

# SPORTS, SOCIABILITY, SEX, AND STIGMA

## EXPERIENCES OF DUTCH GAY AND LESBIANS IN FIELD HOCKEY AND FITNESS TRAINING

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Since the 1970s, the Netherlands has been known as a country where homosexuality is widely accepted. International comparative opinion research suggests this reputation is deserved. According to the World Values Survey (1999-2004), just 6.2% of the Dutch population say they would not like to have a homosexual neighbour. That is slightly more than in Sweden (6.0%) but less than in Denmark (8.0%), and significantly less than in Germany (14.0%), France (15.8%), Belgium (17.5%), the United States (22.9%), the United Kingdom (24.1%) and Italy (28.7%), not to mention Hungary (53.4%), Poland (55.4%), and Ukraine (65.6%).

This high level of acceptance cannot be explained as the expression of a « typically Dutch » permissiveness to « alternative », « deviant » life-styles in general. Whereas the Netherlands has a much more lenient drugs policy than neighbouring countries, the percentage of the population who would object to living next to a drug-addict is considerably higher in the Netherlands (73.0%) than it is in Belgium (41.3%), France (47.8%) and Germany (58.6%).

Beside being a specific phenomenon, acceptance of homosexuality is a fairly recent one. In 1730-1731, when the Dutch Republic was already renowned for its tolerance of religious minorities, it became the stage for the most vehement persecution of « sodomites » in the history of early-modern Europe. Sex between consenting adults of the same sex was decriminalised as early as 1811, when the *Code Pénal* came into force in this part of Napoléon's Empire, but in 1911 the legal age of consent for homosexual contact was raised to 21 instead of 16 years. This dis-

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criminatory article, which ruined the lives of many homosexuals and severely frustrated the development of the gay community, was not repealed until 1971.

Far into the twentieth century, Dutch society was characterised by conservative sexual morals. In the 1950s, the number of babies born out of wedlock, which serves as an indication of premarital sex, was lower than in any other European country – including Ireland. To a large extent, this conservatism was due to « pillarisation » (*verzuijing*). Since the end of the 19th century, Dutch society had been dominated by the distinct sub-cultural organisations (political parties, schools, newspapers, trade unions, professional associations, broadcasting corporations, youth organisations, etc.) of Roman Catholics, Orthodox Protestants, Social Democrats, and others. These « pillars », which effectively divided society along vertical lines and which guided their members along their version of the straight and narrow, competed with each other when it came to morality.

In the 1960s, these « pillars » began to fall apart, and the infrastructure which had served up to that point to keep the believers in the fold, became a motorway for the development of progressive ideas – for example on sexuality. Around 1960, both Protestant and Roman-Catholic theologians, psychiatrists, psychologists and other intellectuals began to openly call for a revision of the traditional Christian morality, which condemned homosexuality, and for acceptance of « the homosexual neighbour ». Soon after that, several public figures – the most famous of them being novelist and poet Gerard [van het] Reve and comedian Albert Mol – came out as being gay, and claimed a place at the table.

An opinion poll, held in 1968, showed that 14% of Dutch boys and 10% of Dutch girls agreed that « Homosexuality is normal. » Six years later, when this survey was repeated, no less than 41% of the boys and even 51% of the girls professed their acceptance of homosexuality. In the mean time, the first gay demonstration had taken place (1969), the discriminatory article in the Penal Code (Section 248 bis) had been repealed (1971), and – as a consequence – the Netherlands Association of Homophiles COC was recognised (1973), became eligible for government funding, and changed its name into Netherlands Association for the Integration of Homosexuality COC. In the subsequent years and decades, homosexuals were admitted to the military (1974), persecution

on the grounds of homosexuality was recognised as grounds for requesting asylum (1981), slandering and discriminating against homosexuals were made punishable (in 1992 and 1994 respectively) and marriage was opened for same-sex couples (2002). More and more public figures came out, among them popular comedians like Jos Brink, André van Duin and Paul de Leeuw. In 2002, no less than 7% of the members of Dutch Parliament were openly gay or lesbian.

## Declining tolerance ?

In recent years, however, there have been news reports on an alleged decline in tolerance of homosexuality. In schools (vocational schools in particular) both students and teachers seem reluctant to come out, because of hostile reactions of (fellow) students. In some popular neighbourhoods, especially in the bigger cities, homosexual men and women have been confronted with verbal, and sometimes even physical violence.

Foreign observers will be inclined to ascribe this decline to the recent turn in Dutch politics, which led to the rise of right-wing politicians like Pim Fortuyn, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and, more recently, Geert Wilders and Rita Verdonk. However, this explanation does not hold. Despite being a hard-liner in matters of immigration and the integration of ethnic minorities, Pim Fortuyn was not a true and blue conservative. For one thing, he was openly gay, and talked publicly about his sex life, which was far from monogamous or domesticated. It was exactly for their misogynist and homophobic attitudes that Fortuyn criticised Muslims. Hirsi Ali, Wilders and Verdonk, too, have repeatedly called the acceptance of homosexuality in Dutch society an achievement that is under threat of ethnic or religious minorities who, as a result of their insufficient integration, stick to traditional views on gender and sexuality.

Their grievances are not without any foundation. Research shows that the biggest share of people with negative attitudes to homosexuality is found among Turkish-Dutch (32%) and Moroccan-Dutch (26%) citizens, especially those who are very religious. More importantly, hostilities against homosexuals are often committed by youngsters with a non-Western background (Keuzenkamp & Bos, 2007). In November 2004, a Moroccan-Dutch web site published an « Anti Homo-Manifesto », with the slogan : Geen nicht in het licht (« *No queens in the spotlights* »).

Interestingly, however, the objections against homosexuality expressed in this manifesto are far from traditional. The authors criticised gay men not for violating any divine or natural law, but – as the title of their manifesto indicates – for obtruding themselves upon other people, e.g. by participating in public manifestations like the annual Amsterdam Canal Pride. Such objections to the increased presence of gay men and women in the public sphere are often called an indication of « modern homo-negativity ».

