Negotiating Masculinities: Gay Athletes and the Gender Order

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with better understanding the experience of gay men in organized, gay sport. More specifically, I ask the question, how do gay men negotiate concepts of masculinity and gender in the context of gay-identified athletics? Drawing upon Connell's (1992) concept of gender order and Collins (1990) concept of the simultaneity of race, class and gender, I utilize sport as an analytic wedge to come to understand better the experience of being gay, but also to understand better larger systems of sexuality and gender in society. In 1997, I joined two team gay volleyball leagues in a large Midwestern city. Over a period of four months, I gathered data primarily through participant observation and secondarily through several, open-ended interviews with teammates. My data analysis focuses on three general areas: the struggle over the nature and meaning of competition, the gendered practices of athletes, and the role of humor in male bonding. My data suggest that in the practice of organized non-heterosexual sport, gay men create a uniquely stylized form of masculinity with radical, yet largely unrealized, potential for change in the gender order. My findings support the notion that gay men bring with them some particular knowledge related to sexuality that informs the social dynamic and which in turn, fosters this emergent masculinity.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

"A lot of athletes go into athletics for the same reason that I did. They need to prove their maleness...."

Tom Waddell, former NFL player, world class decathlete, founder of the Gay Games.

The scene is a local gymnasium in a large Midwestern city alive with the sounds of organized volleyball. As you approach the gym, your ears pick up the familiar sounds of a gym in action: the squeak of rubber soles on the hardwood floor, the chirp of a referee's whistle, the thud of a volleyball making contact with open hands and forearms. The sounds fade into the background as you enter and focus your gaze on the sweaty bodies at work. Men of all races, sizes, and body types dash to and fro, passing, setting, and spiking in the face of athletic competition. Their faces drip with sweat as their tee shirts darken over their overheated skin. Expressions range from intense focus to smiling joy. The air is humid and filled with the distinctive musty odor of aging wooden floors and the salty sweat of dripping athletes.

As you settle in on the sideline bleachers you are suddenly startled by a high pitched shriek from across the gym, "Oh girl! I didn't know you bought Gucci!" You pause and watch as two muscular athletes giggle with delight at the comment while
affectionately pawing at each other's arm. Other players nearby smile at the exchange.
Not understanding at first, you later discover the shrieking player was making reference to a hard-hitting spike that the other had just executed with aplomb. "Gucci" referred to a purse, as in "swing that purse, girl!" a phrase used to praise a good spike by another player. "Odd," you think to yourself.

Welcome to the world of organized, gay male sports. "Odd," yes, for some, but for the men of the City Sports Association and the Greater Metropolitan Athletic Association, it is as natural as opening a window in a stuffy room.

This paper attempts to expound upon the social relations of gay male athletes, their patterns of behavior, their lexicon, and the meanings that emerge from their experience of sport. It is an interpretation gay and athletic experience as it is lived in one, large midwestern city. In this study, my aim is to understand how concepts of masculinity emerge and are defined in the gay male experience of organized sport. Moreover, I explore what role emergent definitions of masculinity might play in the larger gender order both between various groups of men, and between men and women, more generally.

PURPOSE

As a system of inequality, gender relations have severe consequences for both women and gay men. With each passing year, additional scholarship and analytical evidence mounts of restricted work opportunities for women and gay men, lesser wages for women, sexual predation, and homophobia and bashing, to name but a few. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) describes how dichotomous thinking (woman/man,
heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine) is a part of the power structure that makes this possible. One side is strong, the other weak; one good, the other bad. Some research has documented the oppression of women and gay men based on the deceptive appearance of gender as a rigid category, something immutable, that someone possesses, rather than as a social process (see Connell, 1995, part I for an overview). Increasingly, however, this research points to gender as a system of social relations where both domination and resistance occurs (Kimmel, 1996; Connell, 1995, Ward, 1990). This study seeks to understand social relations present in gay male volleyball leagues with the hopes of better understanding the interactional nature of gender and sexuality and its potential for both limiting and promoting change towards a society based on equality.

GENDER AND MASCULINITY

Much like race and class, gender has become increasingly central to understanding our society. Race, class and gender are interlocking systems of inequality which simultaneously structure the experience of all facets of life (Collins, 1990). It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate out the effects of each. Nonetheless, there are times when one or the other seem more salient. Getting at these multidimensional social phenomena is not an easy task. Here, I use sport as an analytical wedge to come to better understand the experience of being gay, but also, to understand better larger systems of sexuality and gender in society. In the process, issues of race and class are intermingled and do occasionally come to the fore. However, the main thrust of this project is to examine critically the experience of being a gay male athlete in a wider heterosexist and gendered
American society.

Growing out of early feminist theories, recent research has focused on the concept "gender order", a term used to identify the historically based set of social relations between men and women as well as between men and other men (Connell, 1987). It is within this set of social relations that dominant and subordinate groups emerge. To understand better a system of inequality based on gender and to work towards a more just system of gender relations, one must study the subjects of domination as well as the subordinated group. This study focuses on the dominant group, men, but men who are situated through the structure of gender and sexuality in a subordinate position to heterosexual men. I pay particular attention to the concept of masculinity which has emerged as a primary focus of men's studies in the last decade.

Connell (1995) argues that masculinities are socially constructed "configurations of practice" occurring within and structured by gender relations. "Configurations of practice" are what we do in every day life--the way we conduct ourselves as gendered beings, the way we use space, the way we treat others and expect to be treated as men and women in our culture. He notes, "Knowledge of masculinity arises within the project of knowledge of gender relations." (p. 44). Masculinities "are inherently historical; and their making and remaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change." (p. 44). This study occurs at a time when sexuality, gender and masculinity are in the forefront of people's minds. Hundreds of thousands of men have rallied in Washington D.C. as part of the conservative, Christian men's group called Promise Keepers--their intent, asserting their manhood in family and spiritual life.
The Supreme Court of the state of Hawaii is weighing evidence about the legality of marriage for same-sex couples. The book, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, continues on national best seller lists. The Women's National Basketball Association (the WNBA) and the American Basketball Conference (the ABC), also a women's league, have just wrapped up their first seasons. Gender relations, sexuality, and masculinity are today highly contested. These types of issues provide the social context in which gay men experience sport today. The debates are increasingly public rather than hidden away in closets or behind closed doors. Many commonly held assumptions about gender, sexuality, the family, and power relations, are called into question, and over time emerge anew. These complex negotiations, battles if you will, occur not just between men and women, but also among different groups of women, as well as different groups of men. The entirety of these social relations Connell calls the gender order.

**GENDER ORDER AND MASCULINITY**

According to Connell (1992), the gender order is the social dynamic contained within gender relations--that is, the social practices among various groups of men, various groups of women, and between men and women. He notes, "The gender order itself is the site of relations of dominance and subordination, struggles for hegemony, and practices of resistance." (p.735). In trying to account for both change over time and within gender differences, the concept of gender order is useful as an organizing principle, for change and difference are integrally connected. As Connell notes, the potential for change lies in the divisions among men as well as in the practices of women. However, in order to
assess relations among men, as I attempt to do in this study, one must refer back to the
gender order. Various masculinities develop *in relation to* other masculinities and to
femininities through the structure of gender relations as well as other social structures.
Thus, certain forms of masculinity come to dominate while others are subordinated or
marginalized (Connell, 1995). Connell's approach to social change is based on this
relational view of masculinity: "Relations of hegemony reflect and produce a social
dynamic: struggles for resources and power, processes of exclusion and incorporation,
splitting and reconstitution of gender forms. To analyze this dynamic is to explore the

Connell (1995) has identified a number of masculinities including: hegemonic,
subordinated, and marginalized. Hegemony, a term first developed by Antonio Gramsci in
his analysis of class relations, refers to the domination of one group's definition of the
situation and their practices over others, across the whole of society. Thus, hegemonic
masculinity refers to the type of masculinity which occupies a position of hegemony in
society. Stated this way, masculinity is not an immutable essence, but rather something
that emerges in social relations and that changes over time. Hegemonic masculinity is a
configuration of practice which works to guarantee the dominant position of men over
women. Subordinated masculinities emerge in relation to hegemonic masculinity.
Principal among them in Western culture are gay masculinities which are subordinate to
heterosexist assumptions prevalent in hegemonic masculinities. Marginalized masculinities
are those that appear in relation to other social structures such as race and class. For
example, in a racist society where whiteness is equated with goodness, masculinities of
people of color are portrayed as threatening and thus marginalized.

This study borrows Connell's framework of gender and masculinity in examining the role of gay male athletes as a force in the development and negotiation of masculinities. I focus on the practices and relationships through which gay male athletes live gendered lives and the effect of these on the creation of masculinity. Through participant observation, I investigate how gay men negotiate concepts of masculinity in the context of organized sport. What do their actions and words tell us about the meaning of gay sport in their lives as men? How is it that men, as sexual minorities, struggle with traditional ways of "doing gender" in the world of sports typically dominated by concepts of hegemonic masculinity? Is there a consciousness present in the actions of gay male athletes, a consciousness of gay sports as a form of rebellion against hegemonic masculinity? Does the experience of gay male athletes reconstitute masculinity in new ways? Is the gay male participation in sports a more ambivalent undertaking, complicit in the perpetuation of male privilege? Does the experience of gay athletes work toward long-term change in gender relations?

WHY SPORTS?

Historically, sport has been defined as a male domain more suitable to the nature and disposition of men and their role in public life, than for women (Mangan, 1983; 1987). This perspective almost always rests on the premise of biological essentialism; biological differences between the sexes predispose men and women differently toward different activities in the world. This is similar to the view that masculinity (and similarly,
femininity) is some immutable, consistent characteristic emerging in the world with birth. However, more recently, social constructionist analysis have been applied to sport and masculinity (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1992; Kimmel, 1987). Rather than conceptualizing sport as meeting some basic biological human need, sport is socially constructed in a specific historical and cultural context (Messner, 1992; Sage, 1990; Whitson, 1990). This recent scholarship has critically examined modern sport as a "gendered institution." As Messner and Sabo (1990) point out: "Viewing sport as a gendered cultural space does mean that gender, as a dynamic, relational process, is taken as a fundamental theoretical category in understanding the historical and contemporary importance and meaning of sport." (p. 17, from Harvey, 1996, p. 131).

To examine the rise of modern day sport in America is to look closely at the path of gender relations. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, modernization, urbanization, and an active women's movement created what has been called a "crisis in masculinity." (Filene, 1975). As Messner (1992) points out, "The rapid rise and expansion of organized sport during this same era can...be interpreted as the creation of a homosocial institution which served to counter men's fears of feminization in the new industrial society." During this same time period, sport, especially more violent, contact sport (such as boxing and football) grew rapidly in popularity among American men.

Men's domination of women occurred through simple exclusion of women from sport as well as their marginalization when participation did occur. Bryson (1987) argues that sport supported men's domination of women "through the association of males and maleness with valued skills and the sanctioned use of aggression, force, and violence (from
Messner, 1992). As Messner summarizes, "In promoting dominance and submission, in equating force and aggression with physical strength, modern sport naturalized the equation of maleness with power, thus legitimizing a challenged and faltering system of masculine domination." (p. 15). Hegemonic masculinity was born out of this crisis in masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the traditional behavioral manifestation of this system of domination. It is the competitive, aggressive stance with a not-so-veiled threat of physical force. Sport has been a site where men empower other men in patriarchal privilege while subordinating women (Whitson, 1990) and marginalizing groups of men not subscribing to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995).

