



## CHAPTER 2

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# Media Coverage of Lesbian Athletes

**Abstract** This chapter discusses prior research about media coverage of women athletes in general, as well as lesbian athletes, and analyzes of the coming out stories of prominent athletes. Scholars have uniformly found that women's sports receive little coverage, whereas the subject of lesbianism in women's sports is routinely ignored or presented as a problem. But, recent studies of coming out stories have found reporting to be strongly favorable, suggesting a more hospitable societal and media environment for gay and lesbian athletes.

**Keywords** Media coverage · Women athletes · Lesbian athletes · Coming out stories

Many studies examining media coverage of women athletes do so through the lens of cultural hegemony, which Hardin and Whiteside (2010) describe as “the reinforcement of certain norms and ideas that ultimately benefit the most powerful groups in a culture. These ‘common sense’ assumptions thus normalize certain behavior or groups while making others seem unnatural or wrong” (p. 20).

Many scholars have noted that sports is the domain of hegemonic masculinity, described by Connell (1990) as “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” (p. 83) which emphasizes physical strength, toughness and competitiveness, and places women in lesser, subservient roles

(Connell 1990; Hardin et al. 2009). Sports help define hegemonic masculinity because athletes are manifestations of “what it means to be a man” (Anderson 2002, p. 860). Given, that the public primarily views and reads about sports through the media and that many sports are greatly aided by media revenues, this synergistic relationship makes what Jhally (1989) calls the “sports media complex” the most powerful institution reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Hardin et al. 2009) and thus by extension heteronormativity and homophobia.

The media reinforce hegemonic masculinity in their coverage because sports are commonly presented “as symbolic representations of a particular kind of social order, so that in effect they become modern morality plays, serving to justify and uphold dominant values and ideas” (Hargreaves 1982, p. 128). Similarly, the media often present male athletes who embody traits linked to hegemonic masculinity as role models (Trujillo 1991).

Such values fundamentally impact coverage of women’s sports. In fact, Kane (1988) maintains that “sport media is an especially effective tool for preserving male power and privilege” (p. 233). The scant amount of media attention devoted to women’s sports occurs, at least in part, because hegemonic masculinity defines sports as a masculine pursuit and thus sees women athletes as deviant, especially those who are powerful and strong and those who participate in sports perceived to be more masculine in nature (Dann and Everbach 2016; Duncan 1990; Kane and Lenskyj 1998). Therefore, “what mainstream sports news does is mark the boundaries of sport as male territory by sidelining sportswomen” (Bruce 2013, pp. 132–133).

The trend of the symbolic annihilation of women athletes remains evident, even in recent studies analyzing media coverage. Kaiser (2018) examined the front pages of newspaper sports sections at 10-year intervals from 1932 to 2012 and found that the percentage of stories in large-city newspapers about women’s sports never rose above 4%. However, there was increased coverage of women’s sports in small-city newspapers after the passage of Title IX. But, the percentage remained small, with only 13.5% of stories in these newspaper sports sections focusing on women’s sports in 2012. Hull (2017) found that only 4.3% of tweets by local television sports broadcasters were about women’s sports. But, much like Kaiser (2018) the percentages were higher (9.2%) for those working in smaller markets.

Billings and Young (2015) studied ESPN’s flagship program *SportsCenter* as well as Fox Sports 1’s *Fox Sports Live* and found that less than 1%

of time was devoted to coverage of women's sports. However, they contend that the results are not necessarily an indication of sexism because more than 80% of coverage was devoted to men's basketball, football and baseball, with other men's sports also being relegated to the sidelines.

When women's sports do receive media attention, many studies have found that stories tended to emphasize the athlete's femininity, as opposed to their athletic talent (e.g., Hardin et al. 2009; Kane 2013). Lenskyj (2013) said that for women athletes "the appearance of heterosexuality has long been promoted through implicit or explicit regulations concerning clothes, hairstyles, comportment and personal narratives—images and information that are communicated through the print and electronic media" (p. 139). In effect, the media require that they "overcompensate for their masculine behavior on the field by acting in traditionally feminine ways off the field" (Knight and Giuliano 2003, p. 273) which gives off the appearance of heterosexuality and counters the perceived image problem of women athletes (Kane and Lenskyj 1998).

