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## METHODS

# Depictions of LGBTQ Athletes in Young Adult Literature that Interrogate Sport Culture

KATHERINE MASON CRAMER

There is no doubt that sports play a huge role in schools and in the lives of students, whether they participate in those sports or not. Indeed, according to Stuart Biegel, author of *The Right to Be Out: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in America's Public Schools* (2010), in many schools, sport culture and school culture are “one in the same” (p. 152). Due to the ubiquity of sports in schools, English language arts teachers would be wise to integrate sports stories into their curriculum design to both hook students’ interests and help them critically analyze the impact of sports on schools and our broader culture. In his foreword to Alan Brown and Luke Rodesiler’s *Developing Contemporary Literacies through Sports: A Guide for the English Classroom*, Peter Smagorinsky (2016) writes about the appeal of sports-themed stories, noting that while athletics allow us to demonstrate such noble qualities as “courage, resilience, loyalty, teamwork, responsibility, dedication, preparation, [and] sportsmanship, ... [s]ports stories may also take a critical view of the human condition, taking into account the cheating that follows from misplaced competitive urges and the emphasis on sports over and above other activities available in school that cultivate other aspects of personality and soul” (pp. xii-xiii). Additionally, Brown and Rodesiler (2016) cite research that reveals the popularity of sports in secondary schools, the likelihood of sports “to keep at-risk students in good academic standing,” and the ability of sports to serve as “an entry point into various literacy practices, particularly for adolescent males” (p. xxi).

At the same time, sports-themed young adult literature (YAL) with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) characters can interrogate and provide a counter-narrative to sport culture in schools and in broader society. Although there is an increasing sense

of inclusivity for LGBTQ athletes in K-12, collegiate, and professional sports, there is still “tremendous unstated pressure not to come out” (Biegel, 2010, p. 153). This is especially true at the professional level in men’s basketball, football, baseball, and hockey (Affleck, 2017). Biegel (2010) notes that “the culture of interscholastic athletics continues to mirror that of higher-level programs,” which means that many young athletes “adopt role models who often act as if LGBTQs do not exist and would not be welcome” (p. 157).

Additionally, the Gay Straight Lesbian Education Network (GSLEN)’s 2017 National School Climate Survey reveals the following disturbing statistics: 40% of LGBTQ youth report feeling unsafe/uncomfortable in school locker rooms; 24% of LGBTQ youth feel unsafe/uncomfortable in on school athletic fields or in other athletic facilities; 43% of transgender and gender non-conforming students were required to use a locker room of their legal sex; and 11% of LGBTQ students were discouraged from participating in school sports because they were LGBTQ (Kosciw, et al., 2018, pp. 14-15, 38). In fact, Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, and Giga (2016) found that LGBTQ students are less than half as likely as straight, cisgender students to participate in intramural and interscholastic sports (p. 33).

As such, the depictions of LGBTQ athletes and the positive message of sports-themed YAL are even more important. Contemporary YAL depicts LGBTQ athletes participating in a variety of individual and team sports including cycling, swimming, running, football, baseball, and soccer, and their participation in sports provides opportunities for them to identify as more than their sexual and gender identities—something that soccer player Rafe Goldberg longs for in Bill Konigsberg’s 2013 novel *Openly Straight*. In fact, for many LGBTQ YAL protagonists, sports provide a supportive community in which they can embody

their full and true identities after coming out to teammates, coaches, friends, family, and teachers. These depictions of openness and inclusiveness are vital to disrupting homophobia and transphobia so readily apparent in some sports sites.

