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Guaging Team Culture for Gay Student Athletes: A Descriptive Examination of Intercollegiate Football

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GUAGING TEAM CULTURE FOR GAY STUDENT ATHLETES:
A DESCRIPTIVE EXAMINATION OF INTERCOLLEGIATE FOOTBALL

BY

AMY L. APICERNO

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2004

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DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES

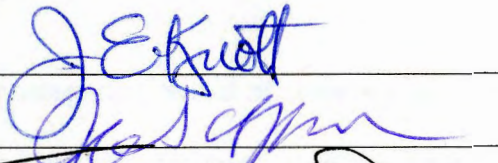
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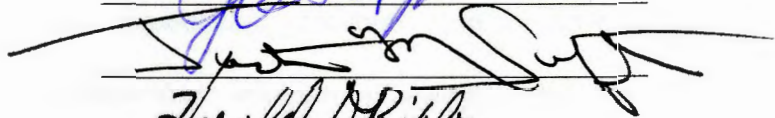
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APPROVED:

Dissertation Committee:

Major Professor







DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2004

Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to learn more about Division I-A and Division I-AA collegiate football team culture and how it relates to gay student athletes. The study attempted to gauge player reactions to the presence of a gay teammate. It used qualitative methods and convenience sampling with phone interviews and a three-part inquiry.

Twenty-eight scholar athletes participated, including eleven Division I-AA players and 17 from Division I-A. All were current players and attended geographically diverse institutions from four regions of the country. Telephone interview responses were transcribed by the interviewer, and responses were color coded by which question was being answered. Patterns were then identified and noted. These responses were compared to other studies involving perceptions of gay college students, sport and gender sociology theories, accounts of male athletes coming out to teammates and student identity development theories.

The findings fit into at least one of four categories: denial of homosexual teammates, shunning a homosexual player, perpetuating stereotypes, and conditions for acceptance. Many respondents did not believe that a member of their team could be homosexual. Most subjects described ways in which they would alienate a player using verbal and physical abuse and isolation, as well as making the gay player a constant target of mocking and practical jokes. Most players stated an affirmed a belief in various stereotypes regarding gay men, as well as about football players, and saw the two contradicting each other. Subjects usually stated that the best way for a gay teammate to be "accepted" was by not coming out at all. Implications for gay student

athletes regarding identity development were addressed and interventive recommendations were provided.

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Introduction

Sport in U.S. society is much more than a game. It is an institution that serves to teach social values and reaffirm conventional social functions (Griffin, 1998). As sport sociologist Todd Crosset (1990) noted, sport's involvement in society has been timely. At the end of the 19th century and at the start of the 20th, sport was utilized as a tool to promote nationalism and make people aware of class constructs (Messner & Sabo, 1990). From early modern times, sport was used as a forum in which to demonstrate "...morality, rationality, and superiority in young men and was a measurable sign of clean living and future success" (Messner & Sabo, p. 53). Historically, sport has had implications in society much deeper than the actual physical event.

Sport is more complex than physical games; it is a tool that defines people and gives them identity. R.W. Connell, faculty member in the Education Department at the University of Sydney, stated that masculinity is not biological or genetic, but a socialized construct (Messner & Sabo, 1990). Participating in or excelling at sport is a way to gain this non-tangible element of masculinity.

Besides affirming sport as a social institution, Messner (1992) said the values and constructs of sport reflect those of which are dominant in society. Not only is sport used to define what is important in society, but the dominant culture and people of power are the ones that have access to shaping what is deemed important. "The modern institution of sport was shaped during the time when women were challenging existing gender relations and helps to explain the particular forms that sport actually took" (Messner, 1992, p.26). Masculinity is not only a quality society values, but one that plays out within and can be defined by sport.

In U.S. culture, fathers push their sons into playing sports because they feel the experience helps ensure that young boys grow up to be masculine, heterosexual men (Anderson, 2001). In a 2001 study, Wolf-Wendel, Toma and Morphey (2001) added that male athletes are not only worshipped for their masculinity but also are looked upon as heroes, and especially in collegiate athletics, their status is elevated based on their public physical performance.

Because the mission of most institutions of higher education is to foster student development, identity development was considered in this study. Chickering believed that identity development is a key factor in overall development during one's college tenure (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996). "Chickering argues that educational environments exert a powerful influence that helps students move through the seven vectors of development" (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996, p. 169).

While a number of sports and athletic endeavors can contribute to the cultural expression of masculinity (and femininity for women), few sports call out the stereotypical depiction of masculinity as football does. Yet, gender orientation diversity in the population at large suggests that gay males are also likely members of football teams at any and all levels of competition. What challenges or dilemmas might that fact pose for participants and coaches? What are potential quandaries for gay football players? And specifically, what issues might this raise for players (and coaches) when and if openly gay players are on a collegiate football team in those developmentally sensitive years of intercollegiate play?

The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study was to shed light on these areas of inquiry, as well as to seek a better understanding of Division I-A and I-AA collegiate

football team culture and its implications for student athletes who do not fit the stereotypical gender roles that are expected from them as football players. The following section describes what sport means to American society, including the ways in which society has used sport to affirm gender roles and social status.

Following that are the findings of a study inquiring how 28 student perceived their team culture, as well as how they would respond, and they thought their teammates and coaches might respond to a player who self-identifies as gay. Finally, a discussion of limitations and implications of the findings is offered along with some concerns and recommendations for addressing them.

Literature Review

Messner and Runfola (1980) refer to sport as a function for “safeguarding men’s privileged position in family and society...to preserve the unequal distribution of wealth, power, opportunity between men and women found in the major social, political, and economic institutions of American society” (p. 7). They also recognized that another important job of sport is to maintain gender stereotypes and males being the dominant sex.

Sport is set up to affirm male ideas of how they want to be portrayed.

Sexist culture revolves around the ideology of male supremacy...A primary function of sports is dissemination and reinforcement of such traditional American values as male superiority, competition, work and success. Sports are among the most crucial socializing forces in the development of the superman syndrome in American society. Through sports boys are trained to be men, to reflect all the societal expectations and attitudes surrounding such a rigid role definition. Sports act as a mirror of the dominant culture and a link between sexist institutions (Sabo, p. xi, 1980).

Sabo and Runfola (1990) further stated that

...socializing boys into stereotypical male gender roles through sport has a societal context. Perhaps the most important function of sports in American society is to integrate varied institutional complexes within a value system that promotes and maintains sexual stereotypes, male dominance, the competitive ethic, and the belief that aggression is a positive and necessary ingredient of social life (Sabo and Runfola, p. 7)

In a 2001 study, Wolf-Wendel, Toma and Morpew (2001) observed that male athletes are not only worshipped for their masculinity but also looked upon as heroes and, especially in collegiate athletics, their status is elevated based on their public physical performance. Crosett stated that “in sport, in which the distinctions between men are so clearly delineated, few men actually achieve top honors. Yet, all male athletes depend on the maintenance of the current masculine hegemony for whatever special status and power they enjoy as a result of their athletic identity and status” (McKay, Messner & Sabo, 2000, p. 63).

Bruce Kidd said that “an extremely fertile field for the reassertion and legitimization of male power and privilege has been sports” (Messner & Sabo, 1990, p. 32). David Whitson added that sport is one of the central sites in the social production of masculinity in societies characterized by longer schooling and by a decline in the social currency attached to other ways of demonstrating physical prowess (e.g., physical labor or combat). Indeed, demonstrating the physical and psychological attributes associated with success in athletic contests has become an important requirement for status (Messner & Sabo, 1990).

Kidd continued to say that boys who grow up not excelling at or being interested in sport must find other ways to prove their manhood and “come to their own terms with sport” (Messner & Sabo, 1990, p. 19). For boys and men who gain a masculine identity from their participation in sport, constant maintenance and upkeep of this socially constructed idea is required. For boys and men who are not athletic or decide not to participate, sport remains a challenge that must be reckoned with in order to maintain their status within the social construct of masculinity.

Messner and Sabo (1994) stated that sports is where individuals develop their gender identity as well as a sexual one, where learned sexual behavior conforms to societal norms.

