



## Institute for Culture & Society Pre-Print Journal Articles

### **The International Gay Games: Subverting Homophobia or Selling Out?**

**Kevin Markwell, David Rowe**

**The definitive version of this article is published in:**

Markwell, K. & Rowe, D. 2003, 'The International Gay Games: Subverting Homophobia or Selling Out?', *International Sports Studies*, 25(1): 5-20.

**The definitive version of this article is available online at:**

[http://www.la84foundation.org/5va/iss\\_frmst.htm](http://www.la84foundation.org/5va/iss_frmst.htm)  
(institutional or subscribed access may be required)

***International Sports Studies* is available online:**

[http://www.la84foundation.org/5va/iss\\_frmst.htm](http://www.la84foundation.org/5va/iss_frmst.htm)  
(institutional or subscribed access may be required)

© Copyright remains with the publisher.

#### **Disclaimer**

Please note that this is an electronic, pre-print version of this article produced by the Institute for Culture & Society, University of Western Sydney, in accordance with the requirements of the publisher.

Whilst this version of the article incorporates refereed changes and has been accepted for publication, differences may exist between this and the final, published version. Citations should only be made from the published version.

#### **User Agreement**

Copyright of these pre-print articles are retained by the author. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article to facilitate their own study or non-commercial research. Wider circulation and distribution of the material and/or use of it in profit-making activities is prohibited.

URLs to access this pre-print version can be freely distributed:

[www.uws.edu.au/ics/people/researchers/david\\_rowe](http://www.uws.edu.au/ics/people/researchers/david_rowe)

# **The International Gay Games: Subverting Homophobia or Selling Out?**

**Kevin Markwell and David Rowe**

Cultural Industries and Practices Research Centre, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

## **Abstract**

This article is concerned with the politics of the International Gay Games, which are to be held next in Sydney, Australia in November 2002. It critically analyses the ways in which the Games can be said to challenge *heteronormativity* both in sport and in wider society. It briefly traces the history and development of the Games since their inception in 1981, and the ideological legacy of their founder, Dr Tom Waddell, in the context of opposing arguments that sport is irredeemably heterosexist or that it can be reclaimed for the purpose of normalising homosexuality in an empowering way.

In analysing issues surrounding gay, lesbian and other identities; access and equity in Games participation; the forms of competitive and non-competitive sport promoted by the Games; and their relationship with mainstream sports organisations, the article seeks to understand the political potential of the Games. It concludes with an assessment of the current Games format and canvasses an alternative structure that might more clearly define and extend the capacity of the event to achieve its founding objectives.

## **Introduction**

The power structures that characterise the relationships between sport, sex and gender are an established focus for critical sports studies. Feminist critiques of sport have consistently demonstrated the ways in which sportswomen have been in various ways objectified, patronised and neglected. While the struggle for sexual and gender equality in sport continues, and has had some notable successes (such as Title IX, the 1972 USA legislation forbidding sexual discrimination in athletics in educational institutions receiving federal funding), prejudice and discrimination on grounds of sexual preference have received less critical attention. Gay men and lesbians have had additional or different problems to confront in the realm of sport than heterosexual women. As will be discussed below, these problems have involved, in different ways, a struggle against the imposition of *heteronormativity*. This struggle has been difficult to wage, however, because of the extent of the historical gulf between being homosexual and practising sport. One of the most notable forms of resistance to heteronormativity and homophobia in sport is the International Gay Games.

The International Gay Games began as an initiative of 1968 Olympian, Tom Waddell, who conceived of a Gay Olympic Games that would be based on the ideals of inclusiveness, personal best and participation.<sup>1</sup> Together with a small number of others, he established in 1981 an organisation called San Francisco Arts and Athletics, Inc (SFAA). The organisation's aim was to plan a nine-day event that it called the 'Gay Olympics'<sup>2</sup> that was to be held in 1982 in San Francisco. However, in early 1982 the U.S Olympic Committee successfully sought a permanent injunction against the use of the 'Olympic' trademark,<sup>3</sup> and so the 'Gay Olympics' was forced to change its name to the 'Gay Games'. The loss of the Olympics appellation and its substitution with the word 'Games' troubled Waddell who, according to Schaap<sup>4</sup>, disliked using the term 'Gay Games'. To Waddell, 'Games' suggested activities such as "drag races" and "handbag tossing" that he felt had none of the legitimacy of mainstream sports, and in a sense pandered to mainstream (mis)conceptions of homosexuals' aptitudes for sport. Waddell's hope was that the event would serve as an educational tool to demonstrate to heterosexuals the normality of gay men and women.

The inaugural Games, held in San Francisco in 1982, and was preceded by a national torch relay, attracted 1350 athletes from twelve nations competing in fourteen sports.<sup>5</sup> In his welcoming address, Waddell spoke of the underpinning philosophy of self-fulfillment and friendship upon which the Games were based, and added, "We are simultaneously students and teachers. Let us hope that the audience at large is receptive to our expanded images. Let us hope that this process continues its evolution to dispel all arbitrary notions of our character."<sup>6</sup> It is clear that Waddell was concerned that the Gay Games demonstrate to mainstream society that gay people are as skilled and as able in the sports arena as heterosexual people, and this appears to be one of his basic motivations for establishing the Gay Games – to destroy the gay stereotype. The emergence of the Games paralleled the rapid increase in HIV infection and AIDS-related deaths in the 1980s, and it was inevitable that the Games would, to some extent at least, become a means of collectively and publicly celebrating endurance and survival through the physicality of sport.

