Gender and Sexuality Themes in Sports Blog Responses

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GENDER AND SEXUALITY THEMES IN SPORTS BLOG RESPONSES

By

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ABSTRACT

Over the past half-century, the expression of sexuality has become ubiquitous in most sectors of American society. From the free love movement associated with the 1960s to Harvey Milk’s agitations for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights in the 1970s, “sex” is no longer an expletive in United States culture. Recent television shows like Modern Family and The L Word celebrate those whom Milk sought to represent, and earlier programming like Maude exemplified female self-actualization and self-discovery. However, as gender and queer studies have expanded in the past five decades, certain arenas have lagged in terms of attitudes toward sexual understanding.

The world of competitive sports is known to be a hyper-sexualized and hyper-masculine realm, but sex and gender add a new dimension of complexity. Structures of sexuality work to maintain overarching social standards; scholar Jayne Caudwell finds that when an athlete challenges those paradigms, fans respond negatively. Whether the stories of such occurrences concern behaviors, such as promiscuity, or inborn traits like sexual preference or gender identity, ardent fans and casual readers alike tend to respond with shock, disdain or despair when their heroes fall from grace.

This qualitative analysis utilizes the works of Kenneth Burke and Judith Butler in examining reactions to controversial stories regarding American professional golfer Tiger Woods and South African runner Caster Semenya. A variety of continuously-updated, Internet-facilitated sources such as blogs are used as the primary texts for research into the mindset of the American sports fan. This allows for a diverse slate of root materials for the analysis, as well as a more assuredly accurate portrayal of fans’ voices in the interest of determining the causes and implications of sports fans’ reactions to stories concerning athletes’ sexuality.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Before the fall of apartheid in South Africa, Caster Semenya would have been considered a trailblazer in the nation’s athletic history simply on the merit of being a black woman with a special gift for doing exceptionally well in track and field events. Considering that the better part of two decades have passed since the oppressive political regime was ousted, a casual observer may not be able to discern why the champion runner has achieved singular status within and without her home country’s borders. However, as Keith Moore reports in the Huffington Post of July 15, 2010, the 19-year-old Semenya spent much of the past year in athletic limbo after the International Association of Athletics Federation commanded her to undergo special testing. The tests administered to Semenya were not the average checks for performance-enhancing drugs or human growth hormone; rather, these examinations were ordered to ensure that the muscular runner was, in fact, female. Moreover, for her part, Semenya was completely oblivious to the nature of the tests; the athlete’s coaches told her that she was undergoing screenings for blood doping instead of a gender assessment.

The allegations that Semenya may or may not have been a man met chiefly with outrage both in South Africa and across the globe at large. The South African government threatened litigation against the IAAF over the agency’s treatment of the runner, which occurred after a report in the British tabloid newspaper The Daily Telegraph claimed that Semenya had “an intersex condition” and, in fact, was “a hermaphrodite” (Hart 2009). A plurality of American sports fans were similarly incensed at the apparent injustice of Semenya’s situation, but this feeling was not completely consistent. On the Yahoo! Sports blog Fourth-Place Medal, sportswriter Chris Chase wrote on September 8, 2009 that a South African gossip magazine’s attempt to give Semenya a “makeover” in the spirit of feminizing her outward appearance “[felt] forced” (Chase 2009). The post was met with a number of negative responses, including one reply left by a self-identified female user with the handle “Give A Darn” as follows:

Get over it...the thing has BALLS for goodness sake! Then they force it to do a cover of a magazine in womans [sic] clothing and makeup? Heck, I can dress my dog as a woman but its [sic] still a dog! No one has ever seen dude in a dress, or even remotely act as a lady! I am insulted as a real woman that this thing is
allowed to run around beating HIS chest after his win, when real women are sitting in defeat knowing that they just got unfairly beaten by a DUDE! He may not have the outside sausage, but the beans never descended but they are there internally, and I hear they are rather large! If it walks like a DUDE, talks like a DUDE, and acts like a DUDE, then it must be a DUDE! (2009).

The references to Semenya as “the thing” and “it” inform attempts at dehumanization, a fact even more uncomfortable than the respondent’s frequent and emphatic use of masculine colloquial nouns--or reference to a penis as “the outside sausage”--in describing the athlete. Even in a sexually-conscious America, sex, gender and sexuality remain touchy subjects in the sports world. Generally speaking, athletes who publicly state their alternative sexual preferences (such as Women’s National Basketball Association pioneer Sheryl Swoopes) or acknowledge their support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (as did National Football League linebacker Scott Fujita of the New Orleans Saints in 2010) receive little to no press in high-output publications, and constantly encounter verbal abuse on many blogs and other online community forums. Semenya’s situation is unique for these readers in that she does not identify as lesbian, bisexual or transgender; her reported intersex condition, based on the IAAF’s test results, create a very new set of stimuli for many fans to address.

Promiscuity is met with similar fire. Legendary college basketball coach Rick Pitino has faded in fans’ eyes after allegations surfaced of an extramarital dalliance; even basketball great Michael Jordan, considered possibly the greatest athlete ever to pick up a ball of any type, has lost some luster following the publication of facts about his unfaithfulness to his former wife (AP 2006). The most prominent and contentious recent example of fan retribution is indisputably Woods, who lost many high-profile endorsements and spent much of 2010 as persona non grata on Internet message boards. A prescient article by Jacqui Goddard in the December 14, 2009 Times of London featured an interview with Dr. David Fraunfelder of St. David’s School in Raleigh, North Carolina, who noted that Woods was the “one shining star in the American firmament we could point to and say, ‘see, this is our hero and hope.’ ... Is Tiger Woods ruined? As the confirmation of the American ethos, yes - we are a nation that punishes and consumes our sinful celebrities.” Recently, impressions of Woods have improved among fans, but the golfer may never recover his original stellar reputation.
Sports and sports narratives are ubiquitous in American culture; apart from the games themselves, films and merchandise such as video games and clothing gross billions of dollars on a yearly basis, and top stories about star athletes garner attention even from those who do not call themselves sports fans. Additionally, it is no secret that the sports world, from Little League and Pop Warner syndicates to the highest professional outfits, is not a particularly welcoming atmosphere for gay men, lesbians or others who live outside the sexual status quo, whether due to religious beliefs (which, given the propensity of victorious athletes to thank God for His favor, are widespread in the arena) or simple ignorance. As such, athletes who identify as LGBT or intersex persons may remain “in the closet” regardless of any research and/or findings of support for said athletes. Moreover, if recent stories of high-profile sports figures like Woods are any indication, there is little evidence that delving into stars’ sexual psyches will promote fidelity or abstinence among A-list athletes. The impetus for this analysis, therefore, is to understand why there is such a premium on carnal purity as a gold standard for athletes—or, more specifically, those particularly prominent sports personalities who are designated as “heroes” among devotees. Additionally, this analysis seeks to find why Semenya and Woods each incurred at least some degree of wrath from sports fans when the impetus for backlash against the runner was beyond her control—and the same could not be said for the golfer.

To address these phenomena, this investigation begins in Chapter 2 by reviewing literature by Kenneth Burke and Judith Butler concerning heroism and the performance of gender. Next, Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for the study, introducing three research questions for the analysis and explaining the story selection process. Following the discussion of methodology, a Burkean analysis is applied in Chapter 4 to entries and comments from the popular sports blogs ESPN, Yahoo! Sports and FOX Sports, utilizing Burke’s model of epic poetry to examine the stories of and responses to athletic figures’ sexual lives. Burke uses the heroic frame of epic poetry to explain the narrative trajectory of those who are constructed as “heroes” by society; considering the eventual downfall of these sports figures in spite of their great accomplishments, the epic poetry model is appropriate for the analysis. This model works in conjunction with works by prior authors in the field to interpret the reactions in a scholarly context. In Chapter 5, the study opens a discussion directly answering each of the three research questions. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with limitations and implications of the study to determine the societal outcomes these findings present and portend.
CHAPTER 2  
LITERATURE REVIEW

To consider further the link between heroism and the sexual status quo in sports and proceed with this qualitative study, we must look to Kenneth Burke’s definition of epic poetry as discussed in the author’s original 1937 text *Attitudes Toward History*. In this work, Burke illustrates the methods by which we construct and shape narrative attitudes toward recording and recounting. This is an appropriate model for the analysis for two reasons: First, according to Burke, the structure of the epic frame “[makes] humility and self-glorification work together; the sense of [a reader’s] limitations provides one with a realistic attitude for gauging his personal resources, while … vicarious kinship with the figure gives him the distinction necessary for the needs of self-justification” (Burke 36); and second, epic poetry shows all sides of its heroes, yet emphasizes their positive attributes while minimizing (but still acknowledging) many of their perceived vulnerabilities. Similarly, the sports world often tries to place greater importance on the favorable accomplishments of its stars while reluctantly addressing or even shying away from many of their less-desirable acts; fallibility, after all, does not boost sales for video games, jerseys or other athletic merchandise.