To be manly in sports, traditionally, means to be competitive, successful, dominating, aggressive, stoical, goal-directive, and physically strong. Many athletes accept this definition of masculinity and apply it in their relationships with women. Dating becomes a sport in itself, and 'scoring' or having sex with little or no emotional involvement, is a mark of masculine achievement. Sexual relationships are games in which women are seen as opponents, and his scoring means her defeat. Too often, women are pawns in men's quests for status within the male pecking order (Messner & Sabo, 1994, p. 38).

Engaging in sexual activities with women is another way (like participating in general) that athletes construct masculinity.

If he does not exude stereotypical masculine or heterosexual qualities, a male who elects to participate in sports in our society can be a constant target (unless he is fabulously talented). Pat Griffin and James Genasci defined homophobia as "the irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuality, gay men, or lesbians, and even behavior that is perceived to be outside the boundaries of traditional gender role expectations" (Messner & Sabo, 1990, p. 211). They defined heterosexism as "the societal assumption that heterosexuality is the only acceptable, sanctioned, and normal sexual orientation" (Messner & Sabo, 1990, p. 211). If a homosexual played a sport where significance is placed on portraying the stereotypical gender role of being male, one could see how a

homosexual male might find conflict in some aspects of fulfilling his male role and acknowledging his homosexual identity.

Messner and Sabo (1994) related homophobia in young males to their gender identity development. Throughout their youth, through what they see and hear, they learn the cultural norms guiding how they should act to be a “real” man. “Homophobia is yet another message sent to boys across the American cultural air waves. This message says that, like oil and water, homosexuality and masculinity do not mix” (Messner & Sabo, 1994, p. 103). Boys learn through the media, and from the people who surround them, that gay men are not masculine.

According to Messner and Sabo (1994), sport is a key place in which boys learn homophobic actions and attitudes. On teams, they learn to tease and ridicule their teammates for portraying feminine behavior, such as showing sympathy or weakness. Teammates use homophobic name-calling, such as “fag and faggot”, to insult teammates. Such behavior continues on the field, where “...some coaches use homophobia as a motivational device. Playing on the gender and sexual insecurities of adolescent athletes, coaches use the threat of homosexual stigmatization to muster allegiance to themselves or esprit d’corps among the ranks” (Messner & Sabo, 1994, p. 104).

Eric Anderson (2002) believed that “sport is likely the most homophobic institution in America. It’s more homophobic than the church and considerably more homophobic than the military” (p. 86). David Plummer (2001) explained how homophobic behavior can begin in boys at a young age when they first participate in name calling targeted to other boys who do not conform to their peer group and the socialized standard by which a boy is supposed to behave. Boys who cry, or do not develop as quickly as their

peers, get good grades, or present themselves neatly, are also picked on for having qualities that are not masculine. "Boys are least vulnerable to homophobia if they participate in tough team sports; more vulnerable if they play less physical solo activities; and are highly vulnerable if they avoid sports altogether" (p. 63). Participating in sports is a way to "prove" masculinity, a stereotypical heterosexual male quality.

Homophobia in sport is hurtful to gay athletes and devalues women while reinforcing inequalities between men and women and strengthening the stereotype of male hegemony in society (Messner and Sabo, 1994). Players learn to act a certain way to avoid being mocked or ridiculed. "The threat of being labeled a homosexual forces boys and men to behave in accordance with traditional masculine stereotypes" (Messner and Sabo, 1994, p. 109).

Kopay and Young (1977) pointed out the projection that the percentage of homosexual athletes likely mirrors the number which exists in society, implying that, given the percentage of gay men in the U.S., there must be more gay men on sports teams than the very small number who have self-identified. In describing his personal experience and his observations while playing in the NFL, David Kopay attributed the lack of publicly known gay professional athletes to the culture that surrounds sport teams (Kopay & Young, 1977).

A society that places great importance on sport and athletes was very naturally alarmed by Magic Johnson's announcement in 1991 that he was infected with the HIV virus. Although his announcement did raise awareness about the disease and its severity, the public's main concern was not Johnson's health, but how the virus was transmitted. American people had a great deal of concern that Magic Johnson could be gay because

HIV and AIDS had a stigma associated with them that only gay men and intravenous drug users could acquire the disease (Johnson & Novak, 1992). Johnson described an appearance on the Arsenio Hall Show. "The day after I announced I had HIV, I appeared on Arsenio Hall's show. When I said I wasn't gay, the audience broke into applause. It was a strange moment and I felt a little awkward when it happened" (Johnson & Novak, 1992, p.226). Johnson was applauded because he affirmed his heterosexuality.

Although Johnson was accepted as not being gay, there are male athletes who are not models of societal norms. Greg was a gay Division III soccer player who had many times contemplated and several times attempted suicide. He was tormented and conflicted by the role he was supposed to play as an athlete and his self-identity as being gay. When he came out to his parents, they replied, "that's ridiculous! You're an athlete. You're popular. You went to military school. You have normal parents. You've got girlfriends. Don't even think you're gay" (Woog, 1998, p.90). Greg's parents assumed that because he exhibited the cultural norms set for him, he could not at the same time be different from them.

In a similar situation, another gay athlete named Greg who was a high school football player and wrestler came out to his team and school, and then was shunned by his coaches, peers, teachers and counselors at school, later attempting suicide. Only two people supported him at high school, and both were female students. Greg was not invited to his high school graduation and said that "missing graduation hurt the most" (Woog, 2002, p. 101). The reaction Greg received from his community showed him firsthand that homosexuality was not accepted in his hometown.

Patrick, a gay Harvard football player, quit the team because he could no longer juggle the double identities of being gay and being a football player. "Coming out to himself, he saw no way to reconcile homosexuality with athletics. He thought there was no way to be strong, masculine, and gay. He had heard locker room chatter about an openly gay Yale football player. The comments had a 'get him' edge" (Woog, 1998, p. 43) which showed Patrick how his teammates would react to his coming out.

A gay high school football player related his story about dealing with his double identity of being gay and being a high school football player.

High school football is all about heterosexuality, manliness, and toughness; for a gay guy it's a true hell on earth. The homophobia is appalling. My coaches try to motivate their players to hit harder, crunch more, or throw farther all by calling us fags. If they cop out early, they are surely criticized as being gay. My teammates use "fag" as a daily and repetitive insult. They call all the guys fags. But if they suspect one of them really is - it would surely mean physical brutality. I must therefore prove I am straight. I have to. (Anderson, 1999, p. 1)

He felt pressure to date girls; to tell them he loved them and to exploit the details of their sexual encounters. He called athletes of less masculine sports homophobic names. He felt that he had to participate in such behavior to avoid being called homosexual himself (Anderson, 1999).

David Kopay, the former NFL running back, experienced similar obstacles. His parents did not accept his homosexuality. His mother denied it, and thought it fine for other people to be gay but not a child of hers, and blamed her gay son for her having to put the house up for sale and move after living there for over 25 years, because she

perceived that the family was looked at as a disgrace. His father told him he never wanted to speak to him again (Kopay & Young, 1977). "It seemed my parents would never overcome the attitudes about sex that kept them from dealing with my homosexuality, attitudes, I knew, that had also kept them from being more open and loving with each other" (Kopay & Young, 1977, p. 15). Even Kopay's physician tried to convince him that he was heterosexual. Kopay would tell him about his fears and depression. His doctor told him that because women were attracted to him, he was heterosexual (Kopay & Young, 1977).

Dating Miss Washington and the Rose Bowl Queen were Kopay's version of playing into his expected gender role. Kopay said, "The problems I have experienced came from my confusion and fear over what other people would think of me as a homosexual" (Kopay & Young, 1977, p. 14). Kopay talks about having sexual relations with men in a way that his friends and teammates found acceptable. It was more acceptable between men to call themselves bisexual because it suggested they were swingers, which was socially acceptable. He shared a female sexual partner with a male friend and had group sex so as not to tip anyone off that he was gay, while at the same time fulfilling his stereotyped identity by participating in sexual acts with men present (Kopay and Young, 1977).

Billy Bean, a former professional baseball player and openly gay athlete now retired, was as confused about his sexuality as Kopay. During Bean's first sexual experience with a man, he convinced himself that it was wrong and that he would not let it happen again. A trainer had engaged him in a sexual act while he was getting his hamstring iced. He reassured himself that he had not reciprocated even though he had

not stopped the trainer. He promised himself that it would never happen again, and had especially vigorous sex with his wife when he returned home (Bean & Bull, 2003). Bean believed that if he was engaging in sex with a woman, then he certainly could not be homosexual.

