



Citation for published version:

Chawansky, M & Francombe, J 2013, 'Wanting to be Anna: Examining Lesbian sporting celebrity on the L word', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 134-149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2012.664100>

DOI:

[10.1080/10894160.2012.664100](https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2012.664100)

Publication date:

2013

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Wanting to Be Anna:

Examining Lesbian Sporting Celebrity on *The L Word*

Megan Chawansky and Jessica Francombe

Bios:

Jessica Francombe Ph.D. University of Bath, Department of Education. As a member of the Sport, Physical Activity and Culture group her research locates the (in)active body as it is (re)presented and (re)constituted in relation to the social operation of power.

Address correspondence to the first author at University of Iowa, Department of American Studies, 728 Jefferson Building, Iowa City, IA 52242, megan-chawansky@uiowa.edu

Authors' Note: Megan Chawansky would like to thank Dr. James H. Sanders III for comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

Abstract

This article adds to the limited literature on coming out and on lesbians in sport by highlighting the presence of lesbian sporting celebrity on Showtime's series *The L Word*. Through a reading of *The L Word*'s character/professional athlete, Dana Fairbanks, we explore the economic impetus and the racial and classed undertones of corporatized coming out narratives. We devote considerable effort to unpacking Fairbanks' articulation that she wishes to be "the gay Anna Kournikova" and speculate on the consequences of this utterance for both real lesbian sporting celebrities and the lesbian fans that necessarily follow Fairbanks' corporate-sponsored coming out.

Key words:

KEY WORDS: lesbian, athlete, *The L Word*, sport, coming out

I want to be the gay Anna Kournikova. - Dana Fairbanks

Introduction

When Showtime's *The L Word* appeared in the United States in January 2004, the television series made history in light of its focus on the professional and intimate lives of a group of (mostly) lesbian friends living in West Hollywood, California.¹ *The L Word* garnered attention from the popular press for its titillating content, and academic literature on and critique of the series necessarily followed, raising complex questions about lesbian representation, visibility, and spectatorship (Akass & McCabe, 2006; Burns & Davies, 2009; Baird, 2005; Himberg, 2008; Lee & Meyer, 2010; McFadden, 2006, Pratt, 2008; Reed, 2009). While it would be disingenuous to say that the series paid extensive attention to sports, it did feature a road trip to the Dinah Shore (now Kraft Nabisco Championship) golf tournament (Turner & Troche, 2004), an excursion to a professional women's basketball game (Chaiken & Robinson, 2006), and a semblance of a pick-up basketball game (Ziff & Sharzen, 2007). One episode also included sporting icon Billie Jean King, who appeared on the series as herself/a tennis commentator assigned to interview Dana Fairbanks, (played by Erin Daniels) a professional tennis player who serves as one of the primary characters in the early seasons of the series (Dabis & Stopkewich, 2006). Throughout the duration of Season One, viewers see Fairbanks transform from a "closeted" lesbian tennis professional to an athlete very much attuned to the power of the pink dollar and the financial potential of her lesbian (sporting) celebrity. We utilize Gevert's (2003) concept of the lesbian celebrity to refer to "instances where a celebrity is known to be and does not deny being a lesbian" and when her "stardom...is achieved and authorized within the

institutions of popular culture and [is] endorsed by the mainstream media” (Gever, 2003, p. 6). Further, we wish to note that the examples of lesbian celebrity within sport—as compared to other entertainment venues—are rare, and therefore worthy of exploration. With her hetero-sex appearance and self-proclaimed desire to be “the gay Anna Kournikova,” the character of Dana Fairbanks locates herself in a new sporting space for an “openly” lesbian athlete. Her highly stylized and “traditionally” feminine style requires scholars to re-visit assumptions about performances of femininity and lesbianism in sport. Indeed, in many ways, her “femme-inine” (Caudwell, 2006, p. 145) performance temporarily renders the “mannish” lesbian athlete invisible, thereby providing an opportunity to explore expectations, norms, and assumptions about lesbian sporting bodies (Cahn, 1994).

With her Subaru sponsorship, appearance on an *Olivia Cruise*, and tennis prowess, it appears that Fairbanks was created in the likeness of tennis legend and lesbian celebrity Martina Navratilova. Yet, through a close reading of Fairbanks’ “corporatized coming out narrative” (she comes out publicly through her Subaru advertisement) we highlight the ways in which Fairbanks’ lesbian subjectivity marks an important shift from earlier iconic lesbian sporting figures such as Navratilova (authors, 2012).ⁱⁱ More specifically, we contend that a closer examination of Dana Fairbanks’ coming out narrative—and in particular her articulated aspiration to be the “gay Anna Kournikova”—reveals much about the current cultural and political context for certain lesbian bodies in sport. In this article, we follow Burns and Davies (2009) as we explore Fairbanks as a cultural product that offers up a revised script for how to “be” a lesbian in sport. We argue, in essence, that the example of Dana Fairbanks can be juxtaposed with other “real” professional athletes who have come out (or been “outed”) as lesbians and have lost endorsements (Billie Jean King), failed to receive them (Martina

