

Case Studies for Discussing LGBT Issues in Athletics

The following series of case studies describe a variety of situations in which athletes, coaches, and athletic directors must make decisions about how to resolve questions of prejudice, harassment, or discrimination directed at LGBT coaches or athletes. Some of the case studies are better suited to high school and others are better suited for college settings.

Discussing the case studies can be an effective way to identify problems and solutions that promote fairness, respect, and safety for LGBT and heterosexual participants. Choose one or more cases for participants to discuss depending on the time available. Dividing the group into smaller subgroups, each with a different case study to discuss and report on to the larger group, is an effective way to encourage more participation.

Three discussion questions and a list of suggested topics to address in the discussion accompany each case study.

Ultimate Frisbee is a “Faggot” Sport

The coach of the boys' ultimate frisbee team asks to talk with the boys' baseball coach just before practice one afternoon. She tells him that the ultimate team has complained that, in the locker room, several baseball players have been calling them “homos” and saying that ultimate is a “faggot sport.” An ultimate player found a male nude pin-up picture taped to his locker, and several baseball players laughed at him and made sexual gestures directed at him when he found it. The ultimate coach asks the baseball coach what ideas he has so they can address this behavior together. The baseball coach laughs and tells the ultimate coach that she is overreacting and that it is all just meant as inter-team rivalry and teasing. He doesn't see what the big deal is and tells her to lighten up.

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics to Discuss:

- Use of anti-gay slurs to put down sport and athletes not thought of as “manly”
- Anti-gay slurs and the effect on climate for gay athletes on either team
- Traditional jock culture: learn to take harassment without complaint
- Harassment is an acceptable form of teasing
- Same-sex sexual harassment as a possible legal concern

Basketball Player Joins The GSA

One of the players on the girls' basketball team has joined the school Gay Straight Alliance Club. She is wearing a rainbow pin on her basketball jacket in school. She has also cut her hair very short and has a streak of green in it. Several of her teammates are very upset with her because they are concerned that people will think the whole team is gay because of her. No one wants to change near her in the locker room, and the team is not working well together when she is on the court. The coach finds out about this because she overhears two players discussing it in the locker room after practice.

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics to Discuss:

- Assumptions about sexuality based on dress, hair, being a member of GSA
- Girls concerned that people will think they are gay because they are athletes
- Stereotypes/fears of lesbians as sexual threats in the locker room
- Wearing GSA pin on team jacket: Free expression or violation of team policy?
- Effects of homophobia on team performance
- Effects of differences on "team chemistry"
- Girls in sport feeling the need to "prove" their heterosexuality

Parental Concerns About College Teams

The star pitcher on the high school softball team has been getting many contacts from college coaches who want to recruit her to their programs. Her parents come to the high school coach for advice about how to choose among the schools. Her father asks the coach what she knows about the coach or anything about the “lifestyle” at one of the colleges his daughter is considering. The father praises the high school coach for being a good role model for his daughter because she is a married with children, and he wants his daughter’s college coach to be married too. Though he does not say it directly, the coach assumes the father wants to avoid sending his daughter to a school where there might be a lesbian coach or lesbians on the team.

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics to Discuss:

- Assumption that lesbian coaches are a threat, not a good role model
- Assumption that the high school coach is straight, shares his beliefs about lesbians
- Assumption that having a lesbian coach might make his daughter a lesbian

Gay Lacrosse Player

A boy on the lacrosse team has come out at East High. The town newspaper featured him in an article about gay teens. Other school teams in the league have found out that East High has a gay lacrosse player. During the preseason, there is a lot of talk from other teams about how they will be out to get the “faggot” during games. Most of the East High team has rallied around their gay teammate, but a few resent that he is “putting it in people’s faces” and “embarrassing” their team. These boys were in a fight one Friday night with players from another school who called them “fag lovers.”

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics to Discuss:

- Being openly gay equated with “putting it in people’s faces”
- Fears of association with gay teammate
- Having a gay teammates is an insult
- Need to defend heterosexuality with violence
- Threats of violence against gay athlete
- Having a gay teammate as an embarrassment
- Using anti-gay slurs to taunt opponents

Inseparable Teammates

Two players on the girls' field hockey team are inseparable. They are together everywhere. They come to practice and leave together every day. They eat lunch together in the cafeteria. They always sit together on the bus traveling to games. Some of the rest of the team is starting to call them "the girlfriends" and make comments about them when they are not there. One Saturday afternoon the coach sees the two teammates holding hands in the town park. They do not see her.

