

Don't be Gay, Dude: How the Institution of Sport Reinforces Homophobia

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Abstract

Kelsey Lucyk analyzes how the media and the institution of sport have entrenched certain ideals about masculinity meanwhile reinforcing homophobic attitudes towards gender roles in sports. This article focusses primarily on analyzing Canadian sports and makes use of the concept of *muscular Christianity* to explain hegemonic masculinity as found in the Canadian institution of sport.

Introduction

With his introduction of Bill C-150 in 1967, Justice Minister Pierre Trudeau famously declared that: “There is no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation.”¹ Eighteen months later, when the Senate passed Trudeau’s “Omnibus Bill,” homosexuality was decriminalized in Canada.² Today, the Canadian Government recognizes equal rights for homosexuals regarding spousal pensions, military participation, divorce, adoption, immigration, and marriage.³ However, while the state does not concern itself with matters that occur in the bedrooms of the nation, the same cannot be said for sport. The institution of sport is fundamentally heterosexist; by reproducing and rewarding hegemonic masculinity, sport reinforces, naturalizes, and institutionalizes homophobic behaviors.

Because I am investigating institutionalized homophobia, I will draw from a wide range of examples to emphasize the homophobic nature of the institution of sport rather than a specific sport, team, or level of competition. I illustrate homophobia in sport from all levels of athletic participation: spectatorial, amateur, elite, and professional. To accommodate this wide scope, I examine dominant masculinity as it has existed in Canada since the 1980s, rather than addressing the competing masculinities throughout our nation’s history. I support and contextualize contemporary sociological and queer theory on homophobia in sport with historical examples from Canada.

Since there are no visible differences between gay and straight athletes, gay athletes are often framed according to their homosexual behaviour. By depicting homosexual athletes as oversexed and erotic, media images illustrate homophobia in sport: gay athletes are not *serious* about sports, or they are locker-room voyeurs that just want to have sex with their teammates. Richard Bonomo, a hockey goalie for the Boston Lobsters—a gay team in a straight league—confirms the prevalence of the “gay athlete” perception:

When you ask people their perceptions of gay men, they probably don’t think of a hockey player...They probably think of what they see in the news—some guy with a wig on. And a skirt. They usually don’t think some guy in a skirt is going to kick the (heck) out of them when they mouth off. (Farrey 2009).

¹ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “There’s no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation,” accessed through CBC.ca under “Digital Archives.”

² Canada, Canadian Heritage, Human Rights Program, “Sexual Orientation and Human Rights.” <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/pdp-hrp/Canada/sxrnt-eng.#other> (accessed November 20, 2010).

³ Ibid.

Similarly, San Francisco running back Garrison Hearst quotes in 2002, “I don’t want any faggots on my team. I know this might not be what people want to hear, but that’s punk. I don’t want any faggots in this locker room.”⁴

Gay athletes, and especially gay professional athletes, often remain closeted because homosexuality is not accepted by mainstream media as “normal.” The media does not reward gay athletes with positive sporting images because sport is a space reserved for men. However, as I will demonstrate throughout this paper, sport sanctions only one type of man—a hegemonic, heterosexual, masculine man. ‘Muscular Christianity,’ to be discussed at length below, has remained the dominant masculine identity in Canada since the Twentieth Century, and is responsible for linking the institution of sport with certain exclusionary values. Heterosexuality is an important component of hegemonic masculinity; for this reason the media does celebrate deviance from the values that sport seeks to reproduce. Popular opinion, coupled with the institution of media, reproduces the idea that athleticism equates to masculinity, which equates to heterosexuality.

Hegemonic Masculinity in Sporting Canada

Before addressing homophobia and sport, I find it necessary to first define key gender and sexuality terms and ideas, as they relate to Canadian society. Contemporary Canadian society accepts a two-sex system, male and female, with complementing binary gender identities of masculine and feminine, respectively. While this idea has existed in Canada well beyond the scope of my paper, it has remained “normal” and “commonsense” dominant society since after the Second World War.

Canadian society is *heteronormative*, which is to say that it assumes individuals are either masculine males that sexually desire women, or feminine females that sexually desire men.⁵ The illusion that heterosexuality is natural (*heterosexism*) goes unquestioned because minority sexualities are actively repressed. Of course, this is problematic for those individuals who do not conform to gender ideals or desire the opposite sex. Same-sex desire is known as *homosexuality*, and *homophobia* the “irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuality, gay men or lesbians, and even behaviour that is perceived to be outside the boundaries of traditional gender role expectations.”⁶ For the purpose of this paper, I will use the term *gay* to refer to homosexual men, and *lesbian* for homosexual women.