Navratilova), retained them (Amelie Mauresmo), and, more recently, earned them from a lesbian-owned company (Rosie Jones and Sheryl Swoopes).ⁱⁱⁱ When viewed in this light, the economics of coming out in the context of women's sports follow a narrative of slow progress and solidify capital accumulation as a queer aspiration (King, 2009). Simultaneously, though, the exclusive focus on the economics of coming out in sport overshadows the import of race and class within the lesbian sporting celebrity equation, and the silence itself then "operate[s] as a racialized narrative" (King, 2009, p. 274). This aim of this article is to challenge the presumed narrative of progress for lesbian athletes that a character such as Dana Fairbanks allows, and we do this by delineating the raced and classed privileges which Fairbanks accesses.

This article builds on our previous work on the notion of the presence of the lesbian celebrity athlete, but we acknowledge that we are now blurring the lines between the "real" and the "hypereal," the mediated and the lived (authors, 2012). As a fictional character and a dramatic device rather than an actual athlete, our exploration of Fairbanks brings with it another layer to our theorizing; her coming out narrative is deliberately mediated and culturally crafted. As such, it is not only Fairbanks' relationship with Subaru that is of interest to us, but also the commercial, corporate media industries involved which "instruct" and "educate" us about the contemporary cultural politics of coming out. Fairbanks' narrative, then, is understood as doubly located: first within the corporatized coming out through Subaru, and second, as a part of *The L Word*, a television program and a cultural technology that reflects certain contextually-specific narratives (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). We explore Fairbanks' narrative so as to inspire continued reflection on currently circulating lesbian sporting subjectivities.

Brief literature review

Though others have examined themes of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) participants, sport, and sponsorship (e.g., Pitts, 1997; Hart, 2001; Jarvis, 2002; Jones & LeBlanc, 2005), only King (2009) and McDonald (2002) have effectively foregrounded the larger racialized context which surrounds a lesbian professional athlete such as Fairbanks. As such, we see this article as an important addition to limited research conducted around lesbian subjectivities in commercialized sport (e.g., Forman & Plymire, 2005; King, 2009; Plymire & Forman, 2001). To the previously theorized “muscle moll” and “butch ballplayer” (Cahn, 1994), we wish to add important critical commentary on the (emerging) lesbian celebrity athlete. We also see this paper adding to the limited literature on coming out as gay or lesbian within a sporting context (e.g., Anderson, 2011; Cavalier, 2011; Griffin 1998; Ianotta & Kane, 2002; Kian & Anderson, 2009) and as being in conversation with the notion of the publicly out and subsequently politicized lesbian, supported by early scholars on lesbians in sport such as Griffin (1998) and Lenskyj (1997). The notion of the “out” and politicized athlete means that when lesbians remain silent about their sexuality, they “serve[s] to perpetuate the...invisibility of their experience thus maintaining heterosexist norms” (Fusco, 1998, p. 88). Iannotta & Kane (2002) effectively challenged this understanding of the explicitly out and politicized lesbian by reporting on coaches who were not explicitly out but still actively resisted fostering a hostile climate within their teams and among their peers. Similarly, our research implicitly calls into question the notion of the explicitly out and subsequently politicized lesbian athlete, albeit in a slightly different way. We seek to ask: what racial and class politics are visible in the emergence of lesbian celebrity athletes? In our analysis, we move “beyond the pale” as we identify the ways in which Fairbanks’ whiteness and middle-class status is an invisible presence within her sport, her coming out narrative, and her lesbian celebrity (McDonald, 2006, p. 33).

To help us locate our interest in exploring Fairbanks' coming out narrative, we call upon Herman's (2005) important work on the discourses surrounding coming out declarations on prime-time television. Herman (2005)—through a comparative analysis of two prime-time television sitcoms, *Ellen* in the U.S. and *Bad Girls* in the U.K.—differentiates between “two competing discourses of coming out”: Ellen's articulation of identity (“I'm gay.”) and Helen's (a character from *Bad Girls*) pronouncement of desire (“I want a woman.”) (p. 16). The two distinct articulations lead to different effects, and as a consequence, Herman (2005) suggests that an important question within discussions of coming out is no longer “from where” these characters came but rather, “into where” are they going (Herman, 2005, p. 18). In our analysis, we would agree as we argue that Fairbanks moves into uncharted territory as a lesbian professional athlete after her Subaru advertisement facilitates her public coming out. Therefore we are particularly interested in identifying *into where* her corporatized coming out allows her to go. Even more, we hone in on her verbalized quest to be the gay Anna Kournikova because it allows us to make apparent the ways in which her whiteness and classed “femme-inine” lesbian sexuality *allow* her to enter new markets and venues via her endorsement (Caudwell, 2006, p. 145).

