

Women's progress in college athletics Part II

The lesbian stigma Stereotyping builds a barrier for women Stereotype a product of perception

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Jen Nickerson stood in front of a physical education class at Eastern Connecticut State University three years ago and wondered aloud what a lesbian looked like. She asked the 25 other students to write their answers.

The composite stereotype emerged quickly: a lesbian has short hair, a lesbian dresses like a man, a lesbian hates men and, of course, a lesbian is usually an athlete.

"Of course," says Nickerson, a lesbian and former high school athlete. "It was a given for these people that being an athlete meant being a lesbian. I looked at them and said, 'That's ridiculous. Let's dispel this perception right away.'"

Homosexual stereotyping of women in collegiate athletics occurs nationally and in Connecticut. In a 1989 national NCAA study, three of four female coaches, athletes and administrators said they believed stereotyping "was a barrier to attracting or retaining women in sports." Half said their involvement in sports led others to assume they were lesbians.

"Saying that every female athlete is gay is like saying that every male hairdresser is gay," Nickerson said. "Maybe they are, maybe they aren't. To become good, athletes have to train and lift weights, and these are nontraditional women's activities. People see muscles and think an athlete is a lesbian."

Homophobia -- the irrational fear of gay people -- is prevalent in athletics and sometimes harms both the athletes and athletic programs.

Some heterosexual women are so afraid of being stereotyped as lesbians they don't try out for teams.

Some dress up or flaunt boyfriends to emphasize their femininity.

Some lesbians hide their lifestyles to avoid being shunned, harassed, or in extreme cases, beaten.

Some parents of high school athletes shop for colleges that say they don't have lesbians on their teams.

Some college coaches will not recruit lesbian athletes.

Some athletic directors will not hire lesbians, or even single women, as coaches.

Few people in college athletics want to talk about stereotyping or discrimination against lesbian athletes, even though there are those who say it is a tremendous problem.

"It's like racism -- maybe in a couple hundred years it can be eradicated," said Tom Blake, athletic director at Albertus Magnus College in New Haven. "A coach in her mid-30s who isn't married, a kid who graduates from a program without a boyfriend. You assume she's a lesbian.

"It's not fair, and it's not right, but it's reality."

Homosexual stereotyping

Nicole Hartnett, a Yale University senior from California, doesn't worry about being labeled a lesbian. A member of the volleyball team, she is tall and thin, and "that's just not the lesbian stereotype," she said.

But she understands why female athletes are often portrayed as lesbians.

"Women are usually described based on their appearances. Men are more merit-based, what they've achieved," Hartnett said. "If someone has a butch-looking haircut or is really muscular, that's not the ideal media-permeated-through-our-society female figure."

Pat Griffin, an associate professor of physical education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, is one of the few people in sports attempting to erase the stereotype and stigma that surrounds it. She gives workshops on homophobia at colleges and universities across the country.

"People have no accurate information about what lesbians are like," said Griffin, who is a lesbian. "That's been such a taboo topic in our culture."

Branding an athlete or coach a lesbian, Griffin said, is a ploy used by the male-dominated sports world to keep women in line.

"And the sad thing is that there are so many women in sport who do it to each other and support that, too," she said. "They think they're protecting their image, but what they're doing is buying into the entire cultural phenomenon that women don't belong in sport."

No known study has attempted to document the number of lesbians in athletics.

Donna Nixon, faculty staff facilitator of Lesbian Expressions, a University of Connecticut support group, says there are no more gay women in athletics than in the general population.

"We're real quick to say there are lesbians in collegiate sports," Nixon said. "But there are lesbians in all different types of places."

Others disagree. Mariah Burton Nelson, a lesbian, former athlete and author of a book about women's progress in sports, believes there are more lesbian athletes.

"History seems to say it's true, but there's never been acceptable statistics, because people were afraid to come out," she said. "The percentage is still higher" than in other walks of life.

Estimates of homosexual women and men in the general population range from 10 percent to 15 percent. The number could be higher in collegiate sports because of sexual experimentation that may go hand-in-hand, for some, with the freedom of college life. Also, some say the camaraderie and travel associated with athletic teams can be conducive to homosexual relationships.

