



Kopay, David (b. 1942)

by Robert Kellerman

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David Kopay made headlines in 1975 when he came out publicly as a gay man. A veteran of the National Football League who played on five NFL teams, he was the first American professional athlete to acknowledge publicly his homosexuality. He thus stands near the head of the short list of openly gay and lesbian elite athletes.

Born on June 28, 1942 in Chicago into a strict Roman Catholic family, Kopay was the second of Anton and Marguerite Kopay's four children. When David was in grammar school, the family moved to North Hollywood, California. At the age of fourteen, he enrolled in Claretian Junior Seminary, a boarding school for students contemplating the priesthood. Although he enjoyed many aspects of the seminary, Kopay left it after eighteen months.

David began his football career at a southern California football powerhouse, Notre Dame High School, where his older brother Tony had preceded him. Named to the all-Catholic Conference football all-star team, he had an outstanding high school football career.

Kopay originally planned to attend Marquette University in Milwaukee on a football scholarship, but when Marquette discontinued its football program in 1961, