



Game on

LGBT+ inclusion in Australian Tennis

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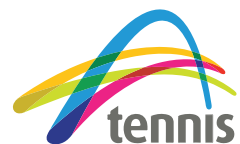


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All recommendations identified by the research team are based on data collected during the research, and this information is known to be correct at the time this report was prepared.

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Executive Summary

Tennis is a popular sport in Australia. Tennis Australia is committed to diversity, in particular adult participation, and recognises LGBT+ inclusion as an important area of growth and development.

Evidence suggests that LGBT+ people attempting to participate in sport often find themselves in environments that are unwelcoming, hostile and discriminatory. This study explored the lived experience of LGBT+ participation and engagement with tennis, and a set of recommendations (targeted initiatives) has been developed for Tennis Australia to promote and enact LGBT+ inclusion.

Firstly, we present an overview of the current state of inclusion in various sports includes exploring issues and challenges currently being faced by LGBT+ communities, as well as, programs and research currently in Australia and overseas. To gain a comprehensive insight into the perception of tennis amongst LGBT+ communities we employed a qualitative research design drawing on the methods of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observations.

We conducted a total of 44 interviews – current players of tennis (N= 27) and those not currently engaged with tennis (N= 17). In addition, we conducted 3 focus groups and over 50 hours of observations at various LGBT+ tennis tournaments in Sydney, Hobart, Perth and Melbourne. The report is structured into four themes offering a depth of discussion to inform Tennis Australia, about approaches for creating a more inclusive experience for LGBT+ tennis players.

Discrimination

This theme details the current lived experience of LGBT+ communities and the discrimination they faced engaging with sport. For Tennis Australia these are important insights; the impact discrimination has had on participants perceptions of sport cannot be ignored. Sport is a prime site of abuse for some participants, and associated feelings of shame and judgement were common. Derogatory slurs and exclusion practices together with other forms of homophobia/biphobia and transphobia continue to exist within sport today.

Barriers and challenges

This section of the report reflects on the barriers that LGBT+ communities have and continue to face engaging with sport. It explores common anxieties experienced by the LGBT+ communities such as fear of being 'out' and sexual identity management. Additionally, this section highlights how improvement to the overall sport governance of tennis at the club level could greatly reduce the discrimination faced by participants.

Safe spaces

The importance of Tennis Australia creating and maintaining "safe spaces" for all tennis players is discussed in this theme. It highlights how a tennis club can be a safe space for members of LGBT+ communities. Tennis clubs can create welcoming, supportive and inclusive environments free of bias, conflict and criticism. Overall, the organisation of Tennis Australia was perceived by players and non-players as inclusive, due to campaigns and the high visibility of LGBT+ symbols, such as the rainbow flag. However, the research suggests that at a club level this could be improved through staff training and by giving LGBT+ communities a voice.

Benefits

Finally, this theme explores the overall benefits of participation and engagement with tennis. The focus of this section is the importance of community and club culture and the capacity for tennis to build social capital amongst its players. The research indicated that those who play tennis reported improvement in their mental and physical health. The opportunities for Tennis Australia to enhance the social, mental and physical benefits to players through active support and promotion of LGBT+ tennis tournaments, are clear.

Recommendations

To increase participation and engagement for LGBT+ people in tennis within Australia, eight key recommendations are suggested: develop an understanding of the histories of exclusion; increase support for LGBT+ tennis structures; governance support; establish a national LGBT+ advisory group; establish a peer support program; develop an LGBT+ communication strategy; develop and adapt entry level participation programs; and finally, promote the positive social benefits to LGBT+ communities.

Conclusion

Tennis is well positioned to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic as an inviting and accessible sport for LGBT+ people; it is a valuable resource to reconnect LGBT+ people with their local communities and other LGBT+ people. This is one of the first pieces of Australian research documenting the positive impact that playing sport, specifically tennis, has on the lives of LGBT+ people. It highlights the importance of fostering social connections, maintaining health and wellbeing, while enjoying a hobby without fear of judgement, hostility, or discrimination. Tennis Australia is well placed to use its platform and reach to show LGBT+ people in Australia and across the globe, that tennis is a sport where you can be your authentic self, accepted and welcomed for who you are – and a space where people can just be themselves and play tennis.

Our report begins with a brief introduction describing the research questions; these are followed by research on sport participation and LGBT+ inclusion and participation in sport. The method we used to conduct the research are presented next, followed by the results, discussion and conclusion.

Introduction

LGBT+ inclusion as a foundation to diversity and inclusion work, has gained prominence in recent years within Australia. There has been an increase in LGBT+ diversity work, through policy and practice, which has been driven by a need to address anti-LGBT+ discrimination in sporting contexts (Storr, Spaaij, Symons, O'Sullivan & Sbaglia, 2017) and facilitate increased engagement and participation for LGBT+ people in sport (Storr, Jeanes, Curro, & Rossi, 2020).

This has included the creation of LGBT+ supporter groups in AFL (Storr, Parry, Klijnik, Collison, and Staples, 2019), developing institutional support for LGBT+ inclusion within sporting organisations (Robertson, Storr, O'Brien, and Bakos, 2019), and improving youth sport environments for young people of diverse genders and sexualities (Storr, Robinson, Davies, Nichols, Collison, 2020). Some sports in Australia have taken leadership on LGBT+ inclusion, and tennis has been one of these sports.

This is reflected in Tennis Australia being awarded the most inclusive organisation in the 2019 Pride in Sport Awards, which benchmarks Australian Sporting Organisations on their LGBT+ inclusion policy and practices.

Tennis is a popular sport within Australia. As part of Tennis Australia's commitment to diversity and inclusion with particular reference to adult participation, LGBT+ inclusion is seen as an important aspect to this commitment. Current evidence suggests that LGBT+ people who participate in sport often do so in hostile and unwelcoming environments, where discrimination is a common experience in sport (Storr et al., 2017; 2020; Denison & Kitchin, 2015).

The vast majority of contributions to research on the experiences of LGBT+ people in sport and movement settings has focused on discrimination. The current research outlined in this report is one of the first pieces to explore the positive impact sport can have on LGBT+ people in Australia.

In June 2019, Tennis Australia (TA) commissioned the School of Health Sciences at Western Sydney University to undertake research on LGBT+ inclusion in Australian Tennis. The overarching aim of the project was to understand the current tennis climate for LGBT+ communities within Australia, and how to grow participation and engagement of tennis amongst LGBT+ communities.

The four key research questions were as follows:

- 1 How can TA effectively promote LGBT+ inclusion in Australian Tennis?
- 2 What are the barriers to participation and engagement amongst LGBT+ people within the tennis community?
- 3 How are safe spaces discussed and understood by LGBT+ people in tennis?
- 4 What are the benefits of participation and engagement in tennis for LGBT+ people in Australia?

Our research aims were investigated through a qualitative scoping study, by speaking to key stakeholders in Australian tennis, via focus groups, interviews, participant observations at tennis clubs and LGBT+ tennis tournaments, and a desk based review.

1. We use LGBT+ as an umbrella term to refer to all identities related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

What the research tells us

In one systematic literature review investigating the interventions to increase participation rates in sporting organisations, two important findings stand out: participation rates are lower in females and decline with age, and are reduced in lower socio-economic and minority groups including people from non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds (Priest, Armstrong, Doyle, and Waters, 2008). The authors stressed the importance of determining the most effective interventions to increase participation in sport.

Twelve years on, authors of another systematic literature review critically analysed published scholarship and peer-reviewed research on LGBT+ issues in physical education. Focussing on the experiences and perceptions of lesbian PE teachers, they found that PE is seen as homophobic and discriminatory in nature, because research into this space and changes in policy have been slow and many recommendations were never implemented (Landi, Flory, Safron & Marttinen, 2020).

There is a premise "that sport is a prime site for homophobic bullying and that the social and personal consequences of homophobic bullying associated with sport are severe" (Brackenridge, Rivers, Gough and Llewellyn, 2007:122). Gender, sexuality and sexual orientation along with bullying behaviour, impact player participation and enjoyment in sport. Despite anti-bullying initiatives and prevention policies designed to protect LGBT+ athletes from homophobic bullying, homophobic bullying is so pervasive it affects participation in sport.

Defining individual homophobic behaviours is not helpful because definitions "capture neither the pervasive cultural negativity that homophobic bullying engenders (the 'repeated' episodes), nor the ways in which rapid cultural shifts from tolerance to intolerance can occur through collusive silences" (Brackenridge et al. 2007:123). In other words, homophobic bullying is a subtle continuous process, and not a series of individual and seemingly isolated events, as the definitions suggest. This is reflected in the Results section (p. 7) in both participant cohorts: LGBT+ tennis players and the LGBT+ non-tennis players.

In the next section studies investigating LGBT+ participation in sport are presented:

- i USA, UK and Italy;
- ii Australia and finally, two individual studies of segregated sport teams; and
- iii A UK gay rugby team and IV) an Australian female hockey club.

i. USA, UK, and Italian studies on LGBT+ participation in sport

In America several large-scale research projects investigated institutional support of LGBT+ diversity in sport (Cunningham, 2008, 2011, 2015; Cunningham and Melton, 2011; and Melton and Cunningham, 2014).

The argument for increasing sexual diversity is based on the assumption that greater contact or exposure will reduce negative attitudes that members of the majority hold towards a stigmatised minority group (Smith, Axelton, & Saucier, 2009 in Brodyn and Ghaziani, 2018:309). "Sexual minorities are members of a devalued or stigmatised social group, and this is especially the case in sport contexts" (Melton & Cunningham 2014:23). Sexual orientation diversity became the new focus in research investigating explicit and implicit examples of sexual discrimination in sport workplaces in the US. Cunningham and Melton (2011) argue that organisations need to seek greater sexual orientation diversity by recruiting sexual minorities. Creating an inclusive diversity culture positively advantages the organisation, with "enhanced decision-making capabilities, improved marketplace understanding, and goodwill associated with engaging in socially responsible practices" (647).

Furthermore, since research demonstrated a causal link between firm growth and LGBT+ inclusive policies "offering partner benefits might also prove beneficial" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009, in Cunningham and Melton 2011: 648). However, profits may increase, at the expense of a rise in homonegativity and resistance to LGBT+ rights and inclusion.

At a time when US Law did not protect LGBT employees from discrimination, Cunningham (2011) examined the relationships among sexual orientation diversity, diversity strategy and organisational performance. "The positive effects of diversity are likely a function of the increased perspectives, viewpoints and decision-making capabilities present in diverse groups... consistent with the categorisation elaboration model (van Knippenberg et al., 2004)" (Cunningham 2011:454).

In a community tennis club in the Intermountain Region of the United States, the motivation behind an individual's decision to participate in sport was investigated by Casper, Gray and Stellino (2007). They interviewed 537 adult recreational tennis players and members (290 female and 247 male, mean age = 47.5 years), to identify adult tennis player motivation to continue involvement. Using the sport commitment model (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler, 1993), Casper et al. (2007) extended the theoretical framework to participation frequency and purchase intention.

"The participants in this study reported that enjoyment and personal investments are major contributors to their commitment to tennis. Second, this study added further evidence of the predictive power of commitment in explaining behavioural involvement and purchase intention" (268).

In Britain, the power relations and hierarchy of a tennis club described as 'typical' of old suburban clubs in the metropolitan London area, were investigated by Lake (2011). He wanted to identify who was excluded, how and why they were excluded, the relative success of organized resistances and

the outcomes of power struggles between members (approximately 500), in their wider socio-historical context of Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) policy implementation (p. 113).

Lake chose ethnographic research for one of the clubs known to have received LTA funding, yet only made superficial changes that barely altered their respective socially-exclusive 'cultures'. He argues that the problem of social exclusion in Voluntary Tennis Clubs is more deep-rooted, divisive and subtle than the LTA previously thought.

Social exclusion was investigated in Italy by Baiocco, Pistella, Salvati, Loverno & Lucidi (2018), in their study of safer sports for people who self-identify as a sexual minority. They interviewed 88 gay males and 120 heterosexual males between 18 and 36 years of age, to discover that bullying and homophobic bullying were reported more often by gay men, compared to heterosexual men.

