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Disconnected Dyads: the Distressed Dynamics of the Coach/Athlete Relationship  
in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Intercollegiate Athletes

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### Abstract

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) athletes face a complex and heterosexist culture in athletics, maintained by stereotypes and harassment, that impacts them negatively: physically, mentally, and emotionally. Theories of social change suggest that their coaches can play an invaluable role in remedying this culture—starting with forging meaningful and supportive relationships with the athlete themselves. This study explored coach-athlete dynamics in various domains and in comparison to ideals as reported by a sample of LGB-identified, intercollegiate athletes using the Coach Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q) and interview questions. It was hypothesized that the relationships between LGB-identified athletes and their coaches would be weakened and would show a significant disconnect between the athlete's reported ideal coaching relationship and their actual relationship. Results provide evidence to support these hypotheses, and show that LGB-identified athletes show weaker relationships with their coaches than other coach-athlete dyads. These athletes feel that they are missing various components of an ideal coach-athlete relationship as it pertains to trust, respect, and understanding of their identity. They suggest that this impacts their personal well-being, their performance as athletes, and their overall satisfaction on their team and in their sport. These findings imply that coaches need to take a more active role in creating an inclusive culture on their team through building more effective relationships and attempting to understand the different challenges that face their LGB-identified athletes.

## Disconnected Dyads: the Distressed Dynamics of the Coach/Athlete Relationship in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Intercollegiate Athletes

Athletics is a multi-billion dollar industry, with a considerable portion of that money going towards research that strives to make athletes more competitive (Klatell & Marcus, 1988). We push for them to be better, faster, stronger, and strive to get them in the optimal environment in order to maximize their potential. But, sport sciences frequently neglect to address a massive variable: who the athlete is, what their identity is, and whether or not this optimal training environment is supporting the athlete as a whole person.

An athlete is subject to a host of social and motivational influences across their entire career span. These influences create an environment referred to by experts as the “goal climate”, and research by Ames has found that the goal climate is instrumental (1992) in determining the degree of overall success, enjoyment, development, and well being of an athlete over their lifetime. A goal climate consists of a variety of needs that support and develop an athlete in three major categories: emotional support, sport specific instruction, and understanding of identity and personal experience. The goal climate is constructed by three key groups of people: an athlete’s parents, peers, and coaches (Keegan et al., 2010). These domains and subsequent influences act at different levels from these three different groups as an athlete progresses through their career, from phases of initiation, to specialization, and eventually to the elite few that make it to an investment mastery stage, where athletes specialize in a singular sport and focus on elite performance rather than enjoyment (Cote, Baker, and Abernethy 2003 & Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee, 2004). Work by Keegan and colleagues has shown that as an athlete approaches the investment mastery stage, peer and parent influence gets squeezed out and the goal climate is dictated almost entirely by the coach (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, Lavallee, 2014).

In light of these findings, experts started turning to coach-athlete relationships in order to better understand sport psychology and the goal climate that help drives performance. Following a case study done by Gould, Guinan, Greenlead, Medbery, and Peterson at the 1996 Olympics, Wylleman (2000) was the first to explore the concept that understanding what makes a hospitable and functional coach-athlete dyad is key to understanding athlete motivation and psychological motivations that may drive performance. A study by Gould and colleagues included interviews from teams and athletes that failed to perform as expected at the 1996 Summer Olympics. Through interviews, athletes cited that their preparation (physically and mentally) was affected by a poor coach-athlete relationship, characterized by a fundamental lack of trust, support, communication, and feeling of mutual respect from their coaches (1999). Bloom, Durant-Bush, Schinke, and Samela have written and contributed to analyses of coach-athlete dyads from as early as 1998, stressing the importance of mentorship in a successful relationship. In one paper, they write about the element of care on the coach’s part as being essential to developing a meaningful coach-athlete relationship (1998). Supporting this, additional research is comprised of athlete reports that claim their coach needs to be close, friendly, and understanding; there needs to be a high

degree of emotional understanding, or relatedness, in order for optimal motivation on and off the field (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, Lavalley, 2014).

Upon the understanding that interpersonal relationships between coaches and athletes undoubtedly play an effect on athletic performance and goal achievement, experts have searched for ways to define the optimal set of coach behaviors. In 1989, Smoll and Smith published a landmark article based on their work with Curtis and Hunt (1979) that sought to re-invent the practice of coaching. They urged professionals to focus more on enjoyment and the quality of the effort that athletes were bringing to practice and performance, proper reinforcement for goal-directed behaviors, corrective but constructive instruction, and to provide encouragement. This required coaches to move away from a punishment-based regimenting structure of behavior, and this shift resulted in a host of positive psychological outcomes for the athletes receiving it, such as increased self-worth, motivation, self-efficacy, and degree of trust and respect with their coach (Poczwadowski, Barott, Jowett, 2006). While this study changed how we viewed productive coaching behavior for a while, thoughtful criticisms of this model provided points that showed Smoll, Smith, and their colleague's work as being limited (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Vanden and colleagues (2000) criticized the nature in which sport psychology researchers characteristically ignore theories, concepts, and methods from other areas of psychology that have to do with relationships and their influence, and Poczwadowski et al. (2006) added that focusing on one participant in an interpersonal relationship causes us to miss and misrepresent some of the more complex issues that are present in a dyad.