## Research design

In view of reports on anti-gay hostilities, the Dutch government commissioned a comprehensive study into the acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands in 2005 (Keuzenkamp et al., 2006; Keuzenkamp & Bos, 2007). The study was carried out by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research ([www.scp.nl](http://www.scp.nl)), in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam ([www.uva.nl](http://www.uva.nl)), and Rutgers Nisso Group ([www.rng.nl](http://www.rng.nl)), the Dutch expert centre on sexuality. It consisted of three projects: a) an analysis of the findings of large-scale opinion research carried out in the Netherlands over the past four decades; b) an analysis of discussions on homosexuality in Internet forums; and c) in-depth interviews with more than 80 men and women on their experiences at work (in the armed forces, in banks or insurance companies, and in the hospitality industry) or in leisure activities, viz. amateur sport. This paper presents the main outcomes of the latter study. Based on twenty in-depth interviews, this paper will analyse experiences of gay and lesbian athletes with being homosexual in sports, particularly in field hockey and fitness.

Amateur sport is an interesting field for research into the acceptance of homosexuality. Where in 1979 slightly over half the Dutch population aged between 6 and 80 years took part in some form of sport, in 2003 this applied for more than two-thirds (Breedveld & Tiessen-Raaphorst, 2006, table 4.4). Solo sports in particular have become highly popular, especially among women (*Ibid.*, table 4.6)

A recent survey by Janssens et al. (2003, 46) showed that Dutch gays and lesbians do not (as suggested by Hekma et al., 1994 ; see also Hekma 1995) participate less in sports than other citizens, but that they do more often hide their sexual orientation. In fact, gay men come out less often in sport than in any other sphere of life

(family, friends, work, neighbourhood, etc.). To some extent their reticence is understandable, as 15% of gay male athletes and 6% of lesbian athletes report having been confronted with anti-gay jokes, remarks, looks, or even outright discrimination (Janssens et al. 2003 : 27 ; see also Hekma et al., 1994 ; Hekma 1995).

Although the sports participation of homosexual men and women equals that of heterosexuals, it is markedly different. Compared with their straight counterparts, gay men are significantly less often members of a sports club, significantly more often clients of a gym, practise team or contact sports significantly less and practise sports that are popular among women significantly more often. In comparison with straight women, lesbians practise team sports significantly more often, but less often engage in contact sports, and more often in sports that are popular among straight men (Janssens et al., 2003). What do these preferences have to do with sexual orientation ?

In order to answer this question, the present study focuses on athletes in one type of team sport and – slightly less closely defined – one type of individual sport. Whereas membership of sports clubs has been declining, membership of commercial gyms has risen dramatically, from one in eleven Dutch citizens in 1991 to one in six in 2003 (Breedveld, 2003, 88, table 4.9 ; Breedveld & Tiessen-Raaphorst, 2006, table 4.7 ; see also Van Bottenburg 2004). The sports practised in gyms vary widely, but in this study « fitness training » is used as a common denominator. Men and women who train in gyms which specifically target gay clients are left out of consideration here. Of all team sports, soccer is the most popular, but is also typically male-dominated. This seems not to put off lesbian women, but the participation rate among gay men is almost three times lower than among straight men (Janssens et al. 2003, 62-63). There are only two branches of team sports where the participation of gay men and women is equal to that of their straight counterparts: rowing and field hockey. This study focuses on the latter.

Field hockey is by no means an « average » branch of sport. The ratio of highly educated to lower-educated athletes is higher than in any other team sport <sup>1</sup> ; the vast majority of field hockey clubs are also overwhelmingly white, and this seems to be one of

1 – Breedveld 2003 : 256, table 10.1. Van Bottenburg (2004) counts field hockey among the « status sports » : it is associated with the lifestyle of the upper class, who used to have a virtual monopoly on it.

the reasons why many white parents prefer them to soccer clubs, where many young athletes have a non-Western background. In one respect, however, these field hockey clubs are quite diverse: the number of female athletes is usually equal to or even slightly higher than the number of male athletes. Moreover, the Dutch field hockey league (like the Dutch rowing league) has seen a higher than average growth in membership since the 1990s (Breedveld, 2003, 308, table B11.1). Unlike soccer or volleyball, in order to play field hockey it is difficult to avoid joining a formal club. That makes this branch of sport all the more interesting for research into the social position of minorities.

## A group portrait of the respondents

The respondents for this study were recruited in the same way as for the other part of the interview project, viz. through ads in gay and lesbian magazines, news letters and web sites. Both in the text of these ads, and in the web page on « frequently asked questions » to which they referred, it was emphasised that the interviewees were not expected to be exclusively, neither to be openly gay; that their anonymity would be guaranteed, and that the interview material would not be used without their informed consent. Moreover, the adverts underlined that the study was not only on negative experiences :

*« We would of course like to know if you<sup>2</sup> have ever encountered discrimination. But we are just as curious to know about all kinds of other experiences, both negative and positive – including “inconsequential” experiences and “vague” impressions. »*

Of the 40 athletes who responded to these adverts, seventeen (including one couple) were selected for an in-depth interview. With a view to creating a diverse research population, preference was given to women, to respondents who lived outside « Randstad » (the highly urbanised region around Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht), to those who were more than 34, or less than 20 years old, who had a low education level, or whose ethnic background was (partly) non-Dutch. As the latter were scarce, particularly among field hockey players, three more respondents (Hisham, Quincey and Tariq) were actively recruited. To protect the anonymity of the respondents, pseudonyms have been used..

2 – Use was made in these texts of the informal ‘you’ form (‘jij/jouw/je/jullie’ rather than the formal ‘u/uw’).

