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Citation:

Dashper, K (2012) 'Dressage Is Full of Queens!' *Masculinity, Sexuality and Equestrian Sport. Sociology*, 46 (6). 1109 - 1124. ISSN 0038-0385 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038512437898>

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Document Version:

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**'Dressage is full of queens!' Masculinity, sexuality and equestrian sport**

**Katherine Dashper**

**Abstract**

Attitudes towards sexuality are changing and levels of cultural homophobia decreasing, yet there remain very few openly gay men within sport. As a proving ground for heteromascularity, sport has traditionally been a hostile environment for gay men. This article is based on an ethnographic study within a sporting subworld in which gay men do appear to be accepted: equestrian sport. Drawing on inclusive masculinity theory, equestrian sport is shown to offer an unusually tolerant environment for gay men in which heterosexual men of all ages demonstrate low levels of homophobia. Inclusive masculinity theory is a useful framework for exploring the changing nature of masculinities and this study demonstrates that gay men are becoming increasingly visible and accepted within once unreceptive locales, such as sport and rural communities. However, this more tolerant attitude is purchased at the expense of a subordinated feminine Other, perpetuating the dominance of men within competitive sport.

**Key words:** equestrian; gender integration; homophobia; inclusive masculinity; sexuality; sport

## Introduction

When I came out I said I didn't want to be known as the gay rugby player, but I've learned since then that I am a gay rugby player. Now, if someone turned around in the crowd and said "Thomas, you're gay" then I would say "Yes, I know I am, I told the world didn't I?" I have nothing to be afraid of any more because no words can offend me. When you can be 100 per cent honest with everyone, it makes you a better person, and a better player. (Thomas, 2011)

When Welsh rugby player Gareth Thomas 'came out' as gay publicly in December 2009 his story was reported in all the major newspapers and outlets. In February 2011 cricketer Steven Davies also 'came out' publicly as gay, citing Thomas as an inspiration. The British Social Attitudes Survey (2010) indicates that people are becoming more tolerant of non-normative sexualities, and McCormack and Anderson's research with young British students suggests that attitudes to male intimacy are changing, and that the lines between homosexual and heterosexual are being blurred (McCormack & Anderson, 2010a; McCormack, 2011). Yet the widespread interest in the 'coming out' of Thomas and Davies indicates that attitudes to homosexuality within sport are lagging behind wider social opinion. Thomas' and Davies' announcements are big news because they are the only openly gay players in professional rugby and cricket respectively. There are no openly gay footballers currently playing in the English football league system. In the strongly masculine, heteronormative institution of organised sport,

gay men remain underrepresented and often marginalised (Anderson, 2009a). This article explores a sporting context in which this does not appear to be the case: that of equestrian sport.

Equestrian sport has a long history, with its origins in the military and farming communities, both strongly masculine locations. However, equestrianism is highly unusual within competitive sport as it is the only Olympic-level sport in which men and women compete against each other on equal terms, and have done for over sixty years. This may help diffuse the hyper-masculine cultures reported in men-only sporting settings, which are believed to contribute to the high levels of homophobia still evident in most competitive sports (Anderson, 2005a; Messner, 2002). Within equestrian sport – and especially within the subjective, artistically-driven sub-division of dressage – openly gay men are present in relatively high numbers.

This article draws on a study that included interviews with 33 competitive horse riders (22 women and 11 men, 4 of whom identify as gay) and over three years of participant observation within the subworld of equestrian sport in Britain. The initial focus for the study was gender and the implications of gender integration within equestrian training and competition for men and women in the sport. I was interested in the ways in which the widely used practice of segregating sport along binary sex lines contributes to the ongoing subordination and devaluing of women's sport and the effects of *not* organising a sport around blanket sex segregation on the experiences of male and female riders. As Jackson (2006, p.106) points out, 'Sexuality, gender and heterosexuality intersect in variable ways' and my investigations of equestrian sport suggested that sex integration and the acceptance of gay men within this milieu are closely related.

In response to McCormack and Anderson's (2010a, p.844) charge that 'research often underplays the complex, multi-dimensional interaction of sexuality and gender', this article explores these intersections in creating what appears to be an unusually welcoming and accepting sporting environment for gay men. Drawing on Anderson's (2009a) inclusive masculinity theory, I argue that the presence of men and women in the same competitive context is important for beginning to break down the persistent homophobia of sport that contributes to the ongoing sporting subordination of both women and gay men.