Sport, though, is also a contested site, a site of resistance to domination. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the women's movement in sport challenged the assumption of sport as a primarily male domain. In 1972, Title IX became law in the United States allowing women legal recourse in pushing for equity in education-based athletics. As a result, there was a dramatic rise in female participation in athletics over the next three decades. The movement also inspired some feminist scholars to turn their attention to sport. Early scholarship focused primarily on uncovering the hidden experience of women in sport (Birrell, 1987; Oglesby, 1978). While important in its own right, this tended to focus the question of "gender in sports" on women in sports, virtually ignoring the role of men except as an oppositional force.

Drawing upon the example of feminist scholars and a growing "men's movement" in the 1970s and early 1980s, some researchers turned their attention to a more critical examination of men in sports. They approached sport as a key site in American culture for
the creation and reinforcement of fraternal bonds (Messner, 1987; Sherrod, 1987). They argued that these bonds were based on shared activity, requiring little in the way of personal disclosure (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Sherrod, 1987). In addition, social-psychologists such as Gilligan (1982) demonstrated how sports typically socialize boys into a "rights-and-rules" orientation. Among young boys, sport promotes the credo that one is rewarded for one's efforts based on discipline and hard work. Sport also promotes identities constructed on the premise of winning--one gains in status by being the best. (Dunning, 1986). Feminist sports scholars have argued that the status gained from winning, being the best, is not available to most women. They argue that sport legitimates mens' domination of women and curtails their ability to participate in public life (Bryson, 1987). The importance of gender and masculinity in sports and its role in reinforcing and creating male privilege and power became central in understanding social relations today (Kimmel, 1996; Messner and Sabo, 1994; Messner 1992; Sabo and Runfola, 1980).

GAY MEN AND SPORT

Sport is a key social situation in which American men "do gender" -- that is, display and institutionalize socially acceptable forms of masculine behavior (West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is also a key site where men connect with each other forming bonds as men. According to Messner (1990), traditional displays of masculinity reinforce the male bond while non-traditional displays threaten the male bond. An important dimension of "doing gender" among men is, in practice, not doing femininity--that is, not doing behavior considered unmasculine. To the extent that one could distance oneself
from the feminine, one could firmly establish oneself as masculine, as a man. Gay men find themselves in a unique position in the context of sport. They are a sexual minority, effectively ostracized from the full bond of "manhood" by their socio-historical association with the feminine, yet they participate in rapidly growing numbers in one of the key social situations perpetuating such exclusion—organized sport.

There have been relatively few scholarly studies of gay men in sport. Still fewer have focused on issues of gender and masculinity as they emerge from the gay athlete's experience in sport. Some research points to the role of homophobia in shaping the social relations between various groups of men and the important role it plays in defining hegemonic masculinity in the world of sport (Messner and Sabo, 1994; Sabo, 1994; Sabo and Runfola, 1980). Few, however, attempt to study gay male athletes in actual athletic activities and the effect of that experience in reconstituting masculinities and gender relations.

An exception to the dearth of studies of gay athletes is a recent study by Brian Pronger (1990), *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex*. In this study, Pronger suggested that gay men's experience of sport is unique, due to an ironic gay sensibility which emerges from the "fluid experience of living an unorthodox life in an orthodox world." In gay men's experience of sport, Pronger finds no evidence of gay athletes having interest in celebrating men's mythic power over women. Rather, gay athleticism works to invite a violation of hegemonic masculinity—that is, it is an ironic stance welcoming the erotic violation of traditional masculinity. I pay particular attention to Pronger's ideas on gay sensibility and fluidity in my analysis.
This study will attempt to answer several key questions relating to the unique position and perspective of gay men in sport. What are the patterns of interaction that emerge in gay men's participation in sport? How does this inform their bond as men? What do their behaviors mean to them in terms of masculinity and sexual identity? How do their behaviors reinforce and/or challenge the existing the gender order? This study seeks to examine the day-to-day experience of gay men in the Chicago gay volleyball leagues, in action, word, and deed, in the hopes of contributing to this on-going discussion of gender, masculinity and sports. Particular attention will be paid to the radical potential which lies within gay male sports to affect, enact, and re-shape the gender order.

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this study were gathered over the course of three months in 1997 through participant-observation. In January of 1997, I joined two gay volleyball teams, one in each of two different gay leagues in a large Midwestern city. I was able to join the teams as a player owing to previous participation in one of the leagues several years earlier. I had managed to keep in contact with several of the players who were now team captains.

When I first thought about studying the gay volleyball leagues in Chicago, I was not quite sure what I would find. While I used to play in a league some years ago, I had never taken a step back, to observe and think through what was going on there as a social phenomenon. Thus, I entered the field as somewhat of an insider but also as an outsider. I was an insider in that I already had an understanding of what a day of volleyball would
entail—the stretching, the warming up, the playing, the gossiping on the sidelines, the feelings of camaraderie. I was an outsider, however, in that my prior experience was an unconscious activity, something I did, but not something I thought about. In approaching this study, I had to become somewhat more of an outsider by distancing myself from the action. By virtue of taking a step back from each moment, from each conversation, from each rally, I was in effect looking at what was happening through a new lens, an insider-out lens.

I chose to participate on a team, rather than simply interview athletes, in order to gain first hand, insider knowledge. A comment from my fieldnotes points to my early decision to join the leagues: "I watched folks play, sweat, get tired. I remembered the long days, the sore muscles, the aches, the swollen shoulder. I asked myself, 'couldn't I just watch? Observe? Interview? My answer came to me later in pondering a team chant "Her-cu-les, Her-cu-les." In order to understand what "Her-cu-les" meant, how it came to take on meaning, what the inside gags, lexicon, rules of behavior were, I would needed to be a part of it to the largest extent possible." By becoming part of the team, rather than tangentially attached to it, I would be able to observe conversations, behaviors and activities (such as in team huddles, and communication patterns on the court, during play) that may otherwise have been inaccessible. While I had informed the team captains to my presence as a researcher-player, I left it up to them as to decide if and when they wanted

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1 I did eventually discover at least one meaning of the chant "Her-cu-les." One player told me the chant was a reference to the popular television show "Hercules" in which a scantily clad, overly muscular man plays the lead character. The chant was used humorously in the league after a player executed a particularly good spike. The effect of the chant was to draw smiles and laughter. It was linked with hyper-masculine behavior and served to undercut its legitimacy as a dominant practice.
others to know. As it happened, one captain chose to introduce me to the team as a "new player joining the team, who will also be doing some research on gay volleyball." The other captain did not mention me outside the player context.

Most often fieldnotes were hand-written in my car, immediately after playing. On occasion, I stole away to the locker room to write down a particular phrase, action, or word usage employed by one of the athletes. Usually within a 12 hour period, these field notes were typed and expounded upon. In the tradition of ethnographic research (Emerson, et al., 1995), the analysis of my field notes included several readings, codings, and refinement of codings. These were then synthesized for emergent themes and theories. The 140 pages of fieldnotes, eventually yielded twenty three different themes the titles of which are included in Appendix A. Each of the twenty three themes was comprised of multiple sub-categories, some more than twenty. My discussion in the results section highlights the major themes which seem to most closely develop and inform theory.

It seems that my access to the teams was facilitated as much by my athletic ability as by personal connections. In asking one team captain if I could join his team as a researcher-player, he said, "Yes, we could use the help." In so far as the Chicago gay volleyball leagues are a predominately white, middle class endeavor, I fit the bill. This is not to say that there was no variety in terms of class and race among the players. For example, at various moments of league play, I took several visual counts of race and estimate the racial composition at about 65% white, 5% Black, 10% Latino, and 20% Asian. It was much more difficult to gauge class variation, though crudely, from a scan of
the occupational backgrounds identified in my field notes, most fell into employment positions more typically associated with a broadly defined middle class (teachers, mid-level managers, computer programmers, businessmen). The men in the leagues ranged in age from 19 to approximately 45 years old.

I joined the teams mid-way through league play in January and continued on until the playoffs ended in March, 1997. I completed gathering my data in April of 1997. I decided to conduct three in-depth interviews at the close of the playoffs to further explore several key issues that seemed to be emerging in my data: competition, humor, and "doing gender." These interviews were semi-structured but flexible enough to allow us to explore tangents where they led us. Some of my guiding questions related to first experiences with volleyball, first engagement with gay culture and camp in an athletic setting, and rewards and draw-backs from playing in the gay leagues. Each interview was approximately three hours, was tape-recorded, and was transcribed for analysis.

For the purposes of this study, I have changed the names of the sports leagues and of all participants and interviewees in order to protect their anonymity. Where nicknames were used, I employ like-minded substitutes.
CHAPTER 2
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are two organized gay male sports organizations in this midwestern city—the City Sports Association (CSA), played on Sundays at a park district fieldhouse, and the Greater Metropolitan Athletic Association (GMAA), played at a city high school on weekday nights. To perhaps overstate the obvious, first and foremost, the men in these leagues are indeed playing volleyball. They dress in gym clothes, sneakers, and knee pads. They warm up and stretch. They bump, set and spike. They sweat. Sometimes they win; sometimes they lose. But, they are also doing much more. They are bonding, gossiping, laughing, and having fun. They are creating a comfortable gay space by choosing to play in a self-proclaimed gay league and by reveling in certain patterns of behavior and speech reflective of the larger gay culture. They are finding out what is acceptable and what is not in how they relate to each other as self-identified gays, and indeed, as men. Perhaps most of all, they struggle with concepts of gender, masculinity, and sexuality, not consciously, as one might struggle with a deciding what shirt to wear with what pants, but more covertly in their negotiation of what it means to be a man, an athlete, and gay all at the same time. In the process of competing and recreating in sport, these men develop and perpetuate a unique type of stylized gay masculinity that draws upon both the trappings of traditional conceptions of masculinity and the language and behavior often
associated with the feminine and the larger gay culture in American society. What emerges has potential to be revolutionary in terms of the wider gender order, albeit such potential remains largely untapped. This stylized masculinity emerges in the tension between competition and recreation in the league, in the actions and words of the players as they negotiate concepts of masculinity while doing gender, and in the use of humor which infuses the entire enterprise.
CHAPTER 3

COMPETING OR RECREATING?

There is a fundamental tension in the CSA and GMAA between competing and recreating. This tension is apparent on different levels: organizationally in the structure of the leagues, and personally, in the actions and words of individual players. On the organizational level, each league is comprised of several divisions which vary according to player ability. In the CSA, the divisions are: AA, A, BB, and B, with AA drawing the most skilled players and B the least skilled. In the GMAA, the divisions are: A, B, and C. A again draws the most skilled players while C the least skilled. While I played and observed most often in CSA-AA and GMAA-A divisions, I did spend some time observing and refereeing the other divisions as well.