### LGBTQ Athletes in Professional Sports

Since professional sports culture influences the culture of interscholastic sports, I will begin by describing the experiences of LGBTQ athletes in professional sports. Biegel (2010) notes that at the professional level, there are more out LGBTQ athletes participating in individual sports, such as diving and tennis, than in team sports like football or volleyball (p. 157). Additionally, professional sports continue to be male-dominated, which perpetuates “the ongoing perception not only that a certain kind of strength is required to succeed in these highly competitive endeavors, but also that women, gays, and gender-nonconforming persons dissipate this strength or personify a lack of strength” (Biegel, 2010, p. 163). Gay male athletes in particular tend to remain closeted in America’s five major men’s professional sports leagues—football, basketball, baseball, hockey, and soccer (Buzinski, 2017; Hine, 2016). For example, in 2007 when John Amaechi became the first National Basketball Association (NBA) player to come out three years *after* the end of his playing career (Sheridan, 2007), other players’ reactions garnered almost as much attention as Amaechi’s revelation. Tim Hardaway spewed homophobic vitriol on a Miami radio show and declared that gay players should be removed from teams (Sheridan, 2007; Biegel, 2010, p. 153). LeBron James asserted that closeted players “are not trustworthy” (Sheridan, 2007). Shavlik Randolph and Steven Hunter worried about “awkwardness in the locker room” and whether an openly gay teammate would “make any advances” toward them (Sheridan, 2007; Biegel, 2010, p. 167).

Six years later, professional sports appeared ready to be more inclusive. After Major League Soccer (MLS) midfielder Robbie Rogers came out in 2013, followed by NBA center Jason Collins and National Football League (NFL) defensive end Michael Sam, professional sports seemed poised to welcome gay athletes out of the closet (Hine, 2016). But that didn’t happen. Instead, Collins retired shortly thereafter, Sam has not played in an NFL game, and only one other professional athlete has come out since then (Hine, 2016).

And with Rogers’ retirement in November 2017, there were no openly gay male athletes in America’s five major professional sports (Buzinski, 2017), until MLS midfielder Collin Martin came out in June 2018 (O’Hara, 2018).

Women’s pro sports tell a different story, however, with several players in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), for example, coming out and being recognized and affirmed—while also serving as positive role models for LGBTQ athletes and allies at all levels (Hine, 2016). In fact, in 2005, ESPN called three-time Olympic gold medalist and WNBA Most Valuable Player Sheryl Swoopes “the most recognizable athlete, male or female, to come out in a team sport” (Granderson, 2005). More recently, WNBA stars Brittney Griner, Diana Taurasi, and Ellena Delle Donne have come out, and in 2013, “U.S. women’s soccer superstar Abby Wambach married her longtime girlfriend” (Affleck, 2017).

One thing that LGBTQ athletes must contend with is the decision to come out or remain closeted, and sometimes this very personal decision is made for them. Biegel (2010) cites, for example, legendary Major League Baseball (MLB) player Sandy Koufax, who after retiring in 1966 continued to serve the Dodger organization as a coach and mentor until 2003, when a publishing company alleged that he was gay and he abruptly left the team (p. 158). Biegel notes that even an allegation of an LGBTQ identity “is still viewed by many in the highest ranks of professional sports as denigrating, defamatory, and perhaps the worst possible name one could be called” (p. 158).

As evidenced by prominent reactions to John Amaechi’s coming out in 2007 and the dearth of out gay male athletes in professional team sports, support for LGBTQ athletes from teammates, coaches, and fans may not be readily apparent. The language and actions displayed by prominent members of professional sports leagues may convince young athletes to hide their sexual and gender identities. For example, when Dodger’s manager Tom Lasorda’s openly gay son Spunky died from complications of HIV/AIDS, Lasorda vehemently denied his son’s sexual identity as well as the cause of his death (Biegel, 2010). Additionally, MLS player Robbie Rogers sums up his fears about coming out in a 2016 *Chicago Tribune* article:

My biggest fear was I was going to go in the locker room and there would be whispers when I walked in. I didn’t care about stadiums, I didn’t care about agents. I cared more about how my teammates were going to treat me,

how my coach was going to react. That's the biggest thing. Guys are afraid of being treated differently by their teammates. (Hine, 2016)

