

Breaking the Silence: Lesbian Fans, the Internet, and the Sexual Politics of Women's Sport

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Women who play sports are often conflated as "lesbian." Thus, athletes, coaches, and administrators in women's sport are constrained to never speak of the lesbians who play and work in sport. The injunction against speech keeps lesbians in the closet and controls all women in sport who must constantly monitor their appearance, behavior, and speech to ensure that they project an appropriately heterosexual image. The code of silence is, typically, justified by the assertion that fans and sponsors would abandon women's sport if lesbian participants were vocal and/or visible. Traditional media support the injunction to silence. They rarely speak of lesbians, and when they do, they typically marginalize and sensationalize lesbian participants. The authors analyze two threads of discussion on an Internet newsgroup devoted to women's basketball. The results indicate that the Internet offers fans a chance to challenge the code of silence and that contributors to this newsgroup are supportive of lesbians in sport.

KEY WORDS: lesbians; sports; women's sport; sexual politics; Internet newsgroups.

In the spring of 1997, a woman wrote to an Internet newsgroup catering to women's basketball. She asked, "Is Cheryl Miller a lesbian? C'mon, don't tell me you have never wondered. I think she is lesbian. Wouldn't it be nice if she held a 'coming out party' to coincide with Ellen Degeneres at the end of April?" (1A-M). In the fall of 1998, another woman wrote, "I know this might be stupid but, anyone would think michele timms is a lesbian?? I am not a lesbian, but I like her playing skills and she is cool and hot even! But sometimes when I look at her actions and with kristi harrower. . . . does anyone have the same thinking as I do?? any comments?" (1A-T).

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Michelle Timms and Cheryl Miller are highly visible public figures in women's sport, the former a star player and the latter the general manager and head coach of the Phoenix Mercury of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), an offshoot of the men's National Basketball Association (NBA). Miller is also a popular commentator on NBA telecasts. Thus, the questions on this Usenet newsgroup violate one of the deep-rooted norms of women's sport—a code of behavior that enforces lesbian silence and invisibility. In this paper we examine how the medium of the Internet provides a forum for women's basketball fans, lesbian fans in particular, to break the code of silence and, perhaps, to change the culture of women's sport.

THE CODE OF SILENCE AND THE CULTURE OF SPORT

Though lesbians and gay men in a variety of professions and occupations stay in the closet to protect their jobs and livelihood, the code of silence in women's sport is especially insidious. All women in sport are asked to prove their heterosexuality, and lesbians are asked to stay in the closet for the good of the game. The code of silence originates with the assumption that "out" lesbians are dangerous because fans and sponsors would not tolerate them and would abandon women's sport in retaliation. Women athletes, coaches, and administrators who come out as lesbian, have been outed, and/or are merely suspected of being lesbian, have lost their jobs and their income (Cahn, 1996; Fleming, 1998; Galst, 1997; Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 1991).

The prohibition is particularly strong because modern sport developed as a male preserve (Dunning, 1994). The ancient Olympic Games consisted primarily of combat events used as training for war (Kidd, 1990). The founder of the modern Olympic Games, France's Baron Pierre de Coubertin, envisioned sport as a way to exalt men's accomplishments. In International Olympic Committee publications he espoused that women were not fit for athletic competition and relegated their role to spectator (Hargreaves, 1994). Messner (1994) argues that sport formed in response to a "crisis in masculinity" (p. 67). Sport "[represents] . . . the male body as a symbol of strength, virility, and power" (Messner, 1994, p. 70), and this representation helps to maintain male power in sport and in the larger social world (Bryson, 1994). Many woman athletes challenge basic assumptions about the congruence between sex and gender, and ask to be allowed into a sacred bastion of male privilege.

And modern sport works to maintain distinctions between women's sports and men's. For example, while the players in the WNBA play with the basketball hoop at the same height as do the men, they play with a smaller ball and compete in shorter games than the men. WNBA games have two halves of twenty minutes in duration, as opposed to the NBA's four quarters of twelve minutes each. To further differentiate the women's from the men's game, the WNBA plays during the summer, while the NBA season lasts from the fall until late spring.

Accusations of lesbianism police the borders of appropriate gender behavior and help to maintain male social power. Women who dare to enter the male arena of sport have, historically, been accused of being "too masculine," and as a result, the female athlete has often been conflated as lesbian (Cahn, 1993, 1994; Peper, 1994). Karen Peper (1994) describes the logic of the equation in these terms:

If little girls were allowed to be strong and powerful and gain self-confidence via participation in athletics they would not be "feminine," and therefore, they would be the only possible socially constructed opposite "masculine" and *then* . . . they would be queer, inverse: in a word, dykes (p. 194).

