Female Field Hockey Players and Gay Games Participation

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Abstract: The creation of the Gay Games and other gay and lesbian sporting events have provided a space for gay and lesbian athletes to participate in sports, free from the discrimination experienced in mainstream sports. The Gay Games in particular is the largest sporting and cultural event organised by and for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community, and is open to all skill levels, genders and sexual orientations. While the Gay Games are based on participatory discourses, the level of competition in some events at the Gay Games is relatively high for a participation-based event. Consequently, recreational level athletes are able to participate in a higher level of competition than they normally would in regular club competitions. An analysis of the experiences of lesbian-identified players from a recreational level women’s field hockey club in Australia and their Gay Games participation has revealed several positive outcomes for these athletes. Through participation at the Gay Games, these women have the opportunity to compete with and against players from other countries and sometimes at a higher level of competition than they would regularly engage in. They have formed new friendships and developed closer bonds with teammates in a homophobia-free space, and experienced a sense of personal empowerment. This paper will draw on interview and sociological material in order to explore the experiences of these women in relation to these themes and their participation at the Gay Games.

Keywords: Gay Games, Field Hockey, Lesbian Athlete, Personal Empowerment

Introduction

Field hockey¹ has been a sport historically participated in by white, middle class women and men in Australia. Unlike other popular team sports in Australia (soccer, rugby and Australian football), hockey has provided young female hockey players with several positive female role models. The Australian women’s team has had great success at the Olympic Games. The Australian women have won three Olympic gold medals, in 1988, 1996 and 2000, along with numerous World Championships and Champions Trophies. A response to this sort of success has been increased media coverage of the women’s hockey team and individual women players, and therefore more women participating in hockey. Participation in hockey in Australia is growing each year. According to the 2006 hockey census, around 138,000 people in Australia were registered with a club to play hockey, and almost 24,000 were registered in Victoria.

Along with participating at the club level of competition, some of these hockey players also compete at a state, national and international level of competition. One such international competition is the Gay Games, in which many gay and lesbian (and heterosexual) women (and men) hockey players participate. The aim of the present study is to investigate the experiences of a small group of women hockey players who ordinarily participate at a recreational level of competition, but also had the opportunity to play hockey at a major sporting event, the Gay Games. These experiences were of eight lesbian female participants who played field hockey in inner suburban Melbourne during the 2006 domestic competition. These women reflected on their experiences of participating at the Sydney Gay Games in 2002. Through their participation at the Gay Games, these women were provided with new experiences (such as playing in a higher level of competition and playing hockey for the first time), have formed new friendships,

¹ This paper forms part of a larger PhD thesis that focussed on the experiences of women from three field hockey clubs in Melbourne. For the purposes of this paper, ‘hockey’ refers to field hockey unless otherwise stated.
developed closer bonds with teammates, and experienced a sense of personal empowerment, within a homophobia-free environment.

**Homophobia and the Gay Games**

Homophobia can occur in many different situations in sport; from discrimination by coaches, spectators, competitors or team-mates, to non-compliance with anti-discrimination legislation or a lack of policy and procedures at the club level. Women who participate in sport, particularly team sports, often encounter stigmatisation or labeling, such as being called a ‘tomboy’ or ‘mannish, butch, dykes, lesbians’, because their sporting participation has historically been deemed gender inappropriate (Hargreaves 2000, 135; Hargreaves 1994; Sartore & Cunningham 2009; Lenskyj 2003; and Peper 1993). In an effort to protect themselves from the consequences of homophobia and the lesbian label in sport, many lesbian athletes have dropped out of sport, created new teams and competitions, or have become more politically active within existing sporting organisations. The establishment of the International Gay Games, for example, was developed in part to counter this situation, and is an example of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) individuals attempting to create a positive and affirming sporting environment for themselves.