Anderson's (2009a) research suggests that as levels of homophobia decrease in the wider culture, even the conservative institution of organised sport may be becoming more inclusive and tolerant of gay men. However, although Anderson's theory was developed on the basis of multiple ethnographies, they all explored a small section of the male population – (mainly) white, university-attending young men – and so this study takes his work in a new direction by focusing on a wider age-range of both men and women, the majority of whom do not have a university education and come from rural backgrounds. I find that inclusive masculinity theory still has relevance and application in this different context and with a different demographic of research participants, but that even within this more inclusive sporting setting, masculinity (gay or straight) continues to be constructed in opposition to a devalued feminine Other.

### **Masculinity, homophobia and organised sport**

Sport has long been recognised as an institution created by and for men. The origins of most modern sports are traced back to the English boys' public schools of the nineteenth

century where sport was used to instil positive masculine characteristics of bravery, team spirit, leadership and resilience into young boys (Mangan, 2000). Throughout the twentieth century sport continued to be seen as a largely masculine practice, and growing professionalism and commercialisation led to the input of huge sums of money into the development of sport as a mass media spectacle. Women have become increasingly involved in sport, as both participants and fans and spectators, but female sports fans continue to be perceived by their male contemporaries as less authentic and dedicated in their interest in sport (Crawford and Gosling, 2004). Female athletes also suffer from lack of sponsorship and media attention, and questioning of their sexuality, appearance and femininity as a result of their active involvement in sport (Griffin, 1998). Women's sport is still seen as inferior to men's sport. This all helps maintain sport as a male domain.

Research on men and masculinity in sport has been heavily influenced by the work of R.W. Connell (1987), particularly the Gramscian-inspired concept of hegemonic masculinity which Connell (1990, p.83) defines as 'the culturally idealised form of masculine character'. Many researchers have identified sport as a prime site for the construction and reproduction of hegemonic, orthodox forms of masculinity (Messner, 1992; Trujillo, 2000). Within sport, the hegemonic form of masculinity has been identified as aggressive, competitive and strongly heterosexual (Anderson, 2005a). This very narrow definition of normative sporting masculinity leads to the sporting subordination not only of women, but also of men who do not conform to hegemonic ideals, including gay men, disabled men and non-sporting men. Sport's role as a 'maker of men' has been facilitated by the exclusion of all things feminine and unmasculine, marginalising, silencing and frequently excluding gay men.

Messner (1992) argued that men involved in sport are assumed to be heterosexual as sport is seen as *the* prime arena for demonstrating masculine capital, particularly in post-industrial societies. Yet not only do most sports involve men in close physical contact, but sport often focuses on fit, muscular, partially clothed bodies and so the homoerotic potential of sport is immense. Pronger (1990) suggests that this homoerotic potential is a key reason for the widespread and deep-rooted homophobia evident in organised sport: homoeroticism is disguised and side-lined by the assumption that everyone is heterosexual. The widespread use of homophobic terms of abuse – words like ‘pussy’, ‘fag’ and ‘queer’ – can be an effective way of marginalising homosexuality within sporting contexts and may encourage athletes to remain closeted to their team mates and coaches (Hekma, 1998). Research throughout the 1990s and early 2000s suggested that homophobia was rife within almost all sporting contexts (e.g. Price and Parker, 2003; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2001; Griffin, 1998). As a result, there was virtually no research on openly gay athletes in mainstream sport, as to ‘come out’ during the course of an athletic career was to risk alienation and exclusion (Anderson, 2002).

Anderson’s (2005a, 2002) work was groundbreaking as he demonstrated the ambivalent status of gay athletes. His research found that only high-performing athletes felt able to ‘come out’ to their teammates without fear of being excluded from sport. These openly gay athletes were never accepted or welcomed by their (presumed) heterosexual peers, merely tolerated on account of their considerable athletic skill. Anderson’s (2011a) more recent research suggests that this may be changing and athletes of lower athletic standing may now be increasingly accepted when they ‘come out’, and recent positive responses to the ‘coming out’ of lowly-ranked Swedish footballer Anton Hysen would appear to support this. However, the ‘coming out’ of sportsmen continues to be

considered newsworthy, indicative of the unusual nature of such announcements and the ongoing marginalisation of gay men in sport.