Although research examining the lack of coverage devoted to women athletes in general is important in establishing a context, Bullingham and Postlethwaite (2019) caution that it should not be used to represent the specific experiences of lesbian athletes. They note that "Gender and sexuality cannot be conflated, nor assumed, to lead to similar experiences and trends" (p. 56).

On the rare occasions, when coverage explicitly addresses the issue of lesbianism, it is often presented as a problem (Hardin and Whiteside 2010). For example, Kane and Lenskyj (1998) found that "the lesbian presence and not homophobia continued to be constructed...as a major barrier to the advancement of women's sport" (p. 200). The media often highlight the risks associated with being out, rather than the benefits, according to Krane and Barber (2003), who note that stories focusing on "[T]he coach who was fired for no apparent reason, lack of endorsements or attention from friends and colleagues are all put forth as lessons to be learned" (p. 340). Certainly, a significant aspect of coverage relating to the coming out of women's tennis champions Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova in the 1980s highlighted the financial losses each suffered after they announced they were gay. According to King, she lost all of her endorsements within 24 hours after confirming her affair with her assistant (Shuster 2013). Navratilova estimated she lost nearly \$10 million in endorsement deals despite being the No. 1 player throughout much of the decade (Zeigler 2011). Furthermore, both athletes feared the impact

their coming out would have on their sport (Birrell and McDonald 2012; Potter 2015). In her autobiography, King said that while she was worried people would think of scandal first before they thought of her accomplishments, her primary concern was that “public disclosure of the affair will come to reflect unfavorably upon women’s tennis... I fear that the sport is in for a hard three or four years” (King and Deford 1982, p. 10). In the *New York Daily News* article revealing Navratilova’s sexuality, she was quoted as saying “If I come out and start talking, women’s tennis is going to be hurt” (Goldstein 1981, p. 92). Nearly 25 years later Swoopes also expressed concern about the impact her announcement would have on women’s basketball. “I hope my coming out doesn’t have a negative effect on the WNBA,” she said. “Because it’s not going to change the game, or the players, or the league” (Swoopes and Granderson 2005, p. 124). And, as recently as 2013, Griner reported that she was told by her coaches at Baylor University not to discuss her sexuality because they were concerned about the image of the school’s women’s basketball program. “It was a recruiting thing,” she said. “The coaches thought if it seemed like they condoned it [being gay], people wouldn’t let their kids play for Baylor” (Fagan 2013, para. 21).

Some have speculated that the initial hostile reception to King and Navratilova in 1981 may have made women athletes more reluctant to come out (Anderson et al. 2016). It wasn’t until 1999 that another top tennis player, Amelie Mauresmo, came out (Forman and Plymire 2005). The fact that relatively few women athletes have come out sends the message that it is risky to do so (Krane and Barber 2003). Years later, when Swoopes made her announcement in 2005, she was the lone active gay WNBA player (Hollar 2006). Although more women had come out than men by the time Griner did so in 2013, it wasn’t as if women’s sports was swelling with athletes publicly proclaiming they were gay. “It is certainly true that female athletes have had trailblazers like Martina Navratilova and Sheryl Swoopes amongst their ranks,” Dave Zirin noted. “But you can still count the number of out female athletes on less than ten fingers” (Zirin 2013a, para. 2).

A prominent example of media coverage emphasizing the risks associated with being a lesbian athlete concerns the 2005 lawsuit filed against Penn State women’s basketball coach Rene Portland by Jennifer Harris, a former player on the team (Lenskyj 2013). Harris said she was harassed by Portland because the coach believed she was a lesbian. Furthermore,

she claimed Portland told other players not to associate with her (Buzinski 2005; Hardin and Whiteside 2010).

University officials conducted an investigation and fined Portland \$10,000, stating that “enough evidence existed to substantiate a claim that Portland discriminated against Harris by creating a hostile, intimidating, and offensive environment” (Voepel 2011, para. 17). Harris briefly continued the lawsuit, but settled out of court in February 2007. Portland resigned the following month (Lash 2006).