And yet, fortunately, in the past several decades, a number of LGBTQ athletes have come out to strong support from their communities, including MLB stars Billy Bean and Glenn Burke, tennis greats Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova, WNBA star Sheryl Swoopes, and NFL players Esera Tuaolo, David Kopay, and Roy Simmons, to name a few (Biegel, 2010; Sheridan, 2007). In fact, although it made headlines, the negative reaction to John Amaechi's coming out was limited to Hardaway and few others—and the public outcry against their homophobic statements, as well as supportive comments from other NBA players (e.g., Grant Hill, Doc Rivers, and Charles Barkley) was a positive sign for LGBTQ athletes (Biegel, 2010). These athletes became “prominent national figures ... and have brought about tremendous ongoing empathy and acclaim in the national and international media” (Biegel, 2010, p. 171). In gathering information about LGBTQ athletes in professional sports, I wondered, in what ways does YAL align with or contradict these narratives of sexual and gender diversity within sport culture?

### Text Selection

In order to locate texts for analysis, I searched online for book lists and recommendations of recently published YAL that features LGBTQ protagonists who are also

athletes. (See Table 1.) In the eight books analyzed, it is important to acknowledge that all protagonists are able-bodied and White (though three books feature supporting characters of color—*The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, *The Other Boy*, and *True Letters from a Fictional Life*). In this article, I analyze depictions of LGBTQ athletes in sports-themed YAL in light of realities LGBTQ athletes face in professional sports—which, as Biegel (2010) notes, influence interscholastic sport programs (p. 157).

### LGBTQ Athletes Coming Out vs. Being Outed

Contemporary YAL reflects the challenge for LGBTQ athletes who must determine whether or not and with whom to embody their full identities. In addition to telling stories of athletes choosing to come out on their own terms, contemporary YA texts also depict LGBTQ athletes being outed by well-meaning but foolish friends, as well as others whose intentions are purely self-serving. In Bill Konigsberg's *Out of the Pocket*, high school star quarterback Bobby Framingham is outed by school newspaper reporter Finch Gozman, who is eager to get the scoop on such an important story. In emily m. danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, swimmer and runner Cameron (Cam) Post is outed by her love interest Coley Taylor with whom she has both a friendship and a physical relationship. In M.G. Hennessey's *The Other Boy*, star baseball pitcher Shane Woods is outed by Nico, a member of the opposing team, who is jealous of Shane's success. And in Kenneth Logan's

**Table 1**  
*Recently Published YAL Featuring LGBTQ Athletes*

Publication	Author	Title	Protagonist	Sport(s)
2008	Konigsberg, Bill	<i>Out of the Pocket</i>	Cisgender male, gay	Football
2010	Horner, Emily	<i>A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend</i>	Cisgender female, lesbian	Cycling
2012	danforth, emily m.	<i>The Miseducation of Cameron Post</i>	Cisgender female, lesbian	Swimming Running Christian aerobics
2013	Konigsberg, Bill	<i>Openly Straight</i>	Cisgender male, gay	Soccer
2015	Jaffe, Sara	<i>Dryland</i>	Cisgender female, questioning	Swimming
2016	Hennessey, M.G.	<i>The Other Boy</i>	Transgender male, straight	Baseball
2016	Logan, Kenneth	<i>True Letters from a Fictional Life</i>	Cisgender male, gay	Soccer Running
2017	Konigsberg, Bill	<i>Honestly Ben</i>	Cisgender male, questioning	Baseball

*True Letters from a Fictional Life*, soccer-player and runner James Liddell is outed by his sort-of girlfriend Theresa who claims to be trying to help him.