Because “people are compelled *to be* a gender, and to *express* that gender through the appropriate dominant cultural expressions of sexuality at the historic moment,” Canadians are compelled to *be* masculine or feminine and *express* it through heterosexuality.⁷ Masculinizing institutions, like sport, allow men to differentiate themselves from “qualities associated with femininity or homosexuality” and reproduce the *hegemonic*, or dominant, masculine norm.⁸ Masculine scripts of strength,

⁴ Outsports. “Anti-Gay Slurs.” Accessed through <http://outsports.com>.

⁵ Shaw and Lee, “Chapter 4: Sex, Power, and Intimacy,” in *Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, eds. Susan Shaw and Janet Lee, 170-178 (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2009), 173.

⁶ Griffin and Genasci, “Chapter 7: Addressing Homophobia in Physical Education,” in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo. 211-221 (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1990), 211.

⁷ Italicization in original. Johnson and Kivel, “Chapter 7: Gender, Sexuality, and Queer Theory in Sport,” in *Sport and Gender Identities: Masculinities, Femininities, and Sexualities*, ed. Cara Carmichael Aitchison, 93-105 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 97.

⁸ Anderson, “Chapter 12: Openly Gay Athletes,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Gender in Sport and Physical Activity*, eds. Paul Davis and Charlene Weaving, 179-196 (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2010), 180; Symons, “Chapter

aggression, and competitiveness are performed to contrast with feminine scripts of weakness, submission, and softness.⁹ By defining separate gender scripts through opposite traits and desires, males and females confirm their gender through their sexuality; by correctly performing masculine identity, men confirm their heterosexuality.¹⁰ In sum, contemporary masculine scripts consist of four key dimensions: the rejection of femininity; ambition and the pursuit of success and wealth; heterosexual potency; and, toughness, confidence, and competence.¹¹ Because homophobia is a chief aspect of hegemonic masculinity—rejection of femininity; compulsory heterosexuality—sport reproduces this intolerance as it reinforces masculine gender ideals. Described by sociologist Caroline Symons as “one of the last bastions of traditional masculinity,” sport allows men to “prove themselves as ‘real’ or ‘inferior’ men and differentiate themselves from women,” as well as other men—especially effeminate ones.¹² Sport glorifies the strength and toughness of men, as they physically compete to dominate one another.¹³ Celebrating men’s strength and dominance has led to the idealization of the male athletic body, marking those who bear it not only with power but also moral superiority, because of its association with Christianity.¹⁴

Muscular Christianity

Since the nineteenth century, *muscular Christianity* has existed as the dominant paradigm of masculinity in Canada. This gender role developed from ideals held by Anglo-Protestant bourgeois Canadians, who promoted gentlemanly behaviour, respect for private property, individualism, imperial allegiance, and social responsibility.¹⁵ The English middleclass promoted team sports as a way to achieve Christ-like character and leadership.¹⁶ “Team sports,” sports historian Colin Howell suggests, “were considered more effective than individual sports in promoting fair play, physical and mental well-being, courage and endurance, teamwork, efficiency, self-restraint, innovation, competitiveness, and respect for others.”¹⁷ Nineteenth-century athleticism negotiated the dualistic tensions that would come to shape hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Canadian society. Sport allows men to be competitive and dominate other players, while simultaneously conveying self-restraint. Similarly, sport allows others to invade the space of other men and steal from them (offensive play, stealing the puck, or ball, etc.),¹⁸ while expressing gentlemanly respect for private property. Muscular Christianity promoted and compromised specific masculine features through the institution of sport; today, sport allows athletes to perform certain attributes—homophobic

10: Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism in Sport: the Promise of the Gay Games,” in *Sport and Gender Identities: Masculinities, Femininities, and Sexualities*, ed. Cara Carmichael Atchison, 140-159 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 141.

⁹ Shaw and Lee, “Chapter 3: Learning Gender in a Diverse Society,” in *Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, eds. Susan Shaw and Janet Lee, 124-139 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 131-137.

¹⁰ Johnson and Kivel, “Chapter 7,” 101.

¹¹ David and Brannon, *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1976), 13-35.

¹² Symons, “Chapter 10,” 140-1.

¹³ Anderson, *In the Game*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 23; Bryson, “Chapter 14: Challenges to Male Hegemony in Sport,” in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, 173-184 (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1990), 173.

¹⁴ Dworkin and Wachs, “The Morality/Manhood Paradox: Masculinity, Sport, and the Media,” in *Masculinity, Sport, and the Media*, eds. Jim McKay, Michael Messner, and Don Sabo, 47-66 (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000) 49.

¹⁵ Howell, *Blood, Sweat, Cheers: Sport and the Making of Modern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 28-30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See Pronger 2010.

discourse and sexual hazing provide young male athletes the opportunity to terrorize and exclude gay athletes while espousing notions of teamwork, mental well-being, and respect for others.

In Canada, muscular Christianity developed from the writings of Thomas Hughes and Charles William Gordon.¹⁹ Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) tells the story of a passive, English school boy's transformation into a man, through character and moral tests that equated morality with manhood.²⁰ Gordon, a Presbyterian minister and novelist, wrote more directly about the relationship between sports, Christianity, and good society. His early twentieth-century novels featured divinely educated protagonists that doubled as successful, athletic men.²¹ Gordon advocated "physical toughness and Christian humility" as the essential makings of a good and moral society; sports provided young men with the opportunity to perform both of these qualities, "through active, athletic, and morally upright lives."²² Prior to the First World War, English-Canadian headmasters sought to instill British values in the Canadian private schools which they led. From Vernon, British Columbia to St John's, Manitoba to King's College in the Maritimes, British public school traditions were adopted across Canadian private schools, as school athleticism was regarded "an essential component in both the making of 'gentlemen' and the progress of the Empire."²³

Since the nineteenth century, Protestant churches have used sport to attract middle-class boys to their congregations. Perhaps the most renowned example, the Protestant church created the Young Men's Christian Association to depict Christianity as tough, virile, and masculine.²⁴ As a secondary motive, religious groups wanted to maintain class values and prevent a tarnishing of the middle class; sport was meant "to protect 'respectable' adolescents from the temptations of tobacco, alcohol, and sex and from falling in with 'the wrong crowd.'"²⁵ Arguably, sport functions with much the same objectives today. A number of programs that provide sporting equipment and programming to low-income children operate with muscular Christian values. Speaking about his financial support for KidsSport, a non-profit organization that provides children-in-need with funding for sports programs, long-track speed skater and 2010 Olympic gold medalist Denny Morrison remarked that "sport helped to develop my self-esteem, teamwork, leadership, and social skills."²⁶ His statement suggests that sport has maintained its founding muscular Christian values of teamwork and leadership. Similarly, Rossbrook House, located in the inner city of Winnipeg, "offers a constant alternative to the destructive environment of the streets" to youth and children through their afterschool sports programs.²⁷ While I do not wish to devalue the intentions or achievements of these programs in any way, I find it significant that they operate with certain assumptions about sport. Since the nineteenth-century, organized sport in Canada has developed according to muscular Christian values, resulting in the linkage between morality, respectability, teamwork, leadership, and sport that exists today.

¹⁹ Howell, *Blood, Sweat, Cheers*, 32.

²⁰ Whannel, "Chapter 2: Meidating Masculinities: The Production of Media Representations in Sport," in *Sport and Gender Identities: Masculinities, Femininities, and Sexualities*, ed. Cara Carmichael Atchison, 7-21 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 8.

²¹ Howell, *Blood, Sweat, Cheers*, 32-3.

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

²³ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

²⁶ KidsSport.ca, "About Us: Team Kidsport," *KidsSportCanada.ca*, 2010.

²⁷ Rossbrook House, "Mission," *RossbrookHouse.ca*.

Canadian society re-embraced “muscular Christianity” in the 1980s, a phenomena that cultural media analyst Garry Whannel links to the widespread televising of sports events.²⁸ During this time period, televised sports figures like Terry Fox and Paul Henderson came to replace the “real” war heroes of Canadian society, resulting in “major sports stars became the site of intersecting discourses of morality and masculinity.”²⁹ Sports stars emulated the same masculine virtues as the war heroes they displaced: aggression, fearlessness, courage, strength, self-discipline. Televised sports turned athletes into role models, “reconstruct[ing] the discursive formation of muscular Christianity.”³⁰

Government policy around this time period also reflects the importance of sport and sporting role models to Canadian society. Federal spending on sport throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s sought to increase the number of elite-level athletes that represent Canada internationally.³¹ By producing medal-winners, the Canadian government simultaneously created great Canadian role models. Indicative of its significance, federal funding in sport increased throughout the 1980s, culminating with the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. Unfortunately, as Canadians adopted and government promoted sport and sports heroes in the 1980s, they also promoted the homophobic gender ideals and disciplinary practices embedded in the institution.

