

Running head: Jason Collins' Coming Out

“I am happy to start the conversation”:

Examining sport media framing of Jason Collins' coming out

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Abstract

A textual analysis examined U.S. media framing of NBA player Jason Collins' coming out as the first 'active' gay athlete in one of the four most popular U.S. professional men's team sport leagues. We analyzed all articles on Collins published over a four-day period in the five most circulated U.S. newspapers and five most trafficked U.S.-based sport Websites. Four primary themes emerged from the data. Journalists framed Collins' self-outing as a landmark for U.S. sport, noting that both sport and the U.S. are now far more accepting of sexual minorities. The few media members and athletes who criticized Collins or homosexuality were framed as antiquated outliers. Whereas Collins was praised as a hero, sport journalists noted that his impact could be mitigated if he never played again; however he ended up signing with and playing for the Brooklyn Nets. Overall, media framed sport as an inclusive, accepting institution for gays, countering most previous research on homosexuality in sport media.

Keywords

Homosexuality, sport media, NBA, media framing, inclusive masculinity

‘I am happy to start the conversation’:

Examining sport media framing of Jason Collins’ coming out

Introduction

The gay rights movement in the United States has enjoyed a series of landmark victories in the midst of rapid societal changes in recent years. After serving as a divisive political wedge issue in the previous decade, a majority of Americans are now generally accepting of homosexual lifestyles and support legal recognition of same-sex relationships (Cillizza, 2013). These shifting attitudes toward acceptance are especially prevalent among younger generations, evident by a March, 2013 *Washington Post*-ABC poll that showed 81% of Americans age 18-29 support gay marriage (Cillizza, 2013).

Gay and lesbian relationships are commonly featured in American pop culture (e.g., music, movies, television shows, etc.). However, matters have been slower to evolve within one major American cultural/entertainment institution – sport, particularly the four most popular men’s professional team sports. That appeared to change in April 2013 when basketball player Jason Collins became the first openly gay active athlete in any of the four major U.S.-based professional male team sport leagues: Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), and National Hockey League (NHL). Only seven previous professional athletes from these leagues had announced they were gay. None were well-known to American sports fans and all came out publicly well after finishing their careers (Kian et al., 2011).

Collins came out on his own volition through an article published by *Sports Illustrated* via its online site on 29 April 2013, while Collins was still technically an active NBA player for the Washington Wizards (the league's playoffs were ongoing), although his team's season had ended. Prior to his announcement, Collins was a little-known NBA journeyman, tallying unimpressive statistics primarily as a reserve center for six different NBA teams over 12 years. Uncertainty about the then-34-year-old Collins' prospects of playing professional basketball began surfacing shortly after his announcement. While he remained unsigned and not playing for the first half of the NBA season, Collins signed a 10-day contract around midseason with the Brooklyn Nets (later extended for the rest of the season) and played his first game as an openly gay basketball player on February 23, 2014 in his hometown of Los Angeles against the famed L.A. Lakers, receiving a standing ovation upon entrance (Shelburne, 2014).

However, after he came out publicly in April, 2013, U.S. mass media immediately anointed Collins as the first openly gay major men's team sport athlete, which provided a long-awaited opportunity to analyze media reaction to a gay athlete in one of the 'Big 4' professional American team sports. How media framed the meanings, significance, and ramifications of Collins' self-outing are important to examine for future coverage of openly gay athletes and the overall place of homosexuality in sport. The fact that Collins is African American, well-educated, and well-connected (i.e., graduated from prestigious Stanford University, where he formed a friendship with Chelsea Clinton, among others) only provides more intrigue for how media framed his coming out.

Literature review

Gay men in American sport

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A *Sports Illustrated* magazine dated May 6th hit newsstands with a cover of Collins titled, 'Exclusive: The Gay Athlete,' followed by a quote from Collins: 'I didn't set out to be the first openly gay athlete in a major American team sport. But since I am, I am happy to start the conversation' (Collins, 2013, ¶ 1). Such a cover would have been unimaginable for most sport fans just two decades earlier. That is because competitive sport has served as a social institution principally organized around the political project of defining certain forms of masculinity as acceptable, while denigrating other forms of masculinity (Crossett, 1990). Sports associate boys and men with masculine dominance by constructing identities and sculpting bodies to align with hegemonic perspectives of masculine embodiment and expression (Connell, 2005). Boys in team sports are therefore constructed to exhibit, value, and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity.

Men's homophobia has also played an important role in an intra-masculine stratification traditionally found among males. This is because sports, particularly contact sports, often have an institutional culture in which hegemonic masculinity is produced and defined: an athlete is thought to represent the ideal of what it means to be a man – an ideal that runs counter to what it means to be feminine and/or gay (Connell, 2005). Therefore, much of homophobia has also been about femphobia. Hekma (1998) observed, 'Gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise' (p. 2). Competitive men's sports were, in part, initially emphasized in late 19th- and early 20th Century U.S. society to serve as a counter to the supposed 'softening' of boys' masculinity and the perceived threat of homosexuality brought forth through more sedentary lifestyles during the onset of the Industrial Revolution (Rader, 2008).

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Cultural homophobia, however, has rapidly decreased in recent years, which has impacted the relationship between gay men and sport. Anderson (2002) conducted the first research on openly gay male high school and collegiate athletes, finding that the coming-out experiences of the 26 openly gay athletes interviewed were much more positive than those athletes expected. Gay male athletes at the high school and university levels were surprised at the inclusivity they experienced from their teammates. Yet, heteronormativity and silencing remained rife (Anderson, 2002).

