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Abstract

Only one association football (soccer) player in history has declared his homosexuality during his professional active playing career. Before or since that player's death in 1998, no other professional footballer player has come out. The prohibitively traditional culture of association football is popularly regarded as being responsible for this. Fans habitually use homophobic epithets to abuse players. In recent years, England's governing organizations have cautiously addressed this state of affairs, though ineffectually. The present study uses online methods to explore fans' and industry professionals' perspectives on gay players and the impact their failure to come out has had on the sport. The article, which is based on the responses of 3,500 participants, seeks to answer three questions: (1) Why do fans, who urge gay players to come out, use homophobic language to barrack players? (2) If gay players disclosed their sexual orientations publicly what effect would this have on them personally, on football culture generally and on conceptions of masculinity in sports? (3) What prevents gay football players coming out? The overwhelming majority (93%) of participants in the study oppose homophobia and explained the homophobic abuse as good-humored banter or, in their argot, "stick." An unusual logic is employed to make this intelligible. Participants argue that an athlete's ability to play football is the only criterion on which he is judged and his sexuality is of little consequence to their evaluations. Although few participants encourage forcible outing, the majority welcome openly gay players, whose impact would be transformative. Football clubs and agents are cited as the principal impediments to a more open and enlightened environment: participants argue that they pressure gay players to keep their sexuality hidden and so contribute to a culture of secrecy, which permits and perhaps commissions continued homophobic abuse. Participants speculate that the continued absence of openly gay players actually

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reproduces the apparent prejudices. One fan concludes, "The homophobia in football will remain for longer if no gay players come out."

Keywords

football, gay, homophobia, soccer

Introduction

The particular prominence of association football, or soccer, in global culture gives it an influence unrivaled by other sports. Yet, in spite of its history (England's original Football Association was founded in 1863) and its worldwide participation, football is not known as a paradigm of liberalism. The sport's unwillingness to discard traditional values has made it appear anachronistic when compared to many other major sports that have either accepted or welcomed the presence of gay competitors.

There has been only one openly gay professional football player *ever*: Justin Fashanu (1961-1998) came out preemptively after learning that a British newspaper was about to reveal details of his private life. More than two decades after Fashanu's disclosure and more than half a century since Britain's Wolfenden Report and the repeal of the U.S. sodomy laws decriminalized homosexual behavior between consenting adults in private, values, attitudes, and social behavior have changed.

Today, most people work in environments where gay people, male and female, are capable of expressing their sexual orientation in relative security. Gay showbusiness entertainers, models, politicians, and athletes from many major sports have come out without suffering indignity, embarrassment, or discrimination. Considering there are, at any given time, about 500,000 professional players in the world, it is surprising that only one gay player after Fashanu (Anton Hysen, a semi-pro player in a minor Swedish league) has revealed his sexual orientation. The suspicion is that football's prohibitively heteronormative culture is to blame. (By *heteronormative*, we refer to the state in which heterosexuality is prescribed as normal and which often elicits homophobia, the extreme aversion to lesbians, gay men, and homosexuality in general.)

The present research subjected this suspicion to critical scrutiny by canvassing the views of fans, players, referees, managers, and coaches on the subject of gay players. Specifically, on the question of why there are no openly gay professional players in the supposedly enlightened 21st century. The answers contrived to be both counterintuitive and paradoxical. Of 3,500 respondents, including 62 professional players, referees, managers, and coaches, 93% were relaxed about the presence of gay players and expected one or more to come out by 2014, and agreed that there was no place for homophobia in football. So why do fans scream wry or acerbic homophobic abuse at any player to whom they take a dislike, even though they have no idea of his sexual orientation?

The same fans who adamantly refuse to allow homophobia any place in the sport they love habitually barrage players with homophobic epithets. Football culture has a liquidity that defies firm and stable descriptions, as a fan of Brighton and Hove Albion suggests, posing a paradox we will later probe: “Sport’s all about exploiting weaknesses in your opponent and being seen as gay and therefore unmanly would probably be too good an opportunity to miss. However, and this might sound counterintuitive, just because gay footballers would receive homophobic abuse, it doesn’t mean the people dishing it out are necessary homophobic; it’s just something to pick up on—like footballers who are bald.” (Quotations are taken from the online project; we identify participants by the clubs with which they affiliate. Methodological details of the project are given toward the end of the article.)