According to Burke, there are four basic components of epic poetry: The literary form makes its readers “at home” in primitive, non-commercial conditions; it “accepts the rigors of war … by magnifying the role of warlike hero;” the building-up of the hero “[advertises] courage and individual sacrifice” for the greater good of society; and, finally, “it enables the humble man to share the worth of the hero by the process of ‘identification’” (Burke 35-6). Moreover, if we work to “debunk” the heroism of an individual, Burke writes, “in destroying the dignity of great legendary or historical characters, we automatically destroy ourselves” (36). It is interesting and ultimately most important, then, that a hero’s divinity as an emissary between men and gods is tempered with a fatal flaw, such as Achilles’ exposed heel in Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*. These latter tenets of the narrative form indicate a hero is not meant to remain heroic for the duration of his or her public existence; something inevitably rises to derail that heroism. Thus, tragedy is inherent in the epic frame, no matter how great and powerful the hero may seem; as Florida State University professor Dr. Jeanette Castillo notes, the epic frame is ultimately a fragile and untenable one (Castillo 2008).
The epic frame in its most literal form ultimately becomes a tragic frame when the hero falls from grace, as the near-godlike Achilles does in *The Iliad*. It is essential that the hero is eventually debunked; the unrealistic notion of invincibility has no place even in fictional examples of writings in this frame. The singular traits of a hero such as Achilles—strength, tenacity and the like—are ultimately construed as divine blessings, gifts from the heavens which can be, and are, taken away without notice. Burke notes that ancient tragic playwrights constructed hubris, or pride, as the great downfall of heroic characters: “Their frame of acceptance admonished one to ‘resign’ himself to a sense of his limitations. They feared good fortune, as the first sign of punishment from the gods” (Burke 39).

The use of masculine pronouns in this and other Burke quotations is in itself indicative of the difficulty of even enlightened communicators to diverge from the narrative attitude construction of the male as the “default” example of humanity. Simone de Beauvoir explains this predilection toward non-feminine terms in *The Second Sex*, noting that masculine nomenclature was long the only method by which writers in many disciplines addressed all of the human race; women were treated as the “other” to men, and attempts to deviate from this norm were met with misogynistic reactions (Lloyd 31). In short, within the epic frame, the idea that something other than that man of many adjectives could be the ideal specimen of *Homo sapiens* may in fact lead to negative outputs like misogyny and homophobia; the necessary tragedy of the hero’s fall based on a “fatal flaw” informs the difficulty of accepting deviations from the norm. However, in the sports world, it is possible that other frames such as comic or burlesque may enter the discussion as less fragile narrative frames for the heroism of a given athlete.

In the interest of accurate analysis, it is imperative to introduce those alternative frames as described in Burke’s text. Apart from the epic, the scholar identifies six basic categories in which one can place the overwhelming majority of texts: Tragic, comic, elegiac, satirical, burlesque and grotesque. First, tragedy and comedy, along with the aforementioned epic frame, work under Burke’s definitions as frames of *acceptance*, rather than *rejection*. It should be noted that with regard to those terms, an attitude of “acceptance” toward history indicates that an individual or event of interest is recognized as having value to a given audience—in short, narratives of acceptance can be described as ultimately positive frames. By contrast, an attitude of “rejection” implies that the same audience finds that a given figure or event has no
quantifiable or qualifiable value and/or elicits no interest regarding the subject—thus, frames of rejection are ultimately negative.

Tragedy focuses on causal relationships and typically considers hubris or pride as the catalyst for destruction, often “surrounding it with the connotations of crime” (Burke 39); nonetheless, the fallen hero is accepted by the audience. An example of the tragic frame can be seen in the comments following the publication of Chris Chase’s Yahoo! piece discussing Caster Semenya’s makeover from September 8, 2009. In the final comment on Chase’s article, blog reader “t_frederick21” laments “It is so like Western society to dictate and decide who falls into what category” (Chase 2009). The user is utilizing the hubristic traditions of Western society to explain the negative treatment of Semenya by her coaches, the media and fans alike, thus informing the feeling that Semenya was tragically wronged.

Comedy goes beyond mere risibility and utilizes the character of the fool, portraying that character as mistaken (rather than evil) and, thereby, essentially human. In addition, humor “takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation” (Burke 43). On an ESPN.com article from December 3, 2009, shortly after allegations of Tiger Woods’s infidelity first surfaced and the golfer admitted to “letting his family down,” user “Grandmarocks1960” humanized Woods while at the same time minimizing the situation of the golfer’s private life being broadcast:

All of you people whining about Tiger Woods being a role model need to see Tiger for what he is , a man who plays golf. Stop putting these guys on pedestals then you won’t be so mad when your “Sports Hero” shows he’s just another HUMAN BEING. I love watching Tiger compete, no I’m not interested in his private life I have one of my own thank-you. I feel for TW’s family having to deal with all the gossip but that comes with the fame and money. No you d*i*p*s*h*i*t*s no one gives up their right to have some kind [of] private life.

Drool on m*o*r*o*n*s (ESPN 2009).

The comic tone of the post may not elicit immediate laughter from the reader (though the poster’s handle may do so), but it is nonetheless indicative of the comic frame for the reasons mentioned. In spite of their nemesis standings, the two frames may intersect in the Burkean lens, resulting in a frame of tragedy with a comic corrective; this humanizes the fallen character and can imply the opportunity for growth within both the hero and the audience. For all their obvious
differences, Burke saw tragedy and comedy as working together to construct the “proper” attitude toward history (Castillo 2008).

The elegiac and satirical frames sit somewhere between acceptance and rejection, due to their complex tones; ergo, narratives within these frames qualify contextually as neutral messages due to their placement between the earlier-defined paradigms of “positive” and “negative.” Elegy, in a sense, indicates that one who “has perfected a technique of complaint” (Burke 44) will continue to utilize that tactic passively rather than attempting to grow beyond it; consider A.A. Milne’s Eeyore, a character who seems to be quite functional in spite of his unshakable pessimism. Alternately, user “ras_t” noted on the Yahoo! blog regarding Semenya, “I think she looks beautiful. Why don’t people just leave her alone?” (Chase 2009). In the case of this post, “ras_t” is chiefly accepting Semenya, but only in the context of complaining about others’ opinions—a passive approach. In a sense, the author is utilizing the elegiac frame to conduct “acceptance through weeping” (Castillo 2008).

Satire, per Burke, “attacks in others the weaknesses and temptations that are really within [the satirist]” (Burke 49). It can be argued that this process of “strategic ambiguity” serves to make the satirist, who to a casual observer would seem superior, reconcile his or her own shortcomings through the process of identification. On the previously-cited ESPN post regarding Woods, user “Sandalorn” wrote after hearing the initial voicemail released as evidence that Woods had strayed from his wife: “Oh man..He is in neck deep now. It always surprises me how this [sic] celebrities don’t understand that stepping up and admitting it and asking for forgiveness will get this crap out of the spotlight alot [sic] quicker than constantly denying anything happened” (ESPN 2009). The description of the human tendency to deny truth in times of trouble infers that the user is likely speaking from experience, thus reconciling past or present shortcomings. Thus, the satirical frame affects a seemingly-contradictory phenomenon of acceptance by rejection; identification by whatever means is at its core a necessary function of acceptance (Castillo 2008).

Lastly, the burlesque and grotesque work as frames of rejection, ultimately seeking to distance the audience from the character. The burlesque frame is likely closer to the common conception (or, depending on one’s view, the modern devolution) of satire, in that the deconstruction of a subject still occurs, but without any sort of attempt to understand the position of the subject. The previously-cited post from “Give A Darn” on Chase’s Yahoo! article
regarding Semenya is a clear example of burlesque writing; while there are humorous elements (again, “the outside sausage;” “the beans never descended”) within, as one would find in satirical or comic writing, the user has no interest in understanding Semenya’s struggle and confers no value upon the runner (Chase 2009). Further, those humorous examples are not incorporated in an attempt to elicit laughter.