A study by Hardin and Whiteside (2010) analyzed media reports about the lawsuit because “this story demanded that journalists recast assumptions...in relation to gender, sexualities and sports” given that homophobia was the central issue of the lawsuit (p. 22). They discovered some positive aspects in the coverage, noting that all of the articles operated on the premise that discrimination based on sexual identity was wrong and that homophobia was not just wrong, but outdated. Many also commented that Portland’s reputation as a coach had been tarnished and that she would be remembered as much for her discriminatory behavior as her status as one of the winningest women’s college basketball coaches of all time. Furthermore, there was no blaming of the victims.

However, the researchers concluded that coverage of the lawsuit ultimately reinforced heterosexism because the issue of homophobia in sports wasn’t addressed in any real depth. The articles tended to dismiss such behavior as something from a bygone era and often framed sexuality as a private matter. Such reporting amounts to a denial of the problem and “reinforced lesbianism as an insignificant issue and reinforced the overall silence that shrouds homophobia in sports, cloaking issues of alternative sexualities and lesbians (and gays) where they cannot become accepted and empowered” (Hardin and Whiteside 2010, p. 31).

Similarly, Birrell and McDonald (2012), in their examination of coverage of the revelation of Billie Jean King’s affair with Marilyn Barnett, said that the media framed the relationship as a private matter, noting that some scholars “argue that the silence and privatization of sexuality apologizes for and undermines the fight for public and legal validation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people” (p. 353). Stories also focused on assertions that the presence of lesbians in sports was not scandalous or problematic. For example, as described in Chapter 1, a *Newsweek* article stated that “lesbianism in sports is neither ‘rampant’ or a scandal” (Axthelm 1981, p. 133). The articles emphasized the supportiveness of King’s husband and the image of Barnett as a woman scorned. “It was Barnett who

came to represent the ‘lesbian menace’,” Birrell and McDonald (2012) said, which in-effect made her “the real lesbian,” not King (p. 352). These themes combined to show that the press was “willing to construct a context for understanding, even forgiving the incident as an atypical and unimportant moment in the larger scheme of King’s noteworthy life” (p. 350), thus reestablishing the dominant heteronormative narrative “that presumes Whiteness, and...reaffirms the value of the family, monogamy and heterosexuality” (p. 345).

Despite examples such as Hardin and Whiteside (2010) and Birrell and McDonald (2012), King (2008) wrote that research utilizing hegemonic masculinity-inspired approaches has focused primarily on gay male athletes and is “much more concerned with mapping how gay men’s experiences in sport are governed by dominant... forms of masculinity,” thus resulting in a “relative lack of investment in visibility as a venue for social change” (p. 431). However, it’s important to note here that King’s (2008) assessment addresses the sociological scholarship about gay and lesbian athletes in general, and for the most part doesn’t mention analyses of media coverage of gay athletes. Furthermore, this critique was also written before the publication of several important studies examining press coverage of the coming out of several notable gay male athletes such as NBA players John Amaechi and Jason Collins, and football All-American Michael Sam (e.g., Billings et al. 2015; Cassidy 2012, 2017a, b; Kian et al. 2015). Scholarship about media coverage of the coming out stories of athletes puts the issue of visibility front and center (Moscowitz et al. 2019), and some of that work—including analyses of female athletes—has directly examined press coverage via the lens of hegemonic masculinity. For example, Dann and Everbach (2016) compared media coverage of Griner and Collins’ coming out utilizing this approach. It was found that Collins’ revelation was covered extensively, while Griner’s announcement was treated as a minor news event and that the tone adopted by many reporters was that it was “no big surprise.” The researchers attributed these findings in part to hegemonic masculinity “which takes into account that heterosexual males dominate the sports industry, whereas female athletes and the LGBTQ community are symbolically annihilated in sports media” (pp. 169–170). Dann and Everbach (2016) also contend that the lack of attention given to Griner might be because she “defies social constructions of femininity” and furthermore “adheres to the stereotypical view that aggressive female athletes are ‘masculine’” (p. 169). Kian and Anderson (2009) assessed media coverage of retired National Basketball Association (NBA) player John Amaechi

who came out in 2007. They discovered that many of the stories challenged orthodox hegemonic views of masculinity and said that the positive reception given to Amaechi by journalists was indicative of a more hospitable climate that could result in increased visibility for gay athletes via the coming out of an active male player—although they were quick to say that it wasn't likely to happen “anytime soon” (p. 813). One could argue Kian and Anderson (2009) were right on both counts given that Collins—the first active male gay player in a major American team sport—came out six years later in 2013.