In the world of organized volleyball, a 'C' division is almost unheard of. For example, the United States Volleyball Association (USVA), the flagship organization for organized, amateur volleyball in the United States (and whose written rules are applied in the CSA and GMAA) does not have a 'C' division league--just AA, A, BB, and B. C, as a division, is unique to the GMAA. This institutionalized hierarchy establishes a pecking order. The "most talented" are separated from the "least talented." Once, while refereeing, a C-division game, it became clear to me that many of the players were novices and/or simply not athletically inclined. The physical maneuvering of bodies--halting steps, hesitant movements towards the ball, uncoordinated arm swings--belied the skill level and ability of the players. In contrast, the B division players that I observed, had much better
coordination, moved to the ball well and with aggressiveness rather than hesitancy. The focus of physical exertion in the B division was on fine-tuning passes to effectively pull off a basic bump-set-spike sequence. In the C division, energy was devoted to simply get the ball back over to the other side of the net. The A division players seemed generally unconscious of their polished movement towards the ball and their assertive play. Rather, their energy seemed more devoted to trying a variety of plays, types of spikes, and complex rotations of players among the various positions on the floor.²

By virtue of having a C level, the GMAA organizationally, provides an opportunity for unskilled players, to play volleyball, while institutionally sorting people out according to ability. This seems to be a clear indication that beginners are welcome and that play will be of a more recreational nature in the C division.³ Comments from players confirm what one might expect from this sorting mechanism; the C and B divisions are seen as more recreational while the BB, A and AA divisions are seen as increasingly more competitive. The players comments were also consistent regarding the different reputations of each league. For example, when I asked one CSA player (Robert) if he had ever played in the GMAA, he said, "Yea, but only once--too many rec teams."

Several participants confirmed Robert's take on the leagues, but in most cases, indicated a

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² In taking a step back, and making these observations, I became acutely aware of my bias as a competitive athlete. Having good motor and hand-eye skills, volleyball came quite naturally when I began playing in college some years ago. The types of movements and activities which I notice, record and analyze are bound to be influenced by this background. I tried to be conscious of these biases in recording of fieldnotes, and especially so in my analysis.

³ This is not meant to imply that play cannot be both recreational and competitive. This issue is explored later in this paper.
rise in the level of play in GMAA over the past few years. By 'rec', players seem to mean that the focus is on simply having fun; skill and quality of play take a back seat to socializing. By competitive, players seem to mean that skill level was generally higher, and that people were focused on playing good volleyball first, and recreating second.

Some of the higher division players, though, also made it clear that recreation is an important part of the experience. For example, Pat, a highly skilled setter in the AA division of the CSA, commented on the structure of the league: "This year's set up is much better than last. Last year, you only played one game, reffed, and went home. This year the league is organized so that teams play, then referee, then sit out a game or two, then play and referee again." Despite his location in the most competitive division, Pat recognizes the value of the league as a social activity. The structure of the league, at least this year, promotes both the competitive and the recreational. Of course with each level and with each league, individual players bring different needs and expectations based on their personal histories.

In the set up of the leagues, we begin to see the organizational manifestation of what Acker (1992) calls the "gendered understructure" of institutions. This understructure is a set of power relations which often remains invisible. In establishing separate leagues and divisions based on ability, "better" players are separated out from "lesser" players. "Better" is equated with more competitive, lessor with recreational. More competitive connotes more advanced, is accorded more prestige, and becomes a way of establishing oneself and one's power among the men participating in this endeavor. It is a sorting mechanism based on ability and competitive orientation which accords
power and dominance, institutionally, to more skilled, competitive players. As an institution, the gay leagues simultaneously create an open space for a mix of recreation and competition while structurally shoring up a hierarchy typical of masculinity in America--the more competitive, the higher the skill level, the more masculine, the more dominant. My fieldwork and analysis focuses more on those playing in the highest skilled divisions of both CSA and GMAA and it is here that I began to see the tension more clearly between competing and recreating in both leagues.

WINNING AT ALL COSTS?

Thom is a good example of a player who plays in the CSA and GMAA to compete, and to win. Thom is a thirty year old Caucasian man, about five feet ten inches tall, with a lean, muscular body. He sports a goatee, often wears dark, sleeveless shirts which highlight his muscular biceps, and is well known in the leagues because he is a very active player and a team captain. Thom's focus on winning became clearer one day in a game which pitted the first and second place teams of the CSA against each other. Before the game, a fellow teammate of Thom's named Robert, was goofing around during warm-ups--smiling, laughing, and joking with another player on the team. Noticing this, Thom abruptly chastised Robert, "This is serious. Get in the game." Robert, a 26 year old Asian man, similar in size, body type, and manner of dress to Thom, immediately lost his smile, sporting a more serious expression. The ability of Thom to impose his view of the situation on Robert was shored up by his status as captain. The structure of teams accords some authority to people in the position of captain. They decide who plays and
who doesn't. They serve as spokesmen for their teams in disputes with referees. They often also serve as coach, organizing the team's play on the court. As an authority figure, one who can control playing time for others and the fate of the team on the court, the competitive orientation of the captain can dramatically influence the tenor of a match and the league overall.

Other players on Thom's team shared his same focus and purpose. Harry is a tall (six feet three inch), African American man, with a strong, athletic body. In this same game, during a timeout taken to stifle a rally by the opposing team, Harry, asserted, "We just need to get in the game. We need to move, get things up!" During yet another timeout, also taken to break the momentum of the opposing team, another teammate named Pat, a short Asian American setter, with a thin, agile body, offered excitedly, "On the blocks, make sure you set them on the net and to the right; make them cut the angle," mimicking the required hand movements he described. Another player chimed in, "Come on. Get those blocks up there strong!" These are hardly the words of the casual, recreating volleyball player. The game is seen as "serious" not frivolous. There is a conscious effort to focus one's mental state and one's physical actions on the competitive task at hand, to "get in the game," to be strong, to stymie the other team, and to win. And, there is a conscious effort at strategizing: taking timeouts, setting blocks in particular places, getting psyched up.

BODIES AT WORK

This competitive stance, is echoed in the movements of players on the court:
bodies diving after the ball, players in the crouched and ready position before serves, high fives after favorable plays, hard hitting spikes, aggressive, difficult-to-return serves, sweat pouring from faces and bodies. The actions of the players are not simply to keep the ball in play or to have a good rally; it is to compete, to do well, to win if possible. The men dress in athletic shorts, tee-shirts, knee pads and volleyball shoes. Some wear knee or ankle braces, others have fingers taped up to help with splitting skin or to shore up an injured finger. In physical comportment and movement, in dress and competitive focus, the configuration of practices at times, indeed seems highly competitive.

Sometimes this focus on competition, turns into a win-at-all-costs attitude. For example, in the CSA, Thom was the captain of the team I joined. In the GMAA, he was captain of another team, of which I was not a member. During the second night of the GMAA playoffs, Thom, the captain of an opposing team, protested my eligibility to participate in the playoffs citing a rule that prohibits those who have not technically played 50% of the league games. Ironically, Thom, in the other league (the CSA) is the captain of my very own team. The drive to win in the GMAA game, at that point in time, a playoff situation, drove Thom to protest me which in effect sacrificed my ability to play with him in the CSA playoffs.

Not just in deed as Thom demonstrates above, but in physical action, do some of the players illustrate the win-at-all costs stance. I call this action, demonstrative behavior. This is the type of behavior associated with displays of intimidating, in-your-face attitudes and posturing, finger pointing at the opposing team, and taunting. During one three game match, for example, after the first game, which involved a good deal of cross-net taunting,
the referee had to intercede warning each team captain that any future "talking" or "celebrating" would be allowed only if it was directed inwardly, towards one's own team. The effect--the warning was mocked. After the first good play in the second game, all of the members on one team threw their arms up in the air yelling "yea," while running into a little circle on their side of the court, facing each other. I noticed one of the players peaking out of the huddle to see how their action was affecting the other team. This was a clear mockery of the referee's instructions which had the purpose and effect of rattling the opposing team further.

It seems that this demonstrative behavior is consciously displayed, as the organized group effort above demonstrates. It is performed in relation to another group. Harry's comment during a timeout after the above incident helps in better understanding the dynamic at work. "I don't care about that shit. They know I love it. It gets me playing higher." The purpose is to demoralize the other team. To intimidate. Its effect on some, like Harry, is to inspire them to play harder, better. Others shrink from it. Other members of Harry's team, Robert and Jaime, for example, seemed to withdraw inwardly, looking at the floor intently, saying very little during timeouts.

Harry and Thom are good examples of how gender is an interactional accomplishment. Harry is conscious that "they know I love it." He is conscious that demonstrative behavior is both something performed by someone, and for someone. Through specific behaviors (the physical force of play, verbal sparring, as well as demonstrative behavior), one team tries to maintain power over the other. Some players "do dominance" (the opposing team, Harry) while other "do deference" (Robert and
Jaime). This reinforces and reproduces institutional arrangements—competitive aggression will dominate at the expense of recreation. Gender and its masculine expression here are an on-going accomplishment based in behavior, not an expression of some internal state.

In another example, Jay, a man who plays in both gay leagues, the USVA, and coaches a high school team, overtly struggles with why he personally plays so much volleyball: "I cut back for awhile. But now I think I am playing so much because I am afraid I'm losing my edge. It really hurts when people joke, 'I knew you when you could get under that ball and set it.' I think I am still proving it to myself that I can play at the highest levels. I don't know why. You know, you just can't help being competitive." Fear of losing one's edge, being able to beat the opposing teams, playing at the highest levels, garnering the most respect—all signs of competition, gender, developed in relation to other men. Jay's conflicted feelings, his fear and his yearnings to be acknowledged as competent and capable were echoed in Daryl's comments after hitting a strong spike one day, "I am an ole' bitch, but I ain't dead yet." Daryl is heavy-set, African American man, about six feet two inches, who is approaching forty years old. Most of the other players are in their early thirties or twenties. Both Daryl and Jay recognize their advancing age and see volleyball as a way to assert not just their presence in the league, but an able-bodied presence that is a force to be reckoned with, their masculinity in a traditional, hegemonic sense.

Concepts of self-worth and respect from others are inextricably linked with their competitive orientation. This is a social process not unique to gay men; it exists in the relations of these athletes to other athletes, and more broadly, to societal conceptions of
manhood in America. To be a man is to be powerful, to "get under the ball." These behaviors and attitudes form the foundation upon which some of the men in this league base their conceptions of masculinity.

The context and the particular game is important, too, in setting the stage for a particular competitive stance. The competitive stance of players seems to vary by the stakes at issue. The above game pitted the number one and two teams against each other. The tenor of a game and the competitive stance of players varies by the perceived challenge. With less evenly matched teams, the demonstrative behavior was limited if present at all. There was care taken not to direct demonstrative behavior at the losing team. Timeouts, if taken at all, were filled with casual banter, jokes, and even songs at times. The same people who above, were focused on competing, in an uneven match, were relaxed and even caring with the opposing team.

COMPETITION AND RECREATION: A CONTINUUM

The tension in the leagues is not a dichotomous situation--either competitive or recreational. Rather, it is both competitive and recreational. It appears to be more of a continuum varying by context (division of play), stakes (perceived equality of teams), and the personal histories of the players. Rather than winning at all costs as the above examples illustrate, there are those who see competition, in and of itself, as recreation. It is the end itself, not a means to victory, to dominance. These players seem to define the competitive as good rallies and challenging, high-level play. There is a line here between trying to win at all costs and enjoying the simple thrill of the competitive challenge. One
player, Luke, commented on the protest Thom filed against me saying, "Well Thom is that way. It is so stupid. We are supposed to be having fun. Some people get too competitive." There is a line across which the competitive nature of the enterprise becomes undesirable by some. It detracts from the fun, from the recreational, and additionally, from the pleasure inherent in competition as a mutually satisfying act.

