



On the Possible Outcomes of ‘Coming Out’: Exploring the Troubling Narratives of Homophobia in Football’s Spectator-Culture

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Abstract

This paper aims to situate the notion of ‘coming out’ in both men’s and women’s football (soccer in the US) within the complex discursive field of gender-sexuality- masculinity in order to explore how the construct of ‘identity’ almost always remains at play historically with the dominant factor of heterosexual masculinity associated with the sport, especially in its spectator culture. In the process it also tries to find out whether a difference is perceivable in the treatment towards a homosexual player through a relative comparison between men’s and women’s football. The paper engages and analyses two select memoirs— former USMNT player Robbie Rogers’ *Coming out to Play* and USWNT player Megan Rapinoe’s *One Life* but does not limit its discussion to personal recollections only; rather places them against the historical narratives of homophobia and violence associated with football.

Keywords: homophobia, heterosexual masculinity, spectator, coming out

The discourse concerning gender and sexuality in the arena of sports produces a contested ground. Especially in a global mass sport like football (soccer in the US) where a large number of spectators are involved, a sportsperson’s identity along with his/her performance in the field always remains in the process of being recognized. The scope of the present paper limits itself within the purview of top tier professional football where the players and the

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spectators draw mainstream media attention. 'Coming out' in the public is a largely discussed issue in contemporary football. The popular mainstream version of the sport in the Twenty First century has become a highly mediatized entity that is able to capture the attention of a large number of spectators from all over the world. The issue of coming out of the players in both men's and women's football is thus to be studied in reference to the gender relations historically associated with the idea of the sport along with the history of the sporting culture involving the spectators and media.

Football, Heterosexual Masculinity and Homophobia

Organised sport has often been observed as a phenomenon serving a "mechanism of masculinization" (Adams et al. 279). In football the sense of 'orthodoxy' often adheres to the traditional male values that engender a strictly heteronormative atmosphere. Andrew Parker comments, "[v]iewed either in terms of its occupational or social characteristics, 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" (691). Any deviation from such standards of 'maleness' has been met with adverse reactions. Reiteration of such a judgmental narrative of masculinity in football historically has given rise to the condition of a 'compulsory heterosexuality' (McCarl Nielsen et al. 283-296) and such obligatory notion leads to a clearly homophobic football culture. The construct of such a discourse of masculinity is essentially heterosexual by nature and it endows the dominant narrative a form of hegemony. Such trace of "hegemonic masculinity" along with its constituent "toughness" and "competitiveness" (Connell 63-64) should be investigated in the functional terrain of professional football. While defining hegemonic masculinity, Donaldson mentions two of its elemental components—heterosexuality and homophobia (645). A comparatively recent work further elaborates it, "[h]egemonic masculinity reinforces androcentric privilege, subjugating women, while also discriminating against gay men, who by their sexual orientation alone fail to exhibit the most desirable masculine trait, heterosexuality" (Kian et al. 681).

However, the game of football has certain space for allowing emotional gestures that might be termed non-masculine but that can happen within the affiliated space the spectators grant as long as it does not go against heterosexual gender/sexuality conventions:

Hugging, kissing and embracing are common, both on the playing field and in the stands. Within the context of soccer, various patterns of behaviour are entirely permissible without any hint of their being classified as unmasculine. On the background of denial of non-heterosexuality, it is possible for men to display emotions that they would never dare show openly outside the safe confines of the stadium. This behaviour is acceptable among men only as long as no player or fan seeks physical contact with men privately. (Paul 129)

Coming Out in Public: A History of “Taboo” in Men’s Football?

Although researches in the past decade indicate that there have been changes in perception among spectators in top tier professional men’s football the dominant narrative prevails. Coming out as gay while playing is really challenging for a top level professional footballer; statistically there has been no active homosexual player in the most popular top flight men’s competitions like the English Premier League (England), Serie A (Italy), La Liga (Spain), and Ligue 1 (France). Male footballers refrain from coming out because of a number of factors– mostly out of fear of a fan backlash and consequences of media breaking news. Although the intensity of the factors at work varies in different cultures the output is almost the same. Adam Brenton of *UCFB* identifies some pattern that shapes the narratives of masculinity and determines the environment where the notion of coming out is challenged: 1) “fan’s impact on other fans” where “tolerance of homophobic abuse” is tested, 2) “fan’s impact on players” where “using sexuality as an insult in game situations” affect the footballer, and 3) media and social media’s pressure and abuse. All these affect a footballer or a fan’s decision to assert one’s sexual identity in “football spaces” (Brenton).