"Gay men reported dropping out of sports more frequently due to a fear of being bullied and greater familial pressure to conform to masculine-type sports" (Baiocco et al. 2018:385).

As can be seen the research on sport inclusion for LGBT+ players in community-based sport clubs resonates with reports of homophobia², bullying, and sexual prejudice and discrimination perpetrated against LGBT+ players.

2. Plummer (1998) contests the term because it reinforces the idea of mental illness; it is typically associated with men and therefore neglects women (see also Bryant and Vidal-Ortiz, 2008); it overlooks how sexuality intersects with other paths of oppression (i.e. race, gender and social class); the concept fails to pay attention to the broader context of oppression of sexual minorities; and finally, by focusing on individuals, underlying structural and social conditions leading to sexual oppression are disregarded (in Einarsdóttir, Hoel and Lewis 2015:1185).

ii. Australian studies of LGBT+ participation in sport

The following Australian studies document the sexual discrimination faced by LGBT+ Australians wanting to play sport. Come Out to Play (Symons, Sbaraglia, Hillier, & Mitchell, 2010) was the first to explore the sporting experiences of LGBT Australians.

Over 300 LGBT people (average age 36 years) responded to the survey: 42% reported experiencing verbal homophobia during their engagement with sport, and more than half reported it as frequent. Of the 84% of participants whose engagement was in mainstream sport (as opposed to LGBT teams or clubs), almost half were not 'out' (open about their sexuality) at all, and another third were only out to some in their club. This suggests that language used in sport spaces can send the message that LGBT+ people are not welcome and encourage many to feel the need to conceal their sexuality to participate³.

Four years later the Equal Play study (Symons, O'Sullivan, Borkoles, Andersen, & Polman, 2014) examined the mental health impact of homophobic bullying on young (aged 14-23) same-sex attracted and gender diverse Australians in sport and physical education. The results showed that more frequently experienced verbal homophobia led to higher scores on depression, anxiety and stress in both PE and sport environments. Remarks such as "that's so gay" were heard frequently by a majority of participants in both PE (93% at least sometimes) and sport (68% at least sometimes) settings. Symons et al. (2014) observed that casual homophobic language is sometimes characterised as not having a homophobic or harmful intention⁴, even though a majority of participants (83% in PE and 73% in sport) indicated that they were at least a little distressed when hearing such language.

In the following year, Out on the Fields study (Denison & Kitchen 2015), the first international study into homophobia in sport drew survey data from six western English speaking countries. 3,006 Australians completed the survey, of which 1,690 identified as gay/lesbian or bisexual.

80% of Australian respondents reported experiencing or witnessing homophobia during their sport involvement. Of those LGBT participants personally targeted 82% heard verbal slurs such as "faggot" or "dyke".

Further data focusing on youth sport (22 years old and under) found that almost three quarters believed youth sport is unsafe for same-sex attracted youth, and three quarters of young lesbians and over three quarters of young gay men reported they were not completely out during their sport engagement. The main reasons given for not coming out during sport were a fear of being bullied and being discriminated by coaches and officials.

³ The Australian Human Rights Commission has reported that a large number of LGBTIQ people hide their sexuality or gender at work for fear of exclusion and stigma.

⁴ Non-harmful intention homophobia is questionable, and anti-homosexual sentiments are ambiguous. When staff claims e.g. 'it's not personal' are tolerated and not challenged anti-homosexual attitudes in work environments are perpetuated (Einarsdóttir et al. 2015).



iii. UK gay rugby team research

In the UK a focus group of members from a grassroots gay rugby team, the Liverpool Tritons⁵, were interviewed about the role sporting institutions play in nurturing an acceptance of homosexuality (Gaston & Dixon, 2019).

The research questions were as follows:

1. Do the motivations behind gay men joining a gay rugby team challenge the possibility of 'inclusive masculinity' (Anderson, 2009), or actually reinforce hegemonic conceptualizations of gender and sexuality;
2. Does the existence of gay rugby teams reflect, or challenge diminished cultural homophobia in sport and in society more generally; and
3. Is the existence and popularity of gay rugby teams based on offering a social haven away from the expectations of the heteronormative mainstream, or are they based on 'conventional sporting values' of winning and competition (Jarvis, 2015:286) (Gaston & Dixon, 2019: 3).

The players reported more inclusive masculinities and a decline in homophobia across society; however, there were difficulties among members of the gay community themselves - internal division, and limited spaces in which sociability was defined in non-sexual ways.

Playing for the Tritons offered the opportunity to interact with groups of gay men they might not otherwise have interacted with. "...playing for this rugby team offered a social haven away from the pressure and demands of the homogenous gay community" (Gaston & Dixon, 2019:11). However, in addition to experiencing inclusive masculinities in a safe space, they reported exposure to "a wider range of homosexualities".

5. At the time of writing the paper, the Liverpool Tritons was the most recently established gay rugby team.

iv. Australian female hockey club research

Using a critical feminist framework Litchfield (2011) investigated female hockey participant experiences of, and attitudes towards, gender and sexuality in sport.

Across life spans they found a lack of focus on particular stages of life for participation, that regional and rural areas have higher rates of participation and that policy and strategic direction influence participation.

They believe the way to improve participation rates is by identifying key influencers on participation across each life span while at the same time addressing policy and strategic direction with respect to marginalised groups. It seems that agency and identity formation were positive features of belonging to the Northern Central Hockey Club.

The participants reported experiencing a sense of community and personal identity building in safe and affirming spaces; in their lived experience 'safe space' of the hockey club was a transformative experience.

"Women's team sport, and in particular, women's hockey in Victoria has the potential to provide a safe space for lesbian women to explore and affirm diverse and non-conventional discourses of gender and sexuality"

(Litchfield, 2011:43).

Methods

Multiple methods of enquiry were used to gain comprehensive insights into player and non-player perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of tennis and how the relationship between these variables contributes to the playing experience.

Whilst much research seeks to understand sport engagement through the use of quantitative data, reliance on only one research method can limit the opportunity to explore the norms, values, and meanings shared by large groups of people. By using participant observation in conjunction with qualitative interviews and focus groups, this design enhanced the overall validity of the results of the project.

The research data was collected between November, 2019 and July, 2020 by Drs Storr and Richards and the information presented is based on data collected in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and Perth: 27 in-depth interviews with LGBT+ tennis players and 17 LGBT+ non-tennis players.

The sample was predominately gay men (as reflective of the clubs and tournaments), with 27 men, 14 women (3 of which were trans), and 3 participants who identified as non-binary or gender diverse. Ages of participants varied but three quarters of the sample were in the 40–60 age category, followed by the 30–40 category, with some participants who were retirees. The majority of participants held professional jobs which included law, health and medicine, and held middle to senior leadership roles. Additionally, three focus groups were conducted to enhance the validity and reliability of the study.

We interviewed two cohorts: the first cohort was made up of LGBT+ people who played tennis because we wanted to understand the benefits of tennis playing experiences; the second cohort was made up of non-players from the LGBT+ communities, because we wanted to know how we could engage them in tennis and shed light on the barriers that were preventing them from playing. The total sample number was 44 participants, and the observation hours were in excess of 50.

The data from observations and interviews were transcribed verbatim, and subject to thematic analysis in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. This approach involved the process of active immersion, from which themes were systematically identified and codified into a thematic map (Braun and Clarke, 2006:87).

The thematic map enabled us to identify specific areas of interest and align them together with the observational data set. The data revealed five key themes that are explored in detail at page 8, Results: Discrimination; Barriers and challenges; Importance of safe spaces; Benefits of tennis. The data were coded and organised into these themes using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software package.

To provide anonymity for the participants, no demographic data appears in the report. As there were only a small number of LGBT+ tennis clubs within metropolitan cities, providing demographic data would compromise the participants' privacy. In some instances, to contextualise data, we have provided information about sexual orientation or gender identity, and geographical location. However, we have not provided a breakdown of data around sexual orientation or gender identity, because some participants chose not to disclose that information. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and non-binary people from across the LGBT+ spectrum were interviewed.

One participant identified as trans with an intersex variation, but for the purpose of this report, LGBT+ encompasses sexual orientation and gender identity. Tennis players with intersex variations constitute an important area for future investigation. Full ethical clearance was received from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Western Sydney University.



The Results

Firstly, the data collected from the LGBT+ tennis player cohort are discussed; this is followed by data from the LGBT+ non-tennis player cohort. The data elicited from the two cohorts have been classified according to the main themes outlined herein, together with some of the secondary order themes.

In the non-player cohort themes similar to the player cohort were identified, but in addition, a case study of the GLTA in Australia is presented to inform Tennis Australia about opportunities for increasing engagement and participation for LGBT+ people.

Participant quotes have been de-identified to protect anonymity of the participants. These quotes have been italicised.

LGBT+ tennis players



We spoke to players who were involved in LGBT+ and mainstream tennis clubs. Our analysis of that data identified four key themes related to engagement and participation in tennis: Discrimination, Barriers and challenges, Safe spaces and Benefits.

1. Discrimination

Drawing on data generated from the interviews and observations, a reoccurring theme was tennis players not feeling included within sport generally. Participants told us stories about feeling discriminated against when first playing sport as a young person, or when reconnecting with sport as an adult. The most common form of discrimination were derogatory slurs, and homophobia. When we explored this in more depth, we noticed forms of psychological and physical abuse, shame, judgement and sexism.

1.1 Psychological and physical abuse

Sport is a prime site for psychological and physical abuse or bullying, and the social and personal consequences associated with sport are severe for LGBT+ players. This is because sport often reflects wider social norms around difference, with homophobia/ biphobia/ transphobia in society remaining a challenging landscape for LGBT+ communities.

Participants referred to their own first-hand experiences of being discriminated against, and spoke to the experiences of others who had experienced homophobic bullying. Abuse can be obvious, or it may be subtle and nuanced, such as being denied the right to play in your appropriate grade, or deliberately being ignored and excluded.

One participant reported long term psychological and physical abuse:

"I mean, well if you'd grown up and gone through what I, you know, what I went through and dragging your hair out, suicidal thoughts, being beat up and all these sorts of things, you become, hardened- not the right word, but it's sort of like, OK, well this is my world and I'm not stepping out of it."

Another participant reported being deliberately ignored and excluded for three matches when she first went to play tennis at a regional club.

She reflects on how she felt that this was because of her gender and that the culture of heteronormativity in some rural tennis clubs:

"So, for instance, I went to a rural (tennis) club, rocked up for social tennis, sat there for three matches, wouldn't rotate me in at all, just ignored me completely. I said hello to them, nothing. And then I said, alright, I'm on next, like put me on. And then after the first game, oh my God, yeah, no, you can play all the time. Thank you. But it's getting past that initial, yeah, you're a female."

1.2 Shame and judgement

Participants reported feeling shame, judgement, not being good enough to play tennis and often questioning their performance. For many members of LGBT+ communities, perfectionism and anxiety is a collective struggle. Generations of gay people have been born into a world where being gay remains severely stigmatised. These experiences often interfere with a healthy development of self-worth, which was reflected in the interviews and focus groups. Some participant comments below speak to this point:

"I feel like it comes back to the validation, the tasty poison. It would be like we weren't given that validation growing up. A lot of us were made to feel like we would never be good enough and that's where we tend to over compensate with body, the physical, the external stuff. So that starts to get worse as you get older I feel as well. Yeah, I mean I know quite a few people here who have had eating disorders. They look amazing, but they need to keep filling that void that they have. It was a void that probably put there by I don't know, their parents or something. Something damaged them. So the focus definitely here is on the physical body. Even the physical though, if they're using steroids and stuff, that's not healthy. So yeah, the barriers. It's just all about the validation. The validation is like a poison, a very tasty poison, you could say."

Another participant commented:

“Their ability, being judged for their ability and being worried about what other people think about their ability. I mean, once you’re there you’re like just come, there’s heaps of people, don’t worry about it. But taking the first step is definitely, a lot of people that I’ve asked to come to the [tennis] club, that’s definitely what they say. I need to practice for a month before I come, or whatever. It’s because they’re worried that they’ll be perceived as a poor player.”