This stance becomes clearer in comments made by other players. Jack, for example, described to me one of his most memorable events from the league. It was a playoff match, with long rallies and good play. Typically, a game ends when one team reaches 15 and has a two point lead or more. The final game of this match didn't end until 21-19 with Jack's team losing. Still, it was one his fondest memories. He remembered it so well, and so favorably, because of the nature of the play, the excitement generated in the act of good competition. The competitive was the recreational. Jack and Luke are good examples of players who would much rather have a close game and lose, rather, than a blowout and win. They became most disappointed when the play was not mutually supportive of teams as people, and was unequal in terms of ability, rather than when they were not winning.

Still for others, playing the gay volleyball leagues is an act of coming out and a chance to meet potential partners in a venue other than the bars. John, a 'C' player I met a few years earlier at the "gay beach," approached me day at a GMAA game. During the course of our conversation, I asked him how first become connected with gay volleyball. He said, "When I came out." I asked again, "I mean, when and how did you connect with gay volleyball?" He reiterated, "when I came out, about four years ago. I first hooked up
with volleyball at the beach. Before I knew it, six months later I was captain of the Roscoe's team." When I asked why he plays, he said, "Well I never did very well at the bar scene." Playing gay volleyball was an act of coming out for John. It allowed him entry into a new gay social scene, one seemingly less threatening than the bar scene in his words. John occupies a position on one end of the competitive-recreational continuum, Luke and Jack a middle ground, and Thom and Harry, the other end. What does this say about masculinity for these men?

Some players find themselves personally wrapped up in the idea of competition. And, this is integrally linked with conceptions of masculinity. Others, seem to view competition through a sense of mutuality--something done together which has value in itself. In his description of the gender myth, Pronger (1990), describes the signs of gender as "various gestures--by which I mean assorted body deportment, clothing customs, hair styles, and complex behaviors such as 'being a football player'--that indicate the forcefulness or significance that one's gender is supposed to take" (p. 54). In their body deportment, clothing and complex behaviors as athletes, some men in these leagues draw heavily upon traditional masculine practices and concepts in the gender order. Volleyball for some, seems to become a proving ground of manhood, of hegemonic concepts of masculinity in American society. Rewards for them are based on discipline and hard work. An aggressive orientation emerges that equates force with physical strength while sanctioning its use. Winning equals status. Maleness equates with power and winning. For others, volleyball seems to become an act of cooperation, of excitement based not so much in proving one's maleness through aggression and domination, but mutual
participation in an enterprise rich with physical and social reward in itself.

A significantly complicating factor enters the picture when we examine the whole range of behaviors which comprise this league. What can be seen as blatant attempts to assert one's masculinity in a traditional sense, through winning and competing, becomes more of a struggle whereby concepts of masculinity are negotiated, rather than simply assumed. For example, even the most aggressive of spikes, can be followed by a stylized finger snap or a broadway finish in these leagues. A broadway finish is reminiscent of when at the end of show-stopper musical number, the lead singer thrusts her head back, while projecting one or both arms up in the air, simultaneously bending one hip out to the side and the opposite knee. I observed many players exhibiting this behavior. Sometimes this behavior manifests itself in group action. Even an ace (a winning, unreturnable serve) might be met with a stylized ritual. One such ritual is when an entire team first yells in high-pitched unison "whoop", followed by three quick claps, then a stomp of a foot, and finally the word "ACE", holding on to the 's' sound at the end. There are shared references and rituals here that build a common set of stylized cultural resources among the players. Some of this finds its roots in the wider gay culture and here, mingles with the gendered arena of sport. Masculinity in these gay leagues seems rather unbounded in presentation, and at times, seems to support commonly held assumptions about how men should operate in the world as masculine actors. To conclude the gay volleyball leagues are simply a project of hegemonic masculinity seems a bit premature without further analyzing these uniquely stylized behaviors.
CHAPTER 4
NEGOTIATING MASCULINITY WHILE DOING GENDER

The CSA and GMAA are places of constant gender swapping. Gender swapping is when words and actions typically associated with either women or men in American culture, become commonly utilized by the opposite sex. Time and again, the men in these leagues take certain words and behaviors with female origins and make them a part of their behavioral repertoire and meaning system. From physical flamboyance such as mimicking broadway divas to the more mundane swapping of 'she' for 'he' in regular speech, the league is littered with examples of gender swapping activity. In turn, these have profound implications for the creation of a uniquely stylized masculinity.

"SHE PACKS A POWERFUL PUNCH"

The substitution of the word 'she' for 'he' is used relentlessly in the gay leagues. For example, during one game, when a shorter thin man hit a powerful spike, a player sitting near me asked, "Who is that little girl? She packs a powerful punch." Substituting the 'she' for 'he', and combining it with the active, aggressive 'powerful punch' is a good example of how gay men combine notions of gender and sexual difference into the realm of the masculine. It is an ironic juxtaposition of terms, overlaying feminine pronouns and descriptions with traditionally masculine ways of being in the world. Note too, the
reference to the male player as "little girl," an obvious reference to the shorter, thinner physical presence of the player. Size, physical presence is linked with the female term girl. Yet, "she packs a powerful punch"--power and punch, an aggressive stance, ironically juxtaposed with little girl.

While 'she' is used often to refer to men in the leagues, it is still a fairly generic reference. "Girl names," on the other hand, are linked more specifically with individuals. Virtually all of the players I met had girl names, some more than one. Luke above is known as Lucinda, Jack as Miss Liddie, Daryl as Mother, Tracey as Teresa, Mark as Martha, Leo as Lea, Tony as Betty, and on and on. Many are simply the feminine form of a given name, such as Martina for Martin and Marci for Marcus. Others, such as Mother's, were adopted based on some personality trait of the individual and/or the social role that they play in the group. Mother was so named because she is "older" than many of the other players, and in his words "often looks after them like they were my children. You know, like giving advice about men, sex, and (laughing) what shoes to wear." This is reminiscent of the "old heads" in Anderson's Streetwise (1990), but here they are "old queens." Note even in his description of his role as "mother," he infuses humor into the project. He does not take himself too seriously.

Some of the men object, at least publicly, to the whole girl name thing. For example, when I asked Thom if he had a girl name, he responded curtly, "No. I hate that." Later in the conversation he confessed to being known in some circles as Buchida (dyke in Spanish). Thom's objection was somewhat automatic. He instinctively recoiled at the perceived threat, a challenge to his identity as a man, as a masculine actor. Remember,
Thom is the player quite wrapped up in winning, competing not so much for the joy of competition, but for the actual claim of victory. He is also one prone to wearing dark colored clothing, sleeveless tee-shirts which accentuate his well-defined biceps, as well as sporting a goatee. His girl name, a play on the word “butch,” in spanish, reflects this constant surveillance of his masculine identity and the fact that others (those that did the naming) are conscious of his over-attentiveness to these issues. Naming is a relational activity. As such it reveals how social concepts, the maintenance of masculinity, are exposed and negotiated in this setting. Thom's hyper-sensitivity to being perceived as masculine in a traditional sense is noted, exposed, and becomes humorous in the context of naming. It does not exist unexposed. Rather it is laid bare through humor. There is radical potential for redefinition of masculinity in the act of naming.

Unlike, Thom, others are known by little other than their girl names and seem to revel in their usage. One team even went so far as to label their team "Team Mary."
Nobody on the team could come up with the exact derivation of the name. Some speculated that it referred to Mary Tyler Moore, one of the first single, making-it-on-her-own, female television personalities. Others speculated that it referred to Mary Hartman Mary Hartman, another popular persona in the wider culture. More likely, Mary, probably the most universal of female names in the western world given its link with Christianity and the Virgin Mary, may have evolved as an appropriate generic for all the girl names combined. This, like the pronoun swapping and naming mentioned earlier, is what I call playing with gender. It is a way of acknowledging difference in the shared experience of being gay, of utilizing words and behavior typically associated with one gender, and
making them a routinized part of the social relations. It is also a way of taking control of stereotypes. It is an active appropriation of what were originally derogatory references—that some how gay men were less than real men, and hence, part woman—and making them their own. Some see this as ironic style, some as an integral part of gay camp. It seems to me it is active stance, a traditionally masculine way of working in the world, but with an style informed by sexual difference. This is key in understanding what is happening in these leagues because it informs the play, the competition, and the general sense of community found in the gymnasium. It is also an interactive phenomena. Inverting pronouns and naming take place in the interaction between the players. It is a negotiated event wherein men redefine the boundaries of what it means to be and act like men.

Sometimes it is the absurd, that evokes gender swapping and contributes to an emergent, stylized masculinity. For example, one day Earl, Harry, Thom and I noticed another player, Leo—a short, lean, Latino wrapped in a scarf, a jacket, a stocking cap, and trendy mirrored, circular sunglasses—make an entrance into the gym. He sat there leaning against the door frame for several minutes taking in the scene demurely as his team struggled with only four (of the typically six) players on the court in front of him. He was late. He was in no rush to get on the court. Watching him, we all shared the moment smiling and joking to ourselves: "She looks like a rock star," per Earl. "She looks like she had a late night," per me. "She looks like she ain't in no hurry," per Harry. There is an acute, almost hyper-sensitivity to just who is present in the gym and what they are doing. All four of us immediately noticed Leo's entrance. Note how each in turn, referred to Leo
as a 'she' and latched on to an aspect of 'her' appearance. There is a sense of competition between us to say something witty. Moreover, it is clear to each of us that Leo's entrance, look, and demeanor are in the realm of the absurd--hiding behind sunglasses indoors as a rock star might to hide from the papparazi, or as a sleep-weary person might after having "gotten lucky" the night before. Also, we notice the obvious display of non-nonchalance (i.e., no hurried movements to get ready and on the court, staying wrapped in outerwear). The rather absurd attitude and appearance evoke the use of the gender swapping term.

We, as both spectators and participants in this scene, instinctively worked the situation as a gender swapping occasion. In this context, the absurd seems to evoke the femme.

Pronoun swapping, naming, and links to the absurd are not something unique to gay volleyball. They are practices born of the larger gay community. The leagues, after all, do not exist in isolation from other social institutions, but rather in relation to them. The use of 'she' to refer to a 'he' is common among many gay urban men in settings defined as gay. Girl names abound in the local gay bar scene. Drag queens and divas dripping with "attitude" have long been a part of the larger gay scene. It is important to remember the context of these sports leagues as gay--what works here, might not fly in the corporate board room, or even in a straight volleyball league. Pronger (1990) describes this fluidity of experience as a unique characteristic of being gay. Unlike most women and most people of color who cannot choose what situations will be gendered or racialized, gay men can 'pass', choosing to interpret a situation through the prism of heterosexual assumption, or as distinctly gay. Thus, the 'she' in the gay volleyball league would more likely than not become the 'he' in the straight volleyball leagues where there is immediate threat of
violence or ostracism in playing with other mens' masculinity. In these examples, some
evidence begins to emerge of the unique masculinity which takes shape in these leagues,
and further, to the relationship to other social structures and issues of power and
domination that help shape that masculinity.