At this juncture, we would be remiss if we did not pause to explain more fully that the title of this particular article refers not only to Fairbanks' clear declaration of her economic aspirations, but also to Comer's (2004) article entitled “Wanting to be Lisa: Generational rifts, girl power, and the globalization of surf culture.” The focus and form of Comer's (2004) article serves as both a model and a justification for our research, and we draw on it as we set up our analysis of Fairbanks. Comer (2004) imparts a (sub)cultural studies sensibility to trace the way in which the surfing subculture was appropriated and re-imagined within a mass market or

market culture context at two key moments: the late 1950s (the era of Gidget) and the mid-1990s, the advent of girl power. By looking closely at representations of girls' participation in sport through, for example, analyses of films and magazine, Comer (2004) contends that these key moments of appropriation reveal much about the way in which understandings of gender have shifted within surfing, and furthermore, how these shifts bespeak larger cultural and economic forces. By honing in on one specific example of a contemporary surfing success narrative—that of four-time World Champion Lisa Andersen—Comer (2004) is able to chronicle the visible shifts related to girls and women's economic opportunities in the sport of surfing.

In line with Comer's (2004) assertion that the Roxy^{iv}-sponsored Lisa Andersen inspired a new generation of 'girl power' surfers, we believe that Dana Fairbanks is an "icon" who is doing "important cultural work," despite the fact that she is a fictional character (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003, p. xxix). As we previously hinted, we believe that mass-mediated narratives and images of female athletes have the capacity to inspire, teach, overwhelm, and shame those who consume them, and as such, they warrant our critical attention. Much like Burns & Davies' (2009) work on *The L Word*, we deliberately turned our attention away from critiques of (mis-)representations of lesbianism which occur on the show, and instead we highlight what we see the representations of lesbians "do—what they produce, consume, normalize" (p. 175). We are interested in delineating what Fairbanks' narrative reveals about the shift in opportunities and expectations for lesbian professional athletes, as we anticipate a moment very soon wherein many will find themselves, "wanting to be Dana."

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

We position our reading of Fairbanks within the intersection of critical cultural studies of sport (Birrell & McDonald, 2000) and physical cultural studies (Andrews, 2008; Silk &

Andrews, 2011). Taken together, these perspectives allow us to unpack the larger cultural forces related to gender, race, class, and sexuality which allow a character such as Dana Fairbanks to be visible and legible at this particular historical moment. Her visibility, as has been mentioned above, is not only mediated by gender and sexuality, but by the “interrelated and fluid character of power relations...constituted along the axes of gender, race, class, and sexuality” (Birrell & McDonald, 2000, p. 4). This analysis, therefore, calls upon theories from gender studies, sexuality studies, sport studies, critical race studies, and beyond. Further, it necessarily foregrounds the import of the physical and sporting context. In line with the emerging body of work classified as physical cultural studies, we wish to make salient the ways in which “the various dimensions of physical activity combine to form a complex and diverse cultural space through which personal experiences, meanings, and subjectivities become dialectically linked to, and negotiated through, broader social, political, economic, and technological contingencies” (Andrews, 2008, p. 52). Fairbanks’ subjectivity as a lesbian professional athlete and the historical assumptions and anxieties that accompany this position prove significant and add another dimension to commentaries on *The L Word* that have already occurred (Cahn, 1994).

Exploring key scenes from *The L Word* which pertain to Fairbanks’ coming out narrative proves important because mediated, advertised and marketed sporting discourses of corporeality and their (hi)stories of the past and present are often reflective of power struggles and social hierarchies. In this sense sporting discourses can be considered as “acts simultaneously both of inclusion and exclusion” (Silk & Francombe 2011, p. 262) that help framed the present. We understand the televised scenes to be cultural pedagogies that “contribute to *educating* us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear and desire—and what not to” (Kellner, 1995, p. 2, emphasis added). We follow Giroux (2001) and others when we recognize the necessity for a

(popular) cultural analysis such as ours insofar as it expands “the tools of ideology critique to include[s] exploring a range of sites in which the production of knowledge takes place” (p. 14). For our analysis, we pull together key moments from three episodes of Season One of *The L Word*: “L’Ennui” (Chaiken & Goldwyn, 2004), “Listen Up” (Zakarin & Skogland, 2004), and “Looking Back” (Turner & Troche, 2004) to present a recap of Fairbanks’ decision to come out and to stay out. These scenes serve as points of departure that allow us to highlight the current racialized and classed context for lesbian sporting celebrities.

To conclude this section, we wish to be clear that we are fully aware that the texts we engage are polysemic, dialogic, and sites of contestation, and we further comprehend that they are “susceptible to more than one reading; there is, and can be, no pretense of validity or generalizability” (Francombe, 2010, p. 354). Our analysis will be partial and politically motivated, and subscribes to the understanding that (physical) cultural studies analysis—as it refutes objectivity and “political [and personal] disinvestment”—can never be anything but implicated within the social conditions on which it is premised (King, 2005, p. 28). In this article we put forth our reading of Fairbanks, but also remain open to other interpretations as well.

