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Women and sports is a recurrent topic in the sport studies literature, and consequently in this journal's review columns. Usually it's about the classic women's question, that is, the all too common discrimination against women in sport that has many facets, and most of them displaying the ugly mug of the patriarchy. But there are other problems, which are treated less often, and one is about female homosexuality in sport, heterosexism and homophobia. Nowadays this discussion comes up more often, also outside the gay sports community, but the issue remains extremely sensitive and for some of the sport's stakeholders downright troublesome. There is a limited body of literature on this subject matter, which is why this editor secured a review copy of a 13 year old book from Human Kinetics, *Strong Women, Deep Closet: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport* by the American educator and currently Professor Emerita Pat Griffin, School of Education, University of Massachusetts @ Amherst. Griffin's own sporting career includes several years as an active college athlete in basketball and field hockey, and then as a coach in these sports as well as in swimming. She won a bronze medal in the triathlon at Gay Games IV and a gold medal in the hammer throw at Gay Games V in 1998, the year her book was published. Julia Rönnbäck has read Griffin's book, and appreciates the personal tone and the rich empirical data, which more than compensates for the lack of theoretical depth.

Effective cure against ignorance

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*Pat Griffin***Strong Women, Deep Closets:
Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport**

245 pages, pb., ill.

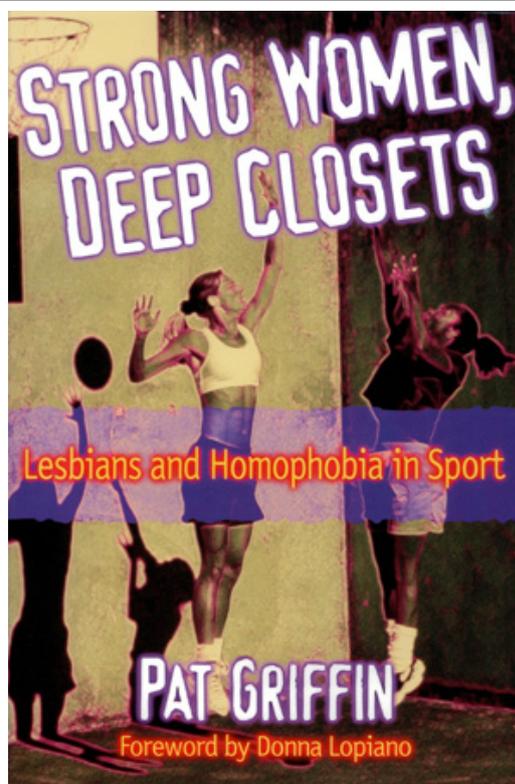
Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics 1998

ISBN 978-0-88011-729-6

"Women who play sports are homosexual." This is a tenacious myth that most women athletes are forced to negotiate. Despite, or maybe because of, the perseverance of the myth, it hasn't been particularly questioned or given much attention – by the women athletes themselves or by the academics. Generally, women athletes, coaches and women's sports organizations avoid public discussions of lesbians in sport because of fear. Fear of how it will affect public relations, sponsorship, recruitment of athletes and the image of women's sport. Why the academia has left the topic almost untouched one can wonder.

Consequently, incidents of discrimination against lesbians in sports are consistently neglected, condoned or addressed in private to keep away from attracting public attention. A silence regarding both the myth and the lesbians in sports has therefore been kept intact and the doors of the closets, where lesbian and other women athletes hide, firmly shut. Ignoring the myth is contributing to its prevalence, and not hearing the voices of lesbians in sports is a shortcoming hard to match.

When homosexuality in sports actually is discussed a lot of people immediately think of sex, and consequently



talking about lesbians in sports is talking about sex. The professional dialogues concerning homosexuality in sports are, however, not about sex. They are about sexism in general and heterosexism and homophobia in particular.

Against this background Pat Griffin sets out to break the silence by placing lesbian athletes and coaches in the spotlight. Griffin's aim is to

initiate a long-overdue discussion about the experiences of lesbians in sports, the effects of homophobia and heterosexism on all women in sport, and the connections between homophobia, heterosexism and sexism in sport. [p. X]

Griffin's ambition is to make the experiences of lesbians in sport visible, as well as to discredit the negative stereotypes that pursue all women in sport. By bringing lesbian athletes to the forefront using interviews, research, professional writings and her own experience as a lesbian coach and athlete, she attempts to depict and explore the contradiction of physically strong and competent women athletes who feel obliged to hide their sexuality in order to be members of the women's sports world. And her attempt is successful.

