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Homophobia in sport

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Homophobia in sport
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The last ten days or so has seen a convergence of seemingly unrelated events which illuminate or cast a dark shadow around the subject of gender and sport. The most high profile of these events was the announcement by former NBA player John Amaechi that he is gay, an announcement tied to the release of a book. As it turns out, the revelation is only one occurrence in a cluster of discreet moments related to the topic of gender and sport and sexuality, a subject that is seldom dealt with in a graceful manner in our society.

The series of stories was presaged by a February 1 story in the New York Times quaintly titled "At Home With Renée Richards" which appeared in the Home Section. Richards, in 1976, while playing on the Women's Tennis Tour, revealed that she had once been a man, Dr. Richard Raskind. Some of you will remember the initial outrage that followed the announcement, and then the endless discussions of Richard's sexuality and whether she was truly a man or a woman, and if she should be allowed to compete on the tour as a woman. In retrospect the entire tempest was archaic and something out of a lost civilization. Or was it?

The Super Bowl and the Snickers Ad would suggest otherwise. Several reactions surfaced over this commercial. First, there were objections that were voluminous enough for the Snickers people to pull the ad from further airplay. The complaints seemed to have been in two broad categories: those who objected to a "kiss" by two men on moral grounds, and those who objected because it made them uncomfortable. Either way it opened a window on the homophobia to be found in television land on the receiving side of the camera.

But wait, there's more. In the days since the Super Bowl there has been a rush to the Snickers Web site, an increase in traffic of sixteen times the pre-ad traffic. The reactions have varied with descriptions of the ad as "stupid," "homophobic," and "homoerotic." Whatever it may be, it certainly reveals some confusion among Homosapiens Americans.

The feel good story of the Super Bowl was the self-congratulatory firestorm by the NFL and the media that, after nearly ninety years, the NFL Championship game would have its first black head coaches, and that one of them would become the

first black head coach to win a Super Bowl. After the game was over, the interviews with Tony Dungy were played and replayed. At the press conferences one of the overpowering images of Dungy came from his public display of religiosity. One of the most interesting images was that of Dungy leading the Colts in prayer in the locker room, an image that has been circulating on the internet.

This has been followed by a number of complaints about Dungy's affiliation with Focus on the Family and its homophobic agenda. Dungy will be the featured speaker at the Indiana Family Institute's "Friends of the Family Banquet" in March. The Indiana group sees itself as a defender of "traditional marriage" and has been working for the passage of a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage in Indiana.

All of this brings us back to John Amaechi and his announcement last week that he is gay. In an interview with ESPN, the company that is also publishing the book, Amaechi described his isolation and his fear that he would be "outed" while playing in the NBA. He says that homophobia is pervasive in the NBA among players, and especially among fans.

Indeed, male identity and sport are so tied up together that anything that might suggest that sport and manliness can be separated is seen as a major threat to the social order, be it inside or outside sport. The words "tough," "hard," and "aggressive," are thrown around the male world as coaches and parents urge their charges to "be a man," "don't be a pussy," and to "be a Warrior."

No wonder the Snickers commercial brought such a strong reaction.

There is an inverse side to all this in the world of women's sport. The reaction to women announcing their lesbian lifestyle, although initially strong, has quickly receded into the white noise of sport with some notable exceptions.

Are lesbians in sport more acceptable than gay men? It would seem so. Why? Because for many in the mainstream of society it affirms that notion that "true women" don't do sport, because sport is the realm of men and those "male" qualities associated with sport are unbecoming of women. These are old ideas that at times seem to have passed from our world, but indeed every now and then they resurface in a firestorm of reaction to events on both the periphery and the main stage of our lives.

All of this is should be a reminder that this is a big country with many points of view on life its many meanings. Old prejudices die hard, new prejudices can appear overnight, and change comes slowly and at varying rates of speed in different locales across the nation.

A column by Simon Kuper in the Financial Times on the 17th December of 2005 indicates that the situation in European football is considerably more enlightened on these issues. For those who would like to see a disconnection of gender and sport, and more enlightenment on these issues in this country, there is much work yet to be done.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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