In a replicate study, Anderson (2011) found that openly gay male athletes from the same demographic had improved experiences, as they were overwhelmingly accepted by their mostly heterosexual teammates. Increasing acceptance for gays and lesbians has also been shown through recent scholarship on athletes (Fink et al., 2012), coaches (Cunningham, 2010), and sport marketers (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011). More important, American sport fans are seemingly now accepting of openly gay athletes. Just 12% of respondents in a 2013 survey of U.S. sport fans said they would be less likely to support their favorite athlete if he or she came out as gay (Gold, 2013).

Masculinity and gay men in American sport media content

There is sparse published scholarship on sport media coverage of homosexuality, likely due to a lack of openly gay athletes in popular, mediated sports throughout the world (Lenskyj, 2013). Numerous studies on global coverage of men's and women's sport found sport media (through all mediums) reinforced orthodox notions of traditional masculinity, gender-specific roles, and implicit homophobia (e.g., Bernstein and Kian, 2013; Dworkin and Wachs, 1998).

Homosexuality in sport was mostly ignored via reporters unofficially implementing a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ attitude toward the personal lives of potential gay athletes, while providing regular coverage of relationships of those female and male athletes known or perceived to be heterosexual (Calhoun et al., 2011). However, recent studies show sport media are framing more positive narratives of openly gay and lesbian sport figures, while also lambasting homophobia as inappropriate bigotry (Kian & Anderson, 2009). Nonetheless, most sport media still frame heterosexuality as the standard and normal for a basis of comparison (Hardin et al., 2009). However, the advent of the Internet and social media has provided more challenges to the traditional, mainstream media framing of sport and sexualities (Kian and Vincent. 2014).

Prior to Collins’ announcement, the most recent former athlete to come out in a major, U.S.-based professional men’s team sport was John Amaechi, a British man who announced his homosexuality in 2007, four years after playing his last NBA game for the Houston Rockets. A pair of scholarly articles examined media framing of Amaechi becoming the first openly gay former NBA player. Both found U.S. sport media were overwhelmingly supportive of Amaechi. Still, men’s team sport locker rooms were framed (without systematic evidence) as still not being ready for an openly gay athlete in their ranks (Hardin et al., 2009; Kian and Anderson, 2009). American cultural attitudes toward gays, however, have changed dramatically since 2007, partly because of the images and messages conveyed through pop culture.

Framing of gay men in American pop culture

Whereas some closeted gay athletes may still struggle with coming out issues, their plight has been lessened by the increasing acceptance of gay men within the realm of U.S.

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popular culture. Recently, many positive images of gay men have exploded throughout the modern, multi-platform media environment. Movies such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Milk* (2009), and popular American television shows like *Modern Family* (2009-) and *The New Normal* (2013) have contributed to the increasing, positive visibility of gays in popular culture. Moreover, an increasing number of pop-culture celebrities are coming out, such as actors Jim Parsons (television show *The Big Bang Theory*) and Zachary Quinto (lead actor for *Star Trek: Into the Darkness*), singer Frank Ocean, and CNN news commentator Anderson Cooper. Whereas in the past celebrities often faced career-ruin for coming out, gay male celebrities today are enjoying more freedom from mostly-accepting American audiences.

One of the major reasons for the re-evaluation of gay men in popular culture is not just about rising population of ‘out’ gays but by the entertainment industry’s expansion from heteronormativity to what Duggan (2002) referred to as homonormativity. Early American television, film, and music were almost entirely heteronormative, positing that the gay lifestyle was deviant because it did not conform to the heterosexual norm (Duggan, 2002). This practice led to the exclusion of gays in entertainment media except for those images that would be tolerated by the ‘straight’ hegemony. Homonormative allows for gay perspectives, applying the same rules of heteronormativity to a gay audience. Some scholars (e.g., Becker, 2006; Chambers, 2009) now view U.S. entertainment media as a venue that allows a defiance of normative assumptions about sexuality. It is important for many closeted men, especially athletes, to feel acceptance after coming out. The recent trend of accepted gay characters and themes in movies, music, and television aids those athletes coming out in the future.

Purpose and rationale

Scant research exists on media framing of gay male athletes, in part because so few came out. None received the amount of attention as Collins, which also came during a period when for the first time a majority of Americans accepted homosexuality. How sport media – who historically have largely ignored male homosexuality in sport – framed Collins is worthy of scholarly exploration and the purpose of this research.

Research questions

Due to evolving attitudes toward homosexuality among American sport fans and U.S. society as a whole, as well as a lack of research on active, openly gay athletes, the following loose research questions guided this exploratory study:

RQ1: How did major American newspapers and popular sport Web sites frame Collins' coming out and its meaning for the place of homosexuality in sport?

RQ2: What people and public figures did American sport media elect to quote in stories on Collins' coming out?

RQ3: How much emphasis did American media given to positive vs. negative comments made by public figures on Collins' coming out?

Methodology

We conducted a textual analysis of U.S. major newspaper and popular sport online sites' framing of Collins' coming out. Textual analyses are subjective, non-reactive methods that focus on uncovering and deciphering both explicit and implicit meanings within content (Anderson and Kian, 2012). Textual analyses typically do not include statistics, which are commonly found in quantitative content analyses of media content (Sparkes, 1992). Journalists cover news by selecting, organizing, and placing emphases on certain

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facts, opinions, and quotes before embedding them in stories, a process commonly referred to as media framing (Devitt, 2002).

