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The Gay Games, Safe Spaces and the Promotion of Sport for All?

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Introduction

To begin, this chapter examines the rhetoric and reality of the Gay Games in terms of offering an experience of sport which encompasses notions of discrimination-free participation and inclusivity for all. We chart the historical development of the Gay Games and the founding and current tenets on which they are based. An analysis of the experiences of a sample of women hockey and soccer players in the Gay Games provides a springboard for examining not only the positive social effect of participation but also the socio-economic and cultural barriers that prevent the Gay Games from fully realising inclusivity and participation for all. Therefore, this chapter provides an analysis and critique of the simultaneous existence of inclusion and exclusion at the Gay Games sporting event.

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Homophobia and the Creation of the Gay Games

Homophobia can occur in many different situations in sport. Women who participate in sport, particularly team sports, have traditionally encountered stigmatisation or labelling, such as being called a 'tomboy' or 'mannish', 'butch', 'dyke', or 'lesbian', because their sporting participation has historically been deemed gender inappropriate (Hargreaves 1994, 2000: 135; Sartore and Cunningham 2009; Lenskyj 2003; Peper 1994). In an effort to protect themselves from the consequences of homophobia and the lesbian label in sport, many lesbian athletes have remained hidden, dropped out of sport, created new/alternative/non-mainstream teams and competitions, or have become more politically active within existing sporting organisations. The International Gay Games was developed in part to address this situation and as a result, the Gay Games are an example of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) individuals attempting to create a positive and affirming sporting environment for themselves.

The International Gay Games is a multi-sport, mass participation event held every four years. The Gay Games is traditionally 'recognised as the premier athletic event that is supportive of lesbian, gay male, bisexual, and trans-gendered (LGBT) individuals' (Krane et al. 2002: 27).[1] The idea of creating the Games was conceived in 1980 in the United States by Mark Brown and Dr. Tom Waddell. Mark Brown was the sports editor of the *Bay Area Reporter* (a gay-identified newspaper) and Waddell was a decathlon representative for the United States at the 1968 Olympics (Symons 2010). The first Gay Games were held in San Francisco in 1982 and since then, the Gay Games have been held every four years. The next Gay Games is scheduled to be held in Paris, France, in 2018 (Federation of Gay Games 2017).

In her seminal work on the Gay Games, Symons (2010) observed that inclusion was an important vision for the first Games, and this inclusion had to 'encompass the diverse gay and lesbian population in the policies and practices of the Games' (2010: 125).[2] Policy and practices surrounding the Gay Games provide the opportunity for the Games to be inclusive

of all participants, not least from the perspectives of gender and sexuality. According to Symons (2010), the Gay Games has also been instrumental in the formation of 'community' that is both simultaneously inclusive and exclusive for those involved. Waddell explained why community is important to the vision of the Games:

> The Gay Games are not separatist, they are not exclusive, they are not oriented to victory, and they are not for commercial gain. They are, however, intended to bring a global community together in friendship, to experience participation, to elevate consciousness and self-esteem and to achieve a form of cultural and intellectual synergy. (Waddell 1982)

Shortly after, Waddell's vision of a non-separatist, participation-grounded Games came to fruition; however, over time, the Games have become increasingly commodified despite their inclusive roots and therefore, not available to all who wish to participate.

Symons (2002) suggested that the 'social elements that sustain communities such as shared meaning, solidarity, belonging, participation, and even equality, are fostered at the Gay Games' (111). Symons (2002) further suggested that community is avowed during events such as the opening and closing ceremonies of the Games (111). While LGBT participants originate from different countries, backgrounds and cultures to compete, the Gay Games has become a place where participants can be uninhibited in a sporting and social setting. In fact, the Games contest the 'heterosexual hegemony of sport' (Symons 2006: 149).

Central to the philosophy of the Gay Games is the participation of all (including all abilities, all fitness levels and all sexual orientations) in the sporting events. Therefore, athletes may range from novice to elite. While the Gay Games have provided a stage for competition for elite athletes and teams,[3] the Games are predominately focused on a participatory culture and doing one's best within a like-minded community. However, it would be naïve to classify all participants of the Gay Games as 'one community.' Symons (2002) suggests that the 'lesbian and gay community' of the Gay Games includes 'lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered, drag queens, leather dykes and daddys, and queers from many different racial, ethnic and national backgrounds' (101). This 'community' is not

one homogenous population, it consists of several communities participating each with their own identities and agendas. Symons proposes that there is 'no one Gay Games' that reflects one single community, there 'is a multiplicity of Gay Games lived by the various participating individuals, groups and communities' (2002: 111). Therefore, there are various sub-cultures present at the Games, which is not dissimilar to a variety of groups that have been identified at other major sporting events (see Dionigi and Litchfield, Chap. 13 in this book).

