Sports: Lesbian

by Tina Gianoulis

Lesbians and athletics have been identified with each other since long before the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion alerted mainstream straight America that there was a large queer minority in its midst.

The relationship between women and sports has traditionally been problematic. Members of the dominant society have often tried to keep strong women in their place by labeling women of great achievement in any field "mannish" and "unnatural." Especially in sports, women have been encouraged to curb their competitive instincts and physical prowess by the fear of these labels.

From Babe Didrikson in the 1930s and Billy Jean King in the 1970s to college athletes in 2000, outstanding female sportswomen have been rumored to be lesbians, even when they claimed to be straight and were married to men. While these rumors were usually intended to hurt and stigmatize, quite often they happened to be true.

Athletics and Lesbian Culture

The connection between lesbianism and athletic achievement is complex and many-faceted. It may be that young lesbians are drawn to athletics because they are attracted to women-only environments or because sports give young women an opportunity to take themselves seriously and to push their physical limits and develop their skills in ways that more traditionally "feminine" activities do not.

Whatever the reason, sports are undeniably a central part of lesbian culture.

A telling example of the importance of sports to lesbian culture is the fact that softball teams are cherished institutions in many lesbian communities. Indeed, joining a lesbian softball team is often the first move a new lesbian in town makes to meet other like-minded women.

Almost every major city has its own softball league (often with unmistakable marks of lesbian "processing," such as allowing team members to take turns coaching or softening rules according to players' individual strengths and weaknesses and needs).

More generally, whether it is participating in a community softball team, cheering on the local university women's basketball team, or watching Martina Navratilova smash a serve over the net on television, many lesbians love identifying with "jocks." Unfortunately, homophobia and discrimination have prevented many jocks from identifying themselves as lesbians.

Dragged Out

Those who have done so have usually been dragged out of the closet unwillingly. In 1981, Czech-born tennis star Martina Navratilova confided to a reporter that she was bisexual and involved in a relationship with lesbian writer Rita Mae Brown. She soon found her secret published in newspapers across the country. Even

then, she was reticent about her sexual orientation until 1991, when a breakup with a subsequent lover, Judy Nelson, resulted in a highly publicized "palimony" suit.

Another tennis great, Billy Jean King, was also "outed" by an ex-lover's lawsuit in 1981. Even after the widely publicized legal battle, King continued to deny that she was a lesbian until 1998.

The Discrimination against Lesbians in Athletics

The pressure on female athletes to avoid the appearance--and taint--of lesbianism is enormous and fueled by discrimination. Discrimination against lesbians in athletics has been like lesbian participation in sports in that both have been, in the words of Liz Galst, "simultaneously blatant and hidden."

Because many colleges and universities have policies of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, attacks on lesbians (or supposed lesbians) within athletic departments are usually indirect and veiled. However, in the hostile environments that often exist in athletic programs, mere rumors are often sufficient to affect negatively the career of a lesbian athlete or coach.

It is not uncommon for a coach to lose her job after rumors of her lesbianism surface, and recruiters sometimes spread rumors to disparage the coaches of rival teams. Even on college campuses that have active gay and lesbian associations and openly lesbian and gay faculty members in other departments, lesbian coaches and athletes are often afraid to come out to members of their own teams.

The Roots of Homophobia in Women's Sports

Perhaps the roots of homophobia in women's sports lie in the cultural assumption that sports are *for* men. While women who excel at athletics are frequently suspected of abnormality, the reverse is true for men: those who don't choose to participate in athletics and those who have no interest in sports teams are considered unusual, unnatural, perhaps even queer.

While participation in sports is a required part of the socialization of boys and young men, girls and young women who are drawn to athletic competition are perceived as stepping outside their acceptable sphere of socialization. They are often regarded as claiming something that belongs to men.

While boys prove themselves on the athletic field, learning teamwork and testing and improving their physical limits and skills, girls are routinely edged off that field. Using ridicule ("You throw like a girl!") and name-calling (from "tomboy" to "dyke"), male-dominated society persuades most girls to find more acceptable and "feminine" outlets.

Title IX

Those girls who do remain involved in athletics usually find themselves participating in under-funded, under-respected, and under-attended athletic events. In 1972, Congress passed Title IX, the Education Amendments of 1972, requiring equal participation and funding for both men and women in all educational institutions, including athletics.

