

Exploring the attitudes towards homosexuality of a semi-professional Swedish football team with an openly gay teammate

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Introduction

Men's contact team sports, such as football, have historically been understood as a hostile environment for sexual minorities (Hekma, 1998; Parker, 1996; Pronger, 1990). In recent years, however, academic research has documented how team sports have become increasingly progressive for gay athletes (Anderson, 2011; Anderson & McGuire, 2010; Magrath, Anderson & Roberts, 2015). As has been argued elsewhere in this collection (see Chapter 1 & Magrath & Cleland, Chapter XYZ), high levels of inclusivity have been especially evident in research on football (e.g. Adams, 2011; Adams & Anderson, 2012; Gaston, Magrath & Anderson, 2018; Magrath, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Magrath, Anderson & Roberts, 2015; Roberts, Anderson & Magrath, 2017).

In this chapter, we aim to investigate the inclusive nature of the teammates of the second active professional footballer to come out, Anton Hysèn. This was a unique opportunity as, historically, the majority of professional athletes wait until their retirement to announce their sexuality (e.g. Cleland, Magrath & Kian, 2018). Hysèn is one of the few professional athletes who has 'come out' whilst still playing professional sport, thus allowing the data to present a current reflection of acceptance rather than a historical account of how team members recall their level of acceptance. In this endeavor, we employed surveys to collect data from Hysèn's teammates, measuring the team's overall attitudes toward homosexuality; whilst also investigating if there were any socio-negative issues with having an openly gay athlete on the team. This chapter will focus on the male homosexuality and homophobia towards male athletes due the participants in this research being only men.

Sport and Homophobia in the 20th Century

Sport has traditionally been heralded as an important institution for men in western societies. This is because it was used to promote a particular form of masculinity brought on by

twentieth-century industrialization (Anderson, 2009a). Sport's principle purpose was to discipline men into becoming suitable soldiers and factory workers, for the new industrial world. Concurrent with the industrial revolution, there was an increasing visibility of homosexuality, which Freud (1905) theorized was a product of primary socialization being the mother's job. Put simply, there was a cultural belief that young men were being made gay through too much mothering influence. As such, sport also socialized men into conservative values: sexism, physical violence, compulsory heterosexuality, the normalization of aggression, homophobia, and femphobia to distance themselves from homosexuality (Anderson, 2009b). This desire for men to distance themselves from femininity is based upon the patriarchal notion that masculinity is superior to femininity (Crosset, 1990), and the belief that any association with femininity will cast homosexual suspicion (Bird, 1996).

As well as adhering to the cultural norms of masculinity, men had to establish their own heteromascularity if they were to be esteemed in the eyes of other men (Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010). Because homosexuality is mostly invisible, men have tackled this by policing the behaviors of others, in a king-of-the-hill style competition, where suspected gay males were relegated down-hill (Anderson, 2005a). While this jockeying often included physical domination (e.g. Plummer, 1999), homophobic discourse has been the primary weapon to regulate the behaviors of teammates, question their heterosexuality, and steer them away from perceived feminine behaviors (Plummer, 2006). Thus, homophobia helps defend against homosexual suspicion whilst ensuring others adhere to the endorsed form of masculinity within sport (Anderson 2009b).

Interestingly, despite the homophobic attitudes palpable throughout the 1980s, little academic research exists concerning the relationship between sport, masculinities, and homosexuality around this time (see Garner & Smith (1977) and Sabo & Runfola (1980) for

notable exceptions). Accordingly, it can be hypothesized that homophobia in sport was not seen as issue for academics, or, simply, an accepted part of sporting culture. This lack of research can also be linked to the fact that gay athletes had not yet begun to emerge from their sporting closets, nor did they exist openly within the sport-related occupational industry. For example, when Pronger (1990) studied closeted Canadian gay athletes in the late 1980s, he was unable to find men who were out to their teammates. Indeed, gay athletes remained closeted largely because of the high degree of homophobia in sport at the time (Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990; Wolf-Wendel, Toma & Morpew, 2001; Woog, 1998). Hence, sport has been widely recognized as an institution which promotes heterosexuality over homosexuality.

