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## Exploring participants' experiences of the Gay Games: intersections of sport, gender and sexuality

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# **Exploring participants' experiences of the Gay Games: intersections of sport, gender and sexuality**

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## **Abstract**

Sport is a social institution that has a considerable impact on the shaping of gay and lesbian subjects. On the eve of the 2006 Gay Games in Chicago and its new rival, the Outgames, in Montreal, this article explores dimensions of participation in such gay and lesbian sports events through a study (based on participant observation and interviews) of their most recent major predecessor, the Sydney 2002 Gay Games. In particular, it points to the centrality to many participants' experiences of both individual and collective forms of identification, including those associated with sexuality and nation. Through their participation in the event, respondents must negotiate the significant tensions that underpin the ideals and demands of these often-contradictory forms of identification. The article suggests that it is this negotiation of competing identities and subjectivities that illuminates the broader political significance of the Gay Games.

**Keywords:** Gay Games; sport; gender; sexuality

I'd never been good at sport at school, always picked last for a team, all that kind of stuff, and I always tried to get out of doing PE. I used to hope that it would rain so I didn't have to go to sport. In primary school I got to help the school librarian catalogue books instead of playing sport—how daggy's [Australian colloquial term meaning lacking style] that? It wasn't until about 10 years ago that I thought my body could do anything sporty as a gay man, actually. I started going to the gym and really enjoyed it. So I started taking an interest in the Gay Games when I heard Sydney had won the right to host them, and just thought, 'yeah I'd like to go in them'. (Jake, 37)

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon of the Gay Games, the latest of which is Chicago 2006, prompts a reconsideration of the historical and contemporary relationship of homosexuality and sport. Jake's negative experiences of sport as a child (shared with some 'straight' men—see Miller 2001), and his later realization that he could 'do sport', seems to be a common experience among many gay men. For school-aged lesbians, however, excelling at sport is often viewed as a form of de facto disclosure of their sexuality. Clearly, then, sport is a social institution that has a considerable impact on the shaping of gay and lesbian subjects. Many critical sports scholars have analysed the ways in which the institution of sport has consistently served to sustain what Birrell and McDonald (2000: 7) call the intersecting 'power lines' that connect different elements of the social structure. Two such 'power lines' of major significance in sport are gender and sexuality, both of which are deeply implicated in its hierarchies and systems of exclusion (see for example, Pronger 1990, 2000; Hargreaves 1994; Rowe 1997; Miller 1998; Krane & Waldron 2000; McKay, Messner & Sabo 2000; Hemphill & Symons 2002). While early research focused largely on highlighting the extent to which sport, as a social institution, was an arena of male control over women and their bodies (McKay 1997; Stevenson 2002), Birrell and McDonald observe that this initial critical emphasis on gender inequality in sport is now supplemented by the emergence of sexuality as an important area of sports scholarship:

Originally subsumed within gender analysis, issues of sexuality are now being investigated in their own theoretical right as well. Sport as a male preserve also has deep implications for sexuality. Homophobia works to reinforce gender expectations: Gay men, dismissed as 'unmanly', have not been welcome in mainstream sport, and women who insist on their rights to play sport have often been labelled as lesbians. Compulsory heterosexuality is thus remade through sport. (Birrell & McDonald 2000: 6)

One overt challenge to this 'compulsory heterosexuality' is the International Gay Games (hereinafter called the Gay Games), which were held for the first time in 1982 and every four years since.<sup>2</sup> The growth in numbers of participating athletes has been notable: 1,350 in 1982; 7,300 in 1990; 14,500 in 1998 and 12,000 in 2002 (a modest fall in the first southern hemisphere Games), meaning that the Gay Games is now a significant global sporting and cultural event (<http://www.gaygames.com/en/games/>). The Chicago 2006 Gay Games, self-described as 'a Gay Games for the ages', anticipates '12,000 participants in 30 sports from 70 countries' (<http://www.gaygameschicago.org/welcome/home.php>). In order to understand the social, cultural and political significance of Chicago 2006, it is necessary to locate it in relation to the broad history of the Gay Games, and to specific earlier events, such as the Sydney 2002 Gay Games.

There has been considerable discussion and debate within gay and lesbian circles concerning the political 'payload' of the Gay Games. It has tended to be seen as either a

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<sup>1</sup> This research was funded by the University of Newcastle's Research Grant Committee.

<sup>2</sup> Venues before Sydney were San Francisco 1982 and 1986; Vancouver 1990; New York 1994; Amsterdam 1998.

limited, reformist initiative that merely normalizes homosexuality by demonstrating gay and lesbian involvement in a revered, mainstream social institution, or as a subversive event that disturbs and even uncouples the hegemonic link between sport and heterosexuality, with far-reaching consequences. While these are important deliberations, they have usually been uninformed by the perspectives of those who, gay or straight (the Gay Games are open to all, regardless of sexuality), actually participate in the Gay Games. This article reports on the findings of a field study of Gay Games VI in Sydney, exploring the meanings that gay and lesbian participants attach both to sport in this context and to the event itself. It points to the centrality of both individual and collective forms of identification, including those associated with sexuality and nation. Participation in the event demands negotiation of the significant tensions underpinning the ideals and demands of these often-contradictory subjectivities, thereby illuminating the broader political significance of the Gay Games. The historical case study also offers a framework for the critical interrogation of subsequent events, such as Gay Games VII in Chicago.