The grotesque incorporates mysticism and incongruity, similar to comedy--but, as Burke notes, without the element of humor or laughter. Further, the grotesque differs from the burlesque in that the viewer is “in sympathy” with the subject, inferring that it creates a sense of alarming sobriety (58). One disturbing post from “vermont royster” on the ESPN blog regarding Woods exemplifies this phenomenon:

Not only does Tiger think white women are better than black women (he never has dated a black woman) he obviously has no respect for women. He’s a sexual deviant. And what amazes me is that none of these hot white chicks had any boyfriends or maybe if they had a boyfriend, their boyfriends recognized that these ihop [sic] waitresses, cocktail waitresses and event planners (aka intermediary's [sic] who hooked up celebrities with a one night stand) were nothing more than trash no different than the way Tiger treated them [as] trash as he bedded them in church parking lots, restrooms and his wife’s bed (ESPN 2009).

In this post, the writer clearly rejects Woods without humor; the writing is simultaneously misogynistic (the discussion of Woods’s mistresses as “trash”) and racially charged (“hot white chicks” et al), ostensibly distancing the writer from the situation. More jarringly, the author initially purports to be in sympathy with women, thus incorporating elements of the elegiac, but this frame quickly disintegrates into the grotesque for two reasons: First, the details of Woods’s alleged trysts as occurring “in church parking lots, restrooms and his wife’s bed” point to this as an example of rejection; and second, the inherent degradation of women clarifies the post as grotesque rather than some other frame. It could also be argued that “vermont royster” is engaging in satire vis-à-vis his or her self-insertion into the post (“what amazes me is…”), thus demonstrating the apparent nebulosity of some narratives as one attempts to infer and apply Burkean frames. Ultimately, a single narrative may incorporate multiple frames, but many such narratives still inform one *overarching* tone regardless of any obfuscation (Castillo 2008).
In addition to familiarizing oneself with Kenneth Burke’s narrative frames, it is imperative to examine the analysis of noted gender studies and queer theory pioneer Judith Butler. In her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler posits that gender—whether or not one is able to separate it from sexuality—is first and foremost a performance, a work of acting. Essentially, Butler establishes that a set of “normal” gender characteristics are set forth for men and women, thus creating paradigms which must be upkept by the individual—real-life cultural fictions. The structure of gender is, per the author, upheld as a result of a “tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders;” should an individual forget or refuse to maintain said norms, he or she incurs “the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them” (Butler 179).

Additionally, Butler notes that gender in and of itself is a construct of limited historical consistency and coherency. The author explains it is difficult to quantify traditional gender definitions “because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (Butler 6). In short, Butler writes, “If one ‘is’ a woman (or a man, or a homosexual), that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive” (6). Therefore, while gender appears to be a reasonably static and easily-classified trait, the myriad of components which enter into its construction—both within the self and by society—obfuscate gender somewhat.

In spite of their shared progressive nature, Burke’s notion of the heroic and Butler’s discussion of gender as a performative construct are necessarily at odds with one another when both are applied to the realm of competitive sports. Burke’s previously-noted usage of masculine language in describing the rise and fall of the hero is both a function of the era in which the scholar penned his text *and* a reflection of society’s general association of heroic traits—particularly those which are tied to physical prowess—with the male sex. When a woman exhibits athletic ability far exceeding that of other women or on par with that of men, her performance of gender is called into question, or even decried entirely. Thus, if a woman wishes to experience heroism in the Burkean sense, she may be prevented from doing so in keeping with her societally-proscribed gender performance norms as described by Butler.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Considering the influence of sports narratives on public perceptions of sexuality, we can pose three qualitative research questions:

1. Which Burkean frames of acceptance or rejection are used to respond to Tiger Woods versus Caster Semenya;
2. How do these frames reflect Judith Butler’s ideas of normative gender and sexual identity; and
3. Which athlete is more likely to evoke a tragicomic attitude within blog respondents?

As this study specifically addresses public opinion of athletes who step outside the boundaries of popularly-established propriety, it is vital to use sources that reflect immediate reactions to the pertinent stories in the interest of ascertaining the most timely and accurate responses to the above questions. Accordingly, for each case of “deviation from the norm” examined, this study, where possible, examines at least one blog post each from the three major sports blog Web sites previously named (Yahoo! Sports, ESPN and FOX Sports), for a total of three primary blog posts for each athlete. These major Web sites are appropriate texts for the analysis because they provide the highest proportion of up-to-the-moment reactions from a variety of sports fans; ESPN and FOX Sports are dedicated entirely to athletics, while Yahoo! Sports may provide impressions from more casual fans as it is a smaller offshoot of Yahoo!, a major Internet hub and general information homepage. Additionally, the instantaneous processes of publishing online content and generating comments for those posted items create a “call and response” dynamic for these stories; the immediacy of the reactions reflects the public’s first impressions.

Reader responses to each post are also analyzed, with the first 50 responses scrutinized as rhetorical components and counted into categories corresponding to each of Burke’s narrative frames. This affects an easy method of analyzing the general tone of responses to the story as to whether posters view a given athlete positively or negatively--and, accordingly, whether they ultimately engage in acceptance or rejection. Only the first 50 relevant comments are used; those which do not concern the story at hand, such as the “first” operative so inescapable in cyberspace as countless users attempt to be the first to comment, are not considered. In cases of stories with fewer than 50 responses, all relevant comments are examined. This primary total is
supplemented with additional online texts to provide complete impressions of the situations faced by Semenya and Woods. Both of these athletes sit at the center of stories which generated intense reactions from fans, but more importantly, they fit the criteria established in the literature review. The controversy surrounding Semenya is entirely based in the question of sexual identity; the mercurial Woods, meanwhile, represents Judith Butler’s notion of complex, multifaceted identity. These messages are examined for exhibition of a variety of Burkean frames, chief among them those of acceptance and rejection.

This analysis interprets heroism in sports rhetoric as well as the aforementioned stories utilizing Burke’s epic frame and (where applicable) gender and queer theory, examining each of the previously-described tenets to determine a further path for the study. The stories chosen, which incorporate selections from sources other than the designated blogs for availability purposes, include:

- “Embattled track star Caster Semenya gets new coach, new look,” by Chris Chase on September 8, 2009 at Fourth-Place Medal, a Yahoo! Sports blog.

- “Hermaphrodite runner Caster Semenya says she will return to competition,” from the Associated Press on March 30, 2010 at FOX Sports.

- “800m champ Semenya cleared to race,” from the Associated Press on July 6, 2010 at ESPN.com.

- “Tiger Woods announces he is returning at the Masters,” by Jay Busbee on March 16, 2010 at Devil Ball, a Yahoo! Sports blog.

- “Westwood to replace Woods as No. 1,” from the Associated Press on October 10, 2010 at FOX Sports.

- “With a change at No. 1 due, what’s next?” by Jason Sobel on October 11, 2010 at ESPN.com.
The selected posts were chosen to show a variety of styles in the root stories. The articles by Chase, Busbee and Sobel are editorial in nature, while the three Associated Press stories are more traditionally objective features. Within those AP stories, however, there is still some variance in tone as established by the publishers’ choices in headlines; even within one agency, namely FOX Sports, the titles range from mere reportage of fact (“Westwood to replace Woods as No. 1”) to seemingly pejorative (“Hermaphrodite runner Caster Semenya says she will return to competition”). Ostensibly, this blend of source material should inform according variety in the responses; subjective blogs would logically generate some significant volume of posts simply agreeing or disagreeing with the author, while more objective articles might inspire deeper analysis and reflection.

It must be noted that some of these blog posts--particularly those concerning Woods--received very high quantities of replies, necessitating the aforementioned limit in the number of responses examined. Additionally, due to the nature of blogs as a consistent, cyclical representation of public opinion as it forms and evolves over time--or what Jeanette Castillo calls a “scrolling barometer of public opinion” (Castillo 2008)--it is arguable that there is no need to dig through thousands of responses in order to ascertain a reasonably accurate interpretation of readers’ opinions, particularly at the time when the story first appeared. In the interest of avoiding “knee-jerk” reactions, five of the six selected articles were published a minimum of about four months after the first breaking of their root stories; while there is important information to be gleaned from immediate responses, the eventual legacy of each of these heroes is most evident in commentary scrutinized after the initial shock of their tales. The lone exception to this is the Yahoo! Sports story concerning Semenya; due to a lack of coverage and commentary on that Web site, the chosen story from September 2009 is the farthest removed from the initial reporting of Semenya’s debacle. One could suggest that this is a function of Yahoo! Sports’s status as a more casual fan site, whereas there is considerably less trouble finding material on Semenya at the more dedicated examples of ESPN or FOX Sports. The specific comments highlighted in the analysis serve to further the comprehensive examination of public opinion, both in outlining the extreme “fringe” elements and identifying the general tone of responses for each case. Finally, the overall impression of the commentary by readers informs whether the Butlerian performances of gender by Semenya and Woods are accepted, rejected or met with neutral reactions by the public.
These texts are appropriate for this analysis because they provide opinions from individuals with varying degrees of sports knowledge; while ESPN and FOX Sports readers are reasonably likely to be die-hard sports aficionados due to the sports-focused nature of those Web sites, the users on Yahoo! Sports, an offshoot of the general-information Web hub Yahoo!, may be either well-versed in athletics or much more casual fans. The content of blogs is constantly shifting and updating due to the malleable nature of these texts, thus providing invaluable insight into the current mindset of the American sports fan as it develops over time.