Sport and Homophobia in the 21st Century

Since the turn of the millennium, matters have changed significantly; an abundance of research has shown that there has been a significant increase in cultural homophobia (Clements & Field, 2014; Twenge, Sherman & Wells, 2016). While there have been claims that sport continues to lag behind wider society (e.g. Butterworth, 2006), extensive research shows that this is not the case; indeed, sport has become one of the safest havens for gay male athletes (Anderson, 2009a, 2014; Anderson, Magrath & Bullingham, 2016; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland, Magrath & Kian, 2018; Magrath, 2017, 2018; Morales & White, 2019; Murray & White, 2017).

It has been theorized that the shift in masculinity and the decline in homophobia is linked to the emergence of softer forms of masculinity; this has disregarded previous research documenting high levels of homophobia—and a hegemonic form of masculinity (Anderson 2005b, Anderson, Magrath, and Bullingham 2016; Murray et al., 2016; White & Hobson, 2017). These have been theorized as ‘inclusive masculinities,’ and is commonly expressed by millennials (Anderson, Magrath, and Bullingham 2016). By contrast, those who continue to

espouse negative attitudes toward homosexuality tend to express what has been theorized as ‘orthodox’ masculinity (McCormack & Anderson, 2010).

Inclusive masculinity theory broadly argues that, with the decline in homophobia, men no longer need to police masculinity to the same degree as that in older research suggests. Indeed, this will be futile and become less effective over time, as individuals will not fear being perceived as gay nor face any repercussions by others if perceived as such (Anderson, 2011a). This freedom to express any gender-specific characteristics allows men to express more femininity and allow men to become closer to each other physically and emotionally (Anderson 2011a; Anderson & McCormack 2016)—thus blurring the difference between masculinity and femininity (Kuper, Nussbaum & Mustanski, 2012). In sport, inclusive masculinity theory has become the most prolific means of theorizing the experiences of openly gay athletes (e.g. Anderson, 2011a; Cleland, 2014; Magrath, Cleland & Anderson, 2017)—as we now discuss in greater detail.

Sport and Declining Homophobia

Although the research in the previous section documents the high levels of homophobia in 20th century sport, the first research on openly gay athletes was not published until 2002. Here, Anderson (2002) interviewed openly gay high school and university athletes in the US, showing that, despite the expectation of physical and verbal assault, these men were supported by teammates and coaches. Anderson (2002) argued that participants’ perceived expectation of homophobia was not met does not rule out any other ways the athletes can be discriminated. Indeed, in this setting, homophobic language was still commonplace in sport, but these athletes did not believe that this language was directed toward them.

Almost a decade later, Anderson (2011a) replicated this research with the same methods. Unlike participants in his initial study, the athletes who came out between 2008 and

2010 did not have any fear about being open with their teammates about their sexual orientation. Moreover, the earlier participants existed more in a *don't ask, don't tell* environment; but, in contrast, found the opposite in the latter study, with open and frank conversations with teammates were commonplace (Anderson, 2011a). Similar research has also documented how a variety of sports have also seen a significant shift in attitudes, including rugby (Anderson & McGuire, 2010) and equestrian sports (Dashper, 2012; Letts, this edition).

However, as we acknowledged earlier in this chapter, many of the cultural changes evident in the sporting world can be found in football—both in the UK and the US. Adams (2011), for example, showed that, despite there being no openly gay teammates, university footballers in the US showed inclusivity towards sexual minorities. None of the players objected to having an openly gay teammate, and all supported same-sex marriage (which had not been passed in the US at the time of data collection), and same-sex adoption. Moreover, several of the players in the team also wore pink cleats and enjoyed emotionally-open friendships with one another, without the threat of homophobic repercussions. Similar levels of inclusivity were also evident in Anderson's (2011b) research on another US university football team. This study found that some participants previously espoused negative attitudes toward homosexuality, something which they were embarrassed about when thinking back. Indeed, all but one of the teammates now exhibited positive attitudes.