The sporting environment remains hostile for gay men but the recent research of Anderson and his colleagues suggests that this may be changing, at least for Anglo-American university undergraduates. In a variety of sporting contexts, including rugby (Anderson and McGuire, 2010), football (soccer) (Adams et al., 2010), cheerleading (Anderson, 2005b), and Australian Rules football (Wedgwood, 2003) - a more inclusive form of masculinity – one based less on homophobia and misogyny than the orthodox masculinity central to earlier work on masculinity and sport – has been found to co-exist with orthodox masculinity, suggesting a shift in gender patterns. This suggests the need to move away from hegemonic masculinity as the prime theoretical framework for understanding sporting masculinity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **From hegemonic masculinity to inclusive masculinity**

Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity has proven useful in explorations of men and sport, the dominance of this analytical framework has limited research in the field (Pringle, 2005). Anderson (2009a) argues that hegemonic masculinity theory was developed during a period of high cultural homophobia where men were fearful of being associated with or accused of homosexuality and links to femininity, and the associated loss of status this entailed. Consequently an orthodox form of masculinity, predicated on homophobia and anti-femininity, was the standard against which all men were judged. However, times have changed and we are currently experiencing a long period of decreasing cultural homophobia, as evidenced in the increased visibility and acceptance



of gay men in a variety of cultural contexts, such as fashion, entertainment and film (Streitmatter, 2009). Once feminised behaviours, such as concern with appearance and emotional closeness between men, are now accepted facets of male heterosexuality and consequently acceptable forms of masculinity have proliferated. Although orthodox forms of masculinity are still dominant in numerous milieus, such as the military (Hinojosa, 2010), other more inclusive forms of masculinity are often also acceptable and hold equal cultural status in many social spheres.

Within hegemonic masculinity theory, masculinities are understood to be structured hierarchically, with orthodox masculinity in the dominant (hegemonic) position (Connell, 1987). However, inclusive masculinity theory maintains that, at times of prolonged decreasing cultural homophobia, masculinities are structured horizontally, so that no one form is culturally dominant. More inclusive forms of masculinity open up space for the acceptance of a wider variety of gendered behaviours, even in traditionally heteromale institutions such as team sports (Anderson and McGuire, 2010). This has important implications for the acceptance of both gay men and women in such contexts.

However, although inclusive masculinity theory suggests that even within sport men are freer to express a wider range of gendered behaviours than was the case 20 years ago, Anderson (2009a) cautions that this does not mean that subordination and oppression have been erased. Central to the organisation of almost all sport is the segregation of men and women, boys and girls, regardless of the level of skill, strength or speed involved. Very rarely do we see males and females competing against each other in sport, and this helps reinforce commonsense belief in the categorical differences between men and women (McDonagh and Pappano, 2008). Segregation is justified as

'protecting' women from strong male athletes, and ensuring women continue to find space within competitive sport. The segregation of sport along binary sex lines is predicated on the idea of sexual difference, and the construction of hetero-desire as the ontological essence of gender difference establishes the meaning of the relationship between male and female, masculinity and femininity, as hierarchical and unequal (Schippers, 2007). Consequently, despite decreasing levels of cultural homophobia and wider variance in acceptable masculine behaviour, sport continues to reinforce heteronormative assumptions about sexual difference. This has implications for all men within sport, as they continue to operate in a realm separated and differentiated from women and all things feminine. This may have particular relevance for gay men, as long established links between homosexuality and femininity may lead to the ongoing marginalisation of gay men in sport, despite gains in other areas of society.

Inclusive masculinity theory is "grounded in the experience of 18-22 year old white undergraduate men" (Anderson, 2011a: p.257), yet those who control sport – coaches, managers, journalists – come from a different generation which valued orthodox masculinity as central to sport (Anderson, 2009b). Additionally, men from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and those without university-level education may hold different views about masculinity, femininity and homosexuality than the students of Anderson's many ethnographic studies. This article thus advances inclusive masculinity theory by applying it to men of varying ages and from very different backgrounds, thus testing its application in contexts different to those studied by Anderson and his colleagues.

## **Equestrian sport**

Equestrian sport provides the empirical focus for the following sections. Horse-riding is often perceived to be marginal and elitist, and this may be a reason for the lack of academic attention paid to this sporting subworld, despite reports that 4.3 million people in Britain ride (BHIC, 2009). Perhaps due in part to its marginal position from the norms of the 'centre' of sport, which Messner (2002) characterised as being dominated by men's team contact sports, equestrian sport offers an alternative sporting environment to its participants, and appears to attract gay men in relatively high numbers.