Title IX has had a dramatic impact on women's sports. According to the National Federation of High School Associations, 294,015 girls competed in high school sports in 1971, the year before Title IX was passed. By 1995, that number had risen to 2,240,461. To describe this increase another way: before Title IX, one in twenty-seven girls participated in school sports; twenty-five years after the passage of Title IX, the number had risen to one in three. No wonder it is currently under attack by conservatives.

Even so, compliance with Title IX is so loosely enforced that the vast majority of colleges still have large inequities between their men's and women's athletic programs, with men receiving a much greater share of

resources. This inequity continues into professional sports as well. The *Forbes Magazine* 1995 list of the forty highest paid athletes included only one woman.

Beating the Odds: Didrikson

However, well before President Nixon signed Title IX into law, lesbians were beating the odds to make names for themselves in sports.

In 1932, a semi-professional basketball player from Beaumont, Texas, Mildred Didrikson, entered an Amateur Athletic Union track and field championship. The woman who would become one of the most versatile and accomplished athletes of the twentieth century entered eight events as a one-woman team and won six, as well as the championship. Eight points behind Didrikson, a team of twenty-two women came in second.

Didrikson, nicknamed "Babe" by the boys who admired her skill at sandlot baseball, went on to win two gold medals and a silver medal in track and field in the 1932 Olympic Games. She became a renowned golfer, winning fifty-five professional and amateur tournaments during her career. She was named Female Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press six times between 1932 and 1955, and, in 1950, was given the title Female Athlete of the Half Century.

Didrikson's career was filled with struggles against both a journalistic establishment and an athletic establishment that disparaged her achievements by calling her "unnatural." She fought back with the cocky confidence and flamboyant humor that she had developed growing up poor and self-reliant in the streets of Beaumont.

She also fought back by breaking down every barrier that was erected against her. For example, when the upper-class ladies golf establishment barred her from their refined amateur tournaments because she was a professional player, Didrikson helped found the Ladies Professional Golf Association. The LPGA helped put women's golf on a more nearly even footing with men's golf by giving professional women golfers a venue comparable to the Professional Golf Association, though far from equal in prize money.

Didrikson was not able to live openly as a lesbian, but her remarkable career nevertheless inspired other lesbian athletes. The epitaph on her tombstone in Galveston, Texas reads "Babe Didrikson Zaharias--1911-1956--World's Greatest Woman Athlete."

King

Babe Didrikson was followed by other pioneering lesbian athletes.

Billie Jean King, born Billie Jean Moffitt, in Long Beach, California, in 1943, began playing tennis at eleven years old and won her first championship at fifteen. By the time she retired in 1984, King had won a record twenty Wimbledon championships and thirteen U.S. Open titles. She had also brought more prize money and respect to women's tennis than any women's sport had received up to that time.

King helped found the Women's Tennis Association, started the magazine *WomanSport*, and was one of the catalysts for the beginning of the Virginia Slims Tournament. A feminist since the early days of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, King worked diligently for the rights of girls and women, both on the playing field and off.

In a lighter vein, she participated in the 1973 "Battle of the Sexes," where she played against 55-year-old men's tennis champion Bobby Riggs. Riggs had baited King for two years, claiming that women had no place outside the home, and that any man could defeat any woman in a sporting event.

King finally agreed to the match, a heavily hyped event in the Houston Astrodome, where she soundly defeated Riggs in three straight sets. King's victory not only won her the $100,000 prize, but also gave a boost to girls' athletics nationwide.

Like Didrickson, King did not live openly as a lesbian during the years of her athletic triumphs. Despite a widely-publicized palimony suit, during which she referred to her "bisexuality" as a mistake, King did not acknowledge her lesbianism until 1998. In 2000, as coach of the U.S. women's tennis team, she became the first openly lesbian coach of an Olympic team.

Navratilova

Another well-known lesbian athlete is also a tennis legend. Martina Navratilova, who won at Wimbledon nine times between 1978 and 1990, was a lesbian icon long before she came out publicly as a lesbian herself.

Born in 1956 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, Navratilova held the Czech singles title from 1972 to 1974, before she defected to the United States in 1975. An awkward, shy teenager, Navratilova worked for several years in U.S. tournaments before she came into her own as an aggressive serve-and-volley player.

