

Pitching for Equality: Gay Athletes and Homophobia

Eric Anderson
University of Bath

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Although athletic competitions date back to before the original Olympic Games in 769 BCE, organized team sports in American culture are relatively new. Sport in the United States was viewed largely as a waste of God's time, and people were thought better off spending their free time studying scriptures rather than playing games. This attitude began to change during the Civil War, as troops waited long periods of time between fighting and found sports, particularly an early form of baseball known as townball, an enjoyable activity. When the war ended, these soldiers brought their love for the game home. It was the Industrial Revolution, however, that was the catalyst for the valuing of sport in American culture.

Prior to the industrial revolution, children would return from school to find both mom and dad working the family farm. But because the industrial revolution brought people out of the farms and into the cities, children returned from school to find that dad was still working in the factory rather than working the family farm. This absence alarmed Americans, who feared that male youth, who were now spending large amounts of time with their mothers and female teachers, would grow to be "soft" or "weak," characteristics that were typically attributed to women and homosexual men. Capitalizing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, many believed that this would result in the "creation" of gay males. Therefore, sporting programs and other masculine-gearred organizations (such as the YMCA and the Boy Scouts of America) were conceived as a solution.

In sport, young boys could be influenced by "proper" male role models, and a multitude of sporting programs were developed and flourished between the 1890s and 1920. Sport was utilized as a tool to turn young boys into sufficiently masculine heterosexual men who would be socially desirable. In other words, the sporting terrain

was born from an antigay and antiwoman perspective. Women were not allowed to play sport, and homophobia in the sporting arena was so rampant that gay athletes would never have considered coming out of the closet.

While things have changed significantly for women in the sporting terrain, little has changed for gay men. The openly gay population is vastly under-represented in sport. This is to say that there are fewer openly gay men in sport than there are in the general population. This, however, does not mean that there are fewer gay men in sport than in the general population; it merely indicates that gay males, for various reasons, have decided not to come out of the closet. For example, there has *never* been an openly gay professional baseball, basketball, football, or hockey player to come out while actively playing in the United States; and only a handful have come out after retiring. This is remarkable when one considers that tens of thousands of professional athletes have gone through the ranks of professional sports in the past 100 years. We are therefore left with the most pressing question, why are there so few *openly* gay athletes in team sports?

Percentages and Problems: Identifying as Gay in Society and in Sport

Before engaging in a discussion of the percentage of gay men in sport, I must state that it is impossible to know what percentage of the general population is gay. There are two main reasons. First, it is impossible to force someone to admit to being gay or bisexual, and as long as there is homophobia, sexual minorities will be influenced to hide their sexuality from a disapproving populace. Second, it is hard to know what percentage of the population is “gay” because it is difficult to define exactly what it means to be gay or straight. The picture grows even more confusing when you consider that in addition to there being those that consider themselves gay, straight, and bisexual; there are also those who consider themselves asexual, intersexual, and transsexual.

After understanding that there are multiple sexual orientations, we then further complicate matters by categorizing sexuality along three other dimensions: sexual behavior (what you do), sexual orientation (what you want to do), and sexual identity (how you view yourself). For example, when I was in high school I knew I wanted romantic and sexual relationships with boys (sexual orientation), but because I was afraid to come out of the closet with my desires, I had relationships with girls instead (sexual behavior), even though I privately identified as gay and never felt emotionally connected to the delete the women (Anderson 2000). In this aspect, my sexual orientation and private identity were gay, while my sexual behavior and public identity were straight.