Justin Fashanu, the first ever male footballer to come out publicly as gay in 1990 while playing professional football received a chain of hostile reactions from the homophobic community—from the players to the fans, from his family members to media. Fashanu in an interview to BBC in 1992 records: “There was a lot of backlash. I could not get a job . . . So, I think it affected me quite badly” (Gaston et al. 306). The consequences of coming out in public were grave. His “career stalled as he drifted from team to team, facing openly homophobic jeers from crowds (and teammates) as he moved from England to the United States, then Canada, bouncing between teams and leagues” (Sloop and West 2). In an interview, his younger brother John Fashanu suggested the presence of such a homophobic society at large—about remembering contemporary “public’s perception of homosexuality” as a “taboo” (Alwakeel). However, such a disapproving stand from his brother is largely influenced by the general perception of the fans towards the issue of homosexuality on the field since John himself was an footballer at that time. John’s rejection of his brother’s sexual orientation might have been structured by a rigid sense of hegemonic masculinity associated with the game. *Pink News* records the following:

I was worried that people would think it was me. John Fashanu, Justin Fashanu, J and J I was the hard man, we were hard men, Vinnie Jones, John Fashanu, Dennis Wise, we were the hard team with a macho, strong image, we had a massive following of people who loved the way we played, and suddenly my brother’s coming out and saying this? (Burman)

The fear concerning the fans’ disapproval of a player’s identity largely deviated from the strict norms of hegemonic masculinity is real and it always remains at play with the narrative of football spectators’ recognition.

Fans and Homophobia: Doubts on Overcoming the Fear

Robbie Rogers, the former United States Men’s National Team representative after retiring from his professional career in English football decided to come out in 2013. In his autobiography *Coming*

Out to Play Rogers elaborately describes the predominant homophobia of the English football fans. Rogers despite being an admirer of the ‘tradition’ of English football fans’ impassioned activities meant for demoralizing the opposition, is critical of the violent part of it and their homophobic chants—

What shocked me most about the anti-gay stuff I encountered in England was what came from the fans In general, fans in the UK would say whatever awful thing they could think of to try to intimidate the opposing team. I loved the tradition and history and passion around football in Great Britain, but I could never understand why a packed stadium in Leeds would chant homophobic slurs when the team from Brighton came to town. It felt like when the pack mentality took over, all humanity flew out the door. It was nothing for fans to boo an opposing team and yell “faggot” this and “faggot” that. At away games, when the fans screamed, “faggot” at us I knew they weren’t speaking directly to me, so it didn’t much bother me because they didn’t know I was gay. And even if they’d known I was gay I’m not sure it would have bothered me to have fans from an opposing team curse me. (ch. 9)

Homophobic chants in football stadiums are common and often have been normalized. Rory Magrath while analysing homophobic themed chants in the football stadium initially resorts to the theoretical positions of early researchers—

As Giulianotti acknowledged, ‘[s]upporters aim epithets such as “poofster,” “fanny” and “nonce” at the allegedly weak masculinity of players and officials’. Pearson’s (2012) ethnography of the various identities of British football fandom observes the commonality of terms such as ‘gay’, ‘queer’ and ‘sausage jockey’ to insult other teams’ fans and players. Such terms or chants, according to Caudwell (126), “suggest male heterosexuality as the highly prestigious norm and gay men’s sexuality as the trivialised ‘other’.” (712)

Generally, football chants in the stadium can be categorized into two types: 1) chants for the team the spectators support and 2) chants against the opposition team's players to demoralize them. Homosexually themed chants often function as "sporting technique" used during the matches as perceived by the fans (Adams et al. 293; Magrath 720). It is a popular perception that the supporters prioritize their team's success (Magrath 721) over anything else and any such method can be employed. However, such a narrative appeals along the lines of dominant masculinity, where homosexuality is associated with all the negative things (Magrath 721). This factor can be really problematic for an on-field player who is homosexual. Rogers' narrative gives a hint of how it feels to be at the receiving end of such chants:

What scared me was what it would feel like if the Leeds fans turned on me. I saw that happen one time to one of our goalies who had let the ball get past him at a critical moment in a game. The fans went crazy. They were so furious and disruptive that our coach pulled him from the game because he was worried the fans were being so hard on him that it would affect his play, and the team's as well. So whenever I thought about what it would be like to play for Leeds if they knew I was gay, I'd think of that and I couldn't imagine that I could take it. It really scared me to think what they'd say—or do—if they ever found out. (ch. 9)

Rogers has been well aware of the sensitizing campaigns inside and around football spaces. However, the toxic masculine culture that prevails in such spaces makes him think that the sport has failed to create a safe and progressive atmosphere—