Equestrian sport differs from most organised sports in a number of ways, with one of the most significant being the lack of sex segregation in any official equestrian competition. As mentioned, the segregation of sport along binary sex lines is predicated on the assumption of significant differences between male and female, underpinned by heteronormative assumptions which position male and female as complementary and opposite, as well as unequal. This contributes to hyper-masculine male sporting subworlds that are frequently characterised by high levels of misogyny and homophobia, and the devaluing of female athletic performance and questioning of female athletes' femininity (Griffin, 1998). Due to the lack of sex segregation in equestrian sport, these factors are less pronounced.

Women dominate equestrian sport numerically, with two thirds of all British riders being female (BETA, 2006). Popular associations of horses and riding also tend to construct it as a predominantly female activity within the UK. However, men compete successfully in all forms of competitive riding and tend to dominate the elite levels of the sport, especially in racing and show jumping (Cassidy, 2002). Equally, although current

associations with girls and women may dominate popular perceptions of horses and riding, Birke and Brandt (2009, p.195) discuss how equestrian discourse is based on 'a predominantly masculine knowledge', and equestrian sport developed from military riding and was thus infused with masculine meaning. Due to historic links with the military, the landed gentry and upper-class society, equestrian sport still has strong class undertones (Riedi, 2006). Although participation in equestrianism is now much more evenly spread across socio-economic groups and now involves more women than men (BETA, 2006), the history of the sport remains firmly linked to upper-class masculinity, and these associations continue to affect how the sport is perceived today.

This study took place within the subworld of equestrian sport in Britain in 2007-2009. Although the phrase 'equestrian sport' could be taken to apply to a wide range of sports involving horses, for the purposes of this study I used it to refer exclusively to the Olympic disciplines of dressage, show-jumping and eventing. These equestrian disciplines have a long history in the UK and an established programme of competitions over the year. I attended horse shows in the midlands and north of England, as both participant and observer, and visited many horse yards in order to speak to riders and observe their interactions.

As a competitive rider myself, I had easy access to this social world and already understood many of the unique cultural practices and language that pervade equestrianism (Birke, 2007; Cassidy, 2002). I am what Adler and Adler (1987) would call a 'complete member' within equestrianism, and although insider status may at times limit a researcher's ability to be critical, in this case it proved invaluable in gaining acceptance from research participants and in understanding the nuances of this relatively closed, insular sporting world. My status as a heterosexual female was also

important in the development of the study. It is probable that participants would have reacted differently to a male researcher, especially when discussing issues relating to gender and sexuality, and many may also have offered different responses to an openly gay researcher. The study involved prolonged contact and interaction with most participants over the course of three years, and so although my social status as a white, heterosexual, female horse rider certainly had a profound impact on the development of the research project, the relatively long nature of the study mimicked (and in fact involved) everyday social relationships within the equestrian social world. Therefore, this paper involves a partial account of masculinity and sexuality within equestrian sport, one that is situated and developed from my social location within this sporting subworld.

The data is based on hundreds of hours of observing at equestrian locations, informal conversations with riders and semi-structured interviews which were voice recorded and transcribed. The following sections explore attitudes to, and experiences of, gay men within equestrian sport, through the lens of inclusive masculinity theory. Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity of participants.

### **'Dressage is full of queens!'**

Within equestrianism, everyone seems aware of the presence of openly gay men and are happy to talk freely about this as an unusual and positive aspect of the sport. Dave, a 53-year old heterosexual dressage rider, explained that this was 'one of the lovely things about dressage' as ability was respected above gender or sexuality. This is consistent with the meritocratic logic of organised sport where athletic ability is prized above all else, but within equestrianism this acceptance of openly gay men extends

beyond the top echelons of the sport and includes the moderately talented and even the purely social rider. As Janet, 45, explained, 'it doesn't matter whether you're gay, straight, male, female, when it comes down to it all that matters is whether you can actually ride or not!'

Matt, a 35-year-old dressage rider, relished telling me how the sport was 'full of queens!'

There's not many straight ones left, and even those are on the turn!  
(laughs) But I mustn't go there! It's one of the nicest things about the dressage world really, there's no bones about it, you are what you are and that's it, take it or leave it. It's actually been quite an eye opener for my other half because he was married prior to being with me, so it was more of a, well, I think he found it quite refreshing, being open about it, whereas before it was constantly hidden. I think it's par for the course, it's more the norm in dressage than anything else and it's probably one of the few sports that is like that.