In a more hopeful light, several YA novels depict LGBTQ athletes choosing to come out on their own terms. In Konigsberg's *Openly Straight*, soccer player and skier Rafe Golberg is already out in his home community in Boulder, CO, but decides not to reveal his sexual identity to his new friends at his boarding school in New England. For a while he enjoys the seeming newfound liberation of his perceived straight identity and revels in his new label: jock. But when he and his friend Ben Carver start to fall for one another, Rafe learns that it's not so easy to hide such an important aspect of his identity. Similarly, in Konigsberg's *Honestly Ben*, the sequel to *Openly Straight*, Ben Carver is the captain of the baseball team and the recipient of a prestigious scholarship; Ben feels betrayed by Rafe's admission that he's gay because Ben views himself as a straight guy who happens to be attracted to Rafe. As Ben stands up to the homophobia and misogyny in the locker room and on the playing field, he also develops the courage to live openly and honestly. In Emily Horner's *A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend*, cyclist Cassandra (Cass) Meyer has dealt with classmates making assumptions about her sexual identity since middle school, but when her best friend Julia dies in a car accident, Cass begins to consider the possibility that she not only loved Julia but was also *in love* with her. And she's finally able to admit this to her friends after cycling (and driving) cross country to spread Julia's ashes on a Pacific Coast beach.

The first four stories depict the consequences of revealing a person's sexual or gender identity without their consent; in each narrative, the LGBTQ protagonist is shocked and horrified by the betrayal and mourns the lost opportunity to come out at a time and place of their own choosing. On the other hand, YAL that depicts LGBTQ athletes coming out on their own terms—to people and in contexts of their choosing—provides a counter-narrative to professional athletes whose identities are not recognized or affirmed. These books give readers hope as they depict possibilities for recognition and affirmation for LGBTQ identities in both individual and team sports.

### Affirming LGBTQ Athletes in YAL

For LGBTQ athletes coming out in YAL, a supportive community exists in the form of friends, teammates,

coaches, and family members—even in books set in the 1990s, like *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and *Dryland*. After Cam is outed by Coley in *Miseducation*, her ultra-religious family sends her to God's Promise, a gay conversion camp that subjects her to prayer and counseling—but also gives her the opportunity to develop friendships with other LGBTQ kids, several of whom (like Cam) are athletes who resist the camp's teachings. In Sara Jaffe's *Dryland*, Julie Winter decides to join the swim team in order to follow in her Olympic-hopeful older brother Jordan's footsteps and to get better acquainted with Alexis, who is both encouraging and flirtatious. As she develops her technique and endurance in the pool, Julie develops a physical (but secret) relationship with Alexis. After Alexis breaks things off with Julie, Julie shares her heartache and her identity with Ben, Jordan's good friend and Julie's new confidant. And Ben fully accepts and embraces Julie.

In Logan's *True Letters from a Fictional Life*, James' friends are supportive and encouraging as he confirms the truth of the letters his sort-of girlfriend Theresa sends to two classmates. The letters are ones that James had written to his family, friends, and classmates—honest and raw; however, he never intended to send them. Instead they are a release for him and they remain locked in his desk drawer, until Theresa gets the key and snoops—and his writing turns into a weapon to be used against him. Although her actions are inexcusable, it is fortunate that in her efforts to “help” James come out, Theresa only sends the letters to two of their intended recipients—and both recipients are encouraged by James' honesty. In fact, one recipient, Tim Hawken, already knows because James comes out to him early in the story—and Hawken embraces James' identity, even if he doesn't return James' attraction. With the exception of Mark, a

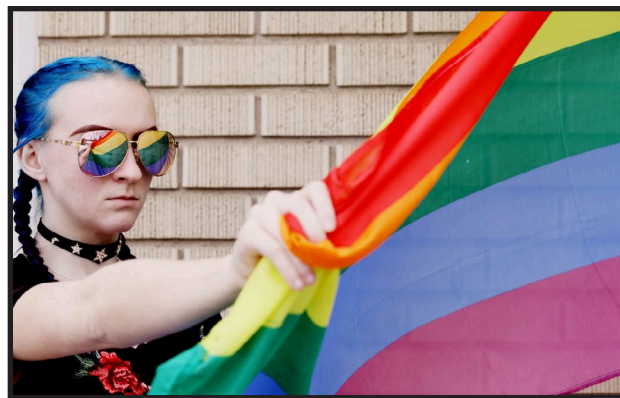


Photo credit [Sharon McCutcheon](#)



classmate who spews homophobic, heterosexist rhetoric every chance he gets, James receives unwavering support from his brothers, father, English teacher, friends, and soccer coach. His mom takes steps to educate herself about raising gay children and what she needs to do to accept and affirm her son.