Many athletes, lesbian and straight, attempt to distance themselves from the lesbian stigma by actively participating in homophobic and heterosexist actions (Griffin, 1998). Women athletes have performed a female apologetic by emphasizing, or even exaggerating, their femininity off the court through their dress, comportment, and actions (Felshin, 1974; Lenskyj, 1994). In an effort at self-protection, the leaders of women's sport have typically chosen to encourage or even enforce the female apologetic in order to present a heterosexualized public image and to counteract the association between lesbians and sport (Crossett, 1995; Felshin, 1974; Festle, 1996; Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 1994).

These attempts by women athletes, straight and lesbian, to maintain the facade of feminine, heterosexual propriety ultimately harm all women in sport. Such strategies do not end the insinuation that women athletes are lesbian, but they do divide women in sport against each other (Griffin, 1998). They also may convince many young lesbians and other women questioning their sexuality that lesbianism is wrong. The accusation of lesbianism has been used to eliminate women in intercollegiate athletics, straight and lesbian, who agitated for their fair share of support on the basis of Title IX (Galst, 1997). The passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act in 1972, which forbids gender discrimination in institutions receiving federal funding, is viewed as the watershed for the growth of opportunities for girls and women in sport in the United States. Today skilled female high school athletes receive much more interest from potential coaches. Some college coaches resort to accusations that the coaches and players on rival teams are lesbian in order to subvert their opponents' recruiting efforts (Cahn, 1996; Griffin, 1998).

THE MEDIA AND THE CULTURE OF WOMEN'S SPORT

In general, coverage of women in sport may be viewed as a case of what Gaye Tuchman (1978) calls symbolic annihilation. Compared to their actual numbers in sport, women are strikingly absent from media accounts, and the few depictions of women athletes often trivialize and/or marginalize their efforts. For lesbians, the situation is far worse. Except for the few cases in which individual star athletes come out, or are outed, lesbian athletes, coaches, and administrators are virtually invisible to the media.

When the issue of lesbians in sport is raised in the mainstream press, the discourse typically reinforces the culture of the closet. For example, the premier issue of the *Sports Illustrated* spin off, *Women/Sport* (1997), featured an article written by Olympic softball star, Dot Richardson. Unbelievably, Richardson contemplated suicide when a college teammate confessed that she was a lesbian. As an adult, Richardson had learned to tolerate lesbians, she said. She was comfortable with her lesbian teammates as long as they were silent and invisible (Griffin, 1998; Richardson, 1997).

Women/Sport represented Richardson's provisional acceptance of her lesbian teammates as a step forward for women in sport, but as Griffin (1998) argues, conditional acceptance is like the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. That policy, while it claims to limit only *public* displays of sexuality while allowing homosexual behavior in *private*, actually legitimates and increases regulation of sexual behavior (Phelan and Blasius, 1997). Women who work in a conditionally tolerant climate are constrained to constantly monitor their speech, dress, and other behaviors to ensure that no evidence of their stigma ever leaks out. In these contexts, lesbians and lesbian visibility are seen as the problem, not homophobia and heterosexism. Lesbian self-censorship is offered as the solution, a damaging solution that does not challenge or threaten the heterosexist status quo.

In contrast to the dominant forms of mainstream media, the lesbian and gay press have provided critical (both in the sense of necessary and the sense of analytical) coverage of the homophobic and heterosexist culture of women's sport (DeMotier, 1998; Galst, 1997; Schwartz, 1997). Like Griffin (1998), these members of the gay and lesbian press understand that the problem is not lesbian visibility but the heterosexism and homophobia that demand conformity and submission from all women in sport. However, their voices are seldom heard outside of the lesbian/gay ghetto.

Proponents have justified the code of silence on the premise that a visible and/or vocal lesbian presence would repel fans from women's sport. For example, the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), concerned about golf's "image problem," have made efforts to heterosexualize the sport's image to appeal to fans and sponsors (Crossett, 1995). They assume, in this case, that the fans are heterosexual, or at least prefer a heterosexual image. The mainstream media work on much the same assumption. They assume that their audiences would rather not see or hear about lesbians in sport.

