Shining a Light on the Unseen Athletes:

Exploring the Experiences of Professional Gay Male Team Sport Athletes

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of gay team sport professional athletes. LGBTQ+ athletes are more commonplace than they used to be in mainstream sport, especially in Western countries. However, there is still a lack of representation of gay team sport professional athletes competing and in the literature. Previous literature includes mostly university/college American athletes, who recently came out. This is the first empirical study that focuses on gay team sport professional athletes, highlighting their experiences for the purpose of mapping for future research and to spark societal change. This study aims to make sport, with society to follow, a more welcoming and inclusive space for gay athletes by familiarizing the sport community with gay athletes. This research includes semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 6 participants, chosen based on their sport, country of origin, country they compete(d) in, age and race. The interviews are transcribed through phenomenological analysis, with common themes across participants presented in paragraph form with direct quotations. The research questions include: What are the experiences of gay team sport professional athletes? What can be done to make sport more inclusive for gay team sport professional athletes? The common themes parallel those seen with amateur athletes, but new arenas exist in the professional realm that are not seen elsewhere. Participants note that straight athletes do not face society the same way that gay athletes do, with true inclusion still being decades away. Participants note having feelings of isolation, especially in the showers, and have suggestions to facilitate in making sport more inclusive ranging from language to education upgrades. Given the absence of previous research on this topic, this study urges and suggests dialogue amongst those at the highest level of sport.

Acknowledgements

None of this academic journey would have been possible without Dr. Kyoung June Yi. Shortly after graduating, Dr. Yi inspired me to aim higher and strive to achieve a lifelong passion of mine through this MA. There is absolutely no way that I would have taken that plunge, navigated the world of academia with paperwork, timelines, and scholarships, nor been successful with writing a coherent thesis without his guidance. I am forever grateful of his guidance, hard work, and dedication.

Of course, my parents were instrumental in my journey, always supporting and loving me wholeheartedly. They inspire me to be better and to always try to improve the lives of those around me, as they have done throughout their teaching and coaching careers. I owe them immensely for holding me up and giving me strength and being my parachute when I fall.

There are too many friends, coaches, and teammates to name but battling day in and day out forms unbreakable bonds, which I will forever hold dearly. I have also been incredibly fortunate to have had amazing teacher and classmates who have taught me invaluable lessons, including the members of this committee: Dr. Jocelyn Thorpe and Dr. Fenton Litwiller. Dr. Thorpe's teaching was instrumental in reigniting my passion for literature and showing me multiple perspectives. Dr. Litwiller's experience in this field offered phenomenal ideas and whose guidance and teaching shaped this research into the product it is.

Thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for the financial support! This honour allowed me to focus to produce the best possible research, without the burden of worrying about how to support myself.

Finally, I cannot thank the University of Manitoba and the Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management enough. I was a Jr. Bison growing up and it was always my dream to be

a Bison. The dream became a reality in 2008, when I first attended the university. It was my home for 5 years as I lived in the classrooms, colleges, team room, athletic therapy center, weight room, and gym. The FKRM has supported me so much over the years, allowing me to finish my bachelor's degree over a decade after joining the university, allowing me to complete my masters, and by supporting me financially throughout. The staff at the university, especially in the offices are superheroes, who I am sure are happy to not receive my daily emails asking for clarification, assistance, or favours. Thank you to everyone for making this possible!

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the gay athletes that came before this study was conducted, who were fought tirelessly in the trenches for our equality and inclusion, who inspired entire nations with their bravery, and whose courage and perseverance proved that out athletes can triumph. This is also dedicated to the gay athletes of the future, for you will be our luminary, our helm, and our grand marshal.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Each one of us is here because somebody before us did something to make it possible."

- Bernice Reagon

In September of 2014, I flew to The Netherlands to start my professional volleyball career. To make the transition onto the team smoother, I tried to learn the names of my future teammates by studying the roster from the previous year. I wasn't sure how being openly gay was accepted within the team culture as there hadn't been athletes for me to look up to who had done it before, especially in volleyball. This was the major reason I came out as Canada's first active openly gay national team athlete, to be a role model for future athletes. Once arriving in The Netherlands, everything was new. I was a little culture shocked by all the differences compared to Canada. It was also really awkward when I was introduced to the team while being in the middle of their huddle. The training began after I shook hands with all the players and coaches whose names were said much too quickly and didn't match up with my study guide. As a result of not even knowing people's names, being new to team, and uncomfortable about having to discuss my sexuality, I felt very out of place and unprepared to begin the practice.

The team consisted of two Americans, myself, and the rest Dutch players. It was not even that I could not remember their names, but also that they were Dutch names that I could not even pronounce. After attempting some of them many times, and being corrected by the person, I would move onto the next person. Since players came from different countries and backgrounds, our lingo was also very different. Sets to attackers are commonly represented using numbers to indicate how far from the setter the attacker should be and the height of the ball at its maximum height. With everyone coming from a different system, it was difficult to discuss what type of set we wanted. Additionally, some words in Dutch sound like English, making it confusing. For

example, when the setter isn't able to get to the ball, they will yell, "Help!" In Dutch, players will yell, "Over!" When I first heard this, I thought that the setter was telling me to put the ball over the net. In fact, the setter was speaking Dutch and the translation means to play the ball instead of him. It was strange to be in a foreign country with a new team, coaches, atmosphere, style of play, drills, language, and culture. My biggest worry was that I did not know how they would accept me and my sexuality. Up until that point, I had been playing with a consistent group for most of my life and so I felt comfortable just being myself and not worrying about every interaction. With this Dutch team, I knew that my first impression would be important. I became hyperaware of my own movements and comments, while still fighting the jetlag and trying to perform. As a recently out gay man who had just started his professional career, I did not know the standard behaviour of the team or the new country that I now lived in. I didn't know if my team knew about my sexuality and didn't want to allow it to become the elephant in the room. Eventually, I figured it was time to make a joke about my sexuality, and I felt the whole team exhale as the tension left the room. Talking with my teammates about it afterwards, I learned that they were also unsure about how to approach the topic and didn't want to offend me by saying something inappropriate. Afterwards, we could become a team and, more importantly, friends. Most of the team grew up in The Netherlands, which was the first country to legalize same-sex marriage. I believe that it was because they grew up in that atmosphere that the team culture was incredibly inclusive.

Throughout my life as an athlete, there are many different stories that exist and run parallel to each other. Clendenin and Connelly (1996) are qualitative researchers that focus primarily on lived experiences through narrative inquiry and write that there are four distinct story types: *sacred stories*, *secret stories*, *cover stories*, and *counter stories*. *Sacred stories* are

the grand narratives that are believed to be true. In the example above, the sacred narrative would be the team culture which dictates our actions and impacts how we portray ourselves (Clendenin & Connelly, 1996). As a gay person joining a professional team for the first time, I was really unaware how to attach myself to the grand narrative, resulting in my transition onto the team feeling awkward. The *secret story* is one's own true story, a personal narrative that remains one's own (Clendenin & Connelly, 1996). In my opening story, this would be my inner thoughts and dialogue of what I experienced and how I felt. *Cover stories* are how one represents oneself, negotiated from their secret stories, but still deemed acceptable under the sacred narrative (Clendenin & Connelly, 1996). An example of this is how I portrayed myself to my team based on my perception of what is acceptable, while still incorporating my own secret narrative (i.e., portraying myself as a hard worker, team player, and eventually as a gay man). *Counter stories* are lived experiences that impact sacred stories through resisting the grand narrative (Clendenin & Connelly, 1996). By capturing the counter narratives, the grand narrative is challenged, resulting in an updated sacred narrative. The power of counter stories stems from the power of storytelling and the impact that stories can have for changing behaviour of the listener. In my example, if I felt more comfortable, there would not have had to been as much negotiation between my secret story compared to my cover story. This concept will be explored more in Chapter 2, with the literature review being categorized through this lens. I should note that it is not my intention to judge and categorize the participants' experiences into this framework. This conceptual framework simply allows for deeper thought and analysis surrounding previous research and will guide my own research and interview guide for more insightful discussions.

In 2016, I signed a contract with a strong team for a lot more money than I made the previous two seasons in The Netherlands. I felt I was starting to finally make it in the

professional sport realm, until the next day the team told my agent they would no longer honour the contract. They did not want to hire a gay player to compete on their team. I had not hidden my sexuality. I came out in January of 2014. I had done many speaking events to promote inclusion and equality in sport but had not until then actually felt the pain of being so overtly denied and held back. This event redefined my professional career and led me to a new vocation. My mission became not only to be a role model, but to break through the barriers and pave a way for future generations. I do not want others to have their careers impacted the same way that mine was. Throughout my career, I tried to share counter stories in order to help pave the path toward inclusion. For example, despite losing a contract for being gay (Prest, 2016), I shared a counter story later that year to try and show that not all sport is discriminating against gay athletes. A counter story example may be when my entire team in Finland walked in the Arctic Pride Parade together years later, making us the first professional volleyball team to walk in a Pride Parade in the world (Voth, 2017b). My hopes are that this story contradicts the homophobic narrative, inspiring more athletes to come out because of my own experience having my team accept and support me.

Nelson Mandela said, “Sport has the power to change the world.” Sport is a microcosm for our world (Pillay & Salo, 2010), and making sport more inclusive and equitable has the potential to lead to positive societal change. For example, Billie Jean King and Venus Williams (two former number one ranked women’s tennis players in the world) successfully fought for equal pay for female tennis players, starting the conversation for the everyday workplace (Lavelle, 2015). Colin Kaepernick (former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers) sacrificed his National Football League (NFL) career to bring attention to police brutality and racial inequality in America (Boykoff & Carrington, 2019). Kaepernick knelt during the national

anthem played before NFL games and now has not been hired by any team due to political pressure. His kneeling has led to an increased awareness of the issue of police brutality and racial inequality in America with the conversation evolving into the "defund the police" campaign. This campaign strives to not depend on having police respond to every type of call. These examples are not anomalies. Pillay and Salo (2010) highlight the efforts that the USA Women's Soccer Team are making for the conversation of gender in sport and politics. This team is composed of athletes across the sexuality spectrum and who use their stardom of being on the most successful national soccer team of all time to influence political conversations. These are just few examples of athletes sparking social change.

Throughout my own professional volleyball career, playing for Canada's national team and across Europe, I experienced various forms of homophobia. Growing up, I was under the same assumption as O'Callaghan (2019) that I would not be able to come out until I was put in my grave. Ryan O'Callaghan played in the NFL for the New England Patriots and the Kansas City Chiefs. He wrote a book called *My Life on the Line,* where he details that he was going to kill himself after his football career to avoid coming out of the closet. O'Callaghan (2019) explained how his suicide was inevitable and even had the note written to his loved ones. I also had notes written so that in the event I did pass, albeit not from suicide, people would come to know the real me. It was not until I was 19 years old when I came out to the first person, and I didn't come out to anyone else for a year. In the mid to late 2000s, I realized that I could come out after all, but only after my own career was finished. The term "out" refers to publicly

identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ (2 spirited[1], lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning and more)[2].

Due to my own perception that I couldn't be myself and felt forced to negotiate my cover story so far toward the sacred story, and thus not resembling my secret story, I began to feel frustrated, alone, and full of melancholy. In 2014, I came out publicly. During that time, thousands of people around the world reached out, including some athletes. I began to realize that there were a lot of "us," but they were all still competing in the shadows. I realized that despite my coming out going incredibly well, the sport world might not be ready for athletes to challenge the *masculine hegemony* and *heteronormative* atmosphere, as expressed by Cleland et al. (2016). *Hegemonic masculinity* refers to the hierarchy that gets created, putting those who exhibit the most masculine traits at the top. An example of this is in many movies, where the star (straight, and usually white) football quarterback is the most popular student in school, who gets voted homecoming king, and to whom everyone bows down. Those who are less masculine (especially feminized/gay men or women in the sport context) are subordinates. It is important to note that masculinity is noted in previously literature as being very prominent in the sport culture, but the concept is present in all facets of life. Instead of masculinity, consider being the "alpha" or the person people admire and/or fear. Depending on the context, the traits that make you the alpha are vastly different. Sinek (2019) writes that in the online gaming world, having the newest and fastest computer would give alpha status. In the academic world, having the greatest amount or the most prominent research makes you the alpha. In the sport context, though, the goal is to be the biggest, strongest, fastest, and so forth, which has taken the

[1] 2 spirited is used by some Indigenous North Americans to describe these who fulfill a traditional third-gender ceremonial and social role in their cultures.
[2] Throughout this study, the acronym may change based on the terminology used in the research.

definition, “masculine.” The definition of masculine has undergone dramatic changes throughout the last decades, and will continue to evolve (Anderson et al., 2016). *Heteronormative* means there is an obvious lack of 2SLGBTQ+ present. This is noticeable in the sport world, as well in many other spaces, making it harder to come out as not-straight for the fear of being isolated from the majority. Heteronormativity is self-perpetuating because many athletes who grow up in that environment become coaches and staff themselves and, due to the overwhelming percentage of heterosexuals, homosexuals may feel unsafe coming out. Throughout my career, I noticed masculine hegemony and heteronormativity and their impact on the team atmosphere and environment.

Undoubtedly, sport is becoming more inclusive for 2SLGBTQ+ athletes (Cunningham, 2021; Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2017; McCormack & Anderson, 2014b; Vilanova et al., 2018; Anderson & Fidler, 2017). This inclusiveness is exemplified there being a steady rise in “out” athletes competing at the last six Olympics (summer and winter) (Voth, 2017a). Overall, there have been 109 out women athletes and 26 out male athletes. On the women’s side, 48 have been on team sports; no men’s team sports players have come out (Voth, 2017a). This dramatic difference shows that gay male athletes are deterred from playing team sports and/or from coming out when they do play. By shining a light on the unseen athletes’ experiences, this study can map the domain for future research and, by educating people about the experiences of gay team sport professional athletes, hopefully create social change (Markula & Silk 2011). To spark societal change, I am hoping that by shining a light on the stories that have not been shared previously, it will give fans, coaches, teammates, and anyone else involved in sport an appreciation for the experiences of gay athletes. It has been noted that experiences with gay athletes results in more acceptance for that group (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Anderson et

al., 2016; MacDonald, 2018; O'Callaghan, 2019). Therefore, the results of this study will aim to provide that context to help make the sport atmosphere and society into a more accepting and inclusive place. Much of the previous research literature involves university/college or professional athletes' coming out stories, which usually happens right before they retire. Currently, it is rare for an athlete to continue competing after coming out.

This study will explore the experiences of gay male team sport professional athletes, as a way of making their stories and counter stories visible. There is already research that explores sacred and cover stories—that is, how those taken-for-granted narratives have been dominant and oppressed/marginalized/excluded 2SLGBTQ+ athletes, and how athletes are living within/alongside those narratives.

Despite the increasing research in this area, there are still some holes that need to be filled with research. There are no studies that focus solely on male team sport athletes or include exclusively professional athletes. Because there is such a lack of representation of out athletes in professional team sports, previous studies were unable to focus on these athletes. This research will thus focus on capturing the counter stories of athletes who compete in team sports. Previous research has included professional athletes, but often only one or two. There is also no research that was conducted with athletes from different countries, especially outside U.S.A., UK, Canada, and Australia.

This study will highlight athletes still competing (or recently retired) and uncover: 1) why they have not come out or how their coming out went; 2) their journeys in understanding their sacred story (e.g., teammate and coach interactions, family and friends influence, media influence, physical education experiences); 3) and what can be done to make sport more inclusive to gay athletes. There is a lot of power in storytelling, with counter stories being able to

impact the grand narratives and change behaviours. Simmons (2007) writes that there are some important components of stories in order to draw readers in and have them begging for more, which in turn can impact their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Therefore, sharing stories, specifically counter stories, of professional gay team sport athletes from various countries of origin and play where cultural norms and acceptable narratives vary will be a powerful catalyst towards changing the sacred story within team sport settings. For example, a potential behaviour-changing counter story could be hearing how an athlete is impacted when teammates use the word "gay" to mean "bad" on the court and in the locker room. My hopes are that by sharing the experiences of gay athletes, the same result will be possible, potentially making sport, and eventually society, more inclusive for the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of gay male team sport professional athletes around the world. Specific research questions include: What are the experiences of gay team sport professional athletes? What can be done to make sport more inclusive for gay team sport professional athletes? To explore these questions, the areas of inquiry are: What are the relationships of gay male team sport professional athletes with their teammates like? How do these athletes feel about the language used within their team and in the sport? What are their experiences in the locker rooms, showers, and hotel rooms with their teammates? What was their experience getting into the professional realm and what factors, if any, did they have to overcome? What was their coming out experience or what has prevented them from coming out? What is their experience with reaching out or seeing other gay athletes? Lastly, what recommendations do they have going forward for athletes, teammates, coaches, sport organizations, sponsors, and others to make sport more inclusive?

My hopes are that this research will map the field for future research and allow the athletes' stories and counter stories to reach a wide audience to inspire change in sport culture. Due to the lack of research exploring the experiences of gay male team sport professional athletes, this research can start an entirely new area for future researchers to explore even further. This research aims to spark societal change by identifying common themes across these gay male team sport professional athletes and offering counter stories to change the grand narrative. Additionally, in reading athletes' narratives, a young athlete may be inspired to come out or to play a sport that they previously deemed unwelcoming as a result of hearing counter stories from professional athletes. My hope is that this research will allow athletes to build off the successes and failures of previous athletes, toward a path of acceptance and inclusion. That is why I started this chapter with Bernice Reagon's quote. There were other gay athletes who paved the way to allow for me to come out when I did, and I am hoping to lay down more bricks on the pathway for future generations. This research is the first empirical study exploring the experiences of gay male team sport professional athletes, documenting and sharing their experiences, mapping the terrain for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The overarching question is “What are the experiences of gay male team sport professional athletes around the world? And, what can be done to make sport more inclusive for gay team sport professional athletes?” As mentioned, these questions will be explored through the conceptual framework outlined by Clendenin and Connelly (1996), which includes: sacred stories, secret stories, cover stories, and counter stories. Sacred stories act as the grand narrative. Secret stories are those which the person holds but does not share with others, including their innermost thoughts. Cover stories are negotiated secret stories that are told but are influenced by the sacred story. Counter stories are those which the person tells in order to spark change in the grand narrative. Previous studies focused on defining the sacred story using predominately athletes’ cover story, mainly with athletes who only recently came out. By not diving deep into the interviews, researching those athletes who are still competing and not anonymizing the results, previous researchers have not been able to capture counter stories. This is likely due to the goal being to simply highlight and honour the athletes and not to change the sacred story. It is important for athletes to be able to speak anonymously so they do not have a fear of impacting their relationships or careers. In my opinion, since most of the new articles consist of athletes’ accounts of their coming out, which can be subjective for many reasons that will be explored more in depth, the grand narrative also has some subjectivity. It is important that statements about team sport culture are researched and not just extrapolated from studies featuring individual sport athletes. The extrapolation will also be explored more. This study will aim to thoroughly explore the experiences of gay team sport athletes, so extrapolation is not necessary, and to dive deep into conversation to maneuver past cover stories. Athletes may hide under their cover stories for many reasons, so uncovering why they feel this way and how they construct

their cover stories will produce original results. Despite the need for researching transphobia and biphobia in sport, but this study will focus on homophobia for a couple of reasons, the first being my own experiences. Previous literature suggests that the same mechanisms that are perpetuating homophobia (i.e., hegemonic masculinity and male patriarchy) are also preserving sexism, racism, transphobia and biphobia in sport (Anderson, 2005; Anderson et al., 2016). Therefore, despite the narrow focus, the results may be relevant for understanding how systems of oppression work and change toward social justice can take place.

