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Heather Barber & Vikki Krane

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Creating a Positive Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youths

Heather Barber Vikki Krane

Sheryl Swoopes, John Amaechi, Rosie Jones, Billy Bean, and Amelie Mauresmo are lesbian and gay professional athletes who have “come out” in recent years. Seemingly, they faced little discrimination and received much support as a result of their coming out. The sport world appears to have become more open and accepting of gay and lesbian athletes. However, there is little evidence that the visibility of these role models translates into a better climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youths in sport and physical activity environments. While these professional athletes have opened the door for more dialogue about LGBT athletes, is it not our responsibility as teachers, coaches, and administrators to ensure that young LGBT athletes and students also experience a welcoming and inclusive climate? We say a resounding yes.

The Importance of Creating an Inclusive Environment

Why is it especially important for physical educators and coaches to create a safe and inclusive environment? LGBT students and athletes often claim that physical education classes and athletic environments are where they feel least safe and least supported. Environments that create this perception are often referred to as homophobic. Homophobia is defined as an irrational fear of lesbians and gay men. This definition implies that the fear is of an unknown origin and that there is little that can be done to influence it. We purposefully choose to use the term “homonegative,” even though “homophobia” is the more recognized term. We believe that

the fear is not irrational, but that it is learned from parents and peers, and teachers and coaches, as well as from the environment in which individuals interact daily. If homonegativism is learned, then it can be unlearned or, better yet, never learned. If physical activity and sport environments are perceived as homonegative, we can and need to actively work to change that climate so that it will not teach or reinforce discrimination.

Students often report that teachers and staff do not intervene when anti-LGBT language is used (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Yet, the presence of supportive teachers and staff greatly contributes to a positive climate for LGBT students and athletes. An inclusive environment is respectful of the differences that individuals bring to class or teams and sends the message that everyone is valued. Some of the most important lessons learned through sport are about teamwork, character building, and respect for people who are different from one's self. Individual differences, whether they are racial, religious, ability-related, or based on sexual orientation or gender identity are part of life and sport. An inclusive environment champions all students and athletes. Rather than being a threat to children, inclusiveness protects all participants.

Another important reason for creating an inclusive setting is to safeguard the health and welfare of students and athletes (Krane, Surface, & Alexander, 2005). If LGBT youths do not perceive sport and physical activity environments as safe, they will be less likely to participate. This affects their ability to accrue the health benefits of physical activity and

decreases the likelihood that they will be lifelong participants. In addition, suicide is a leading cause of death among adolescents and young adults, and it is estimated that LGBT youths are over two times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers (Russell & Joyner, 2001).

If these first two reasons fail to convince teachers and coaches, maybe this next one will: an inclusive environment enhances performance. Negative team dynamics affect the performance of individuals and teams (Barber & Krane, 2005). Team conflict associated with sexual orientation is stressful and distracting. Such conflict will divert participants' focus on performance. Creating a respectful environment allows all players to focus on performing to their potential. Creating an inclusive environment for LGBT students and athletes has multiple benefits for students and athletes, including the life lessons of sport and physical activity, the health benefits, and performance enhancement. So, what are the barriers to creating an inclusive climate for LGBT students and athletes?

Perceived Barriers

The single greatest barrier in physical education and athletics is the pervasiveness of silence about sexual orientation and gender identity. Mariah Burton Nelson (1991) described it as the “silence so loud, it screams” and we have referred to it as the “elephant in the locker room” (Barber & Krane, 2005). Teachers and coaches are seemingly paralyzed by this issue. A primary reason for this paralysis is not a lack of concern, but a lack of knowledge about how or where

to start creating change. Issues surrounding LGBT students and athletes often are not openly discussed. Beginning such dialogue is an important first step toward positive change. Then it becomes necessary to develop specific strategies for countering homophobic language or behavior and for creating a welcoming and inclusive environment.