Describing the first time he heard a coach call a player a “faggot,” Bean says that “clearly it wasn’t a good thing. It was probably the worst thing imaginable. It equaled weakness and timidity, everything a budding, insecure jock wanted to avoid. We were only kids, how were we supposed to know the truth?” (Bean & Bull, 2003, p.107) Bean showed one of the ways in which children are exposed to, and thus learn homophobic remarks while growing up and playing sports.

Bean felt very guilty being in an adult video store looking in the homosexual section when a teammate walked in. “I hadn’t the slightest idea how to reconcile my desires with my life inside or outside the game” (Bean & Bull, 2003, p. 110). He attributed his inner struggle to minimizing his confidence and undermining his performance on the field (Bean & Bull, 2003).

Each time Bean was sexually involved with a man, he said he felt extreme guilt and began hating himself for cheating on his wife. After he broke up with her and was living with Sam, his male significant other, he had to hide him from his teammates in the garage when they stopped by unexpectedly (Bean & Bull, 2003). Bean had to constantly keep up his double life. After learning Sam had HIV, Bean had nowhere to turn for support because he was afraid of being “outed”. There were no support systems for players’ partners either (Bean & Bull, 2003). Gay athletes and their partners cannot benefit from certain team support systems for fear of being exposed as homosexual.

Esera Tuaolo, a former linebacker in the NFL, not only hid a long-term gay relationship from his teammates, but also constantly feared that someone would recognize him when he went to gay bars, and would “out” him to his teammates and the public (Cyphers & Tuaolo, 2002). Tuaolo could not go out socially in a situation that felt comfortable to him; he always had to be aware of what was going on around him and how it would appear or what it would reveal.

Tuaolo was always at odds with himself. He reports consuming massive amounts of alcohol in hopes that he would overdose and die, and said he drove under the influence of alcohol, often contemplating driving off the road and ending it all (Cyphers & Tuaolo, 2002). According to Paul, Catania, Pollack, Morkowitz, Canchola, Binson, Mills, and Stall (2002), it is not uncommon for gay and bisexual men to consider suicide instead of exposing their true identity.

Professional athletes fear coming out because of the anticipated reaction of their teammates, community and public. The small handful of professional athletes who have come out, did so after they retired, knowing that they would still suffer consequences, but the backlash would be less severe away from their teammates and out of the public eye. Bean knew that coming out would ruin his chances at coaching (Bean & Bull, 2003) and Kopay’s brother even blames his brother’s coming out to limiting his own coaching potential (Kopay & Young, 2001).

After his time in the NFL, Kopay questioned the culture surrounding football. “And you have to wonder about the gang rapes, all the sexual assaults involving groups of football players. Are they trying to prove their masculinity to each other? Are they using women to have sexual experiences with each other? When I was in the NFL, I had

group sex involving women as a way to have sex with men, often other athletes” (Kopay & Young, 1977, p. viii). Kopay also recalls a fellow Washington Redskins teammate Jerry Smith (whose name was changed) who he wished he had “outed” to save his life. “Kopay thinks that the only way to have broken the cycle of shame, alcohol, drugs and anonymous sex that led to Smith’s 1986 death from AIDS complications would have been to force him to address his life by disrupting it” (Kopay & Young, 1977, p. ix).

Kopay’s ex-wife saw first hand the impact being a professional football player had on her former husband. “She could once talk tactics and statistics with the best of football players, but now Mary Ann Kopay says she regards professional football as a brutal, dehumanizing sport that damages a lot of good people’s lives and is really just a business operation for selling television advertising” (Kopay & Young, 1977, p. 181). Mary Ann Kopay (the fictitious name of Kopay’s ex-wife) saw football as something with deeper significance than a mere game.

Sabo and Runfola (1980) viewed football as “America’s No. 1 fake masculinity ritual, and the worshipping females are used to give the mock ritual its validity” (p.15). Cheerleaders, fans, girl friends and groupies are all examples of worshipping females. In Friday Night Lights (Bissinger, 1990), a portrayal of the importance of high school football in a Texas town, one of the star players talked about being above the law due to his status as a football player. “You walk around, you break all the rules. The teachers and administrators, they see you, they just don’t say anything to you. It was just like we owned it. Everyone looked up to us, it was just a great life” (p. 291). Football players at a local high school kept showing that the law did not apply to them by robbing convenience stores. “They did a total of seven armed robberies in the space of a month

until they were arrested by police. Their motive as far as anyone could tell was that they had done it simply for kicks; something to do before it was time to play big-time college football. Nor did they give any thoughts to the consequences” (Bissinger, 1990, p. 341). When the book was published and Bissinger was scheduled to make an appearance in Odessa, the town which was the focus of much of the story, it was called off because people threatened his life (Bissinger, 1990). People in the community who put such a great value on football did not appreciate Bissinger’s exposing what goes on behind the scenes.

Wolf-Wendel, Toma and Mophew (2001) studied student athletes and coaches and their ability to accept some forms of diversity but not others. They found that race and socioeconomic status were accepted and included in the team environment, while “sexual orientation remains a potentially divisive issue in athletics. Indeed, student-athletes, coaches and administrators in athletics are often homophobic and heterosexist” (Wolf-Wendel, Toma & Mophew, 2001, p.465). They suggested that “The extent to which those in athletics openly express hostility to gay men and lesbians seems above and beyond that found on other parts of campus” (Wolf-Wendel, Toma & Mophew, 2001, p.466). Student athletes and coaches said gay or lesbian student-athletes were not an issue on their teams, denied their existence, and expressed hostile reactions to the implications that there could be gay or lesbian students on their rosters (Wolf-Wendel, Toma & Mophew, 2001). Further, this study found that coaches and student-athletes did not try to hide their negative attitudes about gay or lesbian student athletes from other teammates, including those who could themselves be gay or lesbian.

Like athletics, college itself can be a homophobic environment for students. Robert Rhoads (1994) conducted a study at Clement University (a pseudonym), one of the estimated 10 percent of institutions of higher education then that included sexual orientation in their discrimination policy. This was also a campus that seemed to be proactive in addressing gay issues and had a prominent student group that is comprised of lesbian, gay, bisexual students and their allies (Rhoads, 1994).

Results from a campus survey Rhoads (1994) conducted regarding students' perceptions and beliefs about gay, lesbian and bisexual students "...indicated a high degree of intolerance... Fifty-two percent of the written comments were oppositional or hostile in nature" (p. 16). The written responses viewed gay, lesbian and bisexual lifestyles as morally wrong, perverted and genetically inferior. One subject wrote, "I feel too many resources are being devoted to minority groups. If you can't fit in, get the hell out" (Rhoads, 1994, p. 16). Roger, a gay student, described his college campus' reaction to him and other non-heterosexual students, stating, "Heterosexual culture is very set on making gay and lesbian people invisible, whether they use physical violence or institutionalized violence. Coming out is a way of battling back" (Rhoads, 1994, p. 16).

Not only intolerance but violence against gay students was acknowledged here. Andrew, another gay student at "Clement", described a situation where he was violent toward a friend to "prove" he was not homosexual (Rhoads, 1994). Students felt they cannot publicly acknowledge their sexual identity and feel pressure to hide it. Rhoads (1994) described it thus: "The byproduct of this continuous onslaught for many is low self-esteem, and some even contemplate escape from a life of pain and turmoil" (p. 66).

Internalizing other people's projections of homophobia had pushed gay college students to suicide rather than of revealing their sexual orientation to their community. Gay students reported being frequently harassed - one student's resident hall started a petition to make him leave because of his sexual orientation. They also felt that the classroom mainstreams heterosexuality and emphasizes it as the cultural norm. Gay students also reported facing harassment and isolation regularly, in addition to the everyday struggle and challenges the sexual majority of college students faced (Rhoads, 1994).

