

Blood, Sweat, and Jeers: The Impact of the Media's Heterosexist Portrayals on Perceptions of Male and Female Athletes

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Although female athletes are becoming more accepted in society, there is still a stigma surrounding women's sport known as "the image problem" (i.e., that all female athletes are lesbians). To circumvent this "problem," the sport media often employs a feminine apologetic in which they heterosexualize female athletes through emphasizing their relationships with men; however, this pattern is not frequently found in coverage of male athletes. Although the existence of this type of differential coverage has been confirmed by qualitative research, it is unknown to what extent these portrayals affect people's perceptions of male and female athletes. As part of a 2 (Gender of the Athlete: Female or Male) x 2 (Depiction of Sexual Orientation: Clearly Heterosexual or Ambiguous) between-subjects design, 91 predominantly White undergraduates (40 men, 51 women) read a fictitious newspaper profile about an Olympic athlete in which the article portrayed the athlete as clearly heterosexual or as having an ambiguous sexual orientation. Interestingly, and contrary to previous research, male athletes did not receive an "assumption" of heterosexuality. However, as predicted, both male and female athletes described as clearly heterosexual were perceived much more favorably than were athletes with an ambiguous sexual orientation.

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Although the seminal passage of Title IX and the rise of professional women's sporting leagues have begun to propel female athletes into mainstream culture, there is still a ubiquitous yet tacit stigma surrounding issues of lesbianism in women's sport. Despite vanguards such as Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova (who have sought to increase the lay public's understanding of the role of homosexuality in sport), female athletes continue to be confronted with the "image problem," or homophobia in women's sport (Griffin, 1994, 1998; Hargreaves, 1994; Kane, 1996; Theberge & Birrell, 1994). That is, there is an underlying fear in society that participating in sports will encourage homosexuality or even convert female athletes into lesbians and prevent them from fulfilling their stereotypical domestic and maternal roles (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983).

Because being a successful athlete contradicts a woman's prescribed societal gender role, the media often employs a "feminine apologetic" (Felshin, 1974) whereby female athletes are required to overcompensate for their masculine behavior on the field by acting in traditionally feminine ways off the field. Because femininity is often used as a proxy for heterosexuality, the media can implicitly or covertly "assure" their audience that female athletes are heterosexual through coverage and photographs that portrays these women in a "heterosexy" manner (Kane, 1996). More explicitly, the media can also dismiss charges of lesbianism by emphasizing female athletes' relationships with men and with their families in pictures, articles, and television coverage (Birrell & Theberge, 1994; Duncan, 1990). For example, in coverage of the U.S. Women's soccer team after their inaugural World Cup victory, *People Magazine* ran few on-the-field "action" shots of the players but instead used photographs of the players with their husbands, boyfriends, and children. Through portraying female athletes as adhering to standards of hegemonic femininity and as clearly heterosexual, these athletes consequently become more privileged and accepted than their fellow athletic peers who do not adhere to these standards (Krane, 2001; Pirinen, 1997).

By contrast, coverage of male athletes does not follow this same pattern. Although the onus is on female athletes to prove they are not homosexual, male athletes typically are assumed to be heterosexual (Griffin, 1998). Consequently, whereas sport commentators and writers often allude or explicitly refer to a female athlete's attractiveness, emotionality, femininity, and heterosexuality, coverage of male athletes is free to focus on their athletic accomplishments, as being an athlete is consistent with the traditional male role (Sabo & Jansen, 1992; Messner, 1988; Trujillo, 1991). Indeed, the only time that the heterosexuality of a male athlete is emphasized is under newsworthy or sensationalistic circumstances (Griffin, 1998), such as with Seattle Seahawks linebacker Chris Spielman's decision to leave the NFL to care for his sick wife or with Los Angeles Lakers guard Rick Fox and New York Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter's relationships with famous singers Venessa Williams and Mariah Carey, respectively. In sum,

the media represent female athletes as heterosexual, feminine women first and as athletes second, whereas male athletes are, for the most part, portrayed solely in terms of their athleticism (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983).