However, King (2008) makes an important point when she notes that visibility, while desirable and “a necessary part of any social change...does not lead automatically to erasure of stereotypes, the end of violence, the redistribution of resources, or to greater freedom” (p. 431). Furthermore, the increased visibility afforded gay and lesbian athletes by the media is a double-edged sword, according to a study by Moscovitz et al. (2019). In their textual analysis of media reports about the coming out stories of Jason Collins and Michael Sam, they found that while much of the coverage portrayed the announcements as historic and important, they also revealed that news discourses about homosexuality and sport are complex and paradoxical. Stories about the two athletes simultaneously hailed their announcements as watershed moments, while at the same time proclaimed that the last hurdle to LGBTQ equality had now been overcome. Coverage framed the act of coming out, they contend, as a gateway to “inclusiveness, even as long-standing forces of orthodox masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality remain firmly intact” because media tend to reinforce hegemonic values (p. 15). Similarly, King (2008) writes that sociology of sport scholarship predicated on equating visibility with power and legitimacy can fall into the trap of embracing the values of the dominant culture without question in an effort to prove that gays and lesbians are just like everyone else. This has been referred to by scholars as homonormativity, defined by Duggan (2003) as a strategy that “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 50). Research has found that such preoccupation with “mainstreaming” gay and lesbian political interests has the effect of advancing the “most assimilated, gender-appropriate, politically mainstream portions of the gay community” (Duggan 2003, p. 41) while minimizing, stigmatizing and even excluding other LGBTQ individuals (Branfman 2018; Eng et al. 2005).

According to King (2008), “sociologists of sport must adopt a more robust queer sensibility if they are to avoid contributing to the drive toward normalization and instead effectively interrogate its premises and assumptions” (p. 420). Such a perspective, she writes “refuses to see the dominant culture’s positive embrace of a previously marginalized identity as an end in itself [and] it has the capacity to address a much broader, interconnected set of issues than a narrowly defined gay and lesbian agenda” (p. 424). A major point of this queer sensibility is that sexuality is not isolated from other forces, such as gender, race, politics and capitalism.

King (2009) analyzed print media coverage of Swoopes’ 2005 coming out via this approach, which she said “recognizes the symbolic power of lesbian visibility,” yet also, “understands...that socially endorsed visibility always produces new exclusions and that it tends to signify and enable assimilation into dominant norms, but not resistance to them” (p. 285). Much like Hardin and Whiteside (2010) in their analysis of the Portland case, she found that one of the key themes present in media reports was the “problem” of lesbianism, in particular the WNBA’s “refusal...to recognize and embrace their considerable lesbian fan base or their lesbian players” (p. 280). On the other hand, King also noted that Swoopes’ relatively high profile as an elite athlete still competing was treated as evidence of the increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians in society. However, she said that coverage also tended to equate lesbian and gay visibility with political and economic empowerment, given that many articles mentioned that Swoopes was going to profit financially from her announcement because she had signed a six-figure endorsement deal with Olivia, a travel company marketed toward lesbian consumers. One study proclaimed this “corporatization of coming out” in stories about Swoopes as reflective of the “unfolding of a new era of lesbian celebrity in sport...wherein the illusion, as opposed to the reality of civil rights and equality for lesbian athletes exists” (Chawansky and Francombe 2011, pp. 466, 473). King (2009) said that ultimately the bulk of stories only scratched the surface and reflected homonormative tendencies both in their proclamation that an out woman athlete was no big deal, and the fact that Swoopes’ racial identity as an African-American woman was essentially erased in much of the coverage. King (2009) wrote that journalists framed her coming out as being “just” about her sexual identity and often failed to address “the complex array of discourses—gendered, racial, economic—to which it was articulated” (p. 274). Such erasure was also present in coverage of the coming out announcements of African-American athletes Jason Collins and Michael Sam (Moscowitz et al.