In Toward Acceptance, Wall and Evans (2000) found similar responses in their research of gay students on college campuses. "Students reported ongoing experiences of harassment and discrimination in a variety of settings. In social settings and on campus, students were physically and verbally assaulted. In the classroom, students were frequently excluded and marginalized by class discussions about issues such as dating, committed relationships, and sexuality" (p. 39). Such experiences led to questioning their self worth and sexual identity because so many other people did. Having other gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) students to model themselves after is important in forming a positive self-identity. It is difficult for students to do this in isolation" (Wall & Evans, 2000). Gay college students are treated poorly and not afforded the supportive environment to help them feel a positive self-worth.

D'Augelli and Rose (1990) found that while support services for GLB students on campus was helpful to them, "...access to supportive resources on campus may be overshadowed by significant barriers. Anti-lesbian and antigay attitudes among heterosexual students provide one powerful barrier. This homophobia is concretely

experienced in hostile remarks and in harassment and violence directed toward students who are identified, correctly or incorrectly, as lesbian or gay (p. 484).” Their study of first year students also found that “...nearly 30% would prefer a college environment with only heterosexuals. Nearly half considered gay men disgusting and believed that homosexual activity is wrong. All freshmen were more hostile to gay men than to lesbians” (D’Augelli & Rose, 1990, p.490).

In a survey of 181 college students, Simoni (1990) found that the majority of self-proclaimed heterosexual students tended to be younger and male. Simoni also found that gay students with friendships and contacts with other gay students felt a positive effect on their self esteem (Simoni, 1990). Evans (2002) also found that gay students with a support system, experienced or reported having a better college experience than at campuses without such a support system. She found that gay students benefited because they felt more of a sense of belonging, their identity was validated and they felt safer on campus. Heterosexual students benefited from an environment with more open and honest communication, where others were more aware and educated about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students (Evans, 2002). Awareness of GLB students was a positive learning experience for heterosexual students’ and GLB students’ development.

In American society, sports are used as a platform for male athletes to gain a socialized definition of masculinity. Often the attitudes in and surrounding sports are homophobic and heterosexist. Colleges are also environments that can be intolerant of homosexuals. Revealing a homosexual identity to a football team, in an atmosphere that combines college with football, may present internal struggles to a college athlete trying to develop his identity.

Like many aspects of student development, identity development is influenced by the student's environment. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) identity development model consists of seven vectors or levels that students engage in and move through. This model starts with maturing as an individual, then deals with becoming self-aware and in control of one's emotions, and moves on to gaining independence and competence. The next vector deals with relationships with others, and is central to both personal development and gaining one's identity. A key aspect of creating one's identity is "...a clear conception of self and comfort with one's roles and lifestyle" (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996, p. 169). This includes coming to terms with one's gender and sexual orientation. The last two vectors concern developing values, morals and goals.

Gender identity in college students is "...how one views oneself in relation to one's own gender group, that is, as masculine or feminine, and how these views evolve and become more complex over time" (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996, p. 202). The formation of masculinity or femininity is the social construct of man and woman, which relates to a sex identity and is partly biological. This process is based on how a person feels about her or his gender in direct relation to the way society views gender roles. "...Sexism is at the heart of models concerning the development of gender identity" (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996, p. 202).

Three widely accepted gender identity models (Feminist Identity Development for Women by Downing and Roush in 1985, Womanist Identity Development from Ossana, Helms & Leonard, 1992, and Gender Role Journey by O'Neil, Egan, Owen & Murry, 1993) all suggest that as a student gains a more advanced gender identity, he or she recognizes gender roles embedded in societal structure and can move past them. Some

progress to the stage of defying gender roles by becoming an activist against societal norms regarding gender, and acknowledge themselves to be within a combination of gender roles. In an advanced phase of these models, one's gender identity becomes linked with their other identities (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996).

Developing multiple identities is commonly seen in college students who belong to more than one oppressed group. Reynolds and Pope (1991) believed multiple identity development was the process of identifying with one component of one's identity, and then another, recognizing that people students have various identities. As students learn and grow, they ultimately portray themselves or herself based on all of their identities, in the final step of their Multidimensional Identity Model (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996).

Vivienne Cass' Model of Homosexual Identity Formation (1979) was used in this study as a framework for gauging what an ideal/healthy learning environment conducive to positive development would look like for student athletes. Cass reviewed student identity development primarily as coming to terms with one's sexual identity. Her model regards sexual identity development as a course of individual development in which the experiences and outcome are very dependent on their environment. She noted that identity development for gay, lesbian and bisexual students does not occur without them internalizing the way the people in their environment interact with and relate to them (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p.92). The question set was composed using Cass' framework, and responses were analyzed using this framework as well.

This study was an attempt to better understand college football team culture as it is related to sexual orientation in order to gain a clearer view of how it fits into a university setting.

Methodology

This was a descriptive, exploratory study utilizing qualitative research methods to learn more about football team culture and its possible influences on current and potential gay student athletes. The exploratory nature of the study was due to the empirical literature written in the past. Most of the limited number of prior accounts of homosexual athletes' experiences were self reports to an author, in a biography or observed by the author as opposed to based on research.

Only qualitative data were employed in this study because of the descriptive nature of the study and the small sample size. This was done to avoid "...mathematically correct but socially ludicrous conclusions" and as to not "miss important dimensions of the setting" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001, p. 259). Qualitative research is important "...with its moral premise of advancing human welfare through such potential benefits as alleviating human suffering and producing better social policy" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001, p. 259). This approach was also chosen because of the "...the moral imperatives and ethical principals related to conduct of this research, including the imperative to respect human dignity" (Van den Hoonaard, 2002, p. 71).

Qualitative research "...seeks to capture what people have to say in their own words. Qualitative measures describe the experiences of people in depth...to find out what people's lives, experiences and interactions mean to them in their own terms and in their natural settings" (Patton, 1980, p. 22). This definition comprises one intention of this study.

In order to conduct such research, the identifying information of the subjects needed to remain confidential. They were made aware of the intent of this study,

provided consent willingly and freely, and were given the option of not participating at any time (Van den Hoonaard, 2002). There were no refusals by respondents after the study was explained, and they were made aware that they could cease participation at any time.

The subjects were all current Division I-A and Division I-AA football players from various institutions across the U.S. Originally, they were going to be obtained by snowball sampling, but when subjects were asked to refer the interviewer to friends or former teammates, they claimed to not know anyone who would be willing to participate in this research. One can speculate as to why individuals denied knowledge of other subjects, e.g., disinclination to be associated with the topic, but that is beyond the scope of this study. Thus, participants were found through former colleagues or friends of the researcher with access to potential subjects through personal or professional ties, not via referral from one student athlete to another.

The researcher was the sole instrument in this study, conducting all interviews by phone due to financial and time constraints, and, in an attempt to get some geographical variety in the sample as well as to use the same method for data gathering. Interviewees were given the option of calling the researcher or passing along contact information to the researcher. The average interview time was 10-15 minutes.

All participants were assured that their name and institutional affiliation would not be identified in the study or its findings. The final sample included 28 subjects. This number was achieved when saturation of theme responses occurred and no new information was being obtained nor any new patterns emerged. In hindsight, after four or five interviews these patterns had clearly emerged.

The researcher was the only person interviewing subjects to assure uniformity in analyzing data. The researcher possesses prior experience both working with and interviewing various student athletes including football players. The researcher had specific experience interviewing professional and collegiate football players for articles and radio broadcasts.

According to Johnson, there are several factors in assuring researcher validity in qualitative research. The first is to avoid researcher bias where "...researchers find what they want to find, and then write up their results" (Milinki, 1999, p. 160) and analyze their findings based on their prior beliefs and dispositions toward the topic (Milinki, 1999). There are several ways to avoid letting biases taint research. One is for a researcher to be conscious of his or her biases and another is to select subjects intentionally that the researcher feels would provide responses that debunk the researcher's thoughts of probable outcomes (Milinki, 1999).

In this study, the researcher came into the process being aware of her previous experiences with college football team culture and attempted to separate that from what she thought the potential outcomes of her responses would be. Although the researcher was not fortunate enough to select her respondents, she did persuade her contacts to find her student athletes from a variety of institutions, hoping that would yield a range of responses.

After making initial contact via phone or email (depending on contact information provided) and securing a properly signed consent form, the interview questions were asked via telephone. The telephone method was used to optimize candor.

The data taken over the phone was immediately transcribed, for later comparison to other responses.