And while many lesbian athletes don't feel comfortable disclosing their lifestyle, women seem to be more at ease telling their teammates than men. This might make it seem as if there are more lesbians than gay men in collegiate sports.

Former University of Connecticut basketball player Kerry Bascom says lesbian stereotyping is discriminatory.

"That's the thing that upsets me, that question is only asked of female athletes," she said. "Obviously, nobody will ask [former UConn men's basketball player] Chris Smith about it. That's never going to happen. It's a double standard."

Bascom does not believe homosexual stereotyping is slowing the progress of women's athletics. There are other athletes and coaches who believe other issues, such as sex discrimination, are more important.

Still others, such as Fairfield University women's basketball coach Dianne Nolan, say they don't encounter the lesbian issue on a daily basis.

"When we talk around as coaches, the entire conversation is based on game play," she said. "Or seniors fitting in. Or freshmen fitting in with seniors. Gender preference hasn't even been a factor."

But then there is Bob Miller, Eastern Connecticut's women's basketball coach, who makes it a point to discuss lesbian stereotyping and discrimination against lesbians with his athletes and other coaches.

"It's a tremendous problem," Miller said. "We haven't really dealt with it."

In November, when Griffin gave a workshop on campus, Miller was the only Eastern head coach in attendance.

Fear of association

Debbie Spell, a former University of Hartford softball captain from New Jersey, was playing football in the muddy quadrangle of a campus dormitory one day. Members of the softball team faced off against players from the women's basketball team.

Everybody was having a good time -- until the yelling began.

"`Oh, this is dyke football day' -- people were screaming that out the windows. Girls and guys. Anybody that walked by," said Spell, who graduated in 1987. Later, she said, "one person came to me and said, `Did you hear about the football game? I heard it was Dyke Football Day.' I said, `I was there.' Her face dropped."

Women don't have to play football to be labeled. Sometimes, being an athlete is all it takes.

"When I went to college, people would ask, `How many people on your team are lesbians?' " said Amy Cahill, an All-State softball player from Durham who played for Keene State College in New Hampshire. "I'd say, `Oh, there's a couple.' And they'd think: `Well, they all must be lesbians then. Where there's one, there's a hundred.' "

As a result, heterosexual women sometimes go to great lengths to avoid being stereotyped.

"They grow their hair long, they wear a lot of makeup," said Kathy Maxwell, a UConn volleyball player. "You shouldn't have to, but it happens."

Jennifer Holden, who plays tennis and water polo at Wesleyan University, has friends who are lesbians. Sometimes, she says, she feels the need to "prove my straightness."

Athletes aren't the only ones who act this way.

"Coaches are hyper-feminized," said Mary Jo Kane, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota. "On the sidelines they wear suits, dresses, makeup and high heels. Imagine coaching, moving around like they do dressed like that. It's so ridiculous."

To avoid the stereotype, some women simply don't play sports in college.

Michele Grenier, a former high school softball player from Durham, said she did not try out for the team at UConn because she heard rumors about lesbians on the team and she didn't want to be branded as one. She admits she might not have made the team.

Rumors can color the way outsiders view female athletes. They also can cause misunderstandings between heterosexual and lesbian teammates.

"It's the heterosexual women who are scared. They don't know, they don't understand, they're afraid, they're angry because they feel like people call them lesbians," Griffin said. "So what they do is they blame the lesbians, rather than blaming the ignorance of the people."

"Lesbians feel threatened and scared and sort of band together for support. They don't like to be blamed. And so they get angry back at the heterosexual women. So sometimes there are splits like that."

Tension can also arise when lesbian teammates date each other.

A lesbian collegiate athlete from Connecticut who goes to school out of state and asked not to be identified because some relatives don't know her sexual orientation, said her college teammates have an unwritten rule that they cannot date each other. This prevents problems, she said.

"In the past, I know there were people dating, then they'd break up. It caused a lot of bad scenes."

Lesbian bashing

Jen Nickerson was beaten when she came out, or admitted, she was a lesbian.