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics to Discuss:

- Assumption that they are lesbians because they are close
- Effect on team dynamics of having two players split off
- Dealing with relationships on a team: What's fair to them and the team
- Reactions of the rest of team to having lesbian partners on the team
- What displays of affection are appropriate for team members and where
- Potential for problems from parents, others

Swimmer Comes Out to Coach

A member of the boys' swim team waits around after practice to talk with his coach. He is fidgeting and reluctant to say what is on his mind. Finally, with some encouragement from the coach, he manages with much difficulty to say that he thinks he might be gay and that he does not know what to do. He says he doesn't want his parents to know because his dad will "go wild."

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics to Discuss:

- How can coaches let athletes know they are open to these conversations
- Knowing how to respond if an athlete comes out
- Confidentiality issues
- Having resources available

Silence is Not Golden

During a discussion in an athletic department meeting about gay athletes and the possibility of scheduling an in-service program on this topic, one of the coaches states that he doesn't care about the sexuality of his athletes. He sees no need for the in-service program. He thinks this is a "non-issue," and he treats all athletes exactly the same so there is not a problem on his teams. He believes talking about this just "stirs things up."

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics to Discuss:

- Is treating all athletes the same, making athletics safe for LGBT students?
- What might the coach learn that would be useful?
- How can silence about LGBT issues be harmful

Sexism and Homophobia

The girl's softball team approaches their coach because they are very upset about the reputation that softball players have. Boys on the wrestling, ice hockey, and football teams are calling some of them "sir" and teasing them about being "she-men." They want the coach to institute a dress code for the team requiring them to keep their hair at least shoulder-length and to wear dresses or skirts to school on game days.

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics to Discuss:

- Why are the girls so upset
- Girls feeling defensive about their athleticism
- Connections between gender roles, sexism and homophobia
- Focusing feminine appearance to "prove" heterosexuality and femininity

Softball Player Comes Out

Two seniors on the women's softball team learn that one of their teammates is planning to come out as a lesbian during a campus forum sponsored by the school GLBT alliance. They pull her aside and warn her not to do this for "the good of the team." They tell her that the whole team will get a "gay reputation" if she goes through with her plan. They also warn her that doing this could jeopardize her relationships with her teammates and chances to be elected team captain the following year. One of the players tells the coach what is going on in the hope that the coach will prevent her teammate from coming out.

Case Study Questions:

1. What is the problem in this situation?
2. What action suggestions would you make to the coach to address the problem?
3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics To Discuss:

- Assumption that having an out lesbian teammate will have a negative effect on the team
- Concerns about people assuming that the whole team is lesbian if one player is
- Damaging effects of keeping an important secret about yourself from people you are close to
- Ways that teammates could support rather than discourage a lesbian teammate who wants to come out

Baseball Players Harass Basketball Players

The women's basketball coach approaches the men's baseball coach to discuss a situation she thinks is grounds for a sexual harassment claim against two members of the men's baseball team. She tells him that two women basketball players are roommates in one of the residence halls. The women players claim that, after they declined to date the baseball players, they have been receiving late night phone calls from them in which they make crude sexual comments. The women also say that the baseball players have scrawled "dykes live here" in permanent marker on the door of their room. When confronted by their coach, the baseball players deny writing the slur on the women's door and tell the coach the phone calls were all a joke and that they didn't mean any harm.

