



Community and Belonging: Being a Trans Man in a Queer League.
POLIS: Sociology & Anthropology Undergraduate Journal, Vol. #1,
Issue. #2, 2024. © Gudrun Wai-Gunnarsson

Community and Belonging: Being a Trans Man in a Queer Soccer League

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Abstract

Sports are traditionally highly gender segregated, creating spaces of exclusion and discrimination for non-normative sexuality and gender identities. This has been countered with the creation and maintenance of lesbian and gay sports leagues that have, in more recent years, widened their scopes to include a wider array of ‘queer’ identities. This paper aims to understand and analyze a transgender man’s subjective experience of belonging and community in a queer Vancouver sports league through ethnographic research methods. While current scholarship relating to transgender people and sports largely investigates the ways in which transgender people experience unbelonging and exclusion in sports and ‘queer’ spaces, my research finds that my primary interlocutor experiences strong senses of community and belonging in a queer sports space. Through observation and interview, I examine the underlying phenomena that explain my interlocutor’s experience of positive trans selfhood in a space that is often problematic for trans individuals in Canada.

Keywords: sports, transgender, queer, community, belonging

IT WAS ANOTHER LOVELY, breezy early-July evening, long shadows from trees casting over the lush field where two Queer Van Soccer (QVS) teams were beginning their game. Friends and loved ones sat at the sidelines with picnic blankets and foldout chairs. I watched from my seat at the corner of the pitch as my dear friend Alex warmed up and made friendly small talk with his peers on Team 8.

Soon, the game begun with Alex positioned as his team's striker. It was a relaxed start. As the shade moved to my seat on the sidelines, I overheard teammates on the sidelines chatting about brunch amidst supportive cheers. As the game picked up, there was boisterous encouragement from fellow Team 8 members: "Good shot, Lou!" When teammates subbed in, they high fived their replacement with smiles on their faces. Though it was a friendly atmosphere, there was a charge of real competitive energy. Both sides were engaged and taking the game seriously. There were calls of "Yes Maxine!" "Way to go!" "Good d!" "Watch middle! Watch middle!" "Yes Alex!"

About 15 minutes after the starting whistle, Alex scored the first goal of the match! The game got a little rough at points, someone exclaiming at one point, "Ouch, right in the ovaries!" after an unfortunate handling of the ball. Another came off the field complaining of a stomped-on foot. As the game progressed, a player was in awe of Alex's attempt at another goal: "Yes Alex! What a freaking run. Holy smokes. That was amazing. He's so fast."

During half-time, Jack, the captain, gave the team a pep talk, noting the evenness of the team they were up against. His team looked back at him with attentive eye contact, nods, and smiles. He concluded by asking for others' thoughts, at which point a teammate called Marshall chimed in with his advice.

Halfway through the second half Alex subbed back in. From my spot in the sidelines, I overheard queer gossip, and someone else congratulated a teammate for having just married her wife. A few minutes before the game's end, the other team scored. The score was now one-one, upping the pressure. The air was thick with palpable tension. Team 8 took several shots on the net, but unfortunately were not able to score.

The game ended in a tie, and Alex's team was content despite not winning: "We were very evenly matched, and we defended for a long time!" They cheered for each other, the goalie, and the referee before high-fiving the opposing team with repetitions of "Good game, good game, good

game...” I packed up as Alex made plans to go to a concert with a couple teammates the following week. “Good job. That was awesome!” said the captain to his happy team (Fieldnotes, 11 July 2024).

Over the course of July 2024, I got to spend several hours of quality time conducting research with Alex, a longtime friend and talented athlete who has, in the past year, realized that he is a transgender man. He is a 24-year-old, passionate elementary school teacher, with freckles, blue eyes, a big smile, and short cropped strawberry-blond hair. Though we chat about our lives often, I sought to learn more about the nuances of his relationships with gender and sports.

We first met through sports almost a decade ago, when a friend invited Alex to watch one of our softball games. From then on, we would see each other at various track and field events and the occasional party until Alex went to Calgary for university. Last year we reconnected and became close friends, now lucky to call each other neighbours. When he moved into our neighbourhood, he was quick to deck out his bedroom in Toronto Raptors merchandise and throw a sports-themed house party for his 24th birthday. Sometime during this period, he realized that he was not non-binary as he had identified for the last few years, but rather is a queer transgender man and has since begun steps in a physical transition.

