



# ONE TEAM

**THE SPORT LANDSCAPE**



Markus Thormeyer

CREATING A SAFE SCHOOL AND SPORT ENVIRONMENT



Egale  
Canada Human Rights Trust

YOU  
CAN  
PLAY

# BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION – UNSAFE ENVIRONMENTS

**ACCORDING TO ROBERTSON** (2013), “progress towards the creation of a more inclusive sports world has been negligible.” In terms of participation in sports, LGBTQ+ phobias as well as heteronormativity and cisnormativity create unsafe spaces for children and youth. Those who are interested in sports deemed to be “for the other gender” are harassed and bullied. This makes for a hostile climate for anyone, but if the student in question actually is LGBTQ+, it is also a fearful climate which makes it impossible for them to be who they are. Not being able to share who you are with your teammates impacts collegiality and performance as well as self-esteem and quality of life (Birch-Jones, 2014 - see section on High Engagement & High Performance for more information).

Becoming aware of how heteronormativity and cisnormativity play out in our schools, teams and classrooms will assist in fostering safer spaces for LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth. Engaging students in open conversations about gender norms in which you explore what they are and how they look different overtime and culture can help to create space for diverse gender expression and less gender policing. Intervening whenever you see or hear homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in the classroom, hallways, gymnasium, and sports arena reinforces the expectations for mutual respect, inclusion and acceptance.

## A FEW EXAMPLES OF HOW HOMOPHOBIA, BIPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA MANIFEST IN THE SPORT ENVIRONMENT INCLUDE:

- The rejection of teammates and coaches when it is discovered that they are LGBTQ+.
- The use of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic slurs, remarks, jokes, teasing, hazing rituals and initiations as well as violence – and the lack of intervention when these occur.

- In post-secondary levels, coaches luring good athletes from competitor teams by alleging that the coaches are LGBTQ+.
- Policies that require same-gender accommodation for trips to away games or tournaments.
- Limiting opportunities for LGBTQ+ athletes – for example, not choosing them to be the team spokesperson even though they may be the best athletes.

(CAAWS, 2012)

**ACCORDING TO THE RESULTS OF EGALE CANADA’S FIRST NATIONAL CLIMATE SURVEY OF HOMOPHOBIA, BIPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS (2011), NON-LGBTQ+ STUDENTS NAMED PHYSICAL EDUCATION AREAS (43%) AS UNSAFE, AND LGBTQ+ STUDENTS NAMED CHANGE ROOMS (48.8%) AS ONE OF THE MOST UNSAFE PLACES IN SCHOOLS.**



“GROWING UP, THERE WERE VERY FEW ROLE MODELS FOR ME IN THE SPORT WORLD. I DIDN’T KNOW IF SPORT WAS A PLACE I BELONGED. BUT THAT PERCEPTION IS CHANGING. NOW, YOUNG ATHLETES NEED TO STEP UP AND BECOME LEADERS, TO GIVE THE NEXT GENERATION OF LGBTQ+ ATHLETES A SYMBOL OF HOPE. TO SHOW THEM CONCRETE EXAMPLES OF THE SUPPORT THAT EXISTS WITHIN THE SPORT COMMUNITY, THAT SUPPORT FROM MY TEAM THAT I EXPERIENCED WHEN I CAME OUT.”