Sampling selection

We examined all published articles that mentioned Collins in the five most popular U.S. newspapers (online versions) and five most popular sport Websites in the U.S. not affiliated with newspapers. In 2013, the five U.S. newspapers with the highest daily circulation per the New Audit Bureau of Circulations were in order: (1) *The Wall Street Journal*, (2) *USA Today*, (3) *The New York Times*, (4) *Los Angeles Times*, (5) *New York Daily News* (Alliance for Audited Media, 2012). The five most popular U.S. sport Websites based on estimated unique monthly visitors in 2013 were in order: (1) ESPN Internet, (2) Yahoo! Sports, (3) CBSSports, (4) BleacherReport, (5) SI.com, according to U.S. Internet traffic rankings from both *Complete* and *Quantcast* (eBizMBA, 2012).

The Wall Street Journal is a business-focused daily that has increased its sports coverage in recent year. *USA Today* and *The New York Times* are the only other two newspapers distributed daily throughout the U.S. *The New York Times* has long been known as “the national paper of record” and all three newspapers are deemed so influential in the industry that their news agendas impact other news outlets (Kian, Fink and Hardin, 2011; Reese and Danielian, 1989). The *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Daily News* are large, regional newspapers, with the latter providing extensive daily sports content to better compete for readers with the news-focused *The New York Times*.

ESPN dominates the global sport media landscape (Miller and Shales, 2011). The extent of ESPN’s supremacy can be seen through the self-proclaimed “Worldwide Leader in Sports” televising 13 channels in a variety of countries and contracting to broadcast

nearly every major sporting league/association in the Western world. However, ESPN also offers a variety of multimedia content, including the most accessed Internet sports site in the U.S. and the widely-distributed *ESPN The Magazine* (eBizMBA, 2012).

Yahoo! Sports largely built its audiences through offering online fantasy sports games and leagues before expanding its sports news content. CBS Sports Internet is owned by CBS, one of the four major, national television networks in the U.S. Bleacher Report started as a mostly amateur sport blog featuring predominately volunteer writers.

Bleacher Report, however, is now a major force in delivering online sport news, even more so after the website was acquired by Time Warner subsidiary Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) in 2012 for nearly \$200 million (Bercovici, 2012). SI.com is the website affiliated with *Sports Illustrated*, which has long been the most influential and circulated sporting magazine in the U.S. (Lulofs, 2013; Lumpkin and Williams, 1991).

Data collection

The time frame of articles included in this research covered 29 April 2013 – the day Collins' name was released as a gay athlete for his self-outing through *Sports Illustrated* – and the next three days to allow time for reflections and follow-up stories. Thus each online newspaper and Web site was searched from 29 April 2013 – 2 May 2013 for any articles that mentioned Collins by name. Because Collins was not a well-publicized player (at any point of his career) prior to his coming out, and his Washington Wizards had already finished their season and were mathematically eliminated from postseason contention for nearly a month prior to his announcement, it was assumed all published articles that mentioned Collins during the search parameter were due to the public revelation of his homosexuality on 29 April 2013.

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Collins' name was searched within each site, and each section of the newspaper or Web site was checked twice daily for any articles on Collins that did not appear in a name search. These included news stories, columns, commentaries, and articles on broader topics related to Collins and/or his public revelation. Not included were letters to the editors, photographs, scouting reports, and posted feedback by readers after articles. Subscriptions allowing access to all content were obtained when needed.

A total of 93 articles were published that mentioned Collins in the 10 outlets over the examined time period. A slight majority of these (n=49 or 53%) of articles were posted on the five sport Web sites. Among the 10 examined outlets, Collins' hometown newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*, provided the most coverage (n=17 articles) of his coming out, whereas the more conservative, business-focused *The Wall Street Journal* (n=2) published the fewest articles on Collins. *ESPN Internet* (n=13) had the most articles on Collins among the examined sport Websites, whereas *Bleacher Report* (n=6) had the fewest in that category.

Coding procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness

Working independently, two coders each read and wrote notes on how the articles framed Collins' coming out and related topics, such as the meaning of an openly gay active in a major American men's professional team sports. Researchers then used the constant comparative method to decipher and define key concepts by unifying their supporting data (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). This process did not aim to reproduce the primary themes from the data, but rather to uncover how textual constructions related to the meaning of Collins' coming out were framed within narratives. Whereas this process

is interpretive, our analytical methods ensured the validity of data collection, and the use of multiple coders strengthened trustworthiness in results (Creswell, 2003).

Results

A total of four primary themes emerged from our analysis. Direct passages from actual newspaper and Website articles will be used for examples that both supported and countered these themes.

This is a momentous occasion for the United States

Sport journalists described the impact of Collins' coming out with terms such as 'historic,' 'landmark,' 'monumental,' etc. News on Collins was not just framed as a story exclusively for sports followers, but rather the breaking down of a major barrier as American society moves further toward the eventual full recognition of gays and lesbians as equals in a free society. 'National political leaders, gay rights groups and entertainment icons on Monday spoke in support of Jason Collins, the first active professional athlete to come out as gay' (Bloomekatz and Serna, 2013, ¶ 1).