Name (pseudon.)	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION LEVEL	ETHNIC BACKGROUND	RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND	RANDSTAD	BRANCH OF SPORT X = NO LONGER PRACTICE
AREND	M	48	HIGH (WO)	NL	PROTEST.	YES	FITNESS
BEATRIJS	F	27	HIGH (WO)	NL	N	NO	HOCKEY
CECIEL	F	25	HIGH (HBO)	NL	NO	NO	HOCKEY
DAPHNE	F	29	HIGH (WO)	NL	NO	YES	FITNESS
ELISA	F	19	HIGH (STUDENT)	NL	PROTEST	NO	FITNESS
FRITS	M	41	LOW	NL	PROTEST	NO	HOCKEY
GERT-JAN	M	26	HIGH (HBO)	NL	NO	NO	HOCKEY
HISHAM	M	28	HIGH (STUDENT)	MOROCCO	MUSLIM	YES	HOCKEY FITNESS
INEZ	F	43	HIGH (WO)	NL	NO	YES	HOCKEY (X)
JAVIÉR	M	27	HIGH (STUDENT)	S.-AMERICA	CATHOLIC	YES	FITNESS
KIM	F	39	HIGH (WO)	NL	PROTEST	YES	HOCKEY
LENN	M	19	LOW	S.-E. ASIA	PROTEST	NO	FITNESS
MUSTAFA	M	23	HIGH (STUDENT)	TURKEY	MUSLIM	NO	FITNESS
OLIVIER	M	42	HIGH (WO)	NL	NO	YES	HOCKEY
PIETER	M	29	LOW	NL	PROTEST	YES	HOCKEY
QUINCEY	M	28	HIGH (WO)	CARIBBEAN	CATHOLIC	YES	HOCKEY
ROB	M	28	HIGH (STUDENT)	NL	NO/ PROTEST.	NO	HOCKEY
SUWARNI	F	29	HIGH (WO)	S.E.-ASIA	CATHOLIC	YES	HOCKEY (X)
TARIQ	M	40	LOW	MIDDLE EAST	CHRISTIAN	YES	FITNESS
YVONNE	F	32	HIGH (WO)	NL	NO	YES	HOCKEY
ZEEGER	M	18	LOW	NL	NO	NO	FITNESS

- HBO = university of professional education ;
- WO = university ;
- NL = both parents born in the Netherlands.

## Athletes' careers

Among field hockey players, one can differentiate between those athletes who chose this branch of sports, usually when they were teenagers, and those who sucked it in with their mothers' milk. Five interviewees (Beatrijs, Gert-Jan, Inez, Kim and Olivier) were to the manner born; their parents played hockey and took them to their club while they were very young. As noted before, field hockey is closely associated with the life style of the upper middle class, cultivated in student fraternities. In the southern province of Brabant, field hockey is far from élitist, but many clubs are dominated by the members of a few « founding families ».

The other field hockey interviewees discovered this branch of sports when they were teenagers or twens, often because they were taken along by friends. Like many others, Hisham (28, born in Morocco) had been to several parties at the field hockey club when his class mates urged him to join. He initially declined the invitation as he did not think of himself as a sportsman and had « many prejudices » about field hockey :

« That it is an élitist, white branch of sports, and that people talk with a stiff upper lip. [...] And that I would not fit in. [...] That people would be arrogant, condescending, and would not accept me, because of my background. Really strange idea. But that's how I imagined it. No one would explicitly say it, but that's how it would go. »

Quincey, who grew up in the Netherlands Antilles, was well into his twenties when fellow students asked him to join their team « I said : "I don't know how to play." – "O, never mind. Take this stick." » The exclusive image of hockey clubs did not scare him off: « It was only after a year that I realised: Gee... few foreigners here... » Yvonne had tried tennis, basketball, swimming and sailing when she, at the age of fifteen, joined a hockey club: « I thought it would be fun, such a team sports with just girls.[laughs] But at that time I still thought I fancied men. » None of the interviewees mentioned homosexuality as a reason for choosing hockey.

Unlike field hockey, fitness training is a newcomer in the Netherlands ; only since the 1980s has it been practised on a wide scale. It is not surprising, then, that none of the interviewees were familiar with it until they came of age. Many of them hardly prac-



tised any sport at all; they disliked it and were bad at it<sup>3</sup>. Mustafa's parents, who are from Turkey, had tried to motivate him for soccer, swim, or karate, but he liked none of these sports. Eventually he joined a fitness club: « My main motive was losing weight [...] I weighed about eighty kilograms. » Tariq, too, took up fitness because he was growing fat, as did Lenn. As he sees it, his obesity started as a result of the negative reactions he got to his sexual orientation when he was eleven :

« One day I was in conversation with my class teacher and he said that I had to keep it quiet – that it was dirty and so on. And since then [laughs] I've known that I was different. [...] I then suddenly became very uncertain. I stopped hanging around with my classmates. I started binge-eating, so I became very fat. [...] I began to avoid everything related to men or boys. I wanted no one to touch me – imagine that they would get the wrong idea! [...] And I stopped taking part in school sport: I used to think up all kinds of excuses. »

At the age of sixteen, Lenn began to accept being gay – and joined a fitness club. By strenuously working out, he got rid of his overweight.

Ten years ago, after having practised athletics for many years, Daphne started doing aerobics in the fitness centre she still visits. There was a time when she came there almost every day, sometimes taking two classes on a row :

« Especially at the time when I was struggling with my homosexuality. It's something you project on your looks; you think you are ugly all over : “Every imperfection in my legs has to be eliminated !” [...] After I had fully accepted it, and particularly after I found my present girl-friend [...] it stopped being an obsession. Now it's more natural, and the two of us will sit staring in the mirror: “O my ! O my !” »

Unlike many other interviewees, Javiér was good at sport. In Chili, where he grew up, he tried all sorts of sports, and after coming to the Netherlands he took up martial arts. As he was a bit too slightly built for that, he also started working out. After a while, he did that instead of martial arts, partly because he did not feel comfortable there :

3 – Such statements should not be taken at face-value; they are a standard-ingredient, a topos in nineteenth and twentieth century homosexual autobiographical discourse.