And, finally in the US, Adams and Anderson (2012) witnessed the first-ever first-hand coming out of a gay athlete in a US football team. They showed that, despite the university's link with Catholicism, the player was positively received, and even witnessed a decline of heteronormativity as players became explicitly aware of the existence of multiple sexualities. The coming out of this player also promoted social cohesion in the group, and they were thankful to the researchers for facilitating this.

Outside of the US, where football arguably holds a far more dominant sporting position, numerous research projects have found comparable levels of inclusivity. Most notably, this has been evident in research on young, elite footballers in Premier League academies. Magrath, Anderson and Roberts (2015), for example, showed that players they interviewed were largely positive in their attitudes toward homosexuality, despite having relatively little contact with gay men in their everyday lives—both inside and outside of football. These players also had little objection to acting as ‘best man’ at a same-sex wedding or speaking to the media about their support of gay rights. Magrath’s (2017a) research elsewhere documents virtually identical findings, though also shows that players identifying as strongly religious, perhaps predictably, held more conservative attitudes (see also Magrath, 2017b).

This change in attitudes towards homosexuality in sport has also affected how straight players interact with one another. Anderson and McCormack (2015) found that 39 out of 40 student athletes had shared a bed with another male, 37 of the participants had cuddled another male either in bed or on a sofa. Finally, majority of participants did not fear getting a boner and was not considered as an issue or a same-sex desire. Other forms of intimacy have been found in athletes specifically, Anderson, Adams and Rivers (2010) found that 89% of their participants had kissed another male, none of the participants reported any homophobic repercussion. The kiss was not considered sexual, also this form of intimacy was considered to happen regularly.

These changes in attitudes have also been evident among sports fans. For example, Cashmore and Cleland (2012) found that 93% of professional football fans in England would accept a gay player on the team they support. These fans were also critical of the claim that they were to blame for keeping professional players closeted, instead believing that clubs and agents were more to blame. Elsewhere, Cleland’s (2015) research on fan forums documented

a significant cultural shift, with stigma attached to those who espoused any personalized degree of homophobia. Moreover, this research also found that fans believed that a player's playing performance was the most important factor, not his sexuality.

Recent years have also seen a shift in the representation of gay male athletes in sports media. Traditionally complicit in the reaffirmation of traditionally masculine values (e.g. Aitchison, 2007), contemporary sports media are far more sensitive in their reporting of homosexuality in sport (Kian, Anderson, Vincent & Murray, 2015). This has been especially evident in the reporting of gay (and bisexual) male athletes coming out of the closet, including John Amaechi (Kian & Anderson, 2009), Jason Collins (Kian, Anderson & Shipka, 2015), Anton Hysén (Cleland, 2014), Thomas Hitzlsperger (Cleland, Magrath & Kian, 2018), and Tom Daley (Magrath, Cleland & Anderson, 2017).

Sweden, Homophobia, and Anton Hysén

While attitudes in the most dominant nations in the West have documented increasingly positive attitudes toward homosexuality (Clements & Field, 2014; Twenge, Sherman & Wells, 2016), Sweden – where this research is situated – is the second-highest inclusive nation when comparing for sexual equality (Gerhards, 2007). Indeed, Gerhards' (2007) study used national samples containing at least 1000 interviews with participants over the age of 18 and asked whether, "Homosexuality is never (1)/always (10) justified." Sweden had a mean value of 7.7. The second question in Gerhards's (2007) study was based on whether participant minded having a homosexual neighbour: again, Sweden had the highest score with 94% documenting no objection.¹

More recently, Gerhards (2010) performed a similar study where the participants were questioned whether they would have a gay neighbour, which 94% of the participants agreed they would. The final question in Gerhards (2010) was "homosexual marriage should be

allowed throughout Europe” 71% of the Swedish participants agreed to this question. Sweden expressed higher positivity than both the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic.¹ The use of the comparison of the United Kingdom and Czech Republic is to use attitudes towards masculinity in a more recent study to be able to suggest if Sweden would have likely changed its overall attitude towards homosexuality.