Analysis

Though committed viewers of *The L Word* know that Fairbanks identifies as a lesbian from the beginning of the series, it is only in “Looking Back” (Turner & Troche, 2004) that we learn when and how Fairbanks came to understand this about herself. As she travels with friends to the events and festivities surrounding the Dinah Shore golf tournament, Fairbanks discloses that she first recognized her attractions to women at the age of sixteen while at a tennis camp. She dreamily recounts to her friends how she fell in love with her seventeen-year old tennis camp counselor. As she tells the story, her reverie takes viewers back to the camp, and we see

the moment when the two young women kissed and realized their attraction to one another. Unfortunately, this reverie also includes the presence of the parents of her first love coming to camp to physically remove their daughter from Fairbanks and the sporting space that facilitated this relationship. Viewers see the young Fairbanks watch helplessly as her first love is torn away from her. From the look on Fairbanks' face, it is clear that she is unsure of exactly what happened, but she is left with the unsettled feeling that she did something wrong. Of note, the face of this first love is "blurred" on the screen, and Fairbanks will not reveal her name as she tells the story because this woman is now a professional tennis player. This "code of silence" that Fairbanks imparts to protect her fellow athlete is the same one that keeps her closeted and seemingly unhappy (King, 2008, p. 429).

Fairbanks lives a guarded life in the beginning of Season One, constantly worrying that her lesbian subjectivity will hurt her ability to gain important corporate sponsorships that would assist her professional tennis career, a storyline often repeated in the real world of women's tennis (Ware, 2011). Her agent, Conrad Voynow, reinforces this fear and, though he knows of her angst as a closeted athlete, he encourages her to "be a lez [lesbian] later." Therefore, she employs fairly standard tactics to prevent others from suspecting that she might be a lesbian. This includes refusing to answer questions that might implicate her as a lesbian and using her (male) mixed-doubles partner as her date to social and philanthropic events while her female partner stays at home. Though she struggles at times with her life in the closet, Fairbanks seems resigned to the fact that she must subscribe to the conventions established for (closeted) lesbian tennis players. Viewers are left to understand Fairbanks as someone who self-identifies as a lesbian, has lesbian friends, and dates women, but fears that a public disclosure of her lesbianism could potentially stymie interest from corporate sponsors. Corporate sponsorship and

endorsements prove especially important to female athletes who must rely on this type of income to supplement their earnings as athletes. Therefore, Fairbanks is presented with an interesting situation when Subaru wants to sign her to appear in an ad campaign. In Troche and Troche (2004), Fairbanks' agent (Conrad) spells out exactly what a contract like this means, and the subsequent dialogue between Fairbanks and her agent proves instructive when one considers the compromises lesbian female athletes have been, and are often, asked to make:

Conrad: Usually these contracts have some sort of lifestyle clause in them wherein you 'reflect the company's image.' You know, in all aspects of your life. It could be stupid things like, no public drunkenness, or I don't know...no Satan worshipping.

Dana: *Gives him a look of annoyance.*

Conrad: This is the deal. Once you sign this thing, Subaru owns your ass. You gotta play by their rules.

Dana: What about Martina [Navratilova]?

Conrad: Yeah, I know Subaru did that whole Martina lifestyle campaign, but that's different. That's Martina. She's a superstar. You know, she can pull off the whole gay thing, but you're not Martina, babe. You're not Tiger Woods. You're not a superstar...What you are is very hot and very sexy, and this is it. This is your chance to cash in. You've got to face the facts, Dana. The clock's ticking...You know...your Anna Kournikova days are numbered...C'mon. You can be a lez [lesbian] when you retire. But right now, you're an ass-kicking...but dick-loving athlete...who's getting a fat paycheck...All you got to do is smile pretty for the camera.^v

Fairbanks implicitly agrees to these terms and conditions, and when she arrives with her agent to the photo shoot with Subaru, it is business as usual. Fairbanks moves around the tennis court while the photographer tries to capture the perfect image for the advertisement. When the photo shoot ends, Fairbanks, her agent, and the Subaru representative convene at the net, and prepare to discuss the ad campaign more seriously. "Do you want to see the preliminary art?" the Subaru executive asks. When they say yes, he presents them with a mock-up featuring a Subaru vehicle and the tagline: "Get out. And stay out." The executive explains: "See, our

concept is. We want to position you as the gay Anna Kournikova.” Fairbanks and her manager appear dumbfounded. “What?!” her agent asks. “This is not something we discussed,” he says. But knowing that this could be her ticket out of the closet and perhaps to more endorsement opportunities, Fairbanks interrupts him before he can go any further. “I love it,” she says to the Subaru executive. “I want to be the gay Anna Kournikova. I do” (Troche & Troche, 2004).