On average, the unhealthiest sub-section of the 2SLGBTQ+ community is gay men (Lee, 2000). Lee (2000) writes that 17% of gay men have eating disorders. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2016) writes that lesbian, gay or bisexual youth are five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. Gibson (1989) writes that gay men are six times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. Unger (1997) concluded that youth who participate in team sports are much less likely to attempt suicide because of the strong social connection that is created among teammates. However, participation among gay youth competing in team sports is not common.

The sporting culture, and Western[3] society overall, is becoming a more accepting space for the LGBTQ+ community (Cunningham, 2021; Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2017; McCormack & Anderson, 2014b; Vilanova et al., 2018; Anderson & Fidler, 2017). Most of the literature including LGBTQ+ athletes have occurred throughout the US, UK, Australia, and sometimes will include other parts of Europe and Canada. Many of those studies include athletes playing for their academic institution (i.e.: high school or college/university) and not professional athletes. There are many differences with how the structure of sport differs between professional

[3] Western European culture/society which includes America and Canada

leagues and post-secondary leagues. For example, professionals will likely change teams several times throughout their career, with non-professionals using their limited eligibility for one team/school before retiring.

The improvement of the attitudes of those involved in sport is shown through various metrics, including the experiences of amateur athletes who have "come out" to their teams (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2017; Cunningham, 2012; McCormack & Anderson, 2014a; Vilanova, et al., 2018), fan interactions (amongst other fans and with athletes) (Anderson, 2017; Caudwell, 2011; Cleland, 2016; Vilanova et al., 2018), the presence of homophobic language in the sport context (including physical education and school sports) (Morrow & Gill, 2003; Plummer, 2001; Vilanova et al., 2018), the views towards homosexuals from heterosexual athletes (Anderson, 2011; Anderson, 2017; Anderson & Fidler, 2017; Magrath et al., 2013; McCormack & Anderson, 2014b; Plummer, 2001; Roper & Halloran, 2007) and physical interactions between teammates (Anderson & Fidler, 2017; Cleland et al., 2016; McCormack & Anderson, 2014b), including how they embrace each other.

Initially when gay men and women began to enter the predominately heterosexual male domains (e.g., varying job sectors and sport arenas), it was challenging male patriarchy because, until then, these spaces were entirely exclusive to only straight or closeted men (Lenskyj, 1991). The addition of new groups of people into the sport realm showed that this space was not only for straight men to compete. To preserve the heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity in sport, many self-preserving phenomena began to take shape. For example, coaches and support staff are often former players. This means that those who were successful in navigating through the heteronormative and hegemonic masculinity are the bridges connecting different generational groups. These athletes also coach and act based on what was appropriate in their time as athletes

and what they deemed to contribute to their successes, both athletically and socially. Additionally, it is the players who are usually the most successful that are given the most opportunity to continue in the sport through coaching or in management because of the masculine capital that they have accumulated, despite my own perspective that there is not a correlation between personal athletic success and coaching ability[4].

Anderson (2009) writes that the LGBTQ+ community went through certain phases of acceptance in sport, which parallels the historical battles concerning race and gender. There is a small difference with the LGBTQ+ community, in that they do not necessarily have to reveal their sexuality, meaning they may not be forced to experience the same overt discrimination as other groups of people who have also been discriminated against in sport.

This literature review is categorized using Clendenin and Connelly's (1996) framework. As noted, this is not meant to be a categorization or judgement of previous research or accounts. It is laid out in this way to show where gaps in the research exist, where my study will focus and how it will achieve its goals. Sacred stories include information about sport's culture, its genesis and notes generalized themes. The secret story section includes research or reasoning for why athletes would feel the inability to come out (i.e.: language, the potential for physical abuse, or the narratives explained by Anderson et al. (2016)). Secret stories are those which people keep to themselves, meaning that whenever something is shared, there is potential for political negotiation. Therefore, the secret story section focuses mainly on quantitative research where people can share their experience while still remaining anonymous. Autobiographies can be considered secret stories, with the knowledge that anytime someone shares anecdotes, there is a

[4] In my own opinion, this is partly because sport evolves, and so when athletes rely on what made them successful, they are often using outdated techniques. Second, when an athlete is naturally gifted and the sport is easy for them, allowing them to succeed, they are not able to articulate the methods for skill acquisition as easily as someone who had to learn step by step and may not have been as successful.

negotiation between their innermost thoughts and the grand narrative based on what they think is appropriate. O'Callaghan (2019) details how holding his secret story in impacted him, which is not to say that he is not sharing his innermost thoughts, but to avoid judgment, it is the cause of the feelings and the impact of them that should be regarded as secret stories. In the section outlining cover stories, there are potential reasons for why there are some holes in previous research and how I will interview to uncover the process of forming the cover story, rather than trying to decipher where along the secret story/sacred story spectrum it is, which is an impossible and unethical feat. Counter stories include accounts from former professional athletes who tell their stories with the goal of giving perspective to other athletes, staff, fans, family and friends. These perspectives are important to share in order to facilitate change in the sport culture.

Sacred Stories

Sacred stories are those grand narratives which hold great power. Sacred stories have influence or are impacted by the other story-types. People's ability to share their deepest truths are negotiated into cover stories based on the grand narrative. Subsequently, counter stories' role is to impact and change the sacred story. Therefore, sacred stories play a vital role in our perception of the world and will guide this research's focus on counter stories. By understanding the previous research, it is possible to guide the interviews to the next layer of questioning and determine how or why certain phenomena occur as opposed to just noting their existence. For this reason, it will be necessary to understand the athletes' potential experiences based on previous accounts.

Anderson (2009) argues that sport in Western society has gone through three distinct periods when it comes to the inclusion of gay athletes: *homoerasure*, *homohysteria,* and *inclusion*. Much of the research would suggest that many Western countries are in a *post-*

homohysteria culture (Anderson & Fidler, 2017; McCormack & Anderson, 2014a & 2014b), meaning the "inclusion" period. According to Anderson (2009), *homoerasure* is a period where there is a denial that homosexuality, particularly in sport, exists at all. This phenomenon can be seen in some countries around the world still, including mostly authoritarian or religious countries. For example, Malaysia's "Tourism Minister Datuk Mohammaddin bin Ketapi was asked by reporters ahead of the opening of the ITB Berlin tourism fair whether the country was safe for gay and Jewish visitors. After initially sidestepping the question, the minister was asked again whether gays were welcome and he replied: 'I don't think we have anything like that in our country'" (Deutsche Welle, 2019).

Homohysteria is the rejection of homosexuals in sport, which is noted to have started based on three predominant factors: 1) The prevalent belief that AIDS was a gay disease, which resulted in hysteria around the presence of gay men; 2) religious views that homosexuality is wrong (Anderson, 2009); and 3) conservative political parties passing homophobic laws (McCormack & Anderson, 2014a). These periods are based on the history in America but are also applicable to previously mentioned countries. McCormack and Anderson (2014a) write that the final stage is *inclusion*. The *inclusion* stage allows for homosexuals to participate in sport and challenges heteronormative behaviors by embracing teammates with hugs, butt slaps, and even previously metrosexual stereotyped behavior like wearing tight pants and doing nude photoshoots (Anderson, 2017; Anderson & Fidler, 2017; McCormack & Anderson 2014b).

It is noted that the transition from homohysteria to inclusion does not occur inevitably (McCormack & Anderson, 2014a). Gay men were initially permitted the opportunity to participate in their sport if they would contribute to the overall goal of sport, winning (Anderson, 2002; Maraniss, 2021). This means that homosexuals needed to be much better than their

heterosexual counterparts to be given the chance to play (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Anderson, 2009, Anderson et al., 2016). Homosexuals are not the only victim of this phenomenon. Racialized athletes also have experienced and continue to experience this phenomenon. For example, Jackie Robinson was able to break the colour barrier because his Brooklyn Dodgers team determined that he was so talented that his race did not matter. In his first season, Robinson won the Rookie of the Year award. Two years later, Robinson won the Most Valuable Player award.

During the homohysteria period, gay athletes would often elect to compete in masculine sports, or join the army, in order to earn certain amount of *masculine capital* and allowing them to be perceived as straight (Anderson, 2002; O'Callaghan, 2019). O'Callaghan (2019) writes that most of his decisions were based on that principle, including his chosen sport, position in football, friends, wardrobe, and personality. This *masculine capital* allowed athletes who were successful enough to even engage in more homosexual or metrosexual behavior, avoiding suspicion (Anderson et al., 2016). After all, "Who questioned excellence?" writes Maraniss (2021, p. 21). Anderson et al. (2016) uses David Beckham as an example for how with enough masculine capital, stereotypical metrosexual behaviour such as shirtless photoshoots, tight pants, and perfume lines were deemed acceptable. During the homoerasure and homohysteria periods, it was forbidden to be gay, but one would encounter pushback even if you only were suspected of as being gay (Baiocco et al., 2018). To avoid being associated with anything homosexual, athletes began to write the sacred story by engaging in hyper-masculine behavior (e.g., using oppressive language towards or even physical violence) to create a super heteronormative environment, thus preventing or deterring some from participating.

Despite the previously mentioned improved attitudes surrounding homosexuality in sport, one sub-section is far more impacted by the hegemonic masculinity culture compared to the rest: gay men (Osborne & Wagner, 2007; Roper & Halloran, 2007). As noted by Osborne & Wagner (2007) and Roper & Halloran (2007), despite all minorities being targeted (i.e., based on race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) (Plummer, 2001), gay men report more difficulty participating in sport compared to lesbian women or bisexual people because of the hegemonic masculinity culture, facilitating rampant homophobia (Anderson, 2002). Homophobia in sport contexts can take many forms, including the language used (Grossman et al., 2018; Morrow & Gill, 2003; Plummer, 2001; Vilanova et al., 2018), physical abuse (Grossman et al., 2009), negative media attention (Halbrook, 2018; Wachs & Dworkin, 1997), or ignoring/playing down someone's sexuality, which perpetuates the heteronormative sacred story with policies such as, "don't ask, don't tell" (Anderson, 2005; Magrath et al., 2013).

Language is at the heart of homophobia in sport, stemming from the hegemony that starts at an early age, before many words even have meaning (O'Callaghan, 2019; Halbrook et al., 2018; Vilanova et al., 2018; Plummer, 2001). Through many different channels (i.e., coaches, friends, family, social media, movies, tv shows, etc.), athletes begin to create associations to words, despite not knowing their meaning. Male athletes are trained to not want to be gay, female or have the stereotyped feminine characteristics. When children begin to understand what the denotation of homophobic and sexist words are, they have preconceptions which associates them with a negative connotation. For example, children learn that they do not want to be labelled a "sissy" after hearing it being associated with negative behavior. Only until later when they learn that sissy is meant to refer to effeminate men (originally coming from sister and is very derogatory) do they then associate with effeminate men as who or what they want to avoid

being. A very common example in many different sporting cultures is the word “gay.” It is common for youth athletes to refer to things they do not like as gay. During this practice, they are not saying that the behaviour is homosexual, but the word gay begins to take on a new connotation. Later, when they begin to discover their own gender or sexuality, these youth will already have negative feelings regarding homosexuality, which can result in them perpetuating homophobia. Anderson (2005) writes that this language continues from generation to generation because of the coaches and staff for the sports teams being former players themselves. MacDonald (2018) was able to research this phenomenon by interviewing AAA hockey players (elite 15 to 18 years old). MacDonald (2018) notes that there is a difference in the sacred story for ice hockey because of the even greater lack of representation of openly gay athletes. MacDonald (2018) further notes that despite the generational changes documented in most sport contexts, ice hockey was still much further behind.

The lack of interaction or experience with 2SLGBTQ+ athletes result in greater hostility towards them (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Anderson et al., 2016; MacDonald, 2018; O’Callaghan, 2019). Morrow and Gill (2003) write that 84.3% of their participants heard homophobic language in their physical education classes. As noted by O’Callaghan (2019), the language does improve as you continue from high school to college or university and again in the professional realm, as players become more educated and professional in their conduct. However, this is not seen outside of North America because professional leagues that are not in Canada or the United States use a club-based system. This means that athletes do not compete for their academic institutions, and on many occasions, playing professionally and studying is not compatible. Therefore, the phenomenon noted by O’Callaghan (2019) where professionals are more educated is present in North America, predominately. Unfortunately, as will be noted

when discussing athletes' coming out, Denison (2020) notes that sexist and homophobia language can have detrimental impacts ranging from dissatisfaction in the sport, which can include leaving the sport or team to suicide, especially in youth athletes. The need to fit in is so important that gay athletes will actually use homophobic language, perpetuating the hegemony against their own interests to be part of the group (Anderson, 2005; O'Callaghan, 2019). Denison (2020) notes that language is one of the biggest factors in people's perception of homophobia in sport and therefore should be targeted as one of the first areas to change in order to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment.

Physical abuse towards an openly gay athlete is quite rare, with most researchers noting that, despite it being a major fear of the athlete, there has not been a case of an athlete coming out on a team resulting in physical abuse (Anderson, 2002; Vilanova et al., 2018). However, this does not seem to match the experiences noted earlier in the athletes' lives in the educational setting. Grossman et al. (2018) captured many stories from high school students where some reported being targeted in dodgeball, coined "faggot dodge" (p. 36), where straight students would target those assumed to be gay. Other students reported they were "jumped [and] beat up" (p. 33) by a group of 10 or more," or "stabbed … with a pair of scissors in [the] back … and again in the leg, … [with the perpetrator] say[ing], 'Faggot! We hope you die.'" (p. 36). O'Callaghan (2019) speaks to the fear of physical abuse being present, even though he was substantially bigger than others (6'7" and over 300lbs). O'Callaghan (2019) names the fear of abuse as one of the reasons he was not able to come out earlier. As noted, professional athletes must first navigate childhood and adolescence in the education system, graduate high school, play university or college, and only then play professionally. There are cases where athletes can leave the university or college before finishing their degree, but it is rare to go professional right

out of high school. With the various obstacles to maneuver around in their early adulthood, athletes must overcome countless barriers in order to fulfill their sport dreams. Despite these facts, there is no research that polls professional athletes about their experiences in the classroom, especially in physical education, and how they were able to continue playing on a team sport. There are some missing sacred stories in the literature even though they are having an impact on athletes in their early years.

Another form of physical abuse that is rife with hegemonic masculinity, highlighting the homophobic atmosphere, is *hazing* (also known as rookie parties, initiation, etc.). While hazing is not only conducted on gay or suspected gay athletes, the act of hazing also perpetuates the hegemonic masculinity that bolsters the homophobic atmosphere. johnson (2011) writes that while being hazed, neophytes can experience:

> personal servitude; sleep deprivation and restrictions on personal hygiene; … being forced to wear embarrassing or humiliating attire in public; consumption of vile substances or smearing of such on one's skin; brandings; physical beatings; binge drinking and drinking games; sexual simulation; sexual assault or death. (p. 200)

Hazing presents a phenomenon where the veterans are establishing their dominance over the neophytes (johnson, 2011), while building up their own masculine capital (Anderson, 2005). The *torture* that the athletes go through will often involve, and therefore stigmatize, homosexual acts (johnson, 2011). The rookies on the team may welcome the torture, seeing it as a way to prove themselves to the veterans and establish their own masculinity on the team (or their own straightness) that perhaps that they would not be able to demonstrate on the field (johnson, 2011; O'Callaghan, 2019). johnson (2011) notes that the more talented rookies can not participate in as many activities than their less talented counterparts, because of already having attained sufficient

masculine capital. This concept of giving more freedom to athletes that have more talent is a great indicator of the impact of hegemony in the sport culture. Not only can more talented athletes forego initiation activities, but later on in their careers, the sacred story allows more leeway with their sexuality and experimentation.

O'Callaghan (2019) mentions several times that it was football that was keeping him alive. Upon retirement, his plan was to kill himself before needing to come out of the closet. Fortunately, O'Callaghan continued to play at higher levels over the years as a result of his athletic ability and determination, preserving his life. McCormack and Anderson (2014b) write that it is becoming more acceptable for athlete to engage in *metrosexual* or homosexual behavior such as the inclusion of gay peers, embracing feminized artifacts (e.g., tight pants), increasing emotional intimacy and physical tactility, erosion of the one-time-rule, and eschewing violence. The one-time-rule (also known as the one-drop-rule) can be visualized as our sexuality being a glass of water. With a single drop of poison, the whole glass turns poisonous. This means that if someone engages in a single homosexual act, they are determined to be gay. With the elimination of the one-time-rule from the grand narrative, people are allowed to experiment and engage in sexual contact with people of the same sex without it challenging their heterosexual identity. It is also suggested that the sport realm grand narrative has reached "inclusion," which comes after Anderson's (2005) homohysteria (Anderson, 2009; Anderson, 2017 McCormack & Anderson, 2014a; McCormack & Anderson, 2014b). O'Callaghan (2019) is clear that none of his former coworkers in the NFL treated him poorly upon his coming out. However, due to the extreme lack of representation in the major North American team sports and at the Olympics, the professional sport community sacred story is not yet at inclusion, or at least determined (Anderson, 2016; Cleland, 2016; Voth, 2017a). Denison and Kitchen (2015) concluded that 81% of Canadian

participants witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport. One study found that one in four gay men did not play youth team sports, with nearly half citing negative experiences in school physical education classes (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). These statistics become very apparent at the highest level of sport because there is a lack of gay team sport athletes (Cleland, 2016; Voth, 2017a). There is a big difference between men and women when comparing out team sport athletes. At the Olympics, around two-thirds of out women competed on a team sport, compared to none of the men (Voth, 2017a). Baiocco et al. (2018) suggests that the grand narrative results in gay men not participating in team sports due to the fear of the homophobia. As a result, they may choose to compete in individual sports, which has been noted to be more accepting of homosexuality (Anderson, 2002). Because there is so much more to learn about sacred stories, specifically surrounding gay male team sport professional athletes, this study will shine a light on these unseen athletes, allowing them to speak to the reasons they, and the other gay athletes, remain unseen.