Additionally, blogs are efficient in showing the evolution of audience mindset. For example, a Yahoo! Sports blog entry regarding the Oakland Raiders’ 2009 signing of quarterback Jeff Garcia, a talented veteran whose high-pitched, sibilant voice and loquacious personality created suspicion about his sexuality throughout his playing career, garnered a handful of homophobic comments such as “Garcia plays pretty good [sic] for a limpwhrist” (Darnell 2009). However, these were few and far between by comparison to the number of comments which had nothing to do with the quarterback’s actual or perceived sexual orientation.

By contrast, the user-generated content sent into OutSports.com in the days following their September 27, 2002 nationally-published response to former New York Giants tight end Jeremy Shockey’s statements against gay people was much more vitriolic in the majority, ranging from the self-righteous (“All gay people should go to church and find Jesus. If you read the bible [sic] you would know that all gay people are destined for Hell”) to the repressive (“Anything anyone says that pushes gay people further back into the closet, the better”) to the simply profane (“You gay mother fuckers. Your [sic] the reason for aids [sic] !!!”) (Outsports.com 2011). Over seven years, the tone changes considerably, though some homophobia is clearly present in the 2009 responses as well. Static material does not provide this insight as readily as fluid and consistently-updated content, thereby giving the blog an edge over other textual sources in providing a lens into the sports fan’s process of narrative construction and development.
CHAPTER 4
APPLICATION OF METHOD

Recall that Burke outlines four basic components of the epic frame: Creating comfort in primitive, non-commercial conditions; magnification of “warlike heroes;” promotion of courage and self-sacrifice; and identification with the hero (Burke 35-6). Let us examine each of those four epic tenets in the scope of sports. First, are viewers of sports comfortable in primitive, non-commercial conditions? Yes; sports by their nature are physical competitions based largely upon brute force, physical strength and endurance. Thus, “primitive” elements are inherent in the games. Additionally, just as readers of epic poetry feel at home when immersed in an imagined world of myth and lore, many die-hard fans of athletic competitions are capable of enjoying a high school football game every bit as much as an NFL contest. In fact, the considerable enjoyment of non-commercial sports sometimes causes those activities to become popularized to the point of sponsorship. Both Little League baseball and softball have become worldwide phenomena, leading to ESPN-televised World Series tournaments which take place each year in Williamsport, Pennsylvania and Portland, Oregon respectively. Qualifying play similar to procedures for acceding to soccer’s World Cup tournament takes place in many parts of the world, with all roads leading to what has become one of the great annual sporting events of the late summer (LittleLeague.org 2011). The sponsorship of Little League is a direct result of the intensity of fans’ ardor for what is generally considered a much more basic incarnation of major league sports, thus satisfying Burke’s first tenet.

Second, do sports fans magnify their idols into warlike heroes? Without reservation, the answer is yes; the athletes and their teams become beacons of hope or destruction (depending upon whether one is cheering for or against a given side) for those who are invested in the games in any way, shape or form. The very nature of sports, particularly full-contact sports like football and hockey, is considered by some to be violent and even barbaric, allowing for an easy jump to “warlike” or “militaristic” themes whether at the behest of media personalities or the fans themselves. An Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles-sponsored August 1990 study of sports announcers’ rhetoric is a direct harbinger of this magnification. The study, conducted by Dr. Margaret C. Duncan, Dr. Michael A. Messner, Dr. Linda Williams and research assistant Kerry Jensen, found that CBS and ESPN television and radio announcers during the 1989
National Collegiate Athletic Association men’s and women’s basketball championship tournaments and the 1989 United States Open tennis competition showed a propensity for using terms like “shootout” and “firepower” as descriptive language, particularly in men’s games (Duncan et al 1990). This idiomatic verbiage transports players and fans alike into an atmosphere far greater than that which is actually portrayed on the field of play; a hypothetical tennis match at the 1989 Open could be construed as an exercise in ballistics, as Andre Agassi and Boris Becker—or, for purposes of gender equity, Monica Seles and Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario—trade bombs (serves), missiles (returns) and cannon fire (volleys). Even the individual strokes with the racquet, as well as hard line drives in baseball and softball and attempts to score in basketball, hockey, soccer and many other sports, are commonly referred to as “shots.” In this way, sports and their practitioners are elevated to warrior status not only by fans, but by the rhetoric inherent in the games themselves.

Third, does the development of athletic greats encourage self-sacrificing behavior? Yes. Successful play in team sports like football, basketball, baseball, soccer and hockey—the five most popular collaborative team sports in America—is predicated upon teamwork, and sometimes, the quest for individual glory and fortunes must be put on hold for the good of the team. The blog Pro Basketball Talk featured a story on July 10, 2010 which stated that current National Basketball Association stars LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh each took pay cuts totaling multiple millions of dollars so that the three could play together with the Miami Heat in the 2010-2011 season (M. Moore 2010). While the difference between salaries of $16 million and $14 million a year is hardly anything about which to get excited for the casual sports fan, such a move nonetheless informs an understanding among those players that while they are individually great, each realizes that he is part of a team—and that, in a game like basketball, not even the best players in the world can succeed without the support of teammates. The reduction of one’s personal assets or wealth for the greater good—perhaps a sacrifice more relatable and easily quantified than nearly any other—meets Burke’s third tenet of the epic frame.

Finally, do professional sports allow for fans to identify with players whom they consider heroic? With the exception of the massive paychecks afforded to most professional athletes, the answer is again yes. The common refrain for sports fans is to describe their favorite teams in inclusive terms; a fan of the NFL’s Chicago Bears, in reference to the team’s longtime rival from Green Bay, might say “We’re going to beat the Packers today,” thus injecting himself or herself
into the struggle. This also creates a sense of ownership of a given team’s wins, losses, successes and failures among its fans, as well as personal investment in the players an individual fan supports. By this same token, empathy is fostered between the athlete and his or her devotees; a fan enjoys the natural high of an athlete’s great personal and team moments, and feels personally wounded and disappointed when an athlete stumbles, particularly in the moral sense as opposed to making errors on the field of play. Ownership, personal investment and empathy are not possible without the ability to identify with one or multiple entities, thus fulfilling Burke’s final tenet of the epic form.

It is again important to note that, while all of Burke’s tenets are met, the epic frame is not necessarily the strongest or most applicable narrative structure for any and all examples of sports rhetoric. Castillo’s previously-cited remarks on the fragility of this frame indicate that sports stories may not be so easily codified; in fact, it is worthwhile to delve further into these accounts and the reactions to them in order to analyze the true roots of the resulting narratives (Castillo 2008).

With a more complete understanding of the nature of blogs as primary texts, the next step in the analysis is to examine the responses to each blog entry regarding Caster Semenya and Tiger Woods.

**Caster Semenya**

Though Semenya received much less attention than her counterpart in this study, the responses to her struggle were certainly no less interesting. Fan responses to Semenya’s plight from the largely-American audiences on major sports blogs mostly ranged from bewilderment to open disdain against the South African star. The previously-cited Yahoo! Sports blog article, posted on the site’s Olympic-themed subpage “Fourth-Place Medal,” was easily the least critical of Semenya; while the entry had just ten distinct responses (that is to say, ten unique posts excepting repeated replies) between its publication on September 8, 2009 and the last post on March 12, 2010, the user’s response cited in the introduction was the most vociferous. Another poster, using the online handle “Drew,” wrote a shorter post of similar sentiment (“RuPaul is a more convincing woman than Semenya … It’s quite disgusting”) (Chase 2009). However, other respondents reacted more in the runner’s favor. User “t_frederick21” argued that the question of Semenya’s gender may be a matter of biological happenstance: “A person with the chromosomal
makeup of a female (XX) could very well contain levels of testosterone higher than another female. So does that make her a man?” (2009). Overall, Semenya’s story received 80% favorable-to-neutral responses on this particular Yahoo! blog entry. A deeper analysis for Burkean frames in those ten unique examples reveals four posts with no apparent frame and one post each falling into the frames of epic comedy, epic tragedy, satire, elegy, burlesque and grotesque; only the tragicomic is not represented.