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Peterson, and S. Kennedy, 'Keeping the Flame Lit: The Federation of Gay Games', in L. Labrecque (ed.), *Unity: A Celebration of Gay Games IV and Stonewall*, (San Francisco: Labrecque Publishing, 1994), 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> P. Siegel, 'On the Owning of Words: Reflections on San Francisco Arts and Athletics vs. United States Olympic Committee', in R. J. Ringer (ed.), *Queer Words, Queer Images*, (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 30-44.

<sup>3</sup> D. Schapp, 'The Death of an Athlete: Tom Waddell, 49, was a doctor, a soldier, an Activist and an AIDS victim, but above all he was a man of Olympic spirit', *Sports Illustrated*, July 27, 1987, 1-4. See also P. Siegel, 'On the Owning of Words: Reflections on San Francisco Arts and Athletics vs. United States Olympic Committee', in R. J. Ringer (ed.), *Queer Words, Queer Images*, (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 30-44.

<sup>4</sup> D. Schapp, 1987, 'The Death of an Athlete: Tom Waddell, 49, was a doctor, a soldier, an activist and an AIDS victim, but above all he was a man of Olympic spirit', *Sports Illustrated*, July 27, 1987, 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> R. Peterson and S. Kennedy, S. 1994, 'Keeping the Flame Lit: the Federation of Gay Games', in L. Labrecque (ed.), *Unity: A Celebration of Gay Games IV and Stonewall*, (San Francisco: Labrecque Publishing, 1994), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> <[www.backdoor.com/castro/gaygames/gaygamesI.html](http://www.backdoor.com/castro/gaygames/gaygamesI.html)>.

By 1990, 7500 athletes from 39 countries participated in the Games held in Vancouver, Canada, and an additional 2000 people participated in the cultural programme. The San Francisco Arts and Athletics Inc. organisation had disbanded in the year prior to these Games and was replaced by the Federation of Gay Games - the body that continues to organise what is formally and fully titled (although rarely called) the International Gay Games. In the two Games that have followed the Vancouver Games, New York in 1994 and Amsterdam in 1998, the numbers of participating athletes has exceeded the Olympic Games, with almost 11000 athletes in the 1994 Games and almost 15000 in Amsterdam in 1998. Obviously, the fact that the number of registered participants in the last few Gay Games has exceeded the Olympics is used by organisers as a means of ensuring a sense of legitimacy, although it should be pointed out that the Olympics is not the biggest sporting event in terms of registered participants anyway – the International Masters Games comfortably exceeds the Olympics the number of participants. However, what is significant is the symbolic value of the claim that the Gay Games is ‘bigger’ than the world’s most prestigious sporting event.

The Games have been held to date in cities which, apart from Vancouver, are internationally recognised as playing a major role in gay and lesbian culture and politics: San Francisco, New York and Amsterdam. Gay Games VI in 2002 is hosted by Sydney, reflecting its prominence within the Asia-Pacific region as a major gay and lesbian city.<sup>7</sup> The first post-millennial Gay Games present an opportunity to analyse critically the possibilities of effective resistance to prejudice and discrimination in sport against gays and lesbians. It could be argued, for example, that sport is irredeemably heterosexist, and for gays and lesbians to participate in an international sports festival is to capitulate to heterosexist power and to collude in the commercial exploitation of heterosexism. Alternatively, the Gay Games could be seen as a crucial intervention in a major, popular social institution, a conspicuous declaration that there is no area of human society ‘off limits’ to gay and lesbians, and normalising homosexuality in an empowering way. Before assessing the political potential and character of the Gay Games, it is necessary to appreciate the difficulty of reaching a smooth accommodation between being gay and playing sport.

### **Gay Men and Sport: “A Stranger in One's Own Home”**

Sport is seen by most social theorists as representing alien, oppressive territory for gay men, but in some cases as capable of being conquered with liberatory effect. Pronger,<sup>8</sup> for example, describes the gay athletic experience as a reflection of the wider experience of being gay, “a lived metaphor for the more general experience of being gay in a straight world ... of being a stranger in one's own home”. This gay male alienation from sport, he argues, is based on the idea of sport as an “apprenticeship” in “orthodox” masculinity and is thus “intensely estranging” for gay men. Young<sup>9</sup> concurs with this view, arguing that until recently the word homosexual could not be used in conversations about sport “without arousing general disbelief,

---

<sup>7</sup> K. Markwell, ‘Mardi Gras Tourism and the Construction of Sydney as an International Gay and Lesbian City’, *GLQ*, Vol. 8, (2002): 81-99.

<sup>8</sup> B. Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, (London: GMP Publishers, 1990), 1, 4.

<sup>9</sup> P. D. Young, *Lesbians and Gays and Sports*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1995), 13.

laughter, or even anger". Gay footballers, Young found, are a contradiction in terms, with sporting bodies maintaining a careful distance between their sport and homosexuality, not least for the pragmatic economic reason that sponsorship and other financial support is likely to suffer by stigmatised association.<sup>10</sup>

These issues are not only important at the upper, professional level, running through all the levels of sport from the professional, semi-professional to the amateur. Crucially, all men are compulsorily introduced to sport through the institution of the school, making encounters with sport a miserable experience for many boys. Plummer<sup>11</sup> describes how the Australian school sports team is an experience of the "homophobic elements" of school life "in a most immediate, concentrated and physical form". Similarly, Miller<sup>12</sup> describes in personal terms sport's "disciplinary regime of brutality and negativity" at the "fee-paying, all-male, WASP" schools he attended in Australia and England. In the taken-for-granted heterosexuality of sports, "homosexuality is more of an insult than a sexual disposition."<sup>13</sup> For homosexual men who play sport, "the irony of being both athletic and homosexual hangs over them, an incomprehensible cloud".<sup>14</sup> Prejudice against gay men has limited the number of homosexuals who play sport, or even who want to play it, and has meant that those who do participate in sport have overwhelmingly kept their sexual identities secret.<sup>15</sup>