From this point in sports psychology, many experts sought to create a system of measurement for coach-athlete dyads based on previous work that effectively incorporated the field's complete knowledge of interpersonal relationships and performance (Ogilvie & Tutko, 1966, Conroy & Benjamin, 2001, Carron & Bennett 1977, Carron & Chelladuria, 1978, Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). The gold standard emerged when Jowett and her colleagues (Jowett, 2001, Jowett & Meek, 2000, Jowett & Ntoumanis 2003) created a model of measurement for the coach-athlete dyad based on a Kelley et al. (1983) exploration and definition of fundamental components to interpersonal relationships. This article defined a dyadic relationship as a situation in which "two people's behaviours, emotions, and thoughts are mutually and causally interdependent" (p.3). From here, they selected three interpersonal constructs, Complementarity (Kiesler, 1997), Closeness (Berschied, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), and Co-orientation (Newcomb, 1953) from literature on successful interpersonal relationships in order to serve as operationalizing variables in determining the functionality of a coach-athlete dyad (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Jowett and Ntoumanis published this scale as the "Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire", or the CART-Q (2003). This scale was later adjusted to replace co-orientation with commitment, which explores the coaches' and athletes' mutual intention to maintain their relationship and implies cognitive orientation for the future.

These criteria of closeness, co-orientation/commitment, and complementarity have been used not only in the CART-Q but also as variables in many studies that look to the coach-athlete relationship as a window into what

defines and drives an athlete's goal climate (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, Lavallee, 2014, Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). A study of twelve Olympic medalists showed closeness as an especially important variable in characterizing successful coach-athlete dyads. Athletes who reported experiencing a negative closeness climate explain feeling frustrated, like they could no longer perform well, and distant from and used by their coach due to their lack of interest in them personally.

This interview data is a testament to an athlete's need and desire to be instructed by a coach who is competent not only in their practical mastery of the sport, but also in their interpersonal skills and ability to show care for and interest in their athletes (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Keegan, among other experts, found that the component of care and closeness was the only dimension that could effectively differentiate between self-reported "compatible" and "incompatible" coach-athlete dyads (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, Lavallee, 2014). An athlete who described having a positive closeness climate and therefore successful relationship with her coach stated that her coach knew her better than anyone in her life, and fundamentally understood her.

This is a theme observed in accordance with research done by Bloom et al. (1998), Hemery (1986), and Lyle (1999) that describes two sides to the practice of coaching: the personal and humanist. The humanistic side is development focused, and has the opportunity to create an understanding and accepting environment between the athlete and coach where they connect in an enriching way (Rogers, 1967). This enriching environment is critical to the coach-athlete relationship, as understanding of identity has been cited as an extremely desirable trait when athletes are prompted to describe their ideal coach. A gymnast in a study by Balaque (1999) that investigated value and meaning in elite athlete's identities and careers reported: "People see me as a pair of legs and think that this is all that I am. I need a coach who will see me as a whole person" (p. 93).

*Are we in spaces where athletes can be a "whole person"?*

Unfortunately, the framework of athletics allows many athletes to fall through the cracks, and doesn't create a space that is welcoming for them. Governing bodies of sport and increased visibility recruits a larger number of to-be athletes every year. Consequently, the population of people that consider themselves athletes is becoming increasingly more diverse in areas such as gender, race, age, religion, and sexual orientation (Ingram, 2015). Experts are uneasy about this fact, though, because many claim that the framework and structure of athletics, especially the professionals directing it, are not equipped to properly welcome and include a more diverse group of athletes that inherently follows increased participation (Naoi et. al, 2011). For the purpose of this paper, we'll focus on the sexual orientation piece of the puzzle—and the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identified athletes that are starting to be open about their identities while on their teams and competing.

Considerable research has described the heterosexist climate of sports culture maintained by stereotypes, harassment, comments, discrimination, isolation, and media attention that leads lesbian, gay, and bisexual athletes to remain silent about their identities or avoid athletics entirely (Griffin 1998, Roper & Halloran

2007). While society is priding itself on increase acceptance of LGB-identified individuals, there seems to be a lag in athletics that is causing severe psychological distress for those it affects (Ingram, 2015). Openly LGB athletes exist at a fraction of what statistics would predict for them based on general population numbers, and the prevailing culture of sports is seemingly at fault for maintaining that. Out in the Field, the first international survey on homophobia in sports, representing over 9,500 participants, helped to describe the hostile environment LGB athletes face. This study found that while participating in athletics, one in four gay men have been threatened, fifteen percent have been physically assaulted, eighty percent of people say they've witnessed homophobia, eighty-one percent of men and seventy-four percent of women reported being closeted to their teammates, and only one percent of the 9,500 participants said they believed that LGB people are completely accepted in sporting culture (Denison, 2015).

In athletics, LGB athletes are frequently labeled as “other”, and often experience a status loss within an athletic context. Extensive research shows evidence that parents (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), prospective student-athletes (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2006), and employees of athletic departments (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010) maintain these prejudices and are biased against LGB athletes. This research, combined with the legal, emotional, and mental struggles of the few LGB athletes that do choose to live authentically serve as a chilling reminder that athletics has a long way to go in upholding its principles of fairness, inclusion, and equality (Anderson, 2005).