These complications aside, studies of the percentage of American males who identify as gay have various findings. They show that anywhere from 2.8% to 10% of American men identify as gay. For example, while 10% of the freshmen at UCLA identify as a sexual minority, 5% of the California voters identify as gay or lesbian. Thus,

the only thing consistent about estimates of the gay population is that they vary. We will never know what percentage of the population is a sexual minority until our culture ceases to produce antigay attitudes (cultural discrimination), and our institutions such as schools, churches, and the government begin to give gays and lesbians equality in their policies—such as allowing gays to marry, to serve in the military, to be Boy Scouts, and to be treated equally in our school settings (not providing this equality is something we call institutional discrimination). As long as homophobia exists, sexual minorities will be influenced to hide their sexuality in much the same manner that the self-reporting of how many students have cheated on a test is likely to be unreliable. This obviously means that we can never know the percentage of gay or bisexual male athletes either. Indeed, it is *possible* that on any given sports team all the players can be closeted gay men, or vice versa; there simply is no way of knowing. When it comes to knowing what percentage of gay athletes are in sports, the only thing that can be said with certainty is that gay men and gay athletes do exist. Indeed, I've interviewed hundreds of them for my research.

My research shows that gay athletes exist at all levels, and in all sports (Anderson 2005). There have been openly gay national champion swimmers, divers, tennis players, runners, and ice-skaters. There have been world record–holding track and field athletes, bodybuilders, and other individual sport athletes. There have been professional football players, baseball players, and soccer players who have come out of the closet after retiring, and I've anonymously interviewed active football players and a Stanley Cup–winning National Hockey League player for my research. For a more comprehensive list of famous gay athletes, you can examine www.outsports.com/outathletes.

What my research cannot say, however, is whether gay athletes are over or under-represented in sport. In other words, are there as many gay men in sport as there are in your typical English class? Since most boys are socialized into sport before they know what their sexual orientation is, we can conclude that the percentages *start off* about the same. So the question becomes, after gay boys are introduced to team sports, are they then attracted to or deterred from continuing to play them?

There are two schools of thought on this issue. The first maintains that the culture of team sports is so homophobic that when boys figure out they are gay (many know before they hit puberty, but most figure it out around puberty) they leave team sports for a safer environment like individual sports, theater arts, or intellectual pursuits. The second way of analyzing this is to understand that if gay boys (and men) are afraid of being known as gay, they might specifically seek team sports out because team sport athletes operate under the assumption of heterosexuality. In other words, stereotypes hold that baseball and football players are “straight,” whereas athletes in ice-skating or kids in the band are more likely to be thought of as gay. Thus, team sports become highly desirable places for deeply closeted gay males. Team sport athletes are essentially cloaked in the assumption of heterosexuality, yet they are immersed in an incredibly homo-eroticized activity. They get to be around highly sexualized and toned athletic boys and men, while being publicly perceived as heterosexual.

Homophobia in Sport

Whether there are more gay athletes in sport than in the general population or not, one thing is certain: Being a gay athlete in an arena that was founded upon a homophobic

premise is *difficult*. Team sports remain one of America's most homophobic institutions. There are several reasons for this. First, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, sport was founded on homophobic assumptions. At the time it was believed that people became gay or straight depending on their upbringing, and homophobia in and through sport was thought to deter boys from "becoming" gay. Although science clearly has demonstrated that neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality is the product of "choice" or one's childhood (most scientists agree that sexuality is largely biological in nature and out of individual control), sport has remained a homophobic arena because homophobia is essentially passed down through the generations. In other words, coaches and older players teach new players to be homophobic. Thus, homosexuality is not learned, but homophobia is.

Sport is also a homophobic arena because, at some level, the players recognize that it is a homoerotic environment. Some men, gay or straight, may be sexually aroused by engaging in sports with other boys. Homophobia therefore becomes the tool by which heterosexuals attempt to say, "No, I am not gay." However, because it is truly impossible for heterosexuals to "prove" they are "not gay," they repeatedly try to prove they are straight. In a homophobic culture, if a man says, "I'm gay," no one questions him; however, if he says, "I'm straight," it is not taken as fact, because people know that he could be closeted. So in a homophobic culture, such as a high school, heterosexual men (and closeted gay men) constantly attempt to dispel any notion of being thought gay, even if they are. They do this by frequently sexualizing women (often referred to as locker room talk), when they talk about their heterosexual desires and activities, which are often made up. Most significant, they also denounce homosexuality through using

words like “fag” and phrases like “that’s so gay” as a way of subjugating homosexuality and distancing themselves from it.