Many of the media citations of public support came via public figures' social media postings. Among those outside of sport referenced for their public praising of Collins were filmmaker Spike Lee, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, talk-show hosts Ellen DeGeneres and Oprah Winfrey, news anchor Katie Couric, actors Dwayne Johnson (i.e., The Rock) and Charlie Sheen, and radio shock jock Howard Stern. However, political figures were easily the most prominent among those pledging their support for Collins in the examined articles. President Barack Obama, who phoned Collins after his revelation, was mentioned in more articles (n=21) than any sports figure besides Collins himself. First Lady Michelle Obama also tweeted her support: "So proud of you, Jason

Collins! This is a huge step forward for this country. We've got your back! –mo” (Strauss, 2013, ¶ 7). Ranking just behind Barack Obama for mentions in the most number of articles was former President Bill Clinton, who has known Jason Collins since he and his daughter Chelsea Clinton were classmates at Stanford. Bill and Hillary Clinton attended Collins' family college graduation party and Chelsea Clinton was a bridesmaid in the wedding of Jason Collins' twin, basketball-playing brother Jarron Collins.

Outside of sport, the most referenced individuals for their support of Collins were in order Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Michelle Obama, Chelsea Clinton, and U.S. Congress representative Joseph Kennedy III (D-Mass.), the grandson of Robert F. Kennedy and Jason Collins' former roommate at Stanford. Multiple articles noted that Collins cited Joseph Kennedy III marching in a gay-pride parade in Boston as one of his motivations for coming out. These political references were almost entirely for some of the most prominent names among democrats, a party that endorsed gay marriage in its 2012 platform, whereas the official Republican party national platform was one opposed to both marriage and federal recognition of civil unions for sexual minorities. No past or present republican politician was referenced in any of the articles for publicly supporting Collins. Nevertheless, overall framing of the articles was that Collins' self-outing was a positive for the entire U.S., met with overwhelming support. “Well, views have shifted. Now the vast majority of Americans have accepted homosexuality (Rosenberg, 2013, ¶ 1). ESPN columnist Tim Keown (2013) related Collins' announcement to common happenings within personal social circles for an increasing number of Americans:

Maybe the most telling aspect of Collins' revelation is just how pedestrian

it all seems. It was the same scene that has played out millions of times in homes across the world...

This is the real world. Families deal with this. Gay people deal with this. Employers and co-workers and friends deal with this. Jason Collins' revelation that he is gay -- thus becoming the first openly gay player in a major American team sport to come out during his playing days -- is contextually relevant but exceedingly dull.

And that's the best thing about it (¶ 2-4).

Keown was one several writers who expressed a desire to move on to new topics, essentially noting that gays and lesbians are now largely accepted in the U.S. Most writers, however, noted that Collins' announcement was a watershed moment in U.S. sport history.

Sports are slowly coming around to acceptance of gays, but challenges remain

Whereas sport journalists and columnists in these articles often placed Collins' announcement into a broader social perspective, the most common concept discussed was what this meant for the sport world as a whole, focusing on how those within it responded to Collins' announcement. 'It's a landmark moment in U.S. sports history, and one that has generated some significant reactions,' Royce Young wrote for *CBSSports* (2013, ¶ 4). An article in the *Los Angeles Times* noted, 'The reaction from the sports world was overwhelmingly positive, especially from the NBA' (Baxter, 2013, ¶ 5).

Athletes and key figures throughout the NBA took to Twitter to express support for Collins. Sport journalists from the examined newspapers and Websites often obtained

quotes for their stories directly from Twitter feeds. Among the basketball players using Twitter to express their support for Collins as cited in the data were superstar past and present players such as LeBron James, Magic Johnson, Charles Barkley, Shaquille O'Neal, Steve Nash, Tony Parker, coach Doc Rivers, and outspoken Dallas Mavericks' owner Mark Cuban. However, easily the most commonly cited sport figure in these articles was NBA superstar Kobe Bryant, whose own personal ideological evolution toward homosexuality may be symbolic of the rapid shift toward societal acceptance throughout the U.S. in recent years.

The Lakers star Kobe Bryant wrote: "Proud of @jasoncollins34. Don't suffocate who u r because of the ignorance of others." He added the hashtags "courage" and "support." ...

Bryant's Twitter message was reposted more than 20,000 times in the hour after his post, with some reminding him that he once sparked a controversy, and received a \$10,000 fine, for directing an antigay slur at a referee who had called him for a technical foul. Since that episode, Bryant has voiced his support for the gay community (Hoffman and Haughney, 2013, ¶ 4, 6).

An abundance of America's top present and past athletes representing nearly every prominent professional sport in the U.S. either tweeted or were quoted in supporting Collins including: Barry Sanders and Michael Strahan (American football), Andy Roddick (tennis), and C.C. Sabathia (baseball). However, the most quoted sport figures

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outside of basketball were those who had long been activists for gays in sport – regardless of their sexual orientation – a list that included Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King (tennis), Chris Kluwe and Brandon Ayanbadejo (American football), John Amaechi (basketball), and active Major League Soccer (MLS) player Robbie Rogers, who publicly came out as gay more than two months before Collins, although MLS soccer is not considered one of the ‘Big Four’ U.S. professional men’s team sports. *Bleacher Report* columnist Timothy Rapp (2013) expressed a common theme among these journalists by hoping that Collins’ announcement inspires other athletes to follow:

One common belief is that we won’t see a true push for acceptance of male homosexual athletes until a major star comes out. While that may be the case, the bravery of Collins and the importance of this moment should not be understated.