Though there are available and visible lesbian professional tennis players with whom Fairbanks could align herself (e.g., King, Navratilova, Mauresmo), we believe that Fairbanks wants to be the gay Anna Kournikova so that she might accumulate the popularity, celebrity, and wealth that Kournikova did during her brief professional career. Kournikova is the Russian-American model and tennis player who turned professional in 1995, never won a Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) title in singles play, and yet still managed to capitalize financially largely because of her physical attractiveness (Harris & Clayton, 2002). For instance, in 2004, she registered as one of the highest-paid female athletes by bringing in \$10 million dollars (Forbes.com, n.d.). Though she did have some success on the court (while competing in doubles), most of her earnings occurred through endorsements and modeling wherein she capitalized on what Hakim (2010) would call her “erotic capital” (p. 499). She is (in-) famously better known for appearing in various men’s magazines (such as *FHM*) or on ESPN’s “Hottest Female Athletes” list than for her prowess on the tennis court (ESPN Page 2, n.d.). In fact, though she was at one point ranked as the number eight female tennis player in the world (on 20 November 2000) her tennis ability is frequently ridiculed or minimized, and subsequently she has been named as the “biggest flop” and one of the most overrated athletes of recent memory. Based on this information we conclude that Fairbanks did not mean to suggest that she aspired to be as accomplished on the court as Kournikova had been. Rather, and in contrast to Hart’s

(2001) earlier work which examined the cost of coming out for lesbian professional athletes, we note that Fairbanks' proclamation about Kournikova was economic, and this sets her apart from the lesbian professional athletes that came before her.

Moreover, Fairbanks' "Kournikova aspirations" reveal obvious racial and class undertones. Insofar as Fairbanks could have likened herself to many earlier iconic lesbian athletes, she similarly could have placed her aspirations with other financially (and athletically) successful female tennis players such as Maria Sharapova or Venus or Serena Williams. However, a comparison with either African American tennis stars Venus or Serena Williams is not likely, for as Himberg (2008) argues, the physical standards of beauty on shows such as *The L Word* reflect "white ideals" and standards (p. 2). Furthermore, scholars have correctly noted how racialized assumptions surrounding Blackness frequently register in media coverage of Venus and Serena Williams' bodies, fashion choices, and style of play (Ifekwunigwe, 2009; Schultz, 2005). The blurring of race and class is also evident on *The L Word* where "characters are coded as high class through fashion, expensive cars and homes, powerful jobs, and cultural sophistication" (Himberg, 2008, p. 4). They further register as high class through their embodiment: the characters of *The L Word* are "sleek, beautiful, zealously groomed [and] stylishly dressed" (Bolonik, 2004, p. 20). As a character on the series, Fairbanks adheres to these expectations; she is white, lithe, conventionally beautiful, and—despite her career as a professional tennis player—rarely sweaty or disheveled; she possesses the physical attributes to be the "gay Anna Kournikova,"

Nevertheless, though Himberg (2008) suggests that the "class-based expression of femininity" found on shows such as *The L Word* and *Work Out* require us to move beyond "discussions of only male voyeurism or lesbian chic," it is not readily apparent why a

comparison with Sharapova, as opposed to Kournikova, did not occur (p. 2). Though Sharapova garners much more legitimacy as a professional athlete than Kournikova does/did, they share similar Russian-American lineage, modeling experience, and adhere to conventional beauty ideals. However, in gaining legitimacy as an athlete, it appears as if Sharapova established a level of political agency that could not easily be assigned to Kournikova. In a similar vein, Fairbanks' traditionally feminine physicality and her apolitical orientation to her lesbianism position her as the perfect foil to the politically-engaged lesbian feminist athletes that preceded her.

She is the “apolitical femme” who “exchanges an association of lesbianism with feminist politics for an association with sex appeal, youth, fashion, and conspicuous consumption. [She is] interested not in sexual politics, but simply in sex itself” (Cragin, 2006, p. 197). In adopting this persona, Fairbanks appears to fall in step with a number of well-known celebrities who “just-happen-to-be-lesbians” including actresses, Portia de Rossi and Cynthia Nixon, comics Rosie O'Donnell and Wanda Sykes, and financial advisor, Suze Orman (Reed, 2009, p. 311). In this way, she aspires to possess the marketable intangibles that Kournikova does and which made/make her appealing to a variety of consumers. As Wertheim (2002) notes: “[Kournikova's] slight accent, her icy demeanor, the persistent whispers of alleged ties to the Russian Mafia, the bizarre love triangles, and the conga line of revolving suitors imbue her with a sense of mystery and a lightning bolt of eroticism” (cited by Ifekwunigwe, 2009, p. 134). In a similar way, Fairbanks can downplay her political sporting lesbianism by following the lead set by Kournikova. Her target market—the “lifestyle lesbians” who are eager, and able, to consume (Gever, 2003, p. 39) “hinges on a [hetero-]sexualized appearance constructed through consumer ideals and an erasure of difference” (McKenna, 2002, p. 286).

Conclusion

The recent hetero media googlyness over lesbians isn't about documentations—showing the realities of lesbian lives—it's about creation: building a better lesbian, one palatable enough for mainstream consumption. In order to show off the new and improved qualities of these lovely ladies, a line is drawn between the fab lesbians of today and those cruddy old dykes of yore (Schwartz, 1993, p. 34).