« I really like doing it but I did not like the group atmosphere and I did not feel at ease with the instructor. Besides, I found it difficult to tell that I'm gay. [...] The instructors are always men, and real macho's, who continually want to "score", to screw around, and who don't respect women. [...] I was never directly discriminated against, and never got any negative reactions, but still I felt bad about it. »

Beside playing field hockey, Hisham works out, since he discovered that the fees for students are very low. But fitness is not his true love :

« Hockey is a real team sport; that's completely different : getting together, shouting, cheering, getting angry, expressing emotion [...] Not so with fitness. That's the drawback: there's no competition. In fact, hockey is much more fun than fitness. But then again : "No pain, no gain." [*laughs*] »

None on the interviewees said they had chosen a club or gym because of its « gay-friendliness ». After having been a member of a gay sports club for twelve years, Arend joined a gym where almost all the customers are men with a non-Western background.

« ...because I don't feel like working out in a slick gym where lots of gays come. [*Why not ?*] This place is much more authentic. These men are much more honest, also in being vain, and much more exciting. Gays are simply not exciting. [...] To me, this is truly male bonding [...] I simply want to work out among men, that's what I like. »

No other respondent mentioned eroticism or sexuality as one of the attractions of their branch of sports or sport club <sup>4</sup>. Some of them did mention « shaping up » as a motive, but rather than pursuing an ideal body, they seemed to strive for overcoming their « ugliness » – the physical reflection of a spoiled identity (see Goffman, 1968).

4 – It should be noted, however, that athletes do not easily admit such motives. Hekma et al. (1994, 27-30) got furious reactions to a question on eroticism in sports they included in their questionnaire.

## Unlike soccer

In the Netherlands, like in other European countries, soccer is by far the most popular sport among men. It is not surprising, then, that all male interviewees repeatedly refer to soccer. Each and everyone of them say they hated it and were bad at it. « Because of the social pressure, » explains Javier, « In Chile, you have to play soccer. Everybody does it – so I just didn't dare. » Arend is disgusted by the way in which soccer is glorified in society.

« I hate soccer. Really, it's the most overestimated pastime. [...] This whole cult of “young gods” and so on – sod off ! [...] I've always hated soccer from the bottom of my heart. Because it allegedly proves [...] that you're a real man, “possessing the ball.” »

In Hisham's view it is not surprising that gays don't like soccer, because the reverse is equally true.

[*Have you ever played soccer ?*] « Good question ! [*laughs*] No. » [*Why not ?*] « I think because I felt that, because I'm gay, I could never be a good soccer player. » [*Hm.*] « I sometimes find myself having such irrational ideas. » [*How did you get this idea ?*] « It's just something I thought. I did karate, though ; that's something I did do. » [*Allright. What does soccer have to do with homosexuality ?*] « Soccer is anti-gay. »

Many of the hockey interviewees spontaneously compare their branch of sports with soccer. Not only is homosexuality more accepted, they say, but manners in general are more civilised. « Teams play against one another, but respectfully, » says Pieter, « Hockey is a decent, a gentlemen's sport. » Frits adds that homosexuality is more easily accepted because hockey clubs are often family-based : « Keep your hands off my son or daughter. » Moreover, unlike soccer clubs, hockey clubs have many female members, who tend to protect gays : « I'm gay. – O, cool ! » Quincey however experienced that female members of his hockey club were less acceptant:

« As long as I did my thing, the men didn't have any problems with me. In that respect they were really tolerant. Not so for the women. [...] I found much more tolerance among men than among women. »

Ceciel, the only interviewee who has played both field hockey and soccer, doubts if hockey players are really more gay-friendly than soccer players. In her view, the main difference is that the latter express themselves in a more straightforward way.

« In my soccer club, I had dated a few boys. [...] So they would step up to me and ask: “You’ve got a girl friend now?” – “Yes.” – “O, that’s probably because of so-and-so [boy]...” »

Suwarni, too, thinks that hockey players are not less homophobic, but express their disapproval in a more subtle way:

« It’s just much less explicit. [...] Hockey players are usually well educated, so they have a knack of making you feel – with just little things – that they dislike something about you. »

At the age of fifteen, when she had her first girl friend, it was from her team and club mates that Suwarni got the most negative reactions. Later, too, as a student, her fellow athletes made it clear to her that heterosexuality was the norm. At best, they would make jokes about her being gay:

« And then I would pretend that I, too, thought it was a good joke. But I would think: All those girls have been to university – and look at what they think is funny. »

One year ago, Suwarni quit. « I really like hockey a lot, but the people are really stupid. » Inez too, gave up sports, because of chronic injuries. Although she still loves hockey, she now also sees things she does not like : [*How do hockey players interact ?*] « Harsh. I think it’s a harsh world. People are very judgemental. [...] So you have to be strong, both verbally and mentally. You have to look good, be well dressed – everything has to be just so. Otherwise you’re just a “wimp !” or a “jerk !”. People are unbelievably judgemental and ready to put you down. »

All the male interviewees, too, affirm that hockey players don’t interact in a gentle fashion. « People don’t flinch from pointing out other people’s weaknesses, » says Frits. Quincey was surprised to find out that hockey players gossip a lot about one another :

« Really terrible. I expected “a team”, “the team spirit”, “the team bond” – but no way ! Each and everyone had comments on the others, like “That guy really doesn’t know how to play hockey !” Terrible. Of course some people don’t like gays, and if they don’t attune to me, they will call me “that faggot” – of course that will happen. But the same thing goes for the others. »

The fitness interviewees do not report gossiping. Most of them limit themselves to minimal interactions with their fellow athletes. The result is less fun, but also less negative reactions – for example to their sexual identity.

## Anti-gay reactions

« One knew about me, but I didn't broadcast it, » says Inez, « especially not in the hockey scene, because they would laugh at you about it; it was thought of as something silly. » About fifteen years ago, at the height of her sports career, it became known she was gay. That did not add to her position. When the team she led lost a very important match, rumour had it that this was due to the relationship she had with a team member. Because of this « scandal », some teams refused her as a coach. Since the 1990s, however, aversion against homosexuality has decreased in the hockey scene, says Inez.