Pronger<sup>16</sup> argues that sport dramatises a primary myth of masculinity based on "physically and mentally tough, obedient, loyal and overall 'manly' men", and supports the gender myth that "justifies, expresses and supports the power of men over women." By hiding their homosexuality, gay men effectively "endorse the significance of sport as an orthodox masculine heterosexual and patriarchal institution". In other words, Pronger argues, as long as gay sportsmen hide their gayness, they are colluding in the mythic celebration of hegemonic masculinity<sup>17</sup> and its linkage with sport in the orthodox world. The weapons of irony and "being out" can expose this mythos, offering a counter-revolutionary "sensitivity of change" in the

---

<sup>10</sup> B. Pronger, 'Homosexuality and Sport: Who's winning?' in J. McKay, M. A. Messner, and D. Sabo, (eds.), *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sport* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000). T. Miller, 'Commodifying the Male Body, Problematizing 'Hegemonic Masculinity?' *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* Vol. 22 (1998): 431-446. T. Miller, *Sportsex*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> D. Plummer, *One of the Boys: Masculinity, Homophobia and Modern Manhood*. (Binghamton NY: Harrington Park Press 1999), 236.

<sup>12</sup> T. Miller, *Sportsex*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> B. Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, (London: GYM Publishers, 1990), 26. See also P. Griffin, 'Heterosexism, Homophobia and Lesbians in Sport', in G. L. Cohen (ed), *Women in Sport Issues and Controversies* (Oxon Hill:AAHPERD, 2001). D. Sabo, and M. A. Messner, M.A. 'Whose Body Is This? Women's Sport and Sexual Politics', in G. L. Cohen (ed), *Women in Sport: Issues and Controversies*, (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001), 31. D. Rowe, 'Big Defence: Sport and Hegemonic Masculinity', in A Tomlinson (ed), *Gender, Sport and Leisure: Continuities and Challenge*, (Aachen: Meyer and Meyer, 1997), 127

<sup>14</sup> B. Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, (London: GMP Publishing, 1990), 4.

<sup>15</sup> P. D. Young, *Lesbians and Gays and Sports*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> B. Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, (London: GMP Publishers, 1990), 11-17; 52.

<sup>17</sup> R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2000).

paradoxical world of gay community sport and the possibility of “a gradual erosion of the edifice of orthodox masculinity.”<sup>18</sup>

The Gay Games, however, is not a simple example of gay community sport. As a large, international sports festival open to gays, lesbians, transgendered and intersex people, as well as to ‘straights’, and with a strong agenda of business (especially tourism) and civic place-making (emphasising the host city), the politics of the Gay Games are complex and contested. One of these areas of complexity and contestation lies in the distinction between gay and lesbian relations to, and experiences of, sport.

### **Lesbians and Sport: “Evil, Sick, Abnormal and Predatory”**

Because of the powerful, affirmative nexus of hegemonic masculinity and sport, the ‘unimaginable’ gay sportsman can be contrasted with the popular stereotype that women who are overly keen on sport are ‘like men’, and as women who are ‘like men’ are lesbians, then “all female athletes must be lesbian.”<sup>19</sup> While the currency of this view should not be exaggerated, anxiety about sport’s role in policing the gender order has routinely prompted a media obsession with the heterosexuality – as evidenced by mode of sexual address or motherhood – of sportswomen.<sup>20</sup> One recent front-page story, for example, opened with the statement, “Three Australians, two of them mothers, made a clean sweep of the women’s marathon at the Commonwealth Games.”<sup>21</sup> By such everyday means, the sexual and reproductive order is maintained.

Cahn <sup>22</sup>describes how lesbianism, as sport was rationalised and increasingly professionalised after World War Two, became linked to “mannish athleticism”. The widespread attachment of the lesbian label has not, however, liberated lesbian women in sport, but has instead forced lesbian athletes to deny, or at best be silent about, their sexuality.<sup>23</sup> Cahn has described an informal code of “play it, don't say it” - a sporting

---

<sup>18</sup> B. Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, (London 1990), 118, 123.

<sup>19</sup> P.D. Young, *Lesbians and Gays and Sports*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers 1995), 27. Also P. Griffin, ‘Heterosexism, Homophobia and Lesbians in Sport’, in G. L. Cohen (ed), *Women in Sport Issues and Controversies* (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> J. McKay, *No Pain, No Gain? Sport and Australian Culture*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991). Also J. McKay, ‘Gender and Organisational Power in Australian Sport’, in D. Rowe and G. Lawrence (eds), *Tourism, Leisure, Sport: Critical Perspectives*, (Sydney: Hodder Headline, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> J. Huxley, ‘Marathon Mums Make it an Aussie Trifecta’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July, 2002, 1.

