

Race, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression in Athletics¹

Addressing discrimination and prejudice against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning student-athletes, staff and coaches requires an understanding of how other identities besides sexual orientation or gender identity affect LGBTQ experience. Individuals are more than their sexual orientation or gender identity. Race, economic class and religion are among the many other aspects of social identity that add to the complexities of addressing discrimination and prejudice in athletics. The interactions of these identities complicate the experiences of LGBTQ people in athletics and make the experiences of individual LGBTQ student-athletes and coaches different from one another.

Because of the intersections of these different identities, it is important not to assume that all LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches experience their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression in the same ways. A lesbian student-athlete whose family cannot afford to pay for college costs is dependent on her athletics scholarship for her college education and will be less likely to be open about being gay if she believes that openness would jeopardize her scholarship. Likewise, a gay athlete whose family religious beliefs condemn homosexuality might feel more conflict or fear about openly identifying himself.

Similarly, LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches of color must deal with prejudices related to race and sexual orientation or gender identity/expression in athletics. Furthermore, LGBTQ women of color must negotiate sexism, as well. For LGBTQ student-athletes of color, the decision on coming out is a balancing act of identities affected by the combined effects of racism, heterosexism and sexism (for women of color). These intersections of identities create conflicts and complications that white LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches do not face.

For example, LGBTQ student-athletes and coaches of color often feel a separation from heterosexual teammates of color. If heterosexual teammates of color express anti-LGBTQ beliefs, LGBTQ student-

athletes of color may be reluctant to identify themselves. This reluctance is based on the fear of isolating themselves from friends and teammates. They often fear religious judgment from faith-based communities of color and are concerned about losing their support network among community, family and friends of color.

This conflict is particularly pressing for student-athletes of color on teams in schools that are predominantly white. LGBTQ student-athletes of color get caught between pressure to be representatives of their race since there may be few students of color on campus and the pressure to pick one identity over another. This possibility of alienating other students of color has consequences that white LGBTQ students do not face in predominantly white schools. In schools where there are more athletes of color than there are students of color in the general student population, LGBTQ student-athletes of color often can develop support and friendship networks with other athletes of color. This support, however, is sometimes contingent on their willingness to hide their sexual orientation. In many communities of color, LGBTQ people are tolerated as long as they are not open about their sexual orientation. However, the psychological costs of keeping one's sexual orientation secret are high and require enormous energy that affects friendships, family relationships, athletic and academic performance and self-esteem.

Heterosexual people of color sometimes perceive LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches of color who are open about their sexuality as choosing their sexuality over their race. This is particularly so among heterosexual people of color who believe that identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual is primarily a white issue. In this instance, LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches of color may experience isolation from others of color who believe that LGBTQ people of color are "misrepresenting" their racial groups. Similarly, LGBTQ student-athletes of color who are first generation college students often feel pressure from their families to be heterosexual as an integral part of representing their ethnic communities in a positive way.

The decision to make one's sexual orientation known publicly is difficult enough for many white LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and

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about how race, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity/ expression affect the experiences of student-athletes.

- When sponsoring LGBTQ education programs for athletics department staff and student-athletes, make sure that the experiences of LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches of color are specifically addressed.
- Invite a panel of LGBTQ athletes of color to talk about their experiences and describe how coaches and teammates can better address their needs.
- When people of color are isolated, depressed or having problems in classes, consider the possibility that questioning one's sexuality or dealing with an anti-LGBTQ climate might be among the issues

with which individuals of color are wrestling.

- Make sure campus LGBTQ support and social groups address the needs of LGBTQ people of color and are aware of how racism and white privilege affect their programming.
- Ensure that campus support and social groups for students of color address the needs of LGBTQ people of color and are aware of potential heterosexism in their programming.
- Athletics department staff should identify resources within the department and within campus counseling services so that student-athletes of color can get help that is supportive of their individual needs, whatever they may be, and that they do not need to fear repercussions in the athletics department.

coaches. However, many reasons related to racism and concerns about isolation from communities of color and family make many LGBTQ individuals of color less likely to come out publicly. For example, religion often is an important and lifelong part of the lives of students of color as a personal and spiritual buffer to racism. If their religious community and family teach that homosexuality is a sin, the potential judgment and isolation from this source of comfort and support can be devastating. Coping with fears of rejection and condemnation can make it difficult for LGBTQ student-athletes of color to find support and inner peace. Consequently, finding churches, mosques or synagogues in which they feel accepted for who they are can be challenging. Though religion also plays an important part in the lives of white LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches, the added complexities of racism are not a part of their experience.

LGBTQ student-athletes of color are also at risk of feeling alienated from white LGBTQ teammates or LGBTQ school organizations. Some LGBTQ student-athletes of color prefer to refer to themselves as “same-gender loving” (Blacks) or “two-spirit” (Native American) as a way to differentiate their experiences from white LGBTQ people. LGBTQ student-athletes of color are faced with the racism often present in predominantly white LGBTQ school-based organizations and among white LGBTQ student-athletes. White LGBTQ students, whether consciously or not, exercise and receive advantages because they are white that can mediate some of the prejudice related to being LGBTQ. They often do not understand how the experiences of LGBTQ people of color are affected by racism or how their own white identity provides them with advantages that can make it easier to openly claim their LGBTQ identity.

Many of the gender and sexuality expectations placed on LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches of color are based on racial stereotypes. At the same time they are caught in the dominant culture’s expectations for masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality.

Cultural differences about perceptions of sexuality and gender affect how LGBTQ individuals of color see themselves and how their families and friends see them. Differences among African-American,

Asian-American, Latino-American and Native American cultures’ perceptions, language and expectations with regard to gender and sexual expression are not necessarily the same as those of the dominant white North American culture. Just as it is important not to assume that LGBTQ people of color have the same experience of their sexual orientation as white LGBTQ individuals, it is also important to understand that the experiences of LGBTQ individuals of color are also different from one another because of these cultural differences.

Lesbians and bisexual women of color face the combined effects of racism, sexism and heterosexism. Lesbian and bisexual women of color also must negotiate between society’s expectations of (white) femininity and their specific racial and/or ethnic community’s expectations of femininity. For example, black women are not held to the same standards of staying home with children as white women. Historically, it was just not feasible to do so; thus, black women are provided with the opportunity, and sometimes the necessity, to work outside the home. Stereotypes of women athletes of color, especially black women, can lead to perceptions that they are “naturally” more animalistic or athletic, masculine or sexual than their white teammates. These stereotypes are particularly demeaning for lesbian or bisexual black women athletes who are also subjected to stereotypes based on their sexual orientation.

Likewise, gay and bisexual men of color may aspire to different standards of masculinity than white LGBTQ men do or have different expectations of gender and sexuality placed on them. Closeted gay or bisexual male athletes of color often feel pressure to conform to more rigid stereotypes of masculinity to deflect suspicions about their sexuality among white teammates and teammates of color.

All of these complexities call for coaches and athletics administrators to anticipate how race and other aspects of identity may differentiate the experiences of LGBTQ student-athletes, staff and coaches of color from those of white LGBTQ athletes and coaches.

Recommended Best Practices

- Coaches of all races should participate in education programs