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Coming Out to Face the Team; Gay athletes are more open about their sexuality. But a 'don't ask, don't tell' coldness still lingers in the high school locker room.; [Home Edition]

BILL SHAIKIN. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 17, 2000. pg. 1

Abstract (Summary)

According to [Eric Anderson], a former track coach at Huntington Beach High who studies gays and sports in his doctoral research at UC Irvine, athletes otherwise supportive of a gay teammate keep their mouths shut for fear of being labeled gay themselves. When one of Anderson's runners at Huntington Beach founded a gay-straight alliance there in 1994, many students immediately assumed he was gay. He was not.

[Philip Neumann] just keeps his mouth shut in the locker room. Ryan Edquist, one of Philip's teammates at Bakersfield, said Philip "has seemed somewhat detached from the team. I don't think that's anybody's volition." Philip did not disagree with that assessment. He has not invited his teammates into his social circle, and they have not invited him into theirs.

Teammates who didn't already know Philip was gay found out, he figures, when he submitted an anonymous commentary on a gay issue to the school newspaper and someone on the staff blew his cover. [Jason Fasi] stepped onto a public platform with his fight for the Gay Straight Alliance. (His school did not sanction the GSA, citing its rule against approving clubs not directly related to the curriculum.)

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This could be trouble. A slur? A shove? A fight?

Jason Fasi, an honor roll student and varsity runner, cast a wary eye as his teammate walked toward him.

Jason was the guy getting all the attention earlier this year-- on campus and in the local papers--for trying to launch a Gay Straight Alliance at Mission Viejo High. When everyone on campus finds out you're gay, who knows whether you'll be embraced or vilified, ostracized or tolerated? When you've overheard some of your straight classmates--including the one headed your way--tease one another by yelling "fag," who knows what they might say--or do-- to you?

So Jason braced himself, unsure what to expect from his approaching teammate.

"To my surprise," Jason recalled, "he said, 'I signed your petition in support of your club. I'm cool with it.' "

It was another small step on the rocky path to tolerance for gay high school athletes. Sociologists have long contended that sports offers a "quasi-closet" to gay males, a safe place where masculinity is conferred and heterosexuality is assumed. But now, researchers believe, increasing numbers of young men can compete in high school sports without concealing their homosexuality and without enduring physical and verbal abuse.

"They're presenting themselves in ways that force people to question their own stereotypes about who is gay and who isn't," said University of Colorado sports sociologist Jay Coakley.

Yet even in this more open-minded generation, gay athletes--and straight teammates--tread gingerly. Tolerance is not acceptance. The door to the locker room may be open, but the reception inside is rarely warm.

Jason was nervous, and a bit scared, before he came out publicly. Although he had revealed his homosexuality to family and friends three years ago, many teammates found out only when he campaigned for the Gay Straight Alliance.

The locker room is a hallowed male sanctuary, where boys talk freely and often bawdily about girls. Jason wondered whether his presence there would intimidate his teammates, or whether they would try to intimidate him. "I created illusions and daydreams of all these terrible things that could possibly happen to me, from not having my friends accept me to having total strangers beat me up."

No one beat him up, he said. No one shied away from dressing next to him. No one heckled him on the track. He heard a few taunts, mostly from random classmates in passing cars, as he walked home.

To University of Toronto sports sociologist Brian Pronger, such experiences reflect what he called the "dominant cultural trend" toward tolerance of gays.

"That's not to say the problems of homophobia are no longer. Sports is one of the worst places," he said. "But, when you see things changing in sport, you know things are changing in society."

In a poll commissioned last year by Seventeen magazine and the Kaiser Family Foundation, 54% of teens aged 13-19 said they "don't have any problem" with homosexuality, up from 17% in 1991. And fewer college freshmen endorse "laws prohibiting homosexual relationships"- -30% in 1999, down from 53% in 1987, according to the annual national survey conducted by UCLA's Institute of Higher Education.

In pop culture, the high school football hero and the homecoming queen no longer end up together every time. Last year, on the hit teen TV drama "Dawson's Creek," the high school football hero was gay. In one episode, when an opposing team targeted the gay star, his teammates supported him by turning stereotype on its head. They all wore makeup, and one teammate challenged an opponent to "try to tell which one of us is the homo now."

Jason, 17, a senior at Mission Viejo, strolls toward the locker room after finishing his workout. As he walks, fellow athletes pass, waving or nodding in his direction.

"It's not like he walks by and people say, 'Oh, he's gay,' " said teammate Jim McTeigue. "If anybody bothered him or started making a big deal about it, there would be more than enough kids ready to come to his aid."

The track coach at Mission Viejo, Mike Hoffman, praised his athletes for accepting Jason. "It was like nothing happened," Hoffman said. "I think that's a great thing for our community and our school system, to accept it and not really think about it. We've come a long way."

However, openly gay male athletes often encounter a "don't ask, don't tell" environment, where they are welcomed and supported by teammates so long as they do not make their sexuality an issue, according to Eric Anderson, author of the autobiographical "Trailblazing: The True Story of America's First Openly Gay Track Coach" (2000).

According to Anderson, a former track coach at Huntington Beach High who studies gays and sports in his doctoral research at UC Irvine, athletes otherwise supportive of a gay teammate keep their mouths shut for fear of being labeled gay themselves. When one of Anderson's runners at Huntington Beach founded a gay-straight alliance there in 1994, many students immediately assumed he was gay. He was not.

McTeigue said Jason could lose support if other students believed he was flaunting his homosexuality--if, for instance, he was spotted kissing another guy. "Most kids at school don't have a problem with it if it's not brought to their attention," McTeigue said.