### **Experiencing the Gay Games: some surveys and self-reports**

A small number of studies of variable scientific rigour have been conducted of the experience of participation in the Gay Games. Psychologists Krane and Romont (1997) surveyed the motives and experiences of 132 female athletes (most of whom were lesbian) during the 1994 Gay Games, while 1998 Gay Games participants were surveyed by *The Advocate* newspaper (Anonymous 1998), and the Gay Games 2002 website's 'True Games Stories' has also provided some self-report data. In each case the discourses through which sexual identity was being expressed and experienced were those we would categorize as associated with participation/community and competition/individuality. Krane and Romont's Gay Games IV study found that 'social and personal development' was emphasized more often and more 'consistently' by their respondents than sporting highlights, or, indeed, competition. 'Social, self-enhancement and political' and 'traditional' sport motives were acknowledged by participants, with positive aspects of participation including 'having a sense of belonging, pride, and community' (Krane & Romont 1997: 123).

These emotions, we observe, might also be felt by athletes at mainstream international athletic events, with the 'sense of belonging, pride, and community' applied primarily to the nation. The nature of the community being described is likely to vary with the social location and sexual identity of the participant—for example, a woman who identifies as lesbian may feel part of a lesbian community, while a woman who identifies as heterosexual may identify with a broader, female community. In both cases, although to varying degrees, the power lines connected to nation may be stronger than those of sex, gender or sexuality (Stevenson 2002). This observation demonstrates the inherently political nature of participation or non-participation in any major sports event. Participating in the Gay Games, with its attendant vulnerability to ridicule or hostility, is a significant intervention in the *politics of visibility*. For a person who 'comes out' so publicly it is *being seen* that is both threat and benefit. As one participant in Gay Games

IV recalls, it is 'to be visible and out, to show the world at large that I exist as a healthy, vibrant, normal person' ([www.gaygames.com/en/interchange/stories](http://www.gaygames.com/en/interchange/stories)).

The Games, for some of the participants in Krane and Romont's study were, however, more than an opportunity for protest and a sense of belonging, offering a vision of what it might be like 'to feel proud and out and free and complete' (1997: 135). This almost utopian function of the Games could be almost therapeutic in nature 'the whole environment gives you a glimpse at what it could be like without discrimination. It is a thought I keep with me and an inoculation every four years keeps the possibility fresh' (1997: 135).

For this group of Gay Games participants—mostly lesbian women—the benefit of the Games is represented not as normalization or subversion, but as sustainment, with the individual and the sexual being affirmed through participation and collectivity. The experience of a straight woman or straight/gay man, however, would probably be quite different given their different social positioning and identity. The diverse, open nature of the Gay Games, therefore, makes the analysis of its nature and experience necessarily sensitive to the precise participant grouping being researched.

*The Advocate's* profile of 100 gay and lesbian athletes about to compete in Gay Games was obviously not as methodologically rigorous as Krane and Romont's study, merely asking several broad questions about participation in the Games. Nonetheless, the findings were informative. The highest ranked answer—30 per cent wanting to win medals—contrasted with the non-competitive guiding principles of the Games that are intended to differentiate them from orthodox sporting events. The numerical dominance of men in the sample (67 per cent) may well have raised the competitive profile of the Games—an example of the 'power line' of gender intersecting with that of sexuality. This result compares markedly with Krane and Romont's study, which found that competition was regarded as less important than attainment of a sense of belonging and of temporary community. The second and third ranked answers in *The Advocate's* survey, however, reflected the Games's principles, with 22 per cent wanting 'to have fun' and 12 per cent 'wanting to accomplish their personal best' (Anon. 1998: 71). Some participants, however, de-emphasized sport and stressed the creation of a new political community and the transformative experience of the Games, so pointing to fundamental tensions between participation, competition, and politics within them.

The politics of visibility was also evident in this survey, with respondent Martin J. wanting to 'make my coming out even more public'. As with Krane and Romont's participants, the political task of fighting homophobia was also important, in some cases taking on a more militant complexion, with Marck W. stating, 'I hope to be part of that battle by being an openly gay professional athlete'. The temporary community created at the Gay Games—cosmopolitan, gay and lesbian-accepting, and organized around sport—is clearly extraordinary and far distant from most everyday experience. As Faith S. stated 'to congregate with such a diverse gay and lesbian community on an international level is overwhelming. These are the moments we live for and which can never be forgotten'. This is a liminal experience in which constraints of the everyday and the profane can be

inverted by the extraordinary and the sacred (Durkheim 1965; Turner 1990). In fact, the Gay Games *milieu* was favourably contrasted by some of *The Advocate*'s respondents not only with mainstream, heterosexist culture, but also with 'profane' gay culture itself. As Luke C. put it:

I have a tough time with gay culture. I find it wanting in real meaning and purpose. But it's wonderful at the Gay Games. The attitude is gone. It's a spiritual, positive, uplifting event. When I was at the New York closing ceremonies in 1994, I was crying from happiness and joy.