Based on the number of athletes who are out in North American team sports, it would appear that sport is not at the inclusion phase yet. As mentioned, athletes' upbringing through the educational system, language used, potential for physical abuse, hazing, and media or fan interactions are all possibilities for why the sport culture is lacking inclusivity. Previous research in this field is not solely based on team sport, professional, current, or representative of athletes around the world. The research is quite detailed when discussing recently out college or university athletics, but that area does not seem to be where the lack of representation is occurring. The lack of representation of gay athletes in team sports occurs at the professional level, suggesting there must be different sacred stories when comparing professional athletes to college or university athletes. As noted, the sport environment has been improving for years, but

given there is still an absence of openly gay male team sport professional athletes, it is important to direct attention to this area. There is also some contradiction with experiences of homophobia through language being either a major deterrent for participation for gay males in team sports (Denison & Kitchen, 2015) or a fraction of the reason for a lack of gay male team sport professional athletes (Anderson et al., 2016). Professional athletes act as a perfect participant pool to explore language because they have competed at every level. Given that professional athletes have succeeded despite the labyrinth of the educational and amateur systems, they can provide vital details with how they were able to do so. There are studies that research students experiencing homophobia (Grossman et al., 2009), but none that explore how to overcome the oppression and succeed in sport. There is still a lot to explore due to the lack of ability to speak with enough professional team sport athletes previously.

Anderson et al. (2016) gives their summary of the sacred stories (which they call hypotheses) surrounding gay athletes, giving insight into the reasoning for the lack of representation of gay team sport athletes using seven narratives. Most of their observations, however, are based on athletes in the UK, US, and sometimes Canada and Australia, resulting in the rest of the world unexplored. Anderson et al. (2016) lay out seven narratives summarizing their perspective on why gay men lack representation in team sports in North America, which include: 1) the *international narrative*, which is the notion of not coming out due to the reality of having to compete in countries that are not safe for gay athletes; 2) the *increased migration narrative*, where athletes on teams are composed of people from around the world where it may not be acceptable to come out as gay; 3) the *inability narrative*, which suggests that gay athletes are more feminized than heterosexual athletes and not able to compete in the same sports; 4) the *finite supply narrative*, which suggests that, since individual sports are dominated by gay

athletes, there simply are not enough gay athletes to also have a major presence in team sports; 5) the *selection narrative*, which suggests that athletes are drawn to other activities upon coming out like clubbing and sex; 6) the *selective narrative*, which proposes that athletes are only out to teammates and do not wish to be publicized; and 7) the *homophobia narrative*, which states that only one group in their cohort (e.g., teammates, coaches, staff, owners, sponsors, etc.) needs to be homophobic to prevent the athletes from coming out, even if the others are a "lake of gay friendliness" (p. 93).

The finite supply narrative is better to be conducted through quantitative research because it would involve polling athletes on a large scale to see how many actually identify as gay, or perhaps as non-straight. Anderson et al. (2016) suggests about 3% of the population is gay and so there just are not enough gay athletes to have a major presence in every sport. This narrative somewhat contradicts the writing of Anderson (2002) that gay athletes will often choose physical, macho sports (e.g., O'Callaghan choosing football) to hide their sexuality and gain masculinity capital. Based on my own experience in the professional sport realm, there are more gay athletes than hypothesized in the literature. This study will have the ability to shine a light on athletes who are still in the closet.

The international, increased migration, and selective narrative all assume that society outside sport is not ready to accept gay athletes. While there are obviously countries still in the homoerasure and homohysteria stages, the NHL is dominated by Canadian, American, and Swedish players. These are the top three countries that supply players in the NHL and make up more than 80% of the league (NHL totals by nationality, 2020). Flores' (2019) "social acceptance of LGBT people" is based on a score out of 10. Canada was determined to have a score of 8.2 with America scoring 7.2. When comparing Flores' (2019) scores to the countries

that the athletes originate, the average social acceptance in the NHL by player is about 7.5. Therefore, on average, players come from a country that ranks higher than America and Germany on the Flores (2019) scale. According to Flores (2019), the only countries below a 5 on the scale with players in the NHL are Russia (41 players, 3.4 rating), Latvia (3 players, 4.4 rating), and Belarus (1 player, 3.5 rating). The full table detailing total players from each country, and the LGBT acceptance scores by Flores (2019), can be found in Appendix 1. These athletes are not required to play outside Canada or America for their NHL games, and even still hockey remains the only sport without an athlete to come out during or after their career, at the professional level in North America. As reported by Baseball Almanac (n.d.), over 83% of MLB players are Canadian or American citizens. They do not play outside Canada or America either. Athletes that are from countries with less acceptance of LGBTQ+ people may actually see a rise in gay team sport athletes, albeit who are still in the closet. In these countries, if it is forbidden to be gay, athletes would not choose certain sports over another because a feeling that one sport is more accepting than another, because all sports would not be accepting.

Therefore, while these three narratives might be a factor for a select few of the athletes, based on the structure of the leagues and the countries to fill them, they may also act as a facilitator for athletes, not a deterrent. Moving to America or Canada to compete could actually be seen as an opportunity to start a new life and be your true self. Based on the history of race, gender, and sexuality in North America, sport can actually act as the catalyst to propel inclusion into society by impacting the sacred story. The fact that there is not a bigger representation, or any, in the major North American team sports suggests that there is more at play than just the sacred story not being inclusive.

The selection and homophobia narratives, suggested by Anderson et al. (2016), suggest that there is in fact homophobia and so athletes are not able to come out totally. By an athlete coming out but still wanting to be treated the same, or his teammates still treat him the same only perpetuates heteronormality in sport (Anderson et al., 2016). By perpetuating heteronormativity, it prevents further improvements of the sacred narrative to be more inclusive. If athletes are not coming out for these two reasons, there is a lot to be discovered. The selection narrative suggests that athletes are only coming out to a select group and are not comfortable being totally out. Exploring who the athletes chose to be confidents, how they decided, the impact that has on their life and career, how the dynamic changes on their team if they are only out to certain people, and many more are all new areas for research. There is currently no research at any level that explores the decision process for who and why athletes choose to come out to. The homophobia narrative has not been explored with gay male team sport professional athletes and can help determine what the sacred stories actually are, allowing us to modify and improve them.

The inability narrative is offensive at face value, but also is not based on research. There is no data that suggests that there are not many more gay athletes competing in team sports other than the lack of knowledge. Therefore, it is not possible to determine that there are not more, nor conclude that they are not able to compete with their macho heterosexual counterparts. O'Callaghan's (2019) counter story contradicts this narrative, and it was his sexuality that forced him into football and allowed him to totally dedicate himself to it, improving his ability to focus and succeed. O'Callaghan (2019) was an offensive lineman also, which he states is the position that requires more stereotypically masculine characteristics compared to other positions, according to the sacred story. When comparing the percentage of medals at the Olympics for out

athletes compared to straight and non-out athletes, there is a considerable advantage to being out. Out athletes medal around four times more often than the rest of the field.

These narratives include many interesting areas to explore deeper. For example, they are based on previous research that was not conducted solely on professional team sport athletes' experiences. To fully understand these phenomena, especially outside America, it is crucial to study the athletes competing professionals and not extrapolate narratives or hypotheses from individual sport, amateur athletes. The sacred story will be different between these populations and this study will map the terrain for future research.

High school, college, and university athletes report positive experiences with regards to their recent coming out (Anderson, 2002; Vilanova, 2018). Anderson (2002) notes that coming out usually leads to retiring or quitting the sport altogether, writing that once an athlete comes out, there is no longer a need to build masculinity capital, allowing the athlete to stop competing. Despite reported positive coming out, upon further questioning the reception from the teams is not always as positive as reported (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Anderson, 2011). The athlete has expectations of verbal and physical abuse, so when the only consequence is losing a couple friends and not verbal or physical abuse, it can be considered positive (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2011). As a result of the low expectations, athletes believe that some homophobia is "bearable," when coming out to their team (Vilanova et al., 2018). Once an athlete has come out, they typically will be treated like one of the guys. This phenomenon is quite destructive, for similar reasons to the *don't ask, don't tell* policy, because it forces the athlete to continue perpetuating heteronormativity, as noted earlier (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2005). Anderson (2002) gives examples where the gay athlete is still asked his opinion on women, so as to continue treating him the same. Actions like this do not acknowledge the athlete's sexuality and

is an attempt to play more to their straightness. Magrath et al. (2013) conclude that despite heterosexual athletes reporting that it would not be an issue if a teammate came out on their team, they would still feel weird changing and showering in front of them. MacDonald (2018) found that twenty-nine out of thirty AAA hockey players reporting that they would feel uncomfortable with a gay teammate, nine (the highest of all the categories) saying that showering would be the most uncomfortable issue. It is reported that athletes with no experience knowing or playing alongside gay athletes will be more homophobic than compared to those with experience (Anderson, 2002; MacDonald, 2018). Anderson et al. (2016) suggest that this lack of role models is a factor for future athletes' choice to come out. There is currently no research that explores athletes' coming out and their perception of their teammates' feelings regarding that topic. The current sacred stories are extrapolated from a different population, making this research even more important to map out the field for future research. There is a lot of power in people's perception of sacred stories (e.g., O'Callaghan's life decisions). Therefore, it is important that the sacred story gets explored by studying the people who have experiences in that realm.

Secret Stories

Professional athletes must not only consider their team chemistry, their relationship with the staff and coaches, and sponsors, but also media attention (Anderson et al., 2016) when deciding on their own actions. O'Callaghan (2019) writes that the very negative viewpoint of homosexuals in media (including movies, tv shows, etc.) led to his own self-hatred and added to his thoughts of suicide, but he did not tell anyone. The reason O'Callaghan (2019) was not able to share this type of *secret story* was in part summarized by Wachs & Dworkin (1997) who compared the difference in media coverage of two prominent athletes, Greg Louganis and Magic

Johnson. Both athletes had very different coverage when framing their HIV-positive status. Johnson was cited as being labelled a “hero” who was “fighting the virus,” compared to Louganis who was “a carrier.” These grand narratives influence people’s opinions and therefore shape their secret stories. In the case of O’Callaghan (2019), he felt the media, his family, and his friends all only used gay people as the punch line for jokes and developed a deep shame regarding his sexuality. That is an example of how the sacred story can impact people’s secret stories, making them even more powerful. Later on, the tone improved surrounding gay athletes, but only slightly. Hardin et al. (2009) reported the coverage of NBA retired athlete John Amaechi’s coming out as cowardly, since he only came out after retiring and while living in the UK. Six years later when Jason Collins came out as the first gay athlete still in one of the major North American team sports, the tone can be summed with words like “hero” and “momentous” (Kian et al., 2015). Collins did not sign with a team after he came out. Cleland et al. (2016) notes that the internet can impact secret stories and shape the grand narrative by allowing for anonymous comments and therefore more homophobia, including discrimination towards all minorities, to occur. Thomas Hitzlsperger’s coming out, which was notably also after retiring, resulted in some good-natured people defending homosexuality, but also that “football [North American soccer] remains an unwelcome environment for a gay player,” (Cleland et al., 2016, p. 107). Cleland et al. (2016) have a list of athletes who have come out, either during or after retiring. Jason Collins’ coming out was just as he was aging out of the NBA, and he ended up not playing any games while out. Michael Sam came out while starting his NFL career before being shipped off into the CFL, eventually leaving his team there. Likewise, O’Callaghan (2019) was forced to keep his secret stories secret for his entire NFL career because of sacred narratives

surrounding gay men and gay athletes. Having to hide his secret story is what caused O'Callaghan (2019) so much pain throughout his life.

Because of the limitation of deciphering secret stories from cover stories, it is difficult to use those stories on their own to write the sacred story. When speaking with athletes for research, especially those athletes still competing, there will always be a negotiation between their deepest truths and what they feel comfortable revealing to minimize the impact on their careers. This is true in my own experience. There are so many factors that allow athletes to play a professional sport, including relationship with teammates, coaches, staff, team sponsors, individual sponsors, professionalism on and off the court (which impacts fan relations). In this sense, to make one's secret story public risks jeopardizing one of those areas. Anderson et al. (2016) write that regardless of how accepting or openminded an environment is for the athlete, it only takes a teammate, coach, staff, sponsor, or fan to scare an athlete into not being able to come out.

Denison & Kitchen (2015) found that 80% of respondents to their study noted the presence of homophobia in the sport context. That study used quantitative methods, with some noted biases (e.g., using internet surveys and having a low response rate). Comparing that to the qualitative studies summarized by Anderson et al. (2016), there was not homophobia reported by the athletes, many of whom had just come out to their teams. As noted, some of the problems with interviewing athletes who recently came out include their own low expectations and having a rose-tinted perspective. In my experience, when someone comes out, they are so excited and happy that they perceive events going better earlier on after coming out than when they are interviewed years later. Interviews with recently out athletes may thus not allow for many of the athletes to appreciate their experiences or process everything, at that given time. Therefore, it is more beneficial to try and capture those secret stories after the athlete has had time for reflection.

My research will be conducted on athletes who are more mature, have had time to reflect and see the topics ahead of time, and whose identities will remain anonymous, allowing them to share their experiences at a deeper level.

Cover Stories

Cover stories are negotiated somewhere between sacred stories and secret stories, based on the storyteller's feeling of what is acceptable. There is a definite process in which the storyteller must interpret the sacred story and due to pressure, adjust their secret story to fit within that narrative. In my opinion, Anderson (2002, 2005, 2009, 2011) collects data with gay athletes in a way that does not capture counter stories, due to the factors mentioned earlier. Given Anderson's many publications, much of the sacred story is being written.

All the previously mentioned research on gay athletes was mostly conducted on high school or college/university athletes' coming out, and mostly not in a team sport setting. The reasoning previous research focuses on gay team sport athletes is due to a lack of representation, especially at the professional level. Additionally, for those studies that include team sport gay athletes, the data gets mixed in with individual sport athletes and there is a lack of further examination to see how their experiences have changed over time. Athletes will report their coming out as being positive, due to having low expectations and having a rose-tinted lens. For this reason, it is vital to allow athletes time to reflect and give their perspective after the initial excitement of their coming out has worn off. There is no research on a professional athlete's ability to join a team once already out, or even suspected of being gay. Many gay athletes heavily negotiate their cover stories to allow them to participate in their sport. Since cover stories are negotiated from sacred stories, they perpetuate the sacred story. A topic to research in this study is how cover stories are negotiated and how athletes determine the appropriate place

between their secret stories and the grand narrative. Without researching this compromise, cover stories can masquerade as secret stories and perpetuate a potentially different sacred story. Researching the negotiation of a cover story has not been included in any study. This study will utilize cover studies by looking into that principle. In contrast, counter stories do the opposite compared to cover stories, aiming to change the sacred story.

I know from my own experience that there are many athletes who are suspected of being gay, which may lead to potential issues for those athletes. Previously, even the suspicion of being gay was problematic because those suspected athletes would be impacted in the same manner that a gay athlete would be (Anderson, 2005). This study will not explore this phenomenon amongst heterosexual athletes, but this is another area that requires more exploration. Previous literature regarding gay athletes was conducted over a decade ago (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Anderson, 2007; Anderson, 2009). Due to the lack of representation of gay athletes, focussing on team sports in studying cover stories is vital because that is where there is potential for greater disparity when comparing team sport athletes to individual sport athletes. This study is widening the scope culturally, exploring outside North America, which will result in even more diverse people and findings, exploring those missing cover stories around the world in current research literature.

The athletes in many interviews (Anderson, 2005; Anderson et al., 2016) had recently come out, they are still negotiating their cover stories. In my own experience, I felt pressure to not call out some teammates for not accepting me totally. If I made a habit of speaking poorly about my coach or team staff, it may have impacted my season, and potentially my career. For these reasons, especially for current athletes, interviews are negotiated cover stories. O'Callaghan (2019) finished his career in the NFL in 2011. It took him years to come to terms

with his own sexuality and to be able to write a book about his secret and cover stories to be his counter stories to resist sacred narratives. It was the case with O'Callaghan (2019) that he took eight years to finish his career, reflect, and then share his counter stories. My hopes are that by talking to professionals, they will have reflected enough to be able to give less negotiated accounts. As mentioned, to combat any subjectivity, the interviews will be focussed more on how the negotiation occurs rather than striving to only capture counter stories. Deep reflection regarding cover stories will be an important part of this research.

Uncovering why gay male team sport professional athletes feel the need to create their cover stories and how they negotiate them is an important project as there has not been any research looking into this phenomenon, or even acknowledging that cover stories exist to this level. Cover stories are primarily thought of as the athletes' desire to stay in the closet or to remain "one of the guys." Many studies have written that once athletes come out, they still want things to remain the same with their team (Anderson, 2005; Anderson et al. 2016; MacDonald, 2018). Teammates will also try to act as if nothing happened after an athlete's coming out, which actually results in them not acknowledging and appreciating the new situation (Anderson, 2005; Anderson et al. 2016). By covering up their own sexuality, athletes may still be forced to negotiate their behaviors to fit in the heteronormative environment on a team. As mentioned, teammates will still continue to ask gay athletes their perspective on women, pretending as if nothing changed, perpetuating a heteronormative atmosphere, stemming from their own feelings of awkwardness around homosexuality (Anderson et al. 2016; Vilanova et al., 2018). There are no suggestions in academia that suggest how to overcome barriers such as these. Roles that teammates play and suggestions for them will thus be explored in this study.

Counter Stories

Counter stories are those whose purpose is to challenge and/or change the sacred stories, the grand narratives that is deemed appropriate in team sport culture in relation to 2SLGBTQ+ matters. O'Callaghan (2019) told his story in this way, giving us his most intimate details with the hope to change societal perspective on the topics such as how his perspective of gay was formed. O'Callaghan (2019) comments that before was even a teenager, he saw gays only as being used for jokes on TV, in movies, and in any conversation in his house. He called for the need to ensure better representation in media for gay people. O'Callaghan (2019) also calls for parents to ensure they create a welcoming environment amongst their families. Through his story, it was apparent how his upbringing really impacted him at such a deep level that he was planning on killing himself to avoid coming out. This counter narrative aims to change the sacred story. In this study, these stories that will be sought with the hope to create societal change.