2019). The authors called the exclusion of race from coverage “striking” (p. 16). This finding is also noteworthy given that Kian and Anderson (2009) in their analysis of 190 articles about John Amaechi, a British athlete of African descent, found that some sports journalists favorably compared the gay rights movement to the historic struggle of African-Americans for their civil rights. For example, after Penny Hardaway, another former NBA player made a series of homophobic comments in the wake of Amaechi’s coming out, they reported that one columnist noted that much like in the past with racial segregation, homophobia was still accepted in some circles. But, he expressed hope that Hardaway’s outburst would provide impetus for social change. Other writers invoked comparisons to Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play in Major League Baseball during the modern era. Yet another study of Amaechi also noted that a substantive amount of coverage made note of the parallels between the gay rights and African-American civil rights movements (Hardin et al. 2009).

Conversely, Hardin and Whiteside (2010) write that coverage of the Portland case initially emphasized race, as opposed to sexuality. The lawsuit claimed that Portland was more likely to target African-American players (such as Harris) she felt might be gay or not sufficiently feminine in their behavior (NCLR Fights 2005). Hardin and Whiteside (2010) state that “The emphasis on the racial component of this story—which by any account did not deserve the prominent framing it received—is also evidence of the discomfort, resistance, and perhaps even fear of journalists in dealing with stories about homophobia” (p. 31).

Loke (2016) compared online news readers’ comments to mainstream media stories about Griner’s and Collins’ coming out. Given that both athletes are African-American, she was particularly interested in how “their differing genders and shared race affect the kinds of societal reception based on their sexual preferences” (p. 132). While acknowledging the dearth of research on Black lesbian athletes, she noted that in general “black lesbians are thrust into the spheres of [both] racism and heterosexism in the greater public” (p. 134). Her textual analysis of more than 25,000 reader comments found that Collins was often referred to as a hero, a legend, a leader and an inspiration, while the themes of comments about Griner were dominated by proclamations that it was no surprise that she was gay and also tended to criticize her appearance. Supportive comments were few and far between, with none calling Griner inspirational or heroic. Few of the comments about either athlete focused on race, which led Loke (2016) to conclude that the extreme differences in commenters’ perceptions about

the coming out of Griner and Collins “lies in the roots of our patriarchal society. As the growth of LGBTQ rights is enjoying an upsurge in the nation, the initial embrace of tolerance is first offered to the hegemonic group—men” (p. 148). Although race was not a prominent theme in the comments, she nevertheless cautioned that while “a truly meaningful feminist movement needs to constantly be aware of the different struggles that affect white women as opposed to minority women, there, too cannot exist only one solution for all LGBTQ members” (p. 152). Toward that end, Chawansky (2016) argues that Griner’s use of social media served to make the experiences of black lesbian athletes more visible, particularly given that her Instagram posts presented “images of lesbian desire and romance” (p. 772). Such intersectional research examining Griner’s racial and sexual identities in context with her status as a prominent professional basketball player exemplifies what King (2008) was talking about when she discussed the need for a more queer approach to studying gay and lesbian athletes.

## THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Although there is a large discrepancy between the newsworthiness of male and female athletes coming out (Zeigler 2016), certainly the quality and depth of coverage regarding such announcements—not to mention coverage of women athletes in general—are also important (Hardin and White-side 2010). Several researchers have noted that the environment for media coverage of sexuality issues is improving, at least incrementally due to changes in society (Anderson 2015; Dann and Everbach 2016; Lenskyj 2013), likely impacting the increased willingness of journalists to write about them (Billings et al. 2015; Cassidy 2019; Kian and Anderson 2009; Zeigler 2016). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) acknowledge that there have been challenges to hegemonic masculinity and that as time has passed, it has acquired new meanings. They write that “Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (p. 836). In other words, hegemonic masculinity adjusts to societal changes (Hardin et al. 2009). Thus, the coming out stories of the athletes examined in this book were “not produced in a vacuum, but enveloped in legal, cultural, political, and economic changes to the climate around sexuality” (Bullingham and Postlethwaite 2019, p. 53). Such issues must be taken into consideration given that Billie Jean King, Sheryl Swoopes and Britney Griner came out at different times over a more than 30-year time