Many organizations and activists are approaching this problem of a non-inclusive culture in athletics in a variety of different ways. Little research has been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of these various approaches, but theories of social change can help identify a key player in remedying this problem: coaches. den Hond and de Bakker write about social change in a way that focuses on activist groups and distinctions that can be made between them. They define two major labels for groups involved, the first being the activist group, an organization from the outside of a problem that questions the institution of the situation and is more likely to adopt a narrative that is more radical and challenging as compared to others. The other group den Hond and de Bakker explore is the role of the reformative group, an agent acting from the inside of a problem to explore their own shortcomings and how they can deinstitutionalize practices that contribute to it (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). In terms of LGB inclusion in athletics, this would be the difference between an activist group questioning the entire institution and system that allows athletics to be heterosexist as compared to an athletic department observing their seemingly heterosexist-behavior and seeking to adopt more inclusive practices while prompting other athletic departments to do the same (Cunningham, 2015). Interestingly enough, the reformative groups are shown to be more effective in creating social change, likely because organizations within a given field are more likely to resemble one another than they are to differ (Washington & Patterson, 2011).

Instead of looking at athletics as whole, and athletic departments as the agents leading culture change, we will scale down to look at coaches as agents of social change for the unit that they have control over: their team. The influence a

coach has on their team is unparalleled by any other force, and that their values and beliefs that they set forth are often mimicked by their players and directly influence team culture and cohesion (Gilbert & Trudel 2014, Turman, 2003). Given their influence over team dynamics, it would seem that their relationship and interaction (or lack thereof) with an LGB-identified athlete could set the standard for the climate of the team and therefore the experience of the athlete.

In this framework, this study seeks to explore the three C's, Closeness, Co-Orientation/Commitment, and Complementarity set forth by the CART-Q in coach-athlete dyads consisting of an openly LGB athlete and their coach. Based on previous research, it is expected that these coach-athlete dyads will score lower than the CART-Q has observed in the general population due to the prevailing culture of silence about sexual orientation in athletics (Griffin, 1998) and therefore athletes feeling like they can not share their authentic selves and full identities with their teams and coaches. This study will also provide suggestions for creating inclusive and successful coach-athlete relationships through open-ended interview questions with the athlete. These will come in the form of open-ended interview questions developed by Jowett and Cockerill (2003) that seek to explore the congruency between an athlete's ideal relationship with their actual coach-athlete relationship. It is hypothesized that these answers will describe a relationship that is less than ideal characterized by the potential lack of communication about an athlete's identity and consequentially, a wavering of trust and disconnect in understanding.

It's important to note that this study only explores the coach/athlete relationship as it may be affected by the sexual orientation of the athlete. This study does not investigate the affect of an athlete's gender identity, and therefore can't make any claims about the experience of transgender student-athletes and their relationship dynamics. This was a deliberate choice, as the background, challenges, and attitudes towards transgender athletes differ considerably from those who identify as LGB.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Collegiate athletes were contacted via email addresses found in media articles and through their involvement in activist groups. Sixteen athletes consented and completed the survey, which was approved by the Duke University Institutional Review Board. All participants were current or less than five years post-graduate student-athletes at an institution accredited by the National Collegiate Association of Athletics (NCAA). This is an important criterion, because as research describes, the investment-mastery stage is where an athlete's goal climate and subsequent experience relies entirely on their coach (Keegan et al., 2010). They received no financial compensation for their participation in this study. Of these sixteen athletes, eight are male-identified and eight are female-identified (mean age= 20.67; range= 19-25). Thirteen identify as white, two as black, and one as Hispanic using the text entry option.

### *Procedure*

Participants were introduced to the study through an email or social media script prompting them to take part in a study on coach-athlete dynamics. The script provided a link, which took them to an online survey client that walked them through the informed consent process. Participants then filled out the full twenty-five question CART-Q, or Coach Athlete Relationship Questionnaire as shown in Appendix A (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2003). The athlete was then prompted to answer open-ended questions developed by Jowett and Cockerill (2003) to further probe into the assessed domains of their relationship (Appendix C). The questionnaire then asked for demographic information along with a quick description of their perceived team culture, and then prompted athletes to enter a contact for their coach so they could be reached to fill out a CART-Q describing their relationship with their participating athlete.

Due to extremely low response rates, and lack of participation from coaches, the pursuit of data collection from coaches was stopped. Approximately two weeks into administration of the survey, the questions that were to collect contact information from the coach and send a recruitment message via email were eliminated from the survey. The survey was then distributed and framed as a study solely requiring the participation of LGB-identified athletes, and response rates improved.

### *Analysis*

The survey collected quantitative data from the CART-Q and qualitative data from the interview probe questions. With the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were run in order to describe the sample, and unpaired t-tests were run to observe the difference between data from LGB athletes collected in this study and a larger-scale CART-Q collection of the general population from Jowett and Ntoumanis' 2003 study. The qualitative data from the interview questions was subjected to content analysis (Weber, 1990) to search for recurring themes that either support or undermine the hypotheses of disconnected coach/athlete relationships based on past literature. Previous CART-Q analyses revealed a pattern in factor analysis that led later versions of the scale to replace the construct of co-orientation with that of commitment, so this study followed the same pattern in order to make relevant comparisons. In this study, athlete's responses will be divided into categories of closeness, complementarity, and commitment in their coaching relationship (Appendix B).