This almost ecstatic response to the Gay Games contrasts with a more politically hard-nosed view that the event is too accommodating of the straight world, and compromises irreducible differences of gay and straight:

One of the biggest struggles the gay community faces is it's striving to be viewed like its straight counterpart. This is not going to happen simply because gays are not like straights. Gays have their own uniqueness which should be celebrated and accepted. Until the gay community realises this, many of its efforts are going to be in vain. (Shawn J.)

The difficult political choice here is of 'mainstreaming' gayness or proposing a deep, systemic challenge to the social order based on the impossibility of assimilating the gay and the queer (Beemyn & Eliason 1996). This pivotal issue, and the aforementioned 'profane' and 'sacred' representation of experience, recurs in the *True Gay Games Stories* contributions to the Gay Games website. The Gay Games for one intending participant who logged a story can create a spiritual and healing transformative community:

Before the Gay Games was created I could never really express how I felt out on the soccer field. Now when I practice for the Gay Games I feel more alive because I am with people who do not judge me. I cannot count how many times the Gay Games community has helped me in everyday life. It gives me a sense of deep spirituality and tells me that I can be whatever I want ... I feel at peace with my inner self, something I have not felt since my father molested me when I was younger.  
([www.gaygames.com/en/interchange/stories](http://www.gaygames.com/en/interchange/stories))

The Games's construction of liminal *communitas* is repeatedly presented as deeply affective, less instrumental state-political intervention than expressive, personal-political gesture:

I just had to share my experience walking out into Kezar stadium in 1986 with the bodybuilding contingent. I was newly out and newly relocated to SF [San Francisco]. As we walked into the stadium, thousands smiled and cheered for us. I felt so overwhelmed. It was like I had walked into a huge embrace of love, acceptance and encouragement. It was truly a moment I shall never forget.  
([www.gaygames.com/en/interchange/stories](http://www.gaygames.com/en/interchange/stories))

Ken, similarly, recognized for the first time through the Games the exhilarating possibility of reconciling his gayness with his ‘love of sport’:

The announcement of the first Gay Games in San Francisco was greeted with a hush in the room. Of course my heart was pounding as it was the perfect meld for me of my sexuality and my love of sport. Until that moment it never occurred to me the two could coexist.

[www.gaygames.com/en/interchange/stories](http://www.gaygames.com/en/interchange/stories))

If this is a common experience for gay and lesbian participants in the Gay Games, then the event facilitates the imagination of overcoming the alienation of sport and homosexuality, and at least temporarily realizes it in physical form within a supportive community conceived as ‘sacred’. This counter-hegemonic experience, paradoxically, allowed Ken a new perspective—‘to see the world that I choose to live in’—a moment that Pronger (1990) describes as constitutive of ‘authenticity’.

These findings from scattered, earlier studies of Gay Games participants suggest that involvement may be a significant transformative experience, in Durkheimian (1965) terms more sacred than profane, and may enable those who take part to glimpse, if only for a short time, a society that fully accepts and supports homosexuality. But they also reveal divisions over the strategies and meanings of the Gay Games, and the effect of differences of gender and sexuality on the experience of participation. It is these questions that will be addressed in this empirical case study of Sydney 2002, which sought to understand participation in the Gay Games from the perspectives of a sample of people who participated as competitors, organizers, and/or spectators. In particular, we were interested in the meanings attached by participants in the Games generally, and to particular events within the Games (such as the Opening Ceremony and the various sporting or cultural events), as well as their views on the relations between the Gay Games and broader gay and lesbian cultures and communities. Finally, we wished to explore participants’ views of sport and its relationship to their own lives, and its relationship with broader gay and lesbian cultures. While these research findings may be in some ways specific to the Sydney event, it is believed that they have continuing relevance to successive Gay Games, such as Chicago 2006 and Cologne 2010. The analysis has been organized around two key ‘moments’ within Gay Games VI for our research subjects—the Opening Ceremony and participation in a sporting event. The main methods employed were participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analyses of a range of media.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One of the authors (Kevin Markwell) was also the coordinator of a regional team (comprising nine people) that entered the Gay Games. This role involved the initial formation of the team, taking responsibility for registering the team name with the organizing body, Sydney 2002 Gay Games, raising awareness of the team within the local gay and straight media, organizing uniforms, liaising with Sydney 2002, and helping to engender a sense of ‘team spirit’. Involvement at this level provided him with a detailed understanding of the nature of the relations between an individual team and the organizing body. Kevin observed the Games from the standpoint of a participant observer, commencing with the accreditation process and the Opening Ceremony, and including participation in his sporting event, as well as two of the dance parties, a number of cultural events, and spectatorship at a range of sporting events including aerobics, swimming, track and field, ballroom dancing and netball, and, finally, participation in the Closing Ceremony. Over 70 hours of observations were made during the Games.

