THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MAY 24, 1991

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Gay Bias Moves Off The Sidelines

THE locker room has closets of its own, deep and dark and crowded.

"We've been inundated with the names of famous athletes people want us to 'out,'" says Gabriel Rotello, editor in chief of Outweek, a gay and lesbian news weekly. "I think the proportion of gay men and lesbians who are pro athletes is higher than their proportion in the mainstream population. Over-compensating, I guess. In golf and tennis, maybe 50 percent."

"More like 90 percent when I was still playing," laughs Lynn Greer of Columbus, Ohio, a lesbian who was on the pro golf tour from 1978 to 1982. "The tour was a sub-culture of gay culture. Every dyke with two nickels to rub together got to Palm Springs for the Dinah Shore, it was *the* event." While 90 seems a high percentage, there was no question that the men who wanted to make money from the women's tour were concerned about its lesbian image, a concern that's now pervasive throughout women's sports.

"The real panic is in women's intercollegiate sports," says Arlene Gorton, an associate athletic director at Brown University in Providence, R.I. "Athletic departments don't even like to run workshops on sexual and gender issues, they think it will be used against them in recruiting. There's homophobia, of course, but I think it's basically a power issue, another way of controlling women. Especially now that there is money in women's sports."

Homosexuality and bisexuality in American sports has usually been treated topically, as rare outbreaks, despite a continuing roster that includes Babe Didrikson, the founder of the women's golf tour; the tennis champion, Bill Tilden, pro running back Dave Kopay, major league umpire Dave Pallone, past tennis champions Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova and the Olympic gold medal swimmer Bruce Hayes.

> Some see the backlash as a re-creation of the bias against blacks. 'They will spoil the block, ruin the game.'

Pat Griffin, a lesbian who has coached in high school and college and now teaches physical education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, believes that gay male athletes are not as challenging to mainstream gender roles as are lesbians. "It goes to the heart of the struggle against sexism," says Griffin. "Sports is the last place men can hang on. By whipping out the lesbian label, they can intimidate women and keep control of sports. That's how Rene Portland gets away with it."

Rene Portland, the Penn State women's basketball coach, turned the spotlight back on two months ago, when, without allowing herself to be quoted directly, she let it be known that no lesbian could play for her. Rights groups were outraged, while some coaches grudgingly gave her credit for a cynical recruiting tool in a time of backlash. Professor Gorton found it "disgraceful" that Penn State did not disavow Portland's policy. She saw it as part of a pattern.

"It pushes more women into the closet, it pushes more issues under the rug," says Gorton. "I've seen young lesbian women get married just to get a coaching job. And I've heard athletic directors say, 'If we have lesbians coaching here, I don't want to hear about it.'"

"When I got to college in 1974," says golfer Greer, "the other golfers told me to stay away from the coach, she was one of 'them.' I thought, who do they think *I am*? Silence was the safe way to operate in those days."

Once known with either pride or disdain as the Lesbian Professional Golf Association, the ladies tour has become very much more heterosexual in the past few years, Greer said. She credits Title IX with making sports more socially acceptable for straight young women, and more of a lucrative career opportunity. Others believe that as women athletes became a sales force for cigarettes, whiskey and cars, they needed to be perceived as hetero-sexy for the predominantly male sponsors. Only a superstar who is economically important to the sport, like Martina, could come out without terminal damage to her career.

But even Martina is not immune to what The Advocate, a biweekly gay and lesbian magazine, calls "dyke bashing" in its current cover story. Last summer, former champion Margaret Court accused Martina and other lesbian and bisexual players of ruining the sport and setting a bad example for younger players.

"What we're seeing is a re-creation of the discrimination against blacks," says Professor Gorton of Brown. "They will spoil the neighborhood, ruin the game, hurt recruiting. Substitute the word black every time you hear lesbian, and wonder if Rene Portland could get away saying the same thing."

I called Penn State Wednesday and left a question for the athletic director and the sports information director. Is Coach Portland's policy acceptable, and is it policy throughout the department? I left a question for the football coach, Joe Paterno. Would he keep a gay player off his team?

As of this writing, none have responded. They were correct in assuming that at deadline time I would go away. For now. They were wrong in assuming the issue would leave with me.