” Griffin succeeds in making the deep closets, where lesbian athletes and other women athletes hide, visible. And she does it with strong commitment and love combined with intellectual sharpness.

Griffin starts off the book by describing the extent of which her own experiences as a lesbian athlete and coach have formed her desire to speak out about lesbians in sport. She states:

I share the stories in this book, not as a disinterested observer but as a witness and a participant. Each of the stories in this book is a part of my journey too. [p.14]

As a huge fan of academic texts written with a personal tone and true passion for the topic, which is a common characteristic of feminist writing, the book could not have started in a better way. The personal tone is at all times present, and the passion never diminishes, which made the book a joy to read.

Griffin continues with a description of sport as an institution that functions as a training ground where boys learn what it means to be men, which also defines the sport experience for women. Because sport is linked with men and masculinity, women become trespassers on a male territory. Consequently women's sport performances are trivialized and marginalized so as to maintain the natural gender order. This is a key point for understanding women's sport.

In the historical overview (chapter 3) Griffin outlines perceptions of intimate relationships between women and sport opportunities for women throughout the 20th century, and she illustrates how the association of sport and lesbianism has its roots in the early part of century. She explains in an insightful way the sad logic behind women athletes' association with homosexuality: women athletes are doing the wrong thing (sports) = they are not normal women = they are not feminine. They are masculine/unfeminine and therefore not heterosexual, hence women athletes are homosexual. According to Griffin

The purpose of calling a woman a lesbian is to limit her sport experience and make her feel defensive about her athleticism? As long as women's sports are associated with lesbians and lesbians are stigmatized as sexual and social deviants the lesbian label serves an important social-control function in sport ensuring that only men have access to the benefits of sport participation and the physical and psychological empowerment available in sport. [p.20]

Here she shows how the interconnections of sexism, homophobia and heterosexism are powerful tools to uphold male privilege and dominance within sports. And those tools are being used without encountering much challenge.

What really pleased me to find in this book were the chapters (no. 4 and 5) devoted to a discussion of lesbian stereotypes. Griffin writes:

There is no such thing as a universal lesbian experience? Lesbian identity is only one of a number of other significant social group memberships that affect how women see themselves and are treated by others. Far from the unidimensional image of lesbians used to intimidate women in sport, the lived experience of lesbians cut across such boundaries as age, culture, sexuality, gender, race, religion, lifestyle, ability or disability, and class. [p. 52-53]

Griffin presents several competing media-created and promoted images of women athletes and argues that they all serve male dominance in sports and the rest of society. Furthermore, they stigmatize lesbians and widen the gap between lesbians and other women in sports, since a common result is that heterosexual women in sport distance themselves from lesbians and condemn lesbian participation in sport. Responses to the stereotypes – used by women's sports enthusiasts of all kind – are many, and to name a few: silence, denial, promotion of a feminine heterosexual image, search for heterosexuals-only space, and attacks on lesbians. According to Griffin it is of immense importance to understand how the lesbian label and all the stereotypes associated with it is used as a scare tactic and a control mechanism. Also, it is important to realise that the complete absence of any challenge to the lesbian stereotypes reinforces fears about the assumed danger and menace lesbians in sport pose to other women

and to women's sport in general. The core problems are the power to intimidate that the label lesbian entails and discrimination and homophobia. Not the lesbians.

The book's richness of empirical material compensates what it lacks in theoretical depth. It is a well-balanced book since it not only sheds light upon discrimination of lesbian athletes and coaches but also explores community and love among lesbians in sport. It has an optimistic view for future generations of women athletes and provides strategies for transforming women's sport. Griffin succeeds in making the deep closets, where lesbian athletes and other women athletes hide, visible. And she does it with strong commitment and love combined with intellectual sharpness. Hopefully the visibility provokes discomfort enough to fuel a continuous and very much needed discussion. Because comfort rarely creates changes. Neither does ignorance. Reading this book should not and could not leave anyone comfortable – and certainly not ignorant. It is a book that pleads for conversations that don't occur. So let's start talking.

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