## Results and Discussion

### *The CART-Q Comparison*

It was hypothesized that LGB-identified athletes' scores on the CART-Q would provide lower scores and overall means than previous studies that implemented this same scale. The responses were coded into an abbreviated eleven-measure scale identical to the scale used in previous studies to explore coach-athlete dyads (Appendix B). All mean scores were above the midpoint (above 4 on a



7-point scale). The skewness of the individual answers suggests a negative skew of the distribution, and the kurtosis scores ranging from -1.43-2.63 support the evidence that the distribution may be abnormal. This data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the 11-item CART-Q in LGB athletes

Items	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
<b>Commitment</b>				
I feel close to my coach	4.67	1.95	-.39	-1.43
I feel committed to my coach	6.00	1.13	-.68	-.98
I feel that my sport career is promising with my coach	5.13	1.56	-1.00	.47
<b>Closeness</b>				
I like my coach	5.53	1.30	-.31	-.87
I trust my coach	5.53	1.46	-.96	.87
I respect my coach	6.33	1.05	-1.65	1.83
I appreciate the sacrifices my coach has made in order to improve their performance	5.67	1.68	-1.07	-.02
<b>Complementarity</b>				
When I am coached by my coach, I feel at ease	4.73	1.80	-.48	-.41
When I am coached by my coach, I feel responsive	5.33	.62	1.80	2.63
When I am coached by my coach, I am ready to do my best	5.60	1.35	-1.34	2.50
When I am coached by my coach, I adopt a friendly stance	5.40	1.80	-1.12	.95

These athletes reported the strongest relationship dynamics in closeness ( $M= 5.77$ ,  $SD= .38$ ), followed by commitment ( $M=5.27$ ,  $SD=.68$ ) and complementarity ( $M=5.27$ ,  $SD=.38$ ). Comparisons were made from Jowett's study in which they ran the same 11-question CART-Q scale on 214 British participants. This study reported higher means and smaller standard deviations in all three domains, as illustrated in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation from J&N

Items	Mean	SD
<b>Commitment</b>	<b>5.44</b>	<b>.34</b>
<b>Closeness</b>	<b>6.01</b>	<b>.27</b>
<b>Complementarity</b>	<b>6.00</b>	<b>.06</b>

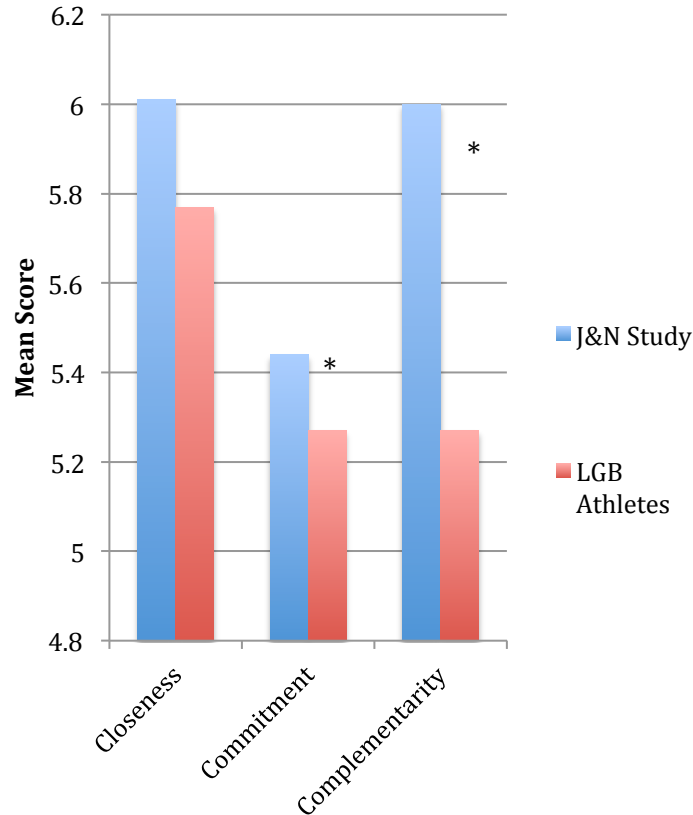
Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation from Miranda

Items	Mean	SD
<b>Commitment</b>	<b>5.27</b>	<b>.68</b>
<b>Closeness</b>	<b>5.77</b>	<b>.38</b>
<b>Complementarity</b>	<b>5.27</b>	<b>.38</b>

Unpaired t-tests were performed to calculate differences between means observed in Jowett's study as compared to the data collected from LGB athletes.

Answers from LGB athletes reported a lower degree of closeness,  $t(228)=3.40$ ,  $p<.01$ , and complementarity,  $t(228)=25.59$ ,  $p<.01$ , with their coaches than did the larger pool of athletes from Jowett and Ntoumanis' 2003 study. T-tests of the mean differences in perceived closeness just missed the cutoff of .01 for statistical significance,  $t(228)=1.87$ ,  $p=.062$ . The differences in means can be observed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Comparison of means on CART-Q between LGB athlete sample and Jowett & Ntoumanis (2003) study



These tests support the hypotheses that LGB-identified athletes would report lower scores on the CART-Q than what has been previously observed in the general population. This observed phenomenon of lower scores in LGB athletes can be brought back to Griffin's proposed "culture of silence" in athletics surrounding sexual orientation (1998), and how this takes a toll on an athlete's well-being and impacts their relationships and experience within these contexts (Anderson, 2005).