Similarly, in Hennessey's *The Other Boy*, 12-year-old Shane Woods' family, friends, baseball teammates, and coach embrace his gender identity and expression, although his coming out process is fraught with anxiety and fear. At his new school in Los Angeles, Shane is outted by Nico, a player from an opposing team, who acquires a photo from when Shane lived as a girl at his previous school—and shares it with all of their classmates. Shane experiences depression and suicidal thoughts as he attempts to downplay and ignore the rumors; however, he also has unwavering support from his mom and his PFLAG mentor Alejandra. Similarly, his father and soon-to-be stepmom affirm Shane's gender identity. Even his crush Madeline is supportive (but not ready to be in a romantic relationship with him). And when Shane comes out to his best friend Josh, he learns that his entire baseball team, including the coach, fully embrace him. As Josh tells Shane, "...you might've quit the team ... [b]ut the team didn't quit you" (Hennessey, 2016, p. 215).

In each story, LGBTQ athletes embody their full identities and find themselves affirmed by friends, family, coaches, teammates, and mentors. This depiction directly contradicts the perception that LGBTQ athletes—particularly in men's professional sports—will be shunned after coming out to teammates, coaches, and fans.

### Disrupting the Weakness and Predator Myths

These stories acknowledge and confront what Biegel (2010) calls the weakness and predator myths: the contradictory notions that "LGBTs are seen both as personifying a lack of strength and as dissipating strength" (p. 165) and that when it comes to the locker room/showers LGBTQ athletes "are often not presented as weak at all but as powerful, hypersexualized predators who cannot be trusted and must be feared" (p. 167). Several stories depict LGBTQ protagonists who face misogynistic, homophobic rhetoric in the locker room, playing field, and other sites. In *Miseducation* when Cam and Lindsey emerge from a changing stall in the locker room after the finals of a

championship swim meet, fellow swimmer MaryAnne comments that she won't change out of her swimsuit because she doesn't want to be "eye-raped," while other swimmers whisper homophobic taunts (danforth, 2012, p. 102). As Lindsey confronts them, Cam retreats from the locker room to the pool deck, ashamed. When MaryAnne and her cronies bring their taunts to the pool deck, Cam's coach puts them in their place with a reminder that both Lindsey and Cam have the upper hand in terms of speed and talent in the pool.

In *Out of the Pocket*, Bobby faces some teammates who believe he should be relegated to his own locker room or, worse, that he should be kicked off the team ("You're our leader. You can't be gay!" said Torry. "That's just ... wrong!" [Kongisberg, 2008, p. 161]). But he has other teammates—and a coach—who stand up for him: "I think if you're worried about being in a locker room with someone who might be gay, you need to move to another planet," said Rahim" (p. 161). In fact, Rahim reminds his teammates that Bobby's identity as a gay man doesn't mean he's attracted to all men: "My uncle is gay," Rahim said, staring down Somers. "And so are a lot of people. And they aren't all after your body, okay?" (p. 161).

In *Letters*, James and his friends must contend with Mark who spews homophobic slurs about the track and cross country teams after the school cuts funding for both programs. After announcing, "Running's not even a sport," Mark continues his diatribe with this: "I'm glad our school's done with running. And with runners. Bunch of faggot homos." (Logan, 2016, pp. 2-3). But Tim Hawken—James' initial crush, who happens to be straight—has an older brother who is gay and doesn't let those kinds of remarks slide by: "Hawken winced and said, 'I know you're trying to be thorough, Markus, but that's redundant. And don't say that kind of crap. It makes you sound stupid.'" (p. 3).