Homophobia in Sport

Sociologist Wilbert Leonard asserts that “sports tend both to change with and promote the values of the culture as a whole.”³² In North American society, sport reinforces the societal values of hegemonic, “muscular Christian” masculinity: strength, aggression, and self-discipline. The athletic male body exists as an idealized representation of muscular Christianity, because it illustrates the masculine attributes of strength and discipline. Therefore, the male athlete symbolizes heterosexuality, a key attribute of hegemonic masculinity. “The distinct way the male body can look when pushed to its limits maintains gender norms by suggesting a ‘real man’ defined against the feminine and the fag” (Saltman 2010, 99). Homosexual athletes threaten hegemonic masculinity because “they threaten the perceived distinctions between gay men and straight men and thus the perceived differences between men and women as a whole.”³³ To maintain athleticism as a masculine attribute, then, it is necessary to exclude homosexuals, effeminate men, and women, by stigmatizing them as weak, soft, unathletic, and feminine. United States figure skater Johnny Weir, a self-described effeminate man with a liking for ‘sparkly things,’³⁴ was “gay-bashed” by two Quebecois commentators during his short program at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Claude Mailhot and Alain Goldberg ridiculed Weir for his body language, appearance, and costume, rather than his actual performance.³⁵

²⁸ Whannel, “Chapter 2,” 8.

²⁹ Whannel, “Chapter 2,” 9; Byfield, “Why the heroes we manufacture these days are of such as very low grade,” *The Report/News magazine* 27, no. 15 (December 4, 2000): 68.

³⁰ Whannel, “Chapter 2,” 9.

³¹ Harvey and Proulx, “Chapter Five: Sport and the State in Canada,” in *Not Just a Game: Essays in Canadian Sport Sociology*, eds. Jean Harvey and Hart Centelon, 93-119 (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 1998), 105.

³² Leonard, “Chapter 3: Sport and Culture – Cross-Cultural Differences: Sport as a Mirror of Dominant Societal Values,” in *A Sociological Perspective of Sport*, 63-66 (Boston: Allyn and Bacon), 66.

³³ Anderson, “Chapter 12,” 178.

³⁴ HBO Sports, “HBO Real Sports: Johnny Weir,” *FanHouse.com*.

³⁵ Bierly, “Johnny Weir Responds to Commentators who Questioned his Gender, Example he Sets,” February 25, 2010, *Entertainment Weekly*, <http://popwatch.ew.com/2010/02/25/johnny-weir-olympics-gender-example/> (accessed December 5, 2010).

As expected, homophobia preserves heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity because it prevents homosexuals from performing aspects of the masculine script that sport reinforces. Furthermore, homophobia in sport is upheld, implicitly and explicitly. Homophobia arises in response to challenges against gender norms, and occur most prominently when females or gay men participate in conventionally “masculine” sport, or vice versa.

Exclusivity: No Girls (or Gays) Allowed!

As discussed above, the explicit intention of sport is to produce hegemonic, masculine males. For this reason, dominant society makes distinctions between “proper” male and female sports to confirm and reflect dominant gender ideals. “Feminine” categories emphasize individual sports, and incorporate “feminine” attributes such as artistry, beauty, and sportsmanship—like gymnastics, figure skating, or tennis.³⁶ Masculine sports, on the other hand, encourage values of dominance, physical strength, and aggression—like hockey, rugby, football, or fighting sports. Team sports are most closely associated with masculinity, since they were promoted by muscular morality during the development of organized sport in Canada, as I have already explained. When men enter into traditional “feminine” sports, they may feel pressured to elaborate hypermasculine genders so that their sexuality, talent, and credibility not challenged—as was the case with Johnny Weir.

Consider the case of Elvis Stojko, a professional male Canadian figure skater. Participating in a typically-feminine defined sport, Stojko worked incredibly hard to maintain a masculine image. His outfits range from working-class male attire—jeans, t-shirts, polos, sportswear, to outfits that ooze machismo—leather, biker gloves, metal studs, belts, and even a martial arts uniform. Leading up to the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games, Stojko went on record to defend figure skating as a masculine domain, and protect it from those who sought to feminize it. While he claims to support the gay community, his statements indirectly support homophobia, since he clearly proscribes to a rigidly heterosexist, hegemonic masculinity.

If you're very lyrical and you're really feminine and soft, well, that's not men's skating. THAT IS NOT MEN'S SKATING, OK? Men's skating is power, strength, masculinity, focus, clarity of movement, interpretation of music.³⁷

Stojko illustrates the dominant masculine perspective. Because hegemonic masculinity seeks to differentiate men from women, men's figure skating must be masculine, powerful, and strong to avoid appearing “feminine and soft.” By describing “men's skating” according to hegemonic male virtues, regardless of whether a man is skating or not, “men” comes to mean a certain kind of male: the powerful, strong, athletic, aggressive man that conforms to masculine gender ideals. Stojko elaborately performs hegemonic masculinity through his outfit and music choices, as he attempts to establish a masculine interpretation of music, without appearing ‘lyrical.’