The International Gay Games is a multi-sport, mass participation event (held every four years) and is ‘recognised as the premier athletic event that is supportive of lesbian, gay male, bisexual, and trans-gendered (LGBT) individuals’ (Krane, Barber & McClung 2002, 27). Krane et al. suggest that ‘because many of the participants experienced marginalisation in mainstream sport settings, it was especially significant to be in a supportive environment without concern for heterosexist prejudice and discrimination’ (2002, 28). The Gay Games provides such an environment.

The idea of a Gay Games originated with Mark Brown and Dr Tom Waddell in 1980. However, the idea was not without its problems:

> The Gay Games as conceived in 1980 had an almost comic start. Since there were no international ties to the sports organizations existing in the gay communities and since those organizations were generally functioning on local levels, or were confined to gender exclusivity, there was an initial skepticism about the viability of the Games. To many it seemed an impossible and foolhardy undertaking (Waddell 1982).

Despite this, a lot of hard work and determination from a group of volunteers meant that this skepticism quickly disappeared. Within two years, the first Gay Games were held in San Francisco. Since those 1982 Games, seven more Games have been held, in San Francisco, Vancouver, New York, Amsterdam, Sydney, Chicago and Cologne respectively. Gay Games IX is scheduled to be held in 2014 in Cleveland, Ohio (Federation of Gay Games n.d.).

In her extensive account of the social history of the Gay Games, Symons observed that inclusiveness was an important vision for the first Games, and this ‘inclusiveness had to encompass the diverse gay and lesbian population in the policies and practices of the Games’ (2004, 125). Policy and practices have been created since 1982 and provide the opportunity for the Games to be inclusive of all participants. The Gay Games has also been instrumental in the formation of a ‘community’. The idea that a sense of community was an intention of the Games is intimated by Waddell:

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2 In 2006, another multi-sport, mass participation event held for the LGBT worldwide community was held. Under the governance of the newly formed Gay and Lesbian International Sporting Association (GLISA), the world ‘Outgames’ were held in Montreal. According to GLISA, the ‘Outgames bring together lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) athletes from around the world in unprecedented numbers for a celebration of sport, culture and human rights’ (GLISA n.d.). Just like the Gay Games, the Outgames are open to all, regardless of sexual orientation.
The Gay Games are not separatist, they are not exclusive, they are not oriented to victory, and they are not for commercial gain. They are, however, intended to bring a global community together in friendship, to experience participation, to elevate consciousness and self-esteem and to achieve a form of cultural and intellectual synergy... Another prime objective was to permit the process of discovery among the many groups within the gay community, in particular the men and women. The previously disparate gay male and female groups within the gay subculture were suddenly in an interactive situation and the terms most descriptive of that interaction were: cooperation, friendship, and mutual support (1982).

Over time, Waddell’s vision of a non-separatist, participation based Games came to fruition.

Symons (2002) explored the idea of community at the Games in her article, ‘The Gay Games and Community’. According to Symons, the ‘social elements that sustain communities such as shared meaning, solidarity, belonging, participation, and even equality, are fostered at the Gay Games’ (2002, 111). Symons (2002) also points out that community is affirmed during events such as the opening and closing ceremonies of the Games, ‘where common cultures are celebrated and common concerns are recognised’ (111). While gay men and women come from differing countries, backgrounds and cultures to compete in the Games, the Gay Games has become a place where all can be uninhibited in a sporting and social setting, and an event that contests the ‘heterosexual hegemony of sport’ (Symons 2006, 149). Waddell suggests that the common goals for gay and lesbians, such as ‘...our insistence on freedom of expression, our vulnerability, [and] our creativity’, not only benefit gays and lesbians, but also society at large (1982). This culture at the Games, generally, displays unity and a space where one group does not exhibit power over another.

Central to the philosophy of the Gay Games is participation of all abilities in sporting events, from novice to elite. Participation is open to all abilities and emphasises participation and doing one’s best. These Games have also provided a stage for competition for elite athletes and teams. Elite athletes such as Judith Arndt from Germany, (world champion and Olympic silver medal cyclist); Bruce Hayes from the United States, (Olympic gold medal swimmer); and Petra Rössner from Germany, (Olympic gold medal cyclist) have all competed in at least one Gay Games (Federation of Gay Games n.d.).