### *Limitations*

It's important to note the limitations of the comparison of these two data sets. The sample of LGB-identified athletes consisted only of collegiate athletes ranging from ages 19-25. The sample used in Jowett's study represented all levels of sport: recreational (8%), club (47%), collegiate (20%), national (16%), and

international (9%). As previously mentioned, the socio-cultural influences in sport career and the support systems in which we seek those from change dramatically as an athlete ages and moves towards the investment-mastery stage (Keegan et al., 2010). Therefore, this broad analysis of all sport levels may not provide the best comparison to a group of NCAA-eligible, collegiate athletes that are at an extremely advanced level.

Additionally, Jowett and Ntoumanis' data set included 214 participants: 139 athletes and 75 coaches. Our study attempted to collect coach data as well, but we were unable to do so because some athletes failed to provide coach contact info, and in the cases of those who did, the coaches failed to complete the survey. This might also skew results seeing as that one data set consists of both coach and athlete perception of their relationship, while the other consists of only athlete responses. While this is an obstacle in making significant comparisons between the two data sets, it can also serve as a testament to the stigmatization of conversations about sexual orientation in athletic culture, the hesitation LGB-identified athletes experience, or the self-imposed disinterest of coaches in their athlete's broader identities.

A final note for consideration: sexual orientation was not collected in Jowett and Ntoumanis' data set. While the sexual orientation of these coaches and athletes can't be assumed, it's likely this data set consists of LGB participants observed at a number closer to Britain's estimated averages of anywhere from 1-5% of the population (Chalabi, 2013). No previous research or data exists to determine the interaction of an athlete's sexual orientation on dynamics of the coach-athlete dyad they exist in, so this problem cannot yet be remedied.

### *Open-ended Responses*

Through the exploration of sport as a problematic and heterosexist institution, it's clear how LGB-identified athletes are subject to a host of obstacles and challenges that impact them in their career. The coach-athlete relationship is an extremely powerful point to connect with these athletes and offer support and a positive relationship to foster productive athletic and personal growth (Turman 2003). Interdependence theory, the idea that closeness is the key to a rewarding relationship (Kelley et. al, 2003), can describe how a successful and meaningful relationship with a coach is instrumental to an athlete's growth, success, and overall satisfaction not only in sports, but also in the grander scheme of their lives (Jowett & Nezlek 2011). Additionally, complex dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship have been predicted to impact an athlete's goal climate, and therefore their self-worth, motivation, and self-concept (Jowett, 2008).

In order to better describe what effective coaching strategies help create inclusive and meaningful environments for LGB-identified athletes and discover what may be causing a weakened relationship, a series of open-ended interview questions from Jowett and Cockerill's 2003 study were analyzed for their content (Appendix C). Out of the sixteen athletes, eleven of them provided complete responses to these questions. These eleven athletes include six men (marked B) and five women (marked A). The title of each section is the question that the athlete was

presented with. It's important to keep in mind that these responses describe both positive and negative coach-athlete interactions. Additionally, these questions didn't seek to explore only domains related to sexual orientation, but rather exist to help characterize and explore potential roots for the weakened coach-athlete relationship observed in LGB-identified athletes.

*What characterizes your relationship with coach? What reinforces it?*

Athletes were asked about what features characterized and reinforced their athletic relationship with their primary collegiate coach. Ninety-one percent of the responses were positive overall, and a common theme was mutual appreciation and respect. Some example responses are as follows from participants A1, B3, and B5 respectively:

"[Our relationship is characterized by] mutual contribution and respect: his respect for my perspective and ideas as a player, which then drive me to be very open minded with what he might have to suggest."

"There was always respect between us....I knew that my coach was not just my coach but also my friend. There was trust between us and I knew I could tell him anything. I also felt that my coach always had my back... he would always be there to support and defend me."

"Communication between me and my coach is important. Understanding how I function and how he functions both mentally and physically."

These responses support various accounts of the coach-athlete relationship that stress trust and respect as cornerstones (Bloom et., al 1998). However, these accounts may also suggest the existence of an additional domain that may be of importance of LGB-identified athletes—the idea that the coach understands their perspective and is willing to defend them.

*In what ways did your relationship with coach contribute to your success? Your performance?*

Athletes were asked to describe how their relationship with their coach impacted and affected them in their sport career, either positively or negatively. Eighty-one percent of the responses were overall positive. Highlights are as follows from participants A6, B1, B2, B5, and B6 respectively:

"Being able to be authentic around my coach was invaluable for me, not only as an athlete, but as a person. I felt like I could bring everything I had to games."

"I feel comfortable to be myself around him. I know he isn't going to judge me... all that matters is how much effort I put forth."

"I always knew that he would have my back and be there for me which

encouraged me to want to try harder. I think that since we respected each other I never wanted to let him down so I was always willing to work hard and compete at my best. Because of our friendship, I was able to really perform well.”

“Creating trust and a positive relationship is pertinent. My coach and I lacked that relationship and trust to an extent after certain interactions, and I would say my performance declined because of it.”

“I have found that I am improving the more confident I am with my coach, and the more comfortable I am with my coach.”

These responses illustrate the dramatic effect that the coach-athlete relationship has on performance at the most basic level. Athletes that alluded to an open and authentic relationship cited improved performance and increased effort in their sport, whereas the athlete who described a lack of trust mentioned declining performance.