Unlike team-based or contact sports, the solo aspect of tennis was appealing, especially for gay men, where previous research shows they gravitate to individual activities and distance themselves from team sports. This is perhaps not surprising given the pressures of not feeling good enough discussed above.

“I liked the solo aspect of it, that in games it could be made or broken on my racquet, I actually prefer playing singles to doubles, because when I’m playing doubles if I play badly I feel like I’ve let down the other people. But if you’re singles you only let down yourself, so that’s fine.”

1.3 Sexism

Several lesbian tennis players spoke about discrimination in the form of sexism when they engaged in tennis circles. They felt that the sport of tennis was dominated by men, and that at times, they were alienated and not welcomed. One of the gay male players reported feeling invisible when heterosexist conversation dominated after competition banter. Reluctance on the part of some male players to partner a female player was reported. Also in one interview a lesbian player stated that she overheard one of the gay male players say:

*“There’s no way in hell
I’m going to lose to a girl!”*

This created a challenging landscape for women in tennis. Our research found that the level of sexism towards female athletes and coaches was evident in both LGBT+ and mainstream clubs. Both athletes and coaches reflected on an element of a ‘boys club’, where women felt that they had to work harder to gain the approval of male players and the wider tennis community. Comments below from some lesbian players illustrate this:

“Funnily enough though when I walked on, three guys went up one end. And I said, boys, one of you is going to have to play with me. And literally one walks back with his head down dragging his racquet. And I’m like, oh my God. Like where are we? Grade two? And yeah, like just turns out that after the first game my doubles partner turns to me, he’s like, I’m glad I’m up your end. I went, yeah, righto. And then there’s no problem, see, everything goes back to normal and then you’re included. So it’s a matter of proving yourself as a female before they will accept you.”

“It’s harder for... it’s harder for women to be coaches generally but particularly in that [tennis] community. I think it is harder that there’s a lot of sexism, I think, towards female tennis coaches and a lot of... the belief is that the males are better coaches because they’re better hitters, not necessarily that they’re better coaches. So yeah, I think it’s hard for gay women to coach sometimes.”

2. Barriers and challenges

The second theme for the LGBT+ tennis players concerns the barriers and challenges faced by LGBT+ communities in tennis. These are important findings for Tennis Australia because they explain the reasons why players may be reluctant to engage with tennis, or to continue participating. For the purposes of this report we have broken the barriers and challenges into separate but interrelated themes: being out and public conversations, social isolation, sexual identity management and lack of institutional support. Participants also reflected on the time commitment to play tennis.

2.1 Being out and public conversations

Being out or being open is a challenging and ongoing issue for many participants we spoke to. They spoke about feeling comfortable to speak openly about their sexuality and gender identity in LGBT+ spaces, but reported feeling the opposite (discomfort), in non-LGBT+ spaces. For example, a participant discussed that when socialising in mainstream clubs, for example after matches, dominate heteronormative cultures and conversations reinforced feelings of difference.

“The problem with playing in like normal mainstream clubs is that afterwards when you’re kind of sharing pizza at the end of the competition, you end up talking to people about their kids, or there’s not necessarily that level of commonality. And I think it’s not necessarily that it’s a safe space about being free from discrimination, or being ... even just feeling comfortable, it’s actually about feeling comfortable to be able to talk about issues that are relevant. And I think that’s still the thing that a place like this has, you can come down and talk to people about things other than children and ex-wives.”

As the participant above outlines, many LGBT+ players identified the need for safe and affirming spaces like LGBT+ clubs, so that they feel there is a common interest and point of discussion in social settings. Another sentiment discussed by some participants was the need for public conversations around LGBT+ inclusion:

“It would be nice if there was more public discussion in tennis, not in a pedagogic way, you know not that we are going to make sure that we are LGBT inclusive, ... but I mean in a business as usual way, that there are gay people in this sport, and some might choose to mention it and some might not. And if they do then that’s part of life, that’s just business as usual. And that obviously has to be a ground swell, it has to build over time. But it really is lacking at the moment. And again, if you compare it to other sports, I mean tennis is a bit behind.”

For many older, gay male participants, the idea of coming out and being out, was associated with painful and traumatic memories of homophobia. Even today, for some gay men, coming out is still not an option they feel they can consider:

“So we’re talking about the kids in high school that are coming out, which still blows my mind when I think about that, because coming out at my high school was a one way trip to the I.C.U. And I wish that was an exaggeration, because I saw it happen.”

Participants reported how important it is not to make assumptions about someone’s sexuality or gender identity and their ‘coming out experience’ for those whom have come to play tennis. Through reflecting on their own experiences, and that of others, they described the personal and social impact of being out in public and sporting circles. Whilst everyone has their own journey of coming out, for some it can be a painful and traumatic experience. As a consequence, participants discussed that all clubs and members need to have greater sensitivities when engaging with LGBT+ players. The following quotes speak to this point:

“You have to be very, very, very careful. You don’t know what people are going through, you don’t know what experiences they’ve had, you know, even in my own family. My sister’s partner’s daughter has just come out as a lesbian and her mother threw her out, and in this day and age. This is in Auckland. Now they’ve both been to counselling and now they’re sort of back together. So you can’t make any assumptions. You have to ensure that young people who are finding themselves in terms of their sexuality feel safe and if they don’t feel safe, they need support. They need friends and they need, you know, family. And well, this is who they are, you can’t give them a call or change the way they feel, this is who they are internally. Mentally, physically, spiritually, that’s who they are. They have to be able to live in a world and feel safe to do so. And that’s, that’s my opinion.”

“In my generation I think it’s just expected. I think people, younger people today would probably just expect to be out and proud and open, but that’s not the background that I came from.”

“But in the city some people may feel a bit intimidated going to a tennis club, let’s say they might not feel like they can be themselves, they might not have people they can really socialise with.”

“It’s more an attitude change, it’s an attitude change. They have to be aware that some people don’t talk about the children’s school issues or that kind of stuff when they’re socialising, they might want to talk about other things or it’s like straight people not wanting to hear about Freddy and his mate went to the drag show the other night and had a good time or the underwear party, or that kind of stuff, which they talk about at our club without any problem. So it’s that social interaction and attitudes is one thing.”

2.2 Social isolation

Many participants reported feeling socially isolated. Unfortunately, feelings of social isolation for those who identify as LGBT+ remain common, with many experiencing emotional isolation from their family, friends and workplaces. Some participants did not have access to LGBT+ specific information, LGBT+ role models or support when younger. Rather, much of the information they were exposed to was negative and at times harmful:

Because isolation is the biggest problem in our community, and this is the thing. People say, ‘Why do you still need an LGBTI group?’ It’s because like any community, you want to form communities within communities and ours is as very important one because isolation is a killer. And we were isolated because we thought no one would love us or care about us or everyone would reject us because we were gay and that’s almost part of our DNA and that’s part of our culture, which we have to change.

A positive finding of this research, however, was that some players felt they overcame feelings of loneliness, rejection and seclusion by joining a tennis club where they were able to meet new friends:

“I wanted to participate, and I wanted to meet people and that’s how I started. It wasn’t easy. As I said, three months, I’d come home every day and my partner would say to me, “Did you make any friends?” and I’m like, “Not yet.” Really it was like that because it’s hard to break into a club and I think that’s where a lot of people fall over because they come in, or they’ll say it’s cliquey, but it’s not cliquey, you just don’t know anyone. It’s easy to look at a group of friends and say, “They’re a clique,” but it’s just because you’re not their friend. But you’ve got to go in – do you know what I mean? So that’s how I started playing. Just meeting new friends and not feeling so isolated as I was feeling.”

2.3 Sexual identity management

Gay men especially, often feel the need to hide or manage their sexuality in public spaces. Exclusion and discrimination both in the wider community and the workplace contributes to negative health outcomes for LGBT+ communities. Sexual identity management refers to the mechanisms people employ to cope with and manage environments not perceived as inclusive. In this way, people make active decisions regarding their disclosure of their sexual or gender identity. For some participants consciously deciding not to reveal their sexual orientation for fear of being ‘exposed’ and/or not being accepted or treated fairly remains a significant issue:

“I think it’s probably, it’s very nerve wracking, obviously, as a gay person to go into like any club.”

“I think a lot of the people who play tennis in clubs down here tend to skew older (in age), and so I wouldn’t go into a clubhouse around here with that as my identifier. I’d hope to get them on side, like get them to like me as a person, and then maybe a few weeks in gently sound out their feelings about gay people, and then once I’d done that, if they’re all OK, then casually mention my husband at some stage.”

"The best way I can describe it is imagine having to make a conscious choice about every word and every action, so before you say anything unconsciously you have to stop and think, how is this going to impact the people around me? And we're doing that every second of the day, depending on who you're with. It's exhausting. And it's a constant reminder that you're not OK, that you're not as good, you're not equal, you're having to debate yourself all the time, for something that's not your choice, but that's just the way things are. It's exhausting, and wearying, and just a constant reminder that you're not as good as everyone else. And you don't deserve what everyone else deserves."

"And then for example, like if you're playing with a straight man, being a gay man, and then you play with a straight man, sometimes I've heard my friends who play in straight comps kind of, that eggs them on. Because we subvert ourselves anyway. So we think that we're going to be worse. We think of ourselves as going to be worse than the straight person playing on the courts because they're stronger or something and yet that's often not the case. And so in a way, sometimes respect is built just by playing your best, being your best."

"A lot of our people don't want to be identified as being gay or LGBTQ. I said, when they come into our database they can tick a box that says they don't want their residential address or their email address made available publicly. Our Facebook group is a closed group, they've got to apply before they're let in because we don't want abusers coming in, we don't want people coming in who might identify someone as being gay who doesn't want to be identified as being gay. There's all these sorts of privacy considerations that just aren't there in the general community clubs and may leave some of our people vulnerable in the pipeline, not everyone."

"When you go to a safe space, it might not be any different from that other group, but the fact that it's there, you can let your guard down and relax and it's just – it is a lot more – if you have those stresses internally, yeah, it's going to be a huge relief just being able to relax and that's massive."

"I go down and play with my husband, and when we're playing at [tennis club], we probably are, I mean not that we're incredibly ridiculously out and campy, ridiculous is the wrong word to have used there, but we're not extroverted in the way that we play. We tend to just go and hit a ball and be fairly muted, and we certainly wouldn't touch each other at the change of ends, or anything, or express any affection towards each other whatsoever, we're just two people playing tennis, and we go and play, and then we go home."

However, some trans women highlighted the complexities of identity management and passing (conforming to social expectations and norms of traditional gender appearance). For some trans women, passing was not an option:

"Trans people, especially those of us that transitioned late in life, we don't always appear the way we want to, and therefore we've got a big sign on us, we stand out, and therefore we don't blend in. I walk into a room, everybody knows. Not one word has been said. Everybody just picks up on it, they know. Therefore, safe spaces for trans people is probably more important because we don't fit in always."

2.4 Institutional support

An important issue observed by the researchers was a perceived mismatch between the expectations around what an "inclusive tennis club" looks like and the reality of being a player in that club. For example, one participant reported a lack of policy enactment, and the mismatch between institutional practices and behaviours. In other words, the club claimed to be inclusive and accepting, without actively enacting those LGBT+ inclusive values in its day to day practices.

"If the clubs sit down and say, 'Yes we are accepting and feel free to relax and be yourself,' there are people that will do that and it will be helpful for them, yes 100%. There still will be those that are cautious and therefore who knows. But at the same time, and this is one thing I sit down, is the club that says, 'Yes we are accepting,' all this, to me, that's words on paper. The actions of the members speak louder than those words on a piece of paper."

This reflects wider issues related to sports governance. Institutional support from the local club to the national level was a key driver for the lack of participation within tennis. Participants noted that whilst Tennis Australia promoted an overall inclusive image and celebration of LGBT+ diversity, at a local club level it was felt that this could be improved.

"I work particularly with Tennis Victoria on a day-to-day basis, like a week-to-week basis with the events, particularly with the women's stuff, they throw enormous amounts of resources into it. And they're really supportive. They send people to our events, they're amazing. So I don't see what more they have to do. I think they're amazing."