**Bitch, Bitch, Bitch**

Recall for a moment the earlier example where Daryl, an "older" (40-ish) player
asserted loudly after executing a strong spike, "I'm an ole' bitch; but I ain't dead yet!" The
word bitch is often used in the league sometimes inwardly focused, as Daryl does above,
and at other times in relation to fellow players. In another case, Daryl was the 'up-ref' (the
referee standing on the step ladder by the net, overseeing play) while another player,
Martin, on the sidelines, was keeping the score sheet and the flip pad which displays the
score for the spectators. While keeping score, Martin was easily distracted by other
players nearby. As a result, he was not paying very close attention to his duties as score
keeper. Finally, Daryl blurted out across the gym, "Listen bitch, keep yo' eyes on the
court 'n not on that boy next to you. Point"--raising one finger indicating that Martin
should flip the score pad one point forward. Martin simply grinned, gave Daryl the finger,
and flipped the score pad.

Bitch, a derogatory term referring to a spiteful, malicious, domineering and/or
lewd woman, is both self-effacing and self-supporting in Daryl's first usage. In the context
of a good spike, he acknowledges his advancing age and sometimes more limited ability
while signifying to others his self-identification as gay with the female associated term,
bitch. However, he simultaneously asserts his presence as a force to be dealt with, his more traditional sense of masculinity. He draws upon a female term which is associated with such qualities as being domineering and/or spiteful--active, rather than passive concepts. In recognizing his sexuality, he does not abdicate his presence as a 'man' who operates in and on the world. Gender swapping vocabulary does not necessarily undermine a masculine project which draws upon hegemonic concepts of what it means to be a man in the world; rather, it seems to stylize it.

In the second usage, Daryl utilizes the term bitch as both a playful and serious tool. As someone not doing his job properly and as someone 'distracted' by a 'boy' nearby, Martin is labeled a bitch. He is called back to attention, to accomplishing the task at hand. His sexuality, one who is easily distracted by the 'boy' next to him, becomes an object of humor in the discourse. This seems fairly typical in the realm of hegemonic masculine speech insofar as it is an assertive style that links incompetence and lasciviousness with the female-centered term bitch. The phrase though, is received as humorous. Martin smiles and responds with a similar assertiveness, giving him the finger. While one is tempted to analyze this metaphorically (i.e., Martin's symbolic 'fuck you' in the face of the feminine label, thus re-establishing himself as man and as masculine in the traditional sense), it seems to me this reads too much into the situation. Rather, I would argue, that this use of the female associated term, bitch, in this second case, is an act of signifying. Daryl and Martin relate to each other as gay men through the gendered term bitch. They signify to each other their insider status as gay men. Martin recognizes the humor in the tone and the use of the term, smiling in return. But, it is a challenge as well. Martin meets the
challenge, again taking action in the world as a bitch might, flipping Daryl off. Bitch, as a concept, a way of being in relation to one another, an active stance, becomes a part of the common gay lexicon and a reflection of the social relations at work.

SWING THAT PURSE, GIRL!

Additional evidence of gender swapping as a project of masculinity in the leagues, appears in the commonly used phrase, "Swing that purse, girl!" This is an affirming comment made by a fellow teammate or a spectator after a powerful spike is executed or attempted. The purse, obviously a female associated object in American culture, becomes a weapon of action. The 'girl', again acknowledges gendered self as different from the heterosexual man. It is again, a signifying term, a term recognizing the common bond of difference relative to straight men. Much like the old lady who hits the mugger with her purse, the gay man swats at the ball aggressively. Here again, as was the case with the term bitch, the female centered object is one of action, of rebellion, of asserting oneself, fighting back. Used by the gay men in this context, it is again a way of acknowledging some gender difference in the common bond of being gay, but also shoring up commonly held, action oriented conceptions of being a man. Gender swapping with female associated terms and pronouns seems to affirm and in fact celebrate, sexual difference, while not undermining the basic tenants of hegemonic masculinity. They are acts of power and aggression, not acquiescence, submission, or mutuality.

Yet to be a man in the hegemonic sense of the term, is to not be a woman. To be masculine is to not be feminine. To be a man is to shun being gay. The above examples
demonstrate a dynamic negotiation of terms and behaviors which constitute masculinity and manhood in these leagues.

**FINGER SNAPS, DANCING, and WONDER WOMAN SPINS**

As I wrote at the beginning of this paper, there were many times when I had to take a step back and really see what was going on around me. In so doing, many of the behaviors that were taken for granted, so much a part of the gay scene than I had been accustomed to, came screaming out into the forefront of my consciousness. While the phrases and word choices above began to take on new meaning for me, the actual behaviors of men perhaps ring the clearest and provide some of the best clues about masculinity in this gay athletic setting.

Some patterns of behavior can be categorized as aggressive flamboyance. The spike followed by a campy finger snap combines the powerful athleticism (the spike) with a hand gesture first associated with working class women of color. The finger snap, a dismissive, "I've said it like it is; now get out of my face" behavior, is a campy gesture in the gay volleyball setting. It draws on the strength of a female centered action—an active, confrontational stance—and brings it into the repertoire of gay male behavior.

Other actions in the league seem to be less of an appropriation and more of a simple relaxing of behavioral male norms. On several different occasions, players were spied performing activities typically associated with women in the larger culture. For example, gay men routinely kiss and hug each other hello and good-bye as they enter and

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4 I discuss gay camp later in the paper in the section on humor.
leave the gym. Rather than creating a clearly defined arms length distance between men by shaking hands, in the kiss and hug hello, players draw each other close, into their private space. Similarly, while watching a match from the sidelines, men often lounge in each other's arms, hold hands, or simply prop each other up—a head resting on another man's leg, for example. This strikes me as quite different from the butt slapping, high-fiving that I have experienced in other, non-gay athletic settings. This is not to say there is not any of those behaviors present, for certainly there is many a high five after a strong spike or a good point. But, the men in these leagues in embracing each other in new physical, more personal ways, seem to be embracing a new pattern of behavior atypical of hegemonic masculinity. What in other settings is considered taboo—male-to-male touching in potentially erogenous zones (the leg, the neck, the lips)—becomes quite the norm.

Other patterns of behavior emerge too. Earl, a rather butch looking man with a bushy mustache and stocky build, for example, performed a little cheerleading routine on the sidelines during one game. Martin, a heavy-set, Filippino man, with gobs of thick, long flowing hair, clapped his hands together excitedly, elbows close together, hands stiff, not cupped, with little claps, during another. An unknown man performed what appeared to be a choreographed dance number on the sidelines of yet another game. Tim, a medium build, pale skinned red-head, danced a short little Irish jig after a good play by his team. Others might groove to an imaginary musical tune while waiting for play to resume. Still others, like Randy, might spin around in circles after a good play as if they were Wonder Woman changing from her mortally identified self and costume, into super-hero.
Dancing, cheerleading, snapping fingers, spinning like Wonder Woman—these are signs of joy and celebration, comfort and togetherness, and of letting down the veneer of traditional concepts of masculinity and putting up another in its place. These behaviors effectively create a gay space, one where men can touch, hug, and be physical in a way that draws them together, rather than pushing them apart. A place where being gay, breaking with male-to-male physical taboo is not just allowed, but expected and indeed celebrated. It is a realm of freedom, freedom from the traditional constraints of the larger gender order. It might be going to far to say that this is an abrogation of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, it seems a relaxation and alteration of it, often drawing upon behaviors associated with the feminine in our larger culture to create a new configuration of behavior.

The type of bonds forged do not seem to be just physical sharing, but emotional sharing. Mother, in his self-described role as "mother," the older nurturing queen doling out advice to the younger players, for example, is a good example of the advice-giving function often found in the leagues. Advice is given and information exchanged in between games, while driving to the gym, even briefly during time outs. The men learn from each other. They share information. Some of the talk is about what one did over the weekend, movies, events, activities. Much of the talk, though, is about relationships with other men—either not having one, how a recent date went, or negotiating sexual boundaries. A good example of the depth of these exchanges occurred one day in the stands in a conversation between Luke, Mark, Earl, Jay and myself. Luke asked Mark how long he and his lover had been together. "Eight years," he responded. Luke asked,
"Of course the big question on everyone's mind... how is the sex after eight years?" "What sex?" he responded somewhat seriously. Luke went on, "Well you must be having it at least once per week?" Mark rolled his eyes, "I don't think so." "So twice a week then?" Luke offered. Mark rolled his eyes again and snorted in disgust. I offered, "I think he means the other way Luke." Luke said, "you're kidding?" Mark said, "No." Jay said, "have you tried toys?" He said, "He would never try any thing like that; he is too conservative. We only have oral sex. Eight years of just oral sex." "Wow." I said. Luke looked surprised as did Earl. Earl asked, "has he been faithful?" "Yes. I haven't though. He knows about it. Just a couple of times. I would like to have an open relationship, but he would never allow it. He wants it to be passionate/hot every time and for me it just isn't. And if it is not going to be he would rather just not do it." Mark asked Jay, "how often do you have sex with your lover?" "Never for the last seven months," Jay responded. I asked, "At what point did your sexual activity start to diminish?" He said, "after about 2 and 1/2 years." Mark's eyes got wide, and he said, "Exactly. That is exactly when ours did too."

The type of exchange and the topics of conversation among the men in this situation speaks to a bond forged not simply in physical activity, competition, or recreation, but a genuine sharing and learning. Expectations for relationships and acceptable modes of behavior are frankly discussed: toys, open relationships, cheating, all become regularized topics, open for debate and discussion. There is an openness present which has significant implications for the type of masculinity that emerges in the leagues.

The men in these leagues are in constant negotiation with concepts of masculinity
and gender. Sometimes more hegemonic displays of masculinity emerge, sometimes a more uniquely stylized form of masculinity comes to the fore. For example, there is a ritual performed before a game begins, during timeouts, and after a match concludes, where members of a team gather close together in a circle, join hands, and just before re-taking or leaving the playing surface, jointly utter a word or phrase while releasing their hands in unison. When the competition is intense, these utterances are deep-voiced, aggressive, phrases such as "points, let's go, or side out" which are focused on the competitive act of sport at hand. When the context varies, however, mainline displays of masculinity are altered, even mocked. When the game is not so competitive, usually a result of one team being clearly better than the other, the huddle-break might be something humorous or campy, saying in unison and with deep voices, "we're butch, we're butch, we're butch" and following it with a high-pitched "wooooooooo" while fanning one's hands out as if outlining the path of a rainbow.

There is a constant tension between societal conceptions of masculinity and the lived reality of these men as gay men. The above huddle breaks point to this tension. It seems that the default position for gay athletes is hegemonic masculinity--"getting in the game," deep-voiced "let's go" in huddles, winning and competition dominating the goals of play (versus mutuality, for example). When the situation is not immediately threatening, or intensely competitive, the players seem to acknowledge and in fact, have fun with this tension. The campy huddle break above illustrates this point well as does the cheerleading and dancing described earlier. When there is a threat present, when the competition is intense, or the opposing team simply meanspirited, the playfulness subsides and the men
seem to draw upon a more blatantly overt repertoire of masculine behaviors and phrases. Gender swapping is situational. It ebbs and flows with the perceived level of competition embodied in the opposing team. It is interactional, emerging in relation to who is present. It is a performance of sorts which is responsive to the audience as well as the perceived social context.