*Any moments where working with your coach was ineffective? Was there conflict? Disagreement?*

Here, athletes were asked to explore their relationship with their coach in terms of potential hardships and roadblocks that occurred. Every athlete but one was able to provide an example of a conflict in their relationship. Many responses articulate disconnect of understanding between athletes their coach about their complex identities or willingness to have conversations. These are responses from participants A1, A4, A6, B1, and B6 respectively:

“He isn’t always the best at recognizing how our off-field lives are all different and how different struggles can create unique situations we have to deal with. I am not like many of my teammates and we shouldn’t be lumped into one stereotype.”

“[There was conflict in] almost every conversation, I was always worried about hurting feelings and how she’d react.”

“I never really talked to him about things happening in my life... outside of sport, like my sexual orientation. There was just never a time where it felt relevant to bring up... that made things feel weird and uncomfortable. It was kind of like an elephant in the room for me...sometimes I didn’t feel entirely comfortable with him for this reason. It felt like I was hiding something, even though I wasn’t actively.”

“Sometimes, I would not want to tell coach about things in my personal life that were bothering me because he always encouraged the team to leave drama at the door so we could focus on training. But sometimes that wouldn’t work for me. I would all of the sudden not want to be at practice or I

wouldn't want to listen or be coached, and if I held it in I would always perform poorly, however as soon as I talked about it with him I would feel better."

"I think most disagreements come from when I don't necessarily fit the plan most athletes have. This is because of anxiety and mental struggles I have had in the past and still struggle with."

These responses support Griffin's idea of a prevailing culture of silence in athletics, where conversations about sexual orientation are swept under the rug due to a heterosexist status quo maintained by stereotypes, harassment, comments, discrimination, isolation, and media attention (1998). Athletes report either a lack of understanding from their coaches about how their identities impact them as a player and make their situation different from other members of the team, and a fear of beginning this conversation due to the potential reactions and discomfort of their coach. There doesn't seem to be a "relevant context" to discuss broader aspects of identities in athletics, and this is something a coach can control and dictate about their culture (Turman, 2003).

*How would you describe an effective coach-athlete relationship? Ideally, how would your relationship have been?*

In this section, athletes were asked to describe what they believe is a successful coach-athlete relationship, and what dynamics characterize that. A common theme was an open line of communication, mutual understanding, and respect for one another. Many athletes also cited their wishes of being able to be authentic and honest with their coach about their personal lives and build a strong friendship in addition to their athletic relationship. Responses from participants A5, A6, B1, and B2 follow:

"I think an athlete should feel comfortable with a coach knowing who they are dating, knowing when they are dealing with something hard that could impact them."

"Similar to mine, but with more open lines of communication. I wish we could have conversations that normally don't take part at practice or seemingly have a lot of 'athletic merit'."

"[An ideal coach is] someone I can be myself around and therefore be able to compete at my best each and every day."

"An ideal coach-athlete relationship is one where the coach and athlete can get to know one another outside of a practice setting. Your coach is a coach, but also a friend/mentor."

Through these responses, it's clear where LGB-identified student athlete is compelled to have a strong relationship dynamic with their coach where

conversations about their sexual orientation are welcomed. These athletes express the necessity of feeling understood and being able to be authentic around their coach—and again bring up the frustration of feeling like conversations that can facilitate this are not welcomed in athletics.

*How would you describe your relationship with your coach in comparison to this ideal? How is it different?*

Here, athletes were asked to compare and contrast their actual relationship with their coach to the ideal they communicated in the previous question. Only sixty-three percent of the responses stated that overall, the athlete's relationship with their coach was generally very close to the ideal that they communicated. The positive responses frequently mentioned a deep and personal relationship based on respect and understanding. The athletes that responded negatively mainly cited a disconnect in communication and trust. Both positive and negative responses are highlighted from participants A4, A5, A6, B2, B5, and B6:

"My real relationship was way off from ideal... an ideal relationship is based on respect and communication, in which both parties give 100% of their time, talent, and energy."

"We don't talk about my dating life, but we are close about everything else. Not because he would disapprove, but I'm hesitant."

"Just the communication thing stands. I really like and respect my coach, and he reciprocates it, but I always have that problem with feeling like he doesn't really understand me because I never feel it's appropriate to disclose my identity to him."

"My relationship is just like what I mentioned above... I can go to him at any time with any problem. He respects me as a person."

"I'd like constant open communication. After I shared my opinions, I felt like my coach was unresponsive to them."

"I think we come pretty close to this ideal. I respect my coach, and he respects me. The main difference is my coach is still working to fully understand how I function."

These excerpts illustrate the disconnect that LGB-identified athletes may feel with their coaches and the ways that their relationships differ from their ideals. Many common themes that have been highlighted in the previous four questions appear here: the need for open communication, the feeling of a respectful mentor/friendship, a space for athletes to be authentic, and the coach's pursuit of understanding an identity and experience that may be different from theirs.

### *Limitations*

These descriptions of coach/athlete relationships may be positively skewed due to the recruitment strategy used. Contacts were obtained through their media presence and activist groups, which may recruit a sample of athletes that are very public about their sexual orientation. The degree of openness about their identity could either be due to an already inclusive environment, or could have created one through contact theory. Contact theory states that exposure to a person of a different identity creates more accepting and tolerant attitudes towards individuals that belong to that group (Roper & Halloran, 2007). It's very hard to get perspectives, data, and experiences from athletes that may still be silent about their identities, because we can't discern who they are and therefore can't contact them. A sample of athletes that are public enough about their sexual orientations to have a media presence may not be entirely representative of the true experience for all LGB-identified individuals in athletics.