Problematically, however, this can now be viewed as historical data, because no such study has been conducted for almost a decade—and no more contemporaneous research on Sweden exists. However, using the Czech Republic and UK data, we can make accurate assumptions towards Sweden attitude toward homosexuality. Kohut (2013) showed further improvement in attitudes toward homosexuality when comparing to Gerhards’ (2007, 2010) results (see footnote 1). The participants in Kohut’s (2013) study were questioned “should homosexuality be accepted in society” 76% of the participants from the UK and 80% of the Czech Republic participants agreed that homosexuality should be accepted by society. We should, therefore, expect to see improvement in Sweden’s collective attitude, too.

Looking at even more recent data Pew research (2017), which used European countries (with the UK and Sweden notably missing), to investigate the attitudes towards homosexuality similar to Kohut (2013) study the researchers investigated whether homosexuality should be accepted by society. 78% of the Czech Republic participants agreed it should be accepted. This was slightly lower than Kohut’s (2013) results but this was still higher than Gerhard’s (2007) results (see footnote 1). Pew research also collected data on

¹ The UK scored 5.1 and the Czech Republic score 5.5 on “Homosexuality is never (1)/always (10) justified”, whilst. Looking at no objection to homosexuality the UK and the Czech Republic had 46% and 52% of the population expressing no objection Gerhard (2007). Looking at whether the participants would have a gay neighbor the UK scored 75.9% and the Czech Republic scored 80.7%. Looking at whether the participants agree with homosexual marriage being allowed throughout Europe 46% of the UK participants and 52% of the Czech Republic agreed with this question.

“should same-sex marriage be legal throughout Europe” 65% of the Czech Republic participants agreed same-sex marriage should be legal. With Kohurt’s, (2013) and Pew Research’s (2017) results it can be suggested that following the UK’s and Czech Republic’s attitudes towards homosexuality becoming more inclusive this trend can be suggested to have a similar effect for Sweden.

In football, aside from Gaston, Magrath and Anderson’s (2018) research on Anton Hysén, no other direct research exists. We can, however, point toward Cleland’s (2014) media analysis, which was largely supportive and positive toward him; this stood in stark contrast to the last openly gay (active) professional footballer, Justin Fashanu (see also Gaston, Magrath & Anderson, 2018). The current study thus exists as the first-ever study of Swedish sporting attitudes toward a gay athlete.

Methods

This research investigated the attitudes and experiences teammates of an openly gay football player, Anton Hysén. Access was possible due to the established rapport between Hysén and the second author, thus giving a unique and noteworthy gateway into this research locale.

Participants

The participants used in this study are the teammates of Anton Hysén. Hysén was also the gatekeeper to the participants. He contacted them through email with a link to the survey was created on Survey Monkey. Although Hysén contacted the participants directly, only half of the potential participants (15) elected to participate in the study. While we still believe this to be a relatively accurate snapshot of attitudes on the team, we cannot speculate as to why the completion rate was only at 50%. Nevertheless, we also exercise caution in the generalizability of these results. Participants were the typical age of a professional footballer;

ranging between 22 and 34, averaging 26. All participants were White, self-identified as exclusively heterosexual, and all but one were non-religious.

Instruments

The study used a questionnaire consisting of 27 questions that participants accessed online. In discussions with Hysén, it was confirmed that all potential participants spoke and read English with some level of competency, thus not requiring an English and Swedish translation of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed using both closed and open questions. The study used a five-Likert scale for participants to express their attitudes toward homosexuality, whilst the other questions had a two-Likert scale (yes and no). Closed questions allowed the research to present statistical finding of players' position about having a gay teammate, while the open questions allowed participants to elaborate a deeper insight of their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas regarding sexuality and masculinity. The use of open-ended questions was strategically developed, as open-ended questions can be beneficial when surveying a small group of people (Sproull, 2002).

