basis of those shared identities. Considering sexual identity expands on models of spectatorship by showing alternative forms of spectator identification. This research follows in a long, although not voluminous, history of anthropological interest in games and sports by recording the virtually unstudied community of women's sports fans. Anthropology is, in one sense, the recording of unfolding personal and community histories. Here I present a look into the lives of some sports fans during the current unprecedented growth spurt in the popularity and professionalization of women's team sports in the U.S.