<sup>22</sup> S. K. Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Women's Sport*, (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> For North American examples see P. Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1998); P. Griffin, ‘Heterosexism, Homophobia and Lesbians in Sport’, in G. L. Cohen (ed), *Women in Sport Issues and Controversies* (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001); M. J. Festle, *Playing Nice Politics and Apologies in Women's Sport* (New York: Columbia, 1996); S. K. Cahn, ‘From the “Muscle Moll” to the “Butch” Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women's Sport’, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19 (1993):343-368; M. J. Kane, ‘Resistance/Transformation of the Oppositional Binary: Exposing Sport as a Continuum’, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 19 (1995):191-218. For UK examples see G. Clarke, ‘Queering the Pitch and Coming Out to Play: Lesbians in Physical Education and Sport’, *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 3 (1998):145-160; for West Germany see B. Palzkill, ‘Between Gymshoes and High-Heels – the Development of a Lesbian Identity and Existence in Top Class Sport’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* Vol. 25 (1990): 221-233; and Australia see A.

version of the US military's edict 'don't ask, don't tell'.<sup>24</sup> This conspiracy of silence has been rationalised as protecting athletes from being stigmatised as lesbians, with resultant likely loss of endorsements and fan favour, and possible discrimination by sports clubs.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the media have generally "deflected notions" of lesbian sportswomen by projecting images of female athletes that emphasise heterosexual femininity.<sup>26</sup>

In some cases, however, salacious stories of a 'lesbian threat' to women's sport circulate as media scandals.<sup>27</sup> Griffin details how lesbians have been blamed for 'ruining' women's sport, and how silence and denial have been traditional responses to this "lesbian bogey woman" based on lesbian stereotypes of "evil, sick, abnormal and predatory" women.<sup>28</sup> In this rather homophobic context, both lesbian and straight sportswomen usually project conventional feminine, heterosexual images, including visible relationships with men, mainstream feminine appearance and demeanour, and homophobic talk.<sup>29</sup> Lesbian sportswomen who are not publicly 'out' sometimes seek "to manage their identities" and so evade discrimination by implicitly coming out or explicitly doing so at a carefully selected moment. Such strategies, Griffin argues, distort relationships with team-mates and coaches, and require continual vigilance, which is distracting and possibly detrimental to self esteem.<sup>30</sup> This stigmatisation of lesbianism, and its consequent repression, is a key component of sport's gender and sexual order that the Gay Games seeks to challenge.

## The Sydney 2002 Gay Games and the Ideological Challenge

---

Burroughs, L. Ashburn and L. Seebohm, 'Add Sex and Stir': Homophobic Coverage of Women's Cricket in Australia', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 19 (1995): 266-84.

<sup>24</sup> S. K. Cahn, (1994) *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Women's Sport*, (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 187.

<sup>25</sup> D. C. Plymire, and P. J. Forman, 'Speaking of Cheryl Miller: Interrogating the Lesbian Taboo on a Women's Basketball Newsgroup', *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, Vol. 13 (2001):1-18. M. J. Festle, *Playing Nice Politics and Apologies in Women's Sport* (New York: Columbia, 1996), 267. G. Clarke, 'Queering the Pitch and Coming Out to Play: Lesbians in Physical Education and Sport', *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 3 (1998):145-160.

<sup>26</sup> G. L. Cohen, 'The Media Industry: Representations, Images, and Issues', in G. L. Cohen (ed.), *Women in Sport Issues and Controversies*. (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001), 238.

<sup>27</sup> A. Burroughs, L. Ashburn, L and L. Seebohm, L. "Add Sex and Stir": Homophobic Coverage of Women's Cricket in Australia', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 19 (1995): 266-84.

<sup>28</sup> P. Griffin, 'Heterosexism, Homophobia and Lesbians in Sport', in G. L. Cohen (ed.), *Women in Sport Issues and Controversies* (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001), 281.

<sup>29</sup> P. Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1998). P. Griffin, 'Heterosexism, Homophobia and Lesbians in Sport', in G. L. Cohen (ed.), *Women in Sport Issues and Controversies* (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001). S. K. Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Women's Sport*, (New York: The Free Press, 1994). G. Clarke, 'Queering the Pitch and Coming Out to Play: Lesbians in Physical Education and Sport', *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 3 (1998):145-160. A. Burroughs, L. Ashburn and L. Seebohm, "'Add Sex and Stir': Homophobic Coverage of Women's Cricket in Australia', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 19 (1995): 266-84. E. M. Blinde and D. E. Taub, 'Homophobia and Women's Sport: The Disempowerment of Athletes', *Sociological Focus*, Vol. 25 (1992):151-166.

<sup>30</sup> P. Griffin, 'Heterosexism, Homophobia and Lesbians in Sport', in G. L. Cohen (ed.), *Women in Sport Issues and Controversies* (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001), 286. See also V. Krane, 'Lesbians in Sport: Toward Acknowledgement, Understanding and Theory', *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, Vol. 18 (1996): 237-246; E. M. Blinde and D. E. Taub, D.E. 'Homophobia and Women's Sport: The Disempowerment of Athletes', *Sociological Focus*, Vol. 25 (1992): 151-166.

Sport as social ideological form, as noted above, is characterised by its role as a training ground for approved (hegemonic) expressions of masculinity.<sup>31</sup> The systematic, participatory involvement of women, gay or straight, and gay men, compromises the capacity of sport to sustain hegemonic masculinity. As a result, the institution of sport is (consciously and unconsciously) policed by marginalising and controlling women's sport, not least by questioning the femininity and sexuality of female athletes. Labelling athletes as lesbians reinforces traditional gender role expectations and affects all female athletes by discouraging female bonding through sport and the "discovery of their own power."<sup>32</sup>

This relationship between sport and empowerment is an important part of the rationale for the Gay Games. For example, Blinde and Taub found that female college athletes in the USA often hid their athletic identity and limited their athletic development so as not to be labelled as lesbians.<sup>33</sup> The "resulting disassociation from self", they conclude, restricts the personal growth, opportunities and potential of all female athletes.<sup>34</sup> The lesbian label means that "only men have access to the benefits of sports participation and the physical and psychological empowerment available in sport."<sup>35</sup> Yet, as Cahn argues, women, gay and straight, who persist in sport despite the negative connotations of being "mannish lesbians", find a "stronger and more authentic self through sport".<sup>36</sup> While such conclusions may exaggerate the power of sport to make a "stronger and more authentic self" – even assuming that such a

