

# Evolution of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Athletes within the NCAA and Lafayette College

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The evolution of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community within college athletics has been slow and quiet. Historically, the overall LGB community has a silent and negative discourse at the national level. Similarly, Lafayette College has a historically silent discourse on the subject. The Archives at Lafayette show little to no record of policy change or social discussion about the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community within the athletic department. The national discourse on LGB within college athletics became active in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, however the silent discourse has not disappeared.

Michel Foucault teaches about the evolution of identities and the discourses that create them. Historical evidence shows that although heterosexuality and homosexuality are created, institutions enforce these identities and continue their evolution (Foucault, 1978). Both Lafayette College and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) are the institutions examined in this paper. Both Lafayette and the NCAA are historically quiet in terms of the LGB community within athletics. However, it is interesting to examine the difference of the change in discourse between Lafayette and the NCAA.

The first athletic intercollegiate event at Lafayette dates back to 1869. At the time of this baseball game, Lafayette was an all male college. At this time in social history the labels heterosexual and homosexual were not yet created and the NCAA also did not exist. Therefore, there was no discourse around homosexuality and no athletic institution to enforce it.

With the creation of the NCAA in 1902 (then the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States), college sports increased nation-wide. The beginning of regulation on college athletics began with football. Interestingly, as the NCAA grew the



national powerhouse that was Lafayette declined in the football arena (Carter, 2006). This decline in football gave other sports the chance to grow. However, as the NCAA and Lafayette both continued to expand, women were still not allowed to be part of either institution.

In 1970, Lafayette along with other comparable colleges, open its doors to women. In the following four years at Lafayette, women began playing field hockey and basketball. However, even with the admission of women and the creation of women's athletic teams, the teams were not part of the NCAA. Before the NCAA included national championships for women in 1982, Title IX was passed. Under this law, enacted in 1972, discrimination on the basis of sex was outlawed. Four years after the law was passed, Lafayette evaluated women's sports and found strong inequality in regard to equipment, facilities, money, coaches, and publicity (Lafayette leopards, n.d).

At this time sexuality was not a topic discussed within the Lafayette community and especially not within the Lafayette Athletic Department. In the 1970's, sexuality was not a "hot topic" in the athletic arena. But after many years the topic of sexual orientation within athletics increased nationally. However, the same topic was not written about in *The Lafayette* until 2011.

The addition of female teams to Lafayette athletics and to the NCAA is very important because of the difference between male and female athletes. Men achieve masculinity and reinforce their male gender by being strong athletes. By reinforcing their gender as athletes, men also get to present as "not gay." This is what men have to do in order to be seen as straight. Thus, being an athlete is very beneficial and reinforces maleness and heterosexuality. Conversely, being a strong athletic woman does not reinforce the feminine aspects of being



female. Instead, being a great athlete as a woman reinforces masculinity and allows for that woman to be labeled as a lesbian (Griffin, 1998). Although playing sports is not correlated to sexual orientation, gender reinforcement during athletics causes sexual orientation to become very important because society wrongfully links gender and sexuality very closely. Being a good male athlete enforces masculinity and in turn heterosexuality but being a good female athlete diminishes femininity and strips women of their cultural capital (heterosexuality and attractiveness to men) and thus reinforces homosexuality.

Although sexual orientation was not a topic of discussion with Lafayette athletics, other college programs began getting bad press about homophobia in their programs in the 1980's. At this point the NCAA has not banned homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation. However, as Foucault teaches, silence is a discourse. Without rules and laws banning discrimination based on sexual orientation, athletic programs were allowed to make LGB athletes feel unwelcome. The example of the Penn State Women's basketball coach saying "I will not have it (lesbianism) on my teams" shows that without rules, discrimination will occur (Griffin, et. Al, n.d.). While the institutions may not want to be talking about LGB athletes, it is obvious from various accounts that the silence caused more talking. In order to keep up reputations and allow programs to look "straight," coaches and administrators needed to continue talking about LBG athletes. If the LGB athletes had protection and there was a "no-nonsense" policy banning discrimination, sexual orientation would not need to be talked about because it would not be a "problem." If discrimination based on sexual orientation were banned, a coach would not need to distinguish between their gay or straight athletes; the team would just be comprised of athletes.



During the 1990's and early 2000's lawsuits related to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation were being brought up around the country. A student-athlete from the University of Florida is one person who succeeded in her lawsuit against the athletic program. That person was softball player, Andrea Zimbardi. She settled a lawsuit against the University of Florida that was filed with the claim that Zimbardi was dismissed from the team for being a lesbian. The final outcome was favorable as she was given back her year of eligibility and the University of Florida coach was required to attend mandatory training on the LGB community within athletics (Griffin, et. Al, n.d.). While not all cases ended as favorably as this, the movement towards inclusion was gaining speed.