FOX Sports, by contrast, received significantly more responses regarding Semenya’s story--and a much higher proportion of those were negative. One March 30, 2010 article on the FOX-facilitated site condemned Semenya before any revelation of test results; the Associated Press story was headlined “Hermaphrodite runner Caster Semenya says she will return to competition” (Hermaphrodite 2010). This agenda was echoed in the majority of the comments on the story. The FOX user responses ranged from crude attempts at comedy, like “dnaward123’s” “Caster Semenya anagram: YES A SECRET MAN” [caps the author’s] and “nerktwins’s” “It is that third leg that is the problem. This isnt [sic] a three legged race!” to a number of misogynistic intimations that Semenya knowingly violated the rules in an effort to perform better against weaker competition; notably, the user “arsenaltodiefor” wrote “Caster would not even be on the radar against men” (2010). Of 29 distinct posts on the FOX Sports story, nine had a clear negative tone--approximately 31%. In terms of Burkean frames, the epic, comic, tragic and tragicomic were never represented in the comment thread; of 17 comments with apparent frames, six qualified as grotesque, five as elegiac, and three each as burlesque and satirical.

ESPN’s users were even less supportive; in fact, a majority of those responses screened were negative in nature. 88 comments were registered on a July 6, 2010 story concerning Semenya’s return to competition as a runner on the women’s international circuit, and of the initial 50 comments, 32 were smears against Semenya--a full 64%. The posts on ESPN also tended to be more profane than others, with many references to colloquial names for male genitalia. Some of the particularly ribald examples included “jbauer420” noting “[H]er adams [sic] apple is [as] big as her balls” and “TobyOnotobee” opining “She’s planning to run relay races now because she’s become much more comfortable with a baton in her hands” (800m Champ 2010). All told, a stunning 25 of those first 50 comments--half of them--qualified in the frame of burlesque, while another seven were recognizable as grotesque. Of the others which met
the requirements of the Burkean frames, three qualified as satirical and just one as tragicomic; user “vhicks” presented Semenya as an unwitting object of scrutiny:

[I]n the end what do you do? If she is somewhat “gender neutral” it wouldn’t be fair for her to compete against men any more than women. Obviously she’s talented and you’d hate to say she can’t compete at all with what God gave her. She can’t really help how she was born, she’s not trying to “cheat” like the East German women who were taking male hormones way back in the day. It kind of makes me think ALL women should get some testing though. Thinking about it, there are many female athletes where we’ve joked “wow her arm’s [sic] are more ripped than most dudes” and stuff like that. And in some cases, they may have really had more testosterone naturally coursing through their body than a normal woman. But at what level are they no longer “women” from a competitive standpoint? Hard to know (2010).

The sizable proportion of negativity regarding Semenya in posts other than the above excerpt informs a clear tendency toward rejection rather than acceptance among the readers of blogs published by ESPN.

Overall, narrative frames concerning Semenya erred overwhelmingly on the side of rejection, with a total of 14 examples of the grotesque and an astonishing 29 cases of burlesque thought. By comparison, just three of 89 distinct blog responses regarding the South African runner qualified as comic, tragic or tragicomic--ergo, less than 4% of the examined replies accepted the runner. Moreover, very few of the presented frames qualified as epic, calling into question Semenya’s eligibility and very identity as a “hero” among these fans. This indicates that Semenya’s performance of gender, as Butler describes in *Gender Trouble*, is unacceptable to a significant proportion of those aware of her plight; she simply presents too great of a challenge to established societal norms of femininity and womanhood for many fans to accept her. Additionally, the narratives of acceptance examined on each of these sites largely imply that Semenya’s gender identity is ultimately confusing even to those who would accept her.

**Tiger Woods**

Prior to Thanksgiving weekend of 2009, Woods’s squeaky-clean image, million-dollar smile and billion-dollar talent made him arguably one of the most beloved sports figures in the
world. When news broke alleging mass infidelity on his part, and when Woods later admitted to the adulterous claims, the fan reaction was unique in that, rather than simply expressing anger, many professed sadness and feelings of betrayal. The previously-cited Times of London infers a sense of loss amid the viewing public who once believed Woods to be a paragon of virtue (Goddard 2009). Nearly four months after the story broke, Woods announced his plan to return to action at the Masters, a major golf tournament; this announcement was met with some excitement from fans, but many participants on blogs reacted negatively to the news.

On the Yahoo! Sports blog Devil Ball Golf, one immediate respondent called Woods a “lowlife” and noted “It is time people start treating adultery as serious as it is” (Busbee 2010). Others offered blanket generalizations (“Tiger is a scumbag like all cheaters are!”), statements of disinterest (“Ugh! Please Go Away!” [Capitalization the author’s]) or mere chauvinism (“hopefully he will bring some hot chicks with him”) (2010). While not every comment was negative, 16 of the first 50 were written as some sort of pejorative—32% of the total. However, Woods had approximately as many supporters as detractors on this particular blog; 17 of the screened responses cheered his return, while the remainder of writers did not feel strongly in favor of acceptance or rejection. This roughly-even spread is reflected in the Burkean frame analysis as well; the eleven grotesque and five burlesque responses are counteracted by the ten comic and seven tragicomic (three of which additionally qualified as epic) posts, showing nearly equivalent feelings of rejection, acceptance and ambivalence toward the troubled golfer.

While Woods met with fewer such responses on other sites, they still left their marks amid the flurry of comments, even long after the news of his return. One FOX Sports blog discussing Woods’s fall from the top spot in the world rankings of golf led user “metro18” to name Woods’s ex-wife, Elin Nordegren, “leading money earner on [the] Tour this year” (Replace 2010). Another respondent agreed; “scluffer” subsequently wrote “Elin did have a spectacular year and never made a putt. She did put a bruising on a pair of balls but they [sic] were well deserved” (2010). Most tellingly, after almost a year since the initial story was released, one respondent to the October 10, 2010 article posited “Woods will go down in history as one of the most tragic sports figures,” indicating a recognition that no matter how impressively Woods rebounds on the links, his legacy is forever marred and his status as a hero will likely never reach its previous pitch (2010). This particular blog inspired 163 comments; of the first 50 relevant replies, 37--almost three-quarters of the posted material--were related more
closely to the fallibility of the international golf rankings system than Woods’s status on or off the links. Moreover, just two of the first 50 distinct responses indicated rejection of Woods, with one burlesque and one grotesque post. By contrast, five of the posts were satirical in nature, and six informed acceptance of Woods—with four of those posts classified as Burke’s definition of tragedy with the comic corrective, and three classified as epic frames.

Similar to the overarching tone of responses on the FOX Sports piece, the 33 commenters on an ESPN blog article also regarding Woods’s eventual surrender of the top world ranking seemed largely interested in moving forward, although a user named “corgar” cracked that Woods’s loss of the #1 spot was “[a]nother reason why you should never put your putter in the wrong bag” (Sobel 2010). Nonetheless, two-thirds of the posts—22 of the 33—chiefly concerned upcoming tournaments and rankings shifts with or without Tiger’s return, and all of those 22 were neutral in tone and frame. Otherwise, a meager five posts—four burlesque and only one grotesque—intimated rejection of Woods, while four were satirical and two showed acceptance of Woods; both of those posts were tragicomic and epic in nature.

Overall, while the initial rhetoric surrounding Woods’s transgressions was perhaps more severe than that concerning Semenya, the golfer regained considerably more support over time than the runner. The Burkean analysis indicates that fans were also much more likely to accept Woods and/or give him another opportunity to prove his personal worth. Additionally, due to the much higher volume of responses, it appears that blog readers were much better acquainted with Woods’s story, and thus more willing to cast their opinions regarding it. Out of 133 posts, most respondents were neutral in tone and expressed interest in moving forward; only 23 rejected Woods, while 25 accepted the golfer. Of those who utilized frames of acceptance, 15—an even 60%—referred to Woods using Burke’s tragic frame with the comic corrective, the frame which Burke noted gives the most proper lens through which to view history vis-a-vis its capability to encourage education based on one’s mistakes and progress following that realization. Moreover, eight of the total frames of acceptance qualified as epic, showing a greater likelihood for fans to continue viewing Woods in a heroic light. These reactions indicate that Woods’s performance of gender is far more easily accepted than Semenya’s; while the initial backlash against the golfer was quite pronounced, the notion of a promiscuous heterosexual man is not an unfamiliar one. Thus, by comparison to Semenya and in spite of the wide range of stories chronicling his
dilettantism, Woods conforms much more readily to Butler’s conception of societally-constructed gender.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

