Sexuality and homophobia in sport

"Some of my dearest, dearest friends who are incredibly effeminate - smaller guys - I tell you, have got more balls than most of the football players I played against because they’re out there being who they are, walking in the street being abused continuously. But they’re who they are, you’ve got to respect that – they have so much courage. I have so much admiration for people who are just comfortable with themselves.” (Ian Roberts)

Scenarios

1. You find out through the media that the sports trainer your club uses is bisexual.
2. The coach of your U15 boy’s footy team is taking the team interstate for a competition. You have just discovered he is gay from a ‘concerned’ parent.
3. A lesbian couple want to share a room at nationals.
4. An athlete complains she feels uncomfortable because a transgender athlete (male to female) is using the female change rooms.
5. One of your athletes advises you he is HIV positive.

Issues that have arisen from these scenarios, such as perceived duty of care responsibilities, parent and other people’s attitudes and reactions, have usually stemmed from ignorance, stereotypes and myths. Some of these include:

- Lesbians and gay men are sexual predators
- Homosexual males are paedophiles
- Gay men prefer artistic sports to contact sports
- Females who excel at sport are lesbians
- Gay men have less aptitude for sport
- Transgender (transitioned) female athletes compete at an advantage over biologically-born female athletes.

Presumptions such as these are harmful to everyone in sport and perpetuate a sport system that is not welcoming to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people.

Unfortunately many people are uncomfortable talking about sexuality and homophobia in sport because of their background, values, beliefs and fears. It
is often easier for them to deny, ignore or joke about the issue. As a result, the stereotypes and myths persist.

As potential leaders in sport, it’s important to learn to be comfortable talking about sexuality and to share a responsibility to speak out against homophobia because silence sustains prejudice.

**Definition of terms**
To help with discussion on the issue, it is important to have an understanding of some of the various terms used in relation to sexuality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Simple Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>Person who does not experience sexual attraction (is considered by some to be a sexual orientation). It is not the same as celibacy which is a deliberate choice to abstain from sexual activity</td>
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<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Person whose emotional and sexual attractions and connections are with persons of both sexes</td>
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<td>Coming out / being of the closet / being Out</td>
<td>Process of becoming aware that one’s sexual orientation is not heterosexual, accepting it and telling others about it</td>
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<td>Gay</td>
<td>Person whose primary emotional and sexual attractions and connections are with persons of the same sex (also homosexual)</td>
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<td>Gender identity</td>
<td>Person’s internal sense of themselves as male, female or something in between</td>
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<td>Heterosexism</td>
<td>The assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the only ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ expression of</td>
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<td>Homophobia</td>
<td>Fear or hatred of homosexuals or homosexuality. It can be expressed subtly and overtly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Person whose emotional and sexual attractions are with persons of the same sex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intersexuality</td>
<td>Where the sex chromosomes, genitalia and/or secondary sex characteristics are neither exclusively male nor female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intersex</td>
<td>Intersex is used by many as an umbrella term for people born with any of a number of physical variations that means they do not clearly fit expectations of a male-female binary in physical sex. While there are some significant overlaps between trans and intersex issues there are also some very clear differences between sex diversity and gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>A more specific term to describe a homosexual female</td>
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<td><strong>LGBTI</strong></td>
<td>Acronym to collectively refer to a group of identities that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender and intersex people and other sexuality, and gender diverse people, regardless of their term of self-identification.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Queer</strong></td>
<td>An inclusive, socio-political umbrella term for LGB and other non-heterosexual sexuality, sexual anatomy or gender identity</td>
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<td><strong>Questioning</strong></td>
<td>Person who is unsure of his or her sexual orientation</td>
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<td><strong>SSAY</strong></td>
<td>Same sex attracted youth</td>
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<td><strong>Sexual orientation</strong></td>
<td>The direction of a person’s sexual attraction towards the same sex (homosexual), the opposite sex (heterosexual) or both sexes (bisexual)</td>
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<td><strong>Sex change</strong></td>
<td>Combined processes of hormone therapy and surgery to change from a person’s birth sex to the opposite sex</td>
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<td><strong>Straight</strong></td>
<td>Person whose primary emotions, sexual attractions and connections are with persons of the opposite sex (also</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transgender</strong></td>
<td>Umbrella term used to describe a wide array of persons whose gender identity does not conform to stereotypical gender norms of male and female; usually refers to a person who lives or seeks to live as a member of the other sex. That person may or may not have had a sex change</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transitioned</strong></td>
<td>Person who has completed sex change surgery to match their genitalia with the sex they perceive themselves to be (<em>Term predominately used in Canada</em>)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transsexual</strong></td>
<td>Person who believes he or she is or should be the opposite sex. It can also mean someone who has completed a sex change.</td>
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</table>
What the law says

The recognition and rights of LGB couples and individuals have gradually been increasing in all states and territories since the 1970s, but the progress has been very slow. It wasn’t until 1997 (Tasmania) that all states and territories legalised homosexuality.