Dark Ages

Association football fans consider themselves organic parts of the game; they regard themselves less spectators, more active contributors. As such, they try to distract, harass, or intimidate opposition players by the only means they can legitimately use: barracking players verbally. Not all forms of barracking are legitimate: The 1991 Football Offences Act, for example, rendered racist abuse, unlawful. So when homophobic sobriquets became popular in the 2000s, there was puzzlement. Abhorrent as racism was in the 1980s, it was comprehensible: White fans resented what they regarded as the contamination of their game by the many Black players who were emerging in that period. But there were no gay players, at least not openly gay players. So who were the targets of shouts such as “poofs,” faggots,” and “benders”?

England’s Football Association (FA) was not especially exercised by this question when, in 2010, it initiated a campaign designed to extirpate the shouting, nor did it seek to understand its sources. The powerful governing organization simply wanted it to stop. For reasons that remain unclear, the FA approached the player’s union, the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA) to produce a video featuring several well-known players, but later withdrew support for the project. The reasons for this also remain opaque, but PFA chief Gordon Taylor presented this thought: “The Premier League didn’t think it was a big enough issue.” He also stated that the time was not right for a campaign of this sort: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/8513284.stm>

Neither the FA nor the PFA accepted responsibility, though the video was actually made and can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evnZci_2p5I.

Within weeks of the decision, a prominent London public relations advisor reiterated an earlier announcement that he had advised two “high-profile” professional players against coming out. His warning was predicated on the assumption that football “remains in the dark ages, steeped in homophobia” (<http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news-and-comment/two-top-gay-footballers-stay-in-closet-1845787.html>).

Dark ages: Was it humorous or derogatory?

Either way, the import was clear: Football was stuck in a period of unenlightenment, with outdated attitudes and principles. It is a popular and largely unchallenged conception of football culture as dominated by traditional masculine values. Association football, like many other sports, was initially created as kind of proving ground for men dispossessed of their preindustrial manual responsibilities by the factory machines that proliferated during the British industrial revolution of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Organized sport, particularly team sport, from its earliest moments, as Michael Messner and Donald Sabo (1990) have shown, was not only a male experience but also an instrument of power over women.

Ian Wellard (2002) links “the declining significance of male physicality in the sphere of work to the symbolic importance of strength and force in other social arenas, such as fitness and sport behaviour” (p. 239). Playing the physically demanding sport was—and, for Wellard, still is—an effective way to authenticate a type of “exclusive masculinity.” Football plays “an important part in validating a masculine identity that emphasizes toughness, bravery, courage, tolerance for pain and quick rational thinking under pressure,” as Cora Burnett (2001) summarizes it (p. 72).

Intuitively, the term *hegemonic masculinity* springs to mind: Football appears to valorize certain qualities associated with men, especially strength and aggression, but also a stoic impermeability to pain and a tendency to sacrifice personal gains for the betterment of the team. “The enterprise of winning is life-consuming,” writes Mike Donaldson (1993) in his analysis of widespread relevance of hegemonic masculinity (p. 655)

The Australian writer R. W. Connell (1987) introduced the concept hegemonic masculinity in the 1980s. It may well have been relevant at the time, but its utility over the past two decades is painfully limited. It has been refuted progressively by gay athletes, male and female, who have come out with relative impunity, by male athletes in all sports who have engaged in what we might call aestheticization (i.e., represent themselves as being beautiful or pleasing) and by countless athletes who conspicuously reject sexist attitudes and the traditional male role, particularly in the context of domestic responsibilities and child care.

Fossilizing cultures or aspects of culture with a construct like hegemonic masculinity is misleading. “Liquid life” offers a more promising way forward. Zygmunt Bauman (2005) describes “a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines” (p. 1). Football culture has none of the permanence or stability surmised by Connell and his acolytes.¹

When, in 2002, Wellard (2002) wrote of sport’s “exclusive masculinity,” he detected a surreptitious and occasionally overt exclusion of women and men who did not conform to a particular kind of “traditional orthodox . . . heterosexual masculinity” (p. 237). But does football enforce this code of exclusive masculinity, or is it a widely held but false belief perpetuated by an assembly of governing organizations, clubs, publicists, agents, and scholars inured to established critiques? Or are gay players

themselves retarding the progress of the sport by declining the opportunity to declare their sexual orientation?

Some fans subscribe to old certainties. “[The sport is] full of macho heterosexual men and supporters,” a Hibernian fan postulated. Yet another fan of the same club was less sure, “Football . . . forms part of a society that, in general, is mostly accepting of individuals’ sexual preferences.” Recent and indeed the present research incline toward the latter understanding.