Humor plays a key role in the negotiation of gender and masculinity in the leagues. Like the use of certain feminized argot, and/or demonstrative or flamboyant behavior, and the physical use of bodies to display power and dominance, humor too is a complex field whereby the men in these leagues play out concepts of gender and masculinity.
CHAPTER 5
HUMOR

If there is one thing that stands out most clearly in these leagues, it is the consistent use of humor among the players. It would seem that almost nothing is sacred, everything fair game for a twist of wit. The data in this study points to humor as a fundamental element in the relations that comprise this community of athletes, an element which at times brazenly confronts some of the most prominent tensions in American society: sexuality, race, and gender.

Peter Lyman (1987) describes the humor of male bonding as generally sexual and aggressive in nature and frequently consisting of sexist or racist jokes. He describes a dynamic where men negotiate, through humor, the tensions that they feel about their relationships with each other, and with women. The men participating in the CSA and GMAA do not come to the leagues unaffected by other social systems and relations. Certainly, all the "baggage" of social life (i.e., class and race differences, the power inequality inherent in a patriarchal society) comes with each person to the gym. But, it is in the gym, in the social relations of these athletes that such "baggage" is unpacked, and re-packed. It seems that humor, as Lyman points out, is a key element in this process—one that makes plain what is often unspoken about race and sexuality, and in the process, has the potential to open up new possibilities, especially with regards to masculinity.
HAVING FUN & DOING CAMP

Recalling the tension present between competing and recreating, it becomes clearer in the analysis of humor that the men in these leagues are indeed having fun. As described earlier, sometimes fun, or enjoyment, is present in the competition itself; other times it manifests itself in the simple banter of teammates or in the stylized displays of behavior related only tangentially to the game at hand. For example, in the midst of a fairly competitive GMAA playoff game, Antoine, a lanky, tall Filippino man, who was the line judge, called a spike out by throwing his hands high in the air over his head, while pushing one hip out to the side, and tossing his hair back. The spectators in the stands and players on the court laughed appreciatively. A nearby player, Tracey, commented loudly, "That was a performance, not a call." His comment was also met with laughter. Public flamboyance, arm gestures mimicking stage divas, atypical male gender behavior, whether a conscious performance and/or a spontaneous event, are forms of camp which inform the humor and the sheer sense of having fun which is so prevalent in the leagues.

Campy behavior, such as Antoine's, moves fluidly across the gender continuum allowing men and women to dabble in both the feminine and masculine repertoires. But camp is pointless unless it is done as part of an interaction. As Seymour Kleinberg (1978) once noted of gay men in the 1950s, "Camping in the gay world did not mean simply behaving in a blatantly effeminate manner; that was camp only when performed in the presence of those it irritated or threatened or delighted. Swishing is effective only if someone else notices, preferably registering a sense of shock, or ideally, outrage" (p. 48).
He went on to describe how successful performance of gay camp had available a persona that mixed ironic distance, close observation and wit. In taking a step back from the nature of the game, a playoff game in the arena of competitive sport, and indeed, from larger societal notions of male comportment, Antoine's actions work the situation as camp in this vein.

Much of the gay league is infused with humorous camp. Sometimes camp is a brief, dramatic movement, as with Antoine, above. Other times, it is a more elaborate production. Towards the end of one game, for example, Luke, the down ref (the referee standing on the floor near the net) had draped himself on the pole holding up the net--one arm lounging upwards, one leg wrapped around the lower part of the pole. With the close of each play, he would demurely indicate with his hand (fingers extended but held together) what the call was (out, in, sideout, or point). He feigned indifference at the play, all the while keeping close eye to see if anyone illegally hit the net during play (which was his responsibility). Harry commented at the sight, "Look at Lucy (Luke); she is the silliest." The other player and I laughed at the scene. When Luke realized he was the object of our gaze, he hammed it up even more, hanging off the pole to make a call, holding onto the pole with one arm while bending backwards as if being "dipped" in ballroom dancing, all the while pointing to a particular side of the court regarding the call in question. With each escalation of activity, each increase in camp, in flamboyance, we laughed so much the harder.

Luke's behavior is a performance with a specific audience in mind. It is an interactional event, not something that emerges because of some innate nelly-ness. The
behavior is encouraged with laughter and attention, drawing it out into even the more
ludicrous. The group is participating in a ritual mocking of what is customarily a
controlled, focused position on the court—the referee. Outside of this setting, in the
straight, USVA league for example, Luke's behavior would have been highly irregular. In
the gay league though, the excessive flamboyance, the exaggerated facial expressions and
body movements, and the demure attitude, become a part of the scene, and in fact, are
encouraged, routinized to a point. They provide amusement in their mockery of a
normally authoritative position. As Susan Sontag (1966) noted, "The whole point of
camp is to dethrone the serious....Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the
serious.'...One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (p. 288). In
Luke's case, the humor is tinged with gender swapping behavior in the loose, flowing arm
movements and in the notion of being dipped (versus dipping). It unravels accepted
societal restrictions on presentation of the male self, allowing for the absurd, the not
entirely in control, and the wistful to enter the male repertoire of comportment. It is not a
complete abrogation of responsibility to the immediate matter of sport at hand—he does,
after all, keep his eye on the game. However, as Sontag points out, Luke does make the
serious (sport, winning, competition, being manly) frivolous.

As a regular part of the scene, humor, as expressed in camp, goes a long way
towards creating a uniquely gay environment and community of gay men. It is a way of
taking ownership of what are stereotypical presentations of gay men as effeminate,
mocking them, and making them a part of the culture. It is also a ritual mocking of sport,
and certain controlling positions within the sports structure, as a "serious" masculine
enterprise. Camp is not an acquiescence to the stereotype. Rather it is an active use of formerly derogatory portrayals to turn them on their heels in support of a different lived experience as men who are gay, and to create a community of men who are "in on the joke," the artifice of the traditional male athletic stereotype and of sport more broadly speaking.

It is also an ironic stance. Pronger (1990) refers to this phenomena as ironic gay sensibility. Ironic gay sensibility is "a special way of interpreting the world that is based on the manipulation of appearance and reality." It is a "way of thinking, communicating, and being that emerges out of the experience of being gay in a society in which people tend to believe that everyone is straight" (p. 120). Logically, then, similar to the way that special knowledge emerges for women living in a patriarchal society, so too do gay men develop special knowledge from their position in a heterosexist society. They become aware of themselves as outsiders, as observers. Even while participating in the activities of a men's locker room, for example, they are conscious of themselves as an observer, as one aware of the erotic nature of the moment. According to Muecke (1982), this distancing, is inherently an ironic stance. Underlying all irony is the invitation to get below the surface and reconstruct something more than what appears. Irony allows for the preservation of appearances while it works to reconstruct reality.

There is radical potential in this mixture of camp and sport. To get men to take sport less seriously, to develop enjoyment not so much from a domination of one's opponent, but from the pleasure of social interaction and challenge which supports mutual respect, is to employ that tactics of irony. In the process, new patterns of behavior
emerge which form an ironic form of masculinity—one that takes a step outside itself long enough to not just see the humor, but to rethink its very foundation.

**SEXUAL HUMOR**

The CSA and GMAA are no exceptions to Lyman's observation that much of the humor present in male bonding is sexual in nature. Freud (1960, p. 99) observed of male humor that "the jokes that individual men direct toward women are generally erotic, tend to the clever forms (like the double entendre), and have a seductive purpose. The jokes that men tell about women in the presence of other men are sexual and aggressive rather than erotic and use hostile rather than clever verbal forms; and...have the creation of male group bonding as their purpose" (from Lyman, p. 88). Freud noted that most jokes have an aggressive content. He argued that shared aggression towards an outsider may be a principal way in which internal conflict is overcome asserting a solidarity. The data point to a different pattern among the men in this study. Rather than creating solidarity through a semiotic of power relations, objectifying "the other" (i.e., women) in hostile terms, it seems the use of humor is inwardly focused, creating a bond from what is there as a shared experience.

During one fairly casual game, for example, Daryl was serving on the far court. I was on the near court. He had just served the ball to Kris, a younger, naive looking Caucasian player on my side who shanked the serve out of bounds. Before the next serve Daryl yelled across the net, "This one's comin' for you darlin'." Kris yelled back, "Who me?" Daryl replied, "No honey, I've already had you, I am goin' for him" (pointing to
me). The double-meaning of the word 'had' drew smiles, laughter and a generally echoed, "ooooo" from the other players on the court. The word 'had' referenced both the fact that Daryl had already picked on the guy next to me by serving a difficult serve to him, but also implied that he already 'had' him sexually. The 'ooooo' from the crowd, signaled to Kris that some sort of response to this statement, this challenge of sexual wit, and relatedly of his sexual virtue, was needed. Kris reacted with campy attitude (mouth pursed, one eye brow raised, a slight tic of the head to one side, hands placed defiantly on both hips while sending a "we'll see about that Missy" look towards Daryl). It is an aggressive, sexual humor, but one directed inwardly at sexuality immediately present, not somewhere excluded from the enterprise at hand.

In another case, I rather casually asked Luke if he was going to be the 'down ref' (a common volleyball term referring to the referee who stands on the floor, rather than on the step ladder) in the next game. He responded, "No. But, don't get me wrong. I can go down," rolling his eyes to see if I got his meaning. I did, responding, "I'll spread the word." He added, "No bother, my publicist is on the case." In this case, down refers to going down on someone for oral sex, servicing a sexual partner, an act of submission outside the bounds of traditional, male sexual behavior. Luke simultaneously flirts and gender swaps while humorously playing off of volleyball terms to bring out sexual innuendo. In so doing, he raises the stakes of ordinary conversation. It becomes a competition of wits. Who can keep up with the wit and go the farthest? The fact of intimating, and in fact, playing with male-to-male sexual contact makes explicit our shared understanding of each other as gay, and in fact, strengthens that bond, but as a relational
device—one created together in mutuality, rather than in opposition to an "out group."

A distinct category of sexually explicit exchanges involves joking about 'tops' and 'bottoms'. Tops, in gay lexicon, are those giving in anal intercourse; bottoms are those receiving. Stereotypically, tops have the reputation as the aggressors, the penetrators, the masculine persona in the sexual act. Conversely, bottoms connote passivity, a willingness to be penetrated, an abandonment of control, the feminine persona. The reality of this is quite open to debate. In any case, the ribbing takes many forms. For example, during one pre-game warm up, I noticed Thom stretching, prone on his back with one leg out straight, and the other crossed over the top of the out-stretched one exposing his buttocks in the process. I smirked at Robert across the floor, then rolled the ball across the width of the court as if throwing a bowling ball towards its target. Robert watched as the ball approached Thom's behind, then yelled with a big smile on his face as it closed in, "Don't! We need to keep that ball," an obvious reference to the ball getting sucked into the vortex of Thom's bottom. The ball bounced off Thom's butt and rebounded over to Robert. Thom looked up and smiled at the exchange. We all laughed. In a similar case, Bill was stretching one day, standing with legs spread apart, bent over at the waist, straining to touch the floor in front of him. Suddenly, Thom walked by and yelled, "hell-o, hell-o, hell-o, in there, there, there" as if it were echoing off the inside of his bottom. The humor lies in the seemingly endless bottom, as if it had been used to the point where it assumed canyon status. The implication is that he is bottom, and perhaps, exclusively so.

