

Running Head: GAY ATHLETE

Real Men Wear Pink

An Autoethnography of a Gay Athlete

Benjamin Archer

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Dr. Reid

Oxford College of Emory University

We were pulling into the school parking lot after solidifying another victory for the team. The boys and I were celebrating the win, conversations filled with the latest female conquests, or how Matt could shotgun a beer faster than his older brother (he was in college, so it was a big deal apparently). I looked at Nathan and laughed as he mocked the heteronormativity in the atmosphere so thick you could see it through the haze of AXE body spray.

Leo was sitting a row behind me, and he was only a sophomore, so of course, he joined in, talking about how his girlfriend was going to come over and give him a blowjob. I laughed again and chastised his sacred coming-of-age experience.

"Dude, no one cares if she's gonna suck your dick, stop gloating."

"Fuck off, Ben. Everyone likes getting a BJ unless you're like gay or something. Are you gay?"

"Yeah, actually, I am."

He was shocked. His face turned white for a second, then the smile returned.

"No, that's bullshit. You're joking, right?"

"Deadass, dude. I'm gay."

"No way, you can't be. You gotta be fucking with me."

He proceeded to ask around the bus. He started with the other captain, my friend David.

"David, did you know Ben was gay?"

"No, but so what if he is?"

"Matt, did you know?" Matt shook his head, seemingly in disbelief.

No surprise, the token frat boy doesn't know, dipshit.

"Yeah, I am. It's not that big a deal, I've been out since January," I said as my fingers twitched nervously in the seat.

But it was a big deal: I had accidentally come out to my team, and the reaction wasn't what I had expected.

Coming out is a significant life event for LGBTQ individuals in which they reveal their true selves to friends, family, and society. However, coming out can be extremely stressful and often comes with an array of challenges presented by society and its heteronormative roles (Toomey & McGeorge, 2018). While coming out and embracing one's LGBTQ identity can be difficult, athletes face an extra level of pressure to be themselves because their careers heavily depend on their reputation, which can often be tarnished by the negative stereotypes associated with LGBTQ members (Iati, 2019). LGBTQ athletes do not adhere to or propagate these offensive stereotypes. Still, it is evident that society lacks support and seems unable or unwilling to alter their schemas surrounding the community. The result is a significant decrease in self-confidence as well as psycho-symbolism and internalized homophobia that has much more of an effect on the athlete's performance. In this autoethnography, I will lay out the systematic factors that influence an LGBTQ person's identity as well as the intersection of sexual orientation and athletic development.

Method

An autoethnography is a process where the author compares their experience with a particular topic to research. The research, combined with personal reflection and analysis, inspires a larger truth that can suggest future research studies. Ultimately, an autoethnography adds a creative twist on sociologic and psychological research and informs how humans interact with others and society. My process incorporates personal memories that have shaped my identity in addition to where my identity has been questioned or put into jeopardy by norms that try to dictate who I am

allowed to be. To strengthen my argument, I cite empirical research from scholarly sources that support these experiences through case studies or statistics. Finally, I will synthesize the information to assert the claim that these socio-cultural and environmental influences dramatically impact an LGBTQ athlete's perception of his or herself and can lead to negative consequences such as self-confidence and body image issues. Through an auto ethnographical style of writing, I intend to describe the factors that play into a gay athlete's identity development to give a voice to an underrepresented minority group often overlooked by society.

An Athlete's Environment

On the field and inside the locker room, a male, sports-heavy setting consists of standard competitive energy and masculinity complexes. Players will chest bump, slap each other's butts, and make crude jokes about their teammate's attractiveness or penis size to enforce the sense of brotherhood and community. While all in good fun, these innocent colloquialisms can be dangerous because these preestablished homoerotic environments confuse the LGBTQ athlete. According to Dr. Meredith Worthen, athletes may not know the difference between fun and flirting, which can lead to embarrassment or an unintentional coming out experience (2014). I remember a few times where my teammates and I would try and grunt sexually to make the others laugh, and some would pretend they were a girl having sex and moaning. However, I was the only one who did not know where the stopping point was: Should I make more sex jokes? What if I did, and they got suspicious? If I commented on how toned Matt was, would they know? I quickly shut my mouth and asked if anyone wanted to hit as if that would distract their judging eyes.