—John Fennell, Sochi 2014 Olympian

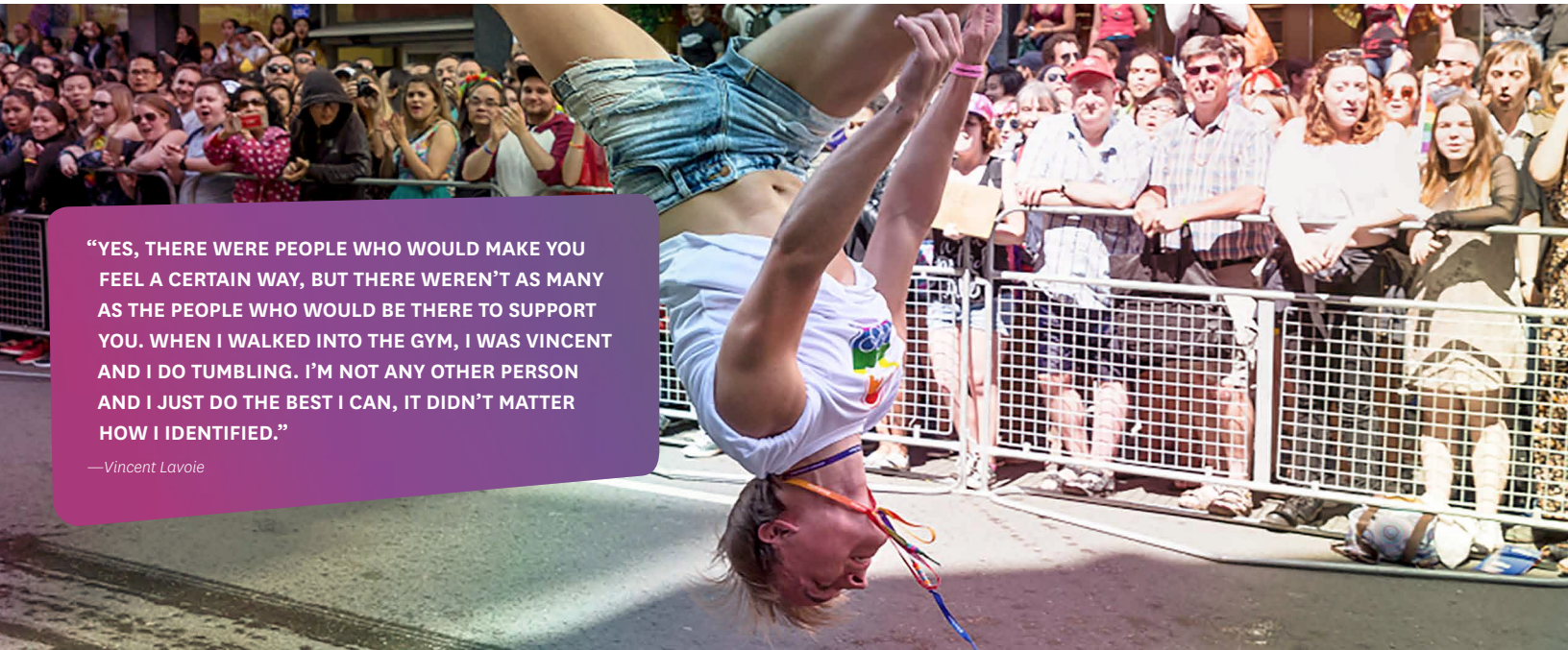
## GENDER NORMS AND STEREOTYPES

**GENDER PLAYS AN** organizing role in society. Very early, children become aware of the culturally imposed, arbitrary rules for their gender in terms of what are deemed appropriate interests, clothing and sports (for example, that pink and princesses are for girls and superheroes and blue are for boys). Children who express interests outside of the gender norms are bullied and harassed by their peers as early as kindergarten (GLSEN, 2012). In addition, parents, teachers and other significant adults in children's lives can also enforce gender norms and may express disapproval of interests or expression outside of these norms. Boys may be dissuaded from an interest in sports and activities considered "feminine" (gymnastics, dance, playing with dolls, etc.). Girls may be steered away from what are considered "rough" sports or "boys" activities (roughhousing, hockey, rugby, etc); however, gender norms for girls are becoming more fluid, as evidenced by the popularity of activities such as girls' hockey, soccer and rugby.

These gender norms and stereotypes can limit a child's self-expression (either imposed or self-regulated) and expose them to homophobia, biphobia and transphobia as they are confronted with assumptions and harassment about their sexual orientation or gender identity if their interests don't conform. Children and youth who choose not to pursue, or are dissuaded or forbidden from pursuing, the sports they are interested in because of gender policing norms and stereotypes lose the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge acquired through sports. Children and youth who are not confined by gender norms, even despite

adult support, often pursue their interests in climates that are heteronormative and cisnormative, making them unsafe for LGBTQ+ individuals or those perceived to be (Barber & Krane, 2007; Krane & Kauer, 2007). In both cases, children quickly learn that it is not acceptable, or even dangerous, to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Two Spirit, queer, or gender creative. For children who happen to be LGBTQ+ or gender creative, these messages are particularly damaging, and can further impact their self-esteem and self-acceptance.