These exchanges play with gay sexuality and clearly, with concepts of just what it means to be masculine, a top or a bottom, willing to go down on someone or have them
go down on you, 'having' someone or being 'had.' The men acknowledge themselves and those around them, equally, as sexual objects. They play with it humorously, and in fact, bond in this understanding of gay sexuality and humor. For some, these exchanges are an opportunity to make their preferences known. For example, in some instances, I have seen men react to similar exchanges with a smirk followed by a clear, "You wish." Others, seem to see the exchanges as yet another test of wits, responding, "And your point is?" In both cases, the equal acknowledgement of gay sexuality is present. In the former, the man makes his status as a top known, while acknowledging the joke with a smirk; in the latter, it is less clear what his status is, but the humor is met as a challenge, nonetheless. Depending upon what personal history a player brings to these types of situations, they react differently. Some are at varying levels of comfort with gay sexuality, with gender swapping, with their masculine identity as a gay sexual actor, top and/or bottom. It seems striking to me, though, that this bond, through humor, is one forged in a shared experience of within group sexuality, rather than an objectification of sexuality as embodied in an unequal "other."

RACE and HUMOR

I was struck by how many times incidents involving humor, sexuality and race came to the fore. Some were very brief in nature. For example, in our team huddle during a time out one day, Pat, (who is Asian), called a play in which both Harry (African American) and I (Caucasian) would simultaneously jump for a "one" spike (a ball set just one foot above the net) each of us taking off on either side of the setter, but within very
close proximity. Mark chimed in with a smirk, "oh, a one sandwich." Pat, responded cleverly, "don't you mean a spring roll?" The team laughed. One, of course, refers to the type of set, while sandwich refers to our close proximity to each other during the play, much like the ingredients of a food sandwich all laying on top of each other. Sandwich, though, is a double-entendre which simultaneously refers to a food sandwich, and three-way sexual intercourse. Pat ups the ante with a reference to his Asian heritage, changing the sandwich, sexual or edible, to a spring roll.

Emerson (1969, 1970) observed how jokes reconstruct or "negotiate" social conflict. "Negotiating' is the way in which people indirectly express the tension and emotion present in a social system based on power relations." Jokes indirectly express the tension and emotion which would ordinarily endanger a social relationship. Lilian Rubin in her recent book Families on the Fault Line (1994), reasserts the critical importance of race as a division within American social life. "With the exception of gender, all other differences...pale next to the differences most Americans attribute to race. Indeed, when we think 'race,' we think 'difference'--not difference in some neutral way, in the way we might think about superior, difference that says people of color don't match up to those who are white" (p. 158). Certainly, the men participating in the CSA and GMAA are enmeshed in these larger social structures. Though no overt evidence presented itself, there are undoubtedly many racists present in the leagues, just as there are in any social situation. I observed racial references most often intermixed with sexual innuendo and humor.

In another case, while watching a game one day I sat near three men at the scorers
Jon (Caucasian), Jay (Latino), and Jay's lover, Jose (also Latino and who was sitting on Jay's lap). Jay was constantly touching and kissing Jose's neck. At one point, Jon looked over at them and quipped, "If you guys keep this up I am going to get sick." I chuckled and leaned towards him saying, "I was wondering how long you would be able to take it?" He joked, "Well if they don't stop I am going to get hard." To which Jay quipped, "You don't like tacos. Do you?" (an obvious reference to their Latino heritage; he was referring to he and his boyfriend as tacos). Jon smiled, "Yea with cheese." Jay scrunched his face feigning disgust, smiled, and said, "I hope you are picking your men cleaner than that. I thought you said you had never been with uncut any way." "Yes," said Jon, "but what I actually said was that I have never had uncut; I have seen it."

In this anecdote, hard refers to an erection, cheese to smegma, uncut to uncircumcised, tacos simultaneously to Latinos as sexual objects, ready for consumption, or more pointedly, to the ethnic heritage of Jay and Jose as Mexican-American. The talk is grotesque and overtly sexual, talk which many would take as typically masculine. There seems to be a distinct vocabulary at work here as well as an acute awareness of racial difference. Race lies just below the surface, as does sexual tension, and aggressive vulgarity. Humor may indeed be a means of negotiating underlying racial and emotional tensions. There is clearly some prior knowledge here--Jay knows Jon's preference is for non-Latino, circumcised men. These are not two strangers sparring in anger, rather two friends, negotiating their different backgrounds and experiences which connect with larger social forces. It is a learning process--an opening up of what are otherwise unspoken topics and tensions. The racial differences between them become something to make light
of, to have fun with. There is also a willingness to share and discuss a range of one's sexual experiences, playfully, and somewhat openly. The exchange certainly is aggressive-Jon and Jay each raise the stakes of the conversation, first through sexuality, then through double-entendre, then through race, then through a test of just how far one will go in vulgarity and in sharing personal information. The more one can keep pace and go with various word play and double meanings and the further one can cleverly respond, here sexually and racially, the more one proves himself. Humor becomes a proving ground of one's cleverness—with almost any topic up for grabs.

There was one telling incident, where reference was made to race outside the context of sexual play. At the end of play one day, a group of guys were hanging out, stretching, chatting and donning sweats to leave. Those present included: Dave (Caucasian), Jaime (Latino), Robert (Asian), Jesus (Latino), Harry (African American), me (Caucasian), Mike (Caucasian) and Carl (Caucasian). At one point, Robert turned to Jaime saying, "When I first saw you and Jesus, I thought you two were brothers." Jaime replied somewhat astounded, but smiling, "He is Puerto Rican. I'm Mexican." Robert, smirking, said, "You know, Puerto Rican, Mexican, you guys all look the same." Everyone chuckled. Jesus joked with Jaime as he turned his head away from Robert feigning disgust, "And, you are still talking to him?" Jaime to me, "Do you think Jesus and I look alike?" I took his face in slowly. "Not in the slightest," I answered. At that point, Harry chimed in, "bye you'all" Robert, awkwardly said, "Get your Black ass out of here." There was complete silence as Harry literally stopped in his tracks. Harry dropped his head with melodrama and paused. I thought to myself, he is going to need a good,
funny comeback to save face for both Robert and himself. Mike murmured something indiscernible from my vantage point, which set Harry up for a one-liner sufficient to get a good laugh from everyone and make a face-saving exit.

There is clearly a pattern of expectation here that calls for certain behaviors in the face of threat. It seemed clear, for example, that those present were waiting for Harry to respond, and that the response should and would be humorous, even before he did it. There is a challenge to be witty in the face of potential threat, racism or oppression—to turn it on its heel. Robert failed to provide an adequate cue that a joke was coming. As Lyman (1990) notes, "if the cue 'this is a joke' is ambiguous, or is not accepted, the aggressive content of the joke is revealed and generally is responded to with anger or aggression, endangering the relationship (p. 89). The pregnant pause after Robert's comment was in reality short, perhaps five seconds. However, in the mind's eye, it seem like minutes while those present thought through a number of issues: What precisely did Robert mean? What is the relationship between Harry and Robert—was using the term "black ass" a freudian slip, or meant as a continuance of what was an established, humorous racial repartee? It seems that humor as a way of negotiation underlying social tensions and emotions, is a double-edged sword. Cut one way, the process of negotiation can lay the tension bare thus exposing it for potentially better understanding and reconceptualization—a bond among men forged in new understandings of each other. Cut another, it can gloss over the tensions, simply making them bearable in the short run, with the divisions intact.

I would argue that humor in the CSA and GMAA is an imperfect tool with
tremendous potential for creating a new masculinity. Humor is used to test one's wit, to interact with and spar, if you will, with other men. In this sense it is an aggressive orientation to the world, a stance not so far removed from traditional, hegemonic forms of masculinity. It is bonding by competitive joking. However, it is also used in a way that makes plain a common bond in gay sexuality. Rather than forging fraternity in opposition to an ostracized "other," it forges a bond in the shared knowledge of sexual difference. And it is this understanding of one's sexual difference in a heterosexist world that creates a special knowledge, an ability to take a step back from the way things seem on the surface, to explore them in a deeper way. This ironic distance, in itself is transforming. It allows the players to recreate a sporting situation that makes the serious frivolous, the referee, less authoritative, the established ways of being, silly. The radical potential of humor in the gay leagues lies in its ability to expose the socially constructed divisions and constraints among us and create anew, configurations of behavior in support an ironic gay masculinity. Humor, though, is an imperfect too. It can be used to gloss over, rather than expose social divisions for a deeper understanding. It can be a way of stymieing meaningful discourse. It can shut down a sharing and learning from one another steeped in mutual exchange, in favor of flippancy, and activity. Humor is indeed a way of unpacking all the social baggage that gay men bring to the gym. Most evidence points to a mixed re-packing in the form of uniquely stylized, ironic gay masculinity.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

I began this essay with a quotation from Tom Waddell, former NFL player, world class decathlete, and founder of the Gay Games: "A lot of athletes go into athletics for the same reason that I did, to prove their maleness...." Tom, originally an aspiring ballet dancer studying in New York, quit that life after discovering that most male dancers "were effeminate, that they were what most people would describe as faggots." He continued, "And I thought I just couldn't handle that....I had to do something to protect my image of myself as male. And so I threw myself into athletics--....football, gymnastics, track and field" (from Messner and Sabo, 1994, p. 114). Later in life, after Tom came out publicly, he founded the Gay Games, an international Olympic-style event drawing gay and lesbian athletes from all over the world to share in the joy of sport. Tom saw the Gay Games as a way to enlighten both straight and gay people. He was particularly concerned about exposing and confronting the prejudices that people, gay people in particular, brought with them to athletics. His goal, "Let's use that same process of self-liberation that we learned through coming out to get at other issues...sexism...ageism....Let's make ourselves an exemplary community" (p. 119).

Thirteen years after Mr. Waddell spoke these words, we see reflections of him and his goals in the relations of the athletes in the CSA and GMAA. The men in this study
struggle with issues of what it means to be a man in America in the 1990s. What value does sport hold for them as a manly enterprise and as a community builder? How does their experience as gay men work in this sporting context work towards negotiating larger social prejudices? Unlike, Tom, most of the athletes in this study came to the sporting arena, the CSA and GMAA, as self-identified gay men. The question is, are they indeed still running from an effeminate gay male image? Or, are they perhaps running to a newly emerging male image--one that combines their knowledge of self as gay in a largely heterosexist world, and as male athletes in a gendered system of power relations?

In the first section of this paper, I discussed the tension between competition and recreation that emerged in the data. The organizational structure of the league mirrors sports structures around the world. Athletes are separated out into varying levels of ability. This re-creates a pecking order, a hierarchy whereby the most skilled are accorded higher status and come to dominant the lessor players. This mirrors power structures that are familiar to most, the physically stronger dominate the physically weaker with an implied, or at times, overt threat of force. Manliness is equated with physical power. Aggression is legitimized as a way of being. These issues are endemic to the study of gender in social phenomena. The data in this study, however, point to this tension as a struggle over the definition and meaning of sport in men's lives.