Responses were grouped together initially by the question answered. Many times, a respondent would explain an answer he provided in a previous question while answering the next one. The data reviewed for patterns and frequency of responses. Themes were then color-coded and noted. Patterns were then determined from the themes in the findings, and then arrayed according to major and minor ones, and grouped for description accordingly.

The question set consisted of three two-pronged questions. All questions inquired about the ways in which a student athlete would expect himself, teammates and coaches to react if a teammate was gay and came out to his team. The sexual orientation of the subjects was never inquired about from the subjects.

The first question was intended to get at the reactions of players, teammates and the interviewee to how a gay student athlete might be treated. It read as follows: If a teammate of yours told the rest of your team that he was gay, how would you react? How would your team and coaches react? Please describe. The second question was meant to inquire about the reasons for previous accounts that guided the subject's responses. The question was worded thus: Why would they react this way? What specific reasons or incidents in the past would lead you to expect that their reaction would be such (please do not mention names)?

The final question wanted to estimate an overall team culture and attitude towards gay student athletes. The question was: What fears or concerns might a gay student

athlete have coming out or being an openly gay football player as a member of your team? Why?

The final questions were devised based on a pilot study involving 12 respondents from a convenience sample, and revised thereafter to the final form. The twelve pilot subjects included both males and females, including former football players and non-football-playing collegians and recent graduates.

The questions asked were open-ended in an attempt to gain a better understanding of football culture according to these Division I-A and I-AA student athletes. "...Open ended responses permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents. The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view." (Patton, 1980, p.28) According to Patton, what people verbally express gives a great deal of insight to their experiences.

Due to the lack of face-to-face interactions with respondents in this study, and because of the possibility of misinterpretation of meaning, additional methods for analysis were employed to add contextual understanding to the data. One way to better understand a subject's perspective is by noting their nonverbal communication, "...unspoken dialogue, all those messages that people exchange beyond words themselves" (Burgoon, Buller and Woodall, 1996, p. 3). According to Burgoon, Buller and Woodall (1996), there is specific strategic nonverbal behavior associated with using deceptive language. While deceivers behave in certain ways to make their verbal statements more believable, they unknowingly "leak" information or cues to what they are thinking or to the actual situation.

Information management is one way to use strategic deception. Information management is "...predominantly linguistic, used to modify the extent to which a message is complete, clear, relevant, veridical, and personal. Nonverbal behavior in this category conveys uncertainty and vagueness, withholds information, expresses non-immediacy, and indicates sincerity" (Burgoon, Buller and Woodall, 1996, p. 435).

There are several forms of nonverbal behavior that are inadvertent and nonstrategic that involve communicating unplanned emotions, referred to as "leaking." 'Arousal and nervousness' are a "...display of non-verbal cues that betray a heightened state of physiological arousal," while 'negative or dampened affect' consists of "verbal and nonverbal behaviors that leak unpleasant emotions or lack of emotion, possibly associated with guilt and embarrassment at deceiving" (Burgoon, Buller and Woodall, 1996, p.435).

Performance decrements are the "...extreme and nonnormative verbal and nonverbal behavior, awkward conversation, and discrepancies between channels that yield awkward, substandard communication, possibly resulting from increased cognitive effort of excessive motivation" (Burgoon, Buller and Woodall, 1996, p.435). These nonverbal cues were also noted when present in the responses, in order to add contextual understanding, and ensure accurate hearing and eventual proper coding of answers.

While analyzing data, patterns were noted and compared to the responses from the few similar studies regarding homophobia and college student athletes, such as "How much difference is too much difference? Perceptions of gay men and lesbians in intercollegiate athletics" (Wolf-Wendel, Toma & Morpew, 2001) and "Pathways to prejudice: Predicting students' heterosexist attitudes with demographics, self-esteem, and

contact with lesbians and gay men” (Simoni, 1996). These articles included responses from college students regarding perceptions about gay men on their campuses.

Responses were also linked to earlier published athletes’ accounts, as well as scholars’ theories regarding sport and society from the literature review, and what was considered an ideal environment conducive to positive identity development was compared to subjects’ accounts of their team culture.

Results

Usable responses were obtained from 28 subjects. Included in the subject pool were male student athletes representing eleven Division I-AA football teams: six were from teams on the East Coast, two from the West/Southwest region, two played on teams in the South and one was from the Midwest region. The other 17 respondents played for Division I-A institutions: four were located on the East Coast, three were in the West/Southwest, seven were from the South, and three student athletes played for teams in the Midwest.

Four primary themes emerged: denial of having homosexual teammates, shunning a homosexual player, stereotypes and conditions for acceptance. These themes included statements disputing that homosexual players existed on their own or even any football teams as well as denial of a player's sexuality if he was to come out. Many responses described ways in which declared or seemingly homosexual teammates would be shunned or ostracized, which was the second theme. A third theme was commentary about stereotypes shared by subjects regarding football culture, football players and homosexual men. Finally, a fourth theme involved conditions for possible acceptance of gay players coming out to teammates.

Denial of homosexual teammates

When the nature of this research was described to them, 26 subjects (93%) denied even the possibility that they had a gay teammate, or that a gay teammate would come out to his team. A typical reaction was, "There are gay players on football teams?! It's real hard to imagine." Another stated, "I doubt that would ever happen," when asked how he would react to a player coming out on his team. In the middle of responding,

another student athlete kept pausing repeatedly to say, "I can't even picture this happening," referring to a teammate declaring his homosexuality to his team.

This same participant, in a reaction shared by several other subjects, paused in the middle of a sentence to make a qualifying statement denying the possibility that a gay athlete was on his team. This sounds like what Burgoon, Buller and Woodall (1996) refer to as information management, which could be the subject's way of withholding information.

The subjects seemed to struggle with someone they did not see as being masculine intruding on their "masculine turf." This is consistent with the findings of Wolf-Wendel, Toma and Morphew (2001), who found collegiate players and coaches to be homophobic as well as denying the existence of homosexual players on their teams and displaying hostility toward them

"I would be shocked that he is gay and that he would admit it to his team," stated another subject when asked how he would react to a teammate's coming out. Athletes also questioned the reasoning behind a gay player coming out to his team. "Why would he say that, what good could come out of that? A gay player would just cause problems!" Rhoads' (1994) study of college students' attitudes towards gay, lesbian and bisexual students found a little over half of the interviewed students were intolerant to gay, lesbian and bisexual students, a stance similar to these subjects about a potential gay player on their teams, but even more pronounced.

Twenty-one respondents (75%) also reported that they would question a player's sexual orientation in disbelief if he self-identified as gay. One subject said that his teammates "would feel let down and want to know why he was gay and when it

happened.” “I would want to know why he was telling everyone and how long he’s felt that way,” said one subject. Others stated their disbelief about a gay player really being certain of his own sexuality. “I would doubt that he was really gay. I would ask if he was sure,” said one student regarding how he would reply to a teammate who told him that he was gay. These comments seem like they could be non-strategic leakage from nervousness as Burgoon, Buller and Woodall (1996) describe, based on an apparent discomfort heard in their voices and noted by the interviewer.

Twenty subjects (71%) found it difficult (and specifically stated so) to answer questions accurately about how they would react to a teammate being openly gay. Some did not believe that gay people played football, and others did not see coming out and failing to hide one’s homosexuality as beneficial to the player or their team. Twenty six out of twenty eight players (93%) felt strongly that homosexuality did not exist in college football. Perhaps Connell’s (1990) statement about men playing sports to gain masculinity provides supports why so many had a difficult time believing that athletes could be gay in an environment where men strive to prove their masculinity.

Shunning a homosexual player

A second theme saw all 28 subjects (100%) speculating about the ways in which a gay player would be isolated or ostracized by teammates and coaches. “Some teammates would avoid him, think less of him, disrespect him and ignore him.” A similar response was, “He would definitely be isolated. No one would probably say anything to him.”

In addition to ignoring a gay teammate, subjects agreed that players would behave in ways that would make a teammate’s experience a negative one in order to discourage him from staying on the squad. One said a gay teammate “would be forced off the team.

Teammates would treat him differently after they found out (about his homosexuality).”

Another guessed that their gay teammates would “be left out of team events” and they would make a gay player “no longer feel welcome on the team.”

