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LGBTQ Sports as Social Activism

Fri, 29/07/2011 - 6:58pm



In the period July 20-24, 2011, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, hosted the **EuroGames**, the main continental gathering of LGBTQ athletes and competitors in recreational and competitive sports. The LGBTQ sports competitions, due to their focus on recreation, cultural and activist programme and social solidarity, are quite different from the known models of "regular" sports. All countries of former Yugoslavia took part in the games, for the first time since EuroGames were established,

with Croatia sending by far the biggest national team. [qSPORT team reports from Rotterdam](#).

In a region in which sports were always viewed as an activity of huge political and social value, it was difficult to expect the dramatic changes of the relationship between sports and society. The elitist, hyper-commercial sports system almost fully replaced the planned and universally accessible system of sports recreation and competitive sports, to the extent that its social role is reduced to fans' groups and corporate recreation. There is, however, hope for another type of sports – at least in the models like the LGBTQ sports movement.

We asked Zrinka (32), participant of the 13th EuroGames in Rotterdam where she competed as a part of the Croatian CRO Divas basketball team, which exists under the auspices of the qSPORT Association of Sports and Recreation (See more on the context in the [previous article](#)), to share her views and experiences.

"It is not that simple here, in these parts, to just gather a women's team to do team sports as a recreation. My previous experience, back as a teenager, was limited to high-school basketball. For women, that is more or less the last chance to do team sports if they don't play to go professional. Nonetheless, sort of unplanned, I jointed an informal women football group in Zagreb some six years ago. The group gathered for games on weekend. It grew and created its (temporary) BURA queer competitive team that participated in several LGBTQ competitions and had some great results. Lamentably, because of my identity, and because I was busy with something else, I couldn't get involved in that. A lot of time has passed since and BURA Team soon close shop and transformed into several other activities.

I was more than glad to find out that the qSPORT association started up a female basketball section, with a team preparing for the EuroGames. I joined at the last possible moment, thanks to a scholarship awarded by qSPORT through the facilities of the Heinrich Boll Foundation. It was the first LGBTQ competition for me. There were little stress and stage-fright at the beginning, but I was ready. Although I joined the team late, all the girls were quite open and I felt welcome. Knowing how strong homophobia is in these parts (including the auto-homophobia inside the community), it was important for me, as a bisexual person, to be a part of a team where sexual orientation is not a subject to prejudice or used to humiliate or abuse somebody, either physically or verbally.

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I realized that team sports, due to their non-verbal and social nature, present an excellent platform for integration and emancipation, through friendship, travel, learning about new cultures, environments and people with whom I have shared experiences. This field in which we have the school of understanding and acceptance of diversity, enriching one's life through friendship, support for personal affirmation of otherwise hidden identities, and team spirit offers more than mere competitive spirit and aiming for the top as instructed by the daily sports reporting in the media. In countries with high levels of extremist homophobia, with pro-fascist background, and philistine prejudices (as demonstrated by the incidents in the first Split Pride), sports are important as a means in the fight against stereotypes what are men's and what women's sports, what is allowed and desired and what is taboo and inappropriate.

It was great to see that unity in diversity at the Rotterdam EuroGames. The Netherlands offers one of the highest levels of liberal democracy and recognition of LGBTQ rights and is, of course, filled with diverse and publicly expressed personal identities. From punk and butch lesbians, through lipstick lesbians, all the way to queer and trans persons that often actually confused me with their androgynous or hyper-sexual appearance, anywhere in between the established binary gender division.

At such gatherings, age, colour of skin, geographic origin, sexual, religious and any other orientation and affiliation are of no importance. It is quite normal for a foreign player to join your team and we had a player from the U.S. There is no prejudice, no humiliation.

In just a couple of days, the girls I hardly knew turned into trusted and dear team-mates and I hope to continue those friendships. Through play, laughter, mutual support and a challenging fight or two, we managed to find a common language. I again am aware how great it was to be a part of a team, have a common goal and work towards it. We hope that we will be able to implement the good vibes of tolerance, support and openness into the daily lives and break the darkness of homophobic surroundings.

I happily expect the new sports gatherings in the new season, both local trainings and competitions abroad. I invite all people to join the nearest queer sports team, or create one in coordination with others, and use games and fun to contribute to a better life for yourself, your LGBTQ and wider community, and more diverse world of sports.

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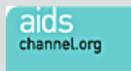
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