The fans, however, are rarely given a chance to speak publicly about what they would prefer. Lesbian fans are a vocal and visible presence at most women's sporting events, and though the numbers of lesbian fans may be hard to gauge, they form a large enough fraction of the total to make them integral to the financial growth and survival of women's sport (DeMotier, 1998; Griffin, 1998; Schwartz, 1997). Despite their numbers, lesbian fans have never been asked what images they would prefer. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that all heterosexual fans are heterosexist and/or homophobic. The study of Internet newsgroups offers a

chance to find out how some fans of women's sport make sense of lesbians in sport.

NEWSGROUPS

There are two ways that Internet newsgroups can be understood: as media and as communities. Each of these ways of viewing newsgroups is useful for our understanding of how fans can use the newsgroup to challenge the code of silence in women's sport.

Newsgroups as Media

A newsgroup is a variation of an Internet bulletin board. The bulletin board is a space where many different users can communicate with one another in a public forum (Strate, Jacobson, and Gibson, 1996). According to Foster (1997), the Internet is a site for people to "publicly legitimate their self expression" (p. 23). Whereas traditional media have gatekeepers to filter out ideas and points of view that are deemed inappropriate, the Internet provides a relatively free forum for ideas that might otherwise be suppressed. Levinson (1997) argues that the personal computer and the Internet have allowed the user to become author, publisher, editor, and distributor of her or his own writing. Critics of the Internet have claimed that the lack of gatekeepers means that inaccurate and uninformed opinions may carry the same weight as authoritative pronouncements. But this feature of the medium may be seen as a blessing as well as a curse. If there are no official gatekeepers on the newsgroup, opinions and ideas that are marginalized or trivialized by the traditional mainstream media may be published electronically. This feature of the Internet gives marginalized groups the chance to contribute to the public discourse. In the case of the women's basketball newsgroup, the freedom of the medium offers a chance for lesbians and their allies to challenge the code of silence in women's sport.

Newsgroups as Communities

There has been much debate over whether Internet communities are really communities at all, since members of such groups share no physical space and since people can lurk on the edges of the community without contributing to the discourse (Foster, 1997; Gurak, 1997; Jones, 1995, 1997; Wilbur, 1997). Gurak (1997) offers a useful model for theorizing Internet communities. She argues that they are *interpretive communities*. What joins them together is not shared physical space but common values and "likemindedness" (p. 9), and these characteristics form a community, even if individual community members come and go, spend time in other communities, or simply lurk at the edges unseen and unheard. Like

all communities, the borders of Internet bulletin boards are permeable, but those borders are policed using a technique known as *flaming*.

Most definitions of flaming emphasize its hostility, profanity, and emotion, and emphasize its destructive potential (Baron, 1984; Dery, 1993; Eckholm, 1984; Lea, O'Shea, Fung, and Spears, 1992; Spitzer, 1986; Thompson, 1996; Thompson & Ahn, 1992; Walther, 1992). Millard (1997) calls flaming "a form of personal verbal violence," an ad hominem attack in which members of an Internet community "vigorously castigate the uncivil" (p. 145). Gurak (1997), however, argues that every Internet community is united by an ethos, or a "characteristic manner of holding and expressing ideas" (p. 13). Users of a newsgroup must become part of the community by learning its ethos. She asserts that in newsgroups, newcomers and outsiders are "'flamed' until they . . . understand and assimilate the community ethos . . . [and] community ethos is the basis for what information other online participants will accept and believe" (p. 15). Thus, flaming can be a method of community formation and defense; but since the ethos of a community is constructed, and thus always in process, flames can also be viewed as instances for the discussion, negotiation, and production of a community's ethos.

The ethos of the women's basketball newsgroup can be illustrated by two exchanges, or flames. In January of 1999, a man wrote that he and nine of his friends could beat any women's collegiate basketball team. The man was flamed immediately and with great heat. In the same month, the group also flamed Charles Barkley, a male NBA player, who said that WNBA basketball was not "real" basketball. Once again, the public flaming was both harsh and swift. Many other examples could be cited, but these two illustrate the core values of the group. The contributors will not tolerate any posting that disparages women athletes or threatens to undermine the integrity of women's sport.

The two posts questioning the sexuality of Michelle Timms and Cheryl Miller were also flamed, probably because they seemed, at least at first, to demean Miller and Timms. But, as the discussion progressed, the respondents disagreed about whether the two postings violated the community's values. Thus, the interplay of responses can be read as a negotiation or clarification of the community's ethos.

We answer two questions in this paper: 1) How does the discussion of sexuality on the newsgroup differ from the typical discussion found in the traditional mainstream media?; and 2) What does the discussion of sexuality and women's sport tell us about the ethos of the newsgroup as it pertains to lesbian visibility and vocality?