Virtually none of the interviewees reports any direct anti-gay hostilities by fellow athletes. The exception is Tariq, born in Syria, who used to work out in an Amsterdam gym :

« I stopped going to that gym, because of a group of Moroccan boys who would often come there. [...] They would also spoke Arabic, really loud [...] One day I heard them using filthy, bad words : “Dirty homo,” and such. [...] Words you wouldn't even hear in some sordid alley, somewhere in Damascus. But then you do hear them in a gym, in Western Europe, in Amsterdam ! In Arabic, for crying out loud. If I hadn't heard it in my mother tongue, it might not have sounded so bad. »

Despite the explicitness of the language Tariq heard, it is not an evident example of anti-gay hostilities, for in this gym he would not hide being Arabic but also being gay. Whereas Tariq was shocked to hear fellow sports participants used words like *homo* as an insult <sup>5</sup> many field hockey players seem to find this perfectly normal. Among *male* hockey players, at least, it is a common term. « Of course, it is often used as an invective, » says Pieter, « if someone does something in a half-hearted way; hits the ball like a softie : “Hey, you homo !”, “Hey, you queen !”, “Hey, you softie !” » All the interviewees who report this sort of language (which seems to be absent among women) underline that they do not take it personally, but regard it as a non-specific, good-humoured expletive – akin to words such as « wimp, » etc. Pieter, who is openly gay, is sometimes annoyed by the frequent use of the term. « Then I will say: “Come on, guys, try some other word.” And

5 – In Dutch, like in French, ‘homo’ is in itself a neutral term, which is even used in official documents

then everybody will say: “O, sorry ! Sorry !” [*laughs*]. » Although the interviewees assure that there is nothing anti-gay about the way in which « homo » is used, they do see some negative side-effects :

« ...because it suggests that gays are weak. And I can imagine that if you're seventeen and full of doubts and all you hear is “Homo !”, “Homo !”, “Homo !” as something negative, it will keep you from coming out of the closet. » (Frits)

If a team-mate calls you « homo, » that's nothing more than playfulness, feels Gert-Jan (26) ; but if someone on the opposing team does it, « then it has different connotations » – especially if you really are gay. Frits was once called « homo » by someone from another hockey club : « My team resolved it very neatly : they beat him up. [*laughs*] I didn't have to do anything. » <sup>6</sup>

The interviewees do not report other anti-gay expressions. Lenn notices that many Turkish fellow athletes look down upon gays, but Arend has never heard or seen any anti-gay hostilities in his gym, where the vast majority of the customers are men with a non-Western background. Just once he overheard a discussion on homosexuality, in which a Turkish man spoke in defence of gays.

## Out in sports

In his gym, Arend has never had any reactions to his being gay. Small wonder, because he does not show it there <sup>7</sup>.

[*Who knows that you're gay ?*] « Everyone. [...] But in the gym, I tell it to no one. It's not relevant, there [...] I reckon they have their suspicions ; I'm not like the average customer. »

The same goes for most of the other fitness interviewees. As Elisa points out, a gym is « in fact just a public space ». Javiér feels uneasy with that anonymity.

« Fitness is so individualised and impersonal [...] I usually talk to no one. And I wouldn't dare to say I'm gay. » [*What do you think would happen ?*] « Nothing, probably, but still I have this feeling. »

6 – According to Erving Goffman (1968, p. 169), this is a familiar pattern : « When the in-group deviant is attacked by outsiders, the group may well rally in support; when the group isolate is attacked, he is more likely to do his own fighting. »

7 – However, the aforementioned fellow athlete who showed his erection apparently suspected that Arend might be interested.

Only Zeeger and Daphne are truly « out ». For both of them, the gym means much more than a public space. Zeeger works out in the fitness centre of a friend of his father's : « So everybody knows about me. » In the gym, he sometimes openly discusses his love life or shows himself « in flashy gay clothes ». Daphne has been a member of the same gym for ten years already, and has many friends there. Years ago, when she had just met her first girl friend, she was eager to tell others about it :

« Because people here are a bit arrogant, so I thought : “I’ll show them a thing or two – I’m special too !” Not to my friends, but to the “silicone ladies” ; I sort of felt like provoking them. »

The majority of field hockey interviewees were « out » in their team or club. The exceptions are Hisham, Rob and, more or less, his boy-friend Gert-Jan. Rob did come out to his previous team, but his present team thinks he's straight :

« ...in the cafeteria [*they will say*] : “Rob, isn't it time you get a girl ? Look at her ! We'll fetch her !” [...] “How about that one ? Nice big boobs !” [...] I know how to talk along with them, but sometimes I think : “How long must I keep up this comedy ?” »

When Pieter finally came out to his team, he found out to his surprise that they had already known about it for months. That was quite a relief to him, because during these months he hadn't noticed any change of attitude. Kim was 31 when she for the first time fell in love, and got involved with a woman. After a few weeks she took her to a match :

« I said : “This is my girl-friend.” Period. That was all, in fact. I can't make it any more dramatic. [*laughs*] [...] I was the first [*lesbian*] in my team, but certainly not in my club. It was not an issue. »

Generally speaking, female hockey players seem to come out more easily than male hockey players ; once they know they are gay, it does not take them long to tell their fellow team members. However, it seems to be quite a different thing to tell other club members – maybe because they include men. Yvonne, for example, finds it difficult « ...to spit out : “Guys, there's no point a making advances ; I'm not interested !” [*laughs*] “Your girl-friend is cuter !” »

Quincey was already out to his family and friends when he started playing hockey, and he never hid being gay :

« At my first *thé dansant* [hockey party] [...] a girl came to me and said : “Wow, you sure know how to dance !” And then someone else asked : “Are you gay ?” [*laughs*] So I said : “What a cliché ! But as it happens, you’re right : Yes indeed, I am gay.” Know what I mean ? [...] People will only start difficulties if you are secretive, or insecure about it. Then they will use it against you, because they simply *smell* it. »