Participants' Expression of Inclusivity

Previous research has shown that athletes are becoming more inclusive in their attitude toward homosexuality – and the notion of openly gay teammates (Adams & Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2011a; Magrath, 2017a, 2017b; Magrath, Anderson & Roberts, 2015; Roberts, Anderson & Magrath, 2017). The current research builds upon these findings, indicating a slight improvement in attitudes toward gay men before and after meeting Anton Hysén. Indeed, as Figure 1 shows, the results showed that all participants held positive attitudes toward homosexuality.

Figure 1: Attitudes Toward Gay Men



Even though there is little change here, these findings are still evidence that improving attitudes is possible when interacting with someone who is gay (Adams & Anderson, 2012); evidence of Allport’s contact theory (see McCann, Minichiello & Plummer, 2009). There is also, of course, evidence that these participants are disinterested in sexuality (e.g. “Do not think about it either way”). Further, these findings could also suggest that these men may have had a gay or bisexual teammate before Hysèn – or indeed in their immediate family or friendship group outside of football. However, we argue here that this is still evidence of inclusivity, because there is no evidence of negativity (see also Magrath, Anderson & Magrath, 2015).

This inclusivity was also evident when participants reported on their direct experiences with Hysèn. The neutrality of these responses were grouped with positive responses, as this could be understood of inclusivity as homosexuality is viewed as on-par with heterosexuality.

Figure 2: Players’ Experience with a Gay Teammate



Participants' overall experiences with Hysén were also positive for team cohesion. Indeed, it was found that seven participants believed that Hysén's sexuality had no negative bearing, while eight participants believed it to have a positive impact. One participant elaborated that this experience has made him "more open-minded about things." All but two (who didn't respond) also felt at ease around Hysén (see also Adams & Anderson, 2012).

As an extension of this, participants also responded positively towards being physically tactile with Hysén. All of those who participated in the research commented that their physical interaction is indifferent to their physical interaction with a heterosexual teammate. Looking specifically at hugging, all 15 participants were comfortable hugging a gay or bisexual teammate, while all also believed that kissing between teammates should occur. These findings thus support existing research documenting physical intimacy and tactility in a sport setting is not negatively disrupted by a gay player (Anderson, 2014; Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Magrath, 2017a).

There were some negative responses, however; four participants spoke of personal issues which were affected by Hysén. For example, one participant reported that Hysén

caused issues for him personally (although didn't elaborate on this), while another spoke of his discomfort when getting changed around Hysén. Two others were concerned with Hysén causing potential issues with team dynamics. Despite these, however, these were very much a minority, and should not overlook the predominantly positive findings in this research.

Indeed, 14 participants reported that there were no issues caused by Hysén's sexuality. In fact, this even proved to be a positive aspect of the research, with one participant commenting that, "Rather [than being negative], the opposite. Playing with Anton abc becoming his friend has rather enriched my life." Another participant also spoke of Hysén's sexuality being an issue no differently in comparison to a heterosexual teammate: "It it would, I wouldn't care less!"