My interest in exploring the topic of sports and gender is that, despite its extreme institutional gender segregation and consequent gender-based exclusion, in many ways sports spaces paradoxically provide positive experiences of belonging for queer and trans youth like myself and Alex. Sport in much of the world is “organized in terms of taken-for-granted assumptions of binary and hierarchical sex difference by virtue of sex segregated sporting spaces and grossly unequal cultural and economic spaces” (Anderson & Travers, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, riding on the coattails of the United States’ widespread anti-queer movement, Canada has recently seen a surge of anti-trans laws and policies (Khonina & Salway, 2024). Some target transgender people in sports: In early 2024 Alberta premier Danielle Smith announced a policy that would “ban trans girls and women athletes from participating in competitive women’s sports” (Mason, 2024). In light of the chilly contemporary climate for queer and transgender athletes in Canada, it is integral to explore how and why sports spaces often still allow for positive experiences of queer and trans selfhood, community, and belonging.

This phenomenon not exclusive to, but especially notable, in the present-day existence of multiple ‘queer sports leagues’ in Vancouver. In Spring 2024 Alex signed up for QVS after we’d spent the last season cheering on our friends’ matches together. Alex is one my closest friends who also happens to have complex relationships with both his gender and sports. For these reasons, he was the perfect interlocutor and QVS was the perfect field (both literally and figuratively) for my endeavor to learn more about the intricate combinations of these two bases of identity.

As seen in my account of Alex’s friendly but competitive July 11th game, “queer community sports are informed by feminist and social justice principles that prioritize shared decision-making [(exemplified when Team 8’s captain concluded his halftime pep talk by asking for others’ thoughts)], inclusion, and community-building”(Carter, 2021, p. 5). Not only do queer sports leagues aim to function as spaces of athletics and recreation, but they seek to foster social connections. Furthermore, queer sports leagues like QVS aspire to be inclusive of people of all genders, including trans identities, and all skill-levels. However, queer sports scholars note the novelty of trans and non-binary inclusivity, as many leagues, QVS included, have shifted from being explicitly “lesbian” or “women’s” leagues to what they are now (Carter, 2021, p. 9). The result is the inclusion of trans and non-binary members while cisgender queer women remain the leagues’ majority demographic. Thus, my research aims to address questions regarding Alex’s sense of belonging as a transgender man: What is my interlocutor’s experience in a queer sports league whose demographic is predominantly queer cisgender women? Do trans men benefit from the sought-after community of queer sports leagues that are implicitly dominated by cisgender sapphic* identities, and how does this affect these men’s sense of self?

Methods

I gathered data using a variety of qualitative methods; literature reviews of queer sports and community in Canada, two sessions of thorough participant observation, followed by an open-ended and transcribed interview with Alex, all while keeping a close eye on the QVS social media pages and downloading anything related to Alex, community, and social events.

Before and during observations and interview I ensured informed and ongoing consent from my interlocutor, and offered the option to use a pseudonym. Alex chose his own pseudonym, and I changed the names of his teammates to further obscure identities. As we socialize together almost

daily, I also ensured I clearly communicated to Alex when research sessions begun and ended. The first observation session consisted of attending a QVS non-game social event; a “summer beach barbeque,” and the second took place at one of Alex’s regular soccer games. I took thorough jottings which I then turned into field notes less than a day after the events, with the framework in mind “that all writing, even seemingly straightforward, descriptive writing, is a construction” (Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 45–46). A few days after observations ended, I conducted an hour-and-fifteen-minute-long interview with Alex in our home’s kitchen, asking open-ended questions first about identity and community, then gender and sexuality, then sports, and then the combination of the two. As we are close friends, I took a conversational approach, intending to build on our already comfortable rapport to encourage openness and personal storytelling. I gathered digital social media data for the entire month of July. Lastly, I coded the data, finding conceptual patterns while paying particular attention to information in actions and statements that pertained to members’ sense of belonging and inclusion, and behaviours that I read as indicative (or not) of community-building.

Findings

Alex has discovered strong senses of belonging and community in a queer sports space, despite being a transgender man in a league whose members are mostly cisgender women. I found several contributing factors to Alex’s sense of belonging: the popular narrative that queer people are a “community,” his renegotiated identification with the sapphic community, the league’s inclusivity policies, the camaraderie provided by a sports environment, and Alex’s personal history with sports and positive selfhood.