METHODOLOGY

We collected 78 postings from 42 respondents for the Miller thread and 33 responses from 18 contributors for the Timms thread. We analyzed these postings as part of an overriding discourse rather than as individual speech acts. The respondents were not merely commenting on the topic of lesbians in sport. They

were debating whether a discussion of lesbians in sport was compatible with the group's ethos. In effect, they were trying to decide whether a discussion of lesbians in sport was harmful or demeaning to women's basketball.

The discussants were not merely speaking their minds; they were responding and interacting with each other, and trying to influence each other's opinions. Our analysis of the discourse was guided by our knowledge of the code of silence in women's sport and the ethos of the newsgroup. We understood that the participants were debating whether the code of silence was beneficial to women's sports. As a consequence, we read the two threads as an ongoing discourse rather than as a series of discrete statements. Although we coded the postings according to themes, we recognize that those themes are intertwined and interrelated. We also recognize that these Internet postings contain numerous errors. However, we opted not to edit the postings in order to preserve, as much as possible, their flavor and tone and to not disrupt the flow of the text with the too frequent use of the word "sic."

Following precedent in sociological and mass communications research (Baym, 1995; Binik, Cantor, Ochs, and Meana, 1997; Gurak, 1997; Mitra, 1997; Schmitz, 1997; Shaw, 1997; Watson, 1997), we neither asked the contributors for their permission to use the material we collected, nor did we inform them of our intent to do so. However, unlike some other researchers (Baym 1995; Mitra, 1997; Shaw, 1997), we chose not to reveal the contributors' on-line pseudonyms. Instead, we have assigned each contributor an identifying number. For example, our first contributor, the woman who began the Miller thread, is contributor 1. The second is 2 and so on. Since some contributors posted more than one message, we have given each posting a letter as well, e.g., 1A, 1B, and so on. In addition, we noted whether the posting came from the Miller or the Timms thread with an initial "M" or "T" respectively, e.g., 1A-M is the first posting in the Miller thread, and 1A-T is the first in the Timms thread.

Where possible, we noted the contributor's sex. This was not always possible. The pseudonyms used by the contributors were often ambiguous. We also realize that the Internet allows for gender travel. In the words of Sherry Turkle (1997b), "on the Internet many people recast identity in terms of multiple windows and parallel lives" (p. 72). Someone may create for him or herself a gender identity that does not match with his or her "real life" identity (RLI). However, unlike participants in Multiple User Domains (MUDs) and (MOOs), where role playing is central to the game (Turkle, 1997a, 1997b), newsgroup and bulletin board users are presumed to use their RLI (Baym, 1995; Shaw, 1997). Though we recognize the problems in such an assumption, we too have followed that course and accepted our subjects' self-identifications.

RESULTS

The Internet discussion of sexuality and women's sport was similar to the typical media discourse in two ways. The first few respondents to each thread

asked, “Who cares?” about the sexuality of women’s basketball players. These contributors emphasized that “this [newsgroup] is about basketball. . . . sexual preferences should be discussed elsewhere” (8A-T). These respondents argued that “it doesn’t really matter” (3A-T) and called the question “irrelevant” (5A-M). Second, several people argued that the lesbian label unfairly stigmatized strong women, even when those women were heterosexual. A man insisted that “not all women who take no mess are gay” (12E-M). His late wife had been a tall strong woman “yet it would be an enormous stretch . . . to portray her as a lesbian.” This man, like others, however, conflated gender with sexuality. His wife could not be mistaken for a lesbian, he thought, because off court she wore make-up and baked cookies! Several straight women objected that the lesbian stigma was unfairly applied to them. One said, “I play volleyball, basketball, softball, and tennis. I would be furious if someone thought I was a lesbian” (20A-M), a response indicative of homophobia.

However, the discussion quickly diverged from the typical heterosexist discourse about lesbians in sport. In each thread, the question of “Who cares?” was followed by the assertion that questions of sexuality were, indeed, relevant to the newsgroup because “it’s a big taboo to even ask the question. Since no player in either league [WNBA or ABL] is openly, proudly gay, I think the issue is more complicated than ‘who cares?’” (5A-T). What complicated the issue, according to these contributors, was the lesbian “taboo” and the history of sexual politics in women’s sport. In the Miller thread, those who wanted to speak of lesbians in sport argued that the code of silence controlled all women in sport. Since sport is coded as a masculine activity, all women athletes risk being seen as gender outlaws. One summed up one thread of this argument succinctly,

Sports are seen as masculine. [Ever hear anyone wonder is a woman figure skater a lesbian?] Sports like figure skating and gymnastics have a ‘feminine’ picture in people’s minds. Those like basketball are seen as masculine. So a woman who is good at bball is seen as a bit masculine. And since the stereotype is out there that lesbians are masculine women—and gays are feminine men—the conclusion is logical—if not reasonable (13A-M).