Olivier was 38 when he finally admitted, to himself and to others, that he is gay. Instead of telling everyone individually (« Then they will say: “Why are you telling this to *me* ? I’m not gay ! ») he sent one email to all his colleagues, friends and acquaintances. The reactions he got were heart-warming, also when he saw them again at the hockey club :

« Those blokes are warming up for the match, see me standing, then leave the ball and jump *bop-bop* over the fence : “Hey, Olly, congratulations !”, “Great !”, “Well done !”, “I’m really proud of you !” I felt like a little boy, all embarrassed, but it was also *cool*. »

Because he had come out to practically everyone at once, fellow club members felt free to refer to his being gay :

« So I walked through the swing-doors, stood there [in the club house], and someone at the bar yelled at me : “Hey, homo ! Want a beer ? You deserve one.” That was sweet. »

## « Family » in sports : other gays and lesbians

Although almost all the hockey interviewees say that they feel accepted at their club, most of them (the men in particular) are the only openly homosexual members. « Gays don’t play hockey, » says Kim jokingly. Beatrijs however thinks that most gay men (unlike lesbians) really are bad at it.

[*Is that something you’ve noticed ?*] « Well, I actually know not a single gay man in the hockey scene. As far as I know gays, I can’t imagine that they can play hockey very well. [...] For women it’s the other way around, I think. Lesbians are often particularly good at hockey. [...] [*Where do you think that difference comes from ?*] « I think it has to do with hormones and certain zones in the brain that are better or less well developed. »



Quincey however thinks the apparent absence of gays in field hockey is a result of « social pressure », and so does Frits. According to him, many athletes have given up hockey because they are gay. « If you're sixteen, » explains Olivier, « everything is scary, and you certainly don't want to be called "sissy", "faggot", "homo"... » When Olivier had finally come out, he was glad to hear that many of his team and club mates had gay friends or relatives. Many other interviewees, however, are under the impression that to their club mates, they are the first gay acquaintance.

Whereas the majority of hockey interviewees do not know any other gays at their club, all the fitness interviewees now and then see « family » in their gym. They recognise them by the way they dress, look, act, talk, or by the form of sports they choose. Men who take part in aerobic classes, for example, are readily « suspected » of being gay. In gyms, athletes do not talk a lot with one another, but there are ample opportunities for exchanging looks. It does not take a well-developed *gaydar* to find out what these mean. Two athletes report sexual proposals. In Arend's gym, a Turkish boy showed him his erection, and Lenn was once approached by « a really muscular bloke » who openly proposed sex. Neither of them jumped at the offer. Lenn even reported it to the manager of the gym : « I don't want that ! I come there for working out, and I don't want to be looked at. » The hockey interviewees report nothing of the kind. In their branch, sport seems to have nothing to do with sex. But that is a myth, as we will see.

## Field hockey culture

« On the hockey field, it's all about getting the ball into the goal. That's just the same for a straight athlete as for me », says Yvonne, « But sport is not just about sport, I think. It's also about socialising and the experiences around it. » All the interviewees emphasise that socialising is an important aspect of playing hockey. For Quincey, this came as a pleasant surprise :

« I thought it was about sport, but that is less than 50%. You play for two half hours and then everybody goes to the club house: drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, and hanging around there for the rest of the day. 70% is about socialising. Great ! Super cool ! »

Suwarni however did not like the group atmosphere before and after training and matches :

« There would always be a few leaders, who ran the show. Whatever they said was cool, according to the team [...] Going after boys a lot, drinking beer, smoking – all those popular things. »

Several interviewees report that hockey players, compared to other athletes, drink and smoke a lot. This is not only true of clubs that are dominated by university students, but even of the family-based club in the southern province of Brabant. Beatrijs recalls how all the members, whether young or old, took part in the drinking bouts after the match. Participating was almost mandatory: « You can't say "I've got other plans," the whole Sunday is reserved for hockey. » Beatrijs' present girl-friend thinks the hockey scene is « cult-like ». Other interviewees mention similarities with student fraternities. Suwarni remembers...

« ...all of those bragging boys. And all of these girls hanging around the boys. And everybody trying to outdo the others, by showing how cool they are or how great their job is. »

Hockey clubs are famous for the parties they organise, often called *thé dansant* – although tea is usually not served. These parties show a strong point of hockey clubs, namely that they usually have as many female as male members. « It's a great marriage market »<sup>8</sup>, says Kim, but « meat market » seems a more appropriate term. Frits refers to « a Costa Brava-feeling », Yvonne says it's « just a lot of whoring around' and according to Quincey, « ...it's one big orgy, in the end. » Olivier summarises what hockey is about: « Beer and broads. » As a consequence, gay athletes may find themselves slightly out of tune :

[*Was there a lot of kissing ?*] « Yes. » [*laughs*] [*Did you take part in that ?*] « No. » [*Did the others notice ?*] « No ! In my team there were more boys who didn't have girl-friends, and who didn't "score" a lot, so fortunately it wasn't noticed. » [...] [*Did the others ever ask why you didn't kiss with girls ?*] « I would make up excuses ; that I didn't fancy them, or that I hadn't had the chance. » (Hisham)

In Beatrijs' club, straight girls would sometimes kiss with one another, to excite the men. Kissing between men, however, is not done, as Quincey discovered during his first tournament:

« I was walking round, a bit drunk, and I was grabbed by a boy [...] and then he started kissing me. People around us were loo-

8 – This is true of most « mixed » team sports (Hekma et al., 1994).

king as if to say “What the hell is going on here ? !” For the rest of the tournament it was the hot gossip. So I quit, the next day. I thought : This is too much. Everyone talked about it. [...] Now I wouldn't be so quick to do it [...] No, that's not done. »

Before and after regular hockey matches, too, heterosexual conquests are amply discussed – not in the most courteous terms. « Sometimes it is not so nice if all your team mates talk about tits. » Olivier, too, says : « It's only about beer and boobs. » At hockey parties, he sometimes feels an outsider, because all his male friends focus on girls.