### **The Opening Ceremony: ‘the most intense, proudest moment in my life’**

The ceremony itself is kind of like a blur to me unfortunately. I mean there was just so much going on, but it was really spectacular and I can remember really feeling proud that I was part of a community that could put something like this on. I was really so disappointed that it wasn't being telecast, 'cos that's where I could have enjoyed it all again—you know, you always see stuff that you miss when you are actually there at the time. Also, it would have been so good to have been seen by mainstream Australia ... it was such a great night. (Wendy, 45)

The Opening Ceremony took place at Aussie Stadium (named after its sponsor, Aussie Home Loans) on the evening of 2 November 2002. The 12,000 or so participants (approximately 14,000 participants officially registered, meaning that about 14 per cent of registrants did not actually participate in Sydney) were required to assemble in the Sydney Cricket Ground adjacent to the Stadium from 4 p.m., transforming the seating areas into a vibrant, colourful spectacle. Signifiers of nationhood were not overly conspicuous—some teams may have worn a uniform that used national colours, or a stylised ‘camper’ version of national dress, but that seemed to be the extent of the projection of national identity. This cosmopolitan ethos is in keeping with the charter of the Gay Games, where nationality is downplayed, and each team is organized around a city or region, rather than a nation. City teams, nonetheless, do march within a national category, and nationhood was still evident in a number of ways. For example, when it was announced that the teams from India and Pakistan, in a demonstration of peace and goodwill, would be marching together, a roar of approval erupted from the crowd, and several interviewees commented that seeing these teams marching together was a highlight for them. Enthusiastic and supportive cheers also accompanied the teams from smaller nations, such as East Timor, or nations where homosexuality is illegal and dangerous, such as Iran.

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Commencing six weeks following the completion of the Games (2–9 November 2002), participants were contacted through a variety of means (word of mouth, accessing Team Sydney's registration database, use of gay media) and asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. For practical reasons, interviewees resided mostly in Sydney or surrounding regions, meaning that the data collected are geographically restricted. However, a number of web pages of individuals or teams who had participated in the Games from elsewhere in Australia or overseas were also examined, and many of the comments placed on these were similar to themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. Nevertheless, the data are skewed toward Sydney residents. A total of 37 people were interviewed: twenty men, sixteen women and one transgender person. In the sample, 95 per cent identified as either gay or lesbian, with the remaining 5 per cent identifying as heterosexual or bisexual. The ages of those interviewed ranged from late twenties to late fifties, with a mean age of 41, indicating that the sample is skewed upwards with regard to age, although this age distribution reflects the overall participation in Gay Games VI. The majority of people were interviewed by one of two research assistants, with the interview being taped and transcribed for analysis. In cases where it was not convenient for a person to be interviewed, the questions were e-mailed and the respondent typed responses to each question. In addition, an archive of relevant texts from the mainstream and gay and lesbian media, downloads from the Sydney 2002 Gay Games website, and printed materials published by the Organising Committee, were also used to inform the analysis.



The moment of entry into the stadium was recalled by many of the interviewees as one that was 'intense', 'an incredible rush', 'powerful' and 'awesome'. Andrea (a 37-year-old lesbian) described it in these terms:

It was absolutely amazing. We had to wait for 5 hours. But it was worth it! To walk into the stadium, when you walk in through the gates, it was just like telly (laughter). You walk in through these big openings and there was just a roar of noises. I was totally overwhelmed. I was crying because it was just so fantastic. It was just amazing.

A majority of respondents mentioned that they felt a strong sense of pride whilst marching in the Parade of Heroes, both individually, for participating in an international sporting event, and collectively as part of a 'global gay and lesbian community'. For many of the interviewees it was also important for them to have their participation witnessed by friends, and for some, by family. Shane, a 30-year-old gay man, bought tickets for his family (who live in rural New South Wales) to attend the Ceremony. When he met up with them afterwards he reported that, 'they were beaming. They'd had the best time. So that was a buzz—with a very personal meaning about it'. Standing on the 'hallowed turf' of a football field was surprisingly significant for several of those interviewed (mostly men), who felt that the moment was 'very special' or 'extraordinary' because they had never imagined that they would have entered such a 'no-go zone' and participated in a large-scale sporting event. Some even felt mildly fraudulent or imposturous, whilst others saw it as an empowering act, a form of defiance against the oppressiveness of sport that they had experienced during childhood or adolescence.

The Opening Ceremony expressed ideas about Australian nationhood while simultaneously drawing upon and advancing notions of global homosexual citizenship—both celebrating and transcending Australian nationhood.<sup>4</sup> Elements of Australian popular culture and mythology, and gay and lesbian iconography, were incorporated into the Ceremony, and included surf lifesavers, gay pop music commentator Ian 'Molly' Meldrum counting down the start of the Parade of Athletes, convicts, 'dykes on bikes', giant purple onions signifying the Purple Onion Nightclub (a Sydney gay venue in the

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<sup>4</sup> The Ceremony narrative was organized into a number of segments, 'Welcome', 'Struggle', 'Remembrance', 'Acceptance', 'Celebration' and 'Finale'. Participants and spectators were welcomed to the country of the Eora people by indigenous representatives, to New South Wales by the Governor, Professor Marie Bashir, and to the Games themselves by the co-chairs of Sydney 2002, Bev Lange and Peter Bailey. In keeping with similar ceremonies at the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, the Opening Ceremony featured music, singing by individuals (including internationally acclaimed gay and lesbian singers kd lang and Jimmy Somerville, and 'out' Australian performers including Paul Capsis, Judy Connelli, and Deborah Cheetham), and by the massed international gay and lesbian choir. It included dramatizations of events significant to the history of gay and lesbian Australia/Sydney, routines by Australian comedic characters, Bob Downe, and Kath and Kim, and speeches, including the 'keynote speech' delivered by openly gay High Court Judge, Justice Michael Kirby. Almost two-thirds of the interviewees, men and women, noted the speech by Kirby as being a highpoint in the ceremony, referring to it as 'memorable', 'wonderful', 'extraordinary', 'beautiful' and 'amazing'. The speech seemed to affirm participants' indivisible sexual identities as both individual and collective, highlighting the twin themes of sexuality and nation. It suggested that each participant could play a role in shaping a better world through support for events such as the Gay Games.