Matt's description of homosexuality as 'the norm' in dressage marks a very different environment for gay men than that reported in most other sports. Even in Anderson's (2011a; 2011b) recent work which suggests that homosexuality may be met with more tolerance than would have been the case 10 years ago, gay men are still the exception within sport. Drawing on contact theory, inclusive masculinity theory suggests that when heterosexual men actually know gay men as friends and team mates, this encourages a more open and accepting attitude towards homosexuality than is the case for individuals with no personal knowledge of gay men (Pettigrew, 1998; Anderson, 2005b). Equestrian sport supports this, as gay men appear to be so thoroughly integrated as an accepted,

normal part of this sporting world that most participants – gay and straight, male and female – see this as nothing unusual or problematic.

Almost everyone I spoke to told me about the presence of gay men in the sport, and most viewed this as a positive aspect of equestrianism. Greg, a 34-year-old heterosexual dressage rider, told me how he has been ‘chatted up’ by other men when he was out competing.

I was talking to a friend of mine after I’d done my test and her instructor came over to join us. He was chatting to me, acting very interested, that sort of thing, and I got the distinct feeling I was being chatted up! He just assumed that because I was riding at the show I must be gay.

Greg told me this with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, but he certainly was not offended by this man’s apparent interest in him and took it as a fairly normal occurrence within equestrian sport. This did not occur often in Anderson’s 2002 or 2005a research. However, heterosexual men in his 2009a research were more willing to take pride in being ‘chatted up’ by gay men. I therefore found it significant that Greg found this acceptable, as he is a decade older than the men in Anderson’s research.

Gay men appear to feel comfortable to talk about their emotions and sexual lives in much the same way as do heterosexual people within the equestrian social world, and I regularly observed gay couples holding hands in equestrian settings. One reason for this acceptance may be the lack of sex segregation within equestrian sport, which does not require participants to ‘prove’ their masculinity within a homosocial environment. Tom,

25, certainly felt this was the case. Tom runs a large livery yard, breeds horses and competes in show-jumping. Almost all his clients are women.

I love it that way, it's brilliant. I definitely prefer having women around. I think that's just a gay thing, though really, more than a male/female thing. I think it's a sexuality thing. I think that if the place was full of men I'd feel quite self-conscious, quite insecure. I just feel more at home being around women, but like I say, I think that's a gay thing, rather than a gender thing.

Tom feels more comfortable being an openly gay man in a sporting environment with a high proportion of female participants. He acknowledges that homosocial male environments can be threatening for him as an openly gay man, and that the presence of women diffuses this. Anderson (2009b) suggests that one of the most effective ways of challenging the ongoing homophobia and anti-femininity of sport, whilst promoting the expansion of inclusive masculinities, would be gender de-segregation. The case of gender integration in equestrian sport would seem to support this, certainly in terms of reducing homophobia and thus helping openly gay men feel more welcome and accepted. However, gender integration in sport does not necessarily lead to a reduction in sexism and anti-femininity (Wedgwood, 1996).

The social world of equestrian sport thus appears to be a prime example of an inclusive setting, where multiple masculinities (and femininities) are culturally accepted. I found that almost all my research participants demonstrated an inclusive attitude towards the presence of openly gay men within the sport, and this was reflected in the behaviour of many gay men who felt comfortable enough to be tactile and affectionate with their partners in many settings. This is not to say that all men within equestrianism are so



accepting. I did hear a few comments that indicated discomfort with possible associations between equestrianism and homosexuality that might develop from the high visibility of openly gay men in this realm. Bob, a 53-year old heterosexual show jumper, illustrates this more ambivalent attitude.

Bob's son, Will, is 19 and had recently 'come out' as gay. One day when I visited their yard Will and his new boyfriend were training some young horses in the indoor arena. Bob came over to me grinning, and holding a plastic bag. 'Look what I've got in here' he said, indicating the bag. 'Perfect for those two!' He gestured towards Will and his boyfriend. I looked inside the bag to see a packet of fairy cakes. Bob went on, laughing, 'fairy cakes for a pair of fairies!'

Bob's joke could be taken to indicate a level of homophobia and a lack of comfort with his son's sexuality and would thus be consistent with more orthodox forms of masculinity. However, McCormack and Anderson (2010b) argue that such use of what they term 'homosexually-themed discourse' is not homophobic, because the intent is not to wound and cause offence. Bob's fairy cake joke may have been his attempt at showing me he is aware of his son's sexuality, and is not afraid to acknowledge that to others. His use of humour may thus have served a dual purpose: it indicated to me that Bob knows that his son is gay and, although he may have been slightly uncomfortable with this, it was not a major issue for him as he chose to make light of it through a joke, using humour as a coping mechanism. McCormack and Anderson (2010b) stress the importance of context in analysing homosexually-themed discourse, and in this case Bob's joke did not appear to be intended to express strong disapproval, and I did not take it as an offensive comment. Given Bob's age, his joke could be considered rather

inoffensive in relation to the more homophobic views expressed in other contexts by members of his generation (Anderson and McGuire, 2010).