Objectivity: Jock Talk

Another preventative measure that sporting masculinity takes against homosexuality is ‘locker room discourse.’ In this setting, men commonly discuss their sexual conquests of women, simultaneously asserting the masculine virtues of dominance and heterosexuality. While I have not occupied this space myself, the countless personal communications with men who have reflects this discourse. Regardless of whether or not men perform homophobically in all homosocial situations, sport

³⁶ Griffin and Genasci, “Chapter 17,” 214.

³⁷ Stojko, interview with the Toronto *Sun*, May 3, 2009.

increases the possibility for this behaviour because locker rooms hold the potential for homoeroticism. Homophobic discourse is normalized in sport, because it allows men to participate in homoerotic environments (like the shower room) after playing with and dominating each other's bodies on the field, without deviating from the masculine script of dominance, aggression, and heterosexuality.³⁸ Thus, homophobic slurs are normalized as a way for male athletes to continually prove his heterosexuality/masculinity.³⁹

By simultaneously asserting heterosexual desire and homosexual disgust, normalized utterances of “fag” and “gay” encourage men to “toughen up” and more closely conform to the masculine ideal. Players learn to adopt homophobic scripts not only from players, but from coaches who use this language to motivate players into being more aggressive/competitive/strong/masculine. In the summer of 2010, the Edmonton Capital's professional baseball coach Brent Bowers was forced to resign after an “anti-gay tirade” towards an openly gay umpire, following a questionable call.⁴⁰ While he did lose his job, Bowers preserved his masculinity. His homophobic rant conformed to hegemonic masculinity and simultaneously asserted his heterosexuality, aggression, dominance, and competitiveness against the umpire.

Arguably one of the greatest Canadians,⁴¹ Wayne Gretzky challenged hegemonic masculine scripts during his career by “clearly rejecting the dominant code of hockey masculinity (which emphasizes defending your honour by dropping your stick and gloves to fight) in favour of the intelligence and self-discipline of staying out of the penalty box.”⁴² During his time with the Edmonton Oilers and later with the Los Angeles Kings, certain players (Dave Semenko, Marty McSorley) played with the specific intention of protecting Gretzky.⁴³ Gretzky was targeted by the media for going against the tough guise of masculinity. Influential sports commentator Don Cherry⁴⁴ included Gretzky's 1987 fight with Phil Sykes on his list of funniest fights in his Rock ‘Em Sock ‘Em video collection.⁴⁵ As Gretzky attempts to shrug off Sykes, Cherry comments about how embarrassed the players and referees must be; further, when Gretzky's teammate Jari Kurri attempts to break up the fight, Cherry comments that he “is going in for a kiss.”⁴⁶ Cherry relates non-fighting and non-dominating behaviour to homosexuality, and implies that homosexuality is something that is both humorous and incompatible with hockey.

Inclusivity: Sexual Hazing and the Bonding Experience

Homophobia is reinforced as a part of the masculine script when young men are initiated into the arena of sport. In sporting masculinities premised upon muscular Christian values, team sports are

³⁸ Whitson, “Chapter 1: Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity,” in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, 19-29, (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1990) 29.

³⁹ Anderson, *In the Game*, 22.

⁴⁰ Van Diest, “Anti-gay tirade costs manager his job,” *Toronto Sun* (August 8, 2010). Accessed online November 2, 2010 through TorontoSun.com.

⁴¹ Voted the sixth greatest Canadian by CBC Radio listeners in 2004. CBC.ca.

⁴² Kidd, “Chapter 2: The Men's Cultural Centre: Sports and the Dynamic of Women's Oppression/Men's Repression,” in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, 31-48 (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1990) 37-8.

⁴³ Pelletier, “Marty McSorley,” *GreatestHockeyLegends.com*.

⁴⁴ Voted the third greatest Canadian by CBC Radio listeners in 2004. CBC.ca.

⁴⁵ Accessed via YouTube, November 14, 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbw6WVs-ICQ>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

considered the manliest. I have found through my research hazing is the most sexual and vicious among team sports. I find it odd that the most masculine (and arguably, most heterosexual) athletes would need to prove their heterosexual manliness at all, let alone by engaging in homosexual acts. As I will describe below, I believe that hazing among teams is so extreme because it is the area of sport where homoeroticism is the most likely to occur; therefore, teammates establish boundaries in explicit ways to verify homosexuality as a negative experience. While hazing goes against the muscular Christian ideals that sport promotes—like respect for others and teamwork—it does exemplify other masculine attributes: aggression, dominance, leadership (someone initiates sexual hazing), and self-restraint (do gay things, without *being* gay; i.e. “take it,” but do not enjoy it). Finally, when the media reports sexual hazing, there is virtually no mention of homosexuality, as if the term is somehow incompatible with the institution.