One misinterpretation or wrong step can shift the dynamic of the team atmosphere, most likely against the LGBTQ teammate, because they are worried that they will "be next" or

somewhat converted to homosexuality against their will (Toomey & McGeorge, 2018). This concept is known as groupthink, where the "hetero masculinity" enforced by the sports environment leads to a much more polarized climate that may support homophobia or other anti-LGBTQ sentiments (Worthen, 2014). More often than not, however, the LGBTQ athlete is not even out to his team primarily due to fear of being ostracized or discriminated against in his athletic safe space. In the eyes of the LGBTQ athlete, he may not want or be able to come out to his team and coaches because he feels it is not safe to do so. Therefore, he pretends to be or passes as straight to avoid potential discrimination. Straight passing comes in the form of hypermasculine behavior, unwillingly objectifying women in front of same-sex peers, or the infamous "don't ask, don't tell" policy that confines LGBTQ people in the closet (King, 2017).

Whether or not the individual is out, they may put on a mask that makes them seem more heterosexual or stereotypically masculine to avoid suspicion and perceived threat, even if the danger is a teammate or friend. In a 2018 sport psychology study, Mullin et al. 2018 interviewed a male gay volleyball player, pseudo named "Mark," throughout different phases of his season on the team as he progressively embraced his gay identity and came out to those around him. When asked why he did not want to come out to his team until he was at least a junior, Mark replied that he was wary of their reaction and prioritized his safety and reputation on the team:

To be honest, I don't know how they would have taken it... [I don't think] they would not have associated themselves with me. But I don't think they would have been very okay with it. (Mullin et al. 2018)

I profoundly relate to Mark's statement: As a gay man, coming out to my teammates was also a very stressful process. I knew I would be accepted because I was a captain and one of the best players on the team, but I was more concerned with how they would see me as an athlete. I was

certainly not the most masculine gay guy on the street, but I was also not incredibly flamboyant, nor did I possess any stereotypically feminine characteristics. Still, I was worried that the team would think I was less of an athlete, that I was weak or too "girly" to play with them despite my prestige and ability on the court. Research supporting our experiences claim that even the fear of anti-LGBTQ behavior can inhibit an athlete's ability to embrace their identity, resulting in straight passing or not coming out entirely.

Institutionalized Homophobia as Toxic Masculinity

I often feel like a walking contradiction: I am gay, but I also play sports. I am gay, but I enjoy getting sweaty and competitive with my teammates. This modernized cognitive dissonance against society's "heteronormative master narratives" describes the predicament of the average LGBTQ teenager caught between their interests and social expectations not to fulfill them (Rockenbach et al. 2017). While commonly unintentional, these master narratives contain homophobic undertones that propagate toxic masculinity behavior in interpersonal connection within the LGBTQ and heterosexual communities. The LGBTQ supports its athletic members who thrive in sports, yet the culture of hetero masculinity chastises them for feminizing their "macho" dominance complexes (King, 2017).

Two primary social institutions historically have been granted permission to broadcast the anti-gay narrative. Firstly, many anti-LGBTQ groups cite the bible or other religious texts that claim that homosexuality is a sin or is wrong despite overwhelming evidence on the contrary (Rockenbach et al. 2017). At Boston Pride, among the thousands of LGBTQ people celebrating their independence and identity, there were representatives of the Westboro Baptist Church chanting "away with the gays" and waving banners that called us faggots and subhuman. Despite the overwhelming majority of LGBTQ acceptance worldwide, there are always people who

oppose us, and it feels like their voices ring the loudest. Additionally, the Greek system present on college campuses enforces the hetero prosocial behavior that either ignores or discriminates against LGBTQ identity traits. For example, in a 2014 study of LGBTQ alliance among college athletes and Greek organizations, researchers found that the lowest-rated supporters of LGBTQ people on campus were male athletes, the second-lowest being fraternity men, and then sorority women (Worthen, 2014). The principles of Greek life are a brotherhood, community, and social justice. However, beyond closed doors, there are hazing rituals and discrimination against gay men, displayed by the presidents, and trickled down through the group behavior seeking to humiliate the weaker pledges through homophobic remarks and pressure to conform to heterosexual ideals (Worthen, 2014). I've heard horror stories of frat pledges being forced to do "gay things" with their pledge class as a form of hazing, but no one told me that being gay was supposed to be funny.