In sports, gender norms prevail. Boys and men are expected to be masculine, and any behaviour on their part, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, that doesn't conform leads to suspicion about their sexual orientation, which can then lead to rejection by their teammates and coaches. This expectation of masculinity can have a lasting impact on personal and social development (CAAWS, 2012). Because of expectations of masculinity, boys are also dissuaded or experience harassment when they show interest in "typically feminine" sports. Girls can be dissuaded from participation in sport because it is seen as "unfeminine". For girls and women, the mere participation in sports can lead to suspicion about their sexual orientation, and females who do not conform to society's expectations of femininity are often not welcome in sport because they seem to confirm this suspicion (CAAWS, 2012). These phobias can impact the experiences and participation in sport for LGBTQ+ and gender creative boys and all girls, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.



"YES, THERE WERE PEOPLE WHO WOULD MAKE YOU FEEL A CERTAIN WAY, BUT THERE WEREN'T AS MANY AS THE PEOPLE WHO WOULD BE THERE TO SUPPORT YOU. WHEN I WALKED INTO THE GYM, I WAS VINCENT AND I DO TUMBLING. I'M NOT ANY OTHER PERSON AND I JUST DO THE BEST I CAN, IT DIDN'T MATTER HOW I IDENTIFIED."

—Vincent Lavoie

## HOMOPHOBIA, BIPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA

Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are fear and hatred towards LGBTQ+ individuals, often exhibited by name-calling, bullying, exclusion, prejudice, discrimination or acts of violence — anyone who is LGBTQ+ or gender creative (or assumed to be) can be a target.



**LGBTQ+ AND GENDER CREATIVE** individuals of all ages can be targets of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia because they often don't fit in to society's expectations of gender identity, gender expression or attraction. This can often result in bullying and harassment from peers and adults alike, as well as rejection by family. Straight and cisgender individuals who don't fit society's expectations of gender (in clothing, expression and interest) can also be impacted by homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in the form of bullying and harassment, because they are perceived to be LGBTQ+.

Studies have shown that schools are unsafe spaces for LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth (Egale, 2011; GLSEN, 2012). Bullying and harassment as well as the possibility of rejection make LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth even more vulnerable, and in need of schools and teachers who understand the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusion and the need for LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces. Because of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heteronormativity and cisnormativity, LGBTQ+ youth are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers (33% vs 7%) and 20% more likely if they are in unsupportive environments (Saewyc, 2007; Hatzenbuehler, 2011). Rates for trans youth are even higher at 47% (Scanlon et al, 2010).

Heteronormativity and cisnormativity are cultural/societal biases, often implicit, that assume all people are straight or cisgender. Because of this, environments overtly and covertly support heterosexuality and being cisgender, and create a culture of silence around LGBTQ+ identities, issues and realities. As a result, homophobic, biphobic and transphobic comments, language and behavior often go unchallenged, making everyone present complicit in creating schools, classrooms, washrooms, gymnasiums, teams, change rooms, locker rooms, team buses, etc. that are unsafe for LGBTQ+ and gender creative individuals and those perceived to be. Lack of support compounds the lack of safety.

In addition, the culture of silence means that same-gender relationships and transgender identities are ignored or underrepresented. The result is that LGBTQ+ and gender creative individuals and their needs and realities are often ignored, overlooked, or silenced, which sends a message about their value and worth – or their existence.

Heteronormativity and cisnormativity also inform policies and procedures, our assumptions, and our curriculum. Being an ally and creating LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces requires that we speak up and challenge these norms.