I'm not saying that there weren't attempts by the management to tamp down the anti-gay rhetoric, because there were. For example, at Elland Road there are signs posted throughout the public areas of the stadium asking fans to "refrain from using abusive language" and stating management's "zero tolerance" for "racial, homophobic, or discriminatory abuse." But it wasn't nearly enough, because sometimes it felt like football was so far behind

where the rest of society had progressed in its views about gay people and homophobia that it was still living in the Stone Age. (ch. 9)

These are the factors that could bar a player from coming out even in apparently liberal nations because the football spaces in the men's sport are hostile in general. Also, media plays another important role. Anxiety regarding the representation affects a footballer as Rogers feared about the consequences of being misquoted; he had his trust issue with the media's fabricated narratives (ch. 12). As a precaution he asked the reporters to share his words at first "off the record" so that he could trust them in order to avoid being part of any agenda driven narrative. (ch. 12). Unlike Fashanu, Rogers received a welcoming reception in general from the world around him but the critical process that he went through before coming out is evocative of the homophobic atmosphere of the sport.

Women's Football/Soccer and Masculinity/Femininity

Any discussion concerning masculinity/femininity in the arena of women's football is a complex one. The initial approach to investigate the area is troubled by the almost obligatory narrative of masculinity associated with the game itself where the sporting culture is synonymous to a masculine culture. Therefore, the first stereotypical impression regarding women's football is that it enters the domain where masculinity is performed (Kaelberer 6). Also, this concept essentially strips off the 'real' woman image of the participating footballers by questioning their deviation from ideal notions of femininity and initiates an associative discourse involving homosexuality (6).

Women's football has always been a phenomenon with contested ground as Engh argues— "Women's participation in sports can be theorised as embedded in cultural norms around 'womanhood', but it should also be understood as shaped and regulated according to heteronormative ideas of femininity that render the female body as distinctly different from the (male) athletic body" (137). On one hand, the domain of women's football functions by breaking the stereotypical gender attributes and

challenging the very masculine construct of the sport itself; on the other, when perceived from the heterosexual and masculine benchmarks of the sport it breeds a new form of sexism as women footballers are often tagged as homosexuals. Cox and Thompson observe:

Female athletes, who deviate from the ‘norms’ of femininity by having short hair and athletic bodies, are challenged overtly or covertly about their sexuality. Homophobia in sport reflects not only a fear of women’s sexuality, but also a fear of the loss of male control of that sexuality, thus endangering the balance of power in gender relationships. (8)

Women’s Football and Inclusivity

Interestingly, women’s football provides a relatively safer space for the LGBTQIA2S+ people as they can assert their sexual identity at least in the top tiers of European and US football (soccer). The 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup observes 95 members out of the LGBTQ+ community as reported by *AP News* (in 2023 by Ralph); another report by *Pink News* (in 2023 by Billson) records the number to be 88—whatever the figure is it clearly shows an increase in comparison to the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup. This is significant as the men’s edition of 2022 FIFA World Cup reportedly didn’t involve any out sportsperson. *Sports Illustrated* quotes USWNT soccer star Megan Rapinoe, a gay footballer, from her interview to *Sky Sports* in 2022 regarding this visible difference—

Why aren’t there any out male athletes in the elite sports? Well, it’s not safe. They don’t feel safe. They either feel that they’re going to be abused from fans, they’re going to be kicked off teams, have slurs thrown at them, whatever it is...So it’s not safe, and until it is safe we won’t see any male players. I think it’s safer on the women’s side, and I think we have a lot of camaraderie just between ourselves and a lot more people coming out, which makes it easier for everyone, but I would say from the sporting directors to the club owners to the fans, to all the players, it’s your responsibility also.

The perceived superior inclusivity (relating to gender and sexuality) in Women's football has evolved out of complex scenarios. Engh comments:

Women soccer players, through engaging in a sport that is deemed by many to be a masculine sport, are constantly engaged in challenging notions of female appropriateness and female athleticism. Through their participation they are destabilising notions about gender roles, as well as notions about the physical and natural difference between men and women, masculinity and femininity. (149)

Skogvang and Fasting hold quite similar views as Women's football not only challenges hegemonic masculinity but also disturbs the narrative of any "hegemonic femininity" by producing 'multiple identities' (875; Cleland et al. 462). While researching on Norwegian women's football Skogvang and Fasting identify "less homonegativity" in comparison to men's football (877). The more visibility of LGBTQ players in Women's football supports such findings even at a global level.