Finally, sport remains a homophobic culture because younger boys want to be accepted by their teammates. If they join a team as high school freshmen, and all the older boys are using the term “fag” consistently, they are more likely to copy them as a way to fit in. They fear that if they don’t denounce others as “fags,” they may be more likely to be considered gay themselves. In this aspect, well over half the kids who use the word “fag” do not truly feel homophobic; they are simply trying to fit in (Smith, 1998). In fact, the most common thing I hear from people after they use the word “fag” is, “Oh. I didn’t mean it that way.” I usually respond with, “Then don’t use the word, because that’s the way I take it.”

My research also indicates that if older boys cease to allow the use of the word “fag” on a team, younger boys will quickly comply. One team I studied showed that the entire team frequently used the word until one of their teammates came out of the closet. As soon as he did, the team had a meeting and unanimously agreed to stop using the word “fag.” When new athletes joined the team, they quickly complied with the tolerant atmosphere, and all agreed that the team atmosphere was much more enjoyable.

All of this places gay athletes in a strange social situation. They are immersed in a homophobic culture that provides them with a group of sexually attractive men to befriend, but they do not necessarily know who is homophobic and who is not. They hear people using the word “fag” and the phrase “that’s gay,” but they do not know in what context they mean it. Because of this, it is very difficult for gay athletes to accurately gauge the level of homophobia on their teams, and it scares them from coming out. To

illustrate the paradoxical existence that closeted gay team sport athletes live, let us examine the story of “Blake,” a high school basketball player in a small Indiana town.

Blake’s Story

The wooden floor of the high school gym squeaks as Blake shuffles his 6-foot 4-inch 190-pound body up and down the court. Only a sophomore, Blake is already one of the best players in Indiana, drawing coverage from local media and praise from his community. Despite the fact that the rest of the team has gone home, Blake remains late into the evening, shooting basket after basket in order to better himself as an athlete. Blake had no dreams of superstardom when he began playing ball, but today he hopes that putting a ball through a hoop will not only provide him with the image of being heterosexual, but that it will also provide him with a college scholarship. “Basketball is my ticket out of here,” he tells me. Blake hopes to escape the immense homophobia from his Midwestern home and community by relocating to a metropolitan area for college.

Blake grudgingly picked up basketball in the fourth grade because he perceived that popularity among boys was based primarily on athleticism, and he desired to raise his social standing among his peers. “I was actually more interested in reading,” Blake tells me, “but that’s not really cool. I mean I really hated basketball; I’d much rather read a book; but other boys didn’t do that. Everybody played basketball, and I wanted to fit in, so I did too.” Blake learned long ago that male athletes are commonly perceived as incapable of being gay—a façade that he strategically takes advantage of as a basketball player.

It was during the sixth grade that Blake began to worry about a sexuality he increasingly recognized as “gay,” and by the eighth grade Blake knew with certainty that he was what he feared. “It’s not easy to be the thing that all the boys use as a put-down. It’s what you call someone when you’re trying to dis them, and I certainly did not want to be that!” So Blake learned to play both the game of basketball and the game of heterosexual passing. On the court he was “straight,” but off the court he was able to shed the heterosexual façade via the Internet. “I met one gay friend online, and then another, and then I discovered XY.com where there are like thousands of gay teens online.” Near the end of his eighth-grade year, he even ventured out to meet other gay boys and eventually found a boyfriend during his freshman year.

His boyfriend helped him realize that he was not alone, and that loving another boy was nothing to feel guilty about. “We dated for a few months, which at 14 seemed like forever, and then one day he just stopped calling. I couldn’t figure out why he wasn’t returning my calls or my e-mails.” Blake began dealing with the taxing emotion of being rejected. Being closeted however, Blake had no adult to turn to express his anguish to. So he returned to venting online. “I was talking to a friend, asking him if he had heard from Chris.” His friend responded, “Didn’t you hear? Chris was killed in a car accident.”