In this article we aspired to highlight the ways in which Fairbanks' corporatized coming out moves her into relatively new territory for a lesbian professional athlete because it challenges the persistent fear that a public disclosure of a lesbian subjectivity would lessen one's chances for sponsorships and endorsements. And yet, despite the new economic possibilities for lesbian sporting celebrity, the assertion that a series such as *The L Word* offered up a “new” way to be a lesbian obscures the historical existence of “femme” performance in the lesbian community. In other words, when a lesbian “fits right in” with heteronormative understandings of femininity, she succeeds in becoming both visible and perhaps invisible (Reed, 2009, p. 308). Indeed, many argue that contemporary lesbian representations display a comparatively (when considered against earlier mediated representations of lesbians) heightened performance of normative femininity which “sanitize[d], depoliticize[d] and even de-homosexualize[d] the lesbian characters” (Himberg, 2008, p. 1). However, whereas some condemned contemporary representations as being unrealistic and for pandering to presumably (straight) male viewers, others celebrated the clear deviation from abovementioned lesbian stereotypes. This persistent tension and the direct challenge to the familiar stereotype of the lesbian body as sexless, frumpy,

and disinterested in displaying any markers of “traditional” femininity inspires new questions and reflections on feminist theories concerning representations, bodies, sexualities, and femininities.

This is a conversation that percolates around notions of diversity, variation and body divergence that operate to simultaneously (re)affirm differences and the “norm,” or rather the lesbian representations we come to expect. While Fairbanks disrupts the stereotypical, caricatured hetero/homo body binary we find that her commodified “difference”—that is, her unique selling point as being based on her palatable “heterosexy” lesbian subjectivity—is only comprehensible by a folding in upon the “normal” and anticipated lesbian body against which Fairbanks is seen to be removed. Her “newness” and “uniqueness” are only understandable then through a recourse to more established patterns of difference and exclusion, thus removing the politicizing potential of her coming out. They also connect with the invisible whiteness and classed-based dimensions of coming out, as we have discussed throughout the article.

Through the use of a television character, Dana Fairbanks, this article argued that investigating Fairbanks’ white, upper class, lesbian, “femme-inine” physicality will help to further theorize the complex relationship between sport, lesbianism, femininity, and the body (Caudwell, 2006). Furthermore, by attempting to understand Fairbanks’ key utterance (“I want to be the gay Anna Kournikova”) we highlight the growing import of economic factors in the decision to profit off one’s coming out narrative. In this article we presented yet another instance of a corporatized coming out narrative, and as such, wish to encourage further interrogation into this phenomenon. In light of a recent National Public Radio story on Howard Bragman, the public relations expert who helps celebrities to devise a media-savvy coming out

strategy, we feel that additional explorations into this realm can help to answer important questions about the current state of lesbians in sport (Cohen, 2011).

To conclude, we wish to remind readers of our main motivation for our extensive exploration of Fairbanks. In essence, we remain attuned to the reality that fictional and mediated characters and narratives such as the one explored within this article produce and normalize certain practices and behaviors. While we have speculated on the impact this might have on “real” lesbian sporting celebrities, Fairbanks’ success as a lesbian sporting celebrity rests on the notion that there is an audience interested, willing and able to consume the products and image she is selling, and this dimension warrants further critical consideration. To briefly begin this type of analysis, we return to *The L Word*, and its depiction of Fairbanks’ decision to come out publicly as positive. Her newly announced lesbian status is immediately celebrated by friends and an extended lesbian “family.” She gets a glimpse of her newfound fame when she travels with several friends to the events surrounding the Dinah Shore golf tournament (Turner & Troche, 2004). There, Fairbanks’ fans receive her (literally) with open arms, and Tonya—Fairbanks’ guest liaison for the tournament—ends up becoming a love interest. In Season Two, Fairbanks continues to harness her celebrity power. She and Tonya plan their wedding, which is to be the first “corporate-sponsored gay nuptials in history” (Bolonik, 2005, p. 124) and later in the series, Fairbanks accepts an invitation from Olivia Cruises to sit on a special guest panel wherein she will discuss lesbian dynamics, love, and friendship. Her stint on the panel appears uneventful: Dana only responds to one question (a woman asks if Dana will marry her). However, her ability to draw in consumers is the main reason that Dana is on board the Olivia Cruise. As an example, a bikini-clad Fairbanks is barraged by two lesbian sports fans while walking towards the pool, and she smiles at the women and obliges their autograph requests. As

the camera moves on to the next scene, one of the women gushes to Fairbanks: “Thank you for being you. I saw you almost beat Capriati in 2002. I drive a Subaru because of you” (Chaiken & Brock, 2005). As anticipated, the “wanting to be Dana” has happened.