### Conclusions and Future Directions

A coach is an instrumental part of an athlete's development, satisfaction, and success not only in their sport but also in the broader context of their life (Keegan, Spray, Harwood & Lavalley, 2014). Components such as trust, respect, friendship, understanding, care, and closeness are imperative in any positive coach-athlete relationship, and coaches should strive to incorporate these values into their team culture and philosophies (Turman, 2003).

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual athletes are no exception to this rule, but may require coaches to approach their relationships in ways they haven't considered before. A heterosexist framework in athletics full of biases and prejudice maintained by parents (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), prospective student-athletes (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2006), and employees of athletic departments (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010) provides a challenging landscape and sets these athletes at a mental and emotional disadvantage to their heterosexual peers (Denison, 2015). den Hond and de Bakker's research on reformative groups suggests that coaches can play a valuable role in shaping this problematic culture from the inside out, and that their relationships with these athletes can serve as a catalyst to achieving true equality and respect for them in athletics (2007).

This study employed the CART-Q and various opened ended questions developed from it in order to explore relationship dynamics in LGB athlete-coach dyads. It was hypothesized that when compared with the initial responses recorded during development of the CART-Q, the responses collected in this study would show significant reductions in average assessment of closeness, commitment, and complementarity than normally observed in coach-athlete relationships.

The data mostly supported this claim, showing a significant deficit for LGB-identified athletes in the domains of commitment and complementarity as compared to the data collected in Jowett's study. Closeness just missed the cutoff for significance (with  $p=.06$ ), but still showed a smaller mean.



As mentioned in the results and discussion section, there are a variety of limitations to this analysis. The lack of coach participation, differing samples, and absence of sexual orientation data in Jowett's data set could have skewed these results. Nonetheless, it shouldn't be overlooked that the data in this study suggest a less meaningful and weaker relationship when strictly LGB-identified athletes are participants.

Expecting this finding, we also believed it would be meaningful to use open ended interview questions to further explore these relationships and see what dynamics may be contributing to this trend. Five questions explored the coach-athlete dyads in terms of what the athlete considered ideal and if/how their actual relationship fell short of that. Research by Bloom et al (1998), Hemery (1986), and Lyle (1999) suggest that coaches have to create an understanding and accepting environment between them and their athletes where they have the opportunity to connect in an enriching way. This can be particularly hard for LGB-identified athletes, since the culture of athletics doesn't create space for conversations about their identities and as a consequence, they often choose to remain silent and suffer (Griffin 1998, Roper & Halloran, 2007). In order to support this theory, it was hypothesized that the answers from this study will cite a relationship that isn't congruent with the communicated ideal due to potential lack of communication about an athlete's identity and a wavering of trust and understanding as a consequence.

Responses from the interview questions partially supported this hypothesis. Not all cases included athletes that felt a disconnect and that they had a negatively characterized relationship with their coach, but a few did and cited the reasons that we expected them to given previous research and theories about heterosexist culture in athletics. Furthermore, these questions also provided an insight to what characterizes positive coach-athlete relationships for LGB-identified athletes. Regardless of whether these components were described as being present or lacking, the most important and recurring themes that athletes described are as follows: an open line of communication, a coach's attempt to understand their identity and how it may influence them differently, a space in which they can be authentic and seek advice, and the pursuit of a powerful friend/mentorship that is pervasive across all areas of their life—athletic and personal. These themes were present in both positively and negatively described coach-athlete relationships, as either a strength of their relationship or a detriment due to the lack thereof.

Athletes also cited being frustrated that they remained silent to their coaches about their sexual orientation because they never felt it was a relevant conversation to have. Like Griffin (1998), Anderson (2005), and Ingram (2015) describe, athletic culture isn't conducive to conversations about broader aspects of identity, including sexual orientation. This takes a negative toll on the athletes, and they report it affecting their mental health, trust in the team, and overall physical performance.

A common argument for coaches is that facilitating these conversations have no place in sports, and serve as a distraction and detriment to what could be training time (Roper & Halloran 2007). However, research from Keegan and his colleagues report that relatedness and understanding within a team in all contexts is imperative for optimal athlete motivation and performance on and off the field

(Keegan, Spray, Harwood, Lavallee, 2014) Not only do the responses from athletes in this study support these findings, they actually even show how performance can decline in the absence of this understanding culture. Various case studies show that teams and athletes that failed to perform in the past cite that their preparation (physically and mentally) was affected by a fundamental lack of trust, support, communication, and mutual respect from their coaches (Gould et al, 1999).

It's clear that athletes are becoming more diverse and visible in terms of their sexual orientation, and also that the prevailing culture of sports isn't conducive to supporting them effectively (Anderson, 2005). Coaches need to take responsibility in creating inclusive environments on their teams, starting directly with the athlete themselves. The data from this study shows that there are a variety of identity-specific dynamics that athletes desire in their coach-athlete relationships, and an overall weakened relationship between LGB athletes and their coaches than is normally observed that may come consequentially from the omission of these dynamics. Previous research about coach-athlete relationships and formation of the goal climate suggests that they directly influence one another at the mastery level (Conroy & Benjamin, 2011), and therefore we see how an LGB-identified athlete could be struggling in athletics in physical, personal, emotional, and mental domains due to their lack of an affirming culture coming from their coach.