It is important to acknowledge however, that events like the Gay Games and Outgames are not economically accessible for all people. The Gay Games are largely a white, male, middle class event, where the majority of those who participate, are from developed countries, particularly from the United States (Symons 2010). Therefore the Games are a luxury available to only part of the population. Davidson (1996) suggests that there has also been opposition to the Games. Davidson (1996) explains that fundamentalist Christian organisations have protested to have the Games banned and vandals have ‘spray painted homophobic graffiti on registration walls’ (77).

It is also pertinent to acknowledge that the ‘community’ at the Gay Games, is not one homogeneous population. For Symons (2002), the ‘lesbian and gay community’ of the Gay Games includes ‘lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered, drag queens, leather dykes and daddys, and queers from many different racial, ethnic and national backgrounds’ (2002, 101). Symons suggested that:

Considering the diverse communities participating in the Gay Games, and their different interests and political perspectives especially concerning the organisation and engagement with sport and leisure, tensions and conflicts are endemic and ongoing (2006, 156).

Conflicts within such diverse communities would not be unusual, as these groups struggle for power in the wider LGBT community. As the women in this study identified as gay or lesbian,
the experiences of these women at the Gay Games may be very different to other individuals at the Games.

Symons (2006) further explains that to encompass such diversity at the Gay Games, the Gay Games organisers and participants have implemented ‘some of the most progressive and inclusive policies and practices to promote this diverse participation in sport’ (156). These policies had to ensure that ‘peoples living with HIV and AIDS, as well as transgendered and intersex peoples’ were included in such policies and practices (Symons 2010, 244). Therefore, the inclusiveness policies formulated and adopted by the Gay Games needed to encompass all aspects of the LGBT community.

Research Design

This research takes an interpretive approach to analysis. Similar to research conducted by Litchfield and Dionigi (2012), the research is interested in ‘understanding people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it’ (Taylor & Bogdan 1998, 7). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) explain that qualitative research recognises that there are always other ways to interpret the lives and stories of the people being studied. In particular, this study analyses the case study interview material from female field hockey players (aged 22-52 years old) who have participated in at least one Gay Games events, within a post-structural framework.

Data Collection and the Participants

The female participants in this study came from a field hockey competition based in inner-northern suburban Melbourne, Australia. Participants were recruited via a combination of both snowball and purposive sampling. Typically, snowball sampling refers to ‘cases of interest from sampling people who know people, who know people, who know what cases are information rich, that is, good examples for study, good interview participants’ (Patton 2002, 243). In the case of this research, a base of two personal contacts elicited further appropriate contacts and from there, several more possible participants were identified.

The significance of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich participants/cases or pre-defined groups for in-depth analysis that are related to the central issues being studied (Ritchie & Lewis 2003, 78-80). This research project involved the use of both of these sampling methods to research a pre-defined group of community club athletes. To be included in this study, athletes had to form part of the same sub-culture, in this case, female hockey players playing at a recreational level in a given geographical location.

The participants were recruited from both the women only Northern Central Hockey Club (NCHC) and the mixed gendered Melbourne Central Hockey Club (MCHC). The average age of the eight participants was 39 years. All participants competed in hockey in a recreational level competition operated by Hockey Victoria (the State Sporting Association), in the regular winter season of 2006. Six of the eight participants were white and middle-class. All but one of the participants had reached a tertiary level of education, with three having completed post graduate qualifications. All participants were in some form of professional employment at the time of their interview. No participant was identified as ‘married’, and all eight of the participants interviewed identified their sexuality as either ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’. All, except for two participants, were involved in a romantic relationship.