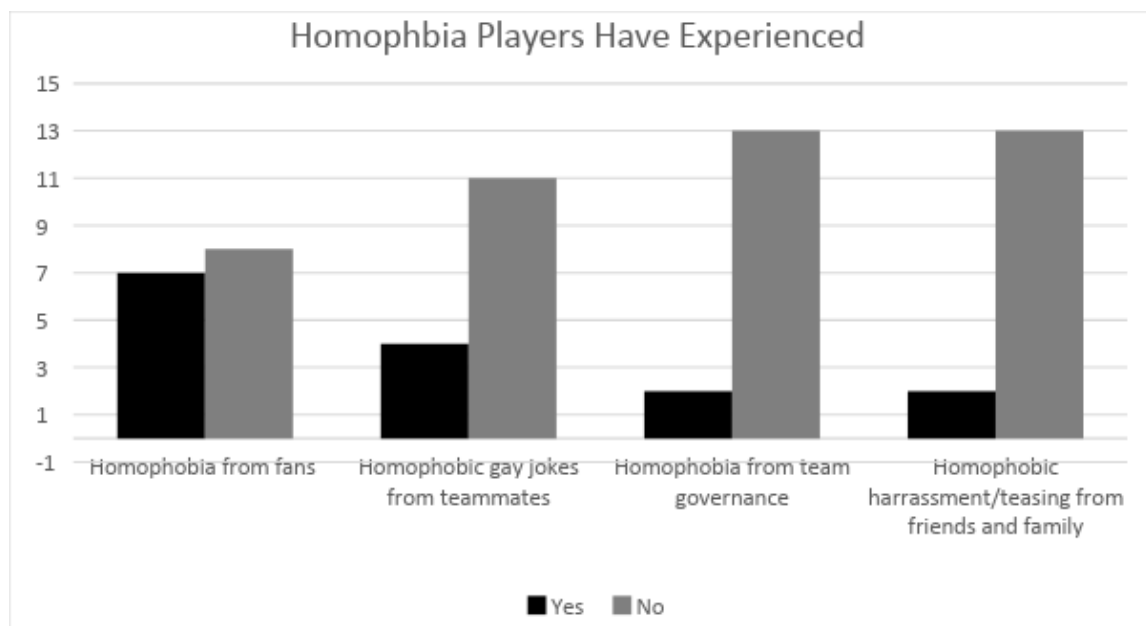
Others simply declared positivity toward Hysén with simple affirmations. Discussing getting changed with Hysén, one simply commented that it was "not a problem," while another said, "I don't have a problem with that." This was also the case when talking about whether Hysén's sexuality caused as an issue with team dynamics: "I don't care whether someone is gay or not. Everyone should feel comfortable with the person they love and whether that's a he or she shouldn't matter."

This overall acceptance of homosexuality, however detailed or otherwise participants were in their support, is telling, and reflective of broader cultural changes in both Sweden (Gerhards, 2007, 2010), and sports culture (e.g. Anderson, 2011a; Anderson, Magrath & Bullingham, 2016; Magrath, 2017a, 2017b). These findings can also be further underpinned using Anderson's (2009a) inclusive masculinity theory, and becomes the first Swedish-based sports research to do so. Participants were overwhelmingly clear in their support, and were unconcerned as to whether playing with Hysén may also lead others to think that they are gay, too. We now discuss this in greater detail.

Continuing Problems

Inclusive masculinity theory suggests that with the shift in attitudes toward homosexuality (Anderson, 2009a), there are still individuals who express negative attitudes. Indeed, despite the high levels of positivity discussed earlier, this proved to be the case here, too. There were, for example, several areas where potential homophobia was experienced by participants in this study. This is best illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Homophobia Players have Experienced



Examining these results, the vast majority of participants (13) agree that 'gay jokes' occur in the locker room setting; sexuality was often used as a means to taunt and tease other players, regardless of their sexuality. As with previous research examining the relationship

between homosexually-themed language and banter (e.g. McCormack, 2011; McCormack, Wignall & Morris, 2017; Magrath, 2018), only four of the participants do not believe this to be evidence of homophobia as there was no negative intent behind their language. One participant, for example, commented that the purpose of this language was to “make the other guys in the team laugh.” Another said that, “It’s humor. We joke about everything...religion, women, men, color, everything!” Participants were also keen to point out that this ceased to be humor if a member of the team was offended. One said that, “As long as someone doesn’t feel offended by it, I don’t see any reason not to joke about anything.” And another: “I believe humor may diffuse things which may normally be difficult to talk about.”