Researchers in the Worthen study claims that these low support levels come from miseducation about LGBTQ issues in the heterosexual community. However, Rockenbach et al. 2017 attribute the hostilities to the socio-spiritual climate of predominantly heterosexual areas, for example, conservative towns and college campuses. Emory University is originally a Methodist institution, and Oxford is located in the very rural south. I haven't been discriminated against directly. However, the looming churches on every block and majority WASP demographic around me does make me wary of outwardly displaying my sexuality in public despite Atlanta being an incredibly sexually diverse place, much like my home in Boston.

The traditional practices of homophobia, whether through religious or socio-cultural lenses, contribute to the overwhelmingly toxic environment of masculine behavior, wherein the ideal characteristics of manhood conflict with generalizations of gay identity (Cunningham,

2012). When I am on the court, I feel like I cannot be gay because then people will think I am weaker or less of an athlete due to preconceived societal notions of what it means to play sports; since I am not a "manly man" as the majority of sports seem to require, I fear being cast aside. Furthermore, when I tell people, I am gay and also a varsity athlete, they react as if I am some sort of alien who has the inside scoop on straight sporty guys as if my sexuality and extracurricular activities cannot coexist (Mullin et al. 2018). As someone who is continually trying to navigate the balance between straight and gay in the athletic environment, I begin to see myself as lesser than my heterosexual counterparts because society has solidified LGBTQ athletes as a separate breed.

The internalization of stereotypes is known as the "looking-glass self," where a person's self becomes the result of their interactions with others and with the environment around them (Meyer, 2003). For gay athletes such as myself, our looking glass selves stem from institutional heteronormativity that comes out in conversations of daily life like in the locker room. We hear the homophobic remarks. We see the toxic masculinity, we feel resentment from heteronormative society, and thus we feel inadequate and lesser than our heterosexual compatriots. Calling someone a fag is trash talk on the field and deemed permissible instead of banned for homophobia, pushing further apart the playing fields of LGBTQ acceptance with heteronormativity (Mullin et al. 2017).

Gay Symbolism

When the term "gay" comes up, what, or who, do you think of? Are there rainbows and skinny guys saying "yes queen" through pounds of makeup and hairspray, or their muscular hairy counterparts? A gay athlete may feel pushed away from athletic spheres due to their perceived femininity or other miscellaneous stereotypes, but simultaneously pushed in the opposite

direction by the LGBTQ community to represent or exemplify LGBTQ identity and defy labels. However, this self-juxtaposition of identity and role internalizes in the individual and can lead to psychological damage, among other consequences.

I always wondered why girls needed to dress so scandalously for these parties when guys showed up with a shirt, jeans, and whatever shoes they were wearing that day. I flaunted ripped skinny jeans and white converse, my "frat shoes" that were scuffed up from a semester's worth of dirt and possibly vomit. We got to the front of the line, my six girlfriends and me well exceeding the "ratio" of 2 girls to 1 guy.

"Finally, the front of the line, it's so cold here," Hannah remarked, freezing in her booty shorts. I took a few steps forward but was stopped by two white blonde frat brothers who I could only assume were named Brad and Chad.

"Woah there, you can't go in bro," one said, hand outstretched, a Natty Lite in the other.

"Why not? Those six girls are with me," I said, my friends, nodding in agreement.

The brothers looked at each other, somehow trying to communicate an excuse telepathically.

"We just reached capacity, sorry, I don't make the rules."

"Yeah, it's like a fire hazard to have this many in,"

Two more girls had danced themselves in the door, and I got mad.

"Listen, I'm not gonna drink any of your stuff, it's fine I just want to be with my friends."

"Sorry, rules are rules."

Out of nowhere, a hail-Mary from Hannah.

"Dude, he's gay."

"Oh, well, I guess... it's okay. You gotta promise not to drink any of our stuff though," the frat brothers managed to blurt out, unsure if I was fooling them or if I was actually gay.