There have been recent books written about gay athletes that give their stories. John Amaechi wrote about his time in the NBA, playing for multiple teams and also in Europe. Most of his book does not include the counter stories about his sexuality, saying he is more than just being gay (Amaechi & Bull, 2007). Notably, Amaechi & Bull (2007) write that his Orlando team were "anti-superstars," suggesting that the diversity the team possessed was its strength. Amaechi & Bull (2007) suggest that their book was about changing culture, more specifically race, gender, sexuality, and intersectionality, providing a counter narrative from his career which spanned from 1995-2003. *Singled Out: The True Story of Glenn Burke* outlines the late Glenn Burke and his MLB career, starting with the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1976. Maraniss (2021) offers a counter narrative to Burke's career and details how Burke was robbed of his MLB career because of homophobia from the sport organization. Burke competed during a time in history

that Anderson et al. (2016) would classify as homoerasure. “A rumour like that could end a guy’s career,” (Maraniss, 2021, p. 99). Gay athletes were not allowed to participate. According to Maraniss (2021), Burke knew of other gay athletes in the MLB, but who married women and had families to hide their secret stories. Once Burke’s teammates started suspecting his sexuality, they behaved much differently, both around him and behind his back. Despite being named the Dodger Rookie of the Year by the Baseball Writers’ Association of America, and the team having success, Burke’s contract was not renewed. Similar to O’Callaghan (2019), Maraniss (2021) writes:

> “I knew I was different”, Burke wrote in his autobiography. “I wasn’t dating women or men.” Instead, the 19-year-old spent all his energy on baseball. Focusing on hitting and running and catching and throwing allowed him to avoid looking inward. That breakthrough would come soon enough. But for now, he convinced himself that avoiding any sort of romantic relationships would make him a better player, and would fuel his journey to the major leagues. (p. 39)

By providing this counter narrative, Maraniss (2021) aims to change the sport culture to be more accepting of gay athletes by outlining the ways in which homophobia wrongfully impacted his career.

These books all provide a variation of counter stories, offering a different perspective to the grand narratives, with the aim to spark change. Most of the attention in this review focusses on O’Callaghan (2019) who had the most recent account of his experience playing professionally detailing how everything in him and all the decisions he made were as a result of his desire to suppress his sexuality. Maraniss (2021) is writing based on knowledge obtained from teammates, family, coaches, and Burke’s autobiography, which occurred in a very different period in history.

Amaechi & Bull (2007) do not go as deep into Amaechi's sexuality, and the impacts on him as O'Callaghan (2019). These books do offer counter narratives, but there is no research literature that highlights counter stories in the same way as this study does.

These counter stories are catalysts for changing the grand narrative, by giving us a new perspective (Clendenin & Connelly, 2000). Simmons (2007) explains that in order to change behavior there are certain components that need to be included. "Teaching" is one story type that can elicit change, which involves first explaining who the character in the story is and what their motivation is. After that, by giving another perspective on a story that was previously unknown to the audience. "The catch is, only by finding and telling stories that feel personally significant to *you* can you expect to elicit the level of personal engagement that wins hearts and minds" (Simmons, 2007, p. 40). Currently, research is done by probing experiences of athletes at a superficial level and making comments or extrapolating from other populations to reach conclusions. Simmons (2007) notes that giving advice is not as powerful as hearing the story behind the advice because it will reach the audience at a deeper level. Having a story instead of advice allows to the reader to not feel threatened and give them an understanding for the reasons behind the anecdote. For example, it does not usually help to tell someone, "Be patient!" Instead, the author can give a parable about the importance and impact of patience. This is why my research is constructed in a way that involves capturing the stories of these athletes, because that is how best to create change in behaviours (Simmons, 2007). To go a step further, using the framework from Clendenin and Connelly (1996), focussing on counter stories whose aim is to spark change will have the greatest impact.

Because of the experiences professional athletes navigated through, including in the school system and in amateur sport, they will be able to give an insight into areas that are in need

of modification or redesigning. There is currently no research that includes this topic. The current research asks people what is currently preventing their participation, either in sport or in the classroom/gym. However, there are benefits to having people look back on their experiences and analyze them with better knowledge of the sacred story and the counter stories that could spark change. These counter stories can help pave the way for teams to be improve the environment for gay athletes, institutions to improve their pedagogies, and sport organizations to be more welcoming and inclusive. At this point, athletes will be about to live and tell their counter stories. This concept relates back to Bernice Reagon's quote in the Introduction. By athletes having a platform to share their counter stories, it will shape the sacred stories for those joining or remaining in the gay team sport professional realm.

Summary

Clendenin and Connelly's (1996) framework allows for a deeper dive into exploring the experiences of gay male team sport professional athletes than previous research. By distinguishing between sacred, secret, cover and counter stories, it provides theoretical tools to explore a more complete picture of the experiences of gay male team sport professional athletes. Most previous research was aimed at defining the culture and thus to summarize the sacred stories surrounding gay athletes. My research is constructed in a way that involves capturing the varying types of stories from these athletes. There are record amounts of 2SLGBTQ+ athletes competing in sport. However, there is still a lack of gay male team sport being represented in both literature and on the field (Voth, 2017a). This current research resembles the work done by Anderson (2002) and Anderson et al. (2016), who mostly researched recently out, and only including limited gay athletes who are not publicly out. The participants of the previous studies included mostly American athletes that usually competed for their high school or

college/university and were not professionals. Previous studies did not distinguish between team sport athletes and individual sport athletes. Additionally, by not categorizing between the four narratives, researchers were not able to differentiate what they were actually summarizing or uncovering. Despite the reported decrease of homophobia in sport, it is still important to continue to expand research to include sacred, secret, cover and counter stories of gay male team sport professional athletes instead of extrapolating from the amateur or individual sport population. Anderson (2002) suggests that homophobia was on the decline, almost two decades later and North America still does not have openly gay team sport athletes competing professionally in the four major sports (basketball, football, hockey, baseball). Notably, Anderson (2002) also mentions that there is a lack of follow up with athletes once they have already come out and exploring their experiences joining other teams. Signing contracts with multiple teams throughout a career is a major difference between high school/college/university athletes compared to professionals. Each time an athletes switches teams, they must renegotiate their cover story and have their secret/counter stories within/against sacred stories, gaining or losing a bit of themselves each time. Because most of the participants of the studies include American high school or college/university athletes, their experience joining new teams has not been documented. Michael Sam was the only athlete joining a professional team after his coming out in a major North American team sport. By widening the scope of the study, in terms of geographic location, sport, the breadth of the questioning, and focusing on professional team sport athletes, the results will better summarize the sacred stories and uncover the reasons this particular groups of athletes remain unseen. By sharing stories, the goal is to map the field for future research (Markula & Silk, 2011), which can also be thought of as summarizing the sacred stories. Another goal is to spark societal change, resulting in a change in the sacred story,

meaning counter stories shall be sought (Clendenin & Connelly, 1996; Simmons, 2007). The other story types (cover and secret) serve a purpose in this study, including to help direct the questioning and understand the purpose and reasoning behind their existence.

Chapter 3: Methodology

To explore the experiences of gay male team sport professional athletes, I used an *interpretive phenomenological analysis* (IPA) (Denzin & Lincoln 2017; Johnson & Parry, 2016). IPA refers to grouping the lived experiences of the participants with meaningful labels and allowing themes and subthemes to emerge (Ebert & Goodwin, 2020; March Natrukach & Goodwin, 2019; Morphy & Goodwin, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Denzin & Lincoln (2017) note that phenomenology "has more recently become standard among qualitative researchers to talk about 'lived experience' to designate the lifeworld phenomena that are in focus in one's inquiries" (p. 1003).

This research on gay male team sport professional athletes focused on their experiences in many contexts, ranging from their upbringing, amateur sport, and professional sport. These are their own lived experiences that they contributed to the research. With an IPA approach, there was not a definite hypothesis, but through interviews and additional data analysis, common themes across participants began to emerge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Therefore, this research was not testing a certain hypothesis (e.g., "Is there homophobia?" or "What are the areas of homophobia in sport?"). Instead, I collected the lived stories and counter stories of my participants to map out the area for future research, and eventually to spark societal change. IPA also involves making visible the phenomena under study that the participants experienced, which was my goal, so that I can share those anecdotes to a wider audience. My own experiences aimed to not interfere with the examination of participants' lived experiences. As a result, I did reflexive journaling. Journaling allowed me to document decisions, enhance reflexivity around my positionality, and remind me of other details surrounding the interviews (Ebert & Goodwin,

2020). My own positionality served as a starting point for shaping my research questions and determining areas of interest.

Participants

I used *purposeful* and *maximum variation sampling* to enhance transferability of findings. *Purposeful* sampling strategies refer to recruiting a very specific population, in this case "gay male team sport professional athletes." Within that group, I sought to achieve *maximum variation sampling* by recruiting participants across many specific different factors (e.g., sport, country of origin, age, race, etc.). I selected 6 participants total, following a specific criterion. These are (1) cis-gender[5] males who identify as gay and (2) play a team sport at the professional level. To avoid post-structuralist complications (i.e., trying to define what being gay means) I will solely rely on the participants' self-identification of their sexuality (Anderson, 2005). A team sport is defined as a sport that has more than two athletes competing against another team. Despite sports like badminton and diving having both individual and pairs competitions, they were not included in this research. To be considered a professional, athletes must make most of their income from sport or endorsements.

To make results the most relatable, diversity in age, birth country, country of sport participation, ethnic background, and sport was sought. The priority for athletes considered for this research first prioritized diversity in sport and second by country of sport participation. Therefore, a list was made of known potential participants based on my knowledge (i.e., *convenient sampling* strategy). Sports that had only one athlete will automatically be selected. When a sport on my list has more than one athlete, the priority was given to the athlete that participated in a country different from the rest of the athletes. When more differentiation was

[5] The term "cis-gender" refers to someone who identifies as the same sex that they were assigned at birth. Therefore, all participants in this research will have been born and assigned being a male and continue to identify as a male

needed, the country of origin was the next factor to consider, meaning that the priority was given to the athlete who was raised and played in one different from the rest. A translator was hired for one athlete who requested because of the feeling that he did not speak English fluently enough to articulate his thoughts. The potential participants were sought through different mediums including email, social media, and telephone using a predetermined script or message explaining the research and giving instructions if they wish to participate. From the date of first contact, the athlete was given two weeks to decide if they wish to participate or not until their "spot" is given to the next athlete on the list. Multiple athletes were contacted at a time, in some cases, with the scheduling being prioritized by the person who responded first. Should the potential participant have made contact after the two weeks have lapsed, they would have been slotted into the appropriate position on the list and told that they will be contacted about participating should they have been selected. Should a participant have not been selected, they would have received a message from me, thanking them for their interest. This did not occur. There was no undue pressure on the potential participants who received the ad directly from me, given their relationship and power imbalance (favoring the potential participant and their high status as a professional athlete).

When the sample saturation was not met, *snowballing* (i.e., recruiting through third parties) was used to recruit more participants. Potential participants were sent an ad, either through me or third-parties. Third parties included athletes, agents, friends, or organizations. The rules for snowballing outlined were explained to the third party to ensure ethically sound recruiting. The advertisement included an outline of the study and my contact information. Potential participants were instructed to reach out directly to me, and not through the third party, if they wish to participate. If many potential participants responded to the advertisement that was

disseminated through third parties, they would have been selected using the same guidelines outlined above, prioritizing a difference in sport and then country of participation, etc. The third parties would have been notified when they no longer need to distribute the advertisement through their communication channel when no more participants are needed, as determined *data saturation* (i.e., when I determine that there is enough data to have substantive findings). Unfortunately, despite reaching out to several third parties, no participants contacted me about participating using this method.

Keeping the identities of the participants private was a top priority. These athletes compete(d) at the highest levels in the world and may have wished to remain anonymous in the results. Therefore, there was a necessity for discretion, so the interviews were recorded for transcribing purposes, and then stored on an encrypted external hard drive (outlined below). Unfortunately, because of the nature of the interview, each participant needed to be identified by myself to certify their identity and that they fulfill the requirements of the study. That would not be possible if a participant wishes to remain completely anonymous (i.e., not wanting to reveal their identity to me). Should an athlete have wanted to participate but was not willing to reveal their identity to me, it would have been impossible to determine if they meet the very specific criteria outlined, and so they would be unable to participate. Therefore, only the participants who voluntarily reveal their identity to me had an opportunity to participate in this study. Each participant was given an alias, determined by me using a random name generator, which produced a common name based on the country of participation. The list connecting the alias to the participant (i.e., *identity key*) was stored separately from the data set.

Upon completion of the research, a thank you email was sent to all participants individually. Participants did not receive an honorarium. All participants were allowed to

withdraw any or all their responses at any time up to publication without providing reasons, which none have.

This study includes interviews from 6 athletes. Due to recruitment troubles, it was impossible to have more participants. Of the 6 participants, three are professional volleyball players (Santiago, Tobias, and Klaus). Santiago played in Spain, Tobias played in Austria, and Klaus in Germany, but none of those listed were born in those aforementioned countries. Another participant was Miika, a professional ice hockey player, who played and is from Finland. Dalton played rugby in the United Kingdom but was not born there. Jackson is a professional curler from Canada. All these athletes competed in their sports in the last year. A table of the participants is available in Appendix 2. If the athlete competed in more than one country, the country they competed in most was considered. If there was a tie between countries, the most recent country was considered. Because of the need for discretion, more information could not be given, as it may be used in identifying the athletes. For example, if sport, country of participation and age are given, it may be possible to narrow down the possible true identities of the athletes, especially when cross-referencing their stories. This need for discretion is also why some unimportant details were altered in the transcript.

Data Collection

The interviews were one-on-one *semi-structured* and online (i.e., Zoom, Skype, etc.), due to the COVID pandemic and participants' geographical locations. A *semi-structured interview* refers to not having a set list of questions. The participant was given a list of topics and/or questions, but the interviews did not follow this list. We would often dive deep into topics and take tangents along the way. The interviews were steered by both the participant and myself. As the interviewer, I asked appropriate follow-up questions to probe athletes differently based on

their responses to my open-ended questions. This was ideal because the participants' responses would have differed greatly as they are from different cultures, sports, countries, age demographics, among other factors. "Individual interviews and focus groups are the typical methods of data collection in phenomenological research," (Johnson & Parry, 2016, p. 90). The interview incorporated question forms outlined by Smith et al. (2009), including descriptive, narrative, structural, contracting, and evaluative. The generic, open ended questions were provided to the participant at least a week before the interview to allow sufficient reflection and grant them the ability to prepare answers. This was also useful since many athletes speak English as an additional language. Ebert and Goodwin (2020) note:

> In an effort to explore the sacred and secret stories that exist beneath the cover stories, the participants were provided the interview questions ahead of time. Once participant commented on this decision, saying, "seeing the questions ahead of time was so useful. Specially to have some deep reflection. I don't think [the stories] would have come up just in conversation." Four people stated that they would be sharing stories that they never shared before and expressed relief at being able to prepare themselves for the interview. (p. 198)

To keep the identities of the athletes hidden, and to probe their responses more, focus groups were not utilized in this research, however. Johnson & Parry (2016) also note that semi-structured interviews are best for phenomenological research as to privilege the participants' voices in the data collection. My goal was to ask open-ended questions and focus on building on the participants' responses as opposed to guiding their answers a certain direction. The questioning involved open-ended questions as to not steer the participant and allow for my own perspectives to skew their responses (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018). To get to substantive findings,

it was up to the researcher to ask appropriate follow-up questions and probe more into their answers. “The goal [was] to approach a phenomenon openly, allowing for individuals’ lived experiences and their expression of those experiences to provide context, insight, and substance,” (Johnson & Parry, 2016, p. 41). Marsh Naturkach and Goodwin (2019) summarize Smith et al. (2009) writing, “researchers use IPA to seek understanding of lived experiences by exploring people’s perspective of their social, cultural, and political worlds and describing and interpreting their everyday occurrences” (p. 267).

Should the situation have risen that the interviewer did not know the participant, the interview would have started with a section collecting information about the athlete to be used in the table outlining the information of the participants. The participants were told which information will be shared. After the introduction, I began with the open-ended questioning, allowing the participant to share their stories. Potential questions are located in Appendix 3.

As mentioned, I made notes during and right after the interview to keep track of areas that require more attention, which may impact future interview guides. The interviews could have lasted up to two hours, based on the detail of the responses of the participants. Most of the interviews lasted around 1 hour, with the longest going almost 1.5 hours. If the interview was going to go over two hours, the interviewer would have asked the participant to schedule another follow up interview to conclude their sharing, if they desired. Should I have needed to follow up with a participant after the interview has concluded, I would have sent a message to the participant asking for clarification or to fill a previously unfilled hole in their response. This did occur with Santiago because a section of his interview was not recorded well enough. The follow-up correspondences were also used as data.

Before each interview, I reviewed previous field notes so that I could refresh my memory with what could have been improved from the last interview. It was also important to review the interview guide and make notes on it in areas that I felt would be important. In some cases, I did some research before the interview on the athlete so that I had a better understanding of their career, and therefore would probe more into it, as opposed to wasting time asking about their resume. After each interview, I wrote a reflexive journal, which is also included in the results. Johnson and Barry (2016) write that it is important for phenomenologists to use a journal to write their thoughts and feelings about the research activities and that journaling is "a key component of data collection and is useful later in analysis and interpretation," (p. 87). Journaling (or bracketing) is an important component to "'keep an eye on' their assumptions, biases, and relationships with a phenomenon" (Johnson & Parry, 2016, p. 87). For me personally, the journal was vital because of my lack of previous experience conducting research. I felt that my interviews improved dramatically because of my reflections, and I was able to ask better follow-up questions as the study continued. I also feel that I was able to listen better to the participant as the study continued because of my continued efforts using field notes and journaling and was able to use previously found data in subsequent interviews.

In some cases, I slightly altered specific facts in stories, to protect the participants' identities. The alterations did not change the story or context, but I felt it was necessary if a story was to be shared because of its significance. Any changes were made before sending the transcript to the participant for approval, to avoid sending many difference transcriptions for them to review. This process also allowed for the participant to ensure the story was still accurate after the changes and that their identity was concealed properly. The changes were highlighted to bring attention to their alteration, along with a description as to why it was necessary. The

participant could reject any or all changes, along with any word, sentence, or section, regardless of if it was altered or not, during that time.

The recording of the interview, transcription, identity key (i.e., pairing the participants to their aliases), and findings are all being stored on Mac OS extended (case-sensitive, journaled), single GUID partitioned, volumes that will be 256-bit AES encrypted on separate USB drives. Only my supervisor and I have the password for, and access to, these USB drives. The USB drives will be stored separately. One backup USB is used in case of corruption or damage to the USB drive.

Data Analysis

After each interview, I transcribed the conversation and began the analysis before interviewing another participant. By transcribing, coding, and analyzing it soon after the interview, it was fresh in my mind, allowing me to journal more effectively. The data collection, analysis, and recruitment worked in a cyclical fashion, allowing me to determine when the data was fully saturated.

Through an IPA approach, themes emerged across participants using *thematic analysis* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). *Thematic analysis* is a method of analyzing qualitative data. The process involves the researcher examining all data (e.g., transcripts, field notes, etc.) thoroughly to determine common themes, concepts and ideas across participants. Smith et al. (2009) outline a four-step procedure for thematic analysis including:

> (a) reading the interviews and field notes numerous times, (b) dividing the data into common statements and coding them with meaningful labels, (c) grouping the codes into clusters of meaning… across participants, and (d) compiling descriptions of the themes and subthemes. (Morphy & Goodwin, 2012, p. 137)

The codes were based on the topics and objectives of the study, and connecting the responses to previous literature (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018). This constant comparison analysis method resulted in findings about team sports, but not allow for generalized statements comparing certain sports, countries, generations, or other factors because of the lack of sufficient representation from any single category. The specific codes emerged from the participants' responses, which alleviated subjectivity, as opposed to predetermining the exact codes to be sough (Johnson & Parry, 2016).