Each story effectively confronts and rebuts the weakness and predator myths in ways that are authentic and instructive without being heavy-handed. These depictions help readers see opportunities to confront those myths in their own locker rooms, practice fields, competition venues, and stadiums—whether they are athletes or fans.

### Staying the Course: The Importance of LGBTQ Visibility in Sports

Like most YAL, these novels give readers a sense of hope

<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the organization officially changed its name from "Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays" to PFLAG. <https://www.pflag.org/our-story>

and encouragement. Although some professional athletes wait until retirement to come out—or quit their sport shortly after doing so—all of the LGBTQ protagonists in these eight books continue to participate in their respective sports after coming out. This isn't the path that every LGBTQ athlete takes, however. For example, in *Letters*, James learns that his love interest Topher had to quit the school hockey team after coming out but later found a supportive community in the theater department. Similarly, in Cris Beam's *I Am J* (2011), in which sports do not play a primary role, J quits the swim team after the coach refuses to let him wear t-shirts and shorts over his swimsuit to hide his breasts. Author Bill Konigsberg writes about how he himself quit the baseball team in high school when he came out in the 1980s: "I simply could not reconcile my sexual orientation with my love for sports. I had no role models to look to. I truly did not know there were other gay guys who liked athletics. I joined the drama club instead. I starred in *The Pirates of Penzance*" (2016, p. 192).

However, in each of these eight novels the LGBTQ protagonists not only remain on their respective sports teams (or in their respective sports), they also thrive in their newfound openness. For example, in *Honestly Ben*, Ben Carver not only plans to continue his baseball career after he admits that he is in love with Rafe, he also learns to resist his father's pressure to be silent, humble, compliant, and stoic. In *Letters*, James plays one of the best soccer games of his life after coming out to everyone, including his teammates and coach. Shane has a similar experience pitching against Nico in *The Other Boy*. In *Miseducation*, Cam continues running (and, later, participating in Christian aerobics at God's Promise) after coming out. And in *Dryland*, Julie proudly reflects on the exhilaration of her 500 freestyle at a recent swim meet: "The water held me and I was sure I was schooling it ... I was on rails, I was on air" (Jaffe, 2015, p. 215). For Julie and all of the protagonists, sports provide both a sense of community and support, as well as another facet of the protagonist's identity—a source of strength and pride.

And that's another important feature of these books: they depict some of the best that sports have to offer—inclusivity, camaraderie, diligence, loyalty, and learning to cope with loss in healthy ways. This is sport at its best, its highest potential, rather than its lowest. This is particularly important since "sports cast a giant shadow on the day-to-day interactions and mindsets of people in education settings" and significantly impact school culture at the K-12

and collegiate levels (Biegel, 2010, p. 151). Sports-themed YAL that features LGBTQ athletes and allies helps readers of all ages see the potential for accepting and appreciating all athletes—all people—just as they are. Perhaps men's professional sports will follow the lead of women's professional sports in encouraging athletes to embody their full and true identities on and off the playing field. In the meantime, perhaps interscholastic athletes will lead the way (Affleck, 2017), as predicted by a sports writer in *Out of the Pocket*: "And [Bobby] Framingham's revelation will lead to another student athlete deciding to come out, and another. And soon it will be happening at the college level. Then, and only then, may we begin to bring the sports universe into the twenty-first century" (Konigsberg, 2008, p. 175). Perhaps YAL will soon give us stories of transgender women who compete alongside cisgender women in their respective sports, continuing the dialogue already happening about the role of trans athletes in professional and interscholastic sports (see, for example, Zeigler, 2018).

### The Importance of LGBTQ Visibility in our Curriculums

In the meantime, teachers would do well to seek out opportunities to include these texts in their classroom libraries and curriculums in order to interrogate sport culture's continued reluctance to embrace LGBTQ identities (Biegel, 2010, p. 152) and, ultimately, to enact change at the school site and beyond. According to GSLEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey, 64.8% of LGBTQ students reported that their classes did not include representations of LGBTQ people, history, or events in lessons (Kosciw, et al., 2018, p. 56). This is inexcusable. All students' identities should be recognized and affirmed through inclusive curriculum, not just students whose white, male, straight, cis, and/or middle class privilege affords them representation in teacher-selected texts and course content.