“I started to cry,” he said. “So I ran to the bathroom and turned the radio up as loud as it went so nobody could hear me.” Alone, Blake had nobody to turn to, nobody to hug him and hold him. He would have to mourn this devastating loss in secret. But while the blaring music cloaked his tears, it couldn’t change his loneliness.

<ext>I tried to tell myself that it didn’t matter to me. But it did. I loved Chris. He was my first love, and I was young, and it hit me twice as hard. I only wished I could have told

others; but I didn't have anyone I could talk to about it. I made a reference to him in a paper my freshmen year but I couldn't tell my teacher or my parents why he died, or who he was, or why I was upset. Hell, I couldn't even tell them that someone had died at all.

Blake's story highlights some of the hardships of concealing one's sexual identity. Blake repeated to me, "I just wish I could have talked to someone." His voice began to crack, and through muffled tears he angrily said, "If it had been a straight friend it would have been easy, but no, it was my boyfriend, and nobody wants to know about that. I was all alone."

Today, Blake walks the hallways of his rural high school publicly popular, but emotionally alienated. He describes his high school as "a typical jock high school." Ironically, where others think that Blake has it all, from where he stands, towering above the others figuratively and physically, he feels alienated. There are no openly gay students at his school, and Blake isn't even sure if there are any in his community. "If there are, I certainly don't know of them," he says with sadness.

Blake is also daunted by the insistent fear of being discovered as gay:
I fear all the time that others will find out. That people's opinions of me will change if they find out that I'm gay. Like my teachers, they won't think the same of me; they make gay comments and say them in a derogatory manner. Even my own bro will say stuff about gay people. It makes it hard, I'm always thinking in the back of my mind, would you feel this way about me if you knew I was gay.

He adds, "My friends, it's the same thing with them. I have a lot of good friends, but a lot of them are religious, which strikes quite a bit of fear with me." Compounding matters, Blake fears that his parents may have an inclination that he is gay. "They don't

want to think about it. Mom says, 'Blake you need to get a girlfriend.' 'Mom I don't want to,' I tell her. 'I don't have time. I'm too busy. I have to get my workout in.'"

Basketball becomes the all-purpose excuse for Blake. It not only provides him with a veneer of heterosexuality, but it gives him something to do other than dating women.

Coming out is certainly something Blake ponders—daily—but he just has not been able to bring himself to come out yet. I asked him how he thought he would be treated if he were to come out to everyone in his town today.

In all honesty, there will be some people who are not okay with it. But, at the same time, I think it might open a lot of people's eyes. Like the people at my school, they don't have any gay friends. They don't know any gay people at all. They might just look at me and say Blake has been my best friend since I was little, and he's gay, and he's cool. I just hope they see me as the same goofy Blake.

His response is pleasantly absent of fears of being victimized by homophobic violence, partially because he embodies the ability to commit violence himself—he is tall and muscular. "Nobody would mess with me," he says, "I'm bigger and stronger than all the other guys at my school."

Blake's decision to postpone his coming out is complicated. Gay or straight, out of state tuition is expensive, and a scholarship for playing ball would help; Blake fears that coming out would hurt his chances, something hard to refute. "I definitely plan on coming out when I'm in college; there is no question about that. The question is, will I come out during my junior or senior year of high school?" Bravery is not so easily bought. Coming out in a small, homophobic town, in opposition to homophobic parents,

teachers, and teammates, is more pressure than any million-dollar athlete would have to handle. It is, without doubt, as tough a decision as any 16-year-old should have to make.