Case Study Questions:

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3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics To Discuss:

- Sexual harassment and creating a hostile environment
- Sexual harassment as a violation of law
- Importance of educating all athletes about sexual harassment
- Connections between sexism and homophobia: Use of the lesbian label to bait women athletes
- Importance of men and women coaches working together to help athletes understand the seriousness of sexual and other forms of harassment
- Note that because the women athletes were aware of what constitutes sexual harassment and told their coach about it, the situation could be addressed rather than ignored

Transgender Field Hockey Player

During her first two years on the team, one of the players on the women's field hockey team has been repeatedly harassed by opposed teams who call her "sir" and ask her why a "guy" is playing on a woman's team. She is tall with short hair, muscular, and an excellent player. Some of her own teammates are also uncomfortable with her appearance. They are embarrassed because they think she presents a bad image for the team. Some of her teammates assume she is a lesbian because of her appearance. She has confided in her coach that she identifies as transgender and does not feel comfortable identifying herself as a man or a woman. She says she is tired of the harassment and assumptions made about her by opponents and her own teammates. She is thinking about quitting the team.

Case Study Questions:

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4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics To Address:

- Harassment of player who does not conform to traditional gender expression
- Women athletes who are afraid of being perceived as unfeminine or are uncomfortable with other women who are not feminine
- Assumption that people who do not conform to traditional gender expression are lesbian or gay
- Ways the coach can address the problem with the team, with opponents
- Ways team captains can provide some leadership
- Ways to educate the team about gender identity and expression

Black Gay Sprinter

One of the sprinters on the men's track team is a black gay man. He has not told any of his teammates or his coach that he is gay. He knows that one of the middle-distance runners and a shot putter are also gay, Both of them are white and they are out to the team. He is comfortable with being gay, but worries that his black teammates will not accept him. He has been with them when they have made fun of the white gay athletes on the team. He already feels isolated at the school because it is in a rural, white town and athletes at the college are practically the only people of color around. He has experienced numerous incidents in the classroom and in the town where white people have made assumptions about him because he is black or treated him differently than they treat white students. The coach, a white man, cannot understand why this athlete is such a loner even with his black teammates.

Case Study Questions:

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Topics To Address:

- Effects of racism on athletes of color compounds the effects of homophobia
- The damaging effects of keeping a secret about yourself from friends
- The isolation black gay athletes can feel from straight black teammates and white gay teammates
- How white heterosexual coaches can learn to be more attuned to the effects of racism and homophobia on athletes both in athletics and on campus or in the community
- Ways black straight and white gay teammates can support black gay teammates

Gay Football Captain

One of the captains of the football team, a popular and respected starter, recently told his teammates and coaches that he is gay. The head coach and most of the team have enthusiastically rallied around him. A few players have come to one of the assistant coaches expressing concerns about being in the locker room with a gay man. This assistant coach, who objects to homosexuality on religious grounds, has told the head coach he has mixed feelings over how to reconcile his religious beliefs with having an openly gay player on the team. The head coach, though supportive of his captain, is concerned that this situation will affect team unity and performance.

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3. What action suggestions would you make to athletes to address the problem?
4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics To Address:

- The importance of LGBT athletes being about to come out to teammates because of the negative consequences of keeping an important secret about yourself
- Fears some people have about being in locker rooms with gay men or lesbians are based on stereotypes and assumptions that stigmatize lesbians and gay men unfairly
- Coaches or athletes who do not approve of homosexuality can still be committed to the right of LGBT athletes to a safe and discrimination-free athletic environment
- The leadership provided by coaches and team captains can determine whether or not the presence of an openly gay or lesbian player will hurt or help team unity

Lesbian Soccer Coach

It has been a tough season for the women's soccer team. Though preseason predictions were high, the team has failed to live up to expectations. The coach has not come out to her team, but it is common knowledge among her players that she is a lesbian who lives with her partner, the women's softball coach. She is in the final year of her contract. As the team sinks lower in league standings, dissension on the team has increased. One faction of the team is claiming that the coach is favoring the lesbian players with more playing time and believes this is one cause of their dismal season. The same players also complain that having two lesbian teammates in a relationship makes the rest of the team uncomfortable and affects their play on the field. They go to the athletic director with their complaints stating their preference for a male coach next year.

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4. What action suggestions would you make to athletic administrators to address this problem?

Topics To Address:

- Homophobia can become more of a problem if the team is losing or the coach is unpopular– looking for a scapegoat
- Without education or open discussion, athletes are more likely to act on their fears and prejudice
- The issue of a relationship between teammates needs to be addressed with appropriate and fair policy and expectations for everyone made clear
- The sexism and homophobia of assuming a male coach would be better for the team and would eliminate favoritism.