Representation

The common themes or notable differences are presented with direct quotations being used to give a summary of the concept. These themes are summarized in paragraph form, relating back to literature, and using direct quotes from the participants to better explain the ideas. The quotes are copied verbatim, but some details may be altered to protect the identity of the athlete. Any changes were made at my discretion and will not change the story's theme in any way. Only minor details will be altered, which will not be indicated or highlighted to the audience. These quotes are used for creating narratives that can be used to help spark change in behavior of other gay athletes, teammates and coaches of gay athletes, sport organizations, fans, and more. For this thesis, though, only the common themes, quotes, and stories are presented in conventional journal article format.

Ethical Considerations

With regards to the procedural or categorical ethical considerations, outlined by Zitomer and Goodwin (2014), the participants were recruited by me (i.e., convenience sampling) and through an advertisement distributed by a third party (i.e., snowball sampling), where the participant would have contacted me directly, either by email or phone (which was provided on

the advertisement), without going through the third party. Those recruited through convenience will make voluntary and informed decision to participate in the study. They would have had the ability to decline because of the absence of a power imbalance between myself and participant.

There was little to no risk to the athlete for participating in this study. All interviewees are anonymous to the reader in the results, eliminating potential political or legal ramifications. There was little risk surrounding psychological harm to the participant. Most memories were aimed to be positive and/or inspiring. However, if a topic may have triggered the participant, they could have declined to answer the question. There was no worry about a poor performance because the participant and I simply went through their lives and there was no wrong answer. They also had the questions beforehand, allowing them time to prepare their answers. Having the interview guide also aimed to alleviate any discomfort that may have arisen from not knowing the discussion topics. If they thought of something that they wanted to say, that could have addressed it in the transcript review. There was no deception from the interviewer. There was no economic cost to the participant, including for the translator. The interviewer subscribed to the web service Zoom, which was needed to conduct the interviews. There are indirect benefits for participating, including knowing they are involved in a study aiming to improve the lives of others and they had access to key themes ahead of publication.

Zitomer and Goodwin (2014) also write about situational, relational, and exiting ethics. I mirrored the language used by the participant during the interviews, which is respectful and aimed to enhance the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (Heck et al., 2012). I also was “mindful of their actions and the consequences they may have on others,” (Zitomer & Goodwin, p. 211). This was important because the interview may have led to the participant reliving painful experiences, in some cases. Each participant was only interviewed

once, with potential follow up if it was needed, either through email or other means. Because of the limited contact, the exit process was not of major concern. Once the interview was transcribed completely, and subtle changes may have been made to prevent the participant's identity from being revealed, the participant was given the opportunity to review it to ensure accuracy and that their anonymity was preserved. Reviewing the transcript is important since English was often an additional language for the participant. There was also respondent validation in this study, so once key themes have been identified, they were shared with the participants, who could give feedback. No participant asked for changes to be made in their transcripts or in the participant validation.

One of the most important factors for the participants to participate was that they could trust me to preserve their anonymity. All the participants are still active professional athletes who may wish to conceal their identity. For this reason, being a former professional athlete gave them the reassurance that I understand the importance of anonymity. An important component was having *field notes* (i.e., notes taken during the interview) and *reflexive journals* (i.e., notes taken after the interview) throughout the research process (Johnson & Parry, 2016).

My major concern for subjectivity was to ensure my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences do not steer the conversations. I aimed to ensure that the questions started open ended and that I probed further into their responses when required. This was even more important when considering that many of the athletes had English as an additional language. Reflexive journaling was also an important tool to help alleviate my own subjectivity (Johnson & Parry, 2016).

When an interpreter/translator was required to interview the athlete who does not speak English, they were hired through the translating service UpWork. UpWork interpreters can be

hired on an hourly basis in most languages and adhere to the Standard Code of Ethics for Professional Interpreters and Translators. This code states that they will interpret regarding the rules of accuracy, cultural sensitivity, confidentiality, disclosure (not offer opinions or publicly disclose information obtained), proficiency, compensation, non-discrimination and conflict of interest and professional demeanor (NCIHC, 2004). The importance of compliance of the code is at the utmost importance, so the interpreter confirmed that they adhere to these guidelines before meeting with the athlete.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The results and discussion are combined for readability. Each of the major themes are summarized using a quote from the study, with sub-themes summarized using another quotation. “Straight boys don’t have to face society as we do,” speaks to the perceived differences between the gay athletes of this study and their heterosexual counterparts, including their coming out, the perception of how accepting sport is for gay athletes, and negotiations that are made when considering how to act on their teams. “I do feel alienated,” revolves around the athletes’ experiences while on teams, including when first joining teams, how to bring the team together, and showering. Lastly, “They didn’t have enough information,” offers suggestions from the participants for education amongst their team and in the school system, with the goal of making sport more inclusive for gay athletes. The participants of this study report their coming out aim was to have had a positive impact on other people, and athletes themselves report being much happier and competing at a higher level after their coming out. The experiences of gay team sport professional athletes appear to have both positive and negative components. When asked to use three words to describe a gay athlete, the responses were all positive, with the word cloud being in Appendix 4. Positive perspectives in previous literature are commonly a result from the ecstasy of the athletes’ recent coming out. The participants’ coming out is reported to increase their mood, which leads to an increase in their athletic performance and even their physical health. The coming out process is not always smooth, but once able to navigate through a labyrinth of micro-aggressions, insecurities, and overt homophobia on occasions, gay team sport professional athletes report that their relationships with their teammates improve over time, with their relationships with coaches remaining consistent. Athletes suggest that larger cities and less popular sports make it easier to come out but still suggest sport overall has a long way to go to

reach inclusion. Inclusion is when athletes do not feel uncomfortable or awkward discussing their sexuality and do not have to code-switch when joining new teams. The participants of the study report many instances of micro-aggressions that forced them to change sports, quit teams, or negatively impacted their experience. Participants say that the awkwardness in the locker room and shower stems from their own insecurities. Depending on the setting and context, the participants confess that they are not always truthful about their experiences or feelings because of a couple reasons, all surrounding the theme of protecting themselves. Despite positive experiences, the consensus is that professional team sport is still ten to twenty years away from being inclusive. Switching teams is especially difficult for gay athletes as they are not sure how welcoming their new team is or who even knows about their sexuality, potentially resulting in an elephant in the room. It can be a difficult topic to bring up, with jokes often being used to break the ice. When a gay athlete joins a team, the ice is usually broken using jokes, but teammates should follow the lead of the gay athlete as to ensure the jokes do not go too far. Despite positive experiences, most of the participants underreport their homophobic experiences for various reasons. This should be a consideration for future interviews and research. To improve the sport culture, having more out athletes would normalize and give more people experience with gay athletes, which has been shown to improve the perception of gay athletes. To expedite the path towards inclusion, teammates of gay athletes can create a more welcoming space by engaging in conversation with gay teammates and self-policing their language and behaviour. Coaches and administrators can create environments for improved language and check in with their athletes occasionally, and schools can improve their curriculum in both Health and Physical Education and History, to include 2SLGBTQ+ lessons and people. Based on their own experiences, the participants advise other gay athletes to find someone to confide in and be vulnerable with,

coming out slowly to ensure a smooth transition to coming out, limiting their potential negative consequences. What is clear is that these current gay team sport professional athletes do not feel completely safe, included, or welcome when competing in their chosen sports. Coaches and administrators can champion allyship and strive to change the language being used on their teams and in their programs. Teammates should ask questions to gay athletes and check in on them occasionally, especially if they are not living in their own country.

There are many instances where the results of this study are in line with previous research. Participants report that sport is not very inclusive for gay athletes, but also that it is not a place of inclusion and pure happiness for heterosexual athletes either (Anderson et al.. 2005). Teammates of gay athletes improve their feelings towards gay athletes after a certain amount of time on their team, usually (Anderson, 2011; Anderson, 2017; Anderson & Fidler, 2017; Magrath et al., 2013; McCormack & Anderson, 2014b; Plummer, 2001; Roper & Halloran, 2007). There is literature that suggests that "sport" is inclusive (Anderson, 2011; Anderson, 2017; Anderson & Fidler, 2017) but, based on who research participants are, these findings refer only to high school, college, and university sports. This distinction is important as the participants of this study hypothesize that professional team sports are decades away from reaching inclusion. By having in depth interviews, this study was able to have novel results, as compared to previous literature that is solely focused on the coming out of athletes, at that snapshot in time. The biggest difference between the professional realm and post-secondary athletes is the need to switch teams on a frequent basis. Switching teams was an area of concern for gay athletes as they would often stay in the shadows on their team, getting a feel for the team atmosphere, before being able to be open about their sexuality. There is still a lot to discover surrounding these topics, including: the power of language, education to improve the perception

of inclusiveness, and the insecurities that gay athletes feel that do not necessarily stem from any specific occurrence on their team.

Straight boys don't have to face society as we do

I wanted to share my story for others

There is research that suggests athletes coming out for their own benefit, like in the case of Jason Collins, where he was thought to be at the end of his career and his coming out was a way to get increased exposure to facilitate him in signing another NBA contract (Kian et al., 2015). However, the participants say that their coming out was mostly to have a positive effect on other people, either to inspire others to come out or to inspire others to pursue an athletic career. Santiago summarizes the overall theme by saying, "I wasn't doing it for myself, you know, like, I wanted to share my story for others." Jackson adds:

> I'm proud to be gay, I guess. I think I'm proud that I can help others live the healthiest and happiest life they can live and not feel like they have to hide who they are, which I think still happens, obviously, as we see quite often.

Unsurprisingly, with the hope to help other people being their major motivation for coming out, any backlash would mean that athletes are enduring a little suffering to help someone else, somewhere else. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why even the participants speak highly of their coming out despite some of the discrimination they experience.

After accepting my sexuality… I started playing better

Not only are participants able to feel as though they are making a difference, but many also note that their athletic performance improved too. Santiago says, "I feel like there's nothing holding me back," since his coming out. Miika sees his coming out as a positive because it put him, and other gay athletes, in a position where they must mature sooner, making them stronger:

> I feel like we … have to grow up maybe a little, especially if the process starts… young, we need to grow up a little bit faster than maybe other kids. And then maybe like this comes maybe from more through my relationship that you know, there's a lot of pressure passing all this stuff that it kind of makes you strong.

The athletes in this study note that being in the closet is a distraction, and once an athlete comes out, they can focus more, improving their game. Jackson summarizes this thought by saying:

> After [coming out], I'd like to think that it would help you improve your game. And then you'll curl better after it too. Because I think whatever our stressors in life and whatever's happening in home and in our world, it affects [your] play.

Dalton echoes this thought, but with a different spin, saying that he feared the unknown and would put pressure on himself to be the best, because if he was not the best at his sport, he would only be the gay athlete and not thought of as a talented one:

> And like, it got to the point where it's obviously like a detriment when you're you know, constantly pushing yourself and constantly putting on pressure of like, well, I can't make, I can't make mistakes, right? … I think there's also a fear that like, when you come out you're going to be embraced but it might be for the wrong reasons. Meaning like, you're afraid that you might be kind of become like a token, right?

Tobias gives a lot of detail about how he believes his coming improved his health and resulted in him being injured much less than compared to when he was in the closet. Tobias states:

> Before coming out my performance was not good at all. And I had a lot of injuries, very painful ones. For example, I broke my tibia, without any apparent issue because of a stress. They told me. I had a hernia, I broke my left shoulder. I had an operation. I had a lot of operations in a little period of time. After accepting my sexuality,

> automatically in the league, I started playing better, and they called me to play with the national team. From this moment, my career went better, and everything improved. I was then a standard player before. So clearly, my career changed. And I think it is because I accepted myself. I started being authentic, free. I even changed my personality. Better me in general.

Whether it was being happier, feeling freer while competing, an improved ability to focus, or being injured less, the participants' consensus is that their athletic performance improved directly because of their coming out. Since the athletes are all still playing their sports, it is not a surprise that they felt positively about their coming out. If an athlete would experience major issues, they would likely not continue playing, such as in the mysterious case of Michael Sam.

Unlike at the post-secondary level, professional athletes do not appear to follow the same trend as mentioned by Anderson (2005). Anderson (2005) notes that upon coming out, athletes would no longer require their sport as a cover to hide their sexuality, and would gain interest in the gay lifestyle, essentially ending their athletic careers. While there are reports of athletes coming out after their careers, or near retirement in the case with Jason Collins (Kian et al., 2015), participants of this study did not end their careers with their coming out. There are other instances in previous coming out stories at the high school and post-secondary level of sport where athletes have cited helping others as their motivation to come out (Prest, 2016).

Maybe another decade or two

Despite all the positive motivations and experiences during the participants' coming out, they all believe that sport is not a welcoming place for gay team sport athletes. Tobias says, "In sport, we don't have the real acceptance yet. If you're gay, you can't be a professional sport athlete," and, "I guess being a straight is easier, but because straight boys don't have to face

society as we do." Miika reflects on previous out athletes, saying, "You just feel like it's there must be something more that's been hidden and then it makes me like, I think that maybe, maybe [the sport world] is not ready yet." Miika also chose not to come out while competing, stating, "I just feel like it was more of the career pressure that if I, if I say something I will close some doors." When giving advice to other ice hockey players, Miika says, "I would like want to help him to, you know, start with the small steps but also not ruining his career." By saying that it is possible to ruin one's career by coming out, Miika suggests that this is still a fear that athletes may have when deciding if to come out or not. Klaus says that despite having a successful season after his coming out, that gay athletes are still at a disadvantage, saying:

> And I think it's kind of put us at a disadvantage that we do have to think about these things while we play because it's just kind of, unfortunately, how the sports world is now.

Jackson says that he has not experienced any homophobia whatsoever, but still says:

> I don't know what they say behind closed doors or what they say in their little teams or what happens. Heck, I don't even know what my three other teammates think.

In this context, inclusion is specifically considering gay male team sport professional athletes. There is mention about the inclusion of people of different races and genders in sport throughout previous literature and with these participants, but for the purpose of this study, inclusion will focus on this specific group. Intersectionality was addressed by a couple athletes, but the focus is put on their comments and feelings that relate to their sexuality. The participants of this study define inclusion (with regards to their sexuality) as an environment where athletes do not have to come out or feel awkward or uncomfortable when discussing their sexuality. Dalton articulates inclusion by saying:

> Sport is inclusive when everybody is going to have access to sport, and when we're going to remove those barriers and people aren't going to … worry about whether or not they're welcome in sport.

Dalton gives an idea of what inclusion feels like by saying:

> And I think that it was nice to go in and be … openly gay. I wasn't trying to hide anything. If anybody asked me any questions, I'd be very candid and being like, Yeah, I'm here living with my partner and me and him are living in this part of the city.

Most participants spoke about inclusion the way Dalton articulates it, that is, as the absence of the feeling of awkwardness or being uncomfortable when discussing one's sexuality. Santiago says, "I will have to say that, like, talking about inclusion, and this, I feel like, I feel like it's important that any, any athlete, not just because you're gay, but any athletes feel welcome." Klaus relates his definition of inclusion to his own troubles joining teams, stating:

> I think inclusion [is] to go to the team and not have to worry about being gay and holding it in the first couple of weeks to kind of test the waters.

An explanation of Klaus's code switching will be mentioned in detail later. In this case, Klaus is saying that inclusion means you can be your genuine self without the need to monitoring your own mannerisms or speech to be a part of the group.

First, this confirms that the participants do not feel welcome and feel awkwardness or discomfort when discussing their sexuality. Second, the feelings of inclusion and welcomeness are a difficult metrics to measure. I do not know how to measure the level of discomfort, awkwardness, welcomeness, or lack of code-switching that someone experiences. There are many factors that influence these emotions, making these definitions difficult to measure, at least quantitatively. It is precisely because of the inability to measure these metrics that a qualitative study needs to be utilized. Throughout the

interviews, the participants were asked how long it would take to overcome these barriers in the future, as to try to quantify the level of discomfort, assuming that the more they felt uncomfortable and excluded, the further away the end goal would be.

Jackson goes one step further, saying that we all need to be seen as humans and not categorized based on sex, gender, or sexuality:

> I think the end goal is that when we're all basically kind of neutral. …We're basically all seen as just humans. And I think that is our I think that is the end the end goal. And I think that's what like to think that's what true equality will look like.

With the definition that Jackson proposes, it is possible to see why he also hypothesizes that sport is two decades away from achieving that goal. Miika comments that sport is not inclusive for gay men, but it is also not a very welcoming place for many heterosexual men, which produces substance abuse and depression. Based on these responses, it seems that sport is not the place to go to when seeking compassion and will require a serious overhaul before reaching true inclusion.

The only mention of inclusion in previous literature, in this context, comes from Anderson (2009), who suggests that we are in the final stage of inclusion presently. Anderson (2009) is referencing mostly high school, college, and university athletes, with only brief mentions of professionals. However, as suggested earlier, inclusion based on the definition of Anderson (2009) is essentially being past the homohysteria stage. With that definition, we are into the inclusion stage, but the participants of this study move the goal posts further back, suggesting that simply being allowed to play is not what inclusion means. Considering the new definition, it is important to note that we have not arrived yet and alternate language should be used to indicate the current climate.

When speaking to how far the sport community must go to reach inclusion, the participants note that the sport community is not at inclusion for all races or genders yet, suggesting that sexuality will follow, as that fight started later. Jackson sums up this thought by saying, “But I also still don't think we're at sometimes at a point, too with, you know, with other battles in the past I still don't think they're fully done.” When asked about how long it will take to reach inclusion, Klaus responds, “I'd say probably maybe another decade or two, yeah.” Jackson, who again has said he has not experienced homophobia, predicts that inclusion is:

> Very far. I think we're I think, I think we're a few generations from it to be honest. I still think that because, you know, what I think happened and what our thoughts were years ago. I think each generation, we're shrinking the gap … I don't know is discrimination the right word? … I don't know if it's if that's the right word or just ignorance … of sexuality. I think [the gap is] getting smaller and smaller every generation and what sometimes is being passed down, some of [the old mentality is] being taken in which is unfortunate.

The participants are the ones who live in the sport climate every day and can give the best insights into how far sport is from reaching inclusion. Keeping in mind that they all have varying degrees of a similar definition, the common timeline is that sport is not a couple years away. Based on the paths forward that the participants recommend, they predict that inclusion is still ten to twenty years away. As suggested in previous literature, this transition does not happen automatically either (McCormack & Anderson, 2014a). With the introduction of the “Don’t Say Gay” bill and the dismantling of the Privacy Act in America, it is obvious that society can even head backwards in terms of their policies towards gay people. If sport is going to continue to

move toward true inclusion, more work must be done to change the climate and ensure that the positive changes made last throughout time and steps backward are not taken.