Besides her wins at Wimbledon, she won the U.S. Open four times, the Australian Open three times, and the French Open twice, setting a record in 1984 with 72 straight wins. Like King, Navratilova advanced the reputation of women's tennis and became the first woman to earn $1,000,000 a year playing tennis.

Although she resisted the attempts of the press to bring her out of the closet, perhaps fearing the impact a revelation might have on her prospects for U.S. citizenship, once she came out, Navratilova became a national spokesperson for gay rights.

The Costs of Coming Out

Both King and Navratilova paid high prices financially for being lesbians. Immediately after King's lesbianism was exposed, she lost all of her endorsement contracts, since she was no longer identified in the public imagination only with wholesome athletic achievement.

Navratilova, perhaps the best-known lesbian in professional sports, holds the all-time record for tournament victories, male or female. Despite this, she has consistently received fewer endorsement contracts than either her male counterparts or her more "feminine" female rivals.

Encouragingly, however, in a move that may presage some change in public acceptance of lesbian athletes, in 2000 Subaru signed Navratilova, along with other female athletes, to advertise its Forester model.

Women's Golf

Babe Didrikson's pioneering work in women's professional golf seems particularly appropriate since women's golf has frequently been viewed as a hotbed of lesbian athletic activity, and the LPGA that Didrikson helped found is sometimes derisively dubbed the "Lesbian Professional Golfers Association."

A controversial article in the April, 1997, *Golf Plus* supplement to *Sports Illustrated* entitled "Lesbian Spring Break," detailed the party atmosphere in Palm Springs, California, where up to 20,000 women, many of them lesbians, gather each year to watch the Dinah Shore Golf Tournament.

Lesbians as Sports Fans

Although many felt that *Sports Illustrated* exploited the subject of lesbians' interest in women's sports, the

article did describe a real phenomenon within the lesbian community. Many successful athletes are lesbians, and many more lesbians are ardent fans of those athletes. Just as many lesbian golf fans travel to Palm Springs to watch a premier women's golf tourney, hundreds of lesbians flocked to Wimbledon to watch Martina Navratilova play tennis.

In smaller venues nationwide, this pattern repeats itself, as lesbians pack arenas to cheer on local university and professional teams. The new women's professional leagues such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) draw crowds of enthusiastic lesbian fans, not only to view the games in person, but also to gather in homes and watch games on television.

Positive Change

Although it is still not easy to be an openly lesbian athlete, there has been some positive change in this regard. In 1993, Martina Navratilova was joined on stage at the March on Washington for Gay Rights by another Olympic tennis gold medalist, Gigi Fernandez.

The 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta offered, for the first time, a Gay and Lesbian Visitors Center that logged in up to a thousand visitors a day.

In 1996, Muffin Spencer-Devlin became the first professional woman golfer to come out as a lesbian. She was followed by hall-of-famer Patty Sheehan and Australian LPGA star Karrie Webb.

Tish Johnson, a leading money-winner on the Ladies Professional Bowling Tour, has also come out publicly. As more lesbians find the courage to declare themselves, they break a trail that makes it easier for other lesbians to follow.

In January, 1999, when French tennis star Amélie Mauresmo came out at the Australian Open, surprisingly supportive media criticized, not Mauresmo, but the homophobic comments made by some of her opponents.

Similarly, in 2004, when acclaimed golfer Rosie Jones came out publicly her announcment was greeted with support rather than derision. Jones, who has won more than a dozen LPGA titles and more than $7,000,000 in winnings over a long career, simultaneously announced her lesbianism and an endorsement deal with Olivia, the lesbian and gay travel company.

In 2005 WNBA basketball superstar Sheryl Swoopes announced publicly that she is a lesbian. As with Jones, Swoopes took this bold step with the support of her league and an endorsement deal with Olivia. Perhaps most tellingly in terms of a trend toward greater acceptance of lesbian professional athletes, she also had the support of her principal sponsor, footwear giant Nike.

Gay Games

Gay and lesbian athletes have also responded to discrimination within the sporting world by creating their own venue, the Gay Games. Community softball and soccer teams have long been places for lesbians to meet and gather, and the Gay Games created an international network for these teams.

Begun in 1982, the sports and cultural festival has recurred every four years in locations as varied as Vancouver, British Columbia, New York City, and Amsterdam, attracting over 10,000 participants, about one third of them lesbians. The 2002 games were held in Sydney, Australia; the 2006 event, once scheduled for Montreal, will be held in Chicago.

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