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Homosexuality and Sport

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It was not a big story but it did set the sports talk shows buzzing for a few days and some print was expended on it. Brendon Lemon, editor of Out magazine let it be known that he has been involved in an affair with a major league baseball player, and that he just might reveal the identity of that player. Lemon said he was tired of the strain that this secret corner of his life was taking on him and his lover.

The story of course is that it is a story. It is a statistical certainty that homosexual men are playing professional sports in the United States and across the world. The same is true for women. The difference is that the case of lesbianism in women's sport is discussed, is practiced openly, and indeed has become a marketing strategy for the WNBA franchise in Los Angeles. "Girl Bar," a lesbian social club, is joining with the LA Sparks to market the team in the lesbian community.

It is not likely that any major league baseball team or any male sports franchise will be marketing to the gay community any time soon.

Martina Navratilova went public with her lesbianism and indeed her lover sat in the "friends box" during matches at the major tennis venues. Shots of her during the telecasts were frequent and Bud Collins of NBC sports called her Martina's "great good friend," as apparently network television was not yet ready to use the "L" word. Other women have followed Martina's lead and after years of talk and gossip the issue of lesbianism in women's sport was in the open and today it is no longer a big story. Today it is becoming a marketing option.

This is not to say that change came easy or that it was not difficult for Martina and others to go public. Navratilova took major public criticism and lost millions of dollars in commercial endorsement contracts. It is a tribute to her however that this subject is no longer a taboo topic in women's sport.

It remains a major taboo in men's sport.

Over the past several days there has been considerable discussion of what would happen to Mr. Lemon's lover if his name was spoken. What would his teammates think and do? What would the fans think and do?

The answers that floated through the media indicate that this player would not be welcomed by fans or teammates. Eric Davis said that he would feel uncomfortable in the locker room and shower with a gay teammate. He said he would worry about the teammate making a pass at him.

Indeed Eric Davis is not alone in his views. Glenn Burke, a former Dodger, said that after his homosexuality became known he was ostracized by his teammates and dumped by the Dodgers. Billy Bean has talked about the pain of being a closet homosexual in major league baseball. Tommy Lasorda refused to acknowledge the homosexuality of his son who died of AIDS, and spoke in harsh homophobic language on the subject.

Over and over again in the culture of both college and professional male sport, both on and off the field, tests of manhood are constantly referenced by coaches and teammates. Insults of players have clear implications concerning their sexuality. Such comments as "you throw like a girl," or the less delicate "you pussy," clearly address the issue of male gender identity and its significance in the macho world of sport.

In a sporting culture that is driven by the male quest for power and dominance any suggestion of ambiguity of sexual identity would be intolerable. It is not likely that a homosexual player would find acceptance among fans and teammates, at least not in the beginning. How long it would take for this to change is difficult to say, but it is not likely to happen as rapidly as it did in women's sport.

Part of the reason for this is the fact that for many years, even generations, the notion that an athletic woman had to have a "male" orientation has been part of American folk culture. Richard Petty sitting in the stands at Daytona shouting that Janet Guthrie must have "balls" may have been tasteless, but it was not surprising. More common than shouting have been the whispers and jokes that have accompanied discussions of women's sport over the decades. The attacks on Eastern European female athletes in this regard were legion.

Nonetheless there is greater tolerance of lesbianism over male homosexuality by American males and this attitudinal difference is an extension of the sexual double standard which is far from dead in this culture. One illustration of this can be found in the porn film industry where "girl on girl" sex is a commonplace, while "boy on boy" sex is not. One sells, the other does not.

The definitions of male sexuality are sharply drawn and the associations of those definitions with the world of sport have been an important part of the culture for nearly as long as there has been sport. In addition males would seem to be much more insecure about their sexuality than females, or at least about their own gender identity. The psychosexual melodramas of "raslin" offer an exaggerated but clear portrayal of these issues.

Perhaps this insecurity helps to explain the difference between the male and female sporting climate, and the male inability to deal with the issue of homosexuality. Certainly there was enough homophobia on display this past week to point up once again this lingering taboo in Sportsworld.

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