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3 Pseudonyms are used for both the hockey clubs and the participants. Participants for this study were chosen from a larger base of participants in Litchfield’s PhD dissertation. Please see Litchfield 2012. Seven participants were chosen from NCHC and one participant was chosen from MCHC. All eight participants competed in the same team in the regular hockey season in 2002 when the Sydney Gay Games were held, and all eight participants competed in the 2002 Sydney Gay Games in either hockey or soccer.
The eight participants were interviewed after matches, training sessions or other times and locations that were convenient. In-depth interviews were used to explore the participants’ lived experiences of belonging and identity at their hockey club. Additional topics included their sporting backgrounds, community, safe spaces in sport, and club culture. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 30 and 70 minutes each.

**Participating at the Gay Games**

Many of the participants had participated in at least one Gay Games in either the sports of field hockey or soccer. However, the current study focuses on the experiences of participants at the Sydney Gay Games in 2002, as this was the Games that all participants had attended. Participating at the Gay Games resulted in several positive outcomes for the participants. Some of these outcomes included: new experiences at the Games (such as competing at a higher level of competition and playing hockey for the first time); forming new friendships and developing closer bonds with teammates; and experiencing a sense of personal empowerment, and these themes will be explored below.

**New Experiences at the Gay Games**

A common theme among the women in this study was the opportunity to compete in sport with a diverse range of team-mates. This includes the participants competing with and against women from other countries. Skeeter describes her experiences:

> The Gay Games give people an opportunity to play at a level… that they wouldn’t otherwise have, so I was playing with the team that was playing quite a low grade in our Victorian competition, yet when we went to the Gay Games … we were in the grand final against Germany. Now that’s not something I’d ever done before and I don’t know if that’s something I’ll ever be able to do again (Skeeter 22 years).

Claire also touched on this aspect; ‘… it was just great and to play against teams from Germany [and] other Australian teams’ (Claire 40 years). She further explained that she was able to play in the same team as other women from countries outside of Australia:

> Well, NCHC sent a team and there was still people in Victoria who wanted to play, so I set up another team and we got international players as well. Players from the UK, America and Holland, Scotland and England, so we made a kind of international mixed team (Claire 40 years).

Another participant, Summer, participated in soccer (football) at the 2002 Gay Games and had a similar experience of competing with international players as team-mates: ‘I played soccer… not hockey and I played for Texas actually, so for me it was great…’ (Summer 36 years).

Other participants suggested that the opportunity to compete with and against players from around the world meant that their playing level increased at the Gay Games. Skeeter maintained that ‘…it was probably one of the best games I’ve ever played at such a high level… it was just this amazing experience (Skeeter 22 years). Dawn also mentioned that her hockey team played some of their best hockey:

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4 Despite most of the participants playing hockey at the 2002 Gay Games, one of the participants participated in soccer at the 2002 Gay Games and her experiences are included in this paper.
We did not for one minute think that we would do as well as we did. We played the best hockey. We connected like we have never connected before and it was just it was great it was a highlight, absolute (sic) great. We loved it (Dawn 49 years).

For some, playing hockey began at the Games. Grace explained that by being a spectator at the Gay Games, she was encouraged to participate:

I went up to the Gay Games… and I was going to be the orange cutter but they didn’t have enough players and so I ended up playing which was great fun and… I [had] never played hockey before, so since then I’ve got involved as well (Grace 40 years).

By attending the Gay Games in 2002, Grace was provided the opportunity to participate in hockey, and has since become a regular hockey participant.

Therefore, for most of the research participants, the experience of participating at the Games meant that they were able to compete with women from international settings, and for some, this experience facilitated a higher playing level. The Gay Games also provided women like Grace, the opportunity to participate in hockey for the first time.

Forming New Friendships and Developing Closer Bonds with Team-mates

While mainstream sport can provide a space for heterosexual women to develop friendships and close bonds with team-mates, lesbian women can be excluded from such an environment, particularly in predominantly heterosexual sporting teams. Therefore, events such as the Gay Games provide a sanctuary for lesbian women to form new friendships with other lesbian (and heterosexual) women and develop closer bonds with their existing team-mates. This culture was apparent in the interview data. Summer felt that the social side of events such as the Gay Games were the most affirming aspect.