Twelve subjects (43%) noted that coaches would engage in similar behaviors with the same intent, i.e. to make the homosexual player’s experience a poor one in hopes that the player would quit the team of his own accord. One subject commented that his coaches “wouldn’t give the guy the same playing time as they used to or count on them anymore.” While not all subjects directly answered the question about how their coaching staff would react to an openly gay player on their team, only one respondent (4%) stated that his coach would be supportive of that player. He went on to question aloud whether the reasoning behind it would be due to his (the coach’s) personal beliefs or to avoid trouble with administration.

According to one respondent, a gay player “would be singled out, not included. They would fear that their career would be jeopardized, their playing time would be affected and worry about keeping their scholarship. They would fear it would become public knowledge and a campus-wide event.” This subject seemed to recognize that both his teammates and coaches could have a huge impact regarding a gay player’s future with the team, and exert influence to remove him from the roster.

Coaches were also expected to act with the intention of keeping the team together as a whole. “If they (the coaches) feel he is breaking the team up or is harming the chemistry, it’s not a good situation and the coaches will make him quit. The coach’s job is to make sure everyone is playing together as a team.” Another subject said the coaches

“would not want it (teammate’s coming out) to be a disturbance to the team. An issue like that would be disruptive and coaches would have a problem.”

All twenty-eight student athletes interviewed (100%) talked about the ways in which gay players would be made to feel unwelcome on their teams. Expected verbal abuse, including mocking and gossiping, were commonly mentioned. “Some teammates would talk behind his back. They would make fun of him and spread rumors to people not on the team,” said one student. Another stated, “there would be a lot of jokes behind his back, but also directed to him if he makes a bad play.”

Wall and Evans (2000) surveyed college students and found that gay students frequently reported being harassed, and commonly experienced both verbal and physical abuse because of other students reactions to their sexual orientation. Their findings are parallel to those in this study concerning the ways players would expect teammates to treat a gay player in an attempt to isolate him from the rest of the team.

One student athlete explained that the verbal abuse would escalate into harsher forms of ridicule. “There are a handful of guys that would make it real hard for the homosexual player. They would spread rumors and gossip. There would be verbal abuse and degrading jokes, but it wouldn’t stop there. They would find gay pictures on the Internet and cut the head off and put on the guy’s (gay teammate’s) face, and put it on his locker. There would be a lot of practical jokes.”

Physical abuse was also mentioned as another method for isolating a gay player. Thirteen subjects (46%) included physical abuse in their descriptions of how teammates would convey a message to a gay student athlete (or even suspected gay player) of non-acceptance. “There would definitely be some physical abuse involved,” stated one

subject. A fellow student athlete explained that "in class, my teammates (already) joke about other classmates being feminine. We all laugh really hard about what we could do to them physically on the field or in a fight. My teammates use their strength and place on the team to intimidate other guys (non-teammates) all the time, so I can imagine what they'd do to a gay player."

There were numerous ways that subjects suggested to pressure a gay player into quitting their team. "He would be banned from the team, not socially accepted, verbally and physically assaulted. They'd be subject to bodily harm, practical jokes, and the list goes on and on. They would make the person's life real hard." Similar to these responses, many homosexual athletes' accounts as reported by Woog (1998) included being shunned by teammates, coaches, their schools and communities.

Student athletes also talked about teammates who they deemed to have feminine qualities. In order to fit in, these teammates would exploit their sexual contact with women as well as brag about the numbers of women with whom they'd had intimate relations. One subject claimed that he did not think that having a gay teammate would bother him as much "if he didn't lie about being with girls to cover it (his homosexuality) up. I knew a gay soccer player who used to brag about the bitches he was with when he just did that to tell us about it." Messner and Sabo (1994) argued that homophobia, similar to what subjects described in this study, not only is harmful to gay athletes but also devalues women while perpetuating the ideal of male superiority. Both Billy Bean (2003) and David Kopay (1977) gave accounts of being intimate with women to make their teammates believe they were heterosexual.

Another participant added that certain “guys go overboard, walking around with their chest high, and (for) every girl that walks by they have a rude sexual comment to try and hide the fact that they have gay tendencies by acting extra masculine.”

Eight subjects (29%) alluded to gay players not starting from equal ground as their heterosexual teammates because of their constant need to maintain their double identities while proving themselves to be one of the guys in hopes to be an accepted teammate. “A gay player would feel he had to prove himself more since players would be calling him a ‘fag’ anyway. He would have to always worry about what people think instead of worrying about football. He’d worry that teammates don’t like him.”

Like the anonymous gay high school football player in Anderson’s (1999) account, teammates commonly use the word ‘fag’ as an insult and thus some struggle to keep up two identities, including the heterosexual image, while partaking in the football culture becomes a powerful challenge. Bean’s (2003), Tuaolo’s (2002), and Kopay’s (1977) depictions of being a gay athletes also seem to mirror the experience this study’s subjects felt gay teammates would have.

Some felt such a player could be at a disadvantage on the field because, while other teammates are concentrating on improving their football skills and playing their best, a gay student athlete would be concerned with how he was perceived. According to Messner and Sabo (1994), sport is one place where gender and sexual identities are developed and based on the previous response, a gay teammate in football could have more of a challenge developing his identity.

Repeatedly, participants discussed the various ways in which they would attempt to force a gay player off their team. They listed methods like shunning and ostracizing a

player from feeling welcome, and verbal and physical abuse, as well as practical jokes.

Players and coaches reportedly would go to some real extremes in order to ensure that the team would not have to interact with a gay player. Also, a gay player could be expected to continuously exaggerate his masculinity to make teammates believe he is heterosexual in order to fit in.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes harbored by respondents regarding football players, football culture and gay men appeared in many statements. The following are answers from student athletes that are based on these stereotypes. The responses seem to illustrate how football is looked upon as a unique culture, and the way players are expected to behave in order to uphold these stereotypes. One subject explained, "a football field is an atmosphere with manly activities, not a place for an individual's feelings...football is an escape time, not a time to deal with social issues, and when you bring that (a gay teammate) into the equation, no one wants to deal with that."

Another talked about the conflict between the stereotypical football player and the stereotypical gay man. "The culture of football teaches you that you (as a player) are supposed to be hard, tough, a strong man. That's what we (as football players) symbolize. To be a homosexual man and play football is a contradiction to what we symbolize." This statement relates to what Messner and Sabo (1994) said about homophobia in American culture teaching boys that homosexuality and masculinity are at opposite ends of the spectrum.

This same player elaborated further: "The homosexual player does not fit into the culture of how football players are supposed to act. When you turn on TV, you see these

warriors sweating, bleeding, playing in the cold in t-shirts, their noses broken. Players are always breaking bones and asking their coaches to put them back in the game. It symbolizes toughness; a different breed of men. There is no room in your mind to accept football players are gay, not hardnosed and tough. A homosexual is a guy who is soft. It's a total contradiction to what people view football to be." These statements mirror Sabo and Runfola's (1980) notion that, for these athletes, playing football fits with the stereotype of how they want to be seen, and reinforces their ideals of superiority, and, as the authors refer to it as, the 'superman syndrome' (p. xi).

Similar comments made by other subjects paralleled Messner and Sabo's (1994) contention that boys learn homophobic behaviors on teams from the terms coaches use as motivators, and insults exchanged between players. One subject "would be surprised if it was a typical macho alpha male" who came out of the closet!

Another said that his teammates "...already make fun of athletes in 'lesser' sports like swimming for wearing tight bathing suits and stuff. We call each other names when we are all together, and insult teammates by calling each other gay names. 'Fag' is one of the nicer ones that we call guys we don't really think are gay. It's the ultimate insult and it makes people mad." Another subject added, "the general feeling around the locker room is guys are talking about 'this guy's a fag or that guy's a fag' and it doesn't happen in a positive connotation."

Twenty-three (82%) also expressed the fears and anxieties they would have if they knew one of their teammates was gay, based on their beliefs about gay men. The accounts of uncomfortable feelings caused by the presence of a gay teammate included one who said "people would feel uncomfortable (around a gay player) and would in turn

make the gay person uncomfortable.” A similar response noted that “some guys (teammates) would try to make him quit because it would make our team look bad if it got out that there was a gay player on it.”