Symons further suggested that the 'diverse communities participating in the Gay Games, and their different interests and political perspectives especially concerning the organisation and engagement with sport and leisure, tensions and conflicts are endemic and ongoing' (2006: 156). Conflicts within such diverse communities are not unusual, as all of these groups struggle for power in the wider LGBT community. For instance, one such tension is that 'lesbians with separatist feminist politics and belief systems can find it difficult to align themselves [with this wider LGBT community] considering their political analysis of patriarchal power' (Symons 2002: 101; also see Jeffreys 1993).

There are also several other tensions and conflicts apparent at the Games, including a focus on the 'body' (particularly for young gay males) and transgendered participation at the Games. In fact, Symons (2002) suggest that there are 'significant differences in economic and social power, as well as gendered cultural perspectives amongst gays and lesbians, differences that can often become political and divisive' (102). Economic conditions and capitalism have been linked to the 'commodification of the body and sexuality, mass media and niche marketing' (Symons 2002: 102). This has been particularly the case for many young gay males who have claimed a distinct sexual identity and placed importance on image, fashion and leisure (see Symons 2002, 2010). Symons explains that while the affluent lesbian lifestyle exists, such a culture is not so obvious in most lifestyles, media and marketing for lesbian identified women (2002; 101).

A further tension that exists in the LGBT community at the Games is the inclusion of transgender participation at the Games. While the culture of transgender participation is widely supported, Symons (2002)

suggests that there are conflicts with some lesbian feminists. Symons explains that 'Lesbian feminists advocating the celebration of womanhood and the centrality of patriarchy to women's oppression have been opposed to the inclusion of women not born 'womyn' in their communal activities' (2002: 102–103). Therefore, tensions can arise when transgendered identified women enter the fray of lesbian feminists and their access and participation at the Games.

It is hardly surprising that tensions exist between members of a number of minority groups. There are a number of political and power struggles between communities within the LGBT population, due to both the shared and separate political and cultural struggles that each group faces. Davidson (2013) suggests that 'the cleaving of solidarity alliances between lesbian and gay communities and other types of social justice struggles is a dangerous enterprise' (75). That is not to say that there is no solidarity at the Games. In fact, the Games' organisers have attempted to proliferate the solidarity that does exist between communities (through policy).

Symons (2006) further explained that to encompass diversity and address cultural tensions at the Gay Games, the Gay Games organisers have implemented 'progressive and inclusive policies and practices to promote this diverse participation in sport' (156). Such policies formulated and adopted by the Gay Games encompass all aspects of the LGBT community. For example, such policies had to ensure that transgendered people, intersex people and people living with HIV and AIDS were included (as they were all part of the combined communities) (see Symons 2010). Additionally, the Games in Amsterdam in 1998 were particularly proactive in changing the gender equity culture at the Games with the implementation of a number of policies. The organising committee of the Amsterdam Games implemented four policy areas to increase female involvement at the Games, including the following:

1. Affirmative Action principles were used in the selection processes of all paid staff members;
2. An extensive and targeted promotions campaign … which meant that all promotional material for these Games … contained images of women and men;

3. A number of specific measures designed to increase the registration of women in the sports programme and to take account of women's generally lower income levels and greater family commitments … was implemented, and;
4. A strategy to achieve gender equity within Gay Games V was the creation of a specific women's programme as well as a balance of women's and men's interests and participation opportunities within the sport, cultural, social issues and events and festivities programmes (Symons 2010: 167–168).

The testimony of participants of the Gay Games should reflect these policies and practices to some extent and reveal feelings of safety, community and inclusivity. However, simultaneously, the Games are inevitably exclusive, especially in terms of culture and class, as argued in this chapter.

The following section examines the experiences of eight female lesbian-identified (aged 22–52 years with an average age of 39 years) participants at the 2002 Gay Games held in Sydney, Australia. At the time of their interviews (2006), these women were all working in some form of professional employment (including lawyer, academic and nurse), thus these women had steady incomes and independence. As such, this group of women were financially independent and able to travel to events such as the Gay Games. Given this event was held 15 years ago, we reflect on both the experiences of participants at the Games, but also how the Gay Games have evolved since these interviews took place and comment on the increased commercialisation and cost and difficulties in accessibility, as well as the cultural politics of this event.