Examining Hysén’s involvement in this locker-room banter, many of the participants acknowledge that he is often front-and-center of this humor. He was described, for example, as being “usually in the middle of it” and “he’s usually the one involved most closely in it.” Thus, these findings directly align with Gaston, Magrath and Anderson’s (2018) research, in which Hysén does not report any homophobia from his teammates, while also acknowledging the positive role that banter plays in this environment.

In contrast, however, when examining the nature of homophobia in the competitive environment, some participants spoke of the occasional comments heard from fans inside stadia. One simply commented that “it [homophobic comments] sometimes happen, but we don’t call them fans.” Another alluded to similar-type incidents yet did not provide any significant depth to his answer, instead preferring to write: “A lot of things [happen] that I don’t need to write here.” Perhaps most surprisingly given recent findings (e.g. Magrath, 2018), approximately half of the participants involved in this study indicated that they have heard homophobic comments from fans during matches.

Two of these examples discussed how Hysén himself was the target of this discrimination. However, perhaps predictably, this came from opposition fans, rather than the

team's own fans. "Not from our fans, but from other teams," one said. Another spoke of the fact that homophobia is occasionally used by opposition players on the pitch: "It's not that much from fans, but some comments are heard by other teams." One was especially critical of this, saying that it "doesn't belong on the pitch." In response, similar to participants in Magrath's (2017a) research, these men said they went to extreme lengths to defend their teammate against homophobia on the pitch: "We tackle the shit out of that person," one participant commented.

Thus, in-line with research discussed elsewhere in this chapter, the participants in this research show resilience against the homophobia discussed above – declaring it unacceptable. Moreover, this also provides further support for Anderson's (2009a) inclusive masculinity theory, where participants support their gay teammate, and do so by extreme lengths. Indeed, they even go to extreme and violent lengths to stand up for Hysén against the homophobia on the pitch. Nevertheless, it also documents how such language is often commonplace in football and exists as a negative consequence of participation in competitive team sports (Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Magrath, 2018). Further research is required to examine the nature of language on the pitch in more detail.

Discussion: Football as Progressive

Sport has historically been used as a vehicle to turn boys and men away from femininity, while simultaneously promoting the athlete's masculine capital (Rigauer, 1981). As cultural homophobia increased throughout the 1980s, men's competitive team sports were shown to be highly homophobic institutions (Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990; Wolf-Wendel, Toma & Morphew, 2001; Woog, 1998). In recent years, however, a plethora of academic evidence has shown that attitudes in sport have become increasingly liberal – and gay athletes widely

supported in the sports industry (Adams, 2011; Adams and Anderson 2011; Kian et al., 2015; Magrath, 2019; Magrath et al, 2015; Cleland 2014; Cleland, 2015).

This research contributes to this ever-increasing knowledge-base by focusing on semi-professional footballers' attitudes toward homosexuality in Sweden – a new and unique area of study. The results of this research show support that football is becoming a more inclusive sport whilst also adding data from another country (research is usually conducted in the UK and US). Indeed, the findings presented in this chapter still document high levels of inclusivity toward their gay teammate – much like that of similar research (Adams, 2011; Adams & Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2011b; Magrath, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Magrath, Anderson & Roberts, 2015; Roberts, Anderson & Magrath, 2017). Hysén's sexuality was deemed unimportant and did not negatively disrupt the flow of team cohesion, although a minority of participants did espouse some concerns. These high levels of support were further compounded by the fact that Hysén's teammates were extremely critical of fans and opposition teammates who attempted to homophobically taunt him, even going to extreme lengths to defend him.

Thus, with the addition of this research to existing knowledge, we can see that there is further evidence that the football industry in Europe, not just the UK and the US, is becoming an increasingly positive environment. However, while these results may have been expected given that Sweden has been shown to have largely positive attitudes toward homosexuality, this may not necessarily be the case elsewhere in Europe. Numerous countries in Eastern Europe, for instance, are seeing rising levels of intolerance toward homosexuality – meaning that this may be reflected in football, too. Further research investigating this relationship must, therefore, be undertaken.

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