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WGSS 125

Professor Ferguson

## Final Project: Queerness in Sports

### **Introduction**

For my final project in the course “*We Interrupt this Program: The Multidimensional Histories of Queer and Trans Politics*,” I created a website that explores the histories, individuals, news, and politics surrounding queer and trans identities in the world of sports. This project was inspired by my lifelong passion for sports. As an avid sports fan since childhood, I have witnessed the scope of popular media expand beyond the four major male-dominated professional sports leagues (NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL) to include more global and diverse narratives. This broader focus now spans leagues such as the WNBA and highlights stories from queer and transgender athletes.

Using my background in computer science, I decided to create a digital platform that serves as both a historical archive and a curated space for lesser-known stories of queer athletes in sports. When planning this project, I reflected upon the famous trailblazing stories of Jason Collins, Megan Rapinoe, and Lia Thomas. However, I also wanted to highlight lesser-known narratives that offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of the challenges and successes of queer athletes, young and old. My ultimate goal is to dispel the misconceptions often perpetuated by mainstream media and social platforms, providing a space where these stories can inspire and inform those who seek to understand queer athletes. In this essay, I will explain each section of my website, discussing its significance, the main points I aim to convey, and the social context in

which it is situated. I will also explore how the project connects to the course themes and readings, highlighting how these materials have influenced its development.

### **Queer Athletes**

The "Queer Athletes" section of my website serves a simple yet powerful purpose: to tell the stories of trailblazing queer athletes. Jason Collins, Megan Rapinoe, and Lia Thomas are among the most impactful and visible queer athletes of their time. Their courage and actions have sparked a modern-day movement, inspiring other athletes to embrace their identities and live authentically, privately and publicly.

Each athlete featured on this page represents a different marginalized community: Collins stands as a role model for gay men, particularly Black gay men; Rapinoe represents lesbian women; and Thomas advocates for transgender individuals. Together, their efforts reflect the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.'s timeless words: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." (King, 1963)

This page is intentionally simple, showcasing these highly visible figures as an entry point to exploring more hidden stories. While King's words were not directed initially at queer communities, their universality resonates deeply here, just as the work of these athletes transcends their personal journeys to contribute to the broader movement for LGBTQ+ inclusion in sports. Through their stories, we see the intersectionality of all struggles for justice and the enduring power of representation.

## Media Analysis

In this section of my website, I aim to analyze how the media has covered queer athletes and how it has responded to pivotal moments for the queer sporting community. A striking example of this is the Chris Broussard clip. Instead of focusing on Jason Collins' accomplishments as an athlete, Broussard used the platform to attack Collins' religious beliefs and question his morality. This approach is particularly shocking, given that this rant aired on ESPN—a network dedicated to sports, not politics, religion, or general news. Rarely, if ever, are an athlete's personal life or religious beliefs brought into discussions on ESPN. Broussard's decision to weaponize religion to undermine Collins was not only inappropriate but also unacceptable.

Merle Woo's words, "We're not fighting for just sexual freedom alone, but to end the economic, political, and social oppression that characterizes our lives in a capitalist society," resonate deeply in this context (Woo, p. 293). The oppression queer athletes face in the sports world is not an isolated issue; it reflects the broader struggles that queer individuals endure in everyday life. This idea is further illustrated by LZ Granderson's comment at the end of the same clip: "I would love not to have premarital sex, but in this country, I am not allowed to get married." At the time, same-sex marriage was still illegal in the United States, emphasizing the systemic inequality queer individuals faced.

The fight for liberation by queer athletes extends far beyond the sports arena—it intersects with every facet of society. The challenges they face are a microcosm of the broader battle against economic, political, and social oppression experienced by queer communities. This section of my website highlights these connections, emphasizing that the struggle for acceptance in sports is part of a larger fight for equality and freedom for queer people everywhere.

## **Trans-Athletes**

With this page of my website, I aimed to bring the stories of transgender athletes to the forefront of the conversation. In recent years, the topic of transgender athletes has drawn immense attention—and often harsh criticism—from the political world. This page was inspired by Gabrielle Le Roux’s work, *Proudly African & Transgender: Collaborative Portraits and Stories with Trans and Intersex Activists*. In her work, Le Roux wrote, “Transgender Africans have been silenced for a long time. We have been invisible, as though we did not exist. Today, many of us speak, we show our faces, we write, and we express ourselves openly.” (Le Roux, p. 54)

Following Le Roux’s lead in amplifying silenced voices, I wanted to highlight the transgender voices in sports that have been muted, such as Blaire Fleming and the thousands of transgender child athletes around the world. At the same time, I wanted to celebrate those who have spoken out, like Lia Thomas. By calling attention to both the silenced and the outspoken, this page strives to ensure that the stories of the transgender athletic community are told and heard. While I recognize that my website alone will do little to impact the broader movement, my hope is that sharing these stories contributes, even in a small way, to advancing the fight for transgender liberation.

## **League Actions**

This page highlights the current efforts of professional sports leagues to promote inclusivity for queer individuals. Like many corporate initiatives, these actions are often

sanitized and designed to appeal to the general public, steering clear of more controversial issues such as the inclusion of transgender athletes.

My reasoning for including this page draws inspiration from Sylvia Rivera’s powerful call to action in her *“Ya’ll Better Quiet Down”* speech, where she criticized the mainstream gay movement for ignoring the struggles faced by transgender people, particularly transgender people of color. Similarly, professional sports leagues often ignore the deeper systemic issues and instead rely on performative gestures—such as “Pride” campaigns and rainbow branding—to show support. These disingenuous actions fail to address the real challenges faced by the most marginalized members of the queer community.

While these initiatives represent some progress toward broader acceptance of queer individuals in sports, they also expose the limitations of corporate approaches. Much work remains for these leagues to move beyond performative gestures and genuinely embrace and support all members of the queer community.

## **Timeline**

With this page, my goal is simply to outline some key events in the history of queer athletes in the sports world. While this section does not delve deeply into analysis, its purpose is to educate readers about the milestones and struggles that have shaped this community over time. It is crucial to highlight that queer athletes are not a recent phenomenon of the 21st century but rather a powerful and resilient group that has been advocating for visibility and freedom for decades. Telling this history is vital to understanding the context in which queer athletes exist today and result in a more significant recognition for the progress that has been made, as well as the challenges that remain.

## Conclusion

The *Combahee River Collective Statement* emphasizes that their work is “not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions.” (Combahee River Collective, p. 269) With my website, I aimed to follow the words and actions of the Combahee River Collective by illustrating how queer athletes are fighting on multiple fronts for their liberation, much like the broader queer movement. This struggle is not solely about sexual freedom but encompasses the fight for racial, gender, class, social, and political freedom. By highlighting the various dimensions of the queer athletic experience, I aimed to present the nuance and complexity of this fight to celebrate the resilience and determination of queer athletes who continue to push for meaningful change.

## Sources

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