But somebody had a problem with Philip Neumann, a senior swimmer at Bakersfield High.

Philip, 17, was driving around town when two teens in another car spotted him and gave chase, yelling derogatory remarks about gays. In trying to escape, Philip said, he backed into a pole, denting his car.

Fear of such moments prevents some gay teens from coming out, especially to teammates they face every day. Philip said he encountered no such abuse from his teammates, although he knows better than to confuse tolerance with admiration. "They don't look up to you, but they respect you a little bit more. "They probably understand you a little bit more too."

In his research, Anderson studied 26 openly gay male athletes in high school and college and found that "not one encountered overt intolerance or physical harm" and only one described his experience in coming out as "poor."

Anderson suggests a number of factors help determine the degree to which a high school team is comfortable with an openly gay athlete, and vice versa.

The support of the coach helps. Philip said his coach "is very supportive of anybody who is a minority or who could be discriminated against."

If the gay athlete has friends on the team who stand by him, that helps. If the athlete plays a key role on the team, that helps too.

In his research, Anderson discovered a relay team in Ohio on which the two heterosexual runners bought rainbow socks, symbolic of gay pride, for all four runners to wear during a state championship meet.

Some differences are more difficult to bridge. In high school, where hormones rage and sexuality blossoms, sociologists say the sporting environment becomes one of "hyper-heterosexuality"-- checking out the girls, flaunting your newfound muscles, bragging about your prowess with the opposite sex.

Philip just keeps his mouth shut in the locker room. Ryan Edquist, one of Philip's teammates at Bakersfield, said Philip "has seemed somewhat detached from the team. I don't think that's anybody's volition." Philip did not disagree with that assessment. He has not invited his teammates into his social circle, and they have not invited him into theirs.

"Some of the distancing probably has to do with them thinking that I like them," Philip said. "That's always there with straight guys interacting with gay guys. But they're straight, not gay, so I would never hit on them or anything."

Swimmers shave their body hair to reduce water resistance, believing it will allow them to swim faster. As an openly gay athlete, Philip said, he can attend team shaving parties and describe them as "no big deal." And Edquist said "nobody really seems bothered" by Philip's presence on the team.

Said Philip: "If you stay closeted, you're going to have to pretend you like girls. Then you're going to end up questioning why you're on the team. Are you on the team just to meet guys? Are you on the team because you actually enjoy the sport? If you can be on the team, then you should be able to be open, I think. If people are going to have a problem with that, I think they should have a right to know, so they can find some way to avoid you, or whatever. You've got to respect people's opinions, even if they are bigoted."

It is impossible to estimate how many gays participate in high school sports, because many have not come out and many others have not resolved conflicts of sexual identity. Some gay males, afraid to come out, hope that classmates will assume an athlete is straight.

That fear lives within one former high school track athlete from Santa Barbara County who graduated last spring. He told only two of his teammates that he is gay.

The 18-year-old, who asked not to be identified, said he did not come out to the rest of his team because of "all the homophobic comments I hear each day." In the locker room, he said, "it's just common language" when teammates use the words "that's so gay" and "you faggot" to insult each other.

"I don't really stop people who make jokes," he said. "I don't know what to say in response. If I say one comment to stop something, I know people will ask, 'Why?' I don't know any other answer to give them besides 'I'm gay,' and I don't really want to come out to them. So I just keep silent." He kept running, for love of the sport.

When Corey Johnson, a high school football star in Massachusetts, came out to his team last season, his teammates rallied around him and his parents posed with him. He appeared on the front page of the New York Times and was featured in Sports Illustrated, and he waved to hundreds of thousands at a gay rights march in Washington, D.C.

Neither Jason Fasi nor Philip Neumann gathered his team and formally came out, or considered it necessary. Each said he has suspected his homosexuality since elementary school--"I always remember wanting to be chased around the playground by a particular guy instead of the usual girls," Philip said.

Teammates who didn't already know Philip was gay found out, he figures, when he submitted an anonymous commentary on a gay issue to the school newspaper and someone on the staff blew his cover. Jason stepped onto a public platform with his fight for the Gay Straight Alliance. (His school did not sanction the GSA, citing its rule against approving clubs not directly related to the curriculum.)

Billy Bean, who dared not reveal his homosexuality during a six-year major league career, watches these athletes and their straight teammates with admiration.

"It says a lot for the MTV generation," said Bean, 36. "There's an understanding there, an awareness since they were 7 or 8. Fifteen years ago, nobody was talking about this the way they are now."

Bean did not acknowledge his homosexuality, even to himself, until years after his 1982 graduation from Santa Ana High. He was married, for three years, to a classmate from Loyola Marymount University.

Bean played with dozens of teammates on three major league teams, including the Dodgers. He told none he was gay. He publicly declared his homosexuality last year, three years after he retired. "It's nice not to lie anymore. "There's a lot of liberating things that happen when you come out."

Heterosexual teammates willing to listen and learn, Bean said, can understand that gays are not flaunting their sexuality simply by discussing it. "It's a matter of not being ashamed of yourself."

Philip is neither ashamed nor afraid as he walks the Bakersfield campus. He is not a crusader or an activist, simply a high school student who exchanges a "how ya' doin'?" with classmates passing in the hall. Friendship is a very different thing. He works out with his team mates, but he seldom joins them for lunch or a night at the movies.

Next year, Philip will graduate and leave town, bound for college and, with luck, an acting career. He will not long for those good old high school days with the swim team, and with his teammates.

"They'll remember me as the gay swimmer," he said, "because that's all they've ever known me as."

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Bill Shaikin's can be reached at bill.shaikin@latimes.com