



What to Expect from Pan/ParaPan Am Games 2015

Address given by Shawn Sheridan, Chair, OutSport Toronto, to the participants in [Pride at Toronto 2015](#), held at HartHouse, University of Toronto, 23 November 2012, as part of the session entitled “What do we expect from the 2015 PanAmerican and Parapan American Games? An ‘early brainstorm’ ”.

Speakers on the panel were:

- *Paul Genest, Deputy Minister, Pan/Parapan American Games Secretariat, Government of Ontario*
- *Luise Lutgens, Senior Vice President, Community and Cultural Affairs, Toronto 2015*
- *Gordon Dunbar, Director, North America, Gay and Lesbian International Sports Association*
- *Clinton Brown, Director, International, Gay and Lesbian International Sports Association*
- *Shawn Sheridan, Chair, OutSport Toronto*
- *Matthew Cutler, Director of Development and Community Engagement, The 519 Church Street Community Centre*

The panel was chaired by Michelle Brownrigg, Director of Physical Activity and Equity, Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education, University of Toronto.

In preparation for this session, panellists were asked to consider three questions:

1. *What is your vision of how the sport world in the Americas, and the communities involved in the 2015 games themselves, can and should be different with respect to LGBTQ issues as a result of the Toronto 2015 Games?*
2. *What challenges do you foresee in being able to achieve that vision?*
3. *What supports do you think will be needed to realize that vision and what would be one or two immediate next steps you would suggest to enable those supports?*

Thank you and good afternoon, everyone. I’m delighted to be here today to address you as one of the co-chairing organisations on behalf of the entire Leadership Team of the PrideHouseTO project.

On May 25th, 2000, at the inaugural Laureus Lifetime Achievement Award, in his speech conferring the award, Nelson Mandela said,

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to unite in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.”

Nelson Mandela probably knows better than any of us how leveraging sport, and the desire to achieve, through fair play, and good sportsmanship, can work miracles in our societies. He used the Rugby World Cup, and South Africa’s pursuit – and eventual win – of it in 1995, to pull together very fractious sides of his country in a common dream, and then realisation of that

dream – of how amazing they could be if they just put aside fear and discrimination, and worked together.

The eyes of the world watched that final match between South Africa and New Zealand, and witnessed a changed South Africa! When the Springboks won, black and white celebrated deliriously together, united for the first time in their history around one cause, and the celebration of achieving it... and sport was the vehicle.

The eyes of the world will be watching Toronto in the summer of 2015, and we have a similar opportunity during, leading up to, and after the Games, to impact the world, and in particular, the Americas. PrideHouseTO's focus of course is on LGBTQ issues and concerns, both within the sport community, and beyond it.

With consultations and working sessions starting back in 2010, various LGBTQ organisations have come together to form a leadership team of organisations to further the project. That group established a "Terms of Reference", which in its preamble outlines the major objectives for PrideHouseTO.

The overarching objective is to achieve an LGBTQ-inclusive experience during, leading up to, and following the Games; something that will resonate and excite an often marginalised segment of society in the world of sport, and welcome the members of that segment into full participation – in the games, and in life.

Now, why is all this important? Well, it comes back to the first of the three questions that Michelle Brownrigg posed regarding this session – what should be different?

We are privileged here in Toronto and Canada. Particularly in Toronto, we enjoy a diverse population and a community that is generally pretty accepting of LGBTQ folks. Pride is one of the biggest parties this city has, and I know it's not just LGBTQ people who are there. There is active participation from MPs, MPPs, and city councillors.

We have the right to marry, to adopt, to receive pension benefits, to openly serve our country in the military, to be free of discrimination and harassment, and the right to be... human, and equal.

Such circumstances are, however, not common throughout the Americas.

In Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, St. Vincent, and Trinidad and Tobago, there are laws criminalising same-sex activity.

Across the other countries of the Americas, only Argentina and Brazil have laws comparable to those in Canada that protect the human rights of LGBTQ people. Some states – such as the United States, Mexico, Uruguay, and Columbia – are moving in the right direction, but are not there yet.

Basic rights such as choosing to marry, adopting children, serving in the military, and being protected in law from discrimination, harassment, violence, and derision based on sexual orientation or gender identity are not afforded to the citizens of far too many countries in the Americas.

Sadly, we don't even have to look outside our own borders to find tragic examples of discrimination and hatred, which tear at our society.

Per the 2009 Egale Canada Climate Survey on Homophobia in schools,

- 59 per cent of LGBTQ high school students reported they were verbally harassed, compared to seven per cent of non-LGBTQ students.
- 25 per cent indicated being physically harassed due to their sexual orientation, compared to eight per cent of non-LGBTQ students.
- 31 per cent of LGBTQ students reported personal harassment on the internet or via text messaging, compared to eight per cent of non-LGBTQ students.
- 73 per cent— three quarters! – reported they felt unsafe at school, compared to 20 per cent of non-LGBTQ students.
- 51 per cent of LGBTQ students reported they did not feel accepted at school, compared to 19 per cent of non-LGBTQ students.

This is what should be different.

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of hearing John Amaechi speak here in Toronto. One of the things he noted was that while he was playing pro basketball, he was never 100% there. He always reserved a portion of his energy to be a buttress against homophobic slurs should they surface during a game or in the locker room.

And this is the case with many athletes and non-athletes alike who identify as LGBTQ.