1970s), and Kath and Kim, television characters who have established a solid gay and lesbian following in Australia, and who, several interviewees suggested, ‘gave [the Ceremony] a very Aussie feel’. Interviewees also mentioned that singing the national anthem was a surprisingly stirring and moving experience—the collective identity of nation temporarily embraced in a context that provided a rare foregrounding of their embodied sexual being. The nation, though, could also be regarded as co-opted in the service of the sexual. A strong theme that emerged from the analysis was the positioning of the Ceremony as an event that marked an international gay and lesbian community, and where a sense of gay or lesbian identity transcending nationality was affirmed and celebrated. Almost all those interviewed spoke of the pride that they felt in their identities as lesbians or gay men whilst watching or participating in the Ceremony.<sup>5</sup>

The multicultural and global dimensions of the event were mentioned by about a fifth of interviewees, with the comments of 33-year-old James being typical:

It’s a bit of everything. It’s a bit political, like we’re saying that we’re here together, all as one, you know, taking part in an international event, all together from all over the world. Different races, different cultures, so I think it’s political. Basically, we’re doing it on our own together, but not having mainstream society telling us what we can and can’t do.

The extent to which the Gay Games generally, and the Opening Ceremony specifically, embraced multiculturalism was questioned by one interviewee closely involved in the outreach scheme to sponsor participants from Asia-Pacific nations who would otherwise have found it financially impossible to attend. Grant (age 50) was especially critical of the missed opportunities for authentic participation by people from ‘peripheral’ countries, ‘where were the speakers from the Pacific, from New Zealand, from Asia?’, and he felt that the Ceremony did nothing to lessen the cultural domination of the Gay Games by America: ‘In a sense you needed to get all the Americans, and Australians for that matter, and have them sit down and say, “Now I want to show you what this is really about”’. In addition, the Ceremony appeared to position political and collective struggle against homophobia as located in the past, and, by doing so, failed to acknowledge the ongoing struggles of many of the participants from nations or states where homosexuality is illegal, or of those who come from conservative rural areas within Australia. Some of the interviewees did comment that they had been very impressed and moved by people marching in the Parade of Heroes from nations such as East Timor, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and many of the smaller Pacific island nation states, and that the Ceremony was a reminder of ‘what still remains to be done in many countries around the world’ (Janine, 39).

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<sup>5</sup> As many authors have observed (for example, de Moragas Spá et al. 1995; Tomlinson 1996; Roche 2000), the opening ceremonies of mega sports events like the Olympics elicit such affective responses by design. The argument here, though, is that the specific context of the Gay Games revealed a tension between the conventionally ‘heterosexual’ nation represented in such ceremonies and its homosexual/queer citizens.

Almost without exception the interviewees felt that the night was an overwhelming success that served to mark the beginning of the Games, to ‘set the scene’, and to ‘launch them’. As Chris, a 43-year-old gay male put it:

I think the Opening Ceremony is absolutely essential. I think it explains—it gets people going. Without that, you don’t have anything to galvanise people and you don’t necessarily have a way of getting people together ... for a lot of participants, if they didn’t have the Opening Ceremony they’d just be off in their own area, you wouldn’t necessarily see what other people were doing.

The positive assessments made of the Ceremony were also shared by writers in the gay and lesbian press, as well as in mainstream publications like the daily broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald*, whose arts reviewer, Bryce Hallet (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/11/03/1036308205226.html>), described it as a ‘triumph’ and ‘in a word, fabulous’. Its scale reinforced for many the significance of the Games as a global event, and positioned Sydney and Australia conspicuously on the international gay and lesbian ‘playing field’. Not surprisingly, many compared it to a Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade or even dance party, although for others it was ‘like nothing [they’d] ever experienced before!’ Feelings of togetherness, community and camaraderie were also articulated by interviewees, who had a sense of marching together as part of a global gay and lesbian community. On a more personal level, it appears that, for a sizeable proportion of interviewees, participation in the Opening Ceremony (and marching into the football stadium) helped ‘exorcise some demons’ in relation to their previous experiences of sport. Its pivotal role continues to be acknowledged—for example, according to the organizers of Chicago 2006, ‘Perhaps more than any one element at past Gay Games, the Opening Ceremony has changed lives’ (<http://www.gaygameschicago.org/ceremonies/home.php>). The next section, therefore, explores the experiences of participants in relation to the post-Opening Ceremony sporting events (whether as an athletic participant or spectator).

### **Playing the field: ‘I’ve never been a football person’**

Approximately 12,000 people (as noted above) representing almost 200 teams from 76 nations registered for the Sydney Gay Games across 31 officially recognized sporting events including aerobics, swimming, diving, track and field, sailing, table tennis and ballroom dancing. Of these 31 sports, eleven are not part of the Olympic Games’ programme, and include aerobics, dancing, bowling, golf, physique, and pool/billiards. In keeping with previous Gay Games, male participation was over-represented at about 70 per cent, even though Sydney, like Amsterdam before it, had made a conscious effort to raise female participation levels. A survey of lesbians conducted before the Amsterdam Games indicated that a variety of factors negatively affected lesbians’ involvement in the Gay Games, including lower discretionary incomes, perceptions of the Games as a male-dominated event, child-care responsibilities, and lower self-esteem levels than gay men (Symons 2004). Only a small number of transgender people registered.