As mentioned in the limitations, the CART-Q comparison drawn between this data and the data collected from Jowett & Ntoumanis' (2003) study isn't perfect. This data set was chosen due to its pervasiveness in literature, but it didn't collect data about the sexual orientation of the coaches and athletes included. There was also an extremely small sample size in the data set from LGB athletes, which was devoid of coach responses. This could also influence results, because as Poczwardowski et al. (2006) stated, focusing on one participant in an interpersonal relationship can cause us to miss and misrepresent some of the more complex issues that are present in a dyad. Additionally, the results from both the CART-Q and interview questions may be skewed in a positive direction due to a recruitment strategy that could only contact athletes who are open enough about their sexual orientation to have a media presence as a result of it.

Keeping these limitations in mind, various future directions emerge from this research. Since the study is the first of its kind, repetition of its methods is strongly encouraged to explore whether or not these hypotheses are continually supported, and to make the literature about identity and sports psychology more robust. Other future directions could include the inclusion of heterosexual athletes for direct, between-groups comparison, differing recruitment strategies in order to capture a more representative sample, the inclusion of transgender athletes, exploration into the effect a coach's sexual orientation has, or a broader range of career-stages to discern whether or not the coach is as pervasive of a force outside of the investment-mastery stage.

Generally speaking, casting a wider net in order to recruit a larger sample size, which may include heterosexual athletes, more diverse levels of sport, athletes that aren't publicly out, and more coaches would remedy a lot of limitations about this study and begin to tackle the future of this research. This study provides a

strong foundation for the implication that LGB-identified athletes show a weakened relationship with their coaches, perhaps due to identity specific relationship components and conversations that aren't likely to occur in athletics. This weak relationship has the power to produce an insufficient goal climate to support the athlete, and can lead to a host of physical, mental, and emotional problems for them. Further research is required, but this data suggests that in order to begin to level the playing field for lesbian, gay, and bisexual athletes, coaches may need to take a more active role in inclusion—starting with fostering meaningful relationships with the athlete themselves based on the themes suggested in this paper: open communication, attempted understanding of an athlete's identity and how it impacts them, the creation of authentic spaces, and an enduring friend and mentorship.

## Appendix A

The twenty-five item Coach Athlete Relationship Questionnaire used in the survey. This initially sought to characterize coach-athlete dynamics in terms of closeness, complementarity, and co-orientation.

*Closeness*

Do you feel close to your coach/athlete?

Do you like your coach/athlete?

Do you trust your coach/athlete?

Do you respect your coach's/athlete's efforts?

Do you feel committed to your coach/athlete?

Do you appreciate the 'sacrifices' your coach/athlete has experienced in order to improve his/her performance?

Do you feel that your sport/coaching career with your coach/athlete is promising?

*Complementarity*

Do you think that both of you work appropriately in achieving the goals set?

Do you think that both of you work well in achieving the goals set?

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I feel competent.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I feel interested.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I am understood.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I am ready to do my best.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I feel at ease.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I feel responsive.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I adopt a friendly stance.

*Co-orientation*

Do you communicate enough with your athlete/coach about training?

Do you agree with your athlete's/coach's views?

Do you know your athlete's/coach's strong points?

Do you know your athlete's/coach's weak points?

Do you communicate well with your athlete/coach?

Do you strive to achieve similar goals with your athlete/coach?

Do you feel there is understanding between your athlete/coach and yourself?

### Appendix B

The eleven-item Coach Athlete Relationship Questionnaire that emerged after multiple studies performed factor analyses, principal components analyses, and tested the validation of the CART-Q. It was found that the questions frequently loaded onto a category better described as commitment, and therefore commitment replaced co-orientation in the scale. These are the items used to calculate the means that were used for comparison between LGB coach-athlete dyads and the group from Jowett & Ntoumanis' 2003 study.

#### *Closeness*

Do you like your coach/athlete?

Do you trust your coach/athlete?

Do you respect your coach's/athlete's efforts?

Do you appreciate the 'sacrifices' your coach/athlete has experienced in order to improve his/her performance?

#### *Complementarity*

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I am ready to do my best.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I feel at ease.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I feel responsive.

When I coach my athlete/am coached by my coach, I adopt a friendly stance.

#### *Commitment*

Do you feel close to your coach/athlete?

Do you feel committed to your coach/athlete?

Do you feel that your sport/coaching career with your coach/athlete is promising?

### Appendix C

The five item scripted interview questions used to collect open-ended data characterizing the coach-athlete relationship in terms of ideals and potential disconnect. This was developed and used in Jowett and Cockerill's 2003 study. Athletes were given this prompt and told to answer in as much or as little text as they felt appropriate.

1. What were the main features that characterized your athletic relationship with coach? What features reinforced your relationship with your coach?
2. In what ways did the relationship you and your coach had developed contributed to your athletic success? How did you relationship with your coach have an impact on your performance?
3. Can you think of any instances where you felt that working with your coach was ineffective? Were there any moments of conflict or disagreement?
4. How would you describe an effective, or ideal, coach-athlete relationship? Ideally, how would you have liked your relationship with coach to have been?
5. How do you describe your relationship in comparison with this ideal? How was the relationship with your coach different from your ideal athlete-coach relationship?

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