span. Stott (2019) writes that the significant impact media have on societal attitudes has influenced the way athletes now come out. In the 1980s and 1990s, gay and lesbian athletes were often outed, with their sexuality framed as scandalous. However, in more recent times they have come out on their own accord via a variety of venues, including social media.

Certainly, in 1981 King suffered culturally and (in particular) economically after being outed in 1981 (e.g., Anderson et al. 2016; Galanes 2014; King and Deford 1982; Starr-Seibel 2013). But, according to Birrell and McDonald (2012) media coverage in the aftermath of her affair with Marilyn Barnett was supportive. They attribute this in part to an improved cultural landscape of “broadened acceptance for divergent sexual norms and gender behavior” (p. 355) as a result of the feminist and gay and lesbian rights movements. However, they still found homophobic discourse in some of the articles and further claim that by apologizing, King, along with the media, reframed her affair and thus acquiesced to the dominant heteronormative narrative.

Swoopes’ and (especially) Griner’s respective announcements came during a time of increasing visibility for gay and lesbian citizens. Substantive attention is now given to LGBTQ issues by the media and significant gains have been made regarding gay and lesbian civil rights issues such as the legalization of same-sex marriage and the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” which allowed gays and lesbians to openly serve in the military (Billings et al. 2015; Groshek and Holt 2017; Loke 2016; Moscovitz et al. 2019). Furthermore, homophobia has steadily declined (Anderson et al. 2016) as evidenced in part by the increased public support for gay athletes. Nearly three-quarters of Americans (73%) said they would support the signing of a gay or lesbian player by a pro sports team, according to the results of a 2015 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and Religious News Service (Waldron 2015). More than half (56%) of the respondents in a study conducted by The Center for American Progress said that if a professional sports team publicly announced their support of LGBT-inclusive laws, they would have a more positive perception of that team (Durso and McBride 2015). Eric Anderson (2015) states that in the years since he began conducting research into the experiences of both gay and straight men in sports that he has seen a positive shift in attitudes toward homosexuality. For example, in a 2002 study the gay male high school and college athletes he interviewed reported their coming out experiences were mostly positive, but that they had expected to be bullied (Anderson 2002). But in a replicate study conducted several years later, he found that “much of the

internal turmoil and anxiety” (Anderson 2011, p. 258) previously displayed was absent in these young gay athletes. Furthermore, he found that their straight teammates were more accepting of their sexuality and expressed more willingness to discuss it. Regarding female athletes, research has also shown increased support for lesbian athletes by their heterosexual teammates (Anderson and Bullingham 2015).

The increasingly supportive climate for gays and lesbians in sports has prompted more athletes to come out (Anderson 2015; Stott 2019). When former NBA player John Amaechi came out in 2007, Zeigler (2016) said it marked “the first time reporters were asking people in sports the tough questions about a ‘gay topic’ that had exploded into the headlines” (p. 22). As noted earlier in this chapter, a study by Kian and Anderson (2009) found coverage of Amaechi to be primarily positive, stating that his announcement “influenced a wider debate concerning the role of sport in contemporary society and its relationship to homosexuality” (p. 807). Many of the stories mentioned Amaechi’s bravery, while also calling for more acceptance of gay athletes. Furthermore, they said that “none of the writers...came out and said that gays do not belong in the locker room...For a highly masculinized profession and sexist group of mostly men, this seems to be a considerable finding” (pp. 811–812).