"I think from a high level ... yeah. I think from a high level perspective they're quite supportive of LGBTQI+. But I think maybe from a club level they could probably be more involved. And maybe it's a tennis big thing, but maybe they could be a little bit more involved, so that there is growth, or progress."

2.5 Time constraints

The final barrier to participation in sport that was identified relates to time constraints of playing tennis. Whilst not an isolated issue for LGBT+ communities, it remained a significant inhibitor to players, and therefore worth of consideration in this report. Some participants highlighted this:

"But yeah obviously like I said, I haven't ever really full gone for it, because I just don't think with my current employment that I'm able to commit to say a full on team sport where you're practicing a couple of times a week, play on weekends. That's not the lifestyle I can lead, unfortunately."

"So I don't play any team sports. So with my work, I usually work a minimum of 50 hours a week. So I'm lucky to get an hour of gym in during the week, each night when I can."

3. Safe spaces

For the purposes of this report a 'safe space' is a physical and metaphorical place where people feel free of judgement or harm to be themselves. A safe space for tennis players, therefore, is a welcoming, supportive and inclusive environment for people from LGBT+ communities to play tennis free of bias, conflict or criticism, as one participant described below.

"I think a safe space is basically a place where you go where everybody is going to accept you. And you go there knowing there will be others there that have issues or whatever and yeah, they're going to accept you, you're going to accept them and you're done with it, and there is none of this putting people down or anything. You're all there, you're all unique, let's just go and be friendly. And that's I think what the safe space is all about. And therefore in that regard, the tennis club fits that."

The concept of safe spaces was particularly important for people within the trans community. One trans participant claimed the LGBT+ tennis club as their safe space.

"The tennis club is basically my safe space. But the thing is I think being trans is also different than the LGB in that whether you're gay male, lesbian, bi, you can be out with – if you're male you can be out with a male friend and people just think two guys. You could be two straight guys, you could be two gay guys, you could be one of each. You're just friends and you're out in public and nobody thinks twice, unless there's some PDA happening you're just two people. Therefore, safe spaces for trans people is probably more important because we don't fit in always. But I know this and therefore it's, for me personally, it's not been an issue."

I get out there and I own it. This is me and I get out there and enjoy it and you get comments, you get – but that's part of it. And personally, the way I look at it, for those few comments and things that happen, I would rather that than be hidden. So yeah, life is full of ups and downs, those are my downs. But if those are the only downs that I've got I'm miles ahead of where I used to be and yeah, I'm happy."

Discussion about safe spaces elicited commentary on the role of tennis in creating acceptance and inclusion, what constituted meaningful signs/symbols for LGBT+ communities, LGBT+ Tennis Clubs vs Mainstream clubs, and safe spaces other than clubs and bars and Safe spaces for trans people.

3.1 Acceptance and inclusion

The extent to which LGBT+ players perceived acceptance and inclusion in their tennis clubs was discussed at length by the participants. Many felt that they were aware of the general acceptance and gay friendly nature of tennis in Australia which made playing tennis and engagement with a tennis club a safe space for them.

"The more I met people the more I become kind of connected, and kind of got to know people, and I felt very accepted right from the beginning. And it just keeps on kind of getting better and better and better. And it's amazing. It's really important part of my life now, this club."

"And you know it makes me feel really fantastic, because they're coming down, knowing this is a gay club, having no problem with it, because of course, diversities are of age, we're very inclusive, it's about just being kind and having fun, and playing tennis, and being kind of social. And that's what [LGBT+ tennis club] does so well. And people can have fun, and they can enjoy themselves, and have really competitive tennis when you want, but you can also just, you can just be yourself. And that is ... and I love the fact that introducing some people to this club and they've kind of stuck with it, because there's obviously something special about the vibe here."

One of the contributing factors to the success of tennis being perceived as an inclusive space for LGBT+ players was the visibility of well-known and iconic symbols such as the rainbow flag. The rainbow flag symbolises inclusivity, solidarity and strength. First flown in 1978, it is now recognised as a worldwide symbol that encapsulates positive feelings for LGBT+ communities.

3.2 Rainbow flags – a visible symbol

Symbols such as the rainbow flag visibility at LGBT+ tennis tournaments were discussed by participants. They reflected on how the visibility of the flag at both LGBT+ and mainstream clubs signified that the club was a safe space. The symbolism of the rainbow flag is discussed below because of their use in navigating social and physical spaces that are safe in and outside of sport.

"They need to make it obvious, it can't be subtle, it can't be ... yeah, of course we accept everyone. It has to be a rainbow flag, or a statement, or something, because we still assume that we're not accepted unless we're told otherwise."

"Visibility has to do a lot of things. And sometimes you look around the cafes and they have a rainbow sticker out the front and you know that you're going to feel safe going in there. So I think if tennis clubs incorporate that as well."

"Rainbow flag, that's why. If I see the rainbow flag anywhere then I'll think that they're inclusive. But that's pretty much it."

"Sporting places, if it doesn't have a rainbow flag I will assume that it's not inclusive and it's a place to be in the closet. Yeah, that's just ... it just makes you feel safe, this is somewhere that I can go and be me without having to watch every word. I mean I'm a lawyer so if anybody is homophobic against me I will stand up and very firmly defend my position, but that's uncomfortable. And when you're playing a sport you want to be there to have fun and enjoy yourself, and not feel, you don't want life to intrude. And I think without the rainbow flag there there's always the possibility of that happening. Another thing else, I think the rainbow means that the club will hold people accountable for their actions. Well without it, you don't necessarily, but if somebody comes up and says something that you have any protection or support or help from the club."

3.3 LGBT+ Tennis Clubs vs Mainstream clubs

In our research, we asked participants to reflect on their experiences of playing in either an LGBT+ (sometimes referred to as a queer club by some participants) club or a mainstream club. The insights that follow suggest that for some participants LGBT+/queer clubs were the preferred safe space because that is where they can play without feeling judged.

"It was an absolute choice to be part of the queer inclusive club. When I moved to Sydney I was determined to be out, I was doing Law at [a Sydney university], where I was not out, and didn't feel comfortable being out, and I wanted an outlet that I could be entirely open in, and so joining a queer club was the one thing that would enable that."

"I think they choose a queer club just because they can play without judgement and have a lot of fun."

"Initially I've gone into like a queer tennis club, because I wanted to get ... like I'd taken a lot time off playing tennis, so I wanted to get back into tennis without the commitment of like signing up to a season, or a membership, or anything like that, so I wanted a one off thing. But then to add to that, if there was like that wanting, inclusion, and like to be able to relate to other people, that sort of element. So I think if I want to compete I'd tend to just go to a club or just sign up for any kind of tournament. But if it's a little bit deeper than that then I'll look for something queer."

Overall however, participants reflected that the decision to choose a mainstream or non-queer club can be based on a number of considerations. These included physical proximity to their place of residence, tennis standards, friendship groups, levels of acceptance and a sense of community. Due to wanting to play high quality tennis, some LGBT+ players chose non-queer clubs, as they felt the standard of play was higher and more aligned with their skill level.

"The stronger players will tend to head towards the mainstream clubs, because of the fact that the level of tennis that they're getting there may be of a higher standard, and more consistent, and that's something that I've only just recently come back on as president, and something that I've become very conscious of, to try and develop to retain our stronger members."

"I know gay people that do play in the mainstream club. Distance is an issue, a barrier. They have their own friends that they've grown up with. I think that's a big thing, if you've played from a young age and you have a whole network and you want to come to [tennis club], there's quite a few people that continue to play with their networks and established relationships. Maybe finding new ones was not necessary for them, not worth the drive."

"If you don't know what's on people's minds when you go to a mainstream club, you're probably assuming that 40% are not going to accept you and do you continue to own it when you're there, or do you play at an LGBT club where you don't even have to think about that? It probably depends on how seriously you take your tennis and the quality of your tennis. If it's strong at a place but you can't be yourself there, you might still go there because you really want to play tennis. But if you're really looking for a community and that type of thing, and for a place to really escape hiding or judgement, then you'd probably choose [tennis club]."

The excerpts from participants above highlight how navigating one's tennis spaces and also one's sexual orientation is always ongoing.

3.4 Safe spaces other than clubs and bars

For LGBT+ communities, many participants recounted how playing tennis was a safe space for them. It was identified as one of the only places where they could be themselves that did not involve alcohol. This becomes an important theme, as many participants recounted that they enjoyed being part of tennis because it was a safe space, but it also encouraged/promoted physical activity and living a healthy lifestyle.

"I used to, I think [LGBT+ tennis club] is a place where you don't have to really worry about too many societal judgements, beside fears or anything like that. You can see people really at ease, at a place they can truly be themselves. So I definitely, when I started here, I was not out. So it was definitely a place that allowed me to explore that and get comfortable with that. It depends who's around, but there were hilarious people around that were happy to take the piss out of themselves, squeal when they hit a shot, or just be welcoming and joke around, crude jokes or whatever. I think that that is probably why [LGBT+ tennis club] is special to a lot of people, because you don't have a place for that elsewhere, unless you go to a bar or a club."

"But I think it would be a shame if the community didn't have that capability of having a place where they can go and play tennis and socialise together in a safe and friendly atmosphere that doesn't allow them to be identified if they don't wish to be identified as being gay. As I said, over the years we've had a number of people that don't say whether they're gay or not, that's fine by me. We don't test them at the gate. So yeah, it's lovely, it's there to have fun, it's there to destress, it's there to help mitigate the effects of depression and those sorts of things, but we're not a counselling service nor are we a competitive tennis club at this point in time."



3.5 Safe spaces for trans people

For members of the trans community, tennis was especially important to them as a safe space. The trans community spoke at length about the value of feeling accepted within the tennis community. As the follow extracts show, for trans people tennis gives them the freedom to express themselves, without repercussion or discrimination.

"I mean [tennis club] is a safe space and so you can go and relax and enjoy. And especially with trans people, because your transition is going to be worst point because either you're becoming who you want to be, you're not there yet and you're no longer who you used to be. You're in this really awkward – and [tennis club] were very accepting of me, even though – and yeah, I wasn't [affirmed name] yet but I wasn't – yeah. But I mean very accepting and I could still get out and do things and that's probably more of a safe space as opposed to tennis, but it was the fact that I could get out and be physical. And that I think is a healthier, getting healthier, it makes you happier, and it's just going to make you happy all round."

The importance of safe spaces also meant trans people could be physically active and foster healthy and positive relationships with sport and their bodies.

"Growing up I didn't really care about my body at all. I was not really happy and I then – when I became [affirmed name] it was like no, I want to start taking care of myself, I want to start getting fit, I want to start doing all these things. Yeah I'm happy now, I want to take care of myself. So I was looking at sports and trying to get fit and trying to find something that I enjoyed. Same thing with tennis, I went down and I gave it a try. I mean the one thing about [LGBT+ tennis club] is their social tennis is probably more social than tennis. Absolutely brilliant, loved it. And I've been there for, I don't know how many years, not taking tennis serious but just enjoying the atmosphere but you're getting out and you're hitting it and the overall, everything I enjoyed so I kept coming back."

4. Benefits

This section of the report focuses on the benefits of tennis to the participants involved within tennis clubs, primarily LGBT+ tennis clubs. Participants spoke favourably about their positive relationship with tennis, with the following themes emerging: community and club culture, being able to be your authentic self, mental health benefits for all life stages, and finally social connection. At the end of this section, a case study of the GTLA tournaments has been included to illustrate the benefits to participants.

4.1 Community and club culture

A sport club plays an important role in any community. Sport clubs create environments where people can learn new skills, as well as build social capital to further personal relationships. For LGBT+ communities, an additional benefit of being in a tennis club setting was that they felt that they were surrounded by people with a shared interest, which led to feelings of belonging and feeling included.

"I feel like a straight sports club offers a certain type of community, like you're all brothers in arms pretty much. I definitely feel a gay one does the same, or would do the same, because we all want to be a part of something, so if we don't feel like we can be a part of the party scene or whatever scene, then a sports team is where you look."

"It's a social club for a lot of different gay sporting clubs as well, you know it is a point of connection, it is actually a kind of a central part of our community, in Perth City. And it would be a tragedy if this club closed down, because you'd never get it back again. I mean that's the thing, you've got to hold on to it."