« Then, sometimes I think: “What the hell am I doing here ? [...] Standing here as some Rémi<sup>9</sup>... in a setting ...” [*Nobody's Boy* ?] « Yes. Then you realise that there's nothing in it for you. »

Yvonne notices that the women, too, are often much more interested in men than in one another.

« Team mates of mine know all these men. [...] They know exactly who plays in which team, how old they are and [...] with whom they have had love affairs. [...] Even I know more men than women at the hockey club. Even without trying. »

Suwarni was annoyed by all this boy talk, particularly when her team mates (who knew she was gay) pushed her to try it with a guy.

Many interviewees emphasise that hockey is « a sociable branch of sports », but apparently that sociability is highly sexualised – *heterosexualised*, to be exact.

## Seeing and being seen in the gym

The sort of socialising that makes hockey clubs attractive to some, and repulsive to others, seems absent in most fitness centres. In part, this is only natural ; fitness is an individual sport. Still, these athletes must relate to one another, because they share rooms, equipment and other facilities. But that does not imply\*\*\* that they will talk, not even that they will greet one another. Beside the solitary nature of fitness, other factors also account for the lack of sociability in many fitness centres. Firstly, their clientele is

9 – Rémi is the protagonist of Hector Malot's \*CHECK\* famous novel *Sans famille* (18\*\*), translated into English as *Nobody's Boy*, and into Dutch as *Alleen op de wereld* ('Alone in the world').

usually less stable than the membership of traditional sport clubs. Secondly, this clientele is often less homogeneous in terms of socio-economic status, ethnic background and education. These class, culture and language gaps discourage making acquaintances. Hans does not know any of his fellow athletes by name, and greets only few of them : « Hardly any of these Moroccan boys makes eye contact, you know, and I find that really hard to deal with. » Thirdly, verbal communication is impeded by the overwhelming presence of visual interaction : in a gym, athletes can hardly avoid looking at one another. Whether they like it or not, they get to see much of one another – more than they themselves feel is appropriate. Ignoring the others (or at least pretending it) is a way of dealing with that tension.

Although verbal communication is scarce in fitness centres, there can be a lively, be it an implicit competition. As athletes watch one another (their physical appearance, their outfit, their performance) they cannot avoid comparing themselves with others. « It's slightly intimidating », says Elisa about the muscular athletes she sometimes sees, « because they make you feel skinny, un-athletic. » She's glad that in her gym, men are not allowed to wear a singlet that leaves their shoulders uncovered. But in relation to women, too, she sometimes feels inferior.

« Lots of those girls wear tiny tops, but I always wear a plain T-shirt, so sometimes I think : “Oh my, I'm a real dyke !” [*laughs*] Know what I mean ? That I don't really make an effort. »

Javiér says that he wears whatever he likes, but before stepping out of the dressing room he sometimes feels insecure.

« Then I worry that maybe I am wearing something wrong. So then I will check in the mirror : “Is this normal ?” The feeling that I'm not normal – that people will look at me. »

Arend says he doesn't care about his outfit. In the gym, he often wears a T-shirt with a big pink triangle on it – but then he wears it inside out. Unlike the other interviewees, Arend says he actually enjoys being looked at, particularly when he's doing some very hard exercise. These looks, and the comments he sometimes gets from fellow athletes tell him that he has their respect. Because Arend works out really hard, and is a regular, his fellow athletes allow him to use more dumb-bells at the same time than is customary in his gym. Such privileges are not uncommon in fitness centres. Javiér has noticed that some athletes can afford to use more space and equipment than others.

« Most people work on a machine and then leave it to others, as quickly as they can. But the regulars often linger [...] As if they don't have to take other people into consideration ; because they are superior, they have more rights. »

Apparently, fitness, too, is a competition sport. Without official rules, referees or score keeping, the athletes experience subtle victories and defeats vis-à-vis fellow visitors. In itself, this « silent competition » has little to do with sport as such or with sexuality, but it seems to discourage gay athletes from expressing their sexual orientation. In sports, after all, homosexuality is commonly associated with weakness. Moreover, in gyms, athletes compete with one another by looking (or consciously *not* looking) at one another ; by showing or hiding themselves. Such « silent acting » is also a well-tried method for sounding one's sexual chances. Gay athletes seem acutely aware that looking at others is actually *not done* – and if they do it anyhow, it often gives them a bad conscience. « I look a lot at people but I have the feeling I shouldn't look », says Javiér, « I feel everyone knows that I'm looking at boys. » Hisham says something similar :

« I try not to look at boys. Because, well, it can have unpleasant consequences. [...] I don't want to give gays a bad reputation. »

People watching is unavoidable in a gym, and even necessary for figuring out one's social position, but that does not make it less dubious – particularly when one gets to see skin.

## The unease of undressing

When she trains with a friend, Elisa sometimes discusses her love life in the gym, but she will always keep in mind that she can be overheard.

« Well, I must admit that I will talk at a lower voice then. » [*Why ?*]  
« Well, er... [*silence*] Well... [*laughs*] Well... er... [*laughs*] God, this is ridiculous ! [*laughs*] I remember that at first, there were these female psychology students, who always looked tiptop, and in the dressing room they would always talk about their boy friends [...] Somehow that makes it more difficult... because they can overhear... I don't know... » [*Can you put it into words ?*]  
« Well... Er... Because they're so terribly straight ! » [*laughs*] [...] It's stupid, but because I always change clothes in the dressing room, and also shower, I don't really want them to know, because I'm afraid they will think I might look at them. Really stupid, don't you think ? »

In gyms, many gays and lesbians try to avoid physical proximity to fellow-athletes of the same sex. They anticipate possible accusations and feel bad about seeing others undressed – precisely because this *could* be sexually exciting. Interestingly, athletes do not easily admit that they feel uneasy about this. Javiér (born in Chili) says he usually showers at home, because the facilities in the gym are not very good.