Two other studies examining media reports about Amaechi were a bit less effusive in their praise. For example, Hardin et al. (2009) said that while it is true that journalists criticized individuals who made homophobic comments, they failed to denounce institutional homophobia in sports. Additionally, they found that some articles criticized Amaechi’s talents in an effort to minimize the impact of his announcement which served to imply that gay athletes were not capable of competing at the highest levels. Nevertheless, they ultimately concluded that reporting about Amaechi’s coming out did represent a step forward in coverage. Cassidy (2012) found that official sources such as current and former players, coaches and executives dominated stories about Amaechi. Gay athletes (other than Amaechi) and gay and lesbian activist sources were rarely heard from, while no sources with expertise in issues concerning the role of sport in society or gay, and lesbian rights were utilized. While this failure to go in-depth about the relationship between sport and gay and lesbian societal issues is worth noting, at least journalists were inquiring about gay issues and denouncing homophobia (Hardin et al. 2009; Kian and Anderson 2009; Zeigler 2016). Thus, overall it can be said that reports about Amaechi’s coming out reflect progress in the environment for gay and lesbian athletes (Cassidy 2019).

Progress appeared to take another big step forward in 2013 when Jason Collins became the first active openly gay male athlete in a major American team sport. For starters, he appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, something that was unimaginable in previous decades (Kian et al. 2015). Secondly, several studies found that coverage of Collins' coming out was overwhelmingly positive. An analysis of 364 newspaper articles by Billings et al. (2015) found that the leading theme in coverage was that Collins' coming out was a "watershed moment" for gay rights. The study found that celebrity support for Collins was also prominent and that the overall tone of the stories was extremely supportive. Surprisingly, fewer than half of the stories quoted Collins directly, thus leading the authors to write that "Collins became someone who was talked about rather than someone who was telling his own story" (Billings et al. 2015, p. 154). Another study similarly found that Collins' coming out was described as historical. However, Kian et al. (2015) went one step further and stated that not only was it treated as a historic moment in sports, but also for society in general. "News on Collins was not just framed as a story exclusively for sports followers," they said. "But, rather the breaking down of a major barrier as American society moves toward the eventual recognition of gays and lesbians as equals in a free society" (p. 625). As laudatory as those findings are, Billings et al. (2015) note that such proclamations "run the risk of falsely assuming that coming out symbolizes full equality for gays and lesbians in sports and the culture at large" (p. 154). Kian, Anderson and Shipka (2015) said that another prominent theme in the articles was whether or not Collins—who came out after the conclusion of the 2012–2013 season and was a free agent—would be signed by another team. The authors say that while these stories also focused on the historical significance, they contended that his coming out would have even more impact if and when he actually appeared on the court.

Collins was signed to a contract by the Brooklyn Nets in February 2014 and finished out the season with the team. Kian et al. (2015) also analyzed 41 articles published after the signing. Not surprisingly, they found that coverage hailed his appearance on an NBA roster as historic, and numerous reports did say this was an even more important event than Collins' initial coming out. "This is a team signing a player knowing he's gay" Cyd Zeigler (2014, para. 3) wrote, while a *New York Times* story called the signing "a significant step toward transforming North American professional sports into a more welcoming environment for gay athletes" (Keh 2014, para. 2). The study also reported that numerous articles stressed that

Collins' presence in the locker room was not a distraction. This may have been in reaction to the fact that approximately nine months passed before Collins was signed to a team and some wondered if the time lag was an indication that the NBA might not be ready for an openly gay player. Dave Zirin believed that NBA executives considered "'Collins' sexuality to be a 'media distraction' and in the buttoned-up corporate world of twenty-first century sports, 'media distractions' are only slightly less welcome than staph infections" (Zirin 2013b, para. 5).

The distraction angle figured prominently in media coverage of football All-American and Associated Press Southeastern Conference Defensive Player of the Year Michael Sam, who came out in February 2014, approximately three months prior to the NFL draft (Cassidy 2017b). He was initially regarded as a solid prospect, with experts predicting he would be drafted in the third or fourth round. But, immediately (21 minutes, in fact) after Sam's announcement, a story was published on the *Sports Illustrated* Web site containing anonymous comments from eight NFL coaches and executives, many of whom said that because of Sam's announcement, teams would be less likely to select him. "There are guys in locker rooms that maturity-wise cannot handle it or deal with the thought of that," according to an assistant coach quoted in the article. "There's nothing more sensitive than the heartbeat of the locker room. If you knowingly bring someone in there with that sexual attraction, how are the other guys going to deal with it? It's going to be a distraction. That's the reality" (Thamel and Evans 2014, para. 16). The "distraction angle" came up time-and-time again in coverage of Sam (Brody 2019; Cassidy 2017b).