"What's fantastic about [tennis club] is that they have their own – they're able to manage their own facility, which is – and I think that's, when you talk about how you were welcomed there and it's because they manage their own facility."

"They're there all the time. It creates a real family type environment. Sydney and Melbourne we don't have that luxury unfortunately. Look, I'm not saying it couldn't happen. Maybe that's just my mindset, but certainly I look at [tennis club] and I think they've got this amazing family culture."

"I think feeling like you belong to something is a really big deal. And I think inclusion is huge. I think that there is so much diversity in the world, and I think it's really important to feel like you belong to something. And whether it's, I don't know, some sort of ... any sort of like group really, if that's where you feel comfortable and where you feel welcomed and belong."

"Being part of the [tennis] club has changed my perception of the suburb that I live in. I had just assumed that [tennis club] and that whole area, retirees, older, would be really homophobic, and I would absolutely not be accepted."

"Yet the people there, the straight people have been so fantastic. Like we're friends with them now, they ask me how [partner's name] is, it's just it's changed my perception of the entire area, because the tennis club was so accepting. And even the fact that they allow us to play, but even more than that, they involve us in more than just that 10.00 'till 12.00 on a Sunday thing, they involve us in all of the events, all of the socials, everything, the competitions, it's not just we'll put up with you for two hours."

"And like I said before, they come here to play, they're so comfortable with this world and our lives, and I think that's absolutely changed. And it's also made me feel more comfortable about being out in Hobart. 'Cause, that was our first really "gay" thing to do in Hobart, to be part of that. So yeah, tennis has really made a difference there."

Participants also noted the importance of the 'social element' that can come with being part of or associated with a tennis club. This demonstrated to the researchers how local tennis clubs were considered much more than a space to 'just play tennis'. As one participant outlines:

"Sundowner basically is – [tennis club] does them. What they did is they would take a couple of nets down on the courts, get a DJ in, get some big speakers, and you basically have a nightclub under the stars and they'd open the bar, they'd do all this stuff. And I mean on a tennis club that has an annual membership of between 60 and 80, to have 300 people at a – it's open and the general public comes in and it's just a big party. We use it as fundraising for doing stuff but it is, it's just a big party and you get out and you can have a dance and in the summer, after the sun's gone down, it's nice but it's still warm in Perth. It's just brilliant and you get to be outside and having a party, you chat with your friends and it's just an absolute brilliant night. Everyone loves them."

4.2 Being your authentic self

For many of the participants they often felt that their lives outside of tennis did not reflect their inner authentic selves. For some, the idea of being themselves in other areas of their lives (family, workplaces) caused them a great deal of anxiety, as they tried to manage societies expectations and their own identity. What was pleasing to hear throughout this research were the stories from the participants that spoke about how tennis gave them a sense of freedom where they no longer needed to carefully manage their sexuality or gender identity. Instead they could simply relax and be themselves without fear of prejudice:

"But basically, it's a place where they can be themselves, talk freely socially about what they've been doing during the week and not have to worry about, you know, thinking, what do I tell these people that have got problems with their child at school, or this, that, and the other. So that's more the point."

"To see every, united colours of Benetton, every colour expressed at Tennis Sydney, as part of the community, opened my eyes to the fact that you don't have to fit a certain box, you can be whoever you want to be, and you're still in the club, and you're still loved, and you're still accepted. And tennis to me was the area where I got that awareness that I didn't have to change, I could just be me. Yeah. So I felt like being part of the [tennis] community, I wouldn't be the person I am."

4.3 Mental health benefits for all life stages

For members of the LGBT+ community, the discrimination that they face living their everyday lives means they have a heightened risk of mental health problems. Our research highlights the positive effects of playing tennis on players' mental health. This included improving mood, reducing stress and depression, boosting self-confidence and the antidote to abusing alcohol and other drugs. Overall, the findings of our research clearly indicate a strong correlation between playing tennis and the improvement of one's mental health, as shown in the following excerpts.

"But I loved the healthy aspect of tennis, it's outdoors, it's energetic, it's a friendly sort of game. It's one of the best sports I think there is. I did play squash seriously up until I was in my late 40s. When squash became a little bit harder for me, and as I got older I put on weight of course, and I can still run around the tennis court, I can still, you know, feel really good after a game of tennis. And that's the physical side of it, but the mental side's really good too, you know, you do meet a lot of nice people."

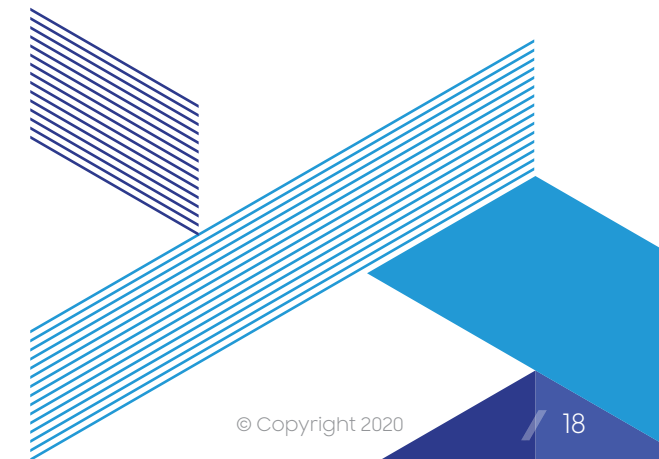
"And we just have to be aware that some people in the community are more at risk to things like depression and therefore possibly suicidal tendencies. We've had a few members Facebook pages go down that path lately and I've said, why aren't you here playing tennis having a chat with us and socialising? It's interesting. You don't see them for a few weeks and then you see a Facebook post like that and you think, has he just broken up with his boyfriend or whatever the story is. And we can be more supportive like that if they come to tennis. We've got to encourage them to keep coming along. We do have a member, a committee member who's been through a breakup after a long-term relationship and having a rough time with it but he comes along to tennis. Not real happy with his tennis at the moment but he comes along still and has a bash."

"We promote it as being good psychologically from a stress and depression point of view. We have a number of regulars that come along that are going through relationship break ups at the moment and they find that being able to come along and play tennis on Tuesday nights helps that."

"He's had all sorts of alcohol and drug abuse issues and stuff like that and it's obviously had some long term effects but he comes every time. Never makes an excuse. He has the biggest barriers to inclusion than anyone, but he's the one who's there most."

"It kinda releases my anger, yeah. It helps me release my emotions. It kinda, for a split second I kinda forget everything. Just playing tennis and enjoying it. Like, when I'm playing tennis it kinda of gets rid of my intrusive thoughts. When you're hitting a ball you can't think about how lonely you are, you just think you're hitting a ball. You know, it takes your mind off it. And obviously it releases serotonin, you know, you don't have time to think about your problems. You're out there, you're hitting a ball."

"I think there's people who are – where they're trying to compensate for something else in their life. They may be getting over some addiction stuff. There are some people who are running away from stuff. And there are people who are just community minded I think. So I think there's a range of reasons why they play."



Sport Australia last year launched a program to encourage sport and physical activity for senior members of the Australian community to enhance their wellbeing – both physical and mental. Our research found that tennis played a vital role in the health and wellbeing of senior citizens across LGBT+ communities. Older members of clubs discussed how tennis offered them an opportunity to keep physically active, maintain social relationships and connections with others improving their mental health:

“And so for quite a few years, well I’ve been retired three and a half now, that was the first thing in my diary for the week ahead, you know. Wednesday’s tennis, Saturday’s tennis. And of course when competition’s on, I’ve always played competition, that’s another night of the week. You know, so there’s three where I’m going to be interacting with people, there’s three nights. And it’s quite difficult in Hobart, you know, during the second half of winter. I mean you really don’t want to go out because it’s dark and it’s cold but you’ve got tennis so you go. You know, and I don’t, if I didn’t have tennis I don’t know what I would have done, you know, because I would have just become a hermit. I wouldn’t get the sunshine that I need, probably.”

“It’s physical, it’s technical, it’s intellectual, it’s emotional, it’s got the fashion. I think it’s such a great sport because of periods of high intensity and then you’re doing nothing in-between the points, so that then brings in the mental and emotional side into it. You know periods, strong exertion for 30 seconds, then nothing, then strong exertion for 30 seconds, you know that just plays with your mind. And watching it when you can see a match turn when you can see the emotions turn. So I think it’s just an absolute art form. Yeah. And the fashions.”

4.4 Social connections

Social relationships are integral to building social capital and have been shown to be a key factor in positive mental health outcomes. These social connections not only make someone feel more included in their community, but also, connect them with others who can provide the necessary support and/or connect individuals with health and well-being providers.

One participant at a LGBT+ tennis club spoke about the positive role of the club on those who may be disenfranchised.

“We have a member who plays with us and he is one of the first people to sign up to every tournament and he comes to every event, he plays every season of comp. He’s there early, he comes to every Sunday social, he’s the most common person. Now he’s had a lot of drug and alcohol issues in the past and he probably is not someone who is very eloquent or very educated. I’m not sure what he does for a living but his payments are paid through – so I think someone manages his finances for him. So he’s my favourite person at [tennis club] and he’s the person that if someone said to me, “Who do you do it for?” it’s like him, because he’s the least privileged but he’s the most appreciative and he’s the person who participates most. Because for me it’s for all about I really want people to participate, I really want people to play, and for me, he is the ideal because he never makes excuses. He never has – there are no barriers for him.”

Many participants also reported the benefits of having friends, feeling connected and establishing respectful relationships in a strong community of practice.

“The feeling I get every time I come here to play social, is like it’s so nice and friendly, and it’s just like having a hit with friends. So I love that.”

“It’s that connection isn’t it? Yeah, connection in kind of in life and experience, and what’s the day to day.”

“I think in this sort of world, in like the queer tennis space, you tend to develop deeper relationships with people, and I think a lot of it is just you can relate to people, and a lot of like-minded people as well. I think on the other side it’s just purely for tennis, I think that’s where the difference is.”

“I’m really proud of two things. The group in general, because they’re just such a good bunch of people, like they’re so respectful of one another. And I love seeing people who have never met really connect, like there are so many friendships that have formed from that group. And it’s so fresh, it’s so new.”

“I knew it was a gay lesbian tennis club, and I was a bit hesitant. I don’t know anybody. No, come down here, you’ll be fine. When we first had a club here, we had two entrances. The one you came in through, there was another one just on the other side. And you come down those steps and turn the corner, and look at the big veranda. It’s full of people, and it can be quite confronting sometimes as well, particularly for people who are only just coming out, or are still closeted in the community. But it was incredibly welcoming. I remember the first game I had on the courts here. You play social tennis for 20 minutes with just members of the club and at the conclusion of the sets, this bell rings, and everybody goes up to thank each other. And unlike any other club where you go and shake the hands of your opponent, you go up and give your opponent a hug and a kiss.”

As reported above, the trust, openness and reciprocity benefits from social connections are valuable for LGBT+ persons. Without social connection individuals are isolated and social bonds break down at the communal level. One participant described the importance of tennis in his transition to retirement.

“No, very important part of my social life. In actual fact, it’s one of the things that helped me transition to retirement, that I would still be going to play tennis. Because I was really quite worried about retiring, I love my work. I’m friends with, a very good friend of mine whose partner then died, and she’d been wanting me to retire for a long time and after she died she said, I’ve left you some money and now you have to retire. So I retired but I was terrified of what I was going to do so tennis helped me through that. And I volunteer, I volunteer as a gardener through a council programme. But tennis was the main thing because there’s people, you know, and people invite you back home and, you know, you can have a causal hit. That’s the beauty of our courts, we’ve all got keys to the court, you can have a casual hit with someone or you can have, we have, you know, set up, we have fixed social nights of Wednesday and all day Saturday and there’s another group who play on Sundays, you can go to that if you like. But it certainly helped me into retirement, you know, that I knew that that was going to happen, that was Wednesday night.”