At the time of these lawsuits the only arguments that could be made had to do with sex. Both Title IX and Title VII were used in these cases. However, neither of these laws address discrimination based on sexual orientation. Instead, cases would be made that a woman was dismissed for defying her gender role by being a lesbian and acting masculine. If the case was presented in that fashion, both Title IX and Title VII could be applied but not very effectively. Between 1999 and 2000 a major change occurred within the NCAA when sexual orientation was added to the nondiscrimination clause within the NCAA handbook (Branch, 2013). This event marked a very important shift in the discourse around LGB athletes because it gave the community a permanent backbone. Not only did this addition allow lawsuits to be more easily won, but it also helped prevent lawsuits from being necessary. The addition of sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination clause in the NCAA handbook also led to the same addition in college athletic department handbooks. This did occur at Lafayette. Although the exact year was not found in the research for this paper, it is known that the clause was added by at least 2008 (Mission statement, 2008).



With the progress in inclusive policy came a shift in discourse. While Lafayette stayed quiet on the subject, the national discourse on LGB athletes became louder. The dialogue grew from a case-to-case basis to a community. In the past the media coverage and discourse on the subject was usually tied to a negative event. While this did not end completely, positive movement began to grab hold. In 2003 the first student-athlete group against homophobia in sports was created at the University of Pennsylvania. This is important to note because the University of Pennsylvania is a comparable school to Lafayette with the high standard of academics and the level of athletic play. As Foucault explains, proliferation is key. Foucault saw the desire to not talk about something as something that makes the conversation even louder. The LGB community in athletics benefited from this proliferation. Administrations and programs that did not want to “deal with” the LGB community in athletics were being forced to because the conversation was getting louder nationally.

The NCAA took another progressive step in 2003 when they offered free LGBT training for all athletic departments that were members of the NCAA. This allowed some schools to take off and form progressive departments. In the coming years some college athletic departments created inclusive environments, while others continued the silent discourse. The Dartmouth College Athletic Department was one of the earlier schools to conduct a climate survey. In 2006 the athletic department conducted a survey, which acquired data about the attitudes and feelings of the Dartmouth student athletes surrounding LGBT issues and inclusion. The answers to the survey gave the athletic administration the opportunity to address policy and climate within their department (Perry, 2014). This also began a more vocal discourse because at the very least LGBT student-athletes could see that the administration was recognizing their presence.



The next big step in changing the discourse around LGB in athletics was the creation of a ThinkTank in the NCAA. Although sexual orientation was added to the nondiscrimination clause in the NCAA handbook, discrimination did not end. Cases were still making their way to courts and LGB athletes were still staying in the closet due to hostile environments. In 2006 the executive director of the NCAA stated that discrimination based on sexual orientation needed to be addressed. As a result a ThinkTank was created by the NCAA and National Center for Lesbian Rights (McKindra, 2006). The ThinkTank focused on 'negative recruiting.' This practice is used heavily in women's sports because of the negative connotation of being a lesbian. As stated earlier, women lose their cultural capital when they do not perform their gender correctly. If being a lesbian is being masculine, women will do anything to avoid that label. Subsequently, female teams will recruit players by stating that other teams are full of lesbians or support the lesbian life style (Griffin, 1998). Many female athletes have documented this negative recruiting across different sports. Lafayette fits in with many other college athletic departments when it comes to recruiting. In female athletics it is very common for recruits to ask about lesbians on a team and it is also common for the college players to note if a recruit "seems like a lesbian." From personal experience I can say this happens at Lafayette as well as other schools similar to Lafayette.

As the NCAA addressed the problem with negative recruiting it began to shame coaches who used these tactics. While it would be naive to believe this practice is not used anymore, it is clear to say that it changed the discourse by showing that it is unacceptable and ultimately hurts athletic programs. The way it hurts programs is by forcing LGB athletes to stay in the closet. Studies have been done that show athletes perform better when they are out



of the closet (Rankin et. Al, 2011). However, negative recruiting is one way a coach or administration will keep athletes from coming out due to a hostile environment.

During this shift in discourse, Lafayette remained silent regarding LGB athletes. The changes that did begin on campus in regards to the LGBT community were not related to athletics. Even with the creation of QuEST (Questioning Established Sexual Taboos) in 1999, very little was written about the LGBT community within Lafayette. Until 2011 most articles regarding LGBT in *The Lafayette* pertained to institutions other than Lafayette. The same story holds true for LGBT within athletics. Even with the addition of sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination policy of the NCAA and Lafayette, Lafayette athletics remained unwelcoming for LGB athletes. The office of Gender and Sexuality Programming heard of one incident in 2009 where a first year student on a female sports team was forced into the closet after teammates said they do not allow any dykes on their team. Although the student involved shared the story upon graduation, the athletic department did not implement any changes after being informed about the incident. By continuing to be silent about the issue, Lafayette athletics sustained a negative discourse on LGB athletes.

On a national level, however, the discourse on LGB in college athletics continued to grow louder and louder. In 2011 Hudson Taylor, who is married to a Lafayette alumna, founded Athlete Ally. The organization has increased education in athletic programs and brought to light the need for allies. At the same time as private organizations formed around the LGBT community in athletics, college athletic departments began to increase inclusion as well. For example, the University of California, Berkeley started a LGBTQ Facebook page titled "Gaystraight Alliance" (LGBTQ, 2014). Although the idea of proliferation is at work here, it can be seen as positive movement. Yes, the more sexual orientation is talked about in



athletics the more organizations form and the more the conversation continues. However, there is a need for inclusion in athletics and proliferation is actually working to help LGB identified athletes feel included.