Until the circumstances I cited earlier are changed, LGBTQ people will continue to live in fear, will hide who they are, and they will not realise – and society will not benefit from – their full potential. And that is a loss to us all.

Sport has the potential to teach all of us how to be better people. It can reach all of us in a very visceral way. When we achieve something in sport, we realise a high like nothing else. When we play together, with a common goal, we come together. We enrich our societies. When we do it right, we are an example of what we all can be if we just try – in Toronto, in the GTA, in Ontario, in Canada, in the Americas, and in the World.

So, somehow, we need to figure out collectively how we can achieve that through the 2015 PanAm / ParaPanAm Games. We need to figure out how we can influence foreign governments to follow Canada's model in celebrating diversity and uniqueness. And, we need to figure out how to further the work being done closer to home, to ensure that the circumstances leading to the statistics I cited from the Egale survey, change.

When that happens, sport itself will become more inclusive in those communities that now are hostile and dangerous to an LGBTQ athlete. When that happens, sport will become a vehicle to develop the potential of LGBTQ people, along with everyone else.

Sport itself has a role to play in this, but can only do so effectively when appropriately supported by law.

We see that happening more and more here in North America, with initiatives like the "You Can Play" project, enlisting professional sports athletes to break down stereotypes, and start to change perceptions of what it means to be an athlete, and conversely, that sport can be a good and safe place to be for LGBTQ people.

So, the vision is of an Americas where all LGBTQ people – along with everyone else – are free from persecution, with their human rights protected by law, so that they can achieve all their

potential, and benefit their communities and all of us in the process. And that includes their potential in sport.

The challenges to this of course are clear – Michelle’s second question.

Sovereign governments do not often listen to the good advice of others, and have their own challenges in changing the attitudes of their populations that have been reinforced through decades of thinking in a particular way.

And many religious organisations stand in the way of granting human rights to LGBTQ people. Even in our own province, when this government introduced very good legislation to stop the terrorism and torture of children by children, religious groups banded together to lobby the government to abandon its course.

I am proud that the Government of Ontario and Premier McGuinty stayed the course. And, as Hillary Clinton said in her address to the United Nations in December of 2011, “no practice or tradition trumps the human rights that belong to all of us.”

Another challenge will be changing hearts and minds of communities in the Americas once human rights laws are in place – both distant and here at home. The laws are important, and must be passed, but the existence of a law itself does not suddenly change beliefs, and does not immediately make what were hostile places now safe spaces.

That is a challenging task, but one where Canada, Ontario, and Toronto can play a significant part. With the eyes of the Americas on us in 2015, we have the chance to show everyone what a truly integrated society is like, where LGBTQ citizens are valued and celebrated, along with all others, that make up our diverse and rich culture. We can set a very clear example, and send a very clear message, to viewers in faraway places, and to those closely touched participants in the games, who we will host in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

We will need support from levels of government to be able to do that; and from foreign governments such as Brazil’s and Argentina’s, in demonstrative support of that direction.

We will need participation, support, and ideas from across the community, to determine what the best ways to achieve our goals are.

We will need to ensure that organisations participating in any way in the Games have policies in place that are inclusive, and guarantee the human rights of LGBTQ people that work for and associate with that organisation. And that includes foreign organisations as much as domestic ones. Where we cannot dictate the existence of policy to third parties, such as how we could with a domestic supplier, we should work to influence the circumstances that hinder the creation of such policies. But we must not take them as a *fait-accomplis*.

Some immediate next steps would be

1. to strongly support TO2015 in its inclusive policies;
2. to begin conversations on LGBTQ human rights with non-LGBTQ-friendly foreign governments where those conversations have not begun, and actively further those that have begun;
3. to continue support to states that have started the journey to recognising the human rights of LGBTQ people;

4. to look close to home, and ensure that the work started with the government's anti-bullying legislation continues to propagate through Ontario's communities;
5. to materially engage the LGBTQ community in the Greater Golden Horseshoe and make sure they know they are welcome at the Games;
6. to start programmes that leverage the excitement of the Games to entice LGBTQ participants into an active and healthy lifestyle;
7. to seek to provide more venues that are accessible to the LGBTQ community for sports activities, thus increasing their participation and heightening their levels of health and well-being; and
8. to provide funding to LGBTQ sports and recreation organisations to ensure their viability, thus furthering the health and well-being of the LGBTQ community as a whole.

PrideHouseTO will be a shining example of celebration of inclusivity and sport that we hope will spread to the rest of the world.

We have the chance, if we do it right, to have a significant, lasting impact, not just on Toronto, not just on the Greater Golden Horseshoe, not just on Ontario or Canada, but on the world!

With the unfortunate events that led to a less-than-hoped-for PrideHouse in London this past summer, and the Russian government's decision to out-law us in Sochi, it is up to us, here in Toronto, in 2015, to show the world what an inclusive society not only means, but the fantastic things it can achieve, if it can only get past its fear of difference, and instead revel in the joy of celebration.

Thank you.

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OutSport Toronto is an incorporated not-for-profit amateur athletic association. Its mission is to support the amateur LGBT sports and recreation community through

- *promotion of health, healthy living, wellness, and well-being through sports and recreation,*
- *facilitation of networking and education for our member organisations, and*
- *building effective partnerships and effectively advocating to external stakeholders.*

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