---

<sup>31</sup> See for example B. Pronger *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, (London: GMP Publishing, 1990); J. McKay, *No Pain, No Gain? Sport and Australian Culture*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991). J. McKay, 'Gender and Organisational Power in Australian Sport', (eds), D. Rowe and G. Lawrence *Tourism, Leisure, Sport: Critical Perspectives* (Sydney: Hodder Headline 1998), pp180-193; D. Rowe, 'Big Defence: Sport and Hegemonic Masculinity', in A Tomlinson (ed.), *Gender, Sport and Leisure: Continuities and Challenge*, (Aachen: Meyer and Meyer, 1997); T. Miller, 'Commodifying the Male Body, Problematizing 'Hegemonic Masculinity?'' *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 22 (1998):431-446; R. Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> P. Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1998), 16-20. P. Griffin, 'Heterosexism, Homophobia and Lesbians in Sport' in G. L. Cohen (ed.), *Women in Sport Issues and Controversies* (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001), 279. D. C. Plymire and P. J. Forman, 'Speaking of Cheryl Miller: Interrogating the Lesbian Taboo on a Women's Basketball Newsgroup', *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, Vol. 13 (2001):1-18. K. Peper, 'Female Athlete = Lesbian: A Myth Constructed from Gender Role Expectations and Lesbophobia', in R. J. Ringer, (ed.), *Queer Words, Queer Images*. (New York: New York University Press, 1994). D. Sabo and M. A. Messner, 'Whose Body Is This? Women's Sport and Sexual Politics', in G. L. Cohen (ed.), *Women in Sport: Issues and Controversies*. (Oxon Hill: AAHPERD, 2001). S. K. Cahn, 'From the "Muscle Moll" to the "Butch" Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women's Sport' *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19 (1993):343-368; G. Clarke, 'Queering the Pitch and Coming Out to Play: Lesbians in Physical Education and Sport', *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 3(1998): 145-160. B. Palzkill, 'Between Gymshoes and High-Heels – the Development of a Lesbian Identity and Existence in Top Class Sport', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol. 25 (1990): 221-233. H. Lenskyj, 'Power and Play: Gender and Sexuality Issues in Sport and Physical Activity', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol. 25 (1990):235-243.

<sup>33</sup> E.M. Blinde, and D.E. Taub, 'Homophobia and Women's Sport: The Disempowerment of Athletes', *Sociological Focus*, Vol. 25 (1992): 151-166.

<sup>34</sup> E.M. Blinde, and D.E. Taub, 'Homophobia and Women's Sport: The Disempowerment of Athletes', *Sociological Focus*, Vol. 25 (1992): 151-166. See also R. J. Rotella and M. M. Murray 'Homophobia, the World of Sport and Sport Psychology Consulting', *The Sport Psychologist* Vol. 5: 355-64.

<sup>35</sup> P. Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1998), 20.

<sup>36</sup> S.K. Cahn, "From the "Muscle Moll" to the "Butch" Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women's Sport" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19 (1993): 363.

unified self is possible – the Gay Games demonstrably provides a sympathetic space where women of all sexualities can engage in sport in a way that does not immediately demand the observation of traditional sexual and gender prescriptions. Sport can already be described as “an ambiguous, fluid space within which lesbians could explore their options and identities” - allowing them to feel “at home” as long as they remained silent.<sup>37</sup> The Gay Games, it could be argued, develops this space a step further – to one that encourages both audibility and visibility for all women. To this end, the Sydney 2002 Games organisation included a Women’s Advisory Committee with a mandate to “provide leadership, advocacy and advice to facilitate the equal participation of women in all aspects of the Games”<sup>38</sup>, and women-targeted promotional brochures and posters have been developed to this end.

However, the Games’ capacity for creating a space for lesbian visibility in sport is somewhat compromised by its insistence on using only the word ‘gay’ in the event’s name. By doing so, the Games risks alienating those lesbians who do not identify as being gay, and who see ‘gay’ as relating only to maleness. Whilst Sydney 2002 has consistently aimed at achieving a 50 per cent male-female ratio (which is somewhat problematic anyway as it assumes only two genders), registration data obtained from the Sydney 2002 website on 2 August 2002 show that they have fallen far short of this intention, and much less than the 42 per cent achieved by Amsterdam in the 1998 Games. Men are significantly over-represented as sports participants. Of the 10539 registrants listed on the website,<sup>39</sup> only 29 per cent were women and 71 per cent were men. New Zealand had the highest percentage of women (56 per cent), followed by Australia (43 per cent), and Germany (38 per cent). The United States, which accounted for 40 per cent of the total registrants, was the origin of only 26 per cent of women registrants and, in fact, women made up only 19 per cent of the American contingent. Of course, this low proportion of women can be explained by a range of factors, including the cost of participating in the event for women living in countries other than Australia. Lesbians tend to have lower levels of disposable income due to the inequities in incomes between men and women generally, and the additional burden of child care that many lesbian women have to shoulder.