The Experiences of Gay Games Participants

The experiences of eight women who have attended the Gay Games are explored in relation to inclusion at the Games. The participants were interviewed in 2006 as part of a larger doctoral study completed in 2012 (see Litchfield 2012). These women were recruited from the women-only Northern Central Hockey Club (NCHC) and the mixed gendered Melbourne Central Hockey Club (MCHC).[4] All of these women had participated in at least one Gay Games in either field hockey or soccer.

Additionally, all of the women had participated in the Gay Games in 2002 in Sydney (Australia). Participating at the Gay Games resulted in several positive outcomes for the participants, but the two most relevant to inclusivity are personal empowerment and forming new social connections.

Experiencing a Sense of Personal Empowerment

A number of participants explained that they felt personally empowered when participating at the Gay Games. This empowerment was achieved through feelings of self-worth, safety and freedom. Dawn (49 years) described her experiences of participating at the Sydney Gay Games as one of the 'highlights of her life'. Claire (40 years) also felt that the Gay Games provided a 'fantastic experience [to be yourself]'. Summer (36 years) also explained that she was empowered by participating at the Gay Games: 'I mean I think it's great because you can get out and be who you are and act, behave with your partner or your supporters without feeling intimidated and so I think that that's a positive thing…'. Symons (2002) found that the 'social elements that sustain communities such as shared meanings, solidarity, belonging, participation, and even equality, are fostered at the Gay Games' (111). Therefore, these positive experiences of the participants are supported by the extensive research into the history of the Gay Games by Symons.

Karen (42 years) described her experiences of the Sydney Gay Games in 2002:

> It was just fantastic… it was just, you felt a sense of freedom in a way… Just the opening ceremony, and the thousands of people, you were just there for the same reason, and look, whether there were straight people there as well participating, they were there because they embraced the people they were with. It was really quite a wonderful feeling.

Karen elaborated on this point and suggested that she would not normally feel the same freedom as a lesbian-identified woman, outside of the Gay Games experience. The Gay Games provided a different type of 'freedom' for Karen. This freedom mentioned by Karen allowed her to

express her sexuality in a public space and, in the context of the Gay Games, such expression was deemed 'safe'. A number of studies have also described such sporting environments as 'safe' and affirming spaces for women (see Griffin 1998; Hillier 2005: 62; Litchfield 2011; and Shire et al. 2000: 53).

Cassandra (52 years) also raised the concept of a 'safe space' when referring to the Gay Games. Claire (40 years) felt that the Gay Games were 'a celebration and again it's a safe space'. In her study on an Australian Rules women's football team, Hillier describes a 'safe space' as a site for 'young women to test gender and sexuality boundaries in relative safety' (2005: 5). Litchfield (2011) also observed this 'safe space' and culture in one of the women's field hockey teams in Melbourne. This culture provided a (perceived or actual) space to experience personal empowerment for the participants in the current study, regardless of sexuality, age and ability. However, it is worth acknowledging that there is still overt opposition to Games which affects the 'safe space'. Davidson (1996) explains that fundamentalist Christian organisations have protested to have the Games banned and vandals have 'spray painted homophobic graffiti on registration walls' (77). Despite this, this small group of participants felt that safety was present at the Games during their participation.

Forming New Social Connections

A number of these women had formed new social connections and friendships at the Gay Games. Connie (32 years) and Summer (36 years) explained that they made a number of new friends and social connections at the Games. Summer (36 years) explains that 'I met a whole lot of people that I hadn't met before'. Dawn (49 years) explained that the Games were 'a great opportunity just to get together and play together and, and have fun together'. In particular, Dawn (49 years) explained that 'meeting each other really bleary eyed at 7.30 in the mornings'; 'hanging about afterwards and warming down'; 'having a spa together'; and 'winning the silver medal in the grand final' provided a space for her to make different social connections with existing and new team-mates.