With the application of the method and full textual analysis in hand, we can now return to answer each of the three research questions. First, which Burkean frames of acceptance or rejection are used to respond to Tiger Woods versus Caster Semenya? The methodological application indicates that both athletes received a wide variety of framed responses; the epic, comic, tragic and tragicomic were used at least once to accept both Woods and Semenya, while the burlesque and grotesque appeared to reject both athletes and the satirical and elegiac were used to inform intermediate attitudes toward both as well. However, Woods received the overwhelming majority of comic, tragicomic and epic responses, while Semenya’s tale met with many more burlesque, grotesque and elegiac responses. Tragedy and satire were nearly even between the two athletes. Thus, Woods shows a much higher propensity to be accepted by fans in the Burkean sense, while Semenya is much more likely to be rejected. In addition, based on the collected findings, we can ascertain that the aforementioned sports blogs regarding Semenya and Woods at Yahoo! Sports, ESPN and FOX Sports, even in the face of the occasionally-inarticulate and ill-informed posts, serve to construct narratives in very similar fashions to the poetic works which Burke analyzed to develop his initial model in Attitudes Toward History. The immediacy of the blog form allows readers to feel “at home” in a condition that is ideally free of sponsorships and agendas beyond those established by the authors and moderators. Additionally, by virtue of their association with athletics and inherent status as epideictic or “charged” texts, sports blogs serve to magnify athletes into “warlike heroes” and build them up as symbols of courage and sacrifice and harbingers of “the greater good.” Finally, by enabling and in fact inviting readers to contribute to the written works of these bloggers, anyone and everyone can “share the worth of the hero” and engage in identification with his or her favorite player or team, or rail against those who would defile those preferred entities in any way (Burke 36).

Second, how do these frames reflect Judith Butler’s ideas of normative gender and sexual identity? Recall that in her book Gender Trouble, Butler characterizes gender as a multifaceted performance based largely in societally-constructed norms; if the structure is significantly threatened, the agent of uncertainty or change incurs societal retribution regardless of intent. Thus, in Woods’s case, his multi-dimensional identity as a heterosexual man with a pronounced
sexual appetite is recognized by the public as deeper than tabloid headlines would infer. Partly thanks to a great deal of coverage from very early in Woods’s life—including a pre-kindergarten appearance on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*—the golfer is seen not only as an outstanding athlete with a troubled personal life, but also as a multiracial individual who grew up with parents who pushed him to do well at anything he attempted. All of these components influence his performance of gender in the Butlerian sense; however, he is still quite obviously “male,” and thus, he is largely accepted by audiences.

When we apply Butler’s multifaceted notion of gender directly to Semenya, it becomes ever more clear that she presents a uniquely confusing dilemma for fans and sportswriters. Simply put, there is no “box” into which Semenya can be easily placed by a casual observer, a phenomenon which creates much uncertainty and discomfiture for fans. The runner’s sexuality, unlike many similar cases involving prominent female athletes, has never been called into question by bloggers, or even respondents to those blogs; all of the above seem much more intrigued and/or incensed by Semenya’s sex, rather than any sort of preference or internal component of gender. This informs a highly unusual and chilling happenstance within Semenya’s case: Where the majority of fans and fellow athletes who decry others based on some trait do so with regard to “issues” which are more difficult to quantify—such as, for example, sexual preference—those who stand against Semenya almost uniformly do so based on her perceived physical sex and the identity which it both presents and confuses. In terms of cultural attitudes, one might expect Semenya to receive the comic treatment from blog readers, as her “foible” is purely biological in nature. However, the propensity of respondents to reject Semenya indicates a difference in attitude based on this biology, versus Woods’s controllable phenomenon of behavior. Vis-a-vis Butler’s definition of gender as a performance, it seems that Semenya’s very existence is cause for rejection among many of these fans.

Finally, which athlete is more likely to evoke a tragicomic attitude in blog respondents? It is clear from the analysis of Burkean frames in the blog responses that Semenya’s complex problem of uncertain gender identity and a possible intersex condition are very unusual problems for fans to address. As such, their reactions veer much more readily toward rejection, and tragedy with the comic corrective is virtually never seen in discussions of the South African runner; again, in 89 posts, just one commenter on ESPN used that Burkean blended frame. By contrast, the clearly male, masculine and heterosexual Woods is much more easily forgiven by his fans,
with over 10% of the total respondents incorporating the tragicomic in their posts. It appears clear that when an athlete’s gender or sexuality falls outside the status quo, he or she is much less likely to regain his or her luster than a comparable figure who fits within the popular definition of normality.

Ultimately, Burke’s perspective that the comic corrective or “tragicomic” frame informs the proper attitude toward history is not only a democratic assertion for its function of counterbalancing the basic frames of acceptance, but also a very humane argument as it precludes judgment based on criteria such as sexuality, gender, race, nationality, religion and class. The application of this frame to organized athletics forges new ground; as previously noted, the sports world is hardly known for its contributions to progress in the realms of gender and sexuality. Even in a comparatively enlightened era, some fans exhibit a tendency to use derisive and frequently expletive nomenclature and rhetoric in discussing women and homosexuals in sports. A commenter on an April 22, 2010 Salon.com blog discussing the lack of gay female coaches in women’s college basketball wrote: “‘One lesbian coach. Do you believe it?’ In the world of women’s sports? No fucking way ... On [sic] heterosexual coach - that I would believe...” (Clark 2010). While this may be taken as a critique of dishonesty in sports culture spurred by cynical impressions of coaching and hiring paradigms, it is at least on the surface level a stereotype-based slur against lesbians.

It may be argued that this homophobic rhetoric, as well as the reluctance to acknowledge the athletic feats of women, stems less from hate than from a desire to maintain the status quo. This phenomenon is nothing new; in the March 1980 issue of the academic journal The Radical Teacher, professor Leon Chorbajian chronicles his experience teaching the sociology of sports to 120 students at Lowell State College in Massachusetts. Among the texts Chorbajian employs is Sport in Contemporary Society, a collection of articles considering the impacts of issues such as religion, racism and sexism on sports. In discussions of the latter stimulus, the professor writes, “every traditional rationalization for second-class treatment for women athletes came out” (Chorbajian 1980). Butler’s notion of gender as a performance informs these negative responses; sports are the domains of the powerful and brutal--adjectives applied much more often to men than women. Thus, in the estimation of Chorbajian’s students, female athletes were challenging traditional gender performance and generating uncertainty.
On the side of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, scholar Jayne Caudwell notes in her 2006 work *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory* that the initial impetus for growth in the field of queer theory was the exploration of “how sexuality functions to maintain social relations of power” (Caudwell 2). Caudwell’s examination implicates all American sports fans as hindering progress in the social application of queer theory; the study deals with all manner of “unconventional” lifestyles, sexual and gendered in particular. This informs a possible desire for both athletes and sports fans who subscribe to the hyper-masculinity surrounding American sports to maintain a “comfort zone,” which would in turn explain the retributive backlash that occurs when someone or something violates that perceived security. Caudwell furthers the explanation for discomfort among American fans by noting that this apparent homophobia and misogyny may be linked in more ways than one: “The imbrications of queer theory and feminism are difficult to ignore given the impossibility of separating out sexuality from gender” (2). The inextricable link between sexual identity and gender is particularly noticeable in the sports world, wherein women—who for so many years were (and often still are) considered the “second sex” per de Beauvoir—are almost biologically excluded from heroic identification in the Burkean sense. The perceived comparative physical weakness of women as opposed to men implies the godlike, nearly all-powerful status of a hero would never be conferred upon a female in that traditional paradigm.

The general cultural nebulosity of gender expressed in Butler’s *Gender Trouble* is shown to an extent in sports as well, from the integration of Major League Baseball in the 1940s to the 1970 merge of the National Football League with the American Football League, a syndicate whose markets were, at the time, mostly smaller and less affluent (Kansas City, Oakland and Miami) than their established NFL counterparts (Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia). No longer is an athlete just a player; he or she is a black, white, Hispanic or Asian person, a Muslim, Christian, Jew or Buddhist, a star in metropolitan Los Angeles or humble Green Bay, an individual with a unique identity. It is logical that sexuality should fit similarly into that schema; however, the sports world experiences difficulty in its attempts to define modern heroes when gender and sexual identities enter the picture.

As sports have evolved, so too have the public’s impressions of those who participate in these contests, be they professional, collegiate or otherwise. In an era when most Americans get the bulk of their intellectual stimulation from electronically-facilitated sources such as television
and the Internet, some would argue that trailblazing philosophers and wordsmithing poets have taken a backseat to the professionals specializing in these more visually-evocative pursuits. However, such is not the case; the aforementioned thought-provoking disciplines have simply evolved to take on a variety of forms more appealing to the average American media consumer. This is manifest in the sports world; in the eyes of fans, coaches and athletes have become modern-day philosophers and opinion leaders of sorts.