Professional sport is a business

As mentioned earlier, Miika raises an interesting point around sport, though, that it is not just gay athletes that are a "taboo." Professional sport is a business, and the athletes are the ones who are put into high-stress situations to perform on command. Miika notes that environment causes athletes to turn to substances to cope with the stress, anxiety, and depression. O'Callaghan (2019) details the impact that his addiction had on his career and personal life while he was competing in the NFL. What is concerning about Miika's assessment is that he pairs sexuality with "medication and alcoholism," saying:

> So, it's been a very conservative world, and very winning focused and it's a business like any other so these things have always been put aside. And what I hear it's…difficult. There's a lot of taboos like let's say, not only with sexuality, it's also like medication and alcoholism and all these things that they're just, you know, wiped under the carpet.

This statement considers that straight athletes may not enjoy the sport environment, not just the gay athletes. Miika brings up a good point, that other athletes have areas of their lives that they struggle with, but sport does not care about them either. The athletes feel that their worth is tied to their performance and their ability to win games. O'Callaghan (2019) speaks about his own journey through addiction, and about how common it is for athletes to have addictions, often fueled from the league to enhance the athletes' performances in the short term. It is not uncommon for a team/company to care most about their win/loss record at the expense of athletes, whom they can replace at any time. This is also a big difference between professional and amateur athletes, where professionals can be dismissed for an injury if their recovery will

take too long. Athletes in high school or college/university will have a longer grace period considering that they will still be attending the school throughout the rehabilitation along with the academic component.

If I was really concerned about homophobia, I probably would have picked an individual sport

Starting at the beginning of the participants' career, all the participants spoke to the reasoning they chose their sport. Most chose their sport because of family or friends. Dalton, a British rugby player, outlines his journey from American football to rugby by saying:

> I actually had quit football in school, American football that is, because I've been bullied and like after like a month or two of playing that I thought I wanted to play a contact sport but just after like, being constantly called like, faggot and all these other things in trainings, I just I started to like lash out at the bullies and then just stopped playing altogether.

Out of all participants, Dalton was the only athlete who felt pressured out of playing a sport and switching to another. Klaus feels that his sexuality prevented him from playing on a previous team, though. Klaus was told by his coach that, "[his] sexuality was a distraction and was preventing [him] from reaching his potential." Jackson, a Canadian curler, notes that he was not concerned about the impact his sexuality would have on his career by stating:

> If I was really concerned about [homophobia], I probably would have picked an individual sport, with you know, golf or something if I was worried about kind of that team atmosphere, having to tell teammates or you know, being in a locker room setting, you know, with other teams.

This statement demonstrates a perceived difference between individual versus team sport environments, which is what sparked this study in the first place.

Another factor that the participants of this study note relating to their ability to come out is the "smaller" and "less popular" sports where athletes can more comfortably come out, due to the lack of risk taken by the athlete due to the decrease in exposure. For example, Santiago says that:

> Personally, I don't think our sport is like super huge in some of those countries so like I don't feel like there's going to be somebody tracking gay volleyball players.

Klaus, also a volleyball player, notes that his own experience, as well as his friends', indicate that volleyball is more inclusive than many other bigger, more popular sports, saying:

> A lot of my friends who are also players that are gay have also just came to volleyball because they felt more welcome than they did in like, when they went to play basketball or football or whatnot.

Dalton notes that rugby is more inclusive than other sports, including American football, partly because of luck but also because:

> It was a more open learning environment because especially in some countries, where nobody knows what rugby is, you know what I mean? Like with fathers there's this expectation of what is a football player and … there wasn't this long tradition or history or understanding what those traditions are. We were all just like, coming into a sport learning and doing the best we could to pick it up as we went. And I think that that led to just a more supportive environment in general where we were all kind of trying to lift each other up.

Jackson downplays his own impact on trailblazing for the curling and gay communities because of the size and exposure of his sport, saying:

> Curling is not massive you know, like when it comes to as far as you look at hockey and NHL and I mean. We're on the smaller, smaller spectrum when it comes to you know, the amount of curlers there are to the amount of hockey players there are. So, I'm not sure we're comparing the same numbers. … So that's why we need somebody … in the in the top sports, like tennis or golf, for those start to, you know, come out and make impacts in that way. I think that … would be more impactful than myself in curling

These sentiments highlight the need for trailblazers to normalize coming out in bigger sports, the way that Carl Nassib was able to do recently in the NFL. The feeling across participants is that the more athletes come out in different sports, the faster sport, overall, will reach inclusion. Anderson (2005, 2009) theorizes certain factors that help determine the likelihood of an athlete coming out, including the combativeness of the sport, geographical location, race, and socioeconomic status of the athlete, to name a few. Because the sample size was not large enough, it would not be possible to make these generalizations at the professional level based on the participants of the study. However, the NFL has had 14 players to come out as gay during or after their careers, NBA having two, MLB with 4, and the NHL had none. Despite American football having the most athletes come out in North America, that is the only sport in this study to have an athlete not feel comfortable in, forcing him to switch to rugby (Dalton). Using the metrics from Anderson (2005, 2009), volleyball is a sport that would not hinder athletes' ability to come out as much, despite each of the participants experiencing significant adversity, perhaps stemming their geographical location. The assumptions made from Anderson

(2005, 2009) are based on North American athletes who mostly compete at the high school and college/university level. Therefore, it may be possible to cite the country of participation as a determinant of the likelihood of negative experiences for gay athletes.

I always choose to tell my experience from a positive point of view

Many of the previous studies and news articles focus on athletes' coming out, in a very public setting, at a time that they may reflect differently upon afterwards. It is for that reason that I feel it necessary to view these snapshots as cover stories. However, there was a very common discussion point with most of the participants with regards to their cover stories. It is no surprise that athletes will hide their sexuality if they think that it would have a negative impact to come out, but participants in this study report that their statements about their experiences often do not reflect the truth, for various reasons. Participants report that they may underreport their homophobic experiences because they focus on the positives, they have a low expectation of the inclusion they should experience, to attempt to fit into the team atmosphere, or they have put in so much work to get where they are that they do not want to jeopardize their career by saying or doing the wrong thing.

Anderson et al. (2005) also discuss the impact of focusing on the positives and the prevalence of low expectations, skewing the reported experiences of athletes coming out at the high school and university/college level, which also is a pattern with the participants of this study. Tobias articulates this by saying, despite the negative experiences that some athletes go through, he made a conscious decision to tell his story with positive spin:

> I understand that some players go through very difficult times, and they even need to give up their sport that they love. But I always choose to tell my experience from a positive point of view.

This is interesting because Tobias is acknowledging that the experience of being gay in a professional team sport setting is often difficult, but that he can find positives and focus on those. When going through these interviews, I wondered if having a positive outlook is the factor that allows for athletes to continue in these environments.

Participants also report having low expectations or the expectation that there will be some homophobia, as a reason that they do not report these experiences publicly. When speaking about the jokes that his teammates would make about him regarding his mannerisms or speech, Santiago says:

> I just feel sometimes it's expected, you know, like I can say they're gonna say something. They're gonna say, they say something, you know, but is it just comes with time, I guess.

By saying this, Santiago is acknowledging that he often expects that there will be jokes made at his expense. Dalton reports that he does not think anything will be totally positive by saying:

> Let's also be honest, and like call a spade a spade. And be willing to like, honestly assess ourselves… it's just always a bit difficult because nothing's ever going to be fully positive.

The interesting component with Dalton is that he reports having amazing experiences, but then in this quote says, “it’s just always a bit difficult.” This comment makes me think back to the comments expressed from a couple of participants, with a quote about from Jackson, that suggests previous battles (i.e.: racism and sexism) are still ongoing and may never be over. Combine those thoughts, with Miika’s insight that sport is rife with heterosexual athletes going through their own problems. Anderson (2005) states that high school and college/university

athletes having low expectations is also seen with professional team sport athletes, to some degree.

Lastly, participants say that their previous reports of their experiences are often more positive than their true feelings because they worked so hard to get where they are, that they do not want to jeopardize their achievements. This can take several forms, including a strategy to maintain a bond with the team by not playing the proverbial victim card and by not calling out their team or sport. As mentioned earlier, Miika recommends to gay athletes to start with small steps, so as not to potentially ruin your career. This quote can help make sense of why some of the athletes say the things they do because it may be on their minds too. For example, Dalton says that, in some of his interviews, he felt pressure to not say anything too controversial as to not bring negative attention to him, his team or sport:

> I felt a bit of pressure to not be like, 'But also by the way some weird things have been going on…'

Dalton says that he wants to be honest, but also must negotiate a cover story because he wants to represent his sport and the gay community as a whole:

> I want to be honest, but it's like you also want to … represent your sport and your community in like, a positive way.

When deciding how to respond and how to negotiate his cover story, where between his secret story and the sacred story, Dalton says that, "it really kind of depends on the context of who is interviewing you and what is my audience." Dalton suggests that if he is comfortable with the platform, the questions are direct, and he does not feel he is putting his job at risk, he theorizes he would be able to call out the governing body of rugby for their acceptance of the LGBTQ community. He says if he is asked:

> What do you think about rugby's LGBTQ inclusive policies as a whole? I'm gonna be honest about that and be like they're terrible.

Dalton continues this thought by speaking about the inclusion policies of trans athletes. I do not know the intricacies of Rugby's policies regarding trans athletes, but I did find it interesting that he became much more passionate about a group that he is not a part of, compared to the treatment he reports from rugby teams, coaches, teammates, and the media because of being gay.

Tobias speaks to the positivity in his cover story as a strategy to create or maintain a bond with his teammates. He suggests that if he is more positive, it protects him from the negativity of his teammates, and therefore can eventually lead to them accepting him for being gay. Tobias says:

> I'm going to talk about myself in a very good way right now. This is also because of my personality. And because I decided to tell this in a very positive way and not as a problem. This is the key to getting… good [acceptance] from people. We always tend to tell it in a very tragic way. But I did the opposite.

By not playing the victim, Tobias says that he is trying to create a path of acceptance into the sport community. I agree that this strategy can work for assimilation, but I am also hesitant to recommend this as it means gay athletes are adapting to fit into the current sport culture as opposed to sport improving to fully accept gay athletes.

Cover stories seem to play an important role with the participants' actions and comments about their experiences as a gay team sport athlete. As noted, the participants felt pressure to report their experiences as more positive because of focusing on the positives, having low expectations, to try to fit into the team atmosphere, or not wanting to jeopardize their achievements by saying or doing the wrong things.

The rose-tinted glasses that Anderson (2005) writes about concerning the coming out of athletes therefore appears to be a deliberate act for various reasons, at the professional level. Public perception is an important component for professional athletes, and therefore the participants do not wish to start negative media attention to themselves, their team, or their sport.

I do feel alienated

You don't have to be fucking Sherlock Holmes

One of the characteristics that separates professional athletes from amateurs is the need to switch teams, usually on an annual basis, depending on the sport. This procedure can be particularly anxiety inducing, as some participants note. Apart from Jackson (curling), the other participants all use a similar strategy when switching teams. This strategy is to keep their head down, not speak up too much, and carefully observe the team environment and atmosphere. Participants note that they are usually unaware if the team knows about their sexuality or not, but they do not say anything until after a certain amount of time to allow them to have done adequate assessments. During this time, the participants do not feel comfortable acting like themselves, allowing them time to determine if they are on a team that would accept their sexuality or not. Klaus reports this phenomenon as "code switching," which is essentially trying to adapt your speech and mannerisms to fit the situation. A majority of the participants code-switch until they reach a point that they feel comfortable to truly be themselves. Klaus says:

> Some people are very like, observant of those things. And I think how I talk as well, I don't know if that would be considered a mannerism, but definitely like code switching. I'd say it would be a pretty accurate way to describe the switching before I feel comfortable.

Language is an important component of this observation period. Dalton explains his process:

> You don't have to be fucking Sherlock Holmes. You don't have to be that smart. I mean, it's very simple stuff with just like in my first few training sessions, like 'Did anybody get called faggot? Like, was it thrown out there? Was that something that people were saying?' like no, okay, well, that's a low bar, but they've cleared it.

Another one of the factors for determining the safety of athlete to be out, according to Jackson is the size of the town that athletes live in. Jackson says:

> I don't want to pick on small towns. But generally, it is a small town where I hear from people, a little place that … everybody knows everybody kind of thing and they're just a little nervous and they're… afraid [to come out].

One of the most common themes concerning the participants in this study is the presence of micro-aggressions in all facets of the professional sport experience. These small acts may not be as noticeable when first joining teams, but as an athlete and their teammates begin to settle more in and feel more comfortable being themselves, micro-aggressions may become more present. It is not surprising that micro-aggressions are present, with examples being thought of as insignificant and unnoticed by heterosexual teammates. There are many examples that are shared by the participants, so only some are highlighted. Dalton gives an example of micro-aggressions that were reported as common across other participants too:

> I'd say that when you do hear the overt things, like I said, you're surrounded by the passive homophobia, right? Like you're surrounded. Very common comments of what I was saying, right? Like the feeling of the need to like distance yourself from other people thinking you might be gay or like, you know, feeling the need to make light of things like that. So that when you do get those very like overt comments … that is just undeniably somebody being homophobic. It just kind of confirms your fears, right? It

> just kind of like is a sounding board to you of like, ‘Okay, I've been able to kind of write off some of these passive comments. But like, now, some of the more overt comments makes me feel like yeah, like I'm not wrong about this,’ like there is something to this and it is still not like a situation where you're going to necessarily be fully accepted or you're going to be you know. You might still be deemed as ‘lesser than’ if you were to come out in this situation.

There were many examples given by other athletes, but Dalton shared another that came from a coach:

> It's just like, ‘You know, if you're gonna train like shit, you're not going to take this seriously, you should go play for the Goldenboys team. They’re looking for some average players.’ And for context, the Goldenboys are the local inclusive gay rugby team in my area. So, it's like there's one inclusive gay rugby team in this region. There's a bunch of really shitty rugby teams with straight players, but like you chose that team as your example. Because to him, like, the gay rugby team is like the most inferior rugby team that you can think of. So, it's like little things like that, where it's like, if I were to explain that scenario to that coach, he might be like, ‘Oh, yeah, I could see why that's, you know, maybe not politically correct,’ but he wouldn't really understand why. That really sends a message to a closeted athlete.

Later, the importance of the coach, and other staff, in setting the tone for the team atmosphere and ensuring an inclusion environment will be discussed. It is apparent from the participants the impact of language on their feeling of being included on the team. Often language that has a negative connotation is referred to as “banter” (Anderson et al., 2016; Denison & Kitchener, 2015), but these two examples are not simply one-off jokes. These statements indicate that

homophobia is present in professional sport, which is apparent because straight athletes demonstrate a fear of being labelled as gay. Language is an important part of determining how inclusive a sporting environment appears for gay athletes, with micro-aggressions usually being verbal (Anderson et al., 2016; Denison & Kitchener, 2015; Grossman et al., 2009). Therefore, improving the language is an important step to improving the inclusivity and welcomeness for sport.

Implement your own language

Implementing a new language on a team is a novel way of avoiding unintentional micro-aggressions. Dalton describes his team's group chat by saying, "We have a giant group text, which obviously, anybody who's ever been in a team sport group chat, it's just like, the absolute just like bottom of the barrel." Dalton suggests a great way to improve the environment and that is to update the language that gets used:

> Whether it's volleyball or rugby, there's terms that you as a team, only, you know, and only you use. So, it's like if you can implement your own language of terms that you guys know specifically what that means. I'm pretty sure that you could also, like eliminate language that you also don't want to have in your environments. And players need to monitor each other and understand, like, I respect the sport. This is the value of the sport that I play. This is the value of the team that I play for that we've now all collectively agreed is important to us. I need to make sure that we're all upholding that because in order for me to be the best teammate I need to make sure that I create the best environment possible for every type of athlete and every teammate that I have to succeed.

This is a very powerful statement and has some concrete metrics that can be implemented. For example, as Miika notes, ice hockey will often label someone or something as “gay” instead of saying “bad”. Perhaps by finding a new word to replace “gay” to be used in this context, athletes can shift the amount of perceived homophobia dramatically (Anderson, 2005; MacDonald, 2008). An example that is being used with the national volleyball team is to avoid using words like “should” and “can,” instead replacing them with “will.” We also use “upgrade” instead of “improve” or “do better.” So, for example, when asking an athlete how they could have done something better, which implies they did it poorly, coaches ask, “What’s the upgrade?” This simple tool is meant to tell the athlete that they are not bad at what they are doing, but there is a way that they can improve or do something differently, without a negative connotation. Another example would be to try to go through a practice without using any words or prefixes with a negative connotation. It can be a fun exercise and may improve the environment.

Jackson speaks more about another platform that needs improving: social media. He notes social media’s impact on determining the grand narrative by saying:

> I think one thing that can be one thing that obviously we love, and that people are so ingrained in social media, and I think that that though can also be really dangerous too… I guess it's also detrimental in the way that some hatred, or I think theories can be brought in and we can people can jump on that bandwagon to see what this person thinks and that's for and then and then it can kind of, you know, spiral.

Santiago speaks to the increase in the suicide rate among adolescents because of social media and cyber bullying. These are all examples of how dark and dangerous these places can be. The strategy that Jackson proposes to counter this environment is the same as the other participants report when there are jokes or comments made on their team; to use that opportunity as a

teachable moment. Jackson admits that his success rate when engaging with people online is only about 50%, stating he does not go to battle with them. Instead, he tries to understand where they are coming from and what their intentions are:

> One thing that I always do like to ask in my in my responses or in my, you know, rebuttals to people is that like, 'What's your what is your intention to by saying this to me and approaching me? Or writing me this?' That's one thing that that I always I think kind of strikes people too, and it takes them back for a second.

The participants cite coaches being an important starting point for making a change in the sport culture. Dalton says that players are never going to buy into something that does not come from the top of the organizational food chain, meaning coaches and/or the administration. Dalton also suggests that the people most in need of education are those people at the top. He says:

> I do think it's at a standoff between the administrators needing to initiate it and them also being the problem, because the fact of the matter is administrators and coaches, they're going to be the ones who are older, they're going to be more likely to have been, you know, entrenched in whatever this culture has been for a longer time. And if we're being candid and honest, they're going to be older, they're going to be white. Like that's, that's going to be the situation where it's like, they're going to be cisgender. They're going to be white; they're going to be older, which generally means they might lean towards more conservative or they just grew up in a situation where it wasn't as big of an issue. You know what I mean? And I think that the reason I start with that is because I think players are never going to buy into something that the administration the coaches aren't taking seriously.

Miika gives a suggestion for coaches to build rapport with their players, suggesting that they have a "quality survey" where the coach can try to get to know their players better:

> I know that a lot of coaches do they have this like, if they go into a new team, they have sort of like a quality survey where they you know, try to get to know the players and they ask you know different questions about their lives and then they meet with the player and then the player tells about himself as much as he wants to. So, there's the possibility to you know, create a connection between the coach as I said, it's up to the player how much you want to tell.