Hazing in masculine team sports is often sexual; males are made to perform homoerotic acts while expected to despise them, reasserting their heterosexual desire and their nonthreatening status to the team. These acts are explicitly homophobic, for they reinforce homosexuality as unmasculine, humorous, and disgusting. McGill University cancelled their 2005 football season after one player reported being sodomized with a broomstick while teammates cheered on.⁴⁷ In the same year, the coach of the Windsor Spitfires in the Ontario Hockey League was fired for not interrupting the team’s hazing of rookie players.⁴⁸ By not intervening, the Spitfires’ coach defined homosexual hazing as acceptable behaviour. Four players from the team were forced to strip and cram into the washroom of the team’s bus. In 1994, the Tilbury Hawks was found guilty of 135 violent crimes, including sexual assault against one another.⁴⁹ The owner of the Tilbury Hawks was fined \$6,000 for allowing a hazing party to occur at his home. Players were forced to race against one another to push marshmallows out of their rectums, to lick players’ anuses, and to drink beer they had dipped their genitalia in.⁵⁰ Sexual hazing violently sends the message that homosexuality is wrong, disgusting, humiliating, and something to fear. On male sporting teams, hazing places veteran hockey players as the most masculine, by forcing younger players into positions of inferiority, submission, and homosexuality.

Sexual hazing is a serious issue that garners little attention unless a “scandal” breaks out, where officials lose their jobs or high profile survivors are involved. Two Canadian cases of sexual assault—Graham James and David Frost—profile interesting messages surrounding sport and sexuality.

Sexual Abuse: Playing with Fire and Taking a Hit

In October of 2009, former Calgary Flames right wing Theoren Fleury published a memoir, *Playing with Fire*, in which he revealed the sexual abuse he received at the hands of his junior league hockey coach, Graham James. Without question, the sexual abuse Fleury underwent is significant; however, it is the aftermath that I wish to analyze. Fleury did not “come out” with the information until after he had retired from his career with the National Hockey League (NHL), claiming that he was afraid the information would ruin his professional hockey career. In an interview with Macleans magazine, Fleury speaks of his wariness to admit to the abuse:

⁴⁷ Bonnell, “Hazing rears its ugly head,” *Sault Star* (October 22, 2005), p. C.4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Farrey, “Like fighting, part of game,” *ESPN.com* (June 3, Copyright 2002).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

It would have been James was a pervert and Fleury ‘let him’ molest him. Or I would be the equally pervy kid who had a ‘relationship’ with his coach. Would I have been invited to the Hockey Canada camp that led to Piestany, which led to the NHL? Get real.⁵¹

There are two things to take note of in Fleury’s statement. First, Fleury claims he did not come out with this information early on because people would have assumed he had a relationship with his coach. I find it reasonable to assume that most sexual assault survivors would be afraid of the consequences involved with denouncing their perpetrator, for fear that they might hurt them or torment them. While these fears may very well be within Fleury, in his interview he chose to disclose that he did not want to be seen as being in a relationship with his coach, which could jeopardize his professional career. Second, the language Fleury uses reveals an alternate fear, he did not want to be labeled as a homosexual. Fleury believed that he, himself, would have been labeled as “pervy” by his teammates, for “letting” James molest him. Fleury’s use of the word “pervy” is easily read as a synonym for homosexual. “Letting” someone molest him would be interpreted by his peers as a consensual, homosexual act. Therefore, I believe that part of the reason that Fleury did not come forth with his allegations against James during his hockey career were because he was afraid of being labeled a homosexual, an identity incongruous with hockey and sport, let alone hegemonic masculinity.

The second case of recent high-profile sexual abuse in the NHL concerns former St. Louis Blues centre Mike Danton and his agent, David Frost. Reportedly, Frost had abused Danton and three other boys throughout their junior hockey careers in the Ontario Hockey League.⁵² Again, rather than the tragic and significant abuse itself, it is the aftermath of the allegations that I will examine. Mike Danton was arrested in November of 2004 for allegedly paying someone to murder Frost.⁵³ Some of Danton’s teammates would also come forth to speak against Frost and his abuse, but Frost and Danton deny the charges to this day. Like the Fleury case, several interesting matters arose in the aftermath of the Danton case. First, when the news initially broke, the media ran the story that Danton’s target was his gay lover, with whom he had been fighting.⁵⁴ Danton’s response to the Toronto and Ottawa *Sun* was interesting. He filed a libel suit against the media outlets for “false, defamatory and malicious” claims; however, Danton did not deny his guilt.⁵⁵ Facing jail time, Danton was more concerned about the public thinking he was a homosexual than a murderer. While I cannot definitively answer why, my research indicates institutional homophobia. Hegemonic masculinity does not accept homosexuality, an image with which Danton clearly did not want to be associated.