LGBT+ non-tennis players

In addition to interviewing LGBT+ tennis players, we spoke with members across LGBT+ communities who were not actively engaged with tennis. For this cohort we recruited people who had either played tennis previously or were interested in playing again. The insights in the following section offer unique and underexplored understandings about the perceptions of sport, and barriers to participating in tennis. Our analysis of the data collected from these participants reflected the themes found in the LGBT+ tennis player data: Discrimination, Barriers and challenges, and safe spaces.

1. Discrimination

Participation in sport for members of LGBT+ communities often is inhibited by a bad experience in youth. These experiences are often a result of bullying and/or being excluded from a sport or a sport club community. Sport is often associated with heteronormativity, with a long history of homophobia and a culture that excludes LGBT+ people.

“Another barrier would be just, it’s like you didn’t play sport when you were a kid because when you were a kid you just, you go to school every day and you’re just put into situations. But as an adult you kind of have to seek them out yourself. So it’s a lot harder I think joining a team as an adult, unless all your friends are doing it. Going as someone into a team environment is also intimidating because you kind of have to be accepted. It’s all kind of peer pressure again. The sports that I enjoyed playing was basketball with my friends, and then when I was at uni, I played mixed netball with my friends. It was a lot easier going into a team with people you already know rather than seeking out a new experience with not knowing other people.”

For participants who were not engaged in tennis, playing sport was also associated with intimidation – fear of being excluded, of trying something new, and of not being good enough. Our research found that the lived experience of discrimination – feeling out of place in heterosexist white male spaces, being othered, and not made to feel welcome was commonly reported. The homophobic comments made by public figures in tennis were perceived as disappointing, disheartening and damaging to their interest in sport. When asked why they do not engage in playing tennis, participants all spoke to these issues and qualified them with their own lived experience with sport.

“Fear of exclusion, fear of being turned away, negative experiences growing up definitely would have an impact as well. There’s a chance that even though a club might be inclusive these days, they might have been turned away from an experience when they were younger. So, that could also be quite a barrier. And not just exclusion from within tennis itself, but exclusion from within other sports; so, if somebody’s been excluded in other environments, there’s that fear of trying something new and going to a space where they have the chance of being excluded again.”

“I can’t speak for any other gay men, but a lot of us grew up in not very accepting places, in school. We probably got bullied by all the guys who played the sports. So I went to a high school that was very heavily involved in sports. So like football and basketball. All sports. I fucking hated wanting to play, and if I did, if we had to do it in P.E., guaranteed I was going to be stuck playing against the jocks in my year who I hated as well. I was never interested in it. In team sports, I don’t know. I think probably the fear of being in that environment as well. The straight, masculine environment. Especially if you come from a conservative place. You’re not sure how they’ll react.”

“I personally wouldn’t go towards one, that’s just my preference, and a lot of that preference is ... actually probably just stems from a generalisation that a lot of LGBT clubs are white male spaces. They are still dominated by those groups of individuals, and to me, if that perception was going to change, then I’d feel comfortable.”

Our research clearly indicated that some gay men feel intimidated when it comes to having any sort of engagement with sports. This was at its most pronounced when they were discussing joining sports clubs and gyms, where fear of “not knowing what to do” was the main reason for their lack of participation.



“Probably intimidation. Especially going to a gym for the first time, if you’ve never gone before it can be very intimidating to know what you’re supposed to do, what other people are doing. You feel like you’re being judged by other people. And it was the same with me as a kid, not understanding all the rules to sports. Probably I never really wanted to try it because I didn’t get it. And be scared of looking like an idiot. It’s the same reason I never took up surfing, because where I grew up, everybody surfed, but I didn’t like the fact that you had to do it in such a public space. It’s like you couldn’t practice in your backyard being a surfer because you don’t have any waves in your backyard. I think intimidation.”

Additionally, the participants reflected on the hurt caused by the homophobic comments made by Margaret Court. Even though participants acknowledged that Tennis Australia condemned her views, understanding that they do not align with the values of equality, diversity and inclusion, the damage of her statements reinforced their perceptions of sport as being homophobic and a non-inclusive space.

“It’s obviously disappointing to hear any public figure have such a big voice in the community that’s able to be homophobic, and it’s really disheartening to hear that sort of thing from anyone, let alone a sports star. Because, really, sport – as much as you don’t want sport to be political about anything, it is – and when you make statements like that it can be really problematic for the community.”

“I think it’s like, it obviously isolates a lot of people and I’m aware of the damage it’s done, but there’s also a lot of positivity around it as well, especially because it’s in the tennis realm where there’s a lot of big advocates. So Navratilova, Billie Jean King and even just on the Australia level, a lot of our recent top players are lesbians. So they’ve kind of come out and given that discussion point to say that’s not what we want tennis to be about. But obviously very damaging, and it’s a bit disappointing that growing up it was like a proud point to have Margaret Court, the greatest tennis player ever, and Australian, and kind of idolised her growing up for her greatness, and now she’s like a huge homophobe.”

1.1 Sexism

Similar to the players reports, non-tennis players also discussed with the researchers how sexist behaviour, and attitudes that are discriminatory, impact their perceptions and engagement with sport. Again, similar to the findings of the players, sexism was experienced at its most acute by lesbians, who described the challenges of playing sport in traditional male spaces. Participants also highlighted the need for education (particularly in terms of language) and to replace current conditions that foster stereotypical social roles based on gender.

“I think there’s still a long way to go, particularly like I said before, I’m just involved in women’s football quite a lot. Over the years I’ve experienced a lot of acceptance of all different people within women’s footy. But I’m very aware on the men’s side of football, how that’s still very old school. They even struggle to see women playing football in a lot of places. So I can only imagine the kind of perception, it’s generalisation but I think they struggle to accept anyone that’s different from the traditional men and women and straight people, I suppose.”

“I guess, I’m pretty lucky to come from a football club that’s been a woman’s football club from day one. So, majority of people on our team are queer or identify that way. Yeah, I can tell that there’s clubs that will accept, and there’s club that won’t accept.”

“Ensuring that there’s education within clubs so that correct terms are used and acknowledgement that there are clubs that will have people who have been around a long time and need to be taught some things that maybe the younger generation just take for granted as what ... the way it is. Yeah, I’d say education is probably the biggest thing for clubs.”

Addressing sexism is a key challenge for the sport sector as a whole. However, tennis has a unique opportunity as it is one sport where people play together regardless of gender, and competition and social play (at the community level) are most often based around ability.

2. Barriers and challenges

The second theme in this section of the report identifies the barriers and challenges that prevented participants from engaging with tennis: acceptance and inclusion, self-confidence, sexual identity management, and time constraints.

2.1 Acceptance and inclusion

Our research suggests that in order to motivate LGBT+ people to join a tennis club, not only the visibility of safe spaces and inclusion (all gender bathroom facilities), but also the day to day communication practices (correct pronouns) are essential. In other words, training and education of those responsible for running and managing sports clubs must be made a priority by Tennis Australia to promote inclusion and inclusive practices.

“There’s constant worry about whether or not they’re going to be seen the way they want to be seen, or accepted for who they are. Whereas if you’re in a queer space, you would hope to think that you don’t have to worry about any of those things at all, so they can just enter the space and be themselves completely. So they know that the bathrooms are going to be all gender and they know the person at the desk is going to ask their pronouns correctly and they know the person, no one’s going to say any silly sexist comments to them on the wall. There’s just an expectation of safety in those spaces.”

Some participants also identified that having clearer signage and visibility that acknowledges training of staff and volunteers in inclusivity would be a valued step forward in them reconceptualising sport as a safe space (like a rainbow tick).

“Acknowledgement that maybe the staff have gone through training. There’s a difference between clapping on a rainbow sticker on the club door and actually having staff aware, trained and supportive. Doesn’t mean the sticker accounts for every part of that club.”

2.2 Self confidence

One of the key reasons for not engaging with tennis was a lack of self-confidence in a sport they were not familiar with. Confidence is one of the key mental factors in participation in sport as it illustrates how much someone believes in their own ability. As the following extracts indicate this was a significant inhibitor for non-tennis players as they felt they may be "not good enough" and would embarrass themselves if they signed up to play in a tournament.

"I had a lot of doubts in myself. I think being not the most masculine of men, I was quite shy and not so much embarrassed, but I just didn't feel like I had the courage enough to join in sports. I just, yeah, I don't know. Bullied as a child and then lost that self-confidence to do anything in a team related activity. I used to swim as a kid, but you do that by yourself. In competition that's not a team sport. I just lost the self-confidence and image to participate in anything, group sport wise."

"I think it's just needing that reassurance and I think we don't give that self validation. The last few times I've been on a tennis court I've walked away going that was fun, and I was quite good at it. But would I put myself forward for a game? No. I used to play tennis as a kid, but that was when I was much younger. But now I just feel like if I was in a competition mode or against strangers, I would have a self complex going like oh shit, I'm wasting their time because I'm not good enough for them. But if it's a friendly match against people I knew then it's a completely different mindset."

2.3 Sexual identity management

Similar to the player cohort discussed earlier, there was an element of hesitation associated with joining a sport club they were unfamiliar with, because they would have to manage their sexuality, and self-disclosure in certain sporting spaces. Particularly heightened within sport, the issue of mis-gendering and having others make assumption about ones sexuality or gender identity remained key issues in participants' reluctance to engage with tennis.

"I mean, based on the feedback I've got from participants from my [LGBT+ club], it's the environment. The activity is mostly the same, but it's the fact that they, I guess it's that constant risk assessment that some people within the LGBT community have to do. So they meet someone, they might get misgendered, or they might meet someone else at another point in time and then they might be worried about assumptions."

2.4 Time constraints

Also reported by the player cohort, the issue of time commitment was mentioned when we discussed with non-players the barriers to their participation in tennis. For younger gay men particularly, they recounted that they were eager to develop successful careers and the demands of employment meant little time for leisure. In this regard, one-off or casual type play was appealing according to this male player.

"So I don't play any team sports. So with my work, I usually work a minimum of 50 hours a week. So I'm lucky to get an hour of gym in during the week, each night when I can. So that doesn't really leave much space for team practice or anything. I had thought about it, because I'd thought about sometimes, should I get a hobby, something to do on the weekends? My first thing, I remember I did this a couple of years ago, I went on and looked up Sydney gay sports teams, because hell no was I going to be joining up a straight team,, it's not a very inviting thought, you could say."

3. Safe Spaces

The third and final theme relates to safe spaces for LGBT+ non-tennis players; a central finding of our research was the wish for inclusive spaces for people of all ages, abilities and genders to be able to interact with sport. Additionally, we asked participants about their perceptions and levels of interest with mainstream versus LGBT+ sports clubs. This section concludes with a discussion on the importance of the visibility of LGBT+ events, as an opportunity for Tennis Australia to grow its participation rates across non-playing LGBT+ communities. A visible and safe space for trans and gender diverse people was highlighted by participants as an important area of growth for sport in Australia, as expressed below by one non-binary participant.

"When I was younger, at 11, as I said, I'm 28, so it was a little while ago, there were issues, I had to play on a boys' team. Didn't have a choice, there weren't really female options. The only other option was to play in senior women's, so it was a big jump for an 11 year old to play with grown women and such."

3.1 LGBT+ Clubs vs Mainstream club

Throughout our interviews with non-players, we asked them to reflect on what they perceived as being the difference between LGBT+ (also Queer) and mainstream clubs. Interestingly, when they described their own personal choice to either join a LGBT+ or mainstream club, some participants reported that the safe space was paramount, whereas for others they were not daunted by mainstream club culture.

"But I can see the appeal in having something that's, like I say, a space for individuals, where if you've never felt comfortable playing sport, or you would like to just have likeminded individuals who are also gay being in that same space. I see it, but it's just not really for me."

"I think knowing upfront that you're going to be walking into a welcoming and inclusive place is really important for most people, I would think. I think that if you are unsure about a space that you're about to walk into the room of, and unsure about people's responses, it puts you on edge, it can make you anxious."

"You might not feel comfortable, or you might give yourself a reason not to be there. Whereas if you know upfront before walking into that space that you are going to be welcome, you might know someone there, that that club has reached out to you and provided you with some information so that you can be ready on your feet when you rock up that first time, I think it does make a massive difference. So, putting that label on as a welcoming LGBTQI+ place, does make a difference."