Compulsory Straightness

In 2005, two American research projects revealed that the long-conjectured homophobia among sports fans had been exaggerated. Jon L. Wertheim (2005), of *Sports Illustrated*, concluded, “A full 79% of the [979] poll respondents agreed that Americans are more accepting of gays in sports today than they were 20 years ago” (p. 65).

When, in the same year, the scholar Eric Anderson (2005) reported that not one of 40 openly gay athletes in his study had been assaulted physically after coming out, he deduced that sport, though hardly a welcoming environment, was not nearly as hostile as he expected. Both studies accentuated acrimony from fellow players rather than fans.

Although there were no European association football players in Anderson’s sample, it seems reasonable to assume they would experience the accepting, if not exactly supportive, response described by his participants. Indeed, the present research strongly suggests that the overwhelming majority of football fans and industry professionals believe there is no place for homophobia in football and that the sport would benefit from more transparency among players, especially in a cultural context that ostensibly encourages diversity.

Bucking the liberalizing trend, Jason Akermanis, an Australian Rules Football League (AFL) player, in 2010, wrote a newspaper column in which he dispensed guidance to any gay player: “If they are thinking of telling the world, my advice would be forget it.” The sport’s governing organization distanced itself from his remarks, but the newspaper the *Herald Sun* launched its own poll and received 8,838 responses to the question “Is the AFL ready for gay players to come out?” 51.97% answered “no.” Not an overwhelming majority, perhaps, but still forbiddingly substantial.

In sharp contrast, association football fans in our survey encouraged gay players, currently unknown, to come out: They resented being characterized as homophobic and protested that they were not opposed to gay players. “I’d rather have a gay player who *can* play than a straight player who *can’t*,” a Manchester United fan captured the mood of most. And an Ipswich Town fan pronounced, “Sexuality has no bearing on how someone plays football.”

Despite these typically permissive perspectives, the absence of gay players in professional soccer suggests that being straight appears to be obligatory. Joyce McCarl Nielsen et al. (2000) use the term “compulsory heterosexuality” to convey the coercive

manner in which gender roles are assigned and evaluated. Heterosexuality seems to have been compulsory in football from its late 19th-century inception.

Fashanu remains a haunting exception: He was vilified after he came out in 1990 and spent the remainder of his life playing in minor leagues outside England. And, in unrelated, yet memorable episode in 1999, Graeme Le Saux, a married man with children whose love of art and reading had been equated by fellow players with effiteness, was playing for Chelsea when rival player Robbie Fowler, of Liverpool, humiliated him by repeatedly bending over and pointing his backside in his direction. "I knew if people thought I was gay it could harm my career," Le Saux reflected. He was moved to reaffirm publicly his heterosexual orientation.

In 2007, Le Saux told Martin Samuel (2007), of the *Times* of London, "Managers might not want to play me, clubs wouldn't want to buy me, so I felt I should say something. But at the same time I didn't want gay people to think I was distancing myself because I thought it was wrong."

It was a revealing admission: Le Saux sensed that, rumors, hearsay, or gossip that he might be gay would damage his marketability. His motivation for reaffirming his heterosexuality was commercial. Since the Le Saux incident, it might be expected that football's heterosexual mandate would have weakened. After all, in several other sports, including golf and tennis, players have come out with impunity, perhaps the most dramatic disclosure coming in 1995 when Australian rugby league player Ian Roberts came out. It was a shocking disclosure from an athlete in a sport known for its hidebound macho values. Yet the expected furor did not materialize and Elspeth Probyn (2000, p. 17), reflected, "Robert's coming out was fairly smooth".

Fourteen years later, another rugby league player, this time from Wales, Gareth Thomas, revealed that he was gay. Apart from one incident when an abusive crowd became openly hostile, he escaped cultural censure. Given football culture's declared opposition to homophobia, it is surprising that fans of football—an analogous sport to rugby, of course—appear to maintain the compulsory heterosexuality rule, tacitly and perhaps unwittingly. We will explore how and, more important, why they do this next.

Into a Player's Head

"Pejorative utterances," writes Mark Vicars (2006), "remain powerful tools in the arsenal of heteronormative practices and culture, in that they continue to constitute what is and is not considered as 'normal'" (p. 357).

At every single game of football ever played, football fans have and continue to express contempt or disapproval for players. Occasionally, members of the team they support are the objects of deprecatory remarks, though, more often, rival team players are defamed. There is a customary, almost ritualistic element in this practice, fans often spicing their humor with the equivalent of deadly nightshade. To those unfamiliar with the banter of football crowds, the kind of utterances to which Vicars refers are disparagingly homophobic. Fans themselves disagree. As a Newcastle United fan explained: "If I hear someone shout 'Get up, you big poof!'" I assume it's because the player in question has gone down like a sack of spuds [i.e., feigning] at the slightest

hint of a challenge, not because the person shouting thinks that the player is gay” (“Spuds” is English slang for potatoes.)