Although researchers have speculated about how this differential portrayal of male and female athletes by the media affects people's impressions, to date no research has experimentally addressed this question. As such, we sought to determine how emphasizing an athlete's heterosexuality influences the public's perceptions of him or her by manipulating, within a hypothetical newspaper article, the gender of an Olympic athlete as well as the depiction of the athlete's sexual orientation. Therefore, in the current study participants read and made judgments about either a male or female athlete who had a clearly heterosexual orientation or whose sexual orientation was ambiguous.

Because male athletes are assumed to be heterosexual (Griffin, 1998), it was predicted that both clearly heterosexual male athletes and male athletes whose sexual orientations were ambiguous would be perceived as heterosexual. However, because of the "image problem" that pervades women's sport (Kane, 1996), it was hypothesized that female athletes who were not clearly designated as heterosexual would be seen as lesbians. Moreover, because of the general homophobia that is present in today's society (Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1992), it was predicted that athletes who were thought to be gay or lesbian would be perceived more negatively (i.e., less deserving of respect, less athletic, less ideal) than athletes believed to be heterosexual.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 91 predominantly White undergraduate students (40 men, 51 women) at a small, private liberal arts university in the Southwest. Participants were recruited primarily from introductory psychology and economics classes and were given extra credit in their courses for completing the study. Additional participants were recruited from the men and women's Division III soccer teams at the university, and they were given small prizes (e.g., movie tickets) as incentives.

Design and Materials

A 2 (Gender of the Athlete: Female or Male) x 2 (Depiction of Sexual Orientation: Clearly Heterosexual or Ambiguous) between-subjects design was used to explore perceptions of athletes as a function of their gender and the type of coverage of their sexual orientation. Across all four conditions, the hypothetical articles were designed to closely mirror the style

and form of real articles and coverage of Olympic athletes. In the article about the clearly heterosexual athlete, the athlete was described as crediting Olympic success to his or her spouse and saying about the partner, "He's [She's] been such a vital part of my life." However, in the profile which left the athlete's sexual orientation ambiguous, the athlete was quoted as using the same quote, but attributing Olympic success to his or her roommate (see Appendix A for example articles).

Each article was followed by a response sheet designed to assess participants' reactions to the profile. Specifically, participants were asked to rate on 10-point scales ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 10 (*Very much*) several different characteristics of the athlete, including how athletic (i.e., athletic, competitive, talented, serious about sports, and dedicated to sports; Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$), respectable (i.e., acting as a leader, respectable, ambitious, a good representative of the U.S.A., and a good role model; Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$), feminine (i.e., tender, cheerful, affectionate, sympathetic, gentle, compassionate, and warm; Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$), and masculine (i.e., aggressive, dominant, and forceful; Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$) they perceived him or her to be. Using the same scale, participants were also asked to make other single-item judgments about the athlete, such as how likable, heroic, homosexual, similar to the "ideal" man/woman, and how physically attractive they perceived the athlete to be. Participants were then given the opportunity to record open-ended responses about their overall impression of the athlete.

In addition, because the media have argued that gender-consistent coverage is "what the public wants" (Kane, 1996), a secondary category of dependent variables was used to assess participants' liking of the hypothetical article. Thus, participants also rated (on the same 10-point scale) how much they liked the article (i.e., how flattering the coverage was to the athlete, how interested they would be in reading more about the athlete, and how accurately the coverage depicted the athlete; Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). Participants were then instructed to give their open-ended responses about their overall impression of the article.

A number of control procedures were used to eliminate extraneous variables. First, because the gender-appropriateness of an athlete's sport is so salient, it was necessary to choose a sport that was not perceived as especially masculine or feminine. To determine whether or not a sport was considered gender-neutral, 15 participants were asked to rate the gender-appropriateness of 16 sports on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Appropriate for men*) to 7 (*Appropriate for women*). The sport of distance running ($M = 4.07$) was chosen as the athlete's sport in this study because it was perceived as gender-neutral, consistent with previous research (Metheny, 1965). Next, to ensure a balanced gender representation in the sample, a randomized-block design was used to assign approximately equal numbers of male and female participants to each of the four conditions. Finally, to minimize additional error

variance, the athlete's reported age (i.e., 35 years old) and name (depending on the condition, either "Bruce Stephens" or "Becky Stephens") were consistent across conditions. To avoid possibly contaminating our manipulation, no pictures of the athletes were included, as prior research has shown that the attractiveness, masculinity, and femininity of faces can influence attributions of sexual orientation (Dunkle & Francis, 1990; Unger, Hilderbrand, & Madar, 1992). As such, participants were asked to rate the *presumed* attractiveness of the athlete.