Interestingly, in terms of advancing inclusive masculinity theory, men of all ages demonstrated a tolerant attitude towards the presence of openly gay men within equestrian sport. This suggests that in contexts where levels of homophobia are extremely low and openly gay men are present in relatively high numbers, heterosexual men of all ages may demonstrate inclusive forms of masculinity.

### **Masculinity in opposition to femininity**

Equestrian sport appears to offer an alternative to the orthodox, homophobic sporting milieus reported in previous studies and this is certainly liberating for gay men within equestrianism. Gender integration appears to play an important role in breaking down hypermasculine sporting culture and promoting multiple, inclusive masculinities. Anderson's (2005b; 2008) research with mixed-sex cheerleading teams suggests that when men and women have to work together to achieve their sporting goals, men's respect for women and femininity may increase. Within equestrian sport, men and women do not necessarily work together as both can perform the same roles. This may mean that the increased respect for femininity found within male cheerleaders may not be as evident within male riders. Indeed, although there is respect between riders for individual ability, I did find that male riders – gay and straight – tended to construct their masculinity in opposition to femininity, regardless of their attitude towards male homosexuality.

Karl, 31, is a professional dressage rider who illustrates both the liberating potential and the limits of a more inclusive approach to homosexuality within the equestrian social world.

I say to people that I'm gay when I meet them, 'cos I don't give a shit what they think, get over it, and I'm quite fussy about who I would date anyway (laughs) I'd say to most blokes "get stuffed, I wouldn't do you even if you were gay," do you know what I mean, so I think people like that.

Karl presented an image of himself as a strong personality and his attitude could be seen as a pre-emptive strike against any homophobic backlash that he might experience from straight men. This is a common response from gay men against many heterosexual men's unfounded assumptions that gay men in homosocial environments like sport are sexually predatory. Karl's upfront stance is to demobilise such homophobic responses to his sexuality by actively asserting his position. He went on to explain further.

I think because I'm generally not effeminate, although I can camp it up as well as anyone, but I think, and this is not a dig at effeminate people 'cos some effeminate people can't help it, some are naturally feminine and some put it on, but I think I'm less offensive to some homophobic people because I'm just a normal bloke who happens to like blokes. Sometimes if you're actually out with people you can get more respect from them anyway.

Queer theorists argue for a move away from seeing 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' as identities and more 'as categories of knowledge, a language that frames what we know as bodies, desires, sexualities, identities' (Seidman, 1996, p.13). Within sport the

hetero/homosexual division is used to construct boundaries, especially in terms of acceptable forms of masculinity, and thus these can be seen as regulatory frameworks. However, as gay and lesbian theorists and activists argue, identity claims remain important and the power to name oneself and to determine the conditions under which that name is used are crucial (Butler, 1993), especially for marginalised groups such as gay men within sport. As rugby player Gareth Thomas found, gay men in sport may want to be seen as 'athletes' rather than 'gay athletes' but due to the ongoing homophobia of sport and the shortage of openly gay athletes, this is unlikely to happen at this time. Karl's forthright affirmation of a gay identity may be one way of trying to claim this as a positive position, as opposed to a negative, derogative label, as it is frequently used within sport.

For Karl, being effeminate – 'naturally feminine' – is clearly undesirable and he constructs his masculine identity in opposition to those people who just 'can't help' being effeminate. He is bothered about getting 'respect' from potentially homophobic people, and wants to be 'less offensive' to them, primarily by being less effeminate. This language demonstrates that for Karl, being associated with femininity is a definite sign of weakness, and something he distances himself from.

I think I'm quite masculine really. The gay world can be, well, a little bit gay, and you can pick up bad habits. If you go out a lot with camp people, you do, unintentionally, well you pick up things from your peers, don't you . . . of course some people are just born very effeminate, but I think I'm quite masculine.

I asked him what he meant by 'masculine'. He paused to think.