A fan of Portsmouth expanded: “It may not be that the fans have an issue with a player being gay, rather that it is an obvious way to target a player and put him off his game. . . . From my 20 years’ experience of going to football matches, there is likely to be a lot of abuse aimed at players, whether it is caused by mistaken bravado (i.e. I have to show off in front of my mates) or genuine homophobia.” The same fan speculated that, even if gay players came out, “Fans may not abuse their own player as much, but would still target known gay players from other teams.”

Whether this is an instance of hypocrisy is a matter of interpretation. Certainly, claiming that “there is no place for homophobia in football,” as 93% of respondents did, does not appear to square with the habitual behavior of fans, who berate players for being gay—even though they may not suspect they are actually gay. A Rangers (Glasgow) fan spotted the speciousness when describing “stick” as “abuse under the guise of banter.” The response chimes with the conclusions of an Australian study reported in this article that found that targets of homophobia were not singled out because of their suspected sexuality, but simply because they did not “measure up” to conventional expectations of colleagues (Plummer, 2006).

Perhaps not surprisingly, football’s governing organizations have been baffled by the rules of discourse operating during a game and read too much earnestness in what fans intend to be harmless “stick”—as they refer to the often wounding but good-humored insults.

Players, on the other hand, have shown less benevolence. The earlier mentioned Le Saux suggested that most players who verbally abused him were not homophobic, but used his reputation as what he called a “default mechanism,” presumably meaning a preselected taunt when they could not think of an alternative. Fans concur, though many believe that Fowler was a member of a generation of bigots. Were a gay player to announce his sexuality today, suggested a Hibernian fan, “There would be little reaction [from other players . . . it is] a few years since [the Le Saux and Fowler incident.” Remember: It happened in 1999.

Another Hibernian fan was unapologetic in his endorsement of homophobic abuse, which he saw as an effective method of reaffirming a central value of football: “It’s a macho sport, isn’t it?” An Aston Villa (Birmingham) fan added approvingly, “Football *is* still in the Dark Ages with reference to sexuality, color, creed and fans taunt to get into a player’s head.”

There is logic in football culture, though it is a logic that has its own codes and principles of inference and proof. Fans continually invoke “stick” as a way of excising the homophobic meaning from “pejorative utterances.” Outsiders may sense that the culture authorizing such abuse would be confirming its own heteronormativity. Fans themselves, on the other hand, see only entertaining comic touches in the choice of terms such as “poof” or jibes like, “Does your boyfriend know you’re here?”

Perhaps they are consolidating the type of milieu that allows and even commissions persistent homophobic taunting players for the most arbitrary reasons. From their perspective, they are merely attracting the attentions of players in a way that amplifies

their conditional dislike. And it is always conditional: There is rarely deep enmity, as fans affirm: Should the earlier mentioned player suspected of feigning (“sack of spuds”) later score a goal, stick quickly mutates to forgiveness and even acclaim. Abuse is, as a Wolverhampton Wanderers fan thoughtfully contributed, “Variable . . . players [are] supported one minute and mercilessly abused the next.”

There is an implication in this line of thought: Football’s absence of gay players actually produces homophobia. This is the view of a Tottenham Hotspur (London) fan, “One thing will be certain. The homophobia in football will remain for longer if no gay players come out.”

The longer the sport endures what is becoming an embarrassing lack of openly gay players, the more it allows fans to engage in raillery that is, or at least *sounds* homophobic, while at the same time exonerating themselves from prejudice. Most fans expect that the first gay player will experience intense abuse (“*initially*, it will be bad”), though equally most feel it will quickly fade as more players are emboldened to come out and fans become accustomed to watching gay players every week. Again, there are comparisons with Black players, who, by the late 1990s, were a formidable presence in British football: Ethnic background became irrelevant.

Before we consider exactly what participants expect from gay players, we should establish a fundamental premise from which forms the basis of their arguments. “Some footballers like eating steak; others may not,” observed a fan of Nottingham Forest. “I do not need to know which ones do and which ones don’t. It is not relevant to the game of football.”

We have alluded to this sentiment earlier and it echoes throughout football culture. The sexual orientation of players is analogous to their tastes in food or any other aspect of life: They have no bearing on their competitive performance. A Brighton and Hove Albion fan was correct in his assumption: “Most fans [are] more concerned about a player’s prowess on the pitch than their activities in the bedroom.” All participants’ comments are predicated on this understanding: players are evaluated on only one feature of their makeup—their ability to play.