"They might not have approached them to have those conversations about safety, identity, inclusion. And so an LGBTI club is just, that's got everything, that ticks everything that I need, I just need to go, no questions are asked. And I know that will be accommodated as such. Whereas a non-LGBTI club, mainstream club, those conversations can be hard for certain people, especially if they're early in their journey, or even later, they might not just have had a positive experience. And so they don't want to go through that again. Like male clubs, there's a lot of masculinity and that can be toxic for some people in their identity. So going to an LGBTI club is just the easier option, and they know that it's just inclusive, other people will be there, and they just know they can play and be themselves."

3.2 Visibility of LGBT+ events

The term, gay friendly, was used to describe the non-contact nature of playing tennis generally, with one participant referring to it as safe (non-threatening). The importance of ensuring that LGBT+ events are advertised and visible to the public was highlighted by several participants.

"Yeah, I think tennis is gay friendly. I think it's a safer sport for people who may be not comfortable to go to, because there's that space between other people. It's non-contact, it's not threatening, it can be not high intensity. There isn't a lot of different ways. So I think that's probably why it would be more gay friendly. Because people can go into it feeling a bit safer that they're not going to be physically targeted in any way. Like I guess my point, if you're playing water polo or rugby or anything like that, if you had insecurities about your gayness, then you might feel targeted physically."

"I think probably just with what we discussed, perception of how tennis is perceived is a nice, safe environment for people to go. So I guess getting information out there and targeting, like I know that they have sports days and stuff like that as part of midsumma and I can't really remember seeing a tennis one. I don't know if they do or not. Like they potentially have, but there's lots of sporting clubs out there. So that would be one way. And having the structure and the information available."

"I think Fair Day [mardi gras] is a good example of opening it up to everyone. Walking around and having a chat and just seeing what's on offer brings, breaks down the barriers of actually how do you go about joining a club. But to be honest, I don't know how they even join a gay sporting team that wasn't advertised. Where you find anything... but I think just making it more inclusive or having more fun open days or something."



Case Study: GLTA Tournaments

The GLTA (Gay Lesbian Tennis Association) worldwide tournaments created a wonderful opportunity for tennis players to compete at all levels, with a lot of entertainment and socialising occurring between matches. From our observations and interviews with players participating in the GLTA tournaments, the overall feeling was that they were a family (and dog friendly) inclusive space. The international component of the tournament was described as an exciting benefit which allowed for a global community of practice of LGBT + tennis players to grow and be nurtured.

At each of the tournaments across different cities, and at the Glam Slam (final major GLTA tournament in a series of events in January), there was a buzz and sense of camaraderie amongst players. Overall, participants reported the experience of being involved in these international tournaments as both positive and beneficial, with the added benefit of encouraging wider participation (partners etc.) amongst LGBT+ people.

The following comments demonstrate the positive impact the GLTA tournaments had on people.

Well I think it's important as a way to encourage people who maybe are unsure of their ability, maybe unsure of participating communally, that you can do it at whatever tennis ability you are, whatever age you are, whoever you are. Because, this tournament is actually inclusive to everybody. No-one knows or cares who you are, you're ... it's inclusive by definition. And I see that both in personal terms and in sporting terms, that no-one cares how bad your tennis is, or how good your tennis is, everyone is here encouraging the young blokes, or really good tennis players, and others who are not strong tennis players, that no-one comments on that, so you are actually welcome if you're a complete beginning at tennis, and although that can be important for everybody I think in LGBT terms it really carries extra weight in terms of valuing you for who you are, what you bring.

Part of the beauty of the GLTA is that it allows you to do more than one thing at once. You can play tennis, and you can meet people, and you can travel. So if you're going on an overseas holiday why not organise two or three days of tennis at the same time? And that's very attractive to older people who may have money, may be retired, may want to go some wineries, go and eat some lovely cheese, go to some art galleries, play a bit of tennis.

So positive things, I have a full committee, I have a full tournament committee, I have a social committee, I have an active... previously the club was run by one person purely on a cash basis. No accountability for money. He kept it in a box at home. We've tidied all that up, we've affiliated with GLTA so we can run tournaments, we're affiliated with TQ so we can participate in some of the Tennis Australia and Tennis Queensland activities. But there's still a long way to go with those yet, from our perspective.

In summary, it is clear that belonging to a tennis club provided participants with a strong sense of community filled with meaningful, pleasurable, and respectful social connections.

These social connections are important for LGBT+ persons to build their community networks. The comments participants provided about safe spaces for trans people in particular, highlight the important role tennis can play in promoting good mental health and wellbeing. Trans participants associated belonging to a tennis club with acceptance, health and happiness.

Additionally, this report shows that the mental health benefits for people throughout all life stages were reported by participants, ranging from young to more senior players who were no longer working full time. They talked about feeling loved and accepted, freedom to be their authentic selves and not having to worry about managing their sexual identity.

Many participants reported feeling they could be whoever they wanted and still be in the club, which was a huge boost to their self-confidence.

Discussion



In the previous section, the results of the research - the key themes emerging from the data - were presented. Based on that information, we discuss what this means for Tennis Australia in developing their LGBT+ inclusion portfolio, by providing a summary in response to the original research questions.

Our analysis of the results from LGBT+ people who do and do not play tennis, shows significant potential and promise to positively impact the health and wellbeing of LGBT+ people in Australia. For those who play tennis, predominately in safe spaces in LGBT+ tennis clubs, the opportunity to play tennis and be themselves, whilst creating meaningful friendships and connections, is a primary motivation and outcome.

In drawing the results and discussion together, we present a synthesis of the key answers to the research questions and aims. Highlighted below are observations of the data from both cohorts, as starting points for discussion.

LGBT+ Tennis Players

- 1 LGBT+ tennis clubs which have a high proportion of gay male tennis players were often viewed as less inclusive by cis-gender women and trans women. Promoting a greater gender balance amongst these clubs would be helpful, but as many participants highlighted, it can be challenging for volunteers. Some additional help in promoting gender diversity would be helpful in this regard.
- 2 Many of the women we spoke to discussed experiences of sexism in both LGBT+ spaces and mainstream spaces, and felt like an add on to club activities rather than being part of, and embedded within the club. Attracting more women from LGBT+ communities will be a key challenge, so that they feel included with LGBT+ specific spaces, and are represented within leadership positions.
- 3 The marketing and visibility of opportunities, and awareness of LGBT+ specific clubs was highlighted as something that could be improved to increase participation, as many participants had heard through friends or came across the clubs by chance. Having a presence at LGBT+ events such as fair day at Mardi Gras and the Midsumma Carnival, in addition to better marketing to LGBT+ communities in online spaces will be beneficial in attracting more people to tennis.
- 4 Interview data identified an increased desire, and need, from LGBT+ tennis clubs and tournaments for institutional support from tennis governing bodies (including TA and State Sport Associations), to help in facilitating participation and engagement. Resources also need to be directed to the LGBT+ portfolio, both financial and non-financial contributions.
- 5 There was an overall consensus that Tennis Australia in particular should be more vocal and visible in their support of LGBT+ communities, outside and separate to major events like the Australian Open and Glam Slam or media commentary on controversies around homophobia and transphobia.
- 6 Access to tennis courts was mentioned significantly, and LGBT+ tennis clubs spoke about a lack of courts and availability to cater for demand, especially in metropolitan regions. Access to a club facility was also a key challenge, with Perth being the only LGBT+ specific venue/ club with a club house. This had a positive impact on the club and people's experiences, mainly around socialising and hosting events/functions.
- 7 Key differences between those players who play in mainstream clubs and LGBT+ specific clubs were around competition and standard of play. Many gay men played in both LGBT+ specific clubs and mainstream clubs, but acknowledged that they offered different things. When players chose to play in mainstream clubs, the majority spoke to the point of identify management to some degree (of their sexuality) and modifying behaviour and language in these spaces. Those players who were attracted to and played solely in LGBT+ specific clubs and tournaments, did so due to a sense of safety and being able to play in a safe space, to be themselves. The narrative of playing a sport people loved, and the ability to be themselves without fear of judgement or hostility, was constant throughout our interviews.

LGBT+ Non-Tennis Players

8 Across our non-player cohort, participants suggested that tennis was perceived as a 'gay friendly' sport, and the majority of the cohort said they would like to start playing or re-engage, but most likely on a casual basis or part of a structured program or opportunity (like cardio tennis or open court sessions).

9 Many lesbian women conveyed that their love and passion of sport broadly, outweighed the discrimination that they had been subjected to, on the grounds of both sexism and homophobia. However, they were not open about their sexuality until they were in an environment which was inclusive and affirmative to them.

10 Many participants in this cohort highlighted that they had previously enjoyed playing tennis at some point (as a young person or casually with friends), but time required to play was a barrier, and some were drawn to team sports. Research does highlight that gay men are more attracted to individual sports, which is supported by this report identifying an over representation of gay men.

11 Ability was also a factor, and many participants identified that not being good enough or being able to rally would be a barrier, so introductory participation programs and targeted initiatives to help people get back into tennis, and some structured coaching would be helpful. Utilising existing products such as cardio tennis or come and try days, led by coaches, would address this.

In relation to providing answers to our initial research questions, a short summary of responses is presented here.

1. How can TA effectively promote LGBT+ inclusion in Australian Tennis?

- Central to this question is to acknowledge that Tennis Australia and several other SSA have started to promote tennis across LGBT+ communities, through support of GLTA tournaments and the 'Glam Slam.

- Focusing on the grassroots and participation entry level tennis for LGBT+ people is key. With the current LGBT+ specific tennis clubs, and GLTA tournaments, there is an established pathway for advanced and established players to engage in structured playing opportunities and competitions. This could potentially be a barrier for those looking to re-engage with tennis or start playing, if they think they are not good enough or a high enough level to play in these settings. This means promoting and investing in come and try events or established participation programs, and also in player development, so that LGBT+ people feel comfortable to engage in competition via leagues or GLTA tournaments.

- Tennis Australia and the associated SSA should seek to provide institutional support to those clubs and key stakeholders/ volunteers who are engaging with diversity work at the grassroots level. Providing more support with regards to governance and management will be extremely helpful in channelling new members and players into clubs. Several participants informed us that they had never received any training on how to run clubs or attract new members, with the result that they felt as if 'they were making it up as they went along.'

- Clear policy guidelines around TA's commitment to LGBT+ inclusion within their broader diversity and inclusion policy, should be developed and communicated appropriately. For example, clear policy on anti-vilification policy on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics. This means that trans and gender diverse people in particular will feel supported and safe playing tennis. Developing specific policies at the national or local level, should be undertaken in consultation with LGBT+ people, but also driven by the values of the organisation; developing values driven policies will foster safe and affirming spaces for LGBT+ people to play tennis as their authentic selves.

- Further increase TA and SSA presence across LGBT+ communities in Australia and maintain the leader status with Australia. Tennis Australia won the pride in sport award as the most LGBT+ inclusive organisation in 2019, so maintaining the status as a world leading organisation should be a priority, with the intention of seeking to further positively impact the health and wellbeing of LGBT+ people in Australia.

2. How are safe spaces discussed and understood by LGBT+ people in tennis?

- Safe spaces were discussed as a key factor in facilitating participation and engagement amongst LGBT+ people in tennis within Australia, by both the player and non-player cohort.
- Symbols such as the pride flag and visibility were seen as vital in communicating that a club or area was a safe space.
- Spaces that allowed LGBT+ people to be themselves, from fear of judgement and shame, were crucial in maintaining positive experiences for LGBT+ people playing tennis.
- Safe spaces were conceptualised and discussed as both physical and metaphorical, and the culture within tennis clubs is paramount in affirming a club or tennis club as a safe space.
- Participation of LGBT+ people within tennis is highly dependent and correlated with the perception of a safe space; if LGBT+ people do not perceive the club or environment as safe, they will not play. Thus, it is crucial in trying to foster safe spaces across tennis communities in Australia to increase participation for LGBT+ people.