Sydney 2002 has made commitments to ensuring that affordable childcare would be available, and considerable efforts have been made to provide free accommodation for participants through a ‘hosted housing’ programme. These initiatives aim to reduce the financial burden imposed on those wishing to participate in the Games. However, it must be said that participation in the Sydney 2002 Games does not come cheap, with the registration fee set at AUD\$330, with an additional AUD\$52 for every extra event. By comparison, registration (or ‘entry fee’, as it is called) for the World Masters Games to be held in Melbourne in October 2002 costs AUD\$165, a considerably lower figure than that for the Gay Games. Whilst no systematic survey has as yet been undertaken, it would be fair to expect that the cost of participation has created a barrier to many who otherwise would have wanted to participate. The official Australian uniform costs a further AUD\$110, and additional costs will be incurred through participation in any of the five dance parties (average cost of

---

<sup>37</sup> S. K. Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Women's Sport*, (New York: The Free Press 1994), 199, 203.

<sup>38</sup> <<http://www.sydney2002.org.au>>

<sup>39</sup> The number of registrants had risen to 12500 at the time of writing, August 2002, but no update in terms of nationality or gender has yet been posted on the Sydney 2002 website.

approximately AUD\$90 per event) and other cultural events that will take place during the Sydney Games. Again, Sydney 2002 did provide ‘scholarships’ that subsidised the cost of participation for people who fitted certain criteria (Indigenous and First Nations peoples, women, youth, people with disabilities, people from the Asia-Pacific region), but nonetheless it would be very difficult for many people with lower income levels to participate in the Sydney 2002 Games. The International Gay Games, therefore, is no less subject to the constraints of wealth inequalities that characterise mainstream sports events like the Olympic and Commonwealth Games.

The degree to which the Sydney 2002 Gay Games has engaged with the transgendered population is also questionable. Whilst the participants’ registration form has four gender categories (‘male’, ‘female’, ‘transgender’ and ‘sistagirl’<sup>40</sup>), and transgendered people are specifically mentioned in various Sydney 2002 publications, the list of registrants that was posted on their website only ever categorised people as either male or female. If the notion of ‘visibility’ was important for the Sydney Games - and the announcement that, “The Sydney 2002 Gay Games will set a benchmark for lesbian visibility”<sup>41</sup> would suggest that it was - then transgendered people, at least prior to the Games being staged, were rendered invisible. No policy statement on how transgendered people were to be included in the Sydney 2002 Games was found by the authors at the time of writing, although the Sydney 2002 website does state that “We will soon publicise our Transgender policy on our website. We anticipate that transgender and intersex people will be able to register under the gender with which they identify”.<sup>42</sup> However, this policy statement can be seen either to have not eventuated or, at the very least, to have been produced too late to be of any practical assistance.

On another front, the Gay Games’ celebration of male gayness and the mixing of sexual identities, genders and ability levels offer a broader challenge to hegemonic masculinity in sport. Both the Federation of Gay Games and the Sydney 2002 Games have consistently held aloft the ideals of “participation, inclusion and personal best”, rather than competitiveness, as characterising the Games. The Games offers gay men in particular the opportunity to reclaim sport and to enhance their self-esteem and self-respect. Many gay boys and adolescents (as noted above) feel a sense of estrangement from sport, especially competitive team sports,<sup>43</sup> and so the Gay Games can potentially provide a space in which sports can be liberated from the constrictions of orthodox or hegemonic masculinities. However, the negativity that many gay men feel toward sport can be seen in this excerpt from a letter to the *Sydney Star Observer* (November 20 1997):

Many people seem to be getting all excited about the 2000 Olympics and the 2002 Gay Games...Personally, I don’t give a hoot for sports, and have horrific memories of school masters and PE teachers as being amongst the most homophobic and sadistic imaginable. I also remember school football heroes as often being cretinous fat-head bashing thugs. Count me out!<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> ‘Sistagirl’ is a gay Australian Aboriginal term for transgender person.

<sup>41</sup> *Women at Sydney 2002 Gay Games VI* brochure, undated

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.sydney2002.org.au>.

<sup>43</sup> B. Pronger *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, (London: GMP Publishing, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> G. Balthazaar, ‘Games clean-up’, Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Star Observer*, November 20, 1997, 3.

A reluctance to embrace sport as a social practice and as a set of ideologies is also evident in the comment made in a quote used in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article published in the lead-up to the event: “Not everyone in the gay community can give a flying f\*\*\* for the Gay Games. There’s a lot of people who, when they think of sport, think ‘yuck’”.<sup>45</sup> Efforts have been made to encourage a greater visibility of gay and lesbian sport through a number of articles that appeared in both the gay and mainstream print media, and the *Sydney Star Observer* began running a sports page in 1997, although it has since been discontinued. In an article headed “Who says I can’t play?”, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s prefatory Mardi Gras supplement, the assumption that gay men are not good at sport is challenged. The writer argues for the normalcy of gays and lesbians as sportspeople, and for the Gay Games’s celebration of the virtues of sport generally – “to rise to the challenge, to win, to be part of a team and to achieve a goal”.<sup>46</sup>

There are, then, intrinsic ideological tensions in the Gay Games, some of which can be traced to its foundation by Tom Waddell. In a 1984 interview with Mike Messner, Waddell revealed himself to have a very individual way of dealing with the tensions between homosexuality, masculinity and sport. He told how he pursued ballet dancing in New York but found that he “couldn’t handle” what he called the effeminate behaviour of the other male dancers. He recounted how “I had to do something to protect my image of myself as a male ... and so I threw myself into athletics”. After medical school and the Army, Waddell finished sixth in the decathlon in the 1968 Mexico Olympics, “want[ing] to protect a male image”. Although comfortable with his (homo)sexuality, he preferred the “male, macho image of being an athlete” because he felt that the expressive femininity popularly associated with gay people was inappropriate given his highly masculinised identification. Waddell confirmed in the interview how he remained attached to aggressive assertions of masculinity: “Yeah, I mean athletically I was just as aggressive and hostile on the football field as anybody else. I loved knocking people down”.<sup>47</sup>

While, of course, the Gay Games has developed since its inception and Waddell’s subsequent death in 1987, the iconic imprint of its founder is still strong, giving him almost a sacred, martyr status. Several websites that private individuals have set up concerning the Gay Games dedicate their sites to Waddell, and his role as the ‘founding father’ or ‘papa’ of the Games is given prominence in the Federation of Gay Games website. Indeed, the Tom Waddell Award was instituted in 1990 to recognise an “individual who has demonstrated a history of outstanding participation, determined by his or her history of service in the arts, athletics, or volunteerism”.<sup>48</sup> An article even appeared in the popular American magazine *Sports Illustrated* after Waddell had died, celebrating his life and the contributions that he had made to sport

---

<sup>45</sup> A. Dennis, ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow, Sydney’s Gay Games 2002’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June 2001, 15.