What's my translation of masculine? Not effeminate! (laughs) I think it's partly to do with your voice and your mannerisms and the way that you act and the way that you treat people. I'm quite a strong person anyway, I know effeminate strong people as well, don't get me wrong, it's just that generally effeminate people are perceived to be a little bit weak, you could say, and I know that sounds awful 'cos as I say there are effeminate people who are strong, but I think that's just a perception. Or bitchy, or girly and I don't think I'm bitchy or girly, I think I'm, um, I don't know, I'm just a normal bloke that is attracted to blokes really, whatever normal is! (laughs) so I think yeah, just not effeminate really. I mean I'm not prejudiced against effeminate people or anything, I'd just prefer to be masculine, definitely.

Karl is clearly aware that femininity is devalued and that, even as a gay man in sport, he can distance himself from it, realigning himself with normative masculinity in spite of his sexuality. All the words he used to describe femininity – 'weak', 'girly', 'bitchy' – are negative words and reinforce the dominance of masculinity in opposition to that which it is not, undesirable femininity. Sykes (2006, p.20) argues that identity is always constructed through the necessary exclusion or expense of an Other and 'thus the logic of identity becomes the logic of a boundary'. Karl demonstrates how his masculine identity is purchased at the expense of a subordinated Other: femininity.

John, a 22 year-old heterosexual dressage rider, indicates that it is not just gay men in equestrian sport who construct their masculinity in opposition to femininity. John had an extremely positive attitude towards the presence of openly gay men within the sport and was not worried if other people assumed that he was also gay.

People always assume I'm gay. I mean I've got highlighted hair, I work on a reception desk and I ride horses, it doesn't look good for me, does it?  
(laughs) so yeah, everyone always assumes that men who ride horses are gay, it's like men who dance, I suppose, there's always that assumption, that stigma around it, but it doesn't bother me, I know what I like so let them think what they want.

John's comments are consistent with those of the young athletes in Anderson's (2009a) research and indicate an inclusive form of masculinity where the possibility of being assumed gay is not perceived as negative for young heterosexual men. This leads to decreased homophobia as heterosexual men feel less pressure to demonstrate their heterosexuality by devaluing and excluding homosexuality. However, although this is very positive for the inclusion of gay men within sport, it may not necessarily lead to a decrease in anti-femininity. In much the same way as Karl did, John understood his more inclusive form of masculinity still in contrast to femininity.

I'm not a butch person, not overly butch, I mean I don't have to walk sideways through doors and I don't go round fighting and things, but I'm butch in the sense that I don't wear girls clothes, if you know what I mean, I'm not feminine.

Both John and Karl indicate that even within a culture of inclusive masculinity and decreased homophobia, this does not necessarily mean a lessening of the distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine, that has long been so important in devaluing female sport and athletes. Men within this milieu may be keen to demonstrate

tolerance and acceptance of gay men, and may even admire the achievements of individual female riders, but the persistent understanding of masculinity is in opposition to a devalued femininity. Masculinity within equestrian sport is thus constructed in opposition to femininity on a symbolic level, despite accepting femininity on a more practical level, such as through the gender-integrated nature of the sport and the devaluing of homophobia. The relationship between inclusive masculinities and femininity(ies) is thus complex and ambiguous.

## **Discussion**

Sport has long been a hypermasculine and homophobic institution. However, in the last few years the impact of decreasing levels of homophobia in wider British culture has begun to impact on sport and young male athletes are increasingly demonstrating a more inclusive, tolerant attitude to homosexuality than their predecessors (Anderson, 2011a). This exploration of equestrian sport contributes to the development of inclusive masculinity theory as a heuristic tool for understanding the changing nature of sporting masculinities.

This study differs from previous research in the area in a number of ways that can contribute to the development of inclusive masculinity theory. Anderson (2009a) called on scholars to explore inclusive masculinities in a variety of contexts in order to consider the relevance of this theoretical construct outside the demographic of his multiple ethnographies. All my research participants were White, and consequently I cannot comment on the relevance of inclusive masculinity theory for men of different ethnic backgrounds. My research participants, however, all came from rural backgrounds and

so the prevalence of inclusive forms of masculinity within this population is somewhat surprising. Rural communities have long been considered to be more homophobic and less tolerant than urban communities (Smith and Mancoske, 1997) and so it might be expected that equestrian sport's close links to farming and rural communities would result in higher levels of homophobia than within urban-based sporting social worlds. This was not the case in this study. Consequently, this suggests that elements of the British countryside, especially those associated with horses and thus possibly with higher socio-economic classes, may be becoming increasingly tolerant of different sexualities and masculinities, a point which warrants further exploration.