Connie (32 years) felt that the social connections made at the Gay Games were the most important part of the Games for her. In fact, after making friends at the 2002 Gay Games, Connie moved from the Netherlands to Australia and decided to play hockey with the same group of women in Melbourne. She explained:

> I met some friends during the Gay Games and one of them said "well why don't you come and join the club at *NCHC* and play hockey here as well?"… so when I arrived here, basically I started to play hockey before I even joined I think. I played two or three weeks after I arrived in… Melbourne. It's a good way to meet people. (Connie, 32 years)

Connie has since found a female partner through the Gay Games. According to Hargreaves (2000), many lesbians participate in sporting cultures where they can meet and socialise with other same-sex attracted women (152; also see Griffin 1998). As a result, lesbian sporting teams and clubs and events such as the Gay Games often provide a space to identify as a lesbian and belong to a community.

Summer (36 years) also placed importance on personal networks established at the Games:

> I think that's [the social aspect] the positive thing that comes out of it. You get to meet a whole lot of people that you wouldn't otherwise and in our environment… where you know being gay you are the minority [usually] and for a change you are the majority, which is an interesting experience.

Similarly, Cassandra suggested that the very experience of participating at the Gay Games and winning a silver medal meant that she developed a closer bond with existing teammates who did not attend the Games. 'My team-mates were so supportive… because they were proud, they were more proud of my silver medal than I was' (Cassandra, 52 years). Therefore, the experience of participating at the Games had provided new social connections and reinvigorated existing ones.

Such bonding may be attributed to both accessibility of the Games, being held in Australia (making the cost of attending less than it would be for an overseas event), and the financial independence of the participants.

Participation in the Gay Games, and the supportive bonding that arose from it, may not have been possible if these women were younger and therefore potentially less financially independent. Symons (2002) explains that the Gay Games is still an event that is largely for the 'affluent, developed nations of the world' (112). The relatively secure economic position of the participants discussed in this chapter ensured that these women were able to socialise together outside of the club and attend events such as the Gay Games (which strengthened their bond as team-mates and friends), and provided the space to make new friends at such events. On the other hand, access to the Games is not available to everyone who may wish to enter and as such, the Gay Games may also provide a culture of exclusion.

Can the Games Also Provide a Culture of Exclusion?

The logo of the upcoming Paris 2018 Gay Games 10 includes the slogan 'ALL EQUAL' under the Federation of Gay Games logo (Paris2018 2017). This kind of slogan suggests equality of access as well as equality related to acceptance and inclusion, regardless of ability, race and sexuality. However, this may simply not be the case. It must be acknowledged that events like the Gay Games and Out Games are, for financial and cultural reasons, not accessible to all. The Gay Games are a largely a white, gay male, middle-class event, where the majority of those who participate are from developed countries, particularly from the United States (Symons 2010). The 'base fee' of the Paris 2018 Gay Games is up to €205 (approximately 300AUD) and covers some aspects of participation whilst at the event, but excludes entry as a participant to sporting competitions and as a spectator to cultural events. Access to sporting events are additional to the 'base' fee (sporting fees cost up to €130 (approximately $200AUD) per event and cultural event prices have not yet been released) (Paris2018 2017). Therefore, registration just to attend the event and participate in one sport can be as much as $500AUD. As such, participants must be sufficiently wealthy to incur not only the base fee and sporting/cultural fees but also the high cost of

travel, accommodation and meals in order to partake in this 'inclusive' experience. In reality, attending the Games is a luxury which is only available to a certain section of the population.

Both Symons (2010) and Davidson (2002, 2013) have reflected on this culture of exclusivity relating to class, sexuality and costs at the Games. Davidson (2002) suggests that the Gay Games have always been commercialised and that this message of commodification and commercialisation is evident in the image of the 'gay athletic and cultural pride'. For instance, traditionally, the dominant marketing image at the Games has included a lithe, fit and athletic gay male body (Symons 2002). Symon's (2010) suggests that the Gay Games organisers have actively pursued the 'supposedly lucrative pink dollar' of the LGBT communities (102). According to Symons (2010):

> Gay media and marketing companies began to point out that gay men and lesbians were an affluent and desirable market to reach. Consumption patterns included frequent dining out, travelling, purchasing of music, books, using credit cards more often, and generally enjoying the 'good life'. (103)

With such thinking, it was deemed appropriate that the costs of participating in the Gay Games were not modest. However, of course, such generalisations about supposed wealth do not apply to all within the LGBT communities. Therefore, the Games are beyond the economic reach of many in their target audience.