I remember one athlete in particular named Stan, who said to me one day, "I hope that team over there (pointing) beats those guys that we beat earlier. Up until today, they haven't lost a game." Later in the conversation, he added, "When it gets too competitive, I am just like..." shaking his head downward from side to side while raising his hands in a
defiant pushing away gesture. "I got my varsity letter in high school. I am done with that! Wrestling (giggling)...figures, doesn't it?" We laughed. Stan is a good example of how some men see, or least used to see, athletics as a proving ground of maleness. He earned his varsity letter already. He proved his mettle as a man through sport. Yet, he simultaneously struggles with the draw to beat another team, to continue earning the varsity letter if you will, and repudiating such competitive aims altogether. He wants to win, but he is "done with" it, pushing away athletic competition as a proving ground of one's masculinity figuratively and literally, with his hands. Stan gives us a glimpse of how gay men in this league try to take a step back and gain some distance by virtue of their sexuality. He giggles when he thinks back on his high school sport, wrestling, the intensely physical co-mingling of male bodies, in light of his current understanding of himself as gay. It is a glimpse of the outsider/within knowledge that informs the social dynamic of the leagues.

Feminist theory leads us to consider the special knowledge that accrues from being an outsider within. Similar to how women gain special knowledge of the world by virtue of their status as women in a society that provides patriarchal dividend to men, so too do gay men develop special knowledge as sexual minorities in a heterosexist society. Pronger, Connell, and increasingly others, draw upon these theories to understand better the social dynamic at work. Evidence from this study supports the notion that gay men, indeed, bring with them some special knowledge related to sexuality. The men in this study, came to the CSA and GMAA as they were, gay leagues. The act of participating in a self-proclaimed gay league, is an act of coming and/or being out. While this may be
limited to the realm of the gay league (for many are not 'out' per se at work and in other settings), it is still some recognition of one's gay sexuality as real, and different than the mainstream. Stan's giggle, gives us a clue at the distance that develops as a result. He can step back and see the irony present in his proving his mettle as a traditional man in the world of organized high school sport, a sport in which he basically groped his way around other male bodies.

It is this step back that combines with existing and emerging gay and straight cultural tools to re-shape what it means to be a male athlete, and by extension, to be masculine. Drawing upon patterns of behavior and cultural references in the wider gay community, the athletes do gender in both action and word thus renegotiating concepts of masculinity. The players employ gender swapping behavior and words in support of a uniquely stylized masculinity. Words typically associated with women, but with a rebellious, active orientation are brought into the common lexicon of the players. Pronoun swapping is mixed with aggressive, strong physical actions such as with hard hitting spikes. Girl names become the norm. Gender swapping pronouns are elicited and encouraged by the absurd, the flamboyant. Play continues in the aggressive vein of the larger male sports world, but is stylized in new patterns of behavior.

Humor plays a critical role in the relations of the athletes, both in deed and meaning. Humor is used instrumentally by the athletes to open up some of the most vexing issues in American life including sexuality, gender, and race. It is a humor born of irony which finds its roots in the distance gained in coming out, at least to oneself, in a straight world. A case could be made that humor, is merely a way for men to gloss over
their differences, to skim the surface of the latent tensions and divisions that abound among them. On some level, this may be true. It seems to me, however, that there is evidence of something deeper. Some have argued that humor, especially hostile sexist and racist humor, can serve to bond men together in the creation of an "out group." It effectively reifies the bond of manhood as an oppositional, power relation. It seems to me that in this study of gay men, humor serves a dual function somewhat at odds with this position. First, the humor I observed was indeed explicitly sexual and flirted with issues of race. However, rather than creating an out group, it seems to me that it is an opening up process which draws the athletes inward, not so much in opposition to an ambiguous other, but in exploring new ways to construct reality.

The gay gym becomes a comfortable place where pretty much everything is up for grabs. This is not to say that the athletes don't bring all their personal social baggage with them. Rather, it is to say, that in the gym, that baggage is unpacked through the use of humor. The referee as authority figure is unpacked. Winning at all costs is unpacked. Controlled male comportment is unpacked. Gendered language is unpacked. Racial division is unpacked. Male-male sexuality is unpacked. One interaction at a time, a new pattern of behavior emerges--one steeped in irony, twisting hegemonic masculinity into a new configuration. Men are conscious of their presence and the effect of their presence on others. Gay athletes actively react to each other in comment and deed, working together to blend concepts of gender and masculinity with sexuality and sport, to create a masculinity that draws upon a similar, aggressive, active modus operandi in the traditional sense of masculinity--but, one with an ironic style. It is this blending of gendered terms
and actions that combine with hegemonic concepts of masculinity relating to aggression that lead to a unique, stylized masculinity.

Unpacking though can also connote messiness and disorder, so many items strewn about a room with no rhyme or reason. The actions of the gay athletes in this study do seem to open up, or lay bare, many of the divisions used as a basis for social inequality. But, does it put it back together in a way that is radical, that can serve to significantly influence the gender order? Does this new masculinity create a male bond that transcends hegemonic masculinity in support of a new gender order?

In answering these questions, it is important to note that gay sexuality is inherently radical in terms of masculinity and the gender order. Remember, to be masculine in the hegemonic sense, is to not be feminine and to not be gay. The fact of gay sexuality, of men having sex with other men, of masculinity being eroticized in the male-male set of relations, in and of itself is a radical act. To have this sexuality a focus of male sexual humor, not as a put off, but as flirtation and an act of bonding, with the potential for consummation real, is a direct assault on hegemonic masculinity.

But, it would appear that sexuality serves as a wider base for radical change. In the rule-bound world of organized sport, the knowledge gained form sexual difference begins to erode the foundation upon which hegemonic masculinity rests. One function of humor is to suspend the rules. Some would argue that the rules are suspended in order to reify the existing social order. It seems to me that the suspension of rules of masculinity in the CSA and GMAA allows a space for the construction of a new form of masculinity--a masculinity based on ironic style. The real radical potential in this new masculinity lies in
its relation to hegemonic masculinity. Will it begin to seep into the wider culture? Will it remain limited to gay leagues, thus effectively subordinated in Connell's terms? Will these new ways of being emerge in straight leagues? Will men in non-gay volleyball contexts begin to redefine what sports means to them as men and as a social enterprise. My own experience tells me that yes, this will happen, but only incrementally and with great strain. I have noticed for example, that out, gay men increasingly bring ironic humor into their social relations with other men, particularly so in the field of recreational sports. Most of the gay athletes in the CSA first learned of the gay leagues when playing in public park district leagues. "It was obvious many of the players were gay," noted one player who described to me how he hooked up with the CSA through men he met at the park district. Gay athletes are already out there "being themselves," exhibiting this new form of stylized masculinity, hopefully, one purse swinging spike at a time, causing others to rethink their assumptions about masculinity and gender.

Yet, it seems that the new stylized masculinity which emerges is not so much an abrogation of patriarchal structure, an alliance with women, for example, based on some understanding of mutuality and regard. The use of the term "bitch," for example, suggests that there is little in the way of man-woman alliance in the data. Rather, I see a renegotiation of male-to-male relations which, of course affects one side of the total gender order relations. Perhaps the truly radical project will emerge when gay men and lesbians join together in organized athletics. What new forms of masculinity and femininity will emerge from that experience one can only speculate. Would it work to open up issues of male-female gender relations that currently remain only tangentially
related to the gender work at hand in the all male gay leagues. Would it lead to new ideas about the nature of competition as a unifying element, rather than an assertion of dominance?

This study may have raised as many questions as it answered. In examining the patterns of behaviors and words in the gay male volleyball leagues, we are able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the world of gay male sports. We are also able to see how in the relations of the athletes, new configurations of behavior constitute emergent forms of masculinity. What is still unclear, is the complex nature of how individuals who live lives enmeshed in larger social structures of work, family, religion, and class, negotiate concepts of masculinity in the context of organized sport. How is it that the configurations of practice in others spheres of life, affect the configurations of practice inside the world of gay volleyball? What, is being unpacked? Conversely, how is what is re-packed then woven into configurations of practice outside of situations, sports and otherwise, which are defined as gay?
EPILOGUE: NOTES ON FEMINISM

It would seem that the emergence of this stylized masculinity would have the ability to penetrate the traditional masculine ethos and if fact, subvert it to a new end. After all, part of the ironic style lies in the fundamental recognition among the players of sexual difference. Their lived experience as both sexual minority and man tells them that the order of things are not necessarily the way they appear. Compulsory heterosexuality, for example, clearly falls short of their lived reality. We might look for signs that this insight manifests itself in some kinship with other marginalized groups in society, women for example. The evidence, however, does not support this.

A rather striking example was one night in the GMAA, when I noticed a mostly women's team playing on the court next to the one I was observing. (I believe this was the only women's team in both leagues). After the women's game ended, they started assembling in the stands near where I and my team were sitting; their belongings were right next to us. I asked one of the women, "How did you do?" She said, "We won...barely." I said, "Good for you," nodding my head approvingly. I was a little embarrassed a few minutes later when at a crucial moment in the match we were watching, Steve hit a serve way out of bounds. My teammates starting chanting and clapping in unison, "Dumb bitch. Dumb bitch. Dumb bitch."--then laughing afterwards. I think I saw one of the chanters glance over to the women to see if they were offended. It
didn't stop him though. One of the women rolled her eyes at another in disgust, as if she were saying, "Ignorant men."

It would seem that these men, as gay men, may be only slightly more aware of their misogyny than straight men... at least in this context. While humorous in their own gay male context--an in-your-face, nasty sort of humor which plays off of aggressive gendered terms like bitch--the humor and behavior is self-serving. It is a humor that seems rather self-serving for gay men, rather than one aimed at bridging a gap with other marginalized groups such as women. Recognizing and in fact opening up issues of human difference in humor, through race, sexuality and gender, it would seem that the soil is rich for a new egalitarian ethos to emerge. However, the little bit of evidence that emerged in the structure of this study points to something far less.

Gay ironic masculinity has radical potential to upend established gender relations between men and between men and women. Currently, though, it seems to work only incrementally and with only forty-nine percent of the equation. If gay athletes can begin to realize in their reconstruction of masculinity in a heterosexually constructed world, that meaning is something that is fluid, that it is embodied in how one acts rather than what one is, that it is contextually specific, then perhaps questions may shift to issues of social justice, rather than personal life and identity.
APPENDIX A
THEMES EMERGING FROM FIELDNOTES

1. Competing
2. Negotiating Masculinity While Doing Gender
3. Doing Gender
4. Managing Time/Committing
5. Taking Comfort in the Gym
6. Building/Maintaining Friendships
7. Sustaining the League
8. Having Fun
9. Becoming an Insider
10. Doing Race
11. Doing Class
12. Doing Sexuality
13. Bonding
14. Pushing the Boundaries
15. Defining a Good Life
16. Performing
17. Celebrating Being Gay
18. Gaining Entre
19. Managing Identity
20. Building Community
21. Managing Emotions
22. Playing with Age
23. Playing the Game/Ritualizing Sport


VITA

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The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

11/29/97
Date

[Signature]
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