3. What are the barriers to participation and engagement amongst LGBT+ people within the tennis community?

- Sexual identity management: Being out, and the disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity amongst LGBT+ people in both LGBT+ specific and mainstream spaces was a key challenge discussed by a large majority of participants. Having an awareness and understanding about coming out and being out for LGBT+ people is paramount for those working in tennis and tasked with increasing participation and engagement in this demographic. Coming out and being out is different for everybody, and often homophobia and transphobia has an impact on this process, and this needs to be understood by those working in tennis.

✔ For those LGBT+ people outside of major cities and metropolitan areas, being socially and physically isolated was a key barrier. For many LGBT+ people, if they cannot access a LGBT+ specific club, or inclusive and LGBT+ friendly tennis club, then they are unlikely to play. This is especially significant for trans and gender diverse people and older gay and lesbian people who have experiences homophobia across the life course. Finding people to play was also discussed as a challenge, so facilitating people with other people to play, with opportunities to play, especially in non-metropolitan areas.

✔ Time constraints were a barrier for several people because matches and tournaments can take up a lot of time. This is a challenge for most sports too, so adapting or promoting playing models (such as tennis workouts/ cardio tennis/ fast 4 style playing opportunities) to appeal to those players who lack time.

4. What are the benefits of participation and engagement in tennis for LGBT+ people in Australia?

- ✔ Tennis clubs were seen as a safe haven for LGBT+ people, and an opportunity to be themselves with no fear of judgement or hostility.
- ✔ Although physical health benefits were discussed and evident, interviews highlighted the importance of social and mental health benefits of being part of the LGBT+ tennis community, and the importance of establishing strong relationships and ties with other people similar to themselves.
- ✔ Our data strongly indicates the positive impact playing tennis, in supportive environments, has on the health and wellbeing of LGBT+ people in Australia.
- ✔ Mental health was a key benefit for all ages, and especially for those transitioning into retirement or for those individuals who had previously struggled with their sexuality or gender identity.
- ✔ Tennis clubs were seen as an important space away from bars/ clubs and alcohol, which promoted wellness in the LGBT+ community. This was discussed by older gay men in particular, who spoke of the difficulties of meeting other gay men outside of spaces which promote unhealthy habits around alcohol.
- ✔ In promoting and marketing tennis across LGBT+ communities across Australia, the social and health benefits should be central in attracting people to play tennis, especially when a global pandemic has increased social isolation and individuals to be socially disconnected from themselves, families, and their local communities.





Recommendations

1. Understand histories of exclusion

One of the stand out messages from the data in this report is that many participants had early negative experiences of playing sport, and held a strong desire to be able to play and engage with tennis in a safe and affirming environment. Therefore, a key message to those working in tennis and facilitating LGBT+ inclusion, is to understand that those players, especially gay men in particular, do not come to the sport of tennis with a blank canvas, but with negative experiences and emotions such as fear of judgement, lacking confidence, shame and stigma, and poor self-efficacy of their own playing ability (for example that gay people are not good at sports). When promoting tennis to LGBT+ communities and designing participation programs, those working in tennis should educate themselves on the LGBT+ experience in sport.

By engaging with this report, they may gain insight into understanding the barriers for LGBT+ people, and what it might be like for them when they first join a tennis club, or participate in a social program. From an organisational perspective therefore, tennis administrators have two key challenges; firstly, attracting people to sport broadly and addressing prior negative experiences, and then attracting LGBT+ people to the sport of tennis and communicating that it is a safe and welcoming sport, offering opportunities to play tennis in safe spaces across Australia.

2. Increased support to LGBT+ tennis structures in Australia

LGBT+ inclusion in Australian tennis is primarily delivered through a series of structures, which helps facilitate participation for LGBT+ people. These include LGBT+ specific tennis clubs including Tennis Sydney/ Tennis Vic/ Loton Park, GLTA tennis tournaments, and inclusive and LGBT+ friendly mainstream tennis clubs across Australia (for example City Community Tennis Club in Sydney and Tennis World in Melbourne). These mainstream clubs have high numbers of LGBT+ people in these clubs, and were discussed as safe spaces with a good reputation amongst participants.

However, many of the clubs and organisations facilitating the participation of LGBT+ people, expressed the desire for more support and guidance from tennis organisations such as TA and state sport organisations.

This support could be financial, but also in capacity building. Several key people who were volunteers, had never had any training in running a tournament, a club, or trying to attract new members. Increased support from those working in diversity and inclusion in tennis specifically would be beneficial, and connecting coaching staff, participation officers, development managers and so forth, with the key volunteers in clubs and tournaments will offer increased support for those working at the frontline of LGBT+ tennis in Australia.

3. Governance support

Following increased support to LGBT+ clubs and tournaments, support in governance is advised. Governance came up in several interviews, as well as the observational data across several clubs and tournaments. How the LGBT+ clubs and tournaments were organised, especially who ran them, impacted on playing experiences. For example, club politics within LGBT+ communities and the clubs/ tournaments were mentioned in many interviews, and our data showed that there was a need for good governance, and to communicate and demonstrate to the clubs and tournaments what good governance looked like. Ensuring good governance around gender equity is also advised, as many participants highlighted the lack of women in LGBT+ specific tennis clubs.

Additionally, ensuring LGBT+ spaces are fully inclusive of trans and gender diverse people is important, so that they have equal access to safe and affirming tennis spaces. Therefore, we advise TA, member states and territories to provide governance training and support for LGBT+ volunteers and those working to promote tennis amongst LGBT+ communities.

4. Establish a national LGBT+ advisory group

There are many hardworking and committed volunteers working in tennis to promote LGBT+ inclusion across Australia. Bringing these key stakeholders together, to help contribute and develop a strategy for Australian tennis allows for input from LGBT+ tennis communities in Australia.

This national advisory group can help provide important feedback to those working in tennis, and especially in Tennis Australia. The group can include key stakeholders from TA and member states/territories, LGBT+ clubs and tournaments, and represent the diversity of members across the LGBT+ spectrum. Having an advisory group has proved effective for several AFL clubs and their supporter groups, where the official LGBT+ supporter group (for example Rainbow Swans and Purple Bombers) can act as a communication channel between the club and LGBT+ communities.

This will be particularly important for future occasions should a controversy involving a player/administrator occur. Having representation and an opportunity to hear directly from LGBT+ communities in LGBT+ inclusion or homophobia/ transphobia matters will be beneficial to Tennis Australia, the peak organisation for tennis in Australia.

5. Establish a peer support program

Our interviews and observations found that there is an opportunity to help support pathways for LGBT+ people into tennis such as coaching, administration, and volunteering. A peer support and mentoring program can help match LGBT+ people in specific roles, such as coaching/administration and leadership with senior LGBT+ people working in tennis. Matching experienced tournament directors with people supporting GLTA tournaments in Australia, or emerging lesbian coaches with other senior and established lesbian coaches, will allow for increased visibility of LGBT+ people and role models in tennis. A volunteering program or support program could allow for volunteers to help at the Glam Slam for example, to take pressure off the players competing in the tournament.

6. Develop an LGBT+ communication strategy

Once an LGBT+ advisory group has been established, TA could develop a communication strategy to disseminate their work in LGBT+ inclusion, demonstrating how the sport promotes this type of inclusion. Many participants in the non-player cohort commented that they were unsure of what TA does, and that if good work was going on (they won the Pride in Sport Index award), they were unaware of it.

There is substantial evidence for the promotion of LGBT+ inclusion in Australian tennis, which needs to be communicated to the general public, especially to LGBT+ communities. It is important for attracting LGBT+ people to tennis, and informing LGBT+ people about the governing body in tennis and its commitment to the inclusion and safety of LGBT+ people in Australia. Documenting this information on websites, through social media channels, and promoting work through LGBT+ organisations will be beneficial.

7. Develop and adapt entry level participation programs

One of the key findings from interview data and time spent with LGBT+ clubs and tournaments, was that what is offered to the LGBT+ community in Australia is predominately targeted towards established tennis players of a certain level (competition and structured participation). Furthermore, from our observations we noticed that the main playing demographic is older gay men; inviting players to casual and one off playing opportunities will prove appealing to younger audiences.

Attracting new players from LGBT+ communities who might not have played before, or played a long time ago, requires specialised and targeted initiatives such as tennis clinics/workshops/come and try days, to teach them some of the basic skills and techniques. Many participants in the non-player cohort spoke of not being able to play or being afraid to play games or sustain rallies. Targeting entry level programs or re-engagement for people who have not played in a long time, should become a priority. This can be done in a variety of ways, by adapting or hosting specialised programs such as 'All Court Sessions/ Get your Racquet on Campaign, or cardio tennis sessions. Partnering and working with LGBT+ sport organisations will be valuable in reaching LGBT+ communities.

8. Promote the positive social benefits of tennis to LGBT+ communities

One of the most significant findings from this research was the social impact of playing tennis in safe and affirming environments for LGBT+ people.

Specifically, the positive social impact on LGBT+ people was the creation of social networks, support systems in tennis clubs, and meaningful opportunities to foster deep social connections. Many participants spoke of the joy of playing tennis and simply being able to play as their authentic selves without fear of judgment. They described the positive role tennis had on their lives and how being part of a club improved their mental health and social wellbeing.

Post pandemic of COVID-19, tennis is well positioned to combat the current social isolation, disconnection and concerns about health and wellbeing, and assist LGBT+ communities to connect with other people, whilst improving a range of health indicators. For example, moving into retirement, affirming one's gender, international students leaving oppressive laws around LGBT+ rights, helping combat depression and anxiety, are all evidence which demonstrate the beneficial influence tennis has in the lives of LGBT+ people. The evidence of this impressive list of social, psychological and physical health benefits could be used to promote the sport of tennis across Australia.



Conclusion

This report is one of the first examples of Australian research to document the positive impact playing sport, specifically tennis, has on the lives of LGBT+ people. It highlights the importance of fostering social connections, health and wellbeing, and being able to enjoy a hobby without fear of judgement, hostility, or discrimination. The report also offers new insights into how safe spaces are understood and discussed by LGBT+ people, and how those working in tennis can foster safe spaces to attract more LGBT+ people to play and engage with tennis. Visibility is important in this sense, and the rainbow flag was hailed by participants as crucial in communicating that LGBT+ people were welcome and celebrated in tennis spaces. In advancing work to promote LGBT+ inclusion across Australian Tennis and increase participation and engagement, promoting the benefits of social connection and mental health will be crucial.

Tennis is well positioned to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic as an inviting and accessible sport for LGBT+ people; it is an ideal mechanism for reconnecting LGBT+ people with their local communities and other LGBT+ people. Directing resources to support LGBT+ clubs, tournaments and volunteers working to increase participation will help with governance and management issues. Finally, developing participation and entry level programs for LGBT+ people to learn new skills and techniques, will equip people with the confidence to play tennis. We conclude our report with a powerful quote from a participant, highlighting the power of tennis and the impact that playing in an inclusive environment can have on an LGBT+ person.

“Tennis has been fantastic that way. Actually, I’ve got to say, a shout out to [LGBT+ tennis club]. When I came to Sydney I wasn’t ... I was just learning to be OK with my sexuality, I was just coming out for the first time, and to go to a group every week, who were everywhere on the spectrum in terms of openness, flamboyance, life, and every single person was accepting, and wonderful. Like I was freaked out by drag queens when I moved to Sydney, I was freaked out by flamboyant people, I was freaked out by three quarters of the spectrum, because I came from a religious home where I’d never seen any of that. All I’d seen was the Mardi Gras and that was my expectation of what gay people were like. And to see every, united colours of Benetton, every colour expressed at [LGBT+ tennis club], as part of the community, opened my eyes to the fact that you don’t have to fit a certain box, you can be whoever you want to be, and you’re still in the club, and you’re still loved, and you’re still accepted.”

“And tennis to me was the area where I got that awareness that I didn’t have to change, I could just be me.”

In conclusion, Tennis Australia should use its platform and reach to show LGBT+ people in Australia and across the globe, how tennis is a sport where you can be your authentic self, accepted and welcomed for who you are. Just be yourself and play tennis.

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MARGARET COURT A



MELBOURNE

“Tennis Australia is committed to diversity, in particular adult participation, and recognises LGBT+ inclusion as an important area of growth and development.”



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