

# Coaching lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender athletes: Training needs for Canadian coaches<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Research project supported by the Coaching Association of Canada



## Background of the study

- › In Canada, homosexuals have full equality rights
- › Lesbian and gay issues are frequently discussed in mainstream society
- › The topic of homosexuality in sport is rarely raised
- › Lesbians and gays in sport are virtually invisible, their existence seldom acknowledged
- › When an athlete or a coach does 'come out', reactions are typically negative and such individuals receive little or no support from their sport leaders or sport governing bodies



## Aim of the project

- ▶ The main aim of this project is to help coaches learn how to create a welcoming environment for LGBT Canadian athletes by identifying the major challenges and fears they face when they have to coach LGBT athletes.
- ▶ This research project was designed to identify the training needs of coaches concerning coaching LGBT athletes.
- ▶ Today's presentation is the first step of the project.

## Participants

- ▶ 12 coaches (2 ♀, 10 ♂), college + university
- ▶ 7 different sports (♀♂ = sex of their athletes):
  - 1 in Track and field (♀♂)
  - 3 in Basketball (2 ♀, 1 ♂)
  - 1 in Soccer (♂)
  - 2 in Badminton (♀♂)
  - 3 in Volley-ball (2 ♀, 1 ♂)
  - 1 in Rugby (♀)
  - 1 in Ice Hockey (♂)

## Data collection

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- ▶ Individual semi structured interviews (audiotaped)
- ▶ Interview guide based on the literature review
- ▶ The interviews were intended to give us information on coaches' fears, challenges and needs about dealing with LGBT athletes
- ▶ Average of 60 minutes long

## RESULTS - Participants' profile

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- ▶ Average of 19 years of experience (6-28)
- ▶ 8 hold a full time job as a coach (varsity coaches)
- ▶ 6 have children

### Have already coached homosexual athletes (N=5)

- The athlete's sexual orientation was known or presumed but never talked about.
- All coaches reported that having a LG athlete did not disrupt the team's cohesion.
- They all insisted on their team's code of conduct: RESPECT DIFFERENCES; so they would have never let something bad happen to those athletes.
- They all mentioned that it was the athlete's personal life; it was none of their business (unless it would have disturbed team cohesion).

### Have already coached LGBT athletes (cont'd)

- Compare to Griffin's continuum of coming out (1988), the majority of known homosexual athletes were implicitly out. Only 2 were explicitly out and it was within a women's team.
- For all the male's team, only one coach reported that he had coached one gay athlete (who was implicitly out).
- All the coaches stated that they had probably coached more homosexual athletes than what they know.

## Coaches' Fear

- Afraid of using inappropriate language
- Not thinking about it = not being prepared if something happens
- Because they are OK with coaching LG athletes, their athletes might pretend to be OK as well (afraid of imposing their values)
- Afraid that this situation (LG athlete) would affect team's cohesion
- Afraid that if they talk about LG athletes, it will put emphasis on them instead of treating them like any other athlete.

## Coaches' role about the coming out

- Not the coach's role :
  - «It is not my job to help an athlete come out, but if he decides to do it, it's ok with me».
  - «We do not need to do anything special. The (gay) athlete just has to live his life normally and eventually people will notice that he is gay»
  - «The team environment has to be ready for a coming out, I can give the athlete some clues about the readiness of the team»

## Coaches' role about the coming out

- To make sure that all the athletes are respectful of any differences:
  - «It is the coach's job to create the climate. It is all about my behaviors, attitudes, how I deal with differences».
- Do not over emphasize that particular situation, that would put the homosexual athletes in an awkward position.
- To intervene when athletes use inappropriate language, to make them think about the impact of their language (might hurt somebody).

## Coaches' knowledge

- All the coaches admitted their ignorance around that topic.
- A few coaches (2) had access to homosexual friends and they could ask questions about their experience.
- Seven of the coaches did not experienced coaching homosexual athletes (to their knowledge) so they say they don't know anything about it.
- Few coaches think that it is easier to come out in 2011 then it was 20 years ago.

## What makes the coming out easier

- ▶ A great team spirit based on respect
- ▶ The coach's own attitude toward differences
- ▶ To be a female athlete in a female sport

## Training needs

- ▶ All the coaches said that they would need a workshop to learn more about this topic:
  - what do we know about LG athletes' experiences
- ▶ They all said that this should be compulsory.
- ▶ They would need a very practical workshop where they would learn how to react, how to behave in different types of situation.

## Qualitative observation

- Coaches were definitely uncomfortable when talking about having a gay couple in their team.
- Double standard:
  - for homosexual athletes' personal life = it is not my business;
  - for heterosexual athletes' personal life = I ask questions about their partner.
- The interviews put the coaches in a reflexion process about how they behave with their athletes and make them realize that they should be proactive (but they don't know how)

## Conclusion

- Although this research is an exploratory one, identifying fears and especially needs has provided excellent leads to better train coaches. It appears, in fact, that their training should include a component on handling LGBT athletes.
- It is obvious that most of the coaches never really thought about coaching LG athletes, especially for coaches of men's teams.
- There is definitely a discomfort when coaches are asked about dealing with a gay couple.

## Conclusion cont'd

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- All the coaches showed an open mind about being educated on the topic.
- They were all concerned about putting too much emphasis on LG athletes (if they talk about it)
- None of the coaches ever talked about the well-being of the LG athletes.

## Conclusion cont'd

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- In closing, we can state that the coaches, through the interviews, realised that they don't know much about LG athletes and that they are not ready to react if a problem arises. They also realize that they always assume that all their athletes are heterosexuals. After the interview, a vast majority realized that they need to learn more on that topic to better serve the needs of LG athletes.

## Next steps

- On line questionnaire (based on the interviews' results) to a larger sample of coaches in Quebec
- Design a workshop based on the results and pilot it
- Build a workshop incorporating CAAWS workshop and research data.
- Getting a research grant to study canadian LGBT athletes' experiences. Right now, we do not have any data.



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## Questions



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