Sports have always been an outlet where societal injustices could be remedied, dating back to Jackie Robinson breaking baseball’s color line. Hopefully, with Collins’ announcement, more male athletes will feel comfortable enough to come out with the support of fans, players and coaches alike (¶ 32-33).

Media have historically framed gay male athletes as soft, which was further reinforced in coverage since most of the prominent openly gay male American athletes (e.g., diver Greg Louganis, figure skater Rudy Galindo, etc.) competed in sports long framed as effeminate and inappropriate for men by mass media (Kian and Clavio, 2011). However,

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comments by authors and the quotes selected for these stories reinforced the notion of Collins as a ‘tough’ athlete in the masculine sport of basketball. ‘He’s a man’s man and a pro’s pro,’ Yahoo! Sports’ Adrian Wojnarowski (2013, ¶ 5) wrote of Collins.

Unlike previous research on media coverage of athletes coming out (Dworkin and Wachs, 1998; Hardin and Whiteside, 2009), most of these journalists framed sport as ready for openly gay athletes. The primary counter was an in-depth, speculative, *New York Daily News* article which insinuated that – unlike other professional men’s team sport leagues – MLB was not ready for an openly gay athlete even though no prominent baseball people made negative public comments on Collins’ announcement. ‘Baseball once led the country on race, but there are many reasons to believe it will lag behind basketball and other sports on the defining civil rights issue of this moment’ (Martino, 2013, ¶ 7, 9).

Some well-known past professional athletes and/or media members like former Pittsburgh Steelers’ American football star and current NBC Sports television commentator Hines Ward questioned if their sports were ready for an openly gay athlete. However, most of these individuals – like Ward – also simultaneously expressed support for Collins in the process. The most publicized, personal attacks on Collins’ coming out did not come from present or past professional athletes, but rather from sport media members themselves.

Overwhelming praise for a hero trumps antiquated, religious fundamentalism

When John Amaechi came out in 2009, he was vehemently attacked in a diatribe by former NBA all-star Tim Hardaway, who directly said he hated all gay people during a radio interview. Hardaway’s comments were publicized as much as Amaechi’s actual

coming out during that period (Kian and Anderson, 2009). However, the focus of these articles was on Collins, in part because no athletes made such bigoted remarks. Ironically, criticism primarily came from some well-known outliers of what are commonly dubbed the ‘liberal media’ in the U.S. The most publicized criticism came from ESPN NBA reporter Chris Broussard. *The New York Times* described this controversy as:

Broussard drew criticism for comments he made calling homosexuality “a sin” on the network’s “Outside the Lines” program.

Broussard took issue with Collins’s description of himself as a Christian because he was “openly living in unrepentant sin.”

He added: “I believe that’s walking in open rebellion to God and to Jesus Christ. So I would not characterize that person as a Christian because I don’t think the Bible would characterize him as a Christian” (Hoffman & Haughney, 2013, ¶ 11-14).

Broussard’s comments were lambasted by many of his colleagues within the sport media ranks, who largely portrayed him as an antiquated outlier for a profession (sport media), sport (basketball), and league (NBA) all ready to welcome an openly gay athlete. For example, Yahoo! Sports’ Kelly Dwyer (2013) wrote:

Chris Broussard is allowed to say whatever he wants on any subject he wants at any time, such is his right as an American citizen. Whether his personal views on the subject of homosexuality were appropriate for this

particular setting is a completely different story. Especially as an American citizen, one that does not live in a theocracy that creates laws and freedoms based off of a religious text (§ 8).

Nevertheless, golfer Bubba Watson came to Broussard's defense, tweeting, 'Thanks @Chris_Broussard for sharing your faith & the bible!! #GodisGood' (Bacon, 2013, ¶ 6). Although Watson never publicly commented on Collins or his announcement, the 2011 Masters champion was framed as the most prominent U.S. athlete to publicly criticize Collins' coming out in the examined articles, with sport journalists also criticizing Watson's perceived intolerance. Yahoo! Sports' golf writer Shane Bacon (2013) used Watson's tweet to challenge broader ideologies in the sport he covers for a living:

Golf is basically the good 'ol boy's club. We live in a world where, up until 2012, the only golf course that consistently hosted a PGA Tour major championship didn't have a woman member...

We live in a world that is transitioning into a more open-minded place each day...yet one of our recent major champions decided to speak up against an issue that, frankly, isn't affecting his day by day life...

...why hate when there is no reason to hate? Why put down someone for being who they are? (§ 8-11).

Whereas his comments on Collins were nowhere near as critical as the proselytizing of Broussard, television commentator Tim Brando posted a series of controversial tweets.

USA Today writer Chis Chase (2013) described them:

After insinuating Jason Collins' sexuality was a choice, CBS play-by-play announcer and radio host Tim Brando complained on Twitter about people using the word "hero" to describe the NBA player and his historic announcement. What followed was exactly the type of reasoned discourse you'd expect on a site that's home to 38 million Justin Bieber followers. Brando retweeted support and argued with critics for more than six hours on Monday after making the inflammatory comments about the NBA's first openly gay player. He later backed away from the "choice" comment, insisting he was talking about Collins' choice to come out at 34 years old. He got the most flak for arguing that Collins isn't a hero (§ 1-2).