A second common barrier to creating change is a misperception that one individual cannot make a meaningful change in the climate. However, most change begins with small steps. If professionals in sport and physical activity do not accept responsibility for the climate on their teams and in their classes, who will? It is important to keep in mind that our students often remember small gestures that we take for granted.

Overcoming Barriers

A good initial strategy for creating an inclusive environment for LGBT youths is to examine our own biases, prejudices, and stereotypes about LGBT individuals. A first step might involve creating a list of perceptions and beliefs about LGBT individuals. Next, teachers and coaches can examine the list to understand why these perceptions exist and how they might be countered. The final step is to identify beliefs that may influence communication or the climate of classes and teams.

It also is important to monitor our own behavior. Homonegative environments often are sustained, inadvertently, by teachers' and coaches' language and behavior. Think about the jokes you make, comments to poorly performing participants, or even what you do not say. Exclusion is one significant way you show your students how you feel about LGBT issues. Never mentioning the words "lesbian" and "gay," or a lack of variety in pronouns used, sends a profound message to LGBT youths.

Continues on page 52



Instructor in Kinesiology (Fixed Term)

The Pennsylvania State University, the Altoona College, invites applications for a one-year fixed term position in the Department of Kinesiology with the possibility of renewal. Candidates should be able to teach introductory courses in the Kinesiology major. Certified Athletic Trainers who have the ability to teach introductory athletic training and movement science classes are desirable. Candidates should also be able to teach a variety of professional activities in the general education program, to include individual, dual, and team sports and games, along with innovative activities that meet contemporary fitness needs and interests of students. There is also potential for teaching aquatics courses. Additional teaching assignments are made at the discretion of the discipline coordinator.

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Viewpoint

Continued from page 7

A starting point for inclusive language can be to talk about current events. Discuss incidents that may appear in the sports pages (such as an athlete coming out or someone making discriminatory comments) or talk about television shows that your students or athletes may watch that may address LGBT issues. Get used to talking about LGBT issues and to using inclusive language in non-threatening situations. Then, if a homonegative incident should arise in which you need to talk with an athlete, you will already be used to saying terms such as “lesbian” and “gay.”

Teachers, coaches, and administrators can enhance their knowledge and skills by attending sessions on LGBT issues at conferences and sport meetings. This will not only enhance your understanding of LGBT matters, it will demonstrate your support of LGBT individuals. Reading the literature, both scholarly (e.g., Anderson, 2002, 2005; Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2003, 2005) and within the popular press (e.g., Amaechi, 2007; Woog, 2002) can provide insight into the experiences of gay and lesbian athletes and coaches. In addition, several excellent web resources are available for teachers and coaches that provide information and strategies for creating a positive climate in schools. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org) and It Takes a Team (www.womenssportsfoundation.org/cg-ibin/iowa/issues/itat/index.html) are highly recommended resources.

While self-reflection and education are important steps, teachers, coaches, and administrators can also begin to actively work toward positive changes in their school climate. The following initial steps can be taken:

- Examine your own language to make sure that you are not

making assumptions that everyone in your class or on your team is heterosexual.

- Be inclusive of LGBT students and athletes in your language and actions.
- Create clear expectations for students and athletes regarding the importance of diversity and respect for all students and athletes.
- Confront homonegative language and behaviors as they occur (e.g., when you hear “that’s so gay,” tell students that the phrase is hurtful and unacceptable).
- Initiate a “Safe Space” program in your school and make sure that athletic facilities and locker rooms are identified as Safe Spaces (for more information on creating Safe Spaces in schools, see www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/1641.html).
- Demonstrate support for LGBT issues by adding books about LGBT issues or individuals to your bookshelves or a rainbow button on your bulletin board. Although a small gesture, LGBT students will notice and appreciate the support.

Most important, teachers, coaches, and administrators need to take responsibility for the climate in their classes, on their teams, and in their schools. We need to be role models for our students.

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- Heather Barber (heather.barber@unh.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824. Vikki Krane (vkkrane@bgsu.edu) is a professor in the School of Human Movement, Sport, & Leisure Studies and the Director of the Women’s Studies Program at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403.