The second issue to arise out of the Frost case happened after the ex-girlfriend of one of Frost’s former players came forward claiming that she had been coerced into a threesome by Frost and her boyfriend on two separate occasions, when she was only sixteen.⁵⁶ The boyfriend, however, claimed that they had sex with Danton, not Frost, that group sex was common in hockey, “and that he has

⁵¹ Gillis 2009.

⁵² See Bloom 2009, CBC Sports 2007, CBC Sports 2005 for details of the case.

⁵³ CBC Sports, “Crown Drops 6 Charges Against Ex-Hockey Agent David Frost,” *CBCSports.ca*, March 6, 2007.

⁵⁴ CBC Sports, “In Depth: Mike Danton Case—A Little Truth, A Lot of Rumors,” *CBCSports.ca*, November 30, 2005,

⁵⁵ Murdoch, “Living in the Sports Closet,” *CBC Sports Online*, March 3, 2005,

⁵⁶ The Canadian Press, “Alleged Victim of David Frost Denies Threesome with Ex-Coach,” *CBC News*, October 20, 2008.

had sexual encounters involving one girl and as many as five or six other males.”⁵⁷ Again, the issue of homosexuality is ignored. Regardless of who had sex with whom, the players admitted to group sex with other men. The player, unnamed, claimed that group sex in hockey is usually coded as “a bonding thing with your friends and teammates.”⁵⁸ Male sexual encounters with other men are homosexual; however, by framing it as a “bonding” experience, hockey players can use sex as an arena to compete with each other or to exercise “teamwork” while still (technically) performing the heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity of aggression, dominance, and competitiveness.

Contradictions and Queers: They do Exist!

There are openly gay amateur and professional athletes; however, sport has not broken through the homophobic barrier. There are so few gay professional athletes that online lists exist naming every elite-level athlete to come out in all sport since the 1920s.⁵⁹ Mark Tewksbury, an openly gay, 1992 Olympic gold medal-winning swimmer, was named Canada’s chef de mission for the 2012 London Summer Olympics. While Tewksbury’s appointment suggests tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality in the institution of sport, the reality is far from it. Tewksbury was victim to homophobia following his coming out; he lost a six figure motivational speaking contract for being “too flamboyant” on stage.⁶⁰ I find it more likely that Tewksbury was appointed chef de mission for his public advocacy to bring reform the International Olympics Committee, rather than for gay rights.

Professional and elite-level gay athletes that have come out while competing have predominantly been athletes from individual sports. This is consistent with the muscular Christian emphasis on team sports to promote well-being, competitiveness, and other “moral” masculine virtues that developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Canada. Gareth Thomas, a Welsh rugby player, is one of the few professional athletes to come out while still competing in 2009. While very little representation of openly gay professional athletes exists, there are a number of amateur sporting leagues and teams dedicated to reversing this.

Gay sporting leagues exist as an interesting loophole to the institution of sport. Created for a number of reasons, gay sporting leagues share the similar goal of providing a safe space for gay athletes to experience the pleasures of sport. In these leagues, gay athletes have the freedom to play sport without having to overcompensate for their sexuality (i.e., adopting a hypermasculine script to ward off feminine associations). In 1982, Tom Waddell founded the Gay Games based on the principle of inclusivity.⁶¹ Waddell opposed the racism, sexism, nationalism, elitism, and homophobia that he saw throughout the Olympic Games.⁶² The Gay Games promote participation; players can be of any skill level, sexual orientation, or gender.⁶³ The Games attempt to redefine the notion of winning in contrast to the hegemonic masculine definition; players focus on personal achievement—no medal tallies are kept, and healthy competition is encouraged over beating and dominating one’s

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid..

⁵⁹ See <http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/2010-2011/thelegacyofbrendanburke/timeline.html>; <http://espn.go.com/otl/world/timeline.html> (Accessed December 14, 2010).

⁶⁰ Melloy, “Interview with Openly Gay Olympic Champion Mark Tewksbury,” *After Elton*, May 9, 2006.

⁶¹ Symons, “Chapter 10,” 147.

⁶² Ibid., 147.

⁶³ Ibid., 147.

opponent.⁶⁴ Gay sporting leagues hold the potential to challenge hegemonic masculinity. In his participation with a gay Toronto softball team, Nigel Jarvis notes that his team performed a *queer* (outside of the norm) gender by skipping across the bases, cheering, speaking effeminately, and making homosexual innuendos.⁶⁵ In theory, gay sporting leagues are revolutionary—they challenge the existing representations of both gay athletes and hegemonic masculinity.