Miika also does not think that coaches will be the ones who can police the behaviour of the players adequately. He says that the relationships with coaches are improving, but it is better if it comes from a player:

> I feel like nowadays, it's easier to go and talk with a coach. And the relationship often is much better nowadays than it used to be before but it's like it's not coach's responsibility to ask private questions. It has to come from the player.

Denison & Kitchen (2015) suggest that it is important for players to monitor each other's behaviour and language because adolescent athletes are often unsupervised and then the culture change comes from within, like Dalton's language shift referenced earlier. Jackson & Delehanty (2013) write that with professionals the best rules are having no rules; otherwise the goal will be to try to find a way around them, based on some technicality. Instead, Jackson & Delehanty (2013) suggest building team chemistry so that players will not want to disrespect their teammates. Denison & Kitchen (2020) write that a majority of their participants feel the coaches and administrators should be the ones championing allyship and inclusion. Based on my own experiences, I think it needs to be a hybrid approach, where the coaches and administrators

explain the concept and language change to the athletes and have them buy in to the new team culture, like how Dalton suggests. The administrators can outline the goal for their team and sport's values and then provide the environment that encourage the athletes to buy in.

You need to be patient and understand

The participants of this study note that once an athlete feels comfortable coming out, the topic can be awkward to bring up, because they are not sure if everyone knows or not. Most of the participants say that they utilize humour to bring up the topic of their sexuality. Jackson says:

> I'll be the first to joke around with any of the teams about anything to do with my sexuality, as you know, as you know, it'd be good to be the first to have some fun and joke around

Tobias also expresses the exact sentiment as Jackson, saying, "I am the first one that likes telling jokes."

The problem with joking around too much is that the teammates of the participants will often not know where the line is between joking and being offensive. Tobias says that athletes must be patient when jokes become offensive because that is a common stop on the road towards inclusion. Tobias says:

> Sometimes there are jokes which are not appropriate, but you need to be patient and understand that making jokes for others is their way of accepting it … As long as [teammates] don't add to the joke that this person is telling.

This is not a new concept. As far back as Buzinski's (2016) article on Sean Conroy, jokes are thought of as a sign of acceptance. Buzinski (2016) writes, "While he was outwardly accepted, it wasn't until teammates started joking with him about gay stuff that he knew he was truly one of

them" (p.1). Santiago speaks about one of his teams where the jokes went too far, and outlines how he handled it by saying:

> Anyway, so yeah I used to like slowly started like laughing but not like super joyful, you know. So, I think they got it, and they do it a lot less. And one time the captain came to me privately at some point, when we were traveling, he asked me about it. And I told him what I told you, you know, like I'm still, I'm still getting to know myself, I'm still learning, you know.

After the captain of the team came to speak to him about it, the team did not joke around as much, but Santiago also felt that he was closer to the team as he then believed that the jokes were not coming from a bad place. This was an important step for both Santiago, to feel welcomed and appreciated on the team, and for the team to realize the impact of their jokes. Miika, who only has experience competing in the closet, notes:

> When somebody actually said that these things shouldn't be talked about or brought to the locker room, then I obviously felt offended in my head, but I wasn't never like brave enough to kind of say it out loud.

With all these situations considered, it is evident that humour plays an important role for both the gay athlete and their teammates. Based on the discussions with the participants in this study, teammates of gay athletes should also utilize jokes as a means of bonding, but only once the gay athlete has initiated. It is also wise for teammates to have one on one discussions with the gay athlete if they think the joking was taken too far. Doing this will ensure that the team atmosphere is welcoming but can also bring the team closer together, as the gay athletes will know that the joking does not stem from bad intentions.

It would be nice for someone to ask

Once gay athletes have successfully joined and team and feel comfortable, the next step is to build a bond amongst the team. Participants of this study report a noticeable difference in how they are treated once they have been on the team long enough to begin building relationships with their teammates. A strategy to change the atmosphere is to strive to show compassion towards teammates, especially gay teammates, and especially those who are not living in their home country. Santiago says that moving around so much for volleyball can be difficult because of the feeling of isolation. Miika and Tobias also feel lonely and isolated while they are away from their home countries for extended periods of time, suggesting that it may be beneficial to make an extra effort to check in occasionally. These three athletes mention that there are not a lot of deep conversations that occur on a team, and it would be nice if they did. Santiago articulates this by saying:

> But I feel like, yeah, it will be … nice for somebody to … ask me about, like, generally, so I can have a deeper conversation and they actually get to know me better than they know me.

These deep conversations can be sparked by teammates asking questions. All the participants of this study comment that they wish their teammates would ask them questions about their sexuality, as it shows a level of acceptance and will aid in their education. Jackson says, “I’d love it if people will ask questions!” Tobias suggests that if teammates are not comfortable asking questions, making comments about homosexuality will open the door for discussion:

> I was trying to do some gay comments in order to give them the opportunity to start talking about it. And after when there is confidence it is when they start asking about my life about gay things in general. I like answering all this here is where we can see

> other people's acceptance when… they try to understand of those things. I enjoyed this.

Jackson also uses what he considers inappropriate comments as teachable moments to educate people in the sport world:

> If there has been any, any chatter about some things that are not appropriate, I'm pretty quick to shut those down. And I take pride in saying, 'Hey, like, I get it, but you can't say that or, you know,' just making sure that you don't stay quiet when you hear things that aren't that aren't, you know, that aren't appropriate.

As mentioned earlier, Tobias feels that these moments are important in the development of the teammates on their journey to accepting gay athletes.

Compassion seems to be an area that is lacking in the world of professional sport. The participants of this study suggest that if a teammate has questions, they should ask. By engaging in conversations, it will undoubtedly bring the athletes closer together and will result in the gay athlete feeling more accepted onto the team. If these conversations are not happening organically, Tobias suggests trying to open that door and allowing the opportunity for people to walk through it. Previous studies do not mention this component for building relationships with teammates, but it may also be utilized at the post-secondary level, where athletes may also be living away from home and feeling isolated and alone.

I'll just wait till I get home

Despite the participants feeling apart of their team, there is one area that they report to still cause anxiety. Half of the athletes, note some issues about showering on teams. Tobias says that when he first went to Estonia, his teammates did not want to shower with him because of his sexuality:

> When I went to Estonia, which is a very difficult society in this kind of aspect, I didn't know this until I came to the country. When I went there, I told my teammates that I that I was gay because I didn't want to hide myself anymore and the reaction was not that good. In fact, they started leaving me alone. I felt discriminated and this lasted at least 3 weeks. They didn't even want to share the locker with me or shower at the same time as me.

Tobias was the only participant to have a story about the discrimination he felt in another country that was in the shower. Two other participants, Dalton and Klaus, report that they also feel weird about showering with their teams, but because of their own insecurities. Dalton and Klaus say that they do not have a problem with showering at the same time as their team, but they feel pressure to not be seen "peeking" or being a creep. Klaus verbalizes this by saying:

> I do obviously feel a little awkward being in the shower situation. Just because I am a little anxious thinking like, oh, hopefully they don't think I'm looking at them or whatnot… I would say the locker room does feel a little awkward at times, yeah.

Dalton says:

> I would like I would generally like try to avoid using the showers, I'd say. I think that more just like I think if it ever came to that I wouldn't want people to be like, thinking back of like, 'Oh, I remember when he was like lurking in the shower or whatever.' And like, I don't know, I didn't want it to be a thing where people would like to find out later on that I was gay and be like, 'Oh well,' and being shady or this or that. So, I think that I always would just hide behind the fact and … just wait till I get home.

The locker room and shower can cause gay athletes to feel uncomfortable, either because of what their teammates say or do, or stemming from their own insecurities. When a gay athlete is the

only one on their team, participants report that it can feel isolating and that they feel as if they are not entirely a part of the team. Dalton speaks to his cohesiveness with teammates, initially reporting that there are no instances that cause alienation. Almost immediately after saying this, Dalton continues, “I wouldn't, hard to say alienated. I think that I've always just been. I mean, I guess I do feel alienated.” Personally, I think this is a normal response, initially not considering previous interactions to be negative or impactful. However, a majority of participants had moments where, upon further reflection, they changed their answer completely, such as Santiago stating, “Wow, well, I, this is something that I, like I said like I never thought about, I don't. When I think about that, I don't. I feel it has been 100% positive.” Jackson has a similar revelation, “I never really thought about it, as that, in that regard.”

Anderson (2005) gives many positive examples of athletes reporting being treated the same as everyone else in the shower setting, noting that this topic is usually the one the public is the most interested in asking about. MacDonald (2018) also writes that the participants in their study consisting of AAA hockey players report that showering was the area of most concern with when theorizing about having a gay teammate. There did not appear to be issues in previous literature, with most problems in this study being perceived by the athletes and not discussed amongst their teammates. Tobias is the only athlete in this study who experienced issues at first, but was able to overcome them with time and education.

Literally anyone will do

Although there are different measures that can be taken to integrate gay athletes onto a team and make them feel comfortable in the showers, there can still be feelings of discomfort in the sport world. It does not matter if an athlete is out of the closet or not, there is advice that the participants of this study recommend for getting through tough times, allowing them to feel more

included and welcome. The participants all gave the same advice to athletes who are struggling with their sexuality. The first step for an athlete to feel more accepted or to improve their mental well-being is to find someone to confide in. The participants spoke about many negative experiences stemming from their own fears and negative thoughts cultivating in their imaginations. When an athlete can talk to someone about their experiences, it allows them to work through the difficult parts, get closer to the person they are confiding in, and can be assured that their fears are worse than reality. Throughout these interviews, there are a lot of examples of the negative thoughts that the participants had, including Dalton putting pressure on himself to ensure that his physical ability cannot be questioned once he does come out, or the common fear of being thought of as a creep in the shower and locker room atmosphere. Another example is Dalton saying:

> So maybe slightly by like, just how positive [the] reception was in the fact that all my teammates were very, like, openly supportive. With that that I'm like, a little bit less like I don't know necessarily feeling like…I definitely am less hurt by smaller comments or whatever it might be that I would be when I was in the closet, because it's like, like you said, you internalize that stuff, right? When you're not sure whether or not you're going to be accepted, you're more likely to internalize those comments and you're more likely to just like, use it as confirmation bias.

However, as seen with Tobias and Santiago, when the athlete was able to communicate, and eventually connect, with their teammate, it dramatically improved their environment and their feeling of acceptance. I do agree with Miika that this needs to be done in steps, though. Miika says to start with family because they will always love and probably support you:

> I would say … start talking to people like, okay, do you talk to your mom? Not yet. No. What kind of relationship do you have with her? Very good one. Then talk to her. She loves you. She will always love you. Talk to her. You will feel better and then moving to your friends and then maybe to your agent or someone that kind of knows about the hockey culture.

Miika comments that this strategy will also allow for the athlete to move at their own pace and ensure they are comfortable with who they confide in. Once the athlete can feel more and more confident coming out, and that it will not ruin their career, they may be able to come out publicly.

Dalton, along with Jackson, Klaus, and Santiago, suggest that it is not just a matter of coming out to someone, but also of finding someone that you can confide in and be vulnerable with. The ideal of vulnerability was prevalent in almost all the interviews and seems to be an important part for individual development and feeling accepted. Dalton says:

> I think some people are going to be in a situation where they're not going to have people on their team when they feel that they can trust and be vulnerable with. I think ideally, there would be somebody else on your team, but if it's not someone on the team, literally anybody will do… Whatever your worst fear or whatever it might be comes true, if you're not welcome on your team anymore or this or that, you know, you at least know that there's that person there who's gonna have your back and is gonna remind you that you know, you did whatever you did for a reason. And you know, whatever reason is, is more important than whatever the response was from those people.

Santiago says that if you are not able to find someone in your circle to be vulnerable with, it is wise to seek out a psychologist. He suggests that they may also be able to help you if you are

struggling with depression. Santiago hypothesizes that the reason athletes do not see psychologists is because of the stigma.

Vulnerability is suggested to be an important goal to strive for, not just for gay athletes. Dalton says:

> But for me, I feel like specifically in men sports, like there are so few people who can cross over into being vulnerable and being themselves and like sharing parts of themselves. That it's a leadership quality. That's really rare. And I think that gay athletes automatically by being open and being openly gay athletes, like you automatically have a level of leadership and leading by example, and like leading with your front foot forward and being like, “Yeah, this is who I am. And, yes, it can be a part of me as an athlete." And I think that that in general is like a tremendous sign of leadership.

Here, Dalton is again confirming that there are a lot of cover stories in sport. Athletes are constantly having to determine how to portray themselves, especially when joining new teams and needing to redefine themselves year after year. In the introduction, I write about my own experience joining a new team and going through the process of negotiating and code switching. When I think about vulnerability, I am reminded of the 1994 Inaugural Speech of Nelson Mandela, which says:

> There’s nothing enlightened about shirking so that other people won’t be feel insecure around you. … And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people the permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fears, our presence automatically liberates others.

This powerful quote encapsulates the idea that if athletes can be vulnerable, it will allow those people around us to do the same.

They didn't have enough information

It's a process for both

In the literature review, there were many examples given that provide evidence when an athlete or team has experience with a gay athlete, their feelings towards gay athletes dramatically improve in the long term (Anderson, 2011; Anderson, 2017; Anderson & Fidler, 2017; Magrath et al., 2013; McCormack & Anderson, 2014b; Plummer, 2001; Roper & Halloran, 2007). Participants all say that despite their teammates initially being nervous about having a gay teammate, they felt more accepted over time. Tobias sums this up by saying:

> But with the time they saw that I was not going to do anything bad to them. So, they started to relax. And finally, they accept me. They even started to defend the cause because they… thought that being gay was okay. They started telling their families that it was okay that they had a team member in the in the team that that was a good person and that nothing bad happened to him. Something that for us is natural and normal. It was not in their minds. They didn't have this possibility of thinking that someone would like someone of their same sex. I realized at that moment that their problem was that they didn't have enough information. They have never had contact with someone that was gay, not in their teams or in their lives. So, in that moment, they came to the conclusion that nothing bad was happening. They changed their mind. And they even became a little gay friendly. So, in the end, it was a good experience. And I finally understood that it the problem was that they didn't have enough information about it more than their first thought about me.

Tobias's experience is a great example, showing how an athlete can go from being shunned from the locker room and showers because his team did not want to share those spaces with someone who is gay,

to being accepted. After accepting him as part of the team, they started defending him to their families and fans of the professional team, as Tobias would put it, “joining the cause.” Santiago parallels this thought saying:

> The more people out there, sharing their voice, like it could be more accepting because more people will have had the chance to see it more you know you see it more often until it could become normal, and it doesn't have to be a thing.

Jackson articulates that the experience a teammate has with a gay athlete allows them the chance to gain confidence in knowing the appropriate language to use as to not be offensive:

> I think there was obviously a bit of awkward awkwardness when it first happened, and we got to the first few major events and I think it was more that people just weren't sure what the right things to say.

Continuing with that idea, Santiago says that it is an educational journey for both the athlete and their teammates, as we grow and begin to understand ourselves and the culture more:

> I'm sure they still, they still learning too, you know, like, I feel like it's a, it's a process for both.

Miika suggests that by having repeated experiences, it will form a new normal in the sport culture by saying, “We need to do these things like a certain amount that it kind of becomes normal.” This idea of repeated experiences to change the grand narrative is exactly the point of a counter story.

The idea of having more athletes coming out, normalizing it, and giving more people the experience of having a gay teammate is one that I hold also. The worrisome outcome is that if the experience of the gay athlete is negative, it may have a ripple effect that may result in other gay athletes not coming out. It was seen with one of the athletes in the study, that they were told by their coach to not come out because of the impact my own coming out had on my career. Klaus told me:

> I was actually advised to not tell people I was gay. Especially future teams, just because I had a coach of mine who actually brought up your situation and how your career had taken a turn because of you being gay.

This is really concerning because, like the participants of this study, I came out to inspire people and to set an example for other gay athletes. However, because the sport community was not ready at that given time, it had the opposite effect, in this case. As Miika suggests, the key is to go slowly and ensure to "start with the small steps but also not ruining [your] carrier."

No one is born homophobic

All the participants say that education needs to improve around LGBTQ issues for everyone, not just for teammates, coaches, and administrators. Most of the participants feel it is necessary to have these lessons take place in the school system, with half of the participants suggesting in Health and Physical Education and a couple also suggesting in History classes. Jackson says that people who have negative feelings towards LGBTQ people are just in need of a little more knowledge around the topic:

> I'd say lack of education, when it comes to those, those topics, so not saying that they're not smart. I'm saying that there's a lack of just, I think, education around LGBTQ issues.

Tobias recites his own lack of education around sex, sexuality and gender growing up:

> In my town, I didn't have a sexual education with my family. We never talked about sex or sexual orientations. It was a topic that it was forbidden to talk about. I never received sexual education at a school. The education that was given about sexuality, was very little and it was bad. And we only talked about sexual reproduction and nothing else. They were explaining you this and they never see any other option like they never considered how you could feel and who do who you would like, like that matter of boy

> or girl, and there weren't any options. If you were a woman, you needed to like boys and if you were a boy, you needed to like girls, if you're a woman you need to feel as a woman. If you're a boy, you need to feel as a man.

Klaus thinks that education is the key to not only combating homophobia, but potentially also other injustices in our society:

> I honestly just think it has to do with a really well-rounded education when you're young, because no one's born a racist, no one's born homophobic. It's just environment you're in, that you grow up, then the environment that you grew up in, has a huge play in how you kind of view the world and how you view people.

Jackson also articulates the theme from other participants' by saying:

> I think school education… I think there's a lot of things they took it around, not just about… I do think that there needs to be more education and in schools and, you know, more programs for even adults. I think we need to change things in our education, curriculum and I think that's one of them. I think that we need to discuss that more…there is a place for it and maybe history, maybe read about the history of… LGBTQ and …what happened in the past."

Klaus thinks that changing sex education may be a big ask, at the beginning, but feels that gay people are being erased from history by omitting them from the classroom textbooks and discussions:

> Well, for example, a lot of, like queer people are erased from history. So, you go a long time before ever learning about the first queer person and you know, we have stories of famous politicians being secretly gay and, you know, writing love letters to people and, like these are known facts that are not taught to the public. And even though it's not

> something as crazy as like changing sex education to promote all sexualities and whatnot in such education, which I do believe that should definitely change.

There appears to be a serious lack of education around all LGBTQ people in the education system, which may also be an area that would produce substantial societal change. Unfortunately, Lee (2022) speaks to the "Don't Say Gay Bill" that was recently passed in Florida, USA, that prevents teachers from discussing sexuality and gender in their classrooms. With the passing of this bill, it appears that we are headed in the wrong direction, in terms of education, because this bill suggests that children need to be shielded from anything LGBTQ. It is because of flaws in the education system, that I think public opinion needs to improve first, before it is possible to make changes in education. It is that concept which sparked this study, with Tobias confirming saying, "This is a process; first we need to accept gays in the sports world. And then we can go one step farther."

