

Nine for IX Film Discussion Guide: *Swoopes*

Key Concepts:

- Role Model
- Agent Of Change
- Social Construction Of Gender
- Gender Binary
- Elite Athlete-Mothers
- Homophobia
- Commercialism
- Sport Marketing
- Social Class
- Intersectionality
- Identity Politics

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the multiple ways in which Swoopes is a pioneer, role model, and an agent of social change? What is Sheryl Swoopes' legacy to basketball and women's sport?
2. In the film Swoopes was described as "playing like a guy" and was often called "the female Michael Jordan". Why might it be problematic for highly competent and athletic women to be compared to men or their male counterparts? [*note*: To dive deeper into this topic, read Kane (1995) from the Additional Readings list below]
3. Swoopes was the first female basketball player to get a NIKE shoe contract and sign with the WNBA; she was positioned to be the star player in the inaugural WNBA season in 1997. Due to the birth of her son Jordan, she missed part of the first season but returned to play mid-season. How did Swoopes challenge stereotypes about women athletes, their commercial potential, motherhood, and competitive success?
4. When Swoopes divorced her husband and announced she was gay in 2005, she became the first out women's basketball superstar and celebrity. How do you think Swoopes' authenticity and openness of her sexual identity challenged or reinforced homophobia in women's sport? Do you think Swoopes public acknowledgement of her sexual identity helped create a more inclusive and tolerant climate in women's sport in general, and women's basketball in particular?

5. During its first year the WNBA marketed a pregnant, married Swoopes, some argue, to put a heterosexual face on its promotional campaign (Google the image of Swoopes on first issue cover of *Sports Illustrated for Women's Sport*, Spring 1997. The subtitle on the SI cover was “*Sheryl Swoopes and the WNBA are both due in June*”). With Swoopes’ announcement, the WNBA had decide what to do with the fact that it’s best and most recognizable player had announced she's gay. Swoopes states in the film that she “hated the WNBA” for turning their back on her. Historically, what have been the commercial and sponsorship consequences for athletes who have come out? What is the current marketing and promotional position of the WNBA pertaining to gay coaches, players and fans?
6. What are the ways in which Swoopes’ multifaceted identities are constructed and highlighted by filmmaker and ESPN commentator Hannah Storm? Why is the construction of identities important in the telling of Swoopes’ story?
7. Can you think of examples in other sports or high profile athletes where the Key Concepts listed at the beginning of this guide are present?

Additional Readings:

Chawansky, M. & Francombe, J. M. (2011). Cruising for Olivia: Lesbian Celebrity and the Cultural Politics of Coming Out in Sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28(4), 461-477.

Griffin, P. (1998). *Strong women, deep closets: Lesbians and homophobia in sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Kane, M. J. (1995). Resistance/transformation of the oppositional binary: exposing sport as a continuum. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 19(2), 191-218.

King, S. (2011). Contesting the closet: Sheryl Swoopes, racialized sexuality, and media culture. In D. J. Leonard and C. Richard King (Eds.), *Commodified and criminalized: New racism and African Americans in contemporary sports* (pp. 203-222). Plymouth UK: Rowman & Littlefield.

King, S. (2009). Homonormativity and the politics of race: Reading Sheryl Swoopes. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 13(3), 272-290.

McDonald, M. (2008). Rethinking resistance: The queer play of the Women's National Basketball Association, visibility politics and late capitalism. *Leisure Studies*, 27(1), 77-93.

Muller Myrdahl, T. (2011). Lesbian visibility and the politics of covering in women's basketball game spaces. *Leisure Studies*, 30, 139-156.

Palmer, F. R., & Leberman, S. I. (2009). Elite Athletes as Mothers: Managing Multiple Identities. *Sport Management Review*, 12(4), 241-25.

Pedersen, I. K. (2001). Elite Sport Mothers as a Social Phenomenon. *Internal Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 36(3), 259-274.

Staffo, D. F. (1998). The History of Women's Professional Basketball in the United States with an Emphasis on the Old WBL and the New ABL and WNBA. *Physical Educator*, 55(4), 187.

Wearden, S. T., & Creedon, P. J. (2002). 'We Got Next': Images of Women in Television Commercials during the Inaugural WNBA Season. *Culture, Sport, Society*, 5(3), 189.

Additional Activities:

1. Compare and contrast the mass-mediated coming out narratives of Swoopes in 2005, to former Baylor University All-American and WNBA player Brittney Griner in 2013. What does Swoopes' and Griner's coming out stories say about the socio-historical aspect of the cultural politics of coming out and lesbians in professional sport?
2. Compare and contrast NBA player Jason Collins coming out narrative to that of Swoopes and Griner. Do gender differences exist in coming out narratives? If so, how might those differences serve to reproduce a gender hierarchy in sport?
3. The WNBA started in 1997 and was not the first professional basketball league for women. What other pro leagues existed before the WNBA? Using the Web and some of the Suggested Readings, track down the marketing taglines and approaches the WNBA has used over the 15+ years of the league's existence. How have the approaches changed or stayed the same? What do the approaches say about gender and professional women's sport?
4. Discuss female athletes' comparison to their male peers in performance outcomes and competition given the 2014 social media [Always #LikeAGirl campaign](#). What meaning does "throw like a girl" hold for girls and boys? What similar or different effects might this have on girls and boys?

Always #LikeAGirl campaign video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWYDTs>

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