The Queer “Community.” “Community” is “a sense of commonality: of a common identity, a common purpose, or a shared set of beliefs” (Sullivan, 2003, as cited in Carter and Baliko, 2017, p. 701). Popular narratives of queerness imagine queer people to be large community with shared identity tied to non-normative sexual identities. This view of community implies a sort of built-in commonality that may provide a basis for social connection among members of the “queer community.” QVS takes this stance, stating in their registration form for their 2024 season, “the league strives to be a positive, safe, and inclusive space for members of the *queer community*” (Queer Van Soccer, 2024) (emphasis added). The queer “community” is then both the imagined commonalities of queer-identifying folks, and something that can be actively sought out in spaces that are designated for members of this group.

Indeed, this imagination of queer “community” is reflected in Alex’s views. In our interview, he told me that he found “community within [...] the queer community too, [which] has been really important for [him], like just finding people that [...] understand some of [his] same experiences, like especially in terms of [...] sexuality,” and that he is now “kind of in the process of trying to find more people that understand [his] gender experience” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). He sees his participation in QVS as an entrance point for meeting people who are part of the queer “community” and might thus share a sense of commonality related not only to his experiences of sexuality, but also to being a transmasculine person. In the league’s frame of acting as an avenue for members of the queer “community” to socialize with other members of the queer “community,” it provides a groundwork for building senses of belonging and community based on a common queer identity for members like Alex.

The sapphic community. Alex is partially able to find senses of community and belonging through a renegotiated identification with the sapphic community. From the ages of 12 to 18, Alex identified as a lesbian. When he left the province to attend university right after secondary school, he felt that he had the freedom to come out as non-binary. Finally, at the age of 24 he realized that his masculine lesbian and non-binary identities were “stepping stones” in his “gender journey” to being a transgender man. However, in these life experiences, he developed an identification with the “sapphic community,” noting a developed sense of belonging among queer women and assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) non-binary people. This identification was complicated when he realized he is a man.

Initially identifying as a lesbian is a common experience for trans men, and for many “who first identified as lesbians and socialized in lesbian social and political spaces, transitioning rendered them differently legible in those spaces” (Nash, 2011, p. 201). In Alex’s initial process of coming to terms with his gender, he expressed a desire to “pass” to others as a cisgender man, and looked forward to a point in his physical transition where he would be able to do so more easily. Some trans men leave the lesbian community entirely. However, Alex’s viewpoint has since evolved:

“When I’m in public, and I don’t know people, I totally want to be like, seen as a cis man. But I think that’s where having a queer community is still really important for me. Because when I’m around that community, I do want to be seen as a trans man. [...] I don’t want to be [...] just lumped in with cis men, because it’s nice to feel seen

and understood, and have people around me that fully know who I am. Because being a trans man is a totally different experience” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024).

Although he is a man, Alex expresses that he “still like[s] that [he] can feel connected to [...] the sapphic community” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). This comes from an understanding that though he enjoys living and being seen by strangers as a man, his life experience and worldview is totally different than that of a cisgender man. Thus, in lesbian and wider queer community spaces, he finds commonality with those who have similar experiences of sexuality and gender. This personal renegotiation of identification with the sapphic community allows Alex to feel a sense of belonging in the majority-sapphic-women community space of QVS.

“For gender expansive folks of all skill levels.” While prior literature notes that QVS was originally a “lesbian” or “women’s” league, and cisgender queer women appear to still be the majority demographic, the QVS Instagram biography states that the league is “for women, gender expansive, non-binary, & trans folks of all skill levels” (Queer Van Soccer, n.d.). This is a wide category that seems to include every category of queer person but queer cisgender men, while placing an emphasis on it being open to everyone – not just those with sports skill and experience. As Alex is a transgender man, he is able play in the league: “it’s a safe space for also like non-binary, and like trans people too” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). At the soccer game I attended, I also noticed that when his team went around the circle introducing themselves, “of the seventeen players, about seven used he/him or he/they pronouns, including Alex” (Fieldnotes, 11 July 2024). This means that nearly half (41%) of his team that day were transmasculine-identifying. This shows that there is potential for Alex to find a sense of belonging at QVS amongst fellow transgender men and masculine non-binary people – people that might be able to “understand his gender experience.”