Nickerson played soccer in high school in Massachusetts, but when arthritis and tendinitis in her knees forced her to the sideline in college, she became manager of the women's basketball team at Eastern Connecticut.

Today, she works at a Willimantic supermarket. The lavender button on her denim jacket says: "Homophobia is a social disease."

A few years ago, when she came out as a lesbian, one of her roommates couldn't handle it. The roommate, an athlete, alternately screamed at Nickerson and ignored her. She put salt in Nickerson's bed.

One night, the tension boiled over into a fistfight. "She screamed, 'Go live with your dyke friends,'" Nickerson said. "She actually beat the [stuff] out of me. Bruises and blood all over. She was worried about what other people thought."

One lesbian two-sport athlete at Yale said a freshman teammate she had befriended was afraid to be seen with her in the dining hall.

"This was probably the thing that hurt me the most about being gay," said the athlete, who asked to remain anonymous because she has not told her parents about her lifestyle and is afraid they would cut off her tuition at Yale. "That was a real eye-opener."

The freshman later came out as a lesbian, the athlete said.

The lesbian athlete who goes to an out-of-state college said she knew she was gay in junior high school. As early as high school, she learned the difficulty of living in a heterosexual-oriented world. She wore her hair short for convenience. She played sports aggressively. Automatically, to some people, that made her fair game for insults.

When she stepped to the free-throw line during a state championship basketball game, she said, the opponent's fans chanted: "D-Y-K-E."

"You're guarding girls and, they're like, 'Don't touch me,'" she said. "Even straight girls on the team, who had short hair, they'd say it to them too."

The ease with which people accept the stereotype -- just by looking at someone, they think they can tell if they are homosexual or not -- scares many lesbians involved in athletics. Many fear rejection or harassment.

"Most athletes are nervous about coming out," said Christine Krause, a senior soccer player at Wesleyan who is bisexual and came out to her peers two years ago.

"On this campus, I don't feel the gay community welcomes athletes much. If more athletes came out, that would change," Krause said.

Paranoid parents

Parents can be homophobic, too.

Carolyn Vanacore tells of parents of prospective athletes, who sat on the couch in her office at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven and asked if it were true that a lot of physical education majors were lesbians.

"Their daughter would be outside, getting shown around, and the parents would say, 'We're a little concerned about our Mary Jane; we'd rather have her go into communications or something,'" said Vanacore, retired director of health and physical education at the school. "I would say, 'We have a cross section of the population in our university. We have faculty members, kids across the university who may be.'"

Coaches and administrators often don't know how to respond when parents express concern about lesbians on teams. At workshops, Griffin tells people to be honest.

Eastern Connecticut softball coach Jeff Anderson said he thinks he has lost recruits by being honest.

"One out of every two parents you talk to, they say, 'Do you have any gays on your team?'" he said. "My answer is, 'Yes, if that matters.'"

"Any coach who tells parents they don't have any gays -- they're lying or they're homophobic."

Ironically, Griffin says, if parents were more realistic, they "would be leery about having men coach their young women. Going on statistics, in this country, men are much more likely to sexually harass young women than lesbians are."

No lesbians allowed

Last year, Penn State women's basketball coach Rene Portland became a target for gay rights activists when she told a newspaper reporter she did not allow lesbians on her team.

Penn State, which was nationally ranked, played at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in January. A gay and lesbian student group from Minnesota protested at the gymnasium.

They chanted: "One, two, three, four, homophobia out the door."

Then, when Portland left the court: "Shame, shame, shame."

Five years ago, Penn State was recruiting Laura Lishness, a star senior basketball player at Bristol Eastern High. An assistant coach mentioned to her and her parents that the basketball team had a rule against homosexuality. She and her parents were appalled by the blatant homophobia and opted for UConn.

In December, Penn State adopted a policy protecting homosexuals from discrimination and Portland said she would abide by it. Despite calls for her ouster by numerous local and national groups, she still coaches there.

Feeling uncomfortable

More than half of the coaches in women's college programs are men. Many are uncomfortable dealing with the lesbian issue.

Clyde Washburne, retired Eastern Connecticut softball coach, admits what a lot of people won't -- he couldn't understand why a woman would date another woman.