Coming Out Soon?

“If football is to advance, someone is going to have to go first.” The statement is that of a U.S.-based AC Milan fan. A gay player will *have* to come out, or, less desirably, be outed. This, as far as our participants were concerned, is not just an option: It will happen, the majority (56.83%) anticipating that this will happen before 2014. In this subsection, we will consider the likelihood of this and its possible consequences. We recognize that there are gay footballers players who, at the moment, choose not to declare publicly the sexual orientation, even though, it seems, they are prepared to let this be known to industry insiders. They obstruct what some writers call a “normalization” of gay players.

Normalization. Pat Griffin (1994) pronounced, “A male athlete is assumed to be heterosexual unless something happens to create suspicion” (p. 84). Today, this still

sounds plausible. Yet the study's 62 industry professionals who affirmed that they personally knew gay players is evidence, albeit inferential evidence, that there are players who either identify themselves as gay and are accepted as "normal" within the confines of the football industry. As their sexual identity is currently not widely known, it is probable they operate in a manner similar to one of the gay athletes in Barbara Ravel and Geneviève Rail's (2008) participants who revealed, "I'm like a chameleon" (p. 20).

Chameleons have an ability to change to the color of their surrounding environments, of course. In the case of gay football players, a more apposite simile might be a glasswing butterfly, which has transparent wings, making it invisible from distance. Gay players, it seems, are known to colleagues and football industry insiders, but prefer not to disclose their sexuality to outsiders. Football fans largely accept this. "No one asks a straight player to state that he's straight, do they?" was a typical consideration.

Participants were exercised by what is after all a difficult issue. Disclosing one's homosexuality to fellow professionals but concealing it from others is a player's right. The difficulty is, as many participants sense, that remaining private and refusing to discuss one's own homosexuality is an easy option. As Judith Lorber (1998) points out, "Men who refuse to participate in heterosexuality do not . . . subvert the gender order" (p. 470). Keeping one's sexual orientation secret and confining knowledge of it to a close circle issues no challenge to the status quo. In fact, it contributes to a condition in which, as Steven M. Kates (2002) puts it, gay players are "stigmatized or somehow apart from mainstream others" (p. 398).

An understanding of this prompted participants to call for a coming-out that would help hasten an end to the stigmatization and its replacement by a different conception of gay men. Reflecting on the fallout after Australia's Ian Roberts took that option, Probyn (2000) wrote, "The whole thing was a prime example of the normalization of gay within mainstream culture" (p. 17).

This is precisely the normalization football fans encourage. "If [Cristiano] Ronaldo, [Didier] Drogba or [Wayne] Rooney said they were gay, would the football fans of the 'Dark Ages' resist in supporting their performances? I think not," hypothesized an Arsenal (London) fan to underline how a big name player's declaration would normalize gayness. A Newcastle United fan concurred, "The only way football is going to get past homophobia is for some top players to come out."

Fallout. Understandably, gay players in sport's major leagues are unsure and perhaps afraid of the consequences of a coming-out, and there is only limited evidence to allay their fears. The consequences of an outing, voluntary or involuntary, are invariably positive, according to Samantha King (2008), "Public declarations and enactments of nonnormative sexuality can provide much-needed inspiration and solidarity for fellow dykes" (p. 431).

Although King is writing about lesbian athletes, there is little doubt among football fans that the effects of a gay male footballer's coming-out would be equally inspirational, if not transformative, especially in the 21st century. There is a strong feeling

that only pioneering gay players can damage football culture's medieval reputation. An Aston Villa fan called for "trailblazers" and drew parallels with Paul Merson and Tony Adams, football players who talked and wrote openly about their indulgences in and dependences on gambling and alcohol, though, the analogy with a reliance on gambling or drink is tenuous.

Many respondents saw more immediate parallels. "Look what happened to Gareth Thomas," said a Newcastle United fan. "He came out and nobody said, 'There's the door!' No, his career is still going from strength-to-strength." A Liverpool fan conferred, "If only one player stood up. . . ."

Other respondents saw similarities between the hypothetical trailblazer and the first Black players who emerged in British football in the late 1970s, "who got terrible abuse to begin with," but who eventually became, as one fan put it, "normal." At the moment, gay players are anything but normal. This spurred some participants to seek more forcible measures. An Oxford United fan thought the players' union leader had a moral duty, "If [Gordon] Taylor knows there are gay players, then surely he has an obligation [to out them]." An Aston Villa fan contrived to make much the same point, though by comparing gay players with the Black players of the 1980s who were subject to racist abuse from crowds, "Unlike race, sexuality isn't obvious and so the option to remain 'hidden' is possible, especially for what will be a relatively short period of time."