Procedure

Potential participants were approached and told that the current study was "an investigation of people's perceptions of Olympic athletes." After agreeing to complete the questionnaire, participants read a hypothetical newspaper account about an athlete (who ostensibly had competed in the 1996 Summer Olympic Games) and then made judgments in response to the coverage and the athlete involved. All participants saw identical profiles, except that the first names (i.e., indicating the athlete's gender) and depiction of sexual orientation (i.e., clearly heterosexual or ambiguous) varied according to the experimental condition.

After reading four profiles (three additional hypothetical profiles were included as part of a separate investigation) and completing the corresponding response sheets, participants recorded their answers to demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, athletic status, and the amount of time they spend following sports through the media) and other personality measures, including the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) and the Sex-Role Egalitarian Scale (Beere, King, Beere, & King, 1984).¹ Participants were also asked to record any ideas they had as to what they believed the research might be studying (but because no participants reported entirely correct hypotheses, none were removed for subsequent analyses). Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were told that the article was hypothetical, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

Results

The data were analyzed using a 2 (Gender of the Athlete: Female or Male) x 2 (Depiction of Sexual Orientation: Clearly Heterosexual or Ambiguous) x 2 (Gender of the Participant: Female or Male) between-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).² Contrary to expectations, the predicted Athlete Gender x Sexual Orientation interaction for participants' ratings of the athlete's homosexuality was not significant, $F < 1$, *ns*. Instead, a main effect of sexual orientation revealed that, for both female and male athletes, those whose sexuality was ambiguously portrayed ($M = 5.51$) were perceived as more homosexual compared to those who were portrayed as clearly heterosexual ($M = 1.33$), $F(1, 88) = 107.6, p < .001$.

The predicted two-way interactions were obtained, however, for perceptions of athletes' femininity and masculinity. Specifically, as shown in Figure 1, although female athletes with an ambiguous sexual orientation ($M = 6.23$) were perceived as equally feminine as female athletes who were portrayed as clearly heterosexual ($M = 6.77$), $t(46) = 1.00$, *ns*, male athletes whose sexual orientation was ambiguous ($M = 3.86$) were perceived as more feminine than male athletes who were portrayed as clearly heterosexual ($M = 2.39$), $t(42) = -2.41, p = .02$, $F(1, 83) = 6.89, p < .01$. A similar interaction, as illustrated in Figure 2, revealed that whereas female athletes with an ambiguous sexual orientation ($M = 3.90$) were perceived as no more masculine than female athletes who were portrayed as clearly heterosexual ($M = 3.23$), $t(46) = -1.23$, *ns*, male athletes whose sexual orientation was ambiguous ($M = 6.14$) were perceived as less masculine than male athletes who were portrayed as clearly heterosexual ($M = 7.65$), $t(42) = -3.28, p = .002$, $F(1, 83) = 9.50, p = .008$.

Finally, there were several main effects of sexual orientation that confirmed our predictions that clearly heterosexual athletes would be viewed more favorably than would athletes whose sexual orientation was ambiguous. For instance, clearly heterosexual athletes ($M = 7.13$) were viewed as more similar to the ideal man/woman than were athletes with an ambiguous sexual orientation ($M = 5.73$), $F(1, 83) = 11.62, p = .001$. Clearly heterosexual athletes ($M = 6.81$) were also presumed to be more physically attractive than were athletes with an unclear sexual orientation ($M = 5.85$), $F(1, 83) = 5.57, p = .021$. Finally, clearly heterosexual athletes were viewed as being more respectable ($M = 7.73$) than were athletes with an ambiguous sexual orientation ($M = 6.98$; $F(1, 83) = 8.31, p = .005$). There were no differences between the two groups with respect to how athletic, likable, and heroic participants perceived the athletes to be or in how much they liked the article, all $F_s < 1$, all $p_s > .05$.