"Yeah, I was of a different generation, all right -- me and a lot of older coaches," he said. "I couldn't deal with it. All of a sudden, there were ladies with other ladies. Now, you're talking to your players on the bench and there's married couples sitting there. Many a day I left there talking to myself."

A former softball coach at the University of Hartford, Dave Johnson said he had no one to consult when conflicts surfaced on his team.

"It was a rude awakening for me," said Johnson, who is now a physical therapist and trainer in Enfield. "There were problems happening on my team, but I didn't do a lot of digging. Being a male coach, that was difficult to do. Some athletes were torn in a sexual-preference type of way. Some made their lifestyles known to me.

"How do you respond? You know, they were reaching out for help as individuals."
Is she or isn't she?

Lesbian stereotyping also can work against single women who aspire to be college coaches and administrators.

Hartford volleyball coach Kathy Franklin said that when she applied for her job six years ago, "the administration was just looking for a good coach, but the girls wanted to know about my lifestyle, whether I was feminine or not. They OK'd me."

"Some administrators hire men, so they don't have to hire a lesbian," Eastern's Miller said. "Nobody says, 'If you're a women's athletic administrator, you're a lesbian.' Nobody says that anymore. But that's the way they play the game."

If a single woman applies for a coaching position, Griffin says, discussion about her sexual orientation is not unusual.

"I have a friend who was interviewing for a job, who was a lesbian -- but they didn't think she was because she didn't look like a lesbian. So they talked to her very freely about how relieved they were because the last coach had ridden a motorcycle. And she was straight!

"And so here they were, hiring a lesbian, because she didn't look like a lesbian and they had gotten rid of a woman just because she had ridden a motorcycle. This is crazy."

Griffin would not disclose her friend's identity or the school involved. Also, it is not public knowledge her friend is a lesbian.

Education the key

Becoming friends with lesbians often helps many heterosexual female athletes overcome their apprehension of gays, which usually stems from having had no previous exposure to homosexuals.

When Anne Palmgren, a Connecticut College soccer and basketball player from New Canaan, walked into the basketball locker room one day a few years ago, she saw a lesbian teammate sitting on a bench with her hand resting on the leg of another teammate.

"It was not very courteous to me," said Palmgren, a senior. "I'm not a very PDA [public display of affection] type of person."

She was new to the basketball team at the time. Now, one of the women is a good friend. Palmgren says the same action, now, wouldn't bother her.

Kris Lamb, who played for the UConn women's basketball team and is now a UConn assistant coach, said as a high school athlete, she would have shied away from a basketball program if she heard rumors of lesbianism.

"They would have been off my list in a heartbeat," she said. "A lot of high school athletes are afraid of it." Looking back, Lamb sees her attitude was homophobic. She said she would not feel the same way now. "I wasn't educated about it," she said.

That's why Griffin believes education -- as well as political pressure by colleges and organizations such as the NCAA -- is the key to resolving homophobia.

Of 18 Connecticut colleges and universities, 11 offer mandatory workshops, talks or discussion groups on homophobia or homosexuality as part of freshman orientation or sometime during the first semester. Also, at Sacred Heart, the topic is discussed during "Gender Equity Week" in February.

"The way we've tried to address it is to keep it silent and to blame lesbians," Griffin said. "It doesn't work. It's going to take a lot [of education]. But you have to start someplace. I don't expect it to be radically changed in my lifetime."

When Anne Sangiovanni arrived at the University of Hartford six years ago, she heard that the softball team was populated by lesbians. Once she began playing, she discovered the rumor was unfounded.

After graduation, when she started coaching her former high school girls basketball team, she made a point to take the players to a University of Hartford women's basketball game.

"A lot of these girls were huge, you know, and my kids are looking at them, like, 'Oh my God,'" Sangiovanni said. "One girl's like 6-4, 200-something pounds, short hair, and the kids are like, 'Holy cow, Anne, that girl looks like a guy.'" So I would talk to them about it.

"I think if more people did that, it would help out a lot -- if you're getting recruited, that your coach would talk to you about things like that. That's going to stop the stereotyping right there."

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