All but one subject (96%) either reported or speculated that a teammate would feel uncomfortable in locker room situations. One subject pointed out that his teammates “wouldn’t change around the player or shower in front of him. People would be uncomfortable.” Another added that his teammates “would feel uncomfortable if a guy was staring at them or checking them out in the locker room.” Buying into stereotypes of football players and homosexual men is congruent with what Messner (1992) states the ideals and values of society are as mirrored in sport.

One student athlete commented that teammates “...would say he better not be gay looking at me in the shower. People on my team are homophobic and homosexuals make them feel uncomfortable.” Another added, “The locker room is an atmosphere where guys walk around naked, not an atmosphere where being gay is accepted.” These comments appear to reflect the stereotypical assumption that because a man is gay and around other men, he might force himself on those men around him.

When asked what concerns an openly gay player would have as a member of their football team, various interviewees felt the need to further explain their answers, perhaps to offer a rationale or to excuse their teammates’ negative reactions to the potentially gay student athlete. “People just act insecure like that. That’s just how society is,” was a typical reason given that put blame on an outside source and the existing culture for players’ acceptable behaviors. Another reason given to justify teammates’ behaviors was

an internal one. One subject said his teammates would behave negatively toward a gay teammate due to "their lack of understanding and maybe a little ignorance involved."

Stereotypes that the subjects subscribe to or assume that the majority believe in greatly shaped many responses. Athletes spoke about what they believed football culture was, and thus, how football players would act to perpetuate their stereotypical ideal of the sport. Student athletes had their beliefs regarding not only how homosexual men behave, but also how gay men really are, suggesting the possibility that a football player could not be gay.

Also, because of their stereotypes of gay men, many subjects suggested that their teammates would fear being anxious or uncomfortable around a gay football player, especially in the locker room. Many subjects assumed, again based on those stereotypic assumptions about gay men, that a gay teammate would try to approach other men in the locker room, staring at them or making sexual advances.

Conditions for acceptance

Nineteen participants (68%) discussed their "terms" for possibly accepting a teammate who came out on their team. The common opinion was that if the player was a key contributor to the team, then he would be more readily accepted, despite his homosexuality. One stated that, "it would depend on the caliber of player and the potential of the player. A good player can get away with a little more. It comes down to how much we need him."

According to seven student athletes surveyed (25%), the best way to be accepted as a gay player on their football team would be to hide one's sexuality from his teammates. One explained that for him and his teammates, "There is a difference between a closet

homosexual and one who is out of the closet. It is more accepted as a closeted one, not being flamboyant and open about it. I wouldn't have a problem if they weren't hitting on people."

Throughout the interview process, some suggested that a homosexual's sexuality should be kept in his personal life, because talking about intimate details with or around the football team was inappropriate. However, many subjects also made mention of sexual comments made about or toward women by student athletes in front of teammates, as well as stories about sexual experiences with women that are shared in the locker room. "A football environment is not a sexual atmosphere. There are sexual comments made in passing but bringing homosexual sex into that atmosphere isn't done," said one athlete.

The seeming contradiction in the preceding quote, with the student athlete claiming that a football environment is not sexual, and then in the next sentence, stating sexual comments are indeed made, gave the appearance that the subject is using what Burgoon, Buller and Woodall (1996) refer to as strategic deception (intentionally misleading), using information management (in this situation, leaving out information that would lead the researcher to see that a locker room as a nonsexual surrounding. This primarily linguistic form of non-verbal communication could possibly be the subject's attempt to hide what really occurs in a football environment by withholding information.

Another subject spoke about conversations witnessed or participated in between players regarding women in the locker room. "Sure, we talk about the girl we were with the night before. It gets us ready for practice. But that would be strange if there were gay guys around." It seems acceptable and appropriate to discuss intimate details of

relationships with women among teammates, but a gay player would be expected to keep his personal life to himself.

One subject stated, "I'd tell him his personal life is outside of the team and football and I'd be fine with it (his coming out) if he's not letting his personal life or choices affect the team. He knows he has choices and what is right or what is wrong. I'm not going to discriminate on him based on his bad choices or choices that are not acceptable to others." This player not only agreed that a gay player's sexuality should be hidden from the team, but also felt that sexual orientation is a personal choice and an unwise one.

The tone of voice of this respondent sounded like what Burgoon, Buller and Woodall (1996) call a negative or dampened affect. In this case, where the subject showed unpleasant emotion and awkwardness, it could be due to guilt from deceiving the interviewer. However, the strained tone of voice heard by the interviewer could also be awkward communication due to the subject experiencing discomfort with the topic. Responses from the student athletes who sounded uncomfortable based on their tone of voice could be interpreted as 'performance decrements' (Burgoon, Buller and Woodall, 1996) based on the awkward nonverbal behavior that created awkward conversations.

In summary, players demonstrated verbally and nonverbally their perceptions of behavior and identity in football and how they and others would regard it and deal with it. Further, shared stereotypes about homosexuality from within football culture about homosexuality were noted, and terms for possible acceptance of a gay teammate were described.

Discussion

Possible limiting factors to this study included the following: 1) The sample, while geographically diverse, was small and acquired randomly and conveniently, not in a systematic manner. 2) The sample was not drawn from or representative of every Division I-A and Division I-AA institution. 3) While conducting interviews via phone perhaps allowed for more candor and eliminated the potential discomfort of face-to-face contact, some key non-verbal cues were lost that could not be detected visually over the telephone. 4) Because subjects were linked to the interviewer through mutual acquaintances, the student demographics could not be controlled, and no data about age or race was asked for. 5) The size of the exploratory study itself was limited because of the sampling method. 6) Willing participants connote more openness, which may have altered the responses to be more positive than if they were the perceptions of "non-voluntary" football student athletes. If subjects were willing to participate because of their openness or comfort with the topic, their responses may have been less or more homophobic than those of the average collegiate football player.

Nonetheless, these findings are a valuable form of data because they give insight into football team culture and an environment where it is extremely infrequent that a player admits a homosexual identity. This data is a beginning to learn about collegiate football team culture and its implications for a gay student athlete's collegiate experience, as well as his student and identity development.

The way football team culture was described by the subjects in comparison to college student identity models such as Chickering and Reisser's (1993), showed that a college football team is not a safe, nurturing place for positive identity development for a

gay student athlete. These results were similar to those found in the study by Wolf-Wendel, Toma and Morphew (2001) where they reported a lack of acceptance from coaches and teammates and hostility toward gay and lesbian student athletes.

Gender development theories [Feminist Identity Development for Women by Downing and Roush (1985) Womanist Identity Development from Ossana, Helms & Leonard (1992), and Gender Role Journey by O'Neil, Egan, Owen & Murry (1993)] suggest that as one grows and matures in their gender identity, he or she lets go of societal constructed gender roles and finds their own personal gender identity. Based on the descriptions by football players in the literature review, [Tuaola's (2002), and Kopay's (1977)], and supported by the findings in this study, stereotypical gender roles seem to be at the core of the culture.

Players and coaches seem to hang on to their expected gender roles and traits and actively behave in ways to reaffirm them, instead of advancing their own gender identity development. They may act out stereotypes, perhaps to conceal their insecurities concerning their own gender identity development.

The descriptions that former professional athletes provided about their own coming out as members of sport culture are similar to the depictions of sport culture found in this study. Their experiences of being shunned mirror the current subjects' perceptions of why their teammates would engage in similar behavior. The fears driving the pro players' deeper into the closet were echoed by the subjects' perceptions of why gay teammates of theirs would hesitate to come out. If a gay student athlete fears their team's reactions to their identity, how can they easily embrace their own sexual orientation and identity? And embracing one's multiple identities is a key step in the developmental

process, according to Reynolds and Pope's (1991) Multidimensional Identity model and Cass's (1979) Model of Homosexuality Identity Formation as well. Further, in an environment where the concept of team dynamics includes a mutual support group, bonding over common abilities, and being close friends with teammates, it is surprising that this same group would be detrimental to each other's student development. Apparently open acceptance of gender diversity is not a characteristic of the team environments that were described by subjects.