Figure 1.
The influence of athlete gender and perceived sexual orientation on ratings of athlete femininity

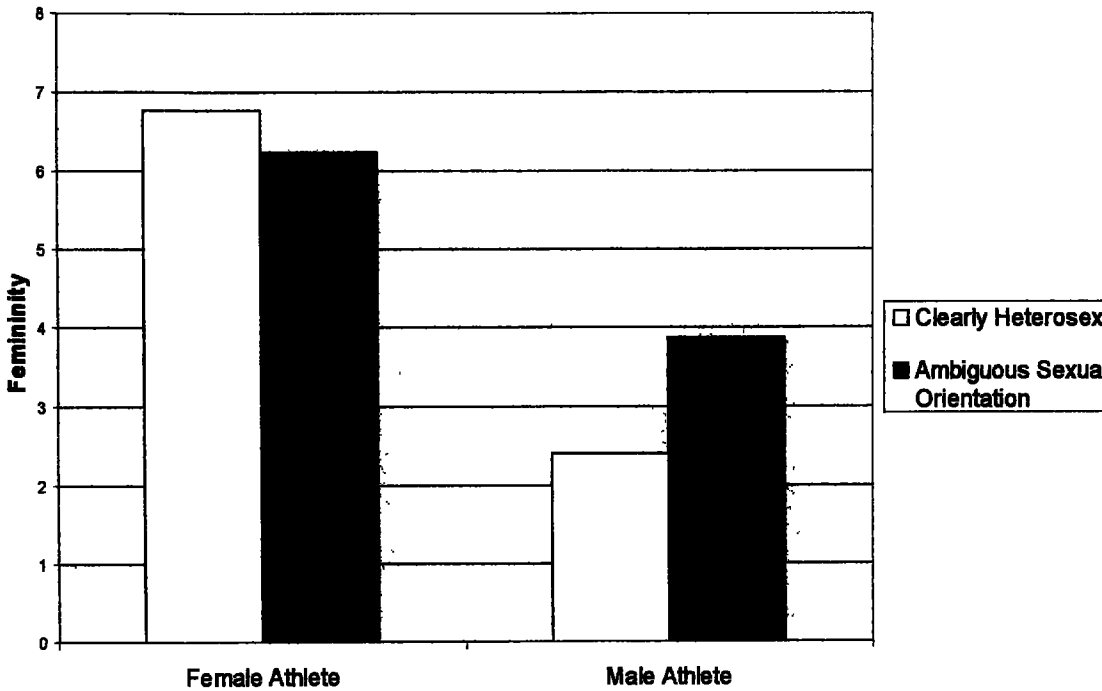
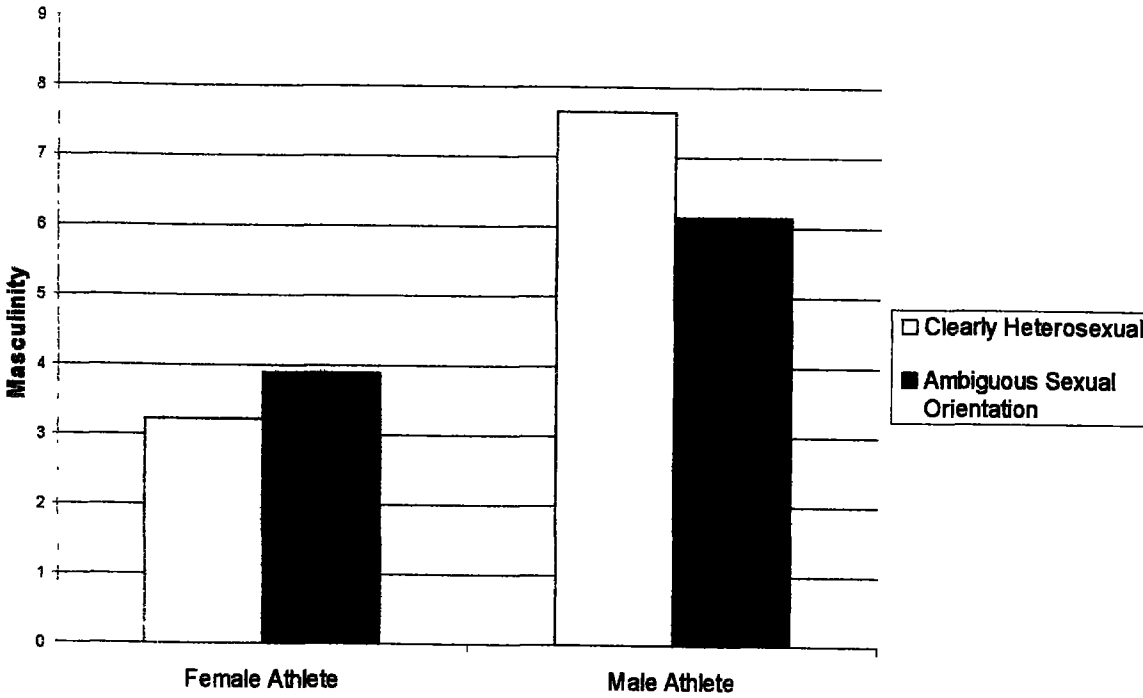