Furthermore, the emphasis on inclusion of “all skill levels” adds to the relaxed social atmosphere of the games, as much “as it’s [...] competitive, it’s also like, just meant to be fun, and everyone’s very supportive of each other. [The players are] a variety of different skill levels, like some people are playing soccer for the first time, whereas others have played for most of their life” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). League members understand the mixed skill levels and experience of their peer and so competitiveness is able to be kept light and friendly, as seen in my observations of Alex’s game. Thus, the leagues’ inclusivity policies about gender and skill levels contribute to Alex’s sense of belonging and community in QVS.

Camaraderie in a sports space. Expressions of camaraderie contribute to Alex's sense of belonging and community, too. By camaraderie, I mean instances of playful competitiveness and friendly 'sportsmanship' that serve as expressions of mutual respect and bonding over a shared interest and engagement in an athletic activity. These moments of camaraderie establish, build, and maintain social connections and thus, sense of community. This was seen in the friendly yet competitive atmosphere of Alex's game, the desire to win and teammate encouragement, but satisfaction in ending in a tie game.

QVS as a *sports space* facilitates this sort of peer support environment, seen in players' cheering, encouragement, and compliments on and off the field as people work together toward a common goal. This social dynamic is highly rewarding in terms of self-esteem, and helps in forming social connections between the members of QVS. I noted, too, that the camaraderie on the field translated to off-the-field banter between opponents and teammates: at the beach barbeque event, there was "an air of masculine, showy, competitive playfulness [...], a person with short-cropped hair in a muscle tee shoved their friend, challenging them to a volleyball match: "Let's go, loser!" (Fieldnotes, 1 July 2024). At the same event I also observed a former opponent say to Alex, "I'm happy to see you even though you kicked our asses last week – I'm only pulling your leg – it's a compliment; you're very fast!" (Fieldnotes, 1 July 2024). So, QVS as a *sports space* encourages camaraderie which works to facilitate social bonding and thus sense of community and belonging for members like Alex.

Alex, sports, and selfhood. Alex has a personal history with sports that is closely linked to positive experiences of selfhood, allowing him to approach his QVS experience with a positive attitude toward sports. He has nuanced feelings toward his personal history with sports as its high gender segregation meant he had to play in "girls" teams growing up: Being openly trans meant risking expulsion, as Alex witnessed when a teammate left their secondary school basketball team after coming out as a transgender boy. Despite this, Alex found that from a young age he "was [...] not always doing very well in school, [so instead he] found that [he] got a lot of confidence from doing well in sports." Having been raised by parents who place high value in athleticism, Alex engaged in sports from a young age, and performed well in them. Alex even says that sports have shaped his identity for the better: "Being a part of a team and a group, [has] made [him] a more confident person. [He] naturally would [...], within a lot of [his] teams, just kind of take on a

leadership role” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). Thus, despite the complexities of sports’ gender segregation, Alex gained self-esteem and valuable leadership skills through sports.

Sports also provided Alex a way to cope with his anxiety related to his gender and sexuality. Coming from a Christian family, he noted that for a period of time he would pray daily to not be gay, and experienced homophobia and transphobia from family members, causing mental health issues like panic attacks. Engaging in a variety of sports like basketball, field hockey, and track and field helped him endure these experiences, because “even though like in a lot of other ways [he] was dealing with, you know, a lot of anxiety, or like dealing with [his] sexuality, [...] sports to [him] always made [him] a very, very confident person [...]” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024) who was self-assured and socially popular in school through sports friendships. Therefore, Alex’s personal history of positive selfhood discovered through sports created a basis for *continuing* to find community and sense of belonging in sports through QVS later in life.

Limitations

While I was able to gain a thorough understanding of my interlocutor’s relationship with sports, gender, and sense of belonging and community within a queer sports league; my findings are not generalizable to all trans members of QVS, or other trans people engaged in queer community sports. As recognized by Carter, “studies identify numerous tensions and complexities that disrupt the dominant narrative of collegiality within queer leagues and teams.” (Carter, 2021, p. 65). My interlocutor is a White, able-bodied, athletically-skilled Canadian citizen. Thus, his sense of inclusion and community does not reflect the experiences of other members of the league, particularly those who are racialized, immigrants or refugees, disabled, fat-identifying, transfeminine, or differing in athletic skill-level. My study also does not take socioeconomic class dynamics into account.