Anderson based the development of inclusive masculinity theory on ethnographies with young, university-attending men and this group might be expected to hold more liberal, tolerant views on sexuality and masculinity than less educated individuals and those from older generations. Within the current study only five of the 33 interview participants had attended university and so few had been exposed to the liberalising effect of a university education, yet most still expressed tolerant and inclusive attitudes towards homosexuality. Equally, although my research participants ranged in age from 18 to 60, the majority of those I interviewed and interacted with were in their 30s and 40s. Anderson and McGuire (2010) found that older men (predominantly coaches, in their research) expressed orthodox and homophobic views which were in stark contrast to those of the young students. This led Anderson (2009a) to conclude that inclusive masculinity theory was most relevant to youth, and that it is young masculinities that are changing and becoming more inclusive. This study indicates that some older men in sport also demonstrate inclusive forms of masculinity and are tolerant and accepting of gay men. This suggests that inclusive masculinity theory may have application outside of youth culture, and it is less generation than experience that contributes to the



development of tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality. As with Anderson's (2008b) students, the men in my study were used to interacting with gay men and so did not see them as abhorrent or fundamentally different from themselves. Increasing visibility of openly gay men may thus be an important factor in decreasing levels of homophobia and intolerance, regardless of age. Context and the specificities of particular social locales thus appear to be extremely important in the emergence of inclusive masculinities.

This study adds to Anderson's important work on gay men and sport and indicates that sport does not have to be an unwelcoming, intolerant environment for gay men. Inclusive masculinity theory is an important development for understanding the changing nature of masculinities in sport, and other masculine institutions, and studies exploring the intersections of inclusive masculinities with ethnicity and socio-economic class will refine this further.

However, although increasing acceptance of openly gay men in equestrian sport is to be celebrated, this article has demonstrated that decreasing levels of homophobia do not necessarily result in a reduction in the polarisation between masculinity and femininity (McCormack and Anderson, 2010a). Even within equestrian sport, where men and women compete against each other on equal terms and male competitors demonstrate more inclusive forms of masculinity, those masculinities are still constructed in opposition to a devalued femininity, and this will have consequences for the relative value and status of women within the sport. In his development of inclusive masculinity theory Anderson (2009a) notes that although a proliferation of culturally acceptable masculinities should have some benefits for women, a decrease in homophobia will not automatically lead to a decrease in sexism. This is an important point to consider in the

development of the inclusive masculinity framework, and one that Anderson fails to follow up on fully. Even in his study of a mixed-sex cheerleading squad he focuses on the male participants and acknowledges that he does not consider how inclusive forms of masculinity are experienced by female members of the squad (Anderson, 2008). This is an important omission, as Wedgwood (1996) found that women in a mixed-sex squash club experienced multiple forms of marginalisation from their male peers, reflecting an ongoing assumption that men are more competent at sport, and that female sport is completely different and inferior to male sport, even in integrated locales. In this paper I have not explored these issues fully within the context of equestrianism. However, the men in this study – both gay and straight – did construct their masculinity in opposition to a devalued femininity, reflecting Wedgwood's (1996) findings. The interaction between inclusive masculinities, decreased homophobia and attitudes to female sport and athletes warrants further consideration and will add to the utility of inclusive masculinity theory.

The acceptance of openly gay men in any sporting milieu should be welcomed and celebrated as a move towards a culture of greater recognition and tolerance. Moreover, sport is one of the most visible and prominent of modern cultural phenomena, and so any increase in the visibility of, and tolerance towards, gay men in sport may have positive consequences for gay men in other social spheres. However, this tolerance is frequently predicated on an acceptable gay masculinity constructed in opposition to a devalued feminine Other. Thus the construction of masculinity by men through sport may continue to subordinate femininity on a symbolic level, despite signs of inclusion and acceptance of women on a more practical level, as evidenced through gender integration in some sporting subworlds, such as equestrian sport (Wedgwood, 2003).

This internal contradiction is an on-going problem for those interested in reconstructing sport as a more welcoming, tolerant and accepting environment for all.

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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and support in the development of this article.

### **Biography**

Katherine earned her PhD from Keele University in 2011. She now lectures in sports events management at Leeds Metropolitan University. Her research interests focus around the subculture of equestrianism and questions of identity, gender and sexuality within this under-researched sport and leisure activity. Her PhD explored competitive equestrian sport and she has now turned her focus towards the leisure rider and horse enthusiast.