Figure 2.
The influence of athlete gender and perceived sexual orientation
on ratings of athlete masculinity



Discussion

The results of this study revealed three notable patterns. First, although previous research shows that the “image problem” usually only affects female athletes, it appears that a male athlete also might be susceptible if his sport is not strongly gender-schematic (e.g., compared to football or hockey) enough to “assure” the audience of his heterosexuality. Indeed, it seems that males who transgress their “heterosexual assumption,” could actually be *more* affected than female athletes who do so, as the masculinity and femininity of male athletes with an ambiguous sexual orientation were more polarized compared to their female counterparts. Next, the results also reveal that our participants equated heterosexuality with a gender-stereotypical sex role (and homosexuality with a gender-astereotypical sex role) only with male athletes but not with female athletes. Perhaps this is because female athletes, regardless of their sexual orientation, are participating in a traditionally male domain, which makes them seem more androgynous. However, a homosexual man is inconsistent with the image of a male athlete (Griffin, 1998), so gay male athletes in this study were perceived as especially feminine. Finally, regardless of athlete gender, people responded in a homophobic manner to athletes whose sexuality was ambiguous. That is, male and female participants had more positive impressions of both male and female athletes when the athlete was clearly heterosexual than when he or she had a sexual orientation that was unclear, as would be expected by the homonegativity in society today (Cahn, 1994).

Substantiating the quantitative data, answers to the open-ended response questions unmistakably showed that people responded negatively to athletes whose sexual orientation was ambiguous. For instance, after reading about the male athlete whose sexual orientation was in question, one female participant wrote, “I would have preferred more information about credentials and less about private life-style.” A male participant also noted, “My optimism about the article waned after the mention of a male roommate.” About the female athlete whose sexual orientation was ambiguous, a female participant noted that, “The article almost focused more on her relationship with her roommate than her running,” and another female participant similarly remarked, “There was way too much coverage on [the roommate]. They should have focused on the athlete more.” In general, it appears that participants only feel that there is too much focus on the athlete’s personal life when the athlete is possibly referring to a same-sex partner; not surprisingly, this pattern is not found when the athlete refers to a heterosexual spouse.

Because the gender-neutral sport of distance running was used in this study, future research should further clarify the effect of the gender-appropriateness or -inappropriateness of an athlete’s sport on a male and female athlete’s perceived heterosexuality. That is, perhaps

athletes in sports that are more strongly gender-typed (e.g., female gymnasts or male rugby players) receive the “benefit of the doubt” and are assumed to be heterosexual in coverage when their sexual orientation is unclear (Griffin, 1998). However, it seems plausible that athletes in gender-neutral or especially gender-inappropriate sports may not receive this benefit, and so their sexual orientation is determined by the reader by context clues within the article. Further research should also explore the extent to which the public’s obsession with homosexuality in female athletes is solely an American phenomenon. As Cynthia Cooper of the WNBA’s Houston Comets explained, “I didn’t have these same issues when I played over in Europe. You didn’t have someone asking, ‘Are you a lesbian?’ just because you played basketball” (Morgan, 2001, p. C10). As such, it would be helpful for future research to clarify the international boundaries of the “image problem” and whether it generalizes beyond Americans’ preoccupation with athletes’ sexual orientation.