<sup>46</sup> S. Batten, ‘Who Says I Can’t Play’, *Sydney Morning Herald Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Supplement*, 9 February 2001, p.17.

<sup>47</sup> M.A. Messner, ‘Gay Athletes and Gay Games: An Interview with Tom Waddell’ *M: Gentle Men For Gender Justice*, Vol. 13, (1984):22-23

<sup>48</sup> <<http://www.gaygames.com/en/federation/committees/awards.htm>>

and to the Gay Games.<sup>49</sup> The exaltation of Waddell as the “patron saint of the Gay Games” was not, however, as noticeable in the discourse of the Sydney 2002 Games, perhaps because of the political limitations of his image. As something of an ‘over-achieving’ gay man - doctor, Olympian decathlete and even father – his legacy is primarily one of reformism. It is a model of gay men gaining, through sport, the confidence to do well in straight society, rather than a queer vision of subversion and the creation of radically alternative cultures.

Waddell founded the Gay Games as an instance of a foreshadowed “exemplary community” that would overcome racism, ageism, sexism and nationalism through the processes of self-liberation that gay and lesbians learnt through coming out. Ageism, he held, could be challenged through all-age group competition, sexual parity gained through there being a complementary women's sport for every male sport, and recruitment in the Third World and among minorities to counter white, racial exclusionism.<sup>50</sup> By such inclusivist means, Anna Quindlen has observed how “the Games have come to illustrate the myriad ways in which gay men and lesbians are now part of the mainstream”.<sup>51</sup> This politics of mainstreaming and inclusion does not satisfy more radical aspirations, however, with the Games’s guiding principles of “participation” and “personal best” interpreted by some critics as reproducing dominant power structures.

For instance, the competitive framework of the Gay Games is uneven. Traditional sports are competitively played and participants are divided mostly along traditional gender and age categories, with top three placings given. Approximately one third of Gay Games IV's athletic events had the “official imprimatur” of governing bodies, and most of the other sports are now run according to official rules. These arrangements provide some mainstream credibility, and so have been criticised by Pronger<sup>52</sup> as being “all about outcomes” and as copying the hierarchical obsessions of mainstream sport. In seeking to show that gays and lesbians are “normal like everyone else”, conflicts arise in the Gay Games concerning how mainstream they should be. For example, while in Gay Games IV the physique competition allowed same-sex pairs to compete, the conventional shave clean rule was applied (rather than permitting those who were ‘hairy and proud’ to enter with their body hair intact), and participants were addressed using depersonalising numbers only.<sup>53</sup> Similar tensions were apparent over the repeal of the international rules governing gender-appropriate costumes for ballroom dance during Gay Games V competition in Amsterdam. ‘Gender-appropriate’ dress is stipulated by the international rules governing that sport, and Gay Games V was initially going to abide by these, until a vigorous protest led by transgendered people and drag queens successfully challenged the dress rule, and it was withdrawn from the Gay Games V competition.

---

<sup>49</sup> D. Schapp, ‘The Death of an Athlete: Tom Waddell, 49, was a doctor, a soldier, an activist and an AIDS victim, but above all he was a man of Olympic spirit’, *Sports Illustrated*, July 27, (1987):1-4.

<sup>50</sup> M.A. Messner, ‘Gay Athletes and Gay Games: An Interview with Tom Waddell’ *M: Gentle Men For Gender Justice*, Vol. 13, (1984):22-23.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in V. Krane and J. Waldron, ‘The Gay Games: Creating Our own Sports Culture’ in K Schaffer and S Smith (eds), *The Olympics at the Millennium Power, Politics, and the Games*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 162.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in J. Clark, ‘The Glory of the Gay Games’ <<http://www.joeclark.org/glory.html>> 1994a.

<sup>53</sup> J. Clark, ‘The End of the Beginning: Gay Games IV Wrap-up’, <<http://www.joeclark.org/endofthebeginning.html>> 1994b.

Some analysts, such as Krane and Waldron, are generally optimistic and positive about the capacity of the Gay Games to subvert mainstream conceptions of sport and sportspeople. They cite a range of events and practices that have been observed during previous Gay Games, which, they argue, “provide a truly queer sports environment that contests the heterosexism of traditional sports culture”.<sup>54</sup> Figure skating, they note, provided opportunities to perform in same-sex couples, wear drag, and express political messages; crowds cheered for all participants regardless of where they were placed; and the Pink Flamingo Relay event provided a space to celebrate in an unabashedly camp style. Yet, little of this capacity for subversion of dominant ideologies and practices of sports seems to have made it into the promotional material of the Sydney 2002 Games, which seemingly adheres to a traditional, mainstream conception of sport. The four young people (two male, two female) pictured under the Sydney Harbour Bridge in a Games’ promotional poster are conventionally beautiful and stylish, and would not be out of place in any mainstream event promotion. Nonetheless, the Gay Games presents the possibility for participants, either individually or collectively, to instigate moments of subversion and destabilisation.