On the Timms’s thread, one woman complained about the “double standard” that allowed men to “go out with men every night,” while women who “hang out with other women a lot” are accused of being lesbians (9A-T). But others pointed out the danger if the discourse about sexuality in sport were allowed to “continue in the same vein it has followed thus far, with women expressing the fear, hurt and resentment they experience at being considered lesbians.” Such posturing,

Is likely to be to the detriment of homosexual athletes as heterosexual athletes attempt to debunk the myth of lesbians in sports and distance themselves from their lesbian contemporaries, thus forcing lesbians further into the closet (18A-M).

The lesbian/gay positive responses emphasized the right of lesbians to be open or out about their sexuality. They affirmed the need for positive lesbian role

models for themselves and for their children. A woman with an eight-year-old daughter said,

I am glad there are strong women role models who may also be lesbians. My daughter . . . really enjoys the game and all of the other lesbians we see [in the stands]. . . . women role models are vital, lesbian role models even more critical for younger lesbians and children of lesbians. It helps dispel myths (20B-T).

Supporters of lesbian rights emphasized that such role models had to be out, or else they would send the wrong message. One pointed out that Cheryl Miller was a poor role model because:

if she is a lesbian [and she is not out], the message to [young lesbians] is that it is not okay to be a lesbian in basketball because if Cheryl Miller, with all her popularity is afraid to be open and honest, then surely I should be afraid (25A-M).

Midway through the thread, some lesbians revealed their secret longings. One envisioned the day:

When lesbians can choose to make their private lives public just as the straight players [do]. . . . Can't you just see it—the camera swings over to a player or coach's girlfriend who's proudly holding up their little bundle of joy for the world to adore! The key here is that the lesbian player or coach proudly makes their private life public AND the media treat it the same way they would treat a straight player or coach making the same decision (2C-T).

The same woman imagined “a world where it would be OK to swoon in public over your favorite players” (2B-T), and her friends teased her “you wouldn't be talking about a certain defensive player from the [New York] Liberty, would you?, <swoon>” (13A-T).

A handful of virulent homophobic attacks disrupted the discussions. One man equated lesbians in sport with pedophiles (32A-M), and another “father” (38A-M) objected to “the tremendous following by the Lesbian faction of our society” at women's basketball games. He complained that lesbians had handed his teen-age daughters a flyer “inviting them to a ‘special’ dance.” He contended that this was an example of lesbians flaunting their sexuality and insisted that “this is unacceptable behavior and would not be done by straight people.” These sorts of statements are usually edited out by the media, even though the sentiments expressed form the unspoken justification for the stigmatization and marginalization of lesbians.

On the newsgroup, these statements were not tolerated. Several members “came out” as straight people to emphasize that homophobia was the problem, not lesbians. Another father of sport-loving daughters said, “In the 10 years of my fandom I have met and become friends with a lot of terrific lesbians” (29A-M). And a straight woman wished that her gay male friends, who were in a stable, long-term relationship, were as accepted as she and her fiancé (27B-M).

The homophobic vitriol was virtually absent from the Timms thread. The strongest criticism came from one (10A-T) who complained, “this is not a forum of society's perceptions of gay people. . . . I am always leery of people that seem to

want to PUSH an agenda.” That criticism did not draw a passionate riposte, just the quip: “oh no—not the dreaded GAY AGENDA!!!!!!!!!!!!” (5B-T). However, some contributors (7A-T; 16A-T) referred to another thread in which a man complained about “1000 or more [lesbians] sitting together chanting obscene lesbian type slogans, extreme forms of dress, public groping of each other” at a Washington Mystics WNBA game (16A-T). The man’s description of the game was criticized and dismissed by one woman who wrote, “I never saw anything like what you are talking about” (16A-T). Another man suggested the idea was ridiculous, stating “1000 fans . . . what a hell of a conspiracy. . . do you think they had a meeting before hand . . . or was it spontaneous, like when people do the wave of the YMCA dance?” But he finished angrily, “my guess is that you are exaggerating at best and out right lying at worst—perhaps to stimulate some lively discussion on the issue” (20A-T). The discussion of the Mystics ended when someone admitted that “the Lesbian Avengers attempted to turn [one game] into a political spectacle,” but she did not mind the spectacle, apparently. She gushed, “the Lesbian Avengers are AWESOME!!!! They should have a bball team!” (14B-T).