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summary

The experiences of gay team sport professional athletes contain both positive and negative elements. Participants report feeling that straight boys do not have to face society as they do, with team sports being more difficult for gay athletes than individual sports. The participants also state they came out of the closet for other people, to be a role model. Because professional sport is a business that prioritizes money over athletes, it is still predicted to be decades away from true inclusion of gay athletes. Athletes may also report their experiences with a positive perspective, omitting their negative experiences. On their teams, athletes report feeling alienated, especially in the showers. Language is a big indicator for the inclusiveness of a team, with athletes reporting that it would be nice for their teammates to engage in conversations with them, especially allowing space to discuss their sexuality. Athletes who are struggling should seek someone to confide in, whether it is someone on their team or not. Verbalizing feelings and experiences with anyone are reported to help in the process for gay athletes who are struggling in their environment. Participants report that education is vital for improving the inclusiveness of the sport environment, both from within the team and in the school system.

Personal Contribution

It is important to reiterate that the participants of this study do not feel that they are on a level playing field with their heterosexual counterparts. It is precisely because of these feelings that they felt compelled to come out, aiming to prove that there are gay athletes out there, to inspire other athletes to come out, and to trailblaze for aspiring athletes to play or continue playing their sport. Despite their optimistic perspectives, athletes still predict that we are two decades away from reaching true inclusion. This prediction should be taken into context, though.

First, it is important to consider that this prediction is based upon their experiences in their sport and in certain countries. Despite my own efforts, there are corners of the globe that remain unexplored in this field. It is also important to realize that many countries have not overcome the homoerasure period outlined by Anderson (2009), meaning that they have not begun the process to inclusion, yet. The world offers a spectrum of acceptance and I feel that the predictions made in this study are only considering inclusion in the environment of that participant, and not throughout all sports and worldwide. Two decades is also quite long when considering the length of professional careers of athletes. Based on the responses of the participants, none of the athletes expect to compete after their sport has reached true inclusion. Two decades could be up to five generations of athletes if their careers are four years long, which is a normal career duration depending on the sport. Regardless of the feelings of the athletes and coaches, since sport is still a business, money will be the motivation of professional teams. If there is any risk in signing a gay athlete, the spot on the team will be given to a heterosexual athlete, which is a feeling that athletes reported in this study. It is disheartening that athletes feel they must negotiate between being themselves and happy with their ability to sign with a professional team, especially since that happiness was reported to improve performance and physical health. Despite all the barriers, it is the athletes who see the positives or only report the positives that were able to participate in this study. Omitting negative experiences or only reporting the positive side of experiences is something that I did not consider before this study, even though I am guilty of it as well. In Finland, my team was the first professional volleyball team in the world to walk in a pride parade, and I reported that it as a huge success. However, there were a couple players on the team who did not participate. In all my interviews, I reported that all my team was there and that we all had a fun time. I did not want to alienate them or bring more

attention to the topic. It could have turned the positive story into one of revenge and negativity, so I never mentioned it. When I was denied a contract for being gay, I also was very careful not to name the team or country because I wanted the story to be about the problem, not about the team. Additionally, I did not want potential teams to think that I was going to run to the press about any issues that might arise throughout the season, making it a risk for them to sign me.

The feelings of alienation were not a surprise because high performance sport is not designed to be a welcoming place. It was interesting to see the participants speak about how to improve language compared to how our national volleyball team is upgrading the environment. There are simple techniques that can be used to ensure check-ins with athletes, upgrading the language, and improving the environment to be more supportive. These strategies will undoubtedly help all athletes, not just gay ones. There is a delicate line to balance when considering that gay athletes must be patient with their teammates and their journey to acceptance, educating people when the opportunity presents itself, finding a way to survive in unwelcoming environments, and leaving teams or sports altogether. Across the participants, there are examples of athletes who changed teams or sports because of the behaviors of others and really enjoyed their new adventure. There are also examples of athletes remaining in unwelcoming environments and either struggling or actively trying to change them. This decision should be left to the athlete to make, which can be tough because they may be experiencing heavy emotions. For these reasons, the solution suggested was always to talk with the athlete and have them verbalize the situation.

Education can be an uphill battle, especially when politics and religion interfere. Anderson (2011) writes that the shift towards inclusion is not inevitable and that it is important to continue the fight towards true inclusion. The inclusiveness of sport is like a house of cards,

with each step forward being another card placed upon the stack, resulting in a higher tower. However, depending which card is displaced, the tower is susceptible to collapsing. This is how I see the inclusiveness of gay men in team sports because, regardless of how fortified we think the tower is, we must protect what we have and aim to add supports to it, aiming to ensure that it never falls. This is apparent when considering the recent laws in America, with the "Don't Say Gay Bill" and the erosion of the Privacy Act after Roe v Wade was overturned. Now the laws protecting 2SLGBTQ+ people are at risk for being dismantled too, including gay marriage. Therefore, despite the positive perspective by the participants in this study, it is important to continue pushing for inclusion, and to protect the progress made. Helping teams change the language that gets used and making changes in curriculum are difficult tasks but should be prioritized.

Academic Contribution

The results of this study indicate that there is a vast field still to be researched. Certain findings have not been noted in previous research, especially considering that the participants were sought using a new criterion; that being team sport athletes. The coming out experience of the athletes in this study paralleled those mentioned previously in literature. However, because there are different dynamics with professional athletes and their teams, teammates, and leagues, such as changing teams, there is much more to explore.

The motivation and pre-determined perspective of the athletes largely determines how they perceive and articulate their experiences. Without interviewing more athletes that have not been able to come out, it is hard to make a definite conclusion about this, but it appears that it is the athletes who choose to see positive aspects or focus on positive experiences who are the ones who are able to continue competing in their sport after coming out. Their initial overview of their

experiences did not always match their later conclusion upon further probing. For example, they might report that their career is going well, and that they have not experienced any homophobia. As the conversation continued, they may later report that they often feel alienated from their teams because of their sexuality or that they do not know how their teammates feel, prompting some concern. Sometimes this disconnect is due to their positive outlook, but it may also stem from them wanting to remain positive and conceal the negative interactions. It is important for researchers to follow up with athletes and allow them space for introspection, through directed questioning and perhaps also having the interview questions ahead of time.

Societal Contribution

Language plays a big role in the perception of inclusion towards gay athletes, which can improve a lot. Players must hold themselves accountable and implement their own language into their teams and sports, so gay athletes can feel more welcome. At the professional level, it may be possible for a gay athlete to take more of a leadership role in establishing a new vocabulary for their team, but it may be much tougher at the high school or post-secondary level. Athletes who have not reached the professional level yet may just want to enjoy learning and competing in their sport, as opposed to isolating themselves from the team and trying to police everyone. Therefore, at the younger ages, it may be more important for coaches to have a leadership role, to champion allyship, and strive to change the language being used on their teams and in their programs, by example and by explaining the importance of it. At the professional level, athletes are likely more mature and educated and capable of engaging in these conversations without the worry of being ostracized.

Across the participants, it was evident that there is still the lack of inclusion for gay athletes in the team sport setting. The participants often felt unwelcome, self-conscious, or

experienced micro-aggressions. By teammates engaging in conversations with their gay teammates, both parties will feel more comfortable, and it will result in a more inclusive space. Establishing a relationship with teammates is mentioned to be a positive strategy to improve the team chemistry, and eventually the team's performance, but also an important tool in overcoming obstacles in people's lives. To form these bonds, conversation is the only strategy mentioned. I am sure that acts of kindness would also be an effective tool but was not reported amongst these participants. Engaging in meaningful conversation may also be useful to educate teammates and familiarize them with the topics surrounding gay athletes. Athletes that do not feel comfortable coming out or talking with teammates should find someone to confide in and be vulnerable with outside of their sport, "anyone will do."

Jokes are a common way for teams to show acceptance of a gay athlete and for gay athletes to demonstrate how comfortable they are on the team. However, it is important that the jokes follow the gay athletes' lead as to ensure they are not taken too far. This is a different line to tiptoe around because the perception of a joke can differ from the intent easily. There may be a period where teammates are making jokes that cross the line, but this may be a rough period on route to their full accepting of the athlete, so the gay athlete may need to be patient. If the gay athlete does not think that the comments are improving, striking up a conversation about it and discuss the impact their comments are having may assist in their education and lead to a faster acceptance. Checking in on each other (as athletes or as a coach) without being prompted is a powerful way to ensure everyone feels comfortable with the jokes being said, which can also bring teams together.

Participants note that they often would not share the truth about their experiences for a few different reasons. This is another reason that establishing a strong connection with athletes is

important, so that they will feel comfortable being honest. Direct and clear questions will also allow space for gay athletes to articulate any issues that they may be having.

Joining new teams can be especially difficult for gay athletes. When a coach has a new player, gay or not, it might be useful for them to meet with the athletes occasionally to check in with them. Education for coaches and administrators is important, but for the culture to change. Participants hypothesize that a change in the curriculums for Health and Physical Education and History classes should include more topics about the 2SLGBTQ+ community, which will have a delayed effect on sport, but will certainly propel society toward inclusion. It may also be interesting to hear about famous gay people throughout history, how their sexuality impacted them, and how and why their sexuality was concealed. Hearing about other gay figures throughout history, whether they were athletes or not, normalizes the subject and will make people feel as if this is not a new phenomenon that is undiscovered. For aspiring athletes, there are undoubtedly many examples of athletes that competed in their sport that have come out somewhere around the world.

The themes that arose from the participants suggest that gay athletes still feel as they are disadvantaged in sport. Despite these perceived disadvantages, the participants continue to compete and are often championing inclusion simultaneously. Participants have found ways to compete and enjoy competing, even if their relationship with their teammates or their coach can improve. In the two cases that the participant felt uncomfortable, they found a way to leave that environment and join another sport or team that supports them, but importantly did not stop sport altogether. This is motivating to show that through adversity, people do not need to feel that sport is not for them. These examples demonstrate that there may be better options for people

who are not in welcoming or inclusive environments but finding the right space may require exploration.

These findings will be important when making suggestions to players, teams, and sport organizations on how to improve the sport climate and make sport more inclusive and welcoming for gay athletes. The findings also give a good indication that the bar for inclusion has progressed and we must continue to work to propel sport (and eventually society) in that direction, as the correlation was discussed earlier. It is concerning seeing that America is backtracking regarding the 2SLGBTQ+ community in the school system, and potentially with same-sex marriage, demonstrating what can happen when the proverbial foot is taken off the gas. Despite the predicted one-to-two-decade road towards real inclusion, the participants remain optimistic for where sport is heading. This is a positive sign and hopefully the suggestions given will aid in achieving inclusion sooner.

Implications

It is important to note the problems in the recruiting process and its potential impact on the study. Convenience sampling was utilized, along with third party recruiters (which had no participants volunteer through), meaning that all participants were in contact with me. These participants were known to the researcher, allowing an invitation to be sent with the hopes of participation, meaning it is possible to research the participants beforehand or have prior knowledge of their experiences, perhaps through previous discussion before the study began. As the recruiting was taking place, there was a trend occurring that the participants who were known to have had serious homophobic experiences (i.e.: forced by their team to engage in sexual activities in the shower after practice), or who were not out, at some point throughout the process, stopped all communication. There were five that fit this profile. It is disappointing that

these experiences could not be explored because they would have undoubtedly been very impactful and hopefully would have been compelling counter-stories. Unfortunately, this is the reality. I tried my best to reassure these potential participants that their identities would be concealed and that they would have full control over all their transcripts to ensure accuracy and that their identity was adequately concealed. Having done everything that I could possibly think of to ensure a safe environment, I wonder if it was the reliving of their traumas that resulted in their absence from the study. Unsurprisingly, it is the athletes I know are experiencing the most difficulties with their sexuality that did not respond to my call for participation. These difficulties have a wide range of geneses and implications. Other participants noted their reasoning for not participating, which was not asked for or expected, ranging from their focus needing to be on their season to their proximity to the conflict in Ukraine and Russia. The timeframe of this study offers challenges because most leagues throughout the world run during September to April, which is exactly when the data collection of this study took place. In total, 20 potential participants were contacted, resulting in 7 consent forms signed, and 6 interviews. If the data collection period is extended to go year-round, it would be possible to reach athletes who are in season and unable or unwilling to participate because they want to remain focused. Recruiting in Asia and the Middle East did not occur, which may also have dramatically impacted the findings. Recruiting through a third party yielded no potential participants, meaning that the only athletes that participated were known by and contacted me. The list of the athletes' aliases, sports, and country of participation can be found in Appendix 2.

The implications of the lack of interest to participate from those athletes may also have impact on other studies. If a researcher does a public call for professional athletes to participate in a study, then it is possible that these same athletes do not wish to participate again, which may

impact the results. Packankis (2019) predicts that 83% of sexual minorities around the world conceal their sexual orientation. This estimate is based off each countries' population size and their laws and policies, with the equation predictor being based off 28 countries. Considering that a substantial majority of this population is predicted to conceal their sexuality, I would also predict that there are many professional team sport athletes who also conceal their sexuality. Based on my own experience recruiting, I would also predict that these athletes have experiences of homophobia during their career. However, we will never know the true number of people who conceal their sexual orientation, and therefore cannot get a true representation of the level of homophobia in sport, as perceived by that population.

Another discussion point regarding recruiting stems from the inability to recruit; out of 6 participants, 3 are professional volleyball players. Athletes invited to participate compete in 8 different sports, including volleyball (7), American football (3), ice hockey (3), football (soccer) (3), baseball (1), basketball (1), curling (1), and rugby (1). The results of the study may have been different if half of the athletes did not play volleyball professionally. Efforts were made to contact athletes outside of the volleyball world, unsuccessfully. Regardless, the participants still offer informative results with themes emerging, and not just between volleyball players.

A heavy majority of the participants competed while out. It would be interesting to see the difference between the athletes who competed out vs those in the closet. But, because of the limited participants, this comparison cannot be made. Perhaps having in-person interviews would result in a more casual conversation, allowing the athletes to feel more comfortable sharing more intimate details.

Recommendations

For future studies, a change to the interview format to not have so many open-ended questions, which allowed for the conversations across participants to diverge, may offer more directed responses. I would recommend having a set of finding or quotes and get the thoughts of those by the participants. This method would keep the conversations on a similar path and would allow for more in-depth discussions around certain topics. Much of the feelings from the participants include secret stories, which are hidden to their teammates. Therefore, it would be interesting to compare gay athletes' perception of their sport or teams' climate compared to heterosexual teammates' perceptions. There is also an emerging field of sports called e-sports. This arena seems to be much more inclusive and offers a level playing field for everyone since games do not favor certain characters over others. This study focuses solely on athletes that self-identify as gay, but it may also be interesting to compare to athletes that do not identify as completely heterosexual. Personally, having a quantitative study that covers entire professional leagues regarding sexuality, gender and team atmosphere would be incredibly fascinating. The athletes were also originally from three different continents, leaving many other arenas unexplored. Since the athletes already feel alienated, concealing the identities of the athletes and allowing them the ability to review their transcript are vital components for future research. Because the athletes already state that they do not always give the whole truth, steps should be taken to allow the space for them to do so. The participants did not all review the interview questions beforehand, but some did comment that it allowed for them to introspect beforehand, resulting in deeper conversations. There are no other studies that contain athletes who are still in the closet.

Concluding Remarks

There is still a lot of work to be done to make male professional team sports more inclusive and welcoming for gay athletes. Despite their continued participation in sport, these athletes still feel alienated and do not expect that to change throughout their careers. It will likely still take decades to reach inclusion as the participants in this study defined it, but for other parts of the world still in the homoerasure stage, it will take even longer. Hopefully with the path already being somewhat paved towards inclusion, it could be accelerated for these later countries. The fight for inclusion may be forever ongoing, like the battles concerning racism and sexism, but that does not mean it is not worth continuing. There is the possibility of regression, so pushing forward is vital. Throughout the recent generations, the climate is improving, because of the work being done. The more athletes that come out, the more it will be become a "new normal." With the coming out of more athletes in high-profile sports, such as Carl Nassib, we may see a snowball effect in sport where having openly gay athletes becomes common. Ice hockey is the next sport to have a break-through athlete come out and open an entirely new arena for gay athletes to explore. Once this happens, all the major sports will have someone to look to and it may spark a culture change throughout all sports. As noted, experience results in increased acceptance, so the more athletes that come out the better the climate will get. This study aims to be a building block on that pathway towards true inclusion.

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Appendix 1 – NHL Players/Flores Country Rating Table

Country	**Flores (2019) Country Rating**	**Number of Players in NHL (2020-2021 season)**
Canada	8.2	345
United States	7.2	216
Sweden	7.9	82
Finland	7.4	48
Russia	3.4	41
Czech Republic	6.0	28
Switzerland	7.4	11
Germany	7.4	7
Denmark	7.9	6
Slovakia	5.0	6
France	7.1	3
Latvia	4.4	3
Austria	6.8	1
Belarus	3.5	1
Netherlands	8.6	1
Slovenia	5.9	1

Appendix 2 – Athlete Table

Athlete's Alias	Sport	Country of Participation
Santiago	Volleyball	+Spain
Tobias	Volleyball	+Austria
Miika	Ice Hockey	Finland
Dalton	Rugby	+United Kingdom
Jackson	Curling	Canada
Klaus	Volleyball	+Germany

* Athlete has not participated in their sport in the last year (either because of retirement, injury or other factors)
+ Country of participation is different from country of origin

Appendix 3 - Interview Guide

Potential interview questions

1. How did you choose [your sport] to play (professionally)?
2. How has being gay shaped you or played a role in decisions you have made (i.e.: sport you play, your behaviour, teams you've played on, countries you've played in)?
3. What makes you feel proud to be gay?
4. Were you out to anyone during your career? Any teammates, coaches, staff, physiotherapists?
5. What factors did you take into consideration when deciding if you would come out or not?
6. Did you ever feel you couldn't be honest about your sexuality?
7. Did you feel added anxiety during your career stemming from the idea that people might discover your sexuality?
8. Has your career been impacted by your coming out?
9. If you knew then what you know now, would you have come out?
10. What does inclusion for gay team sport athletes look like? What's the end goal? What are the steps to get there? Where are we now?
11. How does [your sport] compare to other sports in terms of inclusion of gay athletes? What can be done to improve the sport culture's inclusion?
12. How do we reduce the barriers for the next generation of athlete? What advice would you give to a gay athlete looking to play professionally? Is that advice the same for an athlete currently competing professionally?

Concluding questions

13. What three words come to mind when you think of a gay athlete?
14. Is there anything that we didn't discuss that you would like to share?

Appendix 4 – Word Cloud