

THE ^{portable} GAY & LESBIAN READER

Sensual sport

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Last spring, I came across a large advertisement in the Chronicle Herald inviting anyone who might be interested in helping to found a professional soccer team to represent Nova Scotia in the Canadian Soccer League to contribute \$500 toward the costs of establishing such a team, thereby becoming a Founder-Member and shareholder. I was, and I did; and the Nova Scotia Clippers now exist on paper.

The very idea of owning, in principle, a piece of a soccer team appeals to me strongly, even though the rights and privileges this affords me are wholly fanciful. Fantasies of this quality are well worth \$500. But some of my acquaintances who have noticed my name on the membership lists seem astonished. "I never knew you were interested in sports!" they exclaim, rather accusingly.

Their way of putting their implied question does, I find, raise an issue that tells me quite a lot about the place of spectator sports in culture, and the social contribution to culture gay men may make. From their point of view, and, no doubt, from that of most of my fellow Founding Members, I am not interested in sports. I remember, years ago, the disgust of a gambler who stopped me as I left the old Madison Square Garden after a sold-out basketball game to demand, "Hey, Mac, what was the score?" I couldn't tell him: I hadn't noticed. I hadn't gone there to score, but to delight in amazing grace.

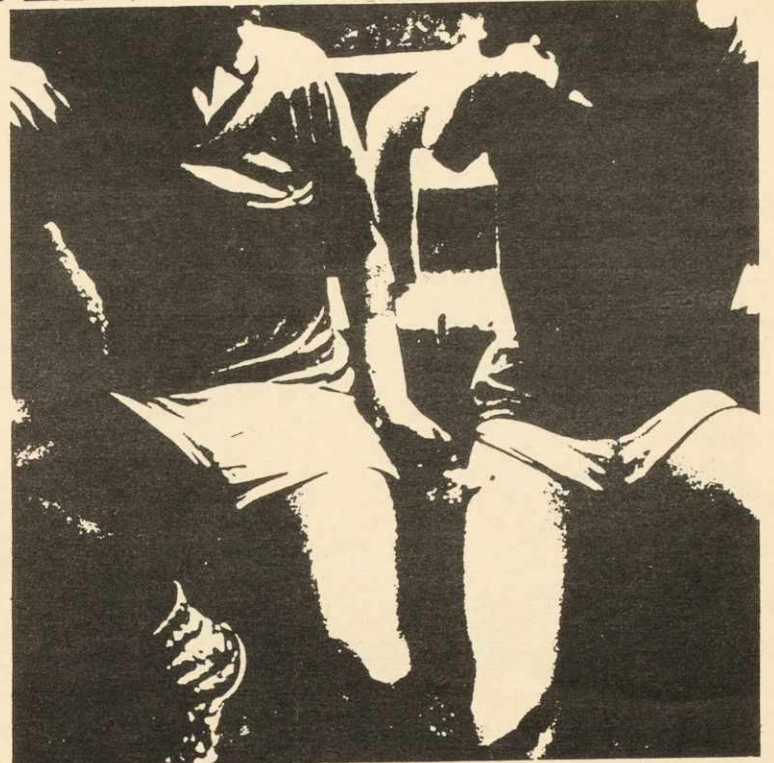
Now, I don't think anyone would have said, if they had seen me at a Mozart chamber concert or reading Shakespeare's sonnets, "I didn't know you were interested in music!" Or literature, or whatever. They might have asked whether I had liked this music and why — what I had got out of it. And if they enjoyed Mozart and Shakespeare themselves they would probably have acknowledged that some of their pleasure was erotic; not just because the music or the language turned them on, though it might, but because they entered into a passionate relationship with it while it lasted, and maybe longer.

Is a soccer team an ensemble of artists? Is a soccer game a work of art? And is our response to art always partly erotic? There are good and bad artists and good and bad art, of course. But the answer to each of these questions is "Yes! Oh, yes!" The experience of watching Bob Lenarduzzi lead the Vancouver White Caps (as they then were) is not like listening to the Orford Quartet play Brahms. But it is surely an aesthetic experience, especially when the opposing team is good enough to provide the tension needed for an exciting composition. One of the more paradoxical expressions of homophobia is the assumption that gay men, to whom straight society used to apply sneeringly the epithet "artistic" or "sensitive", are indifferent to sports. Gay boys, as I recall clearly enough from my own boyhood 60 years ago, certainly had an aversion to organized sports, which required that we deny or conceal our feelings toward our teammates, let alone

our opponents. We sensed, too, that sports played an important and hostile role not just in stigmatizing us but in deliberately poisoning physical intimacy between young males with hostility and competition so that love could not impede economic productivity. We couldn't have put this in so lucid a statement, of course; but many were bold enough to realize that the proper response to the fuck-you-buddy system was the simple question, "Your place, or mine?" Though even that question is phrased in terms of property rights.

