

In the Closet or on the Field: Queer Women in Sports

by Maia R. Kaplan

Women in sports have an unique stumbling block on the way to professional status. Homophobia has found a major haven in sports and sports administration. For many, the tension comes when a sport is publicly seen as dominated by lesbians. Recognizing that the percentage of lesbians and bisexual women in sports is going to be significantly higher than that of the general population should not be an issue. However, fear among marketers, coaches, and players sets up a chasm between a hard to ignore lesbian/bisexual following of women sports, often the main sustaining group in ticket sales, and the pressure within the game to stay in the closet.

According to a national sportswriter quoted in Susan Fox Roger's Sportsdykes, "After covering women's golf for the past ten years, I can tell you what the L stands for in LGPA. The tournaments are very big with the gay crowd. But get one of these gals to stand up and say she's a lesbian publicly, and she's out of the game." Even within the media and administration, it's very difficult to

open a dialogue about the impact of queer women in pro women's sports, as is evidenced by this sportswriter's insistence on remaining nameless. Also, those that will speak readily aren't very positive, such as Margaret Court, a former tennis star who warned parents against letting their daughters play the tennis circuit because they would be converted to Lesbianism. She especially blamed the "lesbian bisexual players on the circuit", claiming they're the ones who get at the youngsters with their example" (Rogers). But isn't such homophobia fading with time and the growing acceptance of women's sports? The number of girls being raised that believe playing sports is a normal thing for girls to do is growing. Surely this institutionalized homophobia is seeing the end of its day?

Well, that's what I thought; but, sadly, I was wrong. Upon opening The Advocate to the "Grassroots" article, I discovered that fear and blame still exists in full force. A web site for the American Basketball League (ABL), one of two professional leagues for women, began to receive a group of posting for a discussion forum under the heading "Fans Who Are Like Ellen." The ABL has, in the past, done nothing to deny their lesbian following. However, the web site began removing messages with

this heading, as well as censoring the word "lesbian." If the site received a message containing the word "lesbian," the sender received the following message, "Sorry, your message contains one or more inappropriate word(s). Please remove any words which may be offensive." Although those interested in the discussion quickly changed the heading and began writing about "l*sbi*ns," many were disheartened by the attempted censoring. Wrote one fan, "Until our culture can get over the stereotypes of female athletes as all l*sbi*ns, the prospects of pro leagues will continue to be precarious."

In the league's defense, when they discovered that the webmaster was committing such blatant censoring, they immediately ordered it stopped, and the ABL has now left the forum unmoderated. Director of media relations, Dean Jutilla, claimed that, "We don't want to alienate any fan of the league."

Despite the league's quick fix, to me it's just more proof of the hidden homophobia that never seems to be discussed. Despite support from some leagues or coaches, there is still an obvious effort on someone's part to keep the "Fans Who Are Like Ellen" quiet.

Here's to the "l*sbi*ns" who keep speaking up. λ

Mel White Praying for the Pit Preacher

Photograph by Mike Kanarek

