
Olympic Memories

more than just great sport performances

by Ann Holmes

I have many wonderful Olympic memories from my week away from Prince George. In the midst of speed skating medal performances, Canadian women's hockey team triumphs, and curling wins, I went to the movies. My husband and I attended a double screening put on by the Vancouver PRIDE house and CAAWS.

My initial intention for the evening was to meet the host, Mark Tewksbury, have him sign my copy of his book, and offer my clichéd words of praise to him for his 1992 Gold medal in backstroke from the Barcelona Olympics. Yes, meeting Mr. Tewksbury was a highlight, but the movies and discussion that followed were fabulous and added to my Olympic experience. "A Knock Out" and "Training Rules" were billed as two amazing documentary films about the plight of open and proud lesbians in the world of competitive sport. They didn't disappoint.

As an instructor at the College of New Caledonia in northern BC I've been teaching a sociology-type course about sport in Canada for a number of years. Every year I include a lecture about homophobia in sport. Many texts and historical pieces offer information on lesbianism and homophobia, and my intention is to open the conversation with my students about these topics. My students are mostly first year Human Kinetics students and generally they have a long history with sport, and in particular, with team sports. After reading Tewksbury's book, "Inside Out, Straight Talk From a Gay Jock", my interest in homophobia and the experiences of gay athletes in sport was piqued and I wanted to share this story with my students.

I began the class with a discussion about Johnny Weir and his recent Olympic figure



Ann Holmes with Mark Tewksbury at Pride House in Vancouver.

skating performance. Weir is a flamboyant, artistic athlete who has been labelled "feminine" in his skating. This led to a comparison of the ideals of what men 'should' portray in figure skating and how 'ladies' in the same sport should display their athleticism. The can of worms was opening . . .

We moved onto other gender topics — the continuing "old boys network" in sport and how the International Olympic Committee was a prime example of this (less than 15% of IOC members are women), the trivialization of women's sport (which was brought to light with the exclusion of female ski jumpers from the Olympics) and the fear of lesbianism. We talked about the power of labels and how fear and isolation hurt these athletes, and the pressure within sport to hide their sexuality and appear straight.

Finally I handed out the executive summary of the CAAWS position paper entitled "Seeing the Invisible — Speaking about the Unspoken". The real homophobia discussion started and it was evident that the prevailing attitude in sport, even after

all these years, is that homosexual athletes should just stay in the closet. My students expressed concerns, which boiled down to fear and ignorance, with comments such as getting hit on or problems in the shower after the game. Once the discussion opened up and empathy and consideration was given to the experiences "on the other side", some minds were opened with a fresher perspective.

I had a brief, albeit memorable conversation with Mr. Tewksbury when I met him. He asked about my interest in his book and I told him about the lecture that I was preparing to give, and how important I felt it was to have an open and frank discussion about a subject that many athletes and coaches have never discussed or are uncomfortable talking about. His question to me was, "How do your students respond to the discussion?" I told him that they are challenged by it, but I felt it was necessary to try to open up minds and think about the experiences of ALL athletes. Then he signed my book, "Keep teaching them!! Thank you for all you do!" What a thrill. But honestly, after delivering my lecture and knowing that many of my students thought about these issues just a little differently, and that in the future they may choose to use different words in the locker room or on the playing field, or that they may think about sexual diversity and discrimination in a new way, that was the bigger thrill.

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