A total of 220 athletes registered as having a disability or special need. All events were organized into men’s and women’s divisions, some had mixed gender divisions (such as

netball), and a number of sports had both competitive and recreational or 'novice' categories (like aerobics). The organization of sports at the Gay Games consciously emulates conventional sporting events such as the Olympics. Traditional sports are competitively played (although ballroom dancing is included within the sporting programme), and participants are divided along gender and age lines, with medals awarded to the three top placings. Approximately one third of the athletic events at Sydney 2002 had the 'official imprimatur' of relevant governing bodies, and most of the others were run using official rules. These arrangements provide some mainstream credibility and a public opportunity for gays and lesbians to demonstrate their sporting abilities to each other and to the heterosexual world. However, while it takes a rather orthodox approach to the organization of sport, the Gay Games' platform of inclusion, participation and personal best does mark it as different from most large-scale, international sporting events. Thus, people were encouraged to register for any sport regardless of their gender, age or level of ability.

The inclusive approach adopted by the Gay Games encouraged a large proportion of interviewees to participate. Indeed, one interviewee said that:

I suppose being a gay and lesbian sporting event was sort of like saying that the standard was going to be lower. I thought they were going to be more accepting of a lower standard from me, and therefore I was less worried. (Rob, 34)

Within the sample of interviewees there was a range of feelings towards sports and fitness, and whilst some people had very little attachment to sport at all, and participated in the Games for 'fun' and 'social' reasons, several others took sport (and exercise generally) quite seriously. As Jack, a gay man in his early forties put it:

Sport allows me to tap into my masculinity, test my ability and compete against others. It gives me freedom to express myself in a level environment with the general community. Sexuality plays no part in how fast I run, or bowl or swim, etc.

Interestingly, that same man had quite a different attitude to sport in his childhood and adolescence:

I hated sport [when I was growing up]. But that was due to the homophobia of a small country town. I was not picked for any team sports (or the last one picked), never included in after-school gatherings and never invited to parties. When eventually I found a sport I could compete in alone, I went for it. After proving I had the ability and talent, I quickly moved into the 'in crowd' of the tenpin bowling community. This was also a problem as tenpin bowling is not a masculine code like footy, so I enhanced my social exemption, however the inclusion in my sport made it worthwhile.

The experience of not being adept or confident at sport at school, or feeling uneasy when playing team sports, was commonly mentioned by men and by some women interviewed. The narrow choice of sports that most were offered at school (cricket and some form of football code for the boys, netball or softball for the girls) also limited interviewees' opportunities to enjoy sport. James, for instance, recalled wanting to play softball as a

child, but it was considered a girl's sport: 'I used to stay back after school and watch the girls play because the boys weren't allowed to play and that really annoyed me'. For many, it was not until they were adults that they discovered a sport or fitness activity such as aerobics (or simply working out in the gym) that they could enjoy, and at which they felt competent. It was common for such sport or activity to be individual, although quite a large proportion then moved into team sports after developing the confidence within their individual sport.

Several people also mentioned that they were comfortable in individual sports at school such as swimming, surfing, and skiing, but not in team sports. Pronger (1990) posits that, for gay men, it is the competitive nature of team sports that is alienating because they don't tend to see themselves as fitting the models of masculinity that such sports celebrate. It is noteworthy, though, that many of the men interviewed mentioned that participation in sports and fitness activities helped them to 'tap into' or 'find' a sense of their masculinity, as the interviewee above mentioned.

The Games were seen more broadly as a supportive environment in which people could participate, regardless of ability. As Charles, a 45-year-old gay man, said:

It's friendly competition. It's friendship, building social networks, and for a lot of us that might have felt excluded from sport when we were younger, it's good to play sport again with the support of other gay and lesbian people, I think.

There was a commonly shared view expressed by most of the interviewees that, at a personal level, it was important to keep active, fit and healthy, rather than emphasizing the competitive aspects of sport. Another important dimension was the social aspect of sport and recreation in general. These provided opportunities to meet people outside the bar, nightclub and dance party culture, and a number of people commented that they felt that there was a greater chance of establishing long-term friendships, and sexual or romantic relationships, through sports or the gym rather than going out 'on the scene'. As one lesbian stated, 'the gay scene tends to be night-based and organized around bars, pubs and nightclubs. It was so refreshing to be doing things with other dykes during the daylight hours, and even going to bed early!' (Emma, 36).