Another fan, who gave his affiliation as "England," discerned a difference between the abuse vented against Black players and the social anxiety over homosexuals: "Racism was/is about hatred. Homophobia is about fear." It may be a questionable distinction, but, as a fan's perspective, it is intriguing; perhaps barracking is a defensive maneuver, an attempt to preserve the existing heteronormative state of affairs. If so, it is a perspective shared by only a minority.

Despite these differences, there is near unanimity on the welcome impact one or more openly gay players would make on football. Yet, for all the enthusiasm for more openness, most respondents (94.4%) oppose involuntary outing, especially if initiated by the scandal-seeking media. They insist that the decision about whether to come out should be made by individual players and, though desirable for football culture, it was of crucial importance. "Homosexuality is not something that defines a person and players should be able to show their skills on the pitch (field of play) without being judged and jeered," said a Chelsea fan.

"It is a personal decision," a York City fan agreed, though many others added that other factors can and probably do influence such a decision. A Tottenham Hotspur fan expressed the views of many when she argued, "I believe most footballers would welcome an opportunity to record their opposition to homophobia in football." She alluded to a campaign, national or possibly international, to make public football's support for the sport's taciturnly gay players.

In fact, the absence of such a campaign is, as an Everton fan put it, "tantamount to agreeing homophobia is acceptable." Coming out would be easier and less

intimidating if football fostered a climate in which gay players were welcomed and appreciated and homophobia was opposed.

Subordinated masculinities. The football landscape has been reshaped, perhaps—to extend the Dark Ages theme—civilized. It is now an environment conducive to what Peter Jackson (1991) describes as “a plurality of *masculinities*, with their attendant instabilities and contradictions” (p. 200).

Femininity has also been pluralized as more women have established a strong presence in the previously male-dominated world. Toby Miller (2004) argues that women’s progress in sport unsettled prevailing sports credo: “The capacity of sport to ideologize masculine superiority has been destabilized as women have struggled to gain greater access [to mainstream sports]” (by “ideologize,” we take Miller to mean the process of perpetuating ideas and ideals characteristic in the late 19th and most of the 20th centuries) (p. 122).

Miller makes a credible point, though, as recently as the 1990s (as the Fashanu and Le Saux experiences indicate), gay players were still stigmatized. In 2002, with gay athletes, male and female, emerging in tennis, golf, and several other popular sports, Anderson (2002) suggested they “threaten the ability of sports to reproduce the hegemonic form of masculinity,” adding—without irony—that they “threaten to soften masculinity” (p. 873).

Why “soften”? Maybe Anderson supposes gay men define a kind of weaker, less solid, or resistant type of masculinity. If so, he is guilty of accepting a similar kind of oversimplified and stereotypical conception of masculinities as those he critiques. Gay athletes are surely no less tough or competitive than their straight counterparts. Sohalia Shakib and Michele Dunbar’s (2002) “subordinated masculinity” is a more judicious term (p. 355), though even then there is an implicit assumption that all gay athletes express, or convey a single conception of masculinity. Is there a specific version of masculinity conveyed by and embodied in, for example, the former NBA player John Amaechi, the ex-Detroit Tigers and San Diego Padres outfielder Billy Bean, and the afore-mentioned Gareth Thomas?

One-dimensional conceptions of gay sportsmen circulate in spite of an increasing number of gay athletes who choose to come out, probably because most wait until their active careers are over before declaring their sexuality; both Amaechi and Bean made announcements in their retirement. At this time, they have faded from public visibility and attract less attention than similar announcements during a playing career. Thomas is, at the time of writing, still playing.

The Reasons for the *Omertà*

So the final question remains: Who keeps the closet door slammed shut? Obviously, in the last instance it is the player himself who makes the choice. But there are several other parties leaning against the door. Participants provided their views on the main ones.

The above-mentioned Aston Villa fan extended his point about gay players remaining “hidden”: “Why should any footballer risk martyrdom when there is no clear need from their point of view?”

Many respondents shared the point, most presumably mindful of a point made by Andrew Parker (2006): “Professional football is a strictly gendered affair. Its relational dynamics, its working practices, its commercial ventures, its promotional interests, are replete with images of maleness” (p. 691). The “maleness” Parker has in mind presumably refers to external appearance of existing players rather than the gay players who, as one fan put it, “hide behind *omertà*” (i.e., code of silence).