The next step for increased inclusion in college athletics was the NCAA's release of "Champions of Respect." The paper outlines recommendations for athletic departments in terms of creating a better environment for LGBT athletes, coaches, administrators, and staff (Branch, 2013). This paper showed that the NCAA was very serious about helping athletic departments create a welcoming environment. The recommendations were just the beginning of what turned out to be very formative years for LGB in athletics.

In 2013 Brittney Griner, a Baylor basketball player, came out as a lesbian after her graduation (ESPN.com, 2013). In 2014 Michael Sam, a University of Missouri football player, came out as gay in his senior year (Connelly, 2014). These star athletes opened the stage for more and more college athletes to come out of the closet. Finally, in 2014 *The Lafayette* published its first article about LGB in athletics. The story was in response to a major shift in the national discourse. Due to the fact that Griner and Sam were such star athletes they attained major media coverage. This increased the conversation about LGB in athletics nationwide. Although still defining the strict binary between gay and straight the conversation made it more welcoming. Many athletes coming out at that time simply said they just wanted to play the game at hand and have sexuality be a "non-issue" (Kowaleski, 2014).

As stated earlier, the conversation at Lafayette started to increase around national happenings first. The same was true for the discourse of LGB within athletics. The 2014 article in *The Lafayette* are about Michael Sam and a Bucknell men's soccer player who came



out, but the article only pondered the possibility of a gay athlete at Lafayette. One week after that issue was released, Lafayette had its first openly gay athlete. A player from the men's tennis team brought to attention the fact that he is gay and a varsity athlete (Kowaleski, 2014). Although this started the conversation, it still left only one openly gay athlete amongst a group of approximately five hundred.

This brings the conversation to present day. What is interesting about almost all the previous events that occurred to move towards better inclusion for LBG athletes is the target audience. Prior to 2012, all the information being discussed was for the administration of institutions. This is important to understand because it so perfectly fits Foucault's theory of institutions constructing identities. The power to change a culture is given to institutions. It was not until student-athletes began to stand up and demand to have a voice that this shifted. By giving institutions such as the NCAA and college athletic departments the power, it allows a silent discourse to be masked by progress. It is true that inclusive policies are important and are forward movement, but at Lafayette the inclusion of sexual orientation allowed the department to mask the real culture. Administrators could check off boxes to show they are inclusive, however, student-athletes were not feeling the inclusion.

Similar to many changes that occur surrounding minority groups, real change within the Lafayette athletic department is being driven by negative experiences. In the fall of 2014 at Lafayette, the lack of LGB inclusion within the athletic department was finally brought to administrators' attention. As the student facilitator, I personally talked to other LGB athletes at Lafayette to see if they thought the silence was a problem. With a resounding yes, I took the issue to faculty at Lafayette and started a forward movement. With ample research and personal stories, the Lafayette athletic department was presented with the issue at hand. With



the drive being led by a student and members of Lafayette faculty, the demand was not just for policy change, but also for an end to the silence on campus. This change is currently shifting the power away from the institution and into the hands of LGB athletes and allies.

In March of 2015 a climate survey was conducted at Lafayette, very similar to that of the Dartmouth survey. Using those results and the NCAA's recommendations for an inclusive environment, the Lafayette athletic department is finally ending their silence. The future plans for Lafayette include a "You Can Play" video. This video will feature student-athletes, coaches, and administrators basically saying "Lafayette welcomes diversity, including LGB athletes, and if you can play your sport, you can play your sport with no discrimination." The future plans for the fall of 2015 also include educational pieces that once again end the silence.

Although the culture and discourse is changing in a positive fashion, one must not jump to the conclusion that the silent discourse disappeared entirely. Action and breaking the silence is important, but the NCAA and Lafayette must continue to prove that the culture is truly changing around LGB athletes. While this still gives institutions the power to construct gay and straight identities, it is important to see that even though the binary of gay and straight is being reinforced, it is still positive movement. Positive movement is necessary through the journey to ending the binary. LGB athletes need to be fully recognized and welcomed before anybody can claim they are treated equally.

The national discourse on LGB within athletics has become more active in recent years, however the historically silent discourse has not entirely ended. The silence of institutions around the matter of LGB in athletics further constructed homosexuality and heterosexuality as identities. The silence allowed homophobic environments to form, which



strengthened the binary of gay and straight. A recent shift towards a more positive conversation around the matter has continued the binary but this shift has made the dividing line less structured because it is increasing the normativity of homosexuality. The increased inclusion within the NCAA and the Lafayette athletic department will be pivotal in future years. The conversation and power cannot only be in the hands of institutions. LGB student-athletes and allies need to be part of the conversation to continue a positive movement in the discourse around lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in athletics.



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