References

- Akass, K. & McCabe, J., (Eds.). (2006). *Reading the L word*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Anderson, E. (2011). Updating the outcome: Gay athletes, straight teams, and coming out in educationally-based sports teams, *Gender and Society*, 25, 2, 250-268.
- Andrews, D. (2008). Kinesiology's *inconvenient truth* and the physical cultural studies imperative. *Quest*, 60, 45-62.
- Authors (2012).
- Francombe, J. (2010). 'I cheer, you cheer, we cheer'; Physical technologies and the normalized body. *Television & New Media*, 11, 5, pp 350-366.
- Baird, B. (2005). The L Word: Histories, theories, and contemporary stories of lesbianism. In G. Hawkes & J. Scott, (Eds.), *Perspectives in Human Sexuality* (pp 61-84). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Birrell, S. & McDonald, M.G. (2000). *Reading sport*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Bolonik, K. (2004, January 12). Not your mother's lesbians. *New York Magazine*, 37, 1, 18-23.
- Bolonik, K. (2005). *The L word: Welcome to our Planet*. New York, NY: Fireside.
- Burns, K. & Davies, C. (2009). Producing cosmopolitan citizens on *The L Word*. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 13, 174-188.
- Cahn, S.K. (1994). *Coming on Strong: Gender and sexuality in twentieth century women's sport*. New York: Free Press.
- Caudwell, J. (2006). Femme-fatale: re-thinking the femme-inine. In J. Caudwell (ed.) *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory* (pp. 145-158). London: Routledge.
- Cavalier, E. (2011). Men at work: Gay men's experiences in the sport workplace, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58, 626-646.

- Chaiken, I. (Writer), & Goldwyn, T. (Director). (2004). L'ennui [Television series episode]. *The L Word*. Showtime Network Inc.
- Chaiken, I. (Writer), & Brock, T. (Director). (2005). Land ahoy. [Television series episode]. *The L Word*. Showtime Network Inc.
- Chaiken, I. (Writer), & Robinson, A. (Director). (2006). Latecomer. [Television series episode]. *The L Word*. Showtime Network Inc.
- Cohen, A. (Speaker). (2011, April 28). PR's gay guru helps celebrities come out. National Public Radio. Retrieved July 1, 2011 from <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/28/135771766/prs-gay-guru-helps-celebrities-come-out>
- Comer, K. (2004). Wanting to be Lisa: Generational rifts, girl power and the globalization of surf culture in N. Campbell (Ed.) *American Youth Cultures* (pp. 237-265), New York: Routledge.
- Cragin, B. (2006). Lesbians and serial TV: *Ellen* finds her inner adult. In J. R. Keller and L. Stratyner (eds.) *The new queer aesthetic on television: Essays on recent programming*. (pp. 193-208). Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc.
- Dabis, C. (Writer), & Stopkewich, L. (Director). (2006). Light my fire. [Television series episode]. *The L Word*. Showtime Network Inc.
- Elliott, S. (2007, March 12). Advertising: Gay athletes slowly enter the endorsement arena. *The New York Times*. Retrieved June 27, 2011 from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9900EEDC1031F931A25750C0A9619C8B63&pagewanted=all>

- Forbes.com. (n.d.). Best paid female athletes. Retrieved July 1, 2011 from
http://www.forbes.com/celebrities/2004/06/14/cz_celebs04_femaleathletes_4.htm
l?thisSpeed=6000
- Forman, P.J. & Plymire, D.C. (2005). Amélie Mauresmo's muscles: The lesbian heroic in women's professional tennis. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, **33**, 1 & 2, 120-131.
- Fusco, C. (1998) Lesbians and locker rooms. In G. Rail (Ed.), *Sport and postmodern times* (pp. 87-116). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Gever, M. (2003). *Entertaining lesbians: Celebrity, sexuality, and self-invention*. New York: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. A. (2001). Cultural studies as performative politics. *Cultural Studies and Critical Methodologies*, **1**, 1, 5-23.
- Griffin, P. (1998). *Strong women, deep closets: lesbians and homophobia in sport*. Champaign: Human Kinetics.
- Hakim, C. (2010). Erotic capital. *European Sociological Review*, **26**, 5, 499-518.
- Harris, J. & Clayton, B. (2002). Femininity, masculinity, physicality, and the English tabloid press: The case of Anna Kournikova. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, **37**, 397-413.
- Hart, K. L. (2001). *Lesbian professional athletes: What was the cost of coming out?* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.
- Herman, D. (2005). 'I'm Gay': Declarations, desire, and coming out on prime-time television. *Sexualities*, **8**, 1, 7-29.
- Heywood, L. & Dworkin, S. L. (2003). *Built to win: The female athlete as cultural icon*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Himburg, J. (2008, January). Lesbian Femininity on Television. Thinking Gender Papers, UCLA Center for the Study of Women, UC Los Angeles. Retrieved 19 September 2010 from <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/48v69502>.
- Iannotta, J. G. & Kane, M.J. (2002). Sexual stories as resistance narratives in women's sports: Reconceptualizing identity performance. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 19, 347-369.
- Ifekwunigwe, J. O. (2009). Venus and Serena are 'doing it' for themselves: Theorizing sporting celebrity, class and Black feminism for the Hip-Hop generation. In Carrington, B. & I. McDonald (eds.) *Marxism, cultural studies and sport* (pp. 130-153). London: Routledge.
- Jarvis, N. (2002). Sponsorship and gay sport: A case study of the 2000 Gay Softball World Series. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 4, 3, 205-230.
- Jones, R. & LeBlanc, R. (2005). Sport, sexuality and representation in advertising: The political economy of the pink dollar. In S. Jackson and D.J. Andrews (Eds.), *Sport, Culture and Advertising* (pp. 119-135). London: Routledge.
- Kellner, D. (1995). *Media culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern*, London: Routledge.
- Kian, E. M. & Anderson, E. (2009). John Amaechi: Changing the way sport reporters examine gay athletes, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 56, 799-818.
- King, S. (2005). Methodological contingencies in sports studies. In D.L. Andrews, D.S. Mason & M. Silk (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in sport studies* (pp. 21-38). Oxford: Berg.
- King, S. (2008). What's queer about (queer) sport sociology now? A review essay, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25, 419-442.
- King, S. (2009). Homonormativity and the politics of race: Reading Sheryl Swoopes, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 13, 272-290.