**“LGBTPHOBIA HURTS EVERYONE, INCLUDING THOSE WHO AREN'T LGBT. FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN PARENTS CHOOSE SPORTS FOR THEIR CHILDREN BASED SOLELY ON PERCEIVED GENDER-APPROPRIATENESS OR WHEN WOMEN STAY AWAY FROM SPORTS WITH A “LESBIAN REPUTATION” OR WHEN TEENAGE BOYS QUIT A SPORT THEY LOVE BECAUSE OF ITS “SISSY” IMAGE AMONGST FRIENDS, EVERYONE LOSES - THE PARTICIPANTS LOSE AND SPORT LOSES AS WELL.”**

*(Birch-Jones, 2014, p. 6).*

## SILENCE

While it is easy to understand that negative messages, bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ and gender creative individuals creates an unsafe environment, silence is also damaging. Silence around LGBTQ+ issues, lack of overtly inclusive practices, and lack of intervention in the face of LGBTphobias, Heteronormativity and/or cisnormativity means that LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth are not only invisible, they are not provided with role models. They may then take in the unspoken message that there is something wrong with being LGBTQ+ and gender creative. Just like a hostile environment, silence can create feelings of isolation, negative self-image, shame, self-hatred and fear. The perception of rejection can be as crippling as being rejected, and so with no evidence to the contrary, LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth are also suffering in environments where LGBTQ+ issues and realities are not spoken about or included in the curriculum.

Overtly LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive environments provide individuals the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. This allows them to feel acknowledged and valued for who they are and to talk about issues that impact them, as well as to feel safer and supported. These environments demand intervention when exclusive behaviours are seen or heard, and actively challenge heteronormativity

and cisnormativity. For straight and cisgender youth, such environments provide them with the opportunity to learn about LGBTQ+ issues, get to know people who identify as LGBTQ+, raise their awareness and understanding, and learn how to be allies.

## LACK OF ALLIES

Allies are a key component in the creation and maintenance of LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces. Allies speak up and stand up against homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying and harassment, and challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Their presence and actions show support for LGBTQ+ communities and individuals – something that LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth often cannot rely on receiving from their family and friends.

The prevalence of gender norms and stereotypes, phobias, as well as heteronormativity and cisnormativity can account for the fact that there are not as many allies as there could be; these messages create a culture of silence, and a reluctance to stand up for others. The impact is a lack of role models for how being an ally looks, as well as a lack of tangible support for LGBTQ+ individuals (or those perceived to be). Allies are the voices that speak up and who can help open the door for their LGBTQ+ peers to come out, be accepted, and lead healthier lives.

**“BEING AN ALLY IS AS MUCH ABOUT LISTENING TO YOURSELF, AS IT IS LISTENING TO OTHERS.”**

–Una Louder



## CURRENT LANDSCAPE IN THE SPORT SYSTEM

The climate in sport continues to be unwelcoming to people who are not straight or cisgender (Viels & Demers, 2013). Heteronormativity and cisnormativity inform the team and locker room culture, making it often impossible and potentially unsafe for LGBTQ+ athletes to come out. Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic jokes, comments, slurs and violence, and the lack of intervention when these occur, mean that LGBTQ+ athletes spend a disproportionate amount of time hiding who they are and worrying about the consequences of coming out or being outed. “LGBT athletes may go to extreme lengths to conceal their sexuality. Some athletes attempt to separate their personal life from their sporting life, avoiding conversation about families, partners and social activities. This eventually leads to dishonesty and compromises the relationship between the LGBT athlete, their teammates and coaches”

*(Brackenridge et al., 2008 as cited in Birch-Jones, 2014).*

In their study on coaches and LGBTQ+ athletes, Demers and Viel (2013) discuss a few reasons that adult athletes don't come out. These include:

- Not wanting to live with discrimination. While not being out (and not being LGBTQ+) doesn't protect you from discrimination, coming out about being LGBTQ+ leaves one more vulnerable.
- Stereotypes about being gay or lesbian related to masculinity and femininity.
- Social pressure and the reality of being a role model in a society where being LGBTQ+ is not fully accepted.
- The fear that their disclosure could affect team chemistry or be a distraction that impacts team performance.
- The reaction of the coaches. Many coaches cited that they would rather not know.

Creating LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive schools and classrooms can assist with all of these reasons that athletes don't come out. When the adults around them speak up and intervene when bullying or harassment occurs, it shows children and youth not only what is not acceptable, and what it means to be an ally, but that LGBTQ+ individuals are valued and respected. Intervening shows LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth that they are supported.