Specifically, Brando tweeted, 'I'm hearing Collins is a HERO because he made history! Ok as a Sports Commentator if I make a SEX tape is that history?The word matters ok' (Chase, 2013, § 3). Chase then became even more critical of Brando in his summary. 'First of all, what? Second of all, just because you're logged into Twitter doesn't mean you have to give every opinion that runs through your head' (Chase, 2013, § 3). Finally, the author was able to find previous tweets where Brando had applied the term 'hero' more liberally for others. 'Brando thinks golfer David Toms and the lead singer of Hootie

and the Blowfish are heroes. That's fine; it's his opinion. On Monday, it was the opinion of many, many more that Jason Collins was a hero too' (§ 14).

Other journalists also criticized Brando's comments, and – unlike Broussard – no well-known athletes came to his defense. In fact, no highly prominent past or present athletes criticized Collins' coming out directly. However, the vast majority of authors of these articles and columnists (like Chase from *USA Today*) framed Collins as a courageous hero and potentially a leader of a movement within sports.

Collins is out and that matters, but it will mean more if he plays again

Like Collins, all of the former athletes who had previously come out as a gay from the four major U.S. professional men's team sports were considered marginal (at best) talents in those professional leagues (Beck and Branch, 2013). Whereas all those athletes came out publicly after retirement, Collins did so at an uncertain time of his career. He had just finished a season, with poor results, and had not been signed by any team for the following season. Although Collins stated his desire to play again in the NBA, most of the journalists who examined his playing history, athleticism, age, and minimum salary requirements under the NBA's salary cap, questioned if his basketball talents were worthy of being an NBA roster for the 2013-14 season. The general consensus in these articles was that it was at best a toss-up if Collins would play in the NBA again. However, nearly all agreed that, at 34, his career was near its end, his body broken down.

Nevertheless, these writers overwhelmingly downplayed Collins' status as a marginal talent, instead focusing on his importance for coming out. Of course, Collins did play again, becoming the first openly-gay man to compete in one of the four major professional men's team sports in the U.S., and thus making those concerns fruitless.

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The Follow-Up: Media Framing of Collins' Playing in the NBA

This study focused on the initial U.S. sport media framing of Collins' decision to come out publicly as gay. However, he was not a member of an NBA franchise still playing games at the time of his announcement. Further, he did not join a team and play again for more than nine months after going public with his sexual orientation. Therefore, we did a separate analysis of how these media outlets framed Collins' return to the NBA in 41 collective articles published from 23 February 2014 – 25 February 2014, a period that included the day the news broke that Collins was signing with the Brooklyn Nets through the day after playing in his first game back in the NBA against the L.A. Lakers.

Historic Importance of Collins' Playing in the NBA Was Again the Dominant Theme

The notion that this was a momentous and historic occasion for both sport and the U.S. was again prevalent by sports writers and those they decided to quote in their articles. In fact, this sentiment was even more common in the second set of stories and columns examined, which was best exemplified in this *New York Daily News* quote from Collins' new teammate with the Brooklyn Nets, Paul Pierce:

“In a society we live in, this was going to happen eventually. This is the normal. He is a guy who is going to open the door for athletes. Maybe not just in America but all over the world, the sports world,” Pierce said.

“That's going to be key. It doesn't matter your race, your gender, your sexuality, or any of that. It's about being part of a team. It's about caring for one another. That's all that matters at the end of the day. ... It's great to have him here to open the doors for so many athletes to feel

comfortable to come out and not be embarrassed and to be part of something” (Bondy, 2014, ¶ 7).

The Good Russian vs. The Bad Russian on Civil Rights

These journalists framed Collins’ playing with the Nets as landmark civil-rights achievement. Comparisons to Jackie Robinson were again commonplace, with many writers noting that Robinson broke the MLB color barrier while playing for the Dodgers, who at that time were based out of Brooklyn. However, a new civil rights hero emerging in the second-set of data was the Brooklyn Nets’ billionaire Russian owner Mikhail D. Prokhorov, who (although he was not quoted in any of these articles) had expressed support for gay and lesbian rights in losing the 2012 Russian presidential election to current President Vladimir Putin. These American journalists framed Prokhorov as a hero for publicly standing up for gays rights in Russia and then signing Collins to a contract, while mocking Putin as a dictatorial homophobe for the anti-gay laws that have been implemented under his reign. Sam Amick of *USA Today* was one of several writers who focused on Prokhorov in correlating Collins signing with the Nets with the ongoing global struggle for gay rights:

Still, in this world of men’s professional sports that has been so behind the times on this issue, this was nothing short of momentous. And Brooklyn’s part in it — both as a team and as a city — can’t be overstated.

In the same place that gave Jackie Robinson his first shot at equality in 1947 when he became the first African-American player in Major League

Baseball, Collins will now join a team that is owned by a Russian man in Mikhail Prokhorov who just sent a strong statement to his homeland. And talk about timing.