These aspects take on less rosy tones from time to time, as well. Athletes and coaches alike set behavioral paradigms for themselves, and thereby create expectations among their fans. The Florida State University women’s basketball team recently launched a massive re-design for its Web site with the intent of proving that female athletes are glamorous and beautiful, while at the same time seemingly minimizing the considerable accomplishments of one of the most decorated athletic programs the Seminoles boast. The lack of focus on the team’s successes is less troubling to critics of the layout than the apparent spirit of the marketing strategy; Salon.com’s Tracy Clark-Flory pondered on November 23, 2009 if the “desperate attempt to conform to [beauty ideals]” did more harm than good for team dynamics and the university as a whole:

[A] university press release explains the intended message of the site is: “Women athletes are powerful and beautiful” - assuming they’re gussied up like princesses. … Female basketball players have long had to fight against the stereotype that they’re gay … [It’s] hard not to wonder whether this straight-gals-going-to-the-prom photo-shoot is evidence that it’s still the case (Clark-Flory 2009).

Whatever the impetus for the campaign, this creates an uncomfortable precedent for the rhetoric surrounding sports: If otherwise-respectable athletes and programs, collegiate and professional alike, spend more time focusing on agenda-setting than their on-field exploits, sports will become a sphere of exclusivity. This is not to argue that athletes and coaches should do nothing but play their chosen sports and talk about the strategies and results of said games; on the contrary, they can provide a great deal of enrichment, or at a minimum entertainment. However, it is eminently clear that much of the language of sports participants and spectators alike has the potential to create or further an unprogressive dynamic, even as some of the most prominent figures in the field shape the rhetoric in such a fashion that it merits deeper exploration as a modern philosophical text.
Gender and sports have certainly found themselves at odds in the past. The previously-cited 1990 study of mediated sports rhetoric found that two separate networks, CBS and ESPN, referred to male and female athletes and the things they did in very different ways over the course of the 1989 men’s and women’s NCAA basketball championships and the 1989 U.S. Open tennis tournament. The impetus for the study, titled “Gender Bias in Televised Sports,” was to examine the similarities and differences in sports rhetoric used to describe male and female athletes and their exploits, and thereby draw conclusions with regard to gender communication dynamics in the discussion of sports. The study found that female athletes were often referred to as “girls,” whereas their male counterparts were never called “boys.” Women’s tennis players were frequently called by their first names (“Martina” for Martina Navratilova, “Steffi” for Steffi Graf et al); male players were rarely denoted by anything but their surnames. Men’s exploits were heralded or decried with strong, vibrant and even warlike language (“shootout,” “firepower,” “bangs in” etc.), while the athletic feats of their female counterparts were significantly less likely to merit auspicious commentary. In one example of this inequality in verbosity, the authors of the study found that when basketball players of either sex failed to score when shooting the ball, a simple syllable made all the difference: “Men ‘misfire,’ [while] women simply ‘miss’” (Duncan et al 1990). The added importance given to men’s actions in these cases, or alternately, the minimizing of women’s feats, indicates a return to the male as the “default” and the female as the “other,” as de Beauvoir wrote. This additionally helps to explain why Caster Semenya is largely dismissed as a heroic figure, while Tiger Woods was given an opportunity for redemption; to many fans, his “misfire” is more forgivable than her “miss” on the basis of sheer chromosomal makeup.

Heroism lost and found is necessarily a common theme in epic narratives. From Ancient Greece’s myths about legendary strongman Heracles to the recently-released film “The Tillman Story” chronicling and examining former Arizona Cardinals defensive back and United States Army Ranger Pat Tillman’s life and death, those athletes who go above and beyond the typical feats of athletic strength have been celebrated for millennia as heroes. Sportsmen and sportswomen who do extraordinary things for the betterment of the world around them and at large are acclaimed and commemorated as near-deities by their supporters. Heroism is particularly pertinent to this study in that athletes such as Semenya and Woods are often constructed as modern-day heroes, a designation which has incited varied responses from
skeptical fans and journalists alike. While some of these rejoinders merely bemoan the fact that our culture has abandoned “ordinary” people as icons or role models, others instead suggest that we should see these powerful, rich and famous athletes as “ordinary” people as well. In 2010, a correspondent for the sports news Web site The Bleacher Report argued that athletes should be viewed and treated like anybody else by their ardent followers: “[W]e want their autographs, and we pay lots of money to see them ... But we don’t need to idolize them. After all, athletes are people” (Fogelgaren 2010).

One notable Burkean foundation of the heroic narrative’s fragility that is omnipresent in the sports arena is religion, a field of study with a sizable quotient of its own heroes. Christianity itself, per the philosopher, was founded on the fallibility of Adam, and God’s followers in the Church took on the punishment of the First Man. In doing so, these followers were able to attain a limited degree of closeness with God: “[T]he Church ... was perfect. Hence by membership in the church, one shared perfection vicariously, so that the incentive to ‘justify’ oneself by extreme individual initiative (‘ambition’) was sidetracked” (Burke 128). The same process of identification is inherent in the construction of the epic frame; the common man or woman must be able to identify with the hero, who is by virtue of great physical prowess, talent or accomplishments nearer to deification, and thereby share the hero’s pain at his or her fall. In the sports world, as previously noted, this identification is often accomplished through the athlete’s giving of credit to God for his or her victorious efforts on the field; the establishment of religious faith creates another marker of similarity between the star and the fan.

Of course, heroic accolades can be quite short-lived; recall Heracles’ fall from grace prior to his taking on the twelve labors of the gods. However, in opposition to the tragic end of Achilles at the tip of Paris’s spear in The Iliad, Heracles regained his glory in the eyes of the gods by accepting his shortcomings and enduring a series of seemingly-impossible tasks. Thus, the strongman ensured his place on Mount Olympus at his death. The acceptance of fault and ultimate return to glorious form is indicative of a tragic frame augmented by a touch of Burkean comedy--Heracles’ struggles, and his admittance of fault, become relatable to the reader. The tragic frame joined with the comic-corrective may be much nearer to the narratives seen in the sports world, as it is quite rare that an athlete who makes a mistake is completely without hope of regaining his or her luster.
Nowhere in recent sports history is this phenomenon more prominent than in the meteoric fall and slow return to prominence of Tiger Woods. Prior to Thanksgiving weekend of 2009, Woods’s squeaky-clean image, million-dollar smile and billion-dollar talent made him arguably one of the most beloved sports figures in the world. When news broke of allegations of mass infidelity, and when Woods later admitted to the adulterous claims, the fan reaction was unique in that, rather than simply expressing anger, many professed sadness and feelings of betrayal. The previously-cited Times of London infers a sense of loss amid the viewing public who once believed Woods to be a paragon of virtue (Goddard 2009). From a fan perspective, recall the respondent to the previously-cited October 10, 2010 FOX Sports article who lamented that, no matter what Woods does to try to reclaim his status, he would “go down in history as one of the most tragic sports figures” (Replace 2010). The return of Woods to professional golf, however, is indicative of the comic-corrective or tragicomic, as he is working toward normality in his life and attempting to reenter the spotlight, his lesson ostensibly learned.

The Burkean notions of heroism as explored in Attitudes Toward History can help to explain attitudes regarding heroes in our culture and the narratives surrounding them, both as these modern icons rise and fall. Sexual identity informs the latter phenomenon; though gender is incumbent upon a variety of personal components as Butler writes, sexuality and the expression thereof seem to be the most difficult hurdles for heroes in sports. Per Castillo’s analysis, heroic frames are fundamentally untenable in light of human fallibility, even for those who might otherwise meet the status quo of gender or sexuality. A voracious sexual appetite like that displayed by Tiger Woods would not always be considered abnormal--in a non-heroic frame, some fans may even identify with Woods for his promiscuity, or at least accept that they might act similarly under like circumstances of fame and monetary largesse. In a world of nebulous gender attitudes and fluid definitions of identity, as Butler describes, the tragic frame with the comic corrective is much more suitable for the construction of narratives.

There has been a great deal of academic research into the respective fields of gender and sports; however, comparatively speaking, very little writing exists which examines the intersection of the two. Sports narratives have major impacts on culture at large, even outside the radius of those who consider themselves followers of professional and collegiate games. As Burke explains, our attitudes towards heroes inform our attitudes toward history; ergo, the rhetoric of a venue like sports, which inherently creates recognition and celebration of
athletically heroic humans, can help to explain overall cultural attitudes regarding gender and sexuality.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS

With the application of Burke’s method and the discussion of the research questions completed, it is vital to examine the implications of this study on two attributes which continue to confound and incense many sports fans: Gender identity; and sexuality. First, in the quoted blog articles, frames regarding gender identity—the root of Semenya’s woes—are clearly identifiable as largely burlesque or grotesque, depending on the respondent. The status of this particular “transgression” as a condition constructed by others further complicates the issue, as do the sex and race of the target. However, sexism is not a new concept in sports rhetoric; FOX Sports contributor and Kansas City Star sportswriter Jason Whitlock argues in an October 12, 2010 article that the backlash against Jenn Sterger—a former New York Jets staffer who allegedly received inappropriate text, voice and picture messages from Brett Favre—informs intense misogyny in sports. Sterger, per Whitlock’s estimation, was sexually harassed by Favre and is now being punished by sports fans for being victimized (Whitlock 2010).