Creating safer and more inclusive environments is both proactive and reactive. It involves intervention when discrimination occurs, but also creating positive environments, challenging norms, stereotypes and assumptions about sexual orientation and gender identity, and including the lives and realities of LGBTQ+ individuals in curriculum. All of these help to raise awareness and acceptance - and ultimately inclusion - for LGBTQ+ individuals.



*Dylan Moscovitch*

## THE ROLE OF COACHES

Because of their direct involvement with athletes, coaches play a critical role in creating a safer and inclusive environment for the participants, including ones that identify with the LGBTQ+ communities. To this end, coaches must be conscious of their language and their assumptions. Intervening when LGBTQ+ bullying or harassment occurs – regardless of the sexual orientation or gender identity of the athlete being harassed – is also crucial as it identifies the coach as an ally while also demonstrating their expectations of acceptable behaviour to the team. Tips for coaches include:

- Educate yourself about homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, as well as LGBTQ+ issues.
- Ask your team captain to help set a positive and respectful tone.
- Talk to your team members about respect for everyone, and set clear expectations.

(Viel & Demers, 2013)

The translation of statistics about unsafe spaces from elementary and high schools to professional sport culture is clear when we consider the mission of You Can Play, an organization founded by Patrick Burke, Brian Kitts and Glenn Witman, in honour of Patrick's brother Brian Burke:

When schools become LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive, and students learn about acceptance and that challenging gender norms is ok, sport culture in schools and then in general will hopefully evolve and make space for LGBTQ+ athletes to be out and to participate without fear. Until then, there are significant safety issues that create barriers for LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth to participate in the sports of their choice, and to be out while doing so.

The impact of hiding who you are is significant and has implications for mental health, self-esteem and social inclusion. Retired LGBTQ+ athletes speak of it not only affecting their willingness to form close bonds with teammates, but also their performance

(Barber, 2013).

If adult athletes who are LGBTQ+ feel this way, we can only imagine how difficult it may be for young LGBTQ+ athletes who are also dealing with the challenges of growing up. Not feeling safe or able to be who you are for fear of rejection or physical harm impacts if and when someone chooses to come out. It also impacts their quality of life by undermining self-acceptance, self-care, and self-esteem. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the impact of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia puts LGBTQ+ youth at significant risk for attempted suicide. So while sports can bolster self-esteem and self-acceptance for straight and cisgender children and youth, for LGBTQ+ or gender creative children and youth the benefits may be overshadowed by unsafe environments. In addition, when spaces are unsafe for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, they also become unsafe for anyone perceived to be LGBTQ+.

You Can Play is dedicated to ensuring equality, respect and safety for all athletes, without regard to sexual orientation. You Can Play works to guarantee that athletes are given a fair opportunity to compete, judged by other athletes and fans alike, only by what they contribute to the sport or their team's success. You Can Play seeks to challenge the culture of locker rooms and spectator areas by focusing only on athlete's skills, work ethic and competitive spirit.

([www.youcanplayproject.org](http://www.youcanplayproject.org))

*Nadia Popov*



**MY EXPERIENCE AS AN LGBTQ+ ATHLETE IN THE WOMEN'S RUGBY COMMUNITY HAS BEEN OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE, AND MY TEAMMATES HAD A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN HELPING ME ACCEPT MYSELF AND MY SEXUALITY. MY SPORT GAVE ME A SAFE SPACE TO DISCOVER WHO I WAS, WHICH IS WHAT SPORT SHOULD BE FOR ANYONE WHO IS STRUGGLING WITH THEIR IDENTITY.**

*Nadia Popov*

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HIGH ENGAGEMENT AND HIGH PERFORMANCE

Research demonstrates that when people, regardless of their age, feel engaged, they perform better. Students become motivated in “giving their everything”. Educators, coaches and club leaders need to become aware of the conditions that foster students’ mental fitness needs and development. LGBTQ+ athletes’ performance can suffer when they can’t be all of who they are. “The effort of LGBT athletes to conceal their preferred sex, sexuality and gender identity diverts their attention away from their training and the sport.” (Birch-Jones, 2014, p. 7).