With the Winter Olympics in Sochi having put President Vladimir Putin and his anti-gay culture on center stage, here comes Prokhorov to show a more-enlightened side. The billionaire who ran for president in 2012 and ultimately lost to Putin was quoted in June 2013 condemning Russia's ban on "homosexual propaganda," saying, "I think we are breaching the international convention of human rights and freedoms we have signed. My position is very simple: This is a personal affair. It is a personal affair who has sex with whom." Eight months later, his approval of the Collins signing was celebrated in the gay community and beyond" (Amick, 2014, ¶ 7-9)

No Issues Reported in the Locker Room, or with Collins' Teammates and Opponents

Media and scholars have long speculated on how a prominent men's professional team sport league would respond to an openly gay player, particularly his teammates who would share a locker room with him and opponents from rival teams (Kian and Anderson, 2009). Collins, thus, served as the first American test case on these subjects, which were discussed extensively in media articles after Collins joined the Nets. Every single player and coach from the Nets or any other teams quoted in these articles was supportive of Collins returning to the NBA. The Nets general manager Billy King was regularly quoted as stating that Collins was signed purely for basketball purposes to

address his team's poor depth at center (Collins' position) and to help Brooklyn win, thus essentially offering a pre-emptive counter to any criticism that signing Collins was a marketing gimmick by the Nets' management team. Further, it was also reported in most of these outlets that Collins would not have been signed had free agent Glen Davis opted to sign with the Nets instead of the Los Angeles Clippers, who he ultimately selected over Brooklyn.

Many writers noted that Brooklyn seemed to provide the perfect organization and progressive, accepting city for Collins to join, adding that it helped that the Nets had so many players Collins already knew well from his previous 12 seasons playing for seven different NBA teams. The Nets' head coach Jason Kidd was a teammate of Collins for six seasons during Collins' earlier stint with the Nets, which saw the team advance to the NBA Finals twice. The Nets' leading scorer, Joe Johnson, played with Collins for three seasons in Atlanta, and Collins had spent much of the previous season as a Boston Celtics teammate with new Brooklyn Nets members and NBA superstars, Paul Pierce and Kevin Garnett. The articles also noted that Collins was friends with Nets' star point guard Deron Williams and injured center Brook Lopez, both of whom were teammates with his twin brother, Jarron, for the Utah Jazz. "(Collins) is a basketball player, and he's been doing this for a long time, so that didn't change," Williams was quoted by *USA Today* as having said shortly after Collins joined the Nets. "Maybe the outside perception did, but in this locker room it wasn't a big deal and it wasn't a distraction" (Johnson, 2014, ¶ 5).

In fact, no locker-room problems revolving around Collins' open homosexuality were conveyed in any mainstream media articles on the Nets during the entire 2013-14 season, including those published well after our search dates. His addition clearly did not

cause a distraction. A Brooklyn roster full of high-priced veteran superstars was one of the NBA's most disappointing teams throughout the first half of the 2013-14 season, winning just 25 of 53 games before Collins' signing. After he joined the team, the Nets won 19 of their 29 remaining games and qualified for the postseason, where they then upset the higher-seeded Toronto Raptors in the first-round of the NBA playoffs before being eliminated by the two-time defending NBA champion Miami Heat in the Eastern Conference semifinals. In other words, adding the well-liked and well-respected Collins only improved the Nets' win-loss record and team, locker-room cohesion.

Even more interesting was the overwhelming acceptance of Collins by African Americans in the NBA, who were quoted in these articles. When Amaechi went public with his sexual orientation in 2009, most of the criticisms he received were from fellow Black former and then-current NBA players (Kian and Anderson, 2009). But in 2014, multiple present and past African-American players equated homophobia with racism, including Collins' teammate and the Nets' vociferous locker-room leader, Kevin Garnett. This attitude of acceptance for Collins' sexual orientation was best summed up by legendary retired NBA hall of fame player and popular television commentator Charles Barkley, who told the *New York Daily News*:

“We've all played with gay guys, and guess what?” Barkley said.

“Anybody who ever played with Jason Collins has already played with a gay teammate, too. C'mon. Anybody in the workforce in this country has worked alongside gay people, and don't feel as if they're making history by doing that.”

“What people really have to do,” Barkley continued, “is relax about all this. Especially black athletes. As far as I’m concerned, it’s an insult for any black athlete to speak out against Jason Collins. If there’s one thing we should do as black people in America, it’s to be inclusive. If you’re a black athlete and you have a negative opinion about Jason Collins, keep it to your own damn self. As far as I’m concerned, to be against gay athletes having a job in team sports is no different from racism.” (Lupica, 2014, ¶ 11-12).

No problems reported within the Nets’ locker-room and the overwhelming acceptance by players in the NBA toward an openly gay player among their ranks were likely the main reasons why the Collins’ story quickly dissipated from the American national news cycle. In a sense, the media moved on to other, far more controversial subjects. Even though Collins’ initial coming out and his later joining the Nets were both framed as hugely important stories, media members regularly expressed desires that the issue of openly gay athletes becomes a non-story in the future. This was not done in a pejorative way, but in calling for athletes’ sexual orientation to become a non-issue in sports, while most added the need for gay athletes to be treated with the same respect as heterosexual athletes. This attitude was best summed up by famed *New York Daily News* sports columnist Mike Lupica shortly after Collins joined the Nets on his initial 10-day contract.

The news about all this will be when it isn’t news. We just aren’t there yet or even close. It is why Jason Collins, a big man at the end of his career,

one who's spent an awful lot of time on the ends of NBA benches, is big news in his sport today all over again, for a 10-day contract (Lupica, 2014, ¶ 6).