I think that’s [the social aspect] the positive thing that comes out of it. You get to meet a whole lot of people that you wouldn’t otherwise and in our environment… where you know being gay you are the minority [usually] and for a change you are the majority, which is an interesting experience… (Summer 36 years).

Similarly, Connie suggested that because sport provides ‘an excellent way to get to know people’ (Connie, 32 years), that the social features of events such as the Gay Games were important.

Most of the participants felt as though the Games provided an opportunity to make new friends. Summer explained ‘… I met a whole lot of … people that I hadn’t met before (Summer 36 years). Connie explained that she was able to meet many new friends by competing in the ‘international’ hockey team at the Games; ‘we were the left overs and we were mixed up in a team but…it was excellent, it was really great’ (Connie 32 years).

Incidentally, Connie was about to embark on a move from the Netherlands to Australia just after the 2002 Gay Games and after meeting new friends at the Games, had decided to play hockey with some of these women on a regular basis. She explained:

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

Connie has since found a female partner at the club and at the time of the interview was ‘engaged’ to this partner. Hargreaves (2000) explains that many lesbians participate in sporting
cultures where they can meet and socialise with other same-sex attracted women (p. 152). For some women, this is simply about camaraderie and community, for others it is an opportunity to find love (Griffin, 1998). As a result, lesbian sporting teams and clubs often provide a space to identify as a lesbian and belong to a community.

Dawn explained that the Games was ‘…a great opportunity just to get together and play together and, and have fun together’ (Dawn 49 years). She further explained the day-to-day bonding processes for the women competing in her team at the Games:

…it was the hockey, it was the getting there, it was you know, meeting each other really bleary eyed at 7.30 in the mornings. It was hanging about afterwards and warming down. It was going to the pool and you know, having a spa together. It was getting back into the city and meeting somewhere… go into a dyke bar and having a few drinks and something to eat and, and going out for a bit of a rage afterwards. It was winning the silver medal in the grand final. It was everything. It was absolutely everything. It was brilliant. We had a ball (Dawn 49 years).

Dawn felt that the experience of being away with women from her regular hockey team meant that they could bond in a different way than they would in the regular hockey season.

Cassandra commented that the experience of participating at the Gay Games and winning a silver medal meant that she had also developed a closer bond to her team-mates that didn’t attend the Gay Games. ‘My team-mates were so supportive… because they were proud, they were more proud of my silver medal than I was’ (Cassandra 52 years). Therefore, the experience of participating at the Games had bonded team-mates who both attended and did not attend the Gay Games.

Experiencing a Sense of Personal Empowerment

A final theme that emerged out of the participant’s interview analysis was the concept of personal empowerment that these women experienced at the Games. Personal empowerment is more likely to occur in a space that is safe and open. In her study on an Australian Rules women’s football team, Hillier describes a ‘safe space’ as a site for ‘young women to test gender and sexuality boundaries in relative safety’ (2005, 5). Litchfield (2011) also observes this ‘safe space’ and culture in one of the women’s field hockey teams in Melbourne. In the present study, the women expressed feelings of freedom, belonging, community, and all of these participants described the experience of participating at the Gay Games as a positive one. These positive experiences at the Games affirmed the women’s lifestyles and experiences as normal and natural.

Karen described her experiences of the Sydney Gay Games in 2002:

It was just fantastic. Ah, not that there were many hockey clubs, but just the whole feeling around Sydney itself, it was just, you felt a sense of freedom in a way… just walking down the street… there was that sense of absolute freedom I felt. Just the opening ceremony, and the thousands of people, you were just there for the same reason, and look, whether there were straight people there as well participating, they were there because they embraced the people they were with. It was really quite a wonderful feeling (Karen 42 years).