The accounts that Tuaola (2002), Kopay (1977) and Bean (2001) shared about identity struggles and their ongoing turmoil in attempts to be accepted, (e.g., Kopay with his non accepting family, and Tuaola with his dangerous binge drinking behaviors) are extremely sad and disheartening tales of people going through distress, and are discouraging and socially frustrating. What is more upsetting is that their team culture might be more inviting if they were a part of a more accepting environment.

Messner and Runfola (1990), Crosset (2000), and Messner and Sabo (1980) suggest that homophobia and masculinity are societal constructs and that sport reflects a society's values. The perceived dichotomy of a gay football player being both masculine and homosexual is only a contradiction because of societal norms and stereotypes. Responses that accept stereotypes of homosexuals and the notion "that's just the way it is" also reflect the larger culture. Physical abuse was a cavalierly stated item listed in this study, when talking about ways teammates would be shunned or isolated from the team if they revealed a homosexual identity. This is an example of student athletes upholding societal standards of masculinity as well as a way to perpetuate their stereotypical gender trait of being aggressive.

Sabo and Runfola (1980) stated that sport "...promotes and maintains sexual stereotypes and male dominance" (p. 7), while Messner and Sabo (1994) suggested that part of gaining that male dominance is by exploiting women. "Dating becomes a sport itself, and 'scoring' or having sex with little or no emotional involvement is a mark of masculine achievement" (p. 38). Subjects also commented about teammates who were trying to prove their masculinity by engaging in sexual acts with various women so they could report back to their teams about it. A society and team culture that is detrimental to gay student athletes struggling with their identity also has harmful implications to the women and heterosexual teammates involved in that culture.

The homophobia and lack of acceptance and understanding described by subjects in this study bode poorly for the way in which women are treated and regarded. As Sabo and Runfola (1980) alerted their readers, such behaviors also reaffirm class constructs and notions of male gender superiority over women. When players womanize in order to provide themselves with a heterosexual image, women can suffer emotional duress. Using derogatory terms when referring to women, such as bitches, is both disrespectful and perpetuates stereotypes.

Several other interesting experiences occurred throughout the interview process. When asked, not one subject offered to contact a friend or former teammate to see if they would be interested in participating in this study, claiming that they did not know anyone who would be willing. However, when friends and former teammates were asked to be possible subjects, every single time they consented to participate!

The subjects did not want to approach friends or former teammates and discuss reactions to possible gay football teammates, likely to avoid placing question on their

own sexual orientation and also did not want to ask them to talk about a gay football teammate with a female stranger. Although when a former teammate or someone approached them, they complied, and even after the interviewer explained to the subjects the exact nature of the study and read the questions, not one subject refused to continue at any point.

Anderson (2002) emphasized that, in comparison to other social institutions, sport is extremely homophobic. This study's findings, support that in collegiate football, the descriptions, accounts and scenarios voluntarily given by subjects tended to be homophobic and were puzzling when put in context to the university setting. If college campus environments, which can be very accepting and diverse, produce students homophobic to the extent that this study shows, what are the implications for society and higher education?

Another interesting concurrent theme within interview responses was the assumption that being gay was a choice. One subject explained that he would not judge his teammate even though he was making a bad choice. It is unfortunate for the gay student athlete, and a poor reflection on society in general, that homosexuals are being judged based on their sexual preference, which suggests choice, and not what may be a biologically influenced orientation.

When many subjects often explained considerably homophobic sounding remarks, several times they blamed society and gave "that's just the way it is" reasoning. College students are at an age and place in their personal development where blindly accepting the norm is common yet unfortunate and unacceptable. Following others mind sets and blaming society for one's poor choices would not be a justifiable option.

Also, in the denial section of the findings, respondents could not understand the reason a gay student athlete would reveal his sexual identity to his teammates. Others stated that doing so would be a bad decision. What these teammates may fail to realize, is that hiding a part of one's identity can be painful. It is unnecessary as well as being unfair, and stunts both the gay student athletes identity development and his teammates' personal development by stripping teammates of the opportunity to be exposed to diversity and learning how to interact with people who are different from them.

For a gay football player to consciously think everyday at practice, in the classroom or even when playing in a game when around teammates how to "prove" their heterosexual identity must be a tiring and nerve racking process. When comparing gay athletes to their teammates, who only have to concentrate on succeeding academically in the classroom or hitting harder on the practice field. It is ironic that many subjects did not think football players could be gay because being homosexual was seen as synonymous with weakness and feminine qualities (also assuming that female qualities are the opposite of strong) and football players were so tough. When in reality, surviving every day in a homophobic environment as a gay man would have taken a great deal of strength.

Recommendations

Given the limitations of this study, and the implications of the findings, more research needs to be conducted regarding homophobia and its implications on the individual, team, women and society. It has been shown that there is considerable concern involving football team culture on personal development so a closer look needs to be taken.

Based on the present findings, it is recommended that the NCAA make it a requirement for the full coaching staff of all Division I-A and I-AA football teams to undergo educational awareness programs as well as training to help teammates deal with volatile social issues.

Further, coaches should implement team rules specifically to address appropriate behaviors regarding gay student athletes, and they should educate their team as needed to change team culture, making it safer for all athletes and more conducive to open college student development.

Also, assuming the NCAA's main priority is student athletes, it should encourage creation of a position in each athletic department or perhaps appoint a representative from each compliance office to monitor teams' functions and practices to assure they are changing. In addition to making team environments safer for all students involved, it would also teach student athletes valuable life lessons and foster their development.

Mission statements of institutions of higher education and athletic departments should converge more closely. Athletic departments should be held to more stringent standards of currently is the case and should employ staff more capable of having positive effects on college students and their development. Adhering to value laden mission statements should help change the culture.

Athletic departments should work in collaboration with others on campus qualified to deliver education regarding social issues. Women's centers, student affairs professionals, non-violence specialists and GLBT advisors are potential people who may have a better handle on how to better affect change in team culture. Still, for student

athletes to take such education seriously, coaches would have to not only buy into it but make a stand by setting and showing examples.

Coaches and administrators need to make a stand and set clear goals and examples of what will be accepted and what will not regarding player behavior. This would breed a new wave of coaches, and force the unfit or unwilling out of the field. Athletic departments and institutions of higher education should be more of a reflection of each other and operates less like they are two separate entities.

Student athletes need to be held more accountable as well. Although it will take coaches to impose penalties based on poor behavior, the students need to be accountable for their own actions and fully understand the consequences to their teammates of their homophobic behavior.

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APPENDIX A

Consent Form

Agreement to Participate Gauging Football Team Climate for Gay Student Athletes.

Instructions:

Read the consent statement below. If you agree to participate, please sign where indicated. **Put your name on this form only. The interview will be completely confidential and your name and specific demographic information will not be used in this study at any time.**

This study is an attempt to learn more about football culture as it pertains to gay student athletes. It is being conducted by Amy Apicerno, a second year graduate student at the University of Rhode Island. This is a research study in order to fulfill a partial graduation requirement for the degree of Master of Science in Human Development and Family Studies. The questions asked inquire about personal reactions to potential gay student athletes as well as your perceived impression to how your team and coaches would react. There are no foreseen risks involved in this study, however if the topic makes you uncomfortable, you may stop at any time. Potential benefits of completing this study could be gaining a new perspective regarding teammates' experiences or having a forum to voice your own. The interview will take approximately fifteen minutes to verbally answer by phone.

- *Please note:* your participation is entirely voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential. You will not be identified at any point in the study or in the reporting of the study's findings. Your participation is not related to your academic standing at your institution of higher education. Your honest opinions will be valued and respected. You may choose to discontinue your participation in any phase of this study at any time without fear of penalty. If you have any questions or concerns regarding any aspect of this research project, please contact Amy Apicerno at by email: amyap97@yahoo.com or phone: (401) 486-3643, Dr. Gene Knott at gknott@uri.edu or the Vice Provost for Research and Graduate Study by mail at 70 Lower College Rd, Kingston, RI 02881 or via phone at (401) 874-4328.

Consent to Participate:

The purpose of my participation and the instructions have been explained to me. I understand that I am not required to participate and that I may stop participating at any time. I understand that my responses will remain confidential and I will not be identified in the study. I understand that my institution, athletic conference and geographical information will also not be utilized in the study. I understand that my participation will not affect my academic standing or my grades.

Name: _____

Signature: _____