Several respondents also expressed the view that, whilst feeling that fitness was important to their health and well-being, it was important to keep sport in perspective, and objected to what they considered to be mainstream Australia's obsession with sports at the expense of other cultural activities. For about a quarter of the sample, the overriding motivator to participate in the Gay Games was simply (perhaps tautologically) involvement in some way. This often meant pragmatically selecting a sport on the basis of competence rather than excellence. However, this does not mean that participants did not take the Games seriously. While there was a mix of views concerning competitiveness, the majority did approach their sport and training with some rigour. Almost all of those interviewed mentioned not attending certain social or cultural events because they did not want to compromise their sporting performance the following day, and a number felt that this was one of the reasons for the lower than expected numbers at some of the dance parties that had been organized. Several even suggested that Sydney

2002, the organizing body of the Games, had not appreciated that a very large proportion of participants, especially those from overseas, were in Sydney primarily for sport rather than dance parties. Most of the interviewees mentioned the months of training and preparation that were involved in the lead-up to the Games, with considerable effort and energy (as well as financial resources) expended in order to participate in them.

The Games were seen as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' chance to enter an international sporting event and to 'do one's best', echoing the notion of personal best, another of the Game's philosophical planks. Despite the rareness of the opportunity to participate, almost everybody interviewed optimistically aimed to participate in what was then to be the 2006 Montreal Games. But the Gay Games is not, of course, free of political conflict. A financial and organizational dispute between the Federation of Gay Games and Montreal 2006 led to Gay Games VII being held in Chicago, scheduled to conclude a week before the commencement of Montreal's rival 1<sup>st</sup> World Outgames.<sup>6</sup> The Outgames, while expressing a similar philosophy and practice to that of the Gay Games (<http://www.montreal2006.org/home.html>), is now in competition with it.

Most, but certainly not all, interviewees were reluctant to consider a more radical and subversive approach to sporting events within the Games, instead taking the view that they were an opportunity to 'prove to straights that we can be as athletic as they can' (Jack, 43). To incorporate elements of drag or camp into the sporting programme (Shogan & Davidson 1999), it was generally believed, was to risk undermining its sporting credibility amongst heterosexuals. Several interviewees suggested that, if some sports practices needed to be challenged, the initiative should come from within the governing body itself. In other words, they felt that gays and lesbians actively participating in a sporting body could bring about changes to rules and regulations. For many, the radical aspect of the Games was that it 'challenged the perception of homosexuals being limp-wristed "nancys" when homosexuals are now setting records' (Frank, 38). Central here were the mainstream competitive aspects of the event. Interestingly, Jane, a lesbian in her early thirties, highlighted an irony stemming from her belief that the mainstream media would 'love to report on the fluffy stuff like handbag tossing and high heel races and stuff like that, because it reinforces how they view us. But then on the other hand, that's the kind of cultural event that we love'.

Others interpreted 'radical' as being associated with novel, fun activities that would be acceptable provided that such events occurred as part of the cultural rather than (competitive) sporting programme. A minority of interviewees felt that such activities had to go beyond drag, that there was already 'enough drag in the Games' (Robert, 52). Most of those who advocated a more radical or subversive approach to sport also made the point that such activities must not interfere with, or replace, the traditional sports. Some interviewees did identify moments of 'camp' in the Games. They recalled a man participating in tae kwon do wearing a pink tutu; the American cheer squads comprising mostly men; ABBA's 'Dancing Queen' being played on the sound system during the Men's 50 years and older race walk; and Dusty Springfield songs continuously played on

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the Sydney Gay Games VI went into bankruptcy, and, in fact, Gay Games III to VI all made substantial losses.

the sound system at the Olympic Park railway station. The Pink Flamingo ‘relay’ that marked the end of the aquatic programme was also mentioned as a prime example of combining athleticism and discipline with camp humour and outrageous fun. Finally, the striking visibility of gay and lesbian couples holding hands and showing affection on the streets of Sydney well out of the Oxford Street ‘gay precinct’ was felt to have transformed Sydney for the duration of the Games.

For many, ballroom dancing was the ‘sport’ that most interviewees regarded as one of the unexpected highlights of the Games, being entertaining, graceful, colourful and stylish. It was also one of very few sporting events reported on by some mainstream media. For instance, under the heading of ‘Delight of the Dance’, *Sunday Telegraph* columnist Leo Schofield (2002: 136) concluded his story with the comment that ‘It was all very sweet and gentle, a rare and innocent evening where even less than svelte couples were having as good a time as the packed and enthralled audience’, the article accompanied by a large colour photograph of two women dancing. As Emma, a 27-year-old bisexual remarked, ‘It really felt like the structure’s being dismantled from within, you know, and we get to do it through dance. It sort of had this kind of subversive undertone...’. Same-sex ballroom dancing connected sexuality and sport in a very immediate, recognizable way unachievable in other sports, yet it was very well received by mainstream spectators and the press, possibly because of the charming aesthetic it created and, as Schofield suggested, its ‘sweet, gentle and innocent qualities’.

In contrast to most of the other sports comprising the Gay Games programme organized around competing individuals or teams, ballroom dancing (or dancesport, as it is also known and now recognized by the International Olympic Committee) provided opportunities for same-sex couples to compete against other couples. Thus, this sport was characterized by an overt intimacy between same-sex couples unavailable in other sports—with the exception of aerobics. Dance also provided opportunities to play with, and frequently subvert, notions of ‘butch’ and ‘femme’, camp and masculine, through the outfits worn, the roles taken by the dancers, and the sensual movements of bodies with bodies. Perhaps it was not on the track, the football field or in the pool, but in the gracious splendour of the Grand Ballroom of Sydney Town Hall, that the Gay Games were at their most transgressive.