The Gay Games is, then, a diverse event in which sport is conventionally practised, in some cases adjusted, and in others substantially transformed. Krane and Waldron argue that figure skating during the Gay Games best exemplifies a “unique, queer sports culture”.<sup>55</sup> Skaters during the 1994 Games were freed from the usual restrictive regulations governing music, costumes and gendered moves. Some women wore trousers, some men were in drag, same sex couples participated, and a half-man and half woman figure appeared. There was music with lyrics, some women led male partners, and political gestures about gays in the military subverted, they argue, traditionally sanctioned figure skating and wider gender stereotypes in sport. In 1998, however, the Gay Games sought official recognition from the International Skating Union (ISU). Under ISU regulations same sex couples were not allowed. This search for mainstream endorsement failed, and elite skaters who participated in the Gay Games were in danger of being expelled from subsequent ISU sanctioned competitions. Ironically, the outcome was an even more subversive format, as the regular competitions were replaced in 1998 by non-competitive ‘public practice events’ without medals and standings. This shift from a competitive to a demonstration sport at the Gay Games, if replicated across the whole event, would radically change its character – to the extent, perhaps, that it would no longer be recognisably sport as it is commonly conceived.

There are many politically interpretive permutations presented by the Games. Kane, for example, notes that in cases where women outperform men at sport there is a “direct assault on traditional beliefs about sport – and gender itself – as an inherent, oppositional binary that is grounded in biological difference”.<sup>56</sup> Women may also use

---

<sup>54</sup> V. Krane and J. Waldron, ‘The Gay Games: Creating Our own Sports Culture’ in K. Schaffer and S. Smith (eds.), *The Olympics at the Millennium: Power, Politics, and the Games*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

<sup>55</sup> V. Krane and J. Waldron, ‘The Gay Games: Creating Our own Sports Culture’ in K. Schaffer and S. Smith (eds.), *The Olympics at the Millennium: Power, Politics, and the Games*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 152.

<sup>56</sup> V. Krane, ‘Lesbians in Sport: Toward Acknowledgement, Understanding and Theory’, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, Vol. 18 (1996): 237-24.

sport to show that they can be as competitive, muscled, aggressive and tough as men. In this instance, women (lesbian or straight) may see prescriptions for women to take part in non-competitive, 'gender appropriate' sports in a traditionally feminine way as highly restrictive stereotyping. Other women, in contrast, may view this mode of sport as reproductive of patriarchy, and practise a form of women's sport organised according to feminist, collectivist and non-competitive values. The meanings of the Gay Games, then, are no less contestable than those of any other sport or social phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

The Gay Games were established in part to reclaim the ideals of "personal best, inclusion and participation" that Tom Waddell and others believed had been lost from the modern Olympics, and partly as a vehicle for gay men and lesbians to prove to the wider society that they too could excel at sport. Given that the establishment of the Games paralleled the emergence of the HIV/AIDS crisis, it was not surprising, as noted above, that the Games would become a highly symbolic affirmation of the resistance (of gay men, in particular) to disease and disability arising from HIV infection. The Games have provided an opportunity to showcase physical and emotional endurance under exceptionally difficult circumstances, and so it is little wonder that there has been an emphasis on performing in sport according to mainstream conceptions, as opposed to subverting the ideologies and practices of sport itself. By extension then, the Gay Games was conceived within a reformist rather than a subversive or radical framework.

This is not to argue that the Gay Games have no capacity for subverting and destabilising the power relations set up through sport, but rather that the desire to normalise gay and lesbian sport constrains the opportunity for a more socially radical agenda to be effected. Official sanctioning of many sports brings both legitimacy and the necessity to 'play by the rules', even when those rules operate to perpetuate inequities and to maintain orthodoxies. An unwillingness to embrace unorthodox sports for fear of playing into the hands of those given to stereotyping gay and lesbian sport as inherently inferior means that the Gay Games can, at best, offer an uneven repertoire of possibilities for destabilising heteronormative assumptions about sport.

Perhaps an alternative sports festival to be run in parallel with the Gay Games would clarify their politics in the same way that 'fringe festivals' have emerged alongside more conventional festivals. Freed of the shackles imposed from within and outside the Gay Games, the alternative sports festival could operate much more according to a 'queer' agenda, destabilising and disrupting notions of gender, sexuality and, indeed, of sport. A similar kind of event, although on a relatively small scale and only loosely organised, occurs alongside the Sydney Festival and has incorporated nude night surfing, as well as a day of queer sports activities like 'handbag tossing' and 'drag racing' that would no doubt have incurred the wrath of Tom Waddell had he still been alive.

The combination of the Gay Games, framed within an orthodox conception of earnest sporting ideals of participation, inclusion and personal best, and a fringe sports carnival providing a space for the playful destabilisation and subversion of the conventional ideologies of sport, could be a more fruitful format for interrogation of

the politics of sport. This appropriately flexible arrangement might provide gays, lesbians, transgendered and straight people, regardless of age and ability, with the opportunity to invent a truly innovative approach to sport. The International Gay Games, as currently constituted, is an arena where the politics of difference sits uneasily with the politics of inclusion.<sup>57</sup> It is a sports spectacle well worth watching.

---

<sup>57</sup> This political dilemma confronts other areas where sport can potentially be used to challenge prevailing inequalities. See for example, B. Quinn, *Faster, Higher, Stronger? Disability Sport, the Paralympic Games and the Politics of Disability*, (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Monash University, 2002).