Discussion

Previous researchers who examined gays in sport largely agreed that organized sport was a highly homophobic institution (e.g., Griffin, 1998; Hekma, 1998). Their collective belief was that openly gay men did not exist in competitive sport – and particularly among the four major U.S. professional men's team sports – because they would not be tolerated within the locker-room culture. However, recent research showed that while sport may still lag behind the general culture, it had become much more accepting of gays and homosexuality at nearly all levels (e.g., Anderson, 2005; 2011; Cunningham, 2010).

The change in attitudes among athletes and coaches may be influenced by evolving acceptance of sport media, who seemingly are now more willing to discuss homosexuality in their content. Jason Collins' historic announcement and later his joining an NBA team provided us opportunities to examine the framing of gay men in a masculine, men's professional team sport in a 2013-14 context, where gays and homosexuality are far more accepted in the mainstream of American society. In analyzing print media coverage of Collins from leading newspapers and sport Websites, this research highlighted that the institution of sport, and the sport media industry itself, are both rapidly adopting more inclusive perspectives concerning gay men. In this research occurrences of journalist- or player-espoused homophobia were scant, and even

more rare after Collins actually started playing in games again. In fact, other journalists heavily critiqued those that did occur.

This research is unique for two reasons. First, it was the first to ‘ostensibly’ examine media framing of an active openly gay male athlete in one of four major U.S. professional men’s team sports. The overall positive framing of Collins’ coming out by prominent U.S. sport journalists was replicated when he, too, became the first ‘active’ openly gay athlete to participate in games during a season in his sport. Our research suggests that the rapid rise in acceptance of homosexuality found in other institutional sectors of U.S. culture were reflected in media acceptance of a gay NBA player.

A sporting shift toward the acceptance of gays in sport may be reflective of more than just improved conditions for gay men; it also reflects (in a symbiotic manner) that athletes today are freer to associate with femininity than previously. Part of this may be attributable to sport being increasingly viewed as a workplace environment and the promotion of non-discrimination policies. But we suggest it is more attributable to a changing culture within sport itself. For more than a decade, studies of sport have shown an inclusive, less homophobic form of masculinity is on the rise. Therefore, this may be a case in which the dominant society’s more inclusive attitudes toward homosexuality have influenced sport journalists’ gendered accounts instead of it being the other way around. For example, in drawing on in-depth interviews with 40 student-athletes at a British university, Anderson and McCormack (2014) found that 37 participants had cuddled with another man. In addition to this cuddling, participants had also engaged in “spooning” with their heterosexual male friends. Anderson (2014) suggested that such findings

reflect the new norm for British men, athletes or not. He also cited experiences of straight male athletes cuddling in the U.S. as well.

The second significant aspect to the evidence generated in this article concerns the absence of a discussion on race among the dominant themes in the first textual analysis, followed by African-American athletes equating homophobia with racism in the follow-up textual analysis. Collins began the article he authored for *Sports Illustrated* by writing, 'I'm a 34-year-old NBA center. I'm Black. And I'm gay' (Collins, 2013, ¶ 1). Whereas Collins' race was mentioned in a few articles, it was rarely discussed by these journalists or those they quoted after his coming out. It was significant that quotes from African-Americans Barack Obama and Kobe Bryant were the most prominently used in support of Collins by these journalists. Whereas research has shown black athletes, through their portrayals, are culturally, economically, and structurally discriminated against in the sport-media complex (e.g., Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006), and despite decreasing American cultural homophobia, some researchers found elevated homophobic prejudice within black culture (Cohen, 1999; Lewis, 2003). However, our findings showed that this prejudice has significantly waned, evident by all of the prominent African Americans (both within and outside of sport) who expressed not only support of Collins and his sexual orientation, but also equated homophobia as a form of bigotry on par with racism.

Finally, our research indicates that team sports and their locker rooms are ready for more openly gay athletes. Further, more athletes who come out publicly as gay – like aspiring professional football player Michael Sam, who did in February 2014, although

he has yet to play in a game or make a professional roster as a gay athlete – are likely to be treated well by leading U.S. sport media outlets, regardless of their race, age, or athletic ability. Collins, in essence, blazed that trail, allowing many more closeted gay athletes to likely come out publicly in ensuing decades.

Limitations/Delimitations

Results from this study should not be generalized to all sport media coverage of gay male athletes. We only examined 10 media outlets. Further, all 10 outlets were U.S.-based, media organizations. In fact, these were the five most popular newspapers and five most trafficked sport Websites in the U.S., and thus our findings may not be indicative of results from smaller, regional U.S., or international-based newspapers and online sites. However, framing of key issues by prominent newspapers and Websites generally influences smaller, more regional media outlets (Kian, 2008). And whereas this study cannot be generalized beyond the U.S., Maguire (2011) noted the prominence and influence of U.S. popular team sports on the global sport-media complex.

Suggestions for Future Research

Additional studies on how media frame gay athletes and homosexuality are needed in the literature, particularly since sport media coverage historically ignored gay athletes and issues (Lenskyj, 2013). Obviously how media frame any controversies that emerge during the season of an active male athlete in major men's team sports are worthy of scholarship. Overall research on sport journalists' attitudes toward LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) athletes and sport figures is largely missing from the existing literature (Kian et al., 2013), whereas there are no such known academic studies

on LGBT representation within the sport media profession. Finally research is needed on the effects of various types of coverage of gay athletes on media consumers.

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