Clubs. More than 90% of respondents suspected the reasons there no openly gay players in football had their origins in market considerations. Another 45.85% identified clubs as the prohibitive element: Football clubs did not wish to risk the possible fallout from having the first overtly gay player on their roster. Clubs, being conservative institutions, allegedly caution gay players against coming out. “Brand damage” was how one fan described the possible anticipated effect. “What club wants to be known as the first club to have a gay player?,” he asked.

Ostensibly, clubs, like other football organizations, oppose any form of prejudice and discrimination on any criteria other than playing ability. It strains credulity to believe that no club has ever employed a player who is gay and not known about that player’s sexual identity. No club has ever made it known that they have supported gay players or, indeed, compromised them.

Agents. Agents earn commission from their clients’ earnings, sometimes as much as 10% of everything, including salary, endorsement deals, and other activities. “Charging for creating images,” is how a Coventry City fan described the work of agents. The fan articulated the view of 44.5% when he said of the typical agent, “No doubt he would know what sells.”

The significant section of the sample who believed agents were one of, if not the principal reason for maintaining a code of silence drew short of criticizing them, reasoning that the commercial logic was sound. But is it?

Consider the out lesbian tennis player Amélie Mauresmo, who was openly lesbian throughout her playing career, 1993-2009. “In this brave new world of consumer choice, Mauresmo represents a move away from the ‘gay window advertising’,” conclude Pamela Forman and Darcy Plymire (2005), who examined the way in which Mauresmo was marketed. “Rather than using her to subtly represent lesbian themes in ways that lesbians will understand but straight folks will not, organizations like Nike and the WTA [Women’s Tennis Association] may use her to openly represent lesbianism to a wide consumer market that include, but certainly is not limited to, lesbians” (p. 124).

It seems persuasive. The afore-mentioned Akermanis, in his article advising gay players not to come out, remarked that he had heard of two gay AFL players “rumoured to have been offered \$150,000 (US\$ 148,000; £95,000) to be the first to publicly come out as gay.” This is a modest amount in the context of association football (about Cristiano Ronaldo’s weekly wage) though, for the AFL, it presents an incentive and

suggests that there is a market. Perhaps the first gay player would be a marketable product. Agents appear not to think so; at least, our sample believed agents thought not and the advice of Max Clifford, the publicist who described football as “steeped in homophobia” and who works in an analogous trade, complements this.

Whatever agents think, coming out has not harmed the professional careers of countless film actors, rock stars, politicians, or athletes from many sports. Football appears somewhat different to an Arsenal fan: “Football is a very *safe* market.” And, as in any market, there are, as practically every fan acknowledged, risks, the main ones lying in the market rather than in the stadiums. Yet most fans felt confident, the players’ “brand” would not suffer, and several participants suggested the soubriquet “the first gay footballer” would be highly marketable, given the power of the so-called pink economy.

Family pressures. Only 5% of participants believed family pressures were a factor, though an American study by Gregory B. Lewis in 2003 provided a basis for understanding how a great many players may wish to spare families embarrassment. At any one time, European football leagues have 20% to 30% players of African background or descent. “Blacks disapprove of homosexuality more strongly than whites,” writes Lewis. It is an admittedly hyperbolic-sounding statement, but he goes on, “African Americans attracted to their same sex tend to face more disapproval from their families and straight friends than do similar whites” (Lewis, 2003, p. 75).

We should also consider that some gay players might be married—as Thomas was—and perhaps have children. Family pressures, though dismissed by the majority of respondents, could be more powerful than they assume and manifest in many ways, including pressure from employers, the fear of losing lucrative deals, and the peril of upsetting families by crossing cultural lines. These are among the reasons fans and industry professionals believe prevent more openness among gay football players.

Enlightenment, however, does not radiate to all corners of football culture: Though the majority of fans and industry professionals encourage the kind of understanding, awareness, and open-mindedness that has been absent from football culture, a (perhaps surprisingly) small minority (7%) sought preservation. “Football is traditional. [It is] not in the Dark Ages,” affirmed a Rotherham United fan. “There is no place for homosexuality or same sex relationships in our society.”

A Newcastle United fan believed gay players and, indeed, all gay people “have an illness” and should “keep their sick shenanigans behind closed doors.” Fans sharing such views anticipated that any gay player who chooses to come out, or is forcibly outed, would be subject to intolerable abuse from fans, the media, and other players. Hence, they agreed with Clifford. “I fully sympathize with him,” said a Manchester United fan. “It’s currently in a player’s best interests to avoid coming out.”