- Lee, P. & Meyer, M. D. E. (2010). "We all have feelings for our girlfriends:" Progressive(?) representations of lesbian lives on *The L Word*. *Sexuality & Culture*, 14, 234-250.
- Lenskyj, H.J. (1997). No fear? Lesbians in sport and physical education. *Women's Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 6, 2, 7-22.
- McDonald, M. (2002). Queering whiteness: The particular case of the Women's National Basketball Association. *Sociological Perspectives*, 45, 4, 379-396.
- McDonald, M. (2006). Beyond the pale: The whiteness of sport studies and queer scholarship. In J. Caudwell (ed.) *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory* (pp. 33-45). London: Routledge.
- McFadden, M. (2006). 'We cannot afford to keep being so high-minded': Fighting the religious right on *The L Word*. In J. R. Keller & L. Stratyner (eds.) *The new queer aesthetic on television: Essays on recent programming*. (pp. 113-129). Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc.
- Ouellette, L & Hay, J. (2008). *Better living through reality tv: Television and post-welfare citizenship*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Pitts, B.G. (1997). From leagues of their own to an industry of their own: The emerging lesbian sports industry. *Women's Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 6, 2, 109-139.
- Plymire, D.C. & Forman, P.J. (2000). Breaking the silence: Lesbian fans, the Internet, and the sexual politics of women's sport. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 5, 2, 141-153.
- Pratt, M. (2008). *The L Word* menace: Envisioning popular culture as political tool. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bowling Green State University.
- Reed, J. (2009). Lesbian television personalities—A queer new subject. *The Journal of American Culture*, 32, 4, 307-317.

- Schultz, J. (2005). Reading the catsuit. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 29, 3, 338-357.
- Silk, M. L. & Andrews, D. L. (2011). Toward a physical cultural studies. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28, 1, pp. 4-35.
- Silk, M., & Francombe, J. . (2011). All these years of hurt: Culture, pedagogy and ‘1966’ as a site of national myth. In S.Wagg, (Ed). *Myths And milestones in the history of sport*. (pp. 262-286).. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Spencer, N. (2003). “America’s Sweetheart” and “Czech Mate”: A discursive analysis of the Evert-Navratilova rivalry. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 27, 1, 18-37.
- Troche, R. (Writer) & Troche, R. (Director). (2004). Luck, next time. [Television series episode]. *The L Word*. Showtime Network Inc.
- Turner, G. (Writer) & Troche, R. (Director). (2004). Looking Back. [Television series episode]. *The L Word*. Showtime Network Inc.
- Ware, S. (2011). *Game, set, match: Billie Jean King and the revolution in women’s sports*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Zakarin, M. (Writer) & Skogland, K. (Director). (2004). Listen Up. [Television series episode]. *The L Word*. Showtime Network Inc.
- Ziff, E. (Writer) & Sharzen, J. (Director). (2007). Layup. [Television series episode]. *The L Word*. Showtime Network Inc.

ⁱ The series lasted for six seasons (2004-2009) and inspired its own reality show, *The Real L Word*, which debuted in the summer of 2010.

ⁱⁱ We are aware that other athletes have received endorsements after coming out, and we wish to distinguish those instances from times wherein the coming out was facilitated by the endorsement. For more on the former, see Elliott (2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ Nancy Spencer (2003) makes a compelling case that Navratilova's inability to attract endorsements was not only reflective of her lesbian subjectivity when she demonstrates that timely cold-war anxieties and the 'likeability' of Chris Evert also contributed.

^{iv} Roxy is a company that sells products and gear to women and girls who surf and snowboard. For examples of their products, see <http://global.roxy.com/>

^v Ellipses indicate pauses in this speech and not words that have been eliminated.