« It's not because I don't want to be naked. [...] Moreover, people don't know that I'm gay. » [*Would it make a difference if people did know ?*] « A bit, but I would still take a shower. » [*What difference would it make ?*] « Well, then I'd be afraid that they wouldn't like sharing the dressing room and the shower with me. [...] When it gets too close, people don't like it. [...] : “Oh no, not *that*.” »

Many respondents who go to gyms seem to feel as if they are trespassing just by using the dressing rooms and showers ; they are afraid that, simply by their presence, they will offend others.

This problem rarely occurs in hockey, since the players (apart from those who play at the highest level, like Pieter and Inez) do not shower. They arrive, play, have a drink (or ten) and go back home in their sports kit. All the interviewees affirm that this is typical of « hockey culture », but none of them seems to know why. « The showers are not very good », say some of them – but that seems to be a result rather than a cause of this habit. Others say that one doesn't want to miss the drinks afterwards. Moreover, say Suwarni and Beatrijs, these drinking bouts will often make you dirty : people throw beer, and if they are drunk, they often fall on the muddy floor. At least as important as these practical reasons is that this happens to be the custom. « Everyone is pushed into the same pattern », says Yvonne.

Whatever the reason for or cause of this custom of not showering may be, the consequence is that the players only ever see each other in their sports kit. This « uniform » outfit blurs differences between individual players, affirms their sense of belonging, marks the difference between sport and everyday life, and thus promotes an exuberant mood – but it also takes away the will or courage of individual players to « stand before your team naked », as Frits puts it. The conformist group culture which holds players back from getting undressed is the same culture that prevents some of them from coming out of the closet.

## Conclusion

« Sport has nothing to do with sex, » it is often said. That puts gay athletes in a difficult position, because as much as they often try to keep these sport and sex apart from one another, their fellow athletes often do put two and two together.

In team sports like field hockey, « homo » is by far the most commonly used invective among men. This is usually not meant as an expression of anti-gay feelings, but it is nonetheless remarkable that athletic performance is being associated not only with gender (as in using terms like *mietje*, which roughly means « wimp ») but with sexual orientation. Even though all the interviewed male hockey players underline that they do not take this usage personally, many of them do think it discourages gay athletes.

Lesbian athletes (hockey players in particular) are not called names and sometimes even feel encouraged by stereotypes about sport, gender and sexuality. In their case, those stereotypes are favourable ; lesbians have a reputation for being tough, manly and therefore sporty. In addition, they have many role models whom they can take as examples : sport is one of the few social sectors where lesbians have a much more prominent presence than gay men (Elling, Knoppers & De Knop, 2001). Yet some of the women interviewed here do not feel entirely at ease in their sports club or gym. None of them described sport as a lesbian sanctuary.

Eric Dunning had called sports « a male preserve » (Sheard & Dunning, 1973). It cultivates and celebrates putatively masculine capacities like muscular strength, daring, and aggression, which have become obsolete or even dysfunctional in modern, post-industrial societies. Such a cultivation and celebration can take reactionary forms, but there is nothing essentially homophobic about recreational white-collar machismo; the present-day gay scene is no less male chauvinist and misogynist than many branches of sport.

Judging by the social composition of clubs, field hockey is a *white middle class* preserve rather than a male preserve. One of the informal means with which this preserve is maintained is « hockey culture » : a set of largely implicit, but compelling norms and rules. For gay athletes, this culture has ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, the emphasis on mutual respect and fair play

protects them from hostile reactions of fellow athletes and spectators. On the other hand, however, there is a strongly conformist tendency. Hockey clubs seem not inclined to acknowledge social differences other than age and gender, not to give room for expressing diversity. This explains why gay athletes, despite the intensive socialising in hockey clubs, often feel somewhat isolated. Initiatives like Pink Hockey can be effective to overcome this isolation ; they offer gay athletes an opportunity to come out as a team, instead of coming out to their team. In branches of sports that are characterised by a strong group culture, such a strategy has important advantages (see also Elling, De Knop & Knoppers, 2003).

Beside being a preserve, sport clubs function as heterosexual hunting grounds (see also Hekma et al., 1994 ; Elling, Knoppers & De Knop, 2001 ; Tiessen-Raaphorst & Breedveld, 2007). In hockey clubs, at least, the atmosphere is highly sexualised. The predominance of sex talk, courting and conquests makes it difficult for gay athletes to hide their sexual orientation, whereas it leaves them little room for sexual expression. Gay athletes who come out, are not deliberately excluded (many of them even get a warm welcome) but usually do not find opportunities for participating on their own terms. Lesbians sometimes do find some room for sexual expression, but gays are virtually disqualified for « the third half ». In fitness centres, too, social interaction is often somewhat sexualised, but thanks to its centrifugal and volatile nature, gay athletes have equal opportunities. The drawback is that, as a group is lacking, there are less rules for preventing frictions between athletes. A remarkable difference between hockey interviewees and fitness interviewees is that the latter report not only more frictions but also more erotic attraction between them and their fellow athletes. In the interviews, this dimension was not systematically explored, because previous research (Hekma et al., 1994) had shown that many gay athletes resent being asked questions on this.

The two branches of sports explored in this study are not representative of Dutch sports in general. As mentioned before, field hockey is one of the very few team sports that are as popular among gay and straight athletes, and fitness is even significantly more so (Janssens, Elling & Van Kalmthout, 2003, table 4h). This makes it all the more remarkable that in these two branches of sports, too, homosexuality is not easily accepted: even though gay athletes are hardly ever confronted with hostilities, their sexual



orientation seems to inspire unease, insecurity, tensions, or shame, and seems to call for information management or, once they are out, tension management. In sport, homosexuality is not a handicap, but it is still regarded as a stigma, i.e. something that disqualifies an individual from full social participation (Goffman, 1968:9).

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