However, gay sporting leagues are problematic for a number of reasons. First, gay sports tend to exist as a way to mainstream gay athletes. By normalizing themselves as “just like everyone else,” gay athletes “continue to reinforce discriminatory practices based on bodily performance and heterosexual configurations of gender.”⁶⁶ In other words, as long as the hegemonic masculinity in Canada is based on muscular Christianity, anyone who deviates from the dominant masculine script—be it women, homosexuals, or the disabled—will not be considered “masculine,” nor will they be valued as much as the men who do conform. Secondly, gay sports reinforce gender and sexuality binaries.⁶⁷ Rather than representing the multitude of sexualities, sexes, and genders, gay sports leagues only touch on a small demographic of the gay community, which is made up of gays, lesbians, transgendered, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, intersexuals, and everyone in between. However, inclusivity may also be problematic; because the Gay Games do practice inclusivity, they may be undervalued by hegemonic society when compared athletes who had to “earn” their position on a team. Dominant society may write off the Gay Games as a ‘fun day’ rather than a sporting competition—by now, I hope I have made clear that authentic “sport” must reflect hegemonic scripts of masculinity and be dominant, aggressive, and competitive. Third, the very existence of gay sports leagues marks them as “different,” which I believe further prevents the acceptance of gay athletes by dominant society. The creation of safe spaces, while done with the best of intentions, does nothing to bring forth tolerance in the institution of sport. For example, Mark Murphy of the gay hockey team the Boston Lobsters claims that they are only abused by straight teams when they are beating them.⁶⁸ This exemplifies that hegemonically masculine males (those who adhere to the muscular Christian ideal) do not value gay athletes as they do straight ones. The Lobsters’ competition is threatened by the idea of gay athletes challenging the masculine script, and attempt to control it and devalue gay athletes’ skill with homophobic slurs. Unfortunately, alternate leagues do nothing force visibility or tolerance from dominant society but rather they place gay athletes in a marginalized space, further separating them from hegemonically masculine men. Until homophobia is opposed at every level of the institution, there seems to be little hope for the acceptance of gay athletes.

Conclusions

Throughout my research, I have found that gay athletes exist at every level of sport and are closeted by pervasive homophobia. Homophobia is essential to maintaining hegemonic masculinity as dominant, aggressive, and heterosexual. From implicit homophobic discourse such as normalizing gay slurs, to explicit acts of sexual hazing, the institution of sport is intrinsically homophobic. Homophobia is used as a tactic to defend hegemonic masculinity from groups that threaten to

⁶⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁶⁵ Jarvis, “Ten Men Out: Gay Sporting Masculinities in Softball,” in *Sport, Sexualities, and Queer/Theory*, edited by Jayne Caudwell, 62-75 (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁶⁶ Wellard, “Exploring the Limits of Queer and Sport: Gay Men Playing Tennis,” in *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory*, edited by Jayne Caudwell, 76-89 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.

⁶⁷ Wellard, “Exploring the Limits of Queer and Sport,” 85.

⁶⁸ Farrey, “Gay Hockey is no Oxymoron.”

“expose the fallacy upon which heterosexual masculinity is built.”⁶⁹ Hegemonic masculinity defines itself as separate from all other gender identities, and uses sport to glorify its attributes; women and homosexuals, then, are excluded from full participation in sport as homophobia enforces. Homosexuality is not a term compatible with athleticism, because athleticism works specifically to reproduce hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity. Even all-gay sporting events are inherently homophobic. By preaching that gay athletes are “just like everyone else,” they seek to conform to hegemonic, heterosexist masculinity by performing aggression, competitiveness, and strength.⁷⁰ By performing this script, they are participating in systemic homophobia. Boston Lobster goaltender Howard Bloom, in discussing locker room discourse on his gay sports team, reveals that “only the pronouns change.”⁷¹

Whether one chooses to participate in sport or not, I hope I have clarified the need to examine gender roles critically. While homosexuals continue to have their rights and freedoms recognized by the Canadian government, hegemonic masculinity implements homophobia through institutions like sport as a way to maintain athleticism, masculinity, and heterosexism as indivisible identifiers. I find it unlikely that either sport or muscular Christianity will be abandoned anytime soon, therefore, it is necessary to redefine what this institution means to us. If we exercised sport to reflect values of inclusivity and participation rather than dominance and aggression, then it would not matter which gender role an athlete performed because all athletes would be valued. While it may sound idealistic, this is a necessary first step. Thinking about sport in ways that deviate from the norm is essential to challenging hegemonic masculinity and conventional norms.

⁶⁹ Anderson, *In the Game*, 43.

⁷⁰ Symons, “Chapter 10.”

⁷¹ Farrey, “Gay Hockey is no Oxymoron.”

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