In Australia, it is unlawful to discriminate on the basis of suggested or assumed sexual orientation or on the basis of characteristics associated with a particular sexual orientation. Although there are some variations between states and territories, sexuality discrimination is described as treating someone less favourably on the basis of their sexuality or assumed sexuality. It is unlawful whether or not the behaviour is:

- intentional or malicious
- based on presumptions, stereotypes or misunderstandings
- direct or indirect

It is also unlawful to discriminate against people living with HIV/AIDS. In sport, this would include selection or involvement in sporting activities.

Unfortunately many of the laws in this country are themselves discriminatory. It wasn’t until May 2008 that the government introduced legislation to amend over 100 federal law statues to provide equality for LGB in areas of tax, health, superannuation, aged care, veteran affairs and other areas.

While there is an increased visibility of LGB people in society generally, and while gains have been made in workplaces to reduce sexuality discrimination and homophobia, there’s been little discussion and less gain made in the sport sector with LGB people being essentially invisible in sport.

Unfortunately homophobia still exists in sport:

- Australian research identifies sport as the place that SSAY feel least safe
- many athletes and coaches, particularly at the elite level, feel it necessary to conform to the heterosexual ‘norm’ to maintain team and coach relationships, to ensure continuity of sponsorships and to obtain other financial or community support
- the ‘jock’ culture in university PE and sport studies courses have been found to intimidate and exclude young LGB people
- homophobic taunts are common in sport to ‘motivate’ athletes, demean players, opposing spectators and sport officials
“The Club felt that once this [his sexuality] had been pointed out and you had this gentleman there who was obviously close to young men – massaging young men – it ran an unnecessary risk and that’s why it decided it was best that he not perform those duties again…..It’s the same if you have a paedophile there as a masseur, right?” (Jeff Kennett, 2008)

**Gender and homophobia**

There are strong gender differences between heterosexual men and women in sport. Equally, gender also provides differences for how men and women experience homophobia.

In most societies, there are conservative and preferred ‘models’ of masculinity and femininity. Generally, the more athletic, muscular and ‘butch’ looking a female is, the more likely she is to be labeled a lesbian and the more harassment she will experience. This has also resulted in some female athletes asserting their femininity, and by inference their heterosexuality, by using make-up and wearing ‘feminine’ clothing – some sporting teams and codes even insist on this so as not to be associated with nor attractive to lesbians. Another difference between male and female homophobia is the greater openness of women toward lesbian team members.

In the case of men, the more effeminate, the less athletic and the less interest shown in sport, the more likely a man will be labeled gay and the more harassment he will receive. Playing sports is considered part of the normal socialisation for males and part of the process of developing from a boy to a man. Another difference of male sport is the extremely homophobic and misogynistic language used in locker rooms and the considerable violence and rejection against gays who have come out. As a result many gays who are athletic can belong to a sport team but do not give away their sexual orientation because of the potential consequence
What can you do to address homophobia

- go to complete the interactive scenario on homophobia and sexuality discrimination - [http://www.playbytherules.net.au/interactive](http://www.playbytherules.net.au/interactive)
- be mindful of your own attitudes and beliefs
- avoid making judgments based on stereotypes or rumour
- provide strong, positive leadership. Model fair and respectful behaviour at all times
- read up on and learn about homophobia and sexuality in general
- use inclusive and gender-neutral language in all your communications (written and verbal)
- be proactive and provide information sessions for coaches, parents and others about sexuality
- raise awareness and display anti-discrimination/anti-homophobia material in club rooms
- make it clear that you are open to diversity in all members of your sport/club/team
- ensure your sport has a Member Protection Policy (or something similar) that covers sexuality discrimination and that members are aware of their rights and responsibilities
- review and change any club/association policies and practices that exclude homosexual people from club/association activities (e.g. invite partners rather than husbands/wives to social events)
- take action against homophobic harassment as soon as you’re made aware
- challenge homophobic language
- act promptly and without bias on any concerns or complaints about sexuality discrimination, harassment or homophobia
- always select players, coaches, officials and administrators on merit
- when travelling internationally with teams, be aware that other countries may have strict laws about homosexuality. Take steps to educate yourself about whether or not a country or city is safe for any LGB team members. Recognise that some team members may be vulnerable – inform, educate and where necessary take steps to protect them
- if you are a leader in sport and you are a LGB yourself, consider taking steps to live your sport life more openly. While the risks are considerable, the rewards may well prove to be greater.
Where to from here

There is still a long way to go to achieve equality for LGB people and sporting cultures and environments that welcome, support and value the full involvement of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. Our challenge is to find ways to strengthen the many positive elements of sport while eliminating the discriminatory and disrespectful behaviours and attitudes.

“We are all different from the colour of our skins to the pitch of our voices, from our religions and ethnicities to our sexual orientations and to the sizes, shapes and abilities of our bodies.”
(Billy Jean King)

Resources

You Can Play resources on http://youtube/playbytherulessport

Play by the Rules website www.playbytherules.net.au/issue_types/

Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity www.caaws.ca/

Hillier L, Turner A, Mitchell A (2005) Writing themselves in again: 6 years on; The second national report on the sexual health & well-being of same sex attracted young people in Australia, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, LaTrobe University, Melbourne, 2005