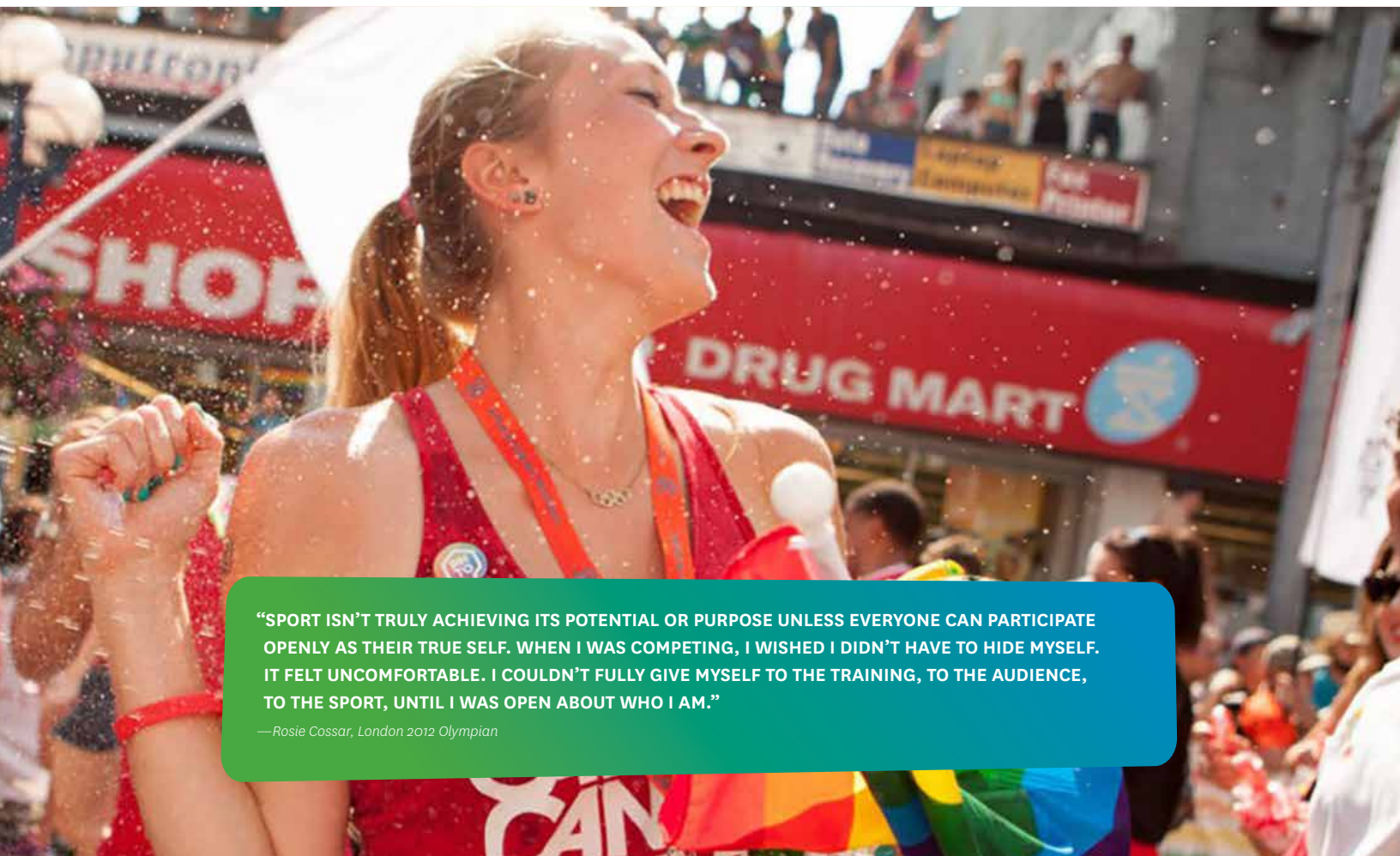
A key component of engagement and high performance for LGBTQ+ athletes is safety. Although there are limited examples of investigations directly examining the relationship between performance and the climate surrounding LGBTQ+ acceptance, research has consistently indicated that the safer and more welcome in their sport environment athletes feel, the better they perform (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Barber & Krane). Krane and Kauer (2007) also state that a sport climate that isn’t LGBTQ+ safer or inclusive can be distracting, frustrating, stressful and difficult (Fasting, 1997; Fusco, 1998; Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005 as cited in Krane & Kauer, 2007). It is easy to see

how any of these descriptions of an athletic environment can negatively impact performance.