A potential limitation of this study is its lack of external validity. That is, because the media is aware of the “image problem” surrounding women’s sport, they often explicitly try to avoid any implication of homosexuality (Griffin, 1998). For example, it was widely known in the tennis world that Conchita Martinez and Gigi Fernandez were lovers, yet they were described on television as “training partners.” Furthermore, many female athletes are quite aware of the negative consequences of being openly lesbian, and thus go to great lengths to conceal their sexual identity from being “leaked” to the media (Lenskyj, 1992). Although homosexuality is rarely discussed in the media, an athlete’s sexual orientation will be emphasized if it is used to contrast with another athlete’s heterosexuality (Birrell & Theberge, 1994). For example, “All-American” tennis player Chris Evert was constantly shown to the public to be heterosexual (through coverage that emphasized her relationships with men oftentimes more than her stellar career), yet the Eastern-European and lesbian Martina Navratilova was constantly described as “manly” in order to highlight Evert’s heterosexuality (Kane, 1996). The same pattern was found in coverage of American heterosexual runner Mary Decker and Czechoslovakian lesbian runner Jarmila Kratochvilova.

Despite this limitation, the current study has demonstrated that, despite recent advances, homophobia can potentially pervade both women and men’s sport. Although homonegativity was found against athletes with an ambiguous sexual orientation in this study, it is believed that with increased media coverage and “mere exposure” (Zajonc, 1968) to homosexual athletes, the public can begin to develop more understanding and acceptance of homosexuality in sport. Indeed, female athletes such as Missy Giove (mountain biking), Gina Guidi (boxing), and Muffin Spencer-Devlin (golf) and male athletes such as Billy Bean (baseball), Greg Louganis (diving), and Esera Tuaolo (football) are challenging traditional notions of hegemonic femininity, hegemonic masculinity, and compulsory heterosexuality. Through telli

ing these athletes' stories, and those of other homosexual sport participants, perhaps society will realize the unique role that gay and lesbian athletes have and will continue to play in the realm of sport. It is only then that the media and sports participants alike will renounce the "feminine apologetic" and embrace a "feminine *unapologetic*."

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Footnote

¹ These demographic and personality variables (e.g., athletic status, age, BSRI [Bem, 1974], and SRES [Beere, et al., 1984]) were included to explore the potential moderating effects that they might have on the interactions and main effects. However, preliminary analyses revealed no significant pattern of results, and thus these variables are not discussed further.

² Although we did not predict gender differences, the data were analyzed using participant gender as an independent variable in order to detect any possible differences between male and female participants; as predicted, there were no three-way interactions.

Appendix A

Profile of the clearly heterosexual female athlete:

ATLANTA-Distance runner Becky Stephens enters today's 5,000-meter competition as a clear favorite to medal after her dominating performance in the U.S. qualifiers. Does the 35-year-old runner let the pressure bother her? "No," says the native of Palo Alto, California, "I just try to take everything one race at a time." Stephens brought a number of long-time supporters with her to Atlanta, including her parents and her husband Albert Stephens. She credits her incredible success to him and notes, "Al has been with me every step of the way. Every time I get discouraged or think I want to just give up, he reminds me of what a great talent I've been given. He's been such a vital part of my life." Stephens will no doubt be looking to the stands again for inspiration from him as she takes on her competitors for Olympic glory.

Profile of the male athlete with an ambiguous sexual orientation:

ATLANTA-Distance runner Bruce Stephens enters today's 5,000-meter competition as a clear favorite to medal after his dominating performance in the U.S. qualifiers. Does the 35-year-old runner let the pressure bother him? "No," says the native of Palo Alto, California, "I just try to take everything one race at a time." Stephens brought a number of long-time supporters with him to Atlanta, including his parents and his roommate Albert Miller. He credits his extraordinary success to Miller and notes, "Al has been with me every step of the way. Every time I get discouraged or think I want to just give up, he reminds me of what a great talent I've been given. He's been such a vital part of my life." Stephens will no doubt be looking to the stands again for inspiration from him as he takes on his competitors for Olympic glory.