In the uncommon instance that a teammate was not fully accepted by peers, this appeared to be for reasons relating to breaking social norms, for example the community sports league social norm of shared decision-making in perceived traits such as “bossiness.” However, my research was limited to one interlocutor, so I was not able to gather sufficient data regarding other potentially ostracized league members’ senses of belonging, and how their intersectional identities may or may not have played roles.

Furthermore, I noticed at the QVS barbeque event that “there were some Asian and Brown people, about three Black people, but it was a majority White crowd” (Fieldnotes, 1 July 2024). In a situation where the racialized members of the community space are visibly a minority group, how might these members’ senses of belonging and community be affected? If I had engaged a racialized member as my interlocutor, I may have gathered very different findings. As Alex is White, and living in Canada, an “imagined community” that sees Canadians as White (Creese, 2019, p. 1487), he does not have to reflect on how his racial identity does or does not affect his sense of inclusion and community, as he is a member of the racial group deemed socially normal.

Conclusion

Despite the Queer Van Soccer league’s original establishment as a “lesbian” or “women’s” space that still has a majority of cisgender lesbian members, my transgender male interlocutor has discovered senses of belonging and community. I found Alex’s positive experience of a queer community sports league to have been shaped by several factors: QVS’ adoption of the popular narrative of queer people as a “community,” the league’s gender and skill level inclusivity policies, the camaraderie environment facilitated by a sports space, Alex’s personal history with sports as a means for confidence-building and positive sense of self, and his re-identification with the sapphic community. He joined QVS with the intention of having fun and making more queer friends, and that he did.

Though there already exists a broader scholarship of works relating to community and belonging in queer community sports, as well as of trans men’s experiences in lesbian spaces; my mini-ethnography about Alex’s QVS experience contributes a thorough account of one individual’s subjective experience in one of these spaces and takes a deeper look into his personal history, allowing me to break down what *specifically* makes queer sports work so well for this individual. My case study of Alex and QVS may also serve as a basis for a broader argument that sports can and do provide positive experiences of queer and trans selfhood, community, and belonging; despite the current contentious social relationships between sports and gender.

Reflection

Methodological reflection. The qualitative research methods I used proved to be very effective in answering my research questions. By reviewing related scholarship prior to beginning my

observations, I was able to formulate a relevant and answerable question to focus on within the limitations of this research project. Field observations provided a good basis of understanding my interlocutor's dynamic within the social space, while the later in-depth interview allowed me to ask the questions that weren't answered by simply watching. The transcription process was tedious, but familiarized me with the data, making the coding process easier as I had already developed a good sense of the themes and categories of my findings through repeat listening. Digital data from the QVS social media pages were also helpful, as they provided textual evidence of the league's ethos and inclusivity policies. It was tough to narrow down the wealth of data I gathered over this process, as I had to choose to leave out a lot of interesting information and audiovisual data to focus on my core argument. Overall, I found these methods effective and enjoyable and will carry what I learned forward into future research.

Notable findings. I found it particularly interesting that Alex has been able to forge a new queer/trans identity within the sapphic community despite now identifying as a man. "Transmen's experiences [...] highlight how representations of self are flexible and unstable but come up against the limitations of what can be understood" (Nash, 2011, p. 205). Today, a multiplicity of queer identities is becoming visible in formerly "homonormative," more homogeneous spaces. Though Alex's unique relationships with sports and gender have rendered him able to find belonging in QVS, the landscape of queer spaces, much like that of gender and sexuality identities, is unstable and changing.

Additionally, it was interesting to see that in his youth, despite having to compromise aspects of his gender identity in order to participate in gender-segregated sports, these same activities provided ways of managing difficulties relating to discrimination and internalized homophobia. Thoughtful reflection over time has allowed Alex to forge a positive relationship between his love of sports and love for his queer community that is supported by his participation in QVS. As the expression goes, it is the best of both of worlds.

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* Broadly, "sapphic" refers to women who sexually and/or romantically desire women. However, the term is fluid and heterogeneous and may be inclusive of other non-normative sexual and gender identities.