Feeling safe to be themselves with their teammates, and feeling accepted and included, allows LGBTQ+ athletes to focus their energy on their performance.

**“...WE KNOW THAT COACHES AND TEAMS DON’T GET THE BEST PERFORMANCE WHEN A MEMBER OF THE TEAM IS FORCED TO KEEP ANY SECRET OR WHEN A PLAYER FEELS SHUT OUT.”**

*(Glenn Witman, You Can Play.)*



**“SPORT ISN’T TRULY ACHIEVING ITS POTENTIAL OR PURPOSE UNLESS EVERYONE CAN PARTICIPATE OPENLY AS THEIR TRUE SELF. WHEN I WAS COMPETING, I WISHED I DIDN’T HAVE TO HIDE MYSELF. IT FELT UNCOMFORTABLE. I COULDN’T FULLY GIVE MYSELF TO THE TRAINING, TO THE AUDIENCE, TO THE SPORT, UNTIL I WAS OPEN ABOUT WHO I AM.”**

*—Rosie Cossar, London 2012 Olympian*



**“WE KNOW THAT TEAMMATES, COACHES, AND FANS ALL BENEFIT WHEN WE WORK TOGETHER AND CREATE A MORE INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR LGBT ATHLETES.”**

—Wade Davis, *You Can Play*

Two professional athletes who have spoken publicly about the impact of being in the closet and of coming out on their performance and experience as an athlete are quoted in Heather Barber’s LGBTQ+ Issues in Sport blog:

“I guess it seems like a weight off my shoulders, because I’ve been playing a lot better than I’ve ever played before. I think I’m just enjoying myself and I’m happy.”

– Megan Rapinoe, Professional Soccer Player.

“Until now, I have kept my personal life and my career strictly separate from each other. No one was supposed to know that I’m gay. This game of hide-and-seek was incredibly strenuous and it took a lot of energy out of me. Now I’m hoping that I can put that energy into my training”.

– Orlando Cruz, Professional Boxer

When LGBTQ+ athletes can be all of who they are and come out, they can engage more with their teammates and can build the strong friendships that are common in sport, as mentioned by Gus Johnston, the Australian hockey player who came out in 2011 after retiring

(<http://www.samesame.com.au/news/7498/Champion-hockey-player-comes-out>).

The You Can Play Project ([www.youcanplayproject.org](http://www.youcanplayproject.org)) also makes the connection between being who you are and performance. As their website states:

“Let’s talk about sports. Everyone’s a Monday morning quarterback, and who doesn’t like the exciting last few seconds of a race – the point at which someone is going to win. The You Can Play Project is about playing a game – any game – and winning. Winning because athletes are allowed to be all the things our parents taught us to be growing up. Honest. Dedicated to achieving goals. Hard working and full of competitive spirit.

It’s tough to be those things when a player is keeping a secret. Teams get better results, and athletes are better, when they can be honest and open about who they are. That includes athletes who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender.”

Coaches play a significant role in creating LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces for athletes because they set the tone, and are in direct contact with the participants.

“Since coaches lead the activities and are responsible for creating conditions that ensure as many participants as possible have the opportunity for a positive experience, they can undoubtedly prevent a heterosexist, homophobic, and hostile environment from developing. The coach’s actions, language, and attitude go a long way towards making the athletes feel safe and able to be themselves by, for example disclosing their sexual orientation in the sport environment in which they are developing.”

(Viel and Demers, 2014, p. 3).

### HIGH ENGAGEMENT INCLUDES:

- Knowing others (positive relationships)
- Recognizing strengths
- Listening to each other (interests/passion)
- Engaging/motivations
- Empowering others

### HIGH PERFORMANCE INCLUDES:

- Sharing a common vision/expectations
- Planning collaborative actions
- Bringing out individual leadership (strengths)
- Experiencing a sense of accomplishment
- Celebrating successes

(HERG, 2011)