While the emphasis on Sam as a distraction can be taken as a step backwards in terms of media coverage (Fatsis 2014), as well as the cultural climate, it can also be argued that journalists were doing their job by providing the public with information revealing the true feelings of NFL executives (Cassidy 2017b). The special place football holds in US culture as the nation's most popular spectator sport may also have played a factor in the relatively hostile nature of media coverage. "The NFL is the closest thing we have in this country to a national obsession," Dave Zirin (2014, para. 3) wrote, and another journalist, noting that football is emblematic of masculinity said "Before Sam's announcement, many gays took it for granted that the NFL whose brand is powered by manliness and violence was the most hostile terrain of all" (Glazek 2014, para. 4). Ultimately, however, Sam was met with considerably less enthusiasm by the media than was Collins. For example, one study found that comments related to

Sam's coming out were much more likely to be negative. More than 70% in stories about Collins were positive, compared to only 49% about Sam (Cassidy 2017b). Yet, despite Sam's ultimate failure to make an NFL roster, Brody (2019) somewhat hopefully asserts that in terms of the cultural climate for athletes who come out his story can serve "as a reminder that we have further to go, that we need to constantly reinsert discussions of equity and of otherwise into conversations of sports and sexuality, and that the conversation...necessitates a larger look at the structural and institutional values inherent to sports culture that predispose some to fail and some to succeed" (p. 16).

Bullingham and Postlethwaite (2019) found indications of some progress in media coverage of lesbian athletes in their analysis of print media articles about soccer players Megan Rapinoe and Casey Stoney who came out in 2012 and 2014, respectively. Stories about the two athletes, they said, were more likely to address the process of coming out, as well as related societal concerns. For example, stories about Stoney were complimentary in that they praised her "for her understanding of how society is changing and how her role is to make coming out easier for others" (p. 67) while Rapinoe was portrayed as an athlete who "uses her platform to challenge and discuss issues within sport, including equal pay for women, and LGBT and black rights" (p. 69).

However, as numerous researchers point out, homophobia (Billings et al. 2015) along with "long-standing forces of orthodox masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality" (Moscowitz et al. 2019, p. 15) is still present in society, especially for women athletes. In fact, Loke (2016) in her analysis of the vast differences in audience reaction to Collins' and Griner's respective coming out announcements suggests that because of "cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity," it might be even more difficult for women athletes to come out. "While physical strength and competitiveness are celebrated in male athletes, it becomes a jarring set of qualities for female athletes as it disrupts the very ideals of traditional femininity" (p. 149) causing them to be viewed negatively as lesbians, unless they balance these qualities with overt displays of femininity and heterosexuality. Such cultural factors create what journalist Dave Zirin (2013a) calls a "glass closet" (para. 2) and Anderson et al. (2016) refer to as the "protection hypothesis" where "women avoid coming out of the closet in order to protect their sport from being socially downgraded through the promotion of the lesbian label" (p. 96).

## CONCLUSION

The scholarship discussed in this chapter shows that inquiries into issues related to gay and lesbian athletes are a burgeoning area. Numerous methodological and theoretical approaches have been utilized. However, as demonstrated here, the findings are as varied as the approaches taken. But, overall media coverage has progressed. Furthermore, there are many additional areas open for exploration. Of particular interest to this project, researchers have expressed a need for even more scholarship examining the coming out stories of gay and lesbian athletes, including comparisons of media coverage of male and female athletes who come out (Kian et al. 2015; Moscovitz et al. 2019). This book addresses those gaps in the literature. But, it does so from a different theoretical and methodological perspective as explained in the next chapter, which also reports the results of two studies examining how journalists framed the coming out stories of King, Swoopes and Griner.

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