Some effort, however, to redress the issue of accessibility has been made by the organisers of the Gay Games. The Federation of Gay Games (FGG) Scholarship Program is one example which both recognises the financial burden of attending the games and aims to redress that burden by offering a number of scholarships to what they call 'economically-challenged athletes' from 'underrepresented populations or regions of the world' (Federation of Gay Games 2017). The scholarship program relies on donations through a 'gofundme' site and encourages previous attendees and supporters of the Gay Games to donate. This ultimately suggests that the more wealthy are funding the less wealthy to attend. While this is, no doubt, an admirable scholarship program, it is also quite evident that even the organisers consider that for many people, attending without financial help would be impossible.

The scholarship requires recipients to be 'deserving' without clearly outlining what that means. The application itself asks applicants to prove their poor financial situation (Federation of Gay Games 2017). Applicants for the scholarship are not only required to state their employment status, annual revenue from all income and pensions and the total amount across all their bank accounts, but must provide bank statements for two years to prove their lack of wealth (Federation of Gay Games 2017). Those who already have a valid passport (a costly item to obtain) are advantaged as the scholarship does not cover this and passport and visa information must be included on the application. Such an application process relies on the applicant's honesty and ability to access such documentation, and it potentially opens up the process to being abused and exploited by those who do not require financial help to attend such events.

Additionally, the less wealthy in society are in the somewhat conflicted position of asking for a hand-out in order to attend something that will potentially empower them. There are, of course, many people for whom, even with this monetary aid, attendance at the Games is beyond their financial capabilities. Thus, the empowerment, friendship and affirmation, which is facilitated through connections with like-minded others in sport to be gained via participation in the Gay Games, is fundamentally inequitable. The fact that the Games are only available to those who can afford to participate negates the premise of inclusion as advertised by the Gay Games. Therefore, this study is a snapshot of a specific group of middle-class, educated, economically independent women, and might not necessarily be the experience of all women. Additionally, the experiences for gay men, bisexuals or transgendered individuals might also provide a different story as touched on above.

Concluding Comments

The simultaneous inclusion and exclusion that occurs at the Gay Games provides a contribution to the knowledge about the Gay Games and an insight into the lived experiences of some of the participants at the Games. Although there are political and power struggles between communities within the LGBT population, essentially the Gay Games can

provide a space where diversity, gender and sexual orientation are celebrated. Additionally, the Gay Games provides a space and opportunity for like-minded active people to come together. However, the (albeit brief) snapshot of the participants in this study along with information about the costs of entering the Games shows that participants are predominately middle-class, gay male or lesbian-identified adults and have access to disposable incomes. Therefore, the luxury of celebration and involvement at the Games is inaccessible for many. In fact, Davidson (2013) suggests that the Gay Games reiterate 'global white, Western, bourgeois privilege' (65).

The Gay Games have long claimed to be inclusive of all and the organisers have been proactive in providing policies to promote an equal representation of women and men, participation opportunities regardless of fitness level, ability, HIV/AIDS and transgender status and offering alternatives to the heterosexist traditions of some sports (such as the inclusion of same-sex ballroom dancing at the Games). However, the Games can only be described as inclusive for those who participate at the Games, or more specifically, inclusive to all who can afford to attend. Most often, this includes individuals who are situated in a financially independent stage of life (late 30s, 40s and 50s). To be truly inclusive of all, it is apparent that a number of changes are required to be undertaken by the Gay Games. Such changes, which could include lowering the costs of participation at the Games, acknowledging that there are dominant communities present at the Games and focusing more on the participatory objectives of the original Games imagined by Waddell and Brown, would provide steps in the right direction for 'inclusion for all'.

Notes

1. From 2006, another multi-sport, mass participation event for the LGBT worldwide community was held, the Outgames (Outgames n.d.). Just like the Gay Games, the Outgames are open to all, regardless of sexual orientation.
2. However, participation at the Games is restricted to participants who are 18 years or over (Paris2018 2017).

3. Athletes such as Judith Arndt from Germany, (world champion and Olympic silver medal cyclist); Bruce Hayes from the United States, (Olympic gold medal swimmer); and Petra Rössner from Germany, (Olympic gold medal cyclist) have all competed in at least one Gay Games (Federation of Gay Games 2017).
4. Pseudonyms are used for both the hockey clubs and the participants. Participants for this study were chosen from a larger base of participants in Litchfield's PhD dissertation. Please see Litchfield 2012. Seven participants were chosen from NCHC and one participant was chosen from MCHC. All eight participants competed in the same team in the regular hockey season in 2002 when the Sydney Gay Games were held, and all eight participants competed in the 2002 Sydney Gay Games in either hockey or soccer.

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