But is it? Is football culture as medieval as some suspect? Is it steeped in homophobia? Is the football environment so prohibitive that gay players are fearful of coming out? These were the kind of questions we set out to answer. The results revealed that, far from being stuck in the Dark Ages, football had passed through its version of Enlightenment but remains haunted by the specter of its own traditions. The

suspicion is that the specter will soon be banished. This is not an overly sanguine prediction; it is simply a realistic expectation that the world's most popular game will follow a trend set by many other major sports (and we remain mindful that there are no openly gay players in any of the U.S. major leagues). Fans and industry professionals alike confidently anticipate a *cause célèbre* when the first living player comes out, but, though controversial, it will not lead to widespread or prolonged abuse or injury.

Method

Topfan.co.uk was the domain site of an online research platform where participants could express their views on, among other issues, the two episodes described above, that is, the withdrawal from the mooted antihomophobia campaign and the publicist's comments about the "Dark Ages." An anonymous online survey had the virtue of protecting the identity of the participants, if they wished (many volunteered their email addresses and asked to be kept informed of developments) and afforded them secrecy. Given the nature of the subject area, any other form of research would have been impracticable and unreliable. The prospect of, for instance, approaching fans on their way to a game and asking, "Would you mind answering a few questions on gay football players?," would have yielded little relevant material. Other methods of gathering data would have been similarly useless.

Online research, on the other hand, offered a way of affording participants anonymity and flexibility: They could choose to complete the questionnaire on whatever computer or other device they wished, in privacy or in public whenever they wanted. There was no motivation to lie, or to repeat the survey, as no prizes were offered.

This method did not suffer from the kind of sampling error that can bias more traditional sampling: Participation was completely voluntary and confidential. The only possible bias would be a skew toward those with access to the internet. We believed this was an acceptable bias in the circumstances. The project drew its sample mainly from Britain, though there were responses from 35 other countries. We should also state that we have an IT team member who devised a dynamic questionnaire in a way that opened up different sets of questions for different classes. For example, though "fan" is a generic category, we also included "pro player," "manager," "coach," and referee." In this way, we were able to assess whether or not there were gay players known to industry professionals (unnamed, of course) but not outside.

Although the online alternative was promising, it needed publicity to attract participants. To this end, we took advice from contacts in the media, who suggested floating a pilot project and publicizing the results together with an announcement of the launch of a full-scale project.

The pilot consisted of logging into football fans' online forums and blogs and engaging users in discussions about the central issues. A pattern emerged: Fans, in particular, resented the accusation that the culture of which they were a constituent part was homophobic. The majority of the 250 users who were prepared to deliberate

(and their responses were typically considered rather than impulsive) resented the characterization and encouraged more transparency. If players were gay, they should feel free to express their sexual orientation without trepidation.

The preliminary results were shared with a journalist at the *Observer*, a respected British Sunday newspaper. The journalist asked for exclusive access to the pilot. The resulting news item included a reference to topfan.co.uk. Exposure in a national newspaper with a circulation of 331,500, gave the project the initial impetus, though follow-up news and, more important, further deliberation in the forums maintained the momentum. One of the features of the questionnaire was that it invited discursive responses as well as direct answers to questions. Participants were invited to ruminate on the issues surrounding gay footballers, their apparent absence, and the alleged homophobia that was thought to permeate football culture. The questionnaire was designed to enable users to define how they tackled the subject. The first 1,000 responses brought about 100,000 words, participants taking advantage of the opportunity to air their opinions limitlessly. With 1,200 qualitative responses, we replaced the original questionnaire with a checkbox version designed to feed back and test some of the findings.

The researchers' role in a project such as this is to steer it in the required direction: After that, the project takes on a life of its own; we had no control on the number of responses until we decided to draw a halt at 3,500. Analysis of the results indicated that responses were from a total of 35 countries, the majority from the United Kingdom. News of the project had been carried by media reports, which viralize once uploaded to news websites. Social media are a powerful resource in research, though, in this instance, we—naively—included only the standard share buttons on the Phase 2 questionnaire and neglected to exploit the opportunities offered by social media. Since then, we have established a presence for topfan in social networking sites.

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Note

1. In fairness to Connell, the writer has more recently with James Messerschmidt (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), acknowledged, "Struggles in which subordinated masculinities influence dominant forms" and offered "a more complex model of gender hierarchy, emphasizing the agency of women . . . recognizing internal contradictions" (p. 829).

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Bio

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