Of course, the greater majority of those who were dancing or watching this event were unlikely to be thinking of themselves as subversives or radicals, and no doubt a mix of reasons had led them to that Ballroom, or to any of the other venues across the city used by the Games. Nevertheless, the Gay Games provided a rare opportunity to create a highly visible—if temporary—gay and lesbian community constituted through sport. If not radical, it was at least political. Politics and sport, gender and sexuality were mixing in the same spaces and at the same moments, whether intentionally or otherwise. One male interviewee (Stephen, 45) commented, ‘As gay people, we do have shared experiences and even language and translating that onto the sporting arena can be a lot of fun’. Whether it was the bearded lesbian holding hands with her lover in Pitt Street in defiance of the curious stares of passers-by, the exuberance of the transgender ‘sistagirls’ playing netball from various Pacific Islands, the 75-year-old woman from Texas who

managed a placing in the women's race walk, or the high-camp send-up of young singer Nikki Webster's performance at the Sydney Olympics Opening Ceremony at the Pink Flamingo, the Gay Games provided manifold opportunities for disrupting conventional images of sport, gender and sexuality.

### **Conclusion: 'to see the world that I choose to live in'?**

Like the ballroom dancing, the Oceania–Pacific Paradise Party at the Sydney Aquatic Centre on the night before the Closing Ceremony seemed 'innocent' and 'playful'.<sup>7</sup> The word 'camaraderie' was mentioned by over half of the interviewees when discussing the Gay Games, and this group formation, like most others, depended on an inside/outside dynamic. The paradox of the Gay Games (Markwell & Rowe 2003) is that it simultaneously draws on and reinforces boundaries based on sexual identities (otherwise the idea of the *Gay Games* is incoherent) while also advancing a universalist, boundary-less ethic of humanity that is either traditionally liberal or, within a more recent theoretico-political framework, queer (Beemyn & Eliason 1996). There are many contradictions in this project, including coming to terms with the historically dominant conservative ideology of sport and with the distinct political strategies of radical separatism and mainstreaming.

In broader sociological terms, the formal inclusiveness of the Gay Games does not secure exemption from structural social inequalities of class, race, ethnicity and so on (Bale & Cronin 2002). The economics of the Gay Games (already precarious, as noted, before a debilitating split and rival events staged in 2006) rely mainly on attracting comparatively affluent western gays and lesbians to western metropolises (Stevenson, Rowe & Markwell 2005—Johannesburg did bid unsuccessfully against Paris and Cologne to host Gay Games VIII). By such measures, the Gay Games is less socio-economically, racially and ethnically diverse than more orthodox international sports festivals, like the Olympic Games and the World Cup of association football. Its making space for 'coming out' and gay/lesbian pride and communality is, therefore, empowering mainly for people who are, by other key 'indicators', already advantaged in global terms (Markwell & Rowe 2003). Furthermore, the Gay Games's retention of participant classification by nation state of origin, and its consequent fostering of conventional nationalist sentiment, is to some degree at variance with alternative, 'Queer', transnational notions of nation and citizenship (McKee 2002).

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<sup>7</sup> As the field notes of one of the observers (Kevin Markwell) put it:

It was kind of like Gidget [a 1959 beach film] goes to Fiji with an Aussie pool party twist. It was several thousand gay boys and girls romping around in their brightly coloured board shorts and speedos, floral bikinis and sarongs. It was a camp and playful mix of inflatable palm trees, islander drag queens performing traditional songs, hula skirts, and near-naked bodies of all shapes and sizes. It was hundreds of men and women laughing and squealing with innocent delight as they were swept along in the current pool like swirling salmon on their way to spawning. It was a moment when everybody was 'on your side' and having fun together, just as you wished it could have been when you were a kid at the baths in summer.



With regard to the politics of the body, there were many evident tensions at the Sydney Gay Games and its predecessors (and, no doubt, its successors), not least between the predominantly masculinist display of approved (muscular, toned, youthful and so on) bodies, and other bodily dispositions (camp, ironic and resistant to the disciplinarity of the gymnasium). Disagreements over the image projected by more extrovert, playful pursuits (like the ballroom dancing) marked points of ideological contestation over the desirability of recognition by, and emulation of, mainstream 'heterosexual' sports culture, as opposed to a more distinctive assertion of the values and practices constitute of a really subversive, agenda-setting Gay Games.

It would be unreasonable to expect the human subjects who took part in Sydney 2002 (or any other such event) to resolve these deep, structurally produced divisions and contradictions. From a vantage point inside the Gay Games, the participants in our sample seemed mostly to reconcile these tensions effectively—if transiently—by deploying the camaraderie of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersex people as an internal affective dynamic. At the same time, they externally projected to the straight world messages that gay and lesbian people can engage in conventional cultural pursuits like sport, and in some areas (such as same-sex ballroom dancing and the greater emphasis on inclusiveness over competition) introduced a distinctive gay twist. In the process, the personal and the political, individual and collective, participatory and competitive, sexual and national, were reconfigured in ways that, if only for the duration, productively redrew and entangled some of the more established and linear logics of social power. How these tensions and logics play out experientially in Chicago 2006, Cologne 2010 and (if they bid successfully) Johannesburg 2014 will be a matter of considerable, continuing importance for those concerned with the politics of sexuality.

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