In comparison to Robbie Rogers' account of coming out, the autobiography of Megan Rapinoe offers a much more relaxed narrative. The fear of the reactions of the society—the fans or media appears to be less operative in guiding her decision; instead it is her individual and political awareness of the need to come out that prompts her to take the decision. Rapinoe recollects in her autobiography *One Life*—

We had been talking about the way athletes never come out, particularly when the spotlight is on them. I'd never been in the spotlight before. The team hadn't been popular enough. Now, as we flew back into the eye of a media storm, we were popular and I didn't feel right . . . All year I'd been reading about gay rights and the law, and it had made me much more politically aware. Coming out, I understood now, was not a zero sum game, but more of a process. I wasn't in the closet, but no one in the press knew I was gay and that aspect of my life wasn't part of the conversation. Saying something now might be impactful—I

don't think I used those kinds of words yet, but I was making my way toward that conclusion. "Clearly this is a public issue and we're public figures," I said to Lori, but it wasn't only that. Not talking about my sexuality felt intuitively bad, like I was operating a policy of don't ask, don't tell, or flying deliberately under the radar. "I'm gay, and an athlete, and I just want to be out," I said. I looked down the aircraft at all the other gay players, most of them older than me. Why am I not out? I thought, impatiently. Why are we all not out? (ch. 8)

Unlike Rogers, regarding public reception Rapinoe didn't have any concerns—

Once a decision feels right, I don't agonize or have reservations. I felt similar to the way I had when I came out to my parents, which was that (a) people were not going to be surprised to find out I was gay. And (b) if this was going to be a super big deal to people, then that's wack, and they're not going to be in my life anyway. But the way the world was going, I didn't think this was going to be a problem. (ch. 8)

The only concern that her mother shares, is regarding the sponsorship issue that might hamper her career. So the fear of reception is there, largely influenced by the preconceived notions. However, Rapinoe's decision to come out cannot be not restrained by the fear of consequences affecting her football career—

I'd been talking to my mom, who went through another round of jitters. She was fearful that, right at the moment when the team and I had made such a splash, coming out might mess things up for me. "Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" she asked, and mentioned my sponsorship deals. She wanted me to consider all the angles before I made my decision, but I told her it was already made. I'd always felt soccer wasn't the beginning and end of my life, which was something my parents had taught me, and now I knew for sure. Coming out was bigger, more important,

and more integral to who I was than anything that happened in sports. (ch. 8)

Rapinoe is well aware of the fact that the sport in general is itself “homophobic” by observing the less number of people coming out. However, she evaluates her untroubled event of coming out as a part of a social movement (ch. 8).

Problematizing the Narrative of Inclusivity and the Dominant Heteronormative Perspective

Although women’s football has been branded a champion where members from LGBTQ+ community can express their sexuality in a safer football space its scope is still limited especially outside the liberal zone. Women’s football appearing as a unique phenomenon differentiates itself from the sport called ‘football’ which is universally thought to be men’s game. Such “gender marking” makes the women’s sport somewhat “inferior” (Kaelberer 5). It has been often employed as a tool of sexism in women’s football spaces. Liberal media’s search for out sportspersons in women’s football often endangers the narrative of inclusivity in football spaces. While writing an insightful article for *The Guardian* Ghanaian researcher Adjepong shares her concerns regarding starkly contrasting scenarios in women’s football in Ghana– women footballers are often portrayed as ‘lesbians’ by the newspapers, coaches and football fans (“With all eyes”). According to her findings, a good number of retired Ghanaian National team footballers revealed that they had been asked to give in to the demand of “sexual favours” demanded by the coaches to ensure their place in the team; refusal to such demands directly affected their selection process (“With all eyes”). Adjepong shares a former captain’s statement where it is claimed that an act of turning down of such proposals eventually would have been considered as a proof for their ‘lesbianism’ (“With all eyes”).

Following the same lines of the dominant masculinity in association with football, homosexuality is referred repeatedly to have negative connotations. Kaelberer too in her research has shown the problems of celebration of femininity of the women footballers by the popular media houses; that in turn effectively

becomes an acknowledging tool of the dominant narrative of the hegemonic masculinity associated with football (8).

Conclusion

Recent researches have suggested that a more inclusive atmosphere can be traced in different football spaces both in men's and women's football. Through the eyes of 'Inclusive Masculinity Theory' in football (Cashmore and Cleland 370-387; Magrath *Inclusive Masculinities in Contemporary Football*; Gaston et al. 301-312) a shift from the hegemonic masculinity has been detected. Women's football contributes largely to the inclusive atmosphere as a significant number of players feel safe to come out publicly; also the fans from the LGBTQIA2S+ community have been able to claim some football spaces, especially in top tiers. Further research needs to be made on the scope of coming out of male footballers while playing in search of a bright future.

Endnote

1. Terms like spectators, supporters and fans have been used interchangeably without following the strict taxonomy of Giulianotti (25-46).

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