Karen declared that she would not normally feel the same freedom as a lesbian identified woman, outside of the Gay Games experience. Therefore, the Games provided a different type of ‘freedom’ for these women. Griffin (1998); Hillier (2005, 62); Litchfield (2011); and Shire, Brackenridge and Fuller (2000, 53) have also described such sporting contexts as potentially ‘safe’ environments for women to ‘come out’, and affirming spaces for women of diverse sexual orientations.
Many of participants mentioned the feeling of ‘freedom’ and the Gay Games as an environment where one could be themselves. Dawn described her experiences of participating at the Sydney Gay Games as one of the ‘highlights of her life’ (Dawn 49 years). Similarly, Claire recounted her experiences of the Sydney Gay Games:

Oh, it was fantastic... the whole experience was fantastic, the tournament was great but the whole... the opening ceremony was just mind boggling... the stadium was filled to capacity, it was just like an Olympic opening... it was phenomenal and beautifully stage managed with shows and performances and Justice Michael Kirby made an amazing speech. Yeah, to walk around Sydney at that time, there were just thousands of athletes from all over the world and everybody had their Games ID around their neck, so you knew who was part of it. It was just an amazing vibe... it was excellent! (Claire 40 years).

Summer also explained why she felt that participation in the Gay Games was a positive experience:

I mean I think it’s great because you can get out and be who you are and act, behave with your partner or your supporters without feeling intimidated and so I think that that’s a positive thing… (Summer 36 years).

The positive experiences of the participants are confirmed by the extensive research into the history of the Gay Games by Symons. Symons (2002) found that the ‘social elements that sustain communities such as shared meanings, solidarity, belonging, participation, and even equality, are fostered at the Gay Games’ (111). However, such a culture does not exist in mainstream sport for many of the lesbian identified participants.

Along with the feeling of ‘freedom’, many of the participants touched on the notion of a ‘sub-culture’ or ‘community’ in regards to the Gay Games. However, as discussed earlier, this ‘community’ is not one homogenous population, it consists of several communities participating each with their own identities and agendas. Symons proposes that there is ‘no one Gay Games’ that reflects one single community, there ‘is a multiplicity of Gay Games lived by the various participating individuals, groups and communities’ (2002, 111). While the individual experience of Gay Games participation is unique, participants from this study found their involvement in the Gay Games to be overwhelmingly positive and affirming.

Cassandra considered the term ‘sub-culture’ when referring to the gay and lesbian sporting population. She explained:

It’s about celebrating a sub-culture and that’s what we have been, and so why not have a celebratory games sub-culture, and isn’t it important to have sub-cultures in our community? You know, having police games and fireman games and all of the other games, they are sub-cultures too. No different to us being a sub-culture to celebrate who we are. For someone who is really quite discriminatory of it, I think that it is really important to have our sub-culture celebrated as it is… (Cassandra 52 years).

Cassandra also raised the concept of a ‘safe space’. Claire’s feelings harmonized with Cassandra and she explained that ‘it’s a celebration and again it’s a safe space’ (Claire 40 years). However defined, this culture provided the participants from the current study with a space to experience personal empowerment.

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5 For a more detailed discussion of these identities and agendas, see Symons (2002); and Symons (2010).
Discussion

The first theme, new experiences at the Gay Games, showed that the women interviewed had participated with and against other women from a range of countries. While it is not unusual for women to participate against women from other countries in events such as the Games, participating in the same team as women from other countries was particularly pertinent, as it extended the friendship group of the participants and provided a unique experience. Such an experience would not be available to the women in their normal weekly hockey competition.

Also, despite the Games being framed in participatory discourses, in some cases, the women were provided the opportunity to compete at a higher level than they would normally participate in. This challenge of competing at a higher level meant that many of the participants were able to ‘step-up’ to a higher personal level of play. For many of the women interviewed, this translated as the opportunity to ‘play-off’ for a gold medal at the Games. According to the Federation of Gay Games website, many LGBT elite athletes have competed at the Gay Games, including world champions and gold medallists (Federation of Gay Games n.d.). Therefore, for some participants, the experience of participating at the Games has become an opportunity to participate in a competitive environment. For others, the Games provided the opportunity for a different new experience, that is, to participate in hockey for the first time.