The paradigm of sexism can be applied directly to Semenya; she is considered an interloper who impedes the status quo in the sports world by performing at the top levels of her chosen events in spite of her womanhood. It would seem that Semenya and other athletes like her will continue to be the object of scrutiny, sanctions and even demonization. As University of Massachusetts-Amherst professor Pat Griffin wrote for the San Diego Gay and Lesbian News on April 26, 2011, the International Olympic Committee recently updated its rules governing the screening of athletes to include a codicil “for determining whether or not women who have higher than usual levels of naturally-produced testosterone will be eligible to compete in women’s sports” (Griffin 2011). Ultimately, Griffin notes, if the female athlete is ruled to exhibit “hyperandrogenism,” a condition in which the body produces too many hormones opposite those dominant for the gender (in Semenya’s case, testosterone), a committee will rule on whether or not that athlete is allowed to continue competing. Though the process, effective at the beginning of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London, is strictly confidential and cannot be triggered by an outside request—say, from a fellow athlete jealous of Semenya’s prowess—it is still inherently sexist as there is no similar test to determine if men are “too feminine” to compete among their sexual peers in men’s events. If the sports world wishes to be taken as an arena of
fairness and “level playing fields,” to paraphrase Griffin, the fallout from Semenya’s debacle would seem to stand in the way of such endeavors. The IOC’s referendum indicates that women like Semenya—and not their male counterparts who may “appear” transgender or intersex, or perform in a fashion inconsistent with their gender—are simply not welcome in sports, and fan reactions seem to galvanize that idea. It is clear that, while women’s sports are much more prominent and popular today than they were as short as three decades ago, organizers and fans alike have much more progress to make toward a greater understanding of these games and the women who play them.

Second, that same sexism can curiously be seen in the seemingly-charitable reactions of fans to Sheryl Swoopes, the women’s basketball great who in 2005 publicly announced that she was a lesbian. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer of October 27, 2005 noted that the “mailboards” of ESPN’s Web site played host to a variety of opinions on the revelation: “[R]eaction tended mostly to support Swoopes’ disclosure, but ranged the gamut. Some appreciated Swoopes’s courage in coming out, while others said Swoopes should just put the ball in the basket and not discuss her personal life. Others were disgusted ... and argued that she should no longer be considered a role model” (SPI 2005). The latter claim is reflective, again, of both Caudwell’s assertion that the status quo is paramount to sports fans and Burke’s point that heroism is by definition a transient phenomenon.

Interestingly, Swoopes’s revelation was widely regarded as no great shock, and possibly even as “old news.” ESPN’s Mechelle Voepel noted shortly after Swoopes came out as a lesbian: “[T]he media that regularly cover this sport did know about Swoopes. … Although she didn’t officially come out until now, she didn’t seem to be actively trying to hide the relationship or intentionally blur dots to keep observers from connecting them. That has always gone on in women’s sports” (Voepel 2005). This informs a long-standing yet dastardly implication of this study: Women in sports are frequently assumed to be gay, which may in fact preclude them from eligibility for hero status as even in a comparatively enlightened society, there is reluctance to acknowledge lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons as mainstream heroes. This leads many female athletes, Voepel notes, to make major external adjustments to throw suspicious people off of their track, from adopting religious fervor to getting married and even having children. This indicates an unhealthy paradigm in women’s sports that, quite simply, must change through a process of public education and institutional reform so that these women can
play the games they love and live the way they choose with no danger of losing out on either side of life. Racial and religious constraints do not seem to impede the identification of heroism; ergo, sexuality--and by extension, sex itself--should not be construed as flaws that preclude an individual from status as a role model or hero.

However, there is potential for positive change on the horizon as well. In the *Albany Times Union* of August 23, 2010, sports columnist Mark McGuire sparked an online discussion with an article asking readers if American team sports are ready for an openly gay male athlete. McGuire noted that Welsh rugby star Gareth Thomas recently came out as a gay man to mostly general acceptance, and wondered if and when a male sports star of similar caliber would be well-received in the United States. In five days, the story generated 40 comments from a variety of readers—and excepting a relatively gentle bobsledding reference, not one indicated that a gay man in sports would be an intolerable precedent. This shows that, while we may not see an active player with the skill set of Donovan McNabb, Dwight Howard or Derek Jeter acknowledge his sexuality at any point soon, there is a changing of the guard in the works. As McGuire wrote, “I don’t know who it will be, or when, or how. I’m not going to guess. But shifts in society and sports say it’s a matter of time and that time is near—even if it somewhat goes against the perceived and real machismo culture surrounding the games we play and watch” (McGuire 2010).

Finally, Semenya’s case may actually serve as a harbinger of positivity for those who fall outside the sexual status quo in a metaphysical sense. As stated before, the only complaints against Semenya were based upon her perceived sex, not her sexuality or any other gender component. In every one of these cases, therefore, the bloggers and respondents who derided Semenya in any way did so based on something which *no one* can argue is within her control. This could pave the way to a less oppressed life for those who believe in a “gay gene” (in short, a phenomenon which dictates that people are born with a sexual preference which they discover at some point in time) in that Semenya’s plight may in fact raise sympathy for those who cannot change their biology to fit the standards set by overarching governing bodies--whether it be society as a whole or the International Olympic Committee. Intersex or not, it is clear that Semenya can not change her lot in life—and it is quite possible that recognition of such might soften the hearts of those who claim homosexuality or transgender status is “a choice.”
While this study takes a close look at the intersecting rhetoric of sports and gender, it is not without its limitations. Most notably, due to the largely-American audiences on sports Web sites like Yahoo! Sports, ESPN and FOX Sports (all of which are facilitated by American companies), the American golfer Woods necessarily receives more press coverage than the South African runner Semenya. As such, the responses to articles discussing Semenya are fewer and farther between; this may create unreliability in the analysis of Burkean frames as they relate to the population as a whole. In addition, Burke’s frames are by their very nature ambiguous constructs; therefore, with only one available perspective to determine where each post fits, some researcher bias may be present in spite of highly-conscious efforts to avoid such a phenomenon. Also, it would be foolhardy to suggest that each and every supporter or detractor of either of these athletes is an active participant on the aforementioned blogs; this study merely analyzes the thoughts of those fans who use the Internet to express their feelings on these issues, but there are certainly more voices to be heard on both Semenya and Woods.

By its nature, heroism is both entirely relative and socially constructed. Without the voice of the public, we have neither heroes nor a frame of reference from which to establish and evolve hero status. Thus, when an individual’s ability to attain or maintain this august regard is tempered or eliminated altogether due to expressions and interpretations of gender and sexuality, the social paradigm informs a stunning lack of sexual literacy and, moreover, acceptance among the American people. While we have become considerably more understanding of gendered dynamics over the past century, we hold our “heroes” to different standards--and react virulently when their actions conflict with our notions of heroic behavior.

After analyzing the cases of Caster Semenya and Tiger Woods, it is clear that, for a variety of reasons, “sex” is still a touchy term to throw around in discussions of all things athletic with sports fans both casual and passionate. Kenneth Burke’s model of epic poetry provides an enlightening glance into the construction of heroic identities in many facets of life, including the sports world. Changing a given fan base’s feelings about promiscuity or sexuality is a difficult prospect, but by challenging those norms and opening dialogue, we can pave the way for a future in which athletes are not afraid to live their lives publicly, openly and happily.
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Justin S. Adams was born in Davenport, Iowa on December 8, 1985. After graduating from high school in Washington, Illinois as a National Merit Scholar, he attended Arizona State University where he competed in intercollegiate speech and debate as a member of the nationally-renowned ASU Forensics Team. In the spring of 2008, Justin completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism and Mass Communication with honors, including an undergraduate thesis. Under the advisement of Dr. Jeanette Castillo, he will obtain his Master of Arts degree in summer of 2011 from the College of Communication and Information at Florida State University.

Justin’s research interests include marketing communication, journalism, sports, media studies, argumentation and competitive forensics. He plans to pursue a doctoral degree following graduation from FSU.