The erotic persists, nevertheless; and it guides gay men to see that sports are about a lot more than winning and losing, though current extremes of commercialization may succeed in eliminating authenticity — and with it, erotic interest — where the puritan ethic has failed. Meanwhile, for those with eyes to see, sports continue to reveal a lot about the place of sexuality in culture.

Football is quintessentially American in another way. The



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Soccer is at a disadvantage in North America for the very reasons that make it the favourite sport of people everywhere whose language and culture are not

looks, so that the game could continue. But somebody had to invent it in the first place.

The second and final sport I want to mention is Australian Rules Football, which is hardly played anywhere else, though it would be played in gay heaven if we had bodies there. The game is played 18 men on a side, with a ball shaped like an American football and, I believe, slightly larger. It is as fast as basketball, and the uniforms are a lot like basketball uniforms, but there is a lot of body contact. A player may be tackled, hard, by grabbing him below the neck or above the knees; but when tackled, he must drop the ball or forfeit it to the opposing team, so there are no gross pileups as in rugby. The ball must be dribbled, as in basketball, but may be carried for short distances.

In a "rules" game, there is constant palpable interaction, physical and emotional, among very expressive and usually strikingly handsome young men. In a culture as homophobic as that of North America, it would drive spectators crazy. Australia, too, has a long history of "poofter-bashing" and redneckism. I think the difference is not so much that Australia is less homophobic, but that it has a much stronger tradition of male bonding — of "mateship". Much more involvement, physical and emotional, among men is acceptable before it becomes stigmatized. Obviously, they don't think of the contact in a "rules" game as sexual. It seems to be okay to enjoy getting tackled; still, you have to drop the ball right away and as soon as you do, the guys have to get off your back. Till the next time.

All these sports, I would argue, are dramatic performances that reveal the nature of the culture that cherishes them, just as dance, theatre, or literature do. In a homophobic world, however, only gay men are likely to be able to fully comprehend the performance and take it to heart.

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equipment conceals the face and body in the interests of security. As in much American TV, brutality replaces sensuality. It's like watching tank warfare. The inherent grace of skating makes hockey sexier; but basically, the same limitations apply. If you

English; the English themselves seem to find it too exciting. The problem, I think, is that soccer is both too sexy and too calm about it. The uniforms display the beauty of the player's body; but there isn't much contact — no sweaty scrimmages, and it took me a year to understand what constitutes a tackle in soccer. It's a very graceful sport, really beautiful, but it's designed for cultures that accept sport and sexuality as part of the natural order. Of course, spectators sometimes respond with frenzy; but that's part of the culture, too.

Two other sports are apparently barred from becoming popular in America because, I believe, their sexuality makes us nervous. Rugby football demands the most intimate — even gross — body contact of any team sport; and the uniforms conceal, and protect, very little. I suspect that the public school that gave rugby football its name, and set the pattern of clean-living muscular Christianity for other English Public schools to follow, was expressing thereby its extreme feelings about adolescent homosexuality. The paranoia and spying — homosexuality was the one offence you were expected to snitch on your friends about — were needed to keep the scrum from being as seductive as it

My summer vacation

by j.e.t.

"We may not win, but we'll be the best-looking team," jokes Jello. Jello (not her real name) is referring to her softball team — an all-dyke, Halifax-based team which has unusual plans for summer vacation.

Vancouver beckons. In the steamy month of August, thousands of gay and lesbian athletes and artists will join in Celebration '90: Gay Games and Cultural Events, an annual event drawing teams and individual athletes from around the world.

According to Jello, the 11-member team and their manager decided to make the trip to the west coast "because we like to play ball". But Sly says it was more than a competitive spirit which attracted the team to

Vancouver.

"We want to be visible," says Sly. "There's going to be national media coverage of the Games, and we want people to know there's a strong lesbian and gay community in Nova Scotia." In addition to the ball team, four individual athletes from the province plan to attend in the track and swimming events.

The trip to the Games will be expensive — \$12,000 for airfare and accommodation, a commitment which is keeping the team players busy with fundraising activities.

"Well, we lost money on the kissing booth," admits Jello, "but we're puckering up for next time." The team is making a serious effort to solicit corporate sponsorship and provincial funding from Sport N.S. The most

ambitious fundraising effort to date has been a Valentine's dinner and variety show held at Rumours.

The biggest problem with fundraising, says Sly, is the danger the team faces of exhausting their funding base. "It's the same people in the community who are donating money, not just to this cause but to every gay and lesbian cause in town."

Ultimately, the team members are willing to pay for part of the trip out of their own pockets. Ideally, they will find a base of support outside the lesbian and gay community. "This would be a great opportunity for gay-positive people and organizations to show their support for our community," says Sly. "We'll be in touch."