The second theme, forming new friendships and developing closer bonds with teammates, described firstly, how the participants formed friendships with a variety of women they met and/or competed with or against at the Gay Games. While this is not generally an unusual occurrence in everyday sport, it is less likely for lesbian identified women to easily develop these friendships in a mainstream sport setting (See Hillier 2005; and Hargreaves 2000). Therefore, such friendships would not have been possible without events such as the Games being available to these women. According to Griffin, ‘sport has played a historic role in the development of community among lesbian athletes’ (1998, 182). Secondly, some of the participants also felt that bonds between existing team-mates were strengthened through participation at the Games. The Games provided a homophobia free space for these lesbian identified women to interact and bond in ways that they would not normally be able to do in most hockey club settings. Such bonding may be attributed to both the Games being held in Australia, and the financial independence of the participants, and may not have been possible if these women were younger and less financially independent. Financially independent women with an average age of 39 years made up the women in this study, and Symons (2002) explains that the Gay Games is still an event that is largely for the ‘affluent, developed nations of the world’ (112). All participants had been working in paid employment for many years, enabling a steady income and independence. This economic position ensured the women were able to socialise together outside of the club and attend events such as the Gay Games, further strengthening their bond as team-mates and friends, and the ability and space to make new friends at such events. However, from a socio-economic perspective, events such as the Gay Games could be viewed as performing discrimination, as they are not available to all who wish to participate.

The final theme of experiencing a sense of personal empowerment was evident in many of the participant’s responses. Such empowerment was expressed through experiences at a personal level and community level. For example; most women alluded to the personal freedom associated with being oneself and feeling free from discrimination at the Games, along with playing in a team environment where all sportswomen were either lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or heterosexual women who embraced the LGBT community. On this occasion, sport has provided a space for women to feel empowered. Such empowerment has been also discussed by Griffin 1998; Hargreaves 2000; Hillier 2005; and Krane, Barber & McClung 2002.

In their usual weekly hockey competition, not all of these women were ‘out’ as lesbians to opposition players, teams and the hockey organisation. However, at the Gay Games, these women didn’t have to ‘manage’ their identities. Griffin further explains that many lesbian
athletes describe a ‘variety of identity management strategies’ used to overcome ‘manifestations of homophobia and heterosexism’ in sport (1998, 147). In the present study, the participant’s lesbian identities were empowered and affirmed through their participation at the 2002 Gay Games.

**Limitations**

The fact that the Games are only available to those who can afford to participate negates the premise of inclusion advertised by the Gay Games. Therefore this study is simply a snapshot of a specific group of middle class, educated, economically independent women, and might not necessarily be the experience of all women. Additionally, the experiences for gay men, bisexuals or transgendered individuals might also provide a different story.

**Concluding Comments**

The experiences of these women provide a contribution to the knowledge about the Gay Games and an insight into the lived experiences of some of the participants at the Games. Mainstream sporting events and mainstream society, where heterosexuality dominates, has provided a place (in the past at least) for homophobia and exclusionary practices. Although there are political issues between communities within the LGBT population, essentially the Gay Games provides a space where gender and sexual orientation is celebrated and diversity is expected.

Along with providing policies to promote an equal representation of women and men, participation opportunities regardless of age, ability, HIV/AIDS and transgender status and offering alternatives to the heterosexist traditions of some sports (such as the inclusion of same-sex ballroom dancing at the Games), it is a space that can be described as inclusive for those who participate at the Games. Additionally, opportunities exist at the Games that are not necessarily available in everyday club level sport. Although many participants of recreational level sport will never experience a higher level of competition, particularly the opportunity to participate with and against people from other countries, such an opportunity can exist at events such as the Gay Games. Participants at the Games are also able to form new friendships and bond with new and existing team-mates in a homophobia free space, and also feel a sense of personal empowerment, with little focus on winning and losing.

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