

# Who They Really Are

BY STEVEN R. SHER

## *Warning: This Editor's Column Is Not Politically Correct*

**F**rom my last editor's column, you know this is my fourth term as editor-in-chief. Those who know me would have thought my biggest anxiety would be about how the magazine has changed in production, in editing, in almost every way possible, since computers came to dominate almost everything, including publishing, because I have not embraced the digital age too enthusiastically. But no, my biggest anxiety was: what am I going to say in my four columns? I actually had ideas for what to write about the first three times, but not this time. Then an event I attended served a column to me (cliché alert) on a silver platter. Here it is.

Some background is necessary. One of my earlier articles (not an editor's column), "My Life in Women's Basketball" in the Spring, 1996 (vol. 59, No. 1) issue, described my adventures, decades ago, as what I now refer to as being a "volunteer assistant coach" for the Drexel University Women's Basketball Team. I did this for 15 years, beginning in the 1980-81 season. As my role with the team grew, I traveled with the team (even on airplane trips), was at almost every practice, helped with drills, "dressed" and took full part in practices (even scrimmages) when we were short of the needed women either because of injury, illness or class schedule. Sitting on (or behind) the bench in games, I kept team game statistics before it was done by the home team on a computer, as is done now. Additionally, I helped the real assistant coaches scout opponents, and was in the locker room for all the pregame, half-time and post-game meetings.

NCAA rules changed, however, including those concerning assistant coaches, so that I could no longer do anything that could be called "coaching." From then, on I became just a volunteer faculty advisor to the team. While I was still welcome on the bench and in locker room meetings, there was no more helping out. I did this through the tenure of three head coaches, but, finally, when a new head coach came in, she told me she did not want any of what I did, seeking a clean start with no holdovers as parts of her program. After 20 years of making the team, its games, its practices and everything else about it one of the most important things in my life, I was out, just like that.

Way back then, many of our basketball women played other sports in other seasons. Softball was a popular choice. Often I would go kibitz with my basketball friends at softball practice, and sometimes the coach "drafted" me to do things for her, like hit grounders to the infielders, hit flies to the outfielders and the

like. After my basketball "career" ended, I was telling all of this to the then softball coach, and she invited me to become a volunteer assistant for the softball team. I did this for two years, until I got "NCAAed" out of that spot, too. New rules would not let me be active with the team. Ironically, an incoming new softball coach's husband had recently been "NCAAed" out of being her volunteer assistant.

I give you all this decades-old history to introduce the fact that I got to know and be good friends with many lesbian women – coaches, trainers, players. Most of them were, to the outside world, and even to us "insiders," still in the closet. For instance, one multi-sport player invented a much older man as a boyfriend, who she "kept secret" from her parents because they would not have approved of the large age difference. Since they came to all of her games, the "boyfriend" did not and he was her "cover story" for why she never had a date with a man.

Another player, who was also my student, for whom I must have written at least three recommendations – for grad positions, jobs and the like – went from ridiculing lesbians while having a boyfriend, to being a lesbian, to marrying a man, to divorcing him and being a lesbian "again." More on her later.

Having all these lesbian friends, I called myself the male version of what was referred to as a "fag-hag" (a straight woman who hung out with homosexual men).<sup>\*</sup> Many of these women still keep contact with Drexel; they are

my friends.

So, why all the old stuff? A year or so ago, at the annual basketball alumni game and party, something wonderful happened. There was an unusually large turnout, and a lot of these women came back, and for the first time came as they actually were. A former trainer came from her home in Florida with a woman she introduced as her life companion. A former player came with a woman she was planning to marry. We discussed what state they would do it in. The "back-and-forth" player came with her female spouse and the baby she had given life to in the past year! I had never seen her happier. All of a sudden, these women knew they could be just who they really were. Everyone, former players, coaches, fans, parents, straight husbands, a whole drove of children and I had a ball meeting and greeting each other, sometimes "for the first time." What a heart-warming experience it was. We have come so far.

In a somewhat related vein, some of you may remember



another article I wrote about my taking up figure skating lessons titled “I Return to the Ice” in the Winter, 1998 issue (vol. 61, No. 4). Not only do I still skate and take lessons several times a week, but for 10 years I have been an “adult competitor,” competing against other adult skaters in local and national competitions, and winning my share of gold, silver and bronze medals. I have made some good friends, many of whom are gay men (and a few gay women), but that world is still partially clouded. At the local level, the gays are typically “out” but on the national and international level some skaters still marry and have children for “convenience” to cover their homosexuality. I hope that will soon change, too, especially after the SCOTUS legalized same-sex marriages,

so my women basketball friends, my skating friends (and those in all other sports and other walks of life) can finally be who they really are. ■

*\* At that time this two-word phrase was not considered derogatory by those it described. I used it (and still use it) proudly. Since then, whenever I tell this story to new lesbian friends, they invariably chuckle, approvingly, when I use the term. And before deciding to use it in the column, I vetted it with several gay men who agree it is not offensive in the context of the story.*

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