Internet threads typically die out before the questions they raise are adequately addressed. The Miller thread segued into a discussion of fan behavior, after a final plea to respect Miller’s privacy (41A-M). The Timms thread never gained the momentum of the Miller thread. As the fourth contributor to the thread reminded the group, “we went through this last year with Cheryl Miller” (4A-T). It ended when the woman who posed the question about Timms wrote that she was happy that lesbians were coming out (1B-T), that she was not a lesbian herself, and did not have a crush on Timms (1C-T), but was “just curious” (1D-T).

DISCUSSION

The typical discourse about lesbians in sport suggests that lesbians ought to remain silent and invisible for the good of the game. An open discussion of lesbians in sport is rarely, if ever, undertaken in the traditional mainstream media. Media discussions of lesbianism usually bemoan the unfair lesbian stigma that confronts heterosexual women in sport. Alternately, the media make a spectacle of lesbianism when an athlete comes out or is outed. In either case, lesbians are marginalized and the code of silence is reinforced.

The Internet discussion clearly departed from the code of silence in women’s sport. It was also a departure from the sensationalism of media depictions of lesbians in sport. Seldom, if ever, do the traditional forms of mainstream media facilitate such an open discussion of the sexual politics of women’s sport. Rarely do lesbians have the chance to speak for themselves or to encourage openness in women’s sport.

Contrary to the fears of many, the freedom of speech offered by the Internet medium and the lack of gatekeepers did not lead to a decline in the quality of discussion. Many of the contributors to the discourse are clearly well informed

about the sexual politics of women's sport. Indeed, from our point of view as scholars working in the field of sport studies, some contributors to the Internet discourse have a far more sophisticated grasp of the issues than do the "experts" in the mainstream media. The lack of gatekeepers in this case has a positive impact. Though many members of the newsgroup clearly do not welcome discussions of sexuality, they are unable to prohibit them. On the other hand, the group is not able to prohibit homophobic or heterosexist speech acts either. The worst anti-lesbian remarks are perhaps more offensive than those uttered by Dot Richardson (1997) in *Women/Sport*. However, as is not the case with the print media, the newsgroup provides the necessary resources for a strong and immediate repudiation of heterosexist and homophobic statements. Since the newsgroup makes no effort to offer "balanced" coverage, or to present both "sides" of the issue equally, the reader is left with a much different version of how the fans make sense of lesbians in sport than that offered by the traditional mainstream media.

Most of the respondents who objected to the questions about Miller and Timms argued that such questions were an invasion of privacy. Furthermore, they emphasized that questions of sexuality were inappropriate because the focus of the newsgroup was basketball. These responses can be classified as "liberal." The respondents do not necessarily object to the presence of lesbians, but would like sexuality to remain a private issue. A small minority of contributors were overtly homophobic and heterosexist. The majority strongly condemned this minority. Even those who had tried to silence the discussion originally did not support the bigots.

The contributors who wanted to discuss lesbians in sport argued that the overt homophobes and the liberals who only wanted silence were both wrong. They argued that issues of sexuality were relevant to the newsgroup because the focus of the group was not just basketball but *women's* basketball. This group recognized that we cannot understand the history or contemporary forms of women's sport without understanding the meaning of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. The contributors who came out as lesbians, however, wanted to discuss more than the sexual politics of women's sport. They wanted strong, positive role models to affirm their lesbian identity, and they wanted the right to publicly express their erotic preference.

The ethos of the newsgroup prohibits speech that denigrates women athletes. The newsgroup demands that women athletes be judged on their own terms rather than compared to men, and insists that women's sport ought to be conducted in ways that benefit women athletes. When respondents objected to the questions about Cheryl Miller's and Michelle Timms's sexuality, they were invoking this ethos. Since lesbian is a stigmatized identity, calling a woman a lesbian has typically been a way to control and demean women in sport. However, other contributors made a strong case that questioning an athlete's sexuality, or calling her a "lesbian," need not be construed as a put down. Indeed, embracing "out" lesbians as positive role models could be very consistent with the group's ethos, and rejecting the stigmatization of the lesbian identity, while embracing the contributions of lesbians to sport, might be a positive step for all women in sport.

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