One idea for bringing sports-themed YAL that features LGBTQ athletes into English language arts classrooms is through the use of purposefully selected excerpts that spark critical thinking, dialogue, and inquiry. Penny Kittle (2013) argues that whole-class texts should be used no more than 20-30 percent of the time in classrooms (pp. 52-53), so students can spend more time on self-selected texts. Randy Bomer (2011) advocates for whole-class texts that help us "teach practices to the whole class that we want to become habits, that make sense in a real reading life outside of

school,” including thinking while reading, response and reflection, talking with other readers, and writing that supports a reading experience (p. 86). With that in mind, below is an example of a lesson using Konigsberg’s *Honestly Ben* (2017) that encourages students to confront and interrogate misogyny in school sports.

### Confronting Misogyny in School Sports with Bill Konigsberg’s *Honestly Ben* (pp. 80-81)

In this two-page excerpt, senior Ben Carver is fielding groundballs at baseball practice and listening to his teammate Mendenhall excoriate freshmen who make errors on the field, calling them “pussies” and telling them to “Pull up your girl panties and get back in there” (Konigsberg, 2017, pp. 80–81). As Ben witnesses these attacks, he begins to connect them to misogyny and begins to recognize his own role in perpetuating the problem as a passive observer.

**Key Ideas and Details.** Before, during, and after their reading, students can analyze and discuss the ways misogyny and other prejudices (e.g., homophobia, transphobia) manifest in sports sites:

1. *Before Reading:* Students should first review the definition of *misogyny* (the hatred of, contempt for, or prejudice against women or girls). Then they should reflect on, write, and discuss their responses to this prompt: When have you observed misogynistic behavior—in the media, popular culture, sports, politics, our school community, etc.?
2. *During Reading:* As students read the excerpt, ask them to mark examples of misogynistic behavior in the text and note their responses to those examples, as well as any questions that arise for them. Engage in dialogue about their responses to the text.
3. *After Reading:* Students should reflect on, write, and discuss their responses to these prompts: What other examples of misogyny have you observed in interscholastic, club, or professional sports sites? What other examples of prejudice have you observed in these sports sites? What steps (if any) have you or others taken to resist/challenge those misogynistic behaviors?

After exploring what the text says and how it connects to sports sites, encourage students to analyze and imitate the author’s craft.

**Craft and Structure.** For this part of the lesson, ask students to notice how Konigsberg uses a story (a few

moments in Ben’s experience on the baseball field) to explore an issue (misogynistic behavior in sports). Then encourage them to try out this technique in their own writing by beginning with a story and “flipping toward an idea” (Bomer, 2011, p. 188):

Recount an event or experience, and then flip to a reflection that includes abstract ideas or lessons learned from that event. The story you tell could be one from your personal experience, or it could be an amalgamation of your observations/experiences. Use the story as a jumping off point for reflection and, possibly, problem-solving.

Using Konigsberg’s writing as a model helps students see possibilities for pairing narrative with critical reflection that may spur them—and their audience—to take action. Additionally, introducing this YA text through a purposefully selected excerpt and critical reflection may inspire students to read the book in its entirety, seek out Rafe’s story in *Openly Straight*, and/or locate other books by Konigsberg. Other options for curricular inclusion include using YAL to analyze and critique the language of school sports sites (Cramer, 2016) and analyzing media depictions of male and female athletes (Mason, 2014).

Sports-themed YAL featuring LGBTQ athletes deserves space in our English language arts curriculums and classrooms because of its power to engage students in content they find relevant, its ability to flip the script on narratives surrounding sexual and gender diversity in sport culture at all levels, and its potential to encourage students to interrogate and resist the heteronormative, misogynistic, transphobic culture of many sports sites.

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