I walked in, laughed it off with my friends, and danced the night away. But I didn't forget what had happened. I had temporarily threatened the heteronormative ego as if they thought I would revoke the frat brothers of their institutional right to get teenage girls drunk and hook up with them. But no, I didn't. Because I was gay. I knew that they did not want to let me in because one more guy meant less of a chance for the others, but why suddenly let me in after I unintentionally revealed my sexuality? Why was my identity, something I had never questioned in this scenario, now considered an advantage? Why were the people who had the social leg up giving me a free pass?

Unfortunately, LGBTQ people are grouped as one identity when, in reality, the acronym describes a multitude of individuals with stories far more complicated than mine. I even have grouped my community in this autoethnography because I do not have enough information on the L, B, T, and Q groups, among many other identification markers. The different facets of gay symbolism, known empirically as psychosocial symbolism, constitutes an LGBTQ group identity which, while intended to support the members of its community, paradoxically diminishes the independence of LGBTQ people, especially within the community itself (Rockenbach et al. 2017). Unique people are shoved into the "gay best friend" mold, or "that gay guy from class" or "her gay child," all of which are associated with negative connotations. I am no token for gay culture or identity, but I have been referred to as "gay Ben," or "the gay one," and most relevant to the topic at hand, the infamous "gay tennis player." This symbolism further perpetuates the

stereotypes associated with LGBTQ people and diminishes their performance in sports.

According to a Washington Post article on LGBTQ athletes coming out in professional athletics, there is a looming pressure from society for LGBTQ athletes to publicly come out and declare their sexuality to the world, primarily the media (Iati, 2019). Coming out has become a marketing ploy, a way for athletes to rebrand themselves as LGBTQ-friendly and an ally when in reality, many of the athletes are more confused than ever because they feel expected to be someone they presently are not (King, 2017).

We see the emotional turmoil in the media through celebrities, especially ones who are out and who serve as role models and gay icons for the world's closeted and sexually confused youth. Gus Kenworthy, Olympian, and alpine freestyle skier interviewed with TIME Magazine before skiing in the 2018 PyeongChang Games and described his fear of being outed as gay and how he used it as a motivator to succeed in sports. A well-decorated Olympian, Kenworthy felt added pressure because there was the need to represent not only team USA but also team gay, also known as the LGBTQ community. However, since coming out in October of 2015, his performance has only gotten better, and he accredits this to "being in a better headspace" now that he is out (Time, 2018).

While I am not a professional athlete and have no inclination to be one, I understand the duality of self that involves two completely different aspects of identity. On the one hand, not being out or in touch with one's identity leads to emotional conflict and damaged psyche. On the other hand, however, coming out should not have any effect on an athlete's performance; straight people do not have to come out as straight, nor do they have to worry about how their sexuality impacts their careers or reputation. Therefore, why do LGBTQ athletes face these internal struggles to balance who they are with what they do? The answer lies in the flow of anti-LGBTQ

sentiments from institutionalized homophobia to interpersonal discrimination and finally negative perceptions of self.

Discussion

Numerous factors play into an LGBTQ athlete's self-perception and therefore determine how he acts around his teammates and peers. Socio-cultural conditions develop the stereotypical "athletic environment" where hetero masculinity is revered, and LGBTQ people are forced to disclose their sexualities in fear of emotional harm. These prejudices become personal, in which the previously described influences determine who can be an athlete, mainly emphasizing masculine and stereotypically heterosexual characteristics that society deems opposite of the LGBTQ schema. Lastly, those who lie in the middle are torn between who we are and what we want to do because the world is either not ready to or is unwilling to accept us. Therefore, there continues to be a debate between what exactly is causing this dissonance. Is it homophobia, that demands LGBTQ people continue to pass in the shadows of their identity? Or rather, is it heteronormativity that expects all male athletes to be manly and enforce what is perceived as "straight?" Regardless, there is a majority of athletes who happen to be gay, and vice versa. With this autoethnography, I tried to bridge the gap between the LGBTQ and athletic communities with my narrative as someone in both camps, and I am not alone. There are thousands of others just like me who feel torn between their sexual orientation and the sports world, as if we are expected to choose between the two or if the two are mutually exclusive. All we know is that, until gender and sexual stereotypes are combated, the rainbow flag will not be waved as the team rushes the field anytime soon.

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