Coming Out in Sport—Openly Gay Athletes

Blake's isolation as a closeted gay athlete is the common story for closeted gay athletes. However, gay athletes do come out; and when they do, their stories are somewhat surprising. I interviewed a total of 50 openly gay high school athletes, most of whom were top-rated athletes. They came from all sports, from football to bowling. These athletes' stories show primarily that homosexuality is not antithetical to athleticism. Of the 50 gay athletes I studied, all but 6 were considered highly valuable to their teams. The sample included a number of athletes who were state champions as well.

The fact that so many of those in my study were excellent athletes tells us one of two things: either (1) gay athletes are better than straight athletes, or (2) at this point in time, only good gay athletes are coming out of the closet. Indeed, I maintain that the answer is the second. At present, only really good athletes seem to be coming out of the closet in the sporting realm because what is most important to athletes is winning. In other words, teammates are willing to tolerate gay athletes as long as they are good athletes. Gay athletes are able to sense this. However, at present, gay athletes must be more than good, and most come out only if they are good and they sense some general support from their teammates and coach. When all three conditions align, they are more likely to come out, although it is still more likely that they will not.

Once gay athletes do come out, they generally report a much more accepting environment than they had anticipated. Not one athlete in my study was physically or

even verbally attacked by his teammates. Heterosexual teammates seemed to take one of two stances: (1) they tolerated the gay athlete but preferred that he not talk about it, or (2) they accepted the gay athlete, had many questions for him, and frequently enjoyed talking about it. It is, of course, the latter of the two that makes gay athletes feel more welcomed and more a part of their team.

The Changing Nature of Homophobia in Society and in Sport

All of this is changing. Homophobia is on the decline in American culture, and this is particularly true of youth culture. Shows like *Real World* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* have helped to lower the rates of homophobia among youth, and this has permitted more gays and lesbians to come out of the closet. And once people get to know a gay or lesbian, homophobia decreases. The Internet has also played an important role in decreasing homophobia. By providing a forum for gay men (and lesbians) to anonymously come to terms with their sexuality through a series of small steps, the Internet has accelerated the emergence of gay men from the closet. Gay youth generally create an anonymous screen name to enter gay chat rooms and instant message with other gay kids. After feeling comfortable enough, they often begin a slow process of revealing their true identity. Eventually, their online community leads to public meetings, and gay youth are therefore provided with much more opportunity to find other youth than they were prior to the Internet. They are better networked and emotionally equipped to come out because they have an online community of support. This has led to a greater coming out in general, which has therefore affected the number of gay athletes who come out.

Despite the emergence of gay athletes from the closet in the past few years, and despite the fact that evidence suggests that gay athletes are represented in solid numbers across most sports and at most levels, the institutions that govern sport have been virtually nonrespondent in addressing homophobia in athletics. Gay high school students are protected by law only in California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia. Therefore, in addition to sport remaining one of the last bastions of cultural homophobia, sport in American culture also remains one of the last bastions of *institutional* homophobia. Still, times are changing. A mix of legal actions and legislation is combining with popular culture to quickly erode homophobia in American culture. As these improvements are made in the culture in general, they will also affect the arena of athletics. Therefore, it is likely that gay male athletes will continue to come out at an ever-increasing pace, and they are more likely to be accepted by their teammates with each passing day. As they are increasingly tolerated, heterosexuals will find that the reduction of homophobia also benefits them.

This is because, in a homophobic culture, we can never truly know who is gay or lesbian, for one we assume to be heterosexual could be closeted. Thus, heterosexuals continuously find their sexuality suspect; this is evident in the manner in which teens call each other “fag” in attempt to displace suspicion of homosexuality. In order to “prove” they are heterosexual, they generally try to align themselves with extreme masculinity. Essentially, they are frequently trying to prove they are heterosexuals, and limit their gender expression to do so. Reducing homophobia, however, allows heterosexuals to express a greater gender range, without fear of being called gay or lesbian. This is made popular in the notion of “metrosexuality” (Flocker 2004) in which heterosexual men

proudly cast off homophobia and feel free to associate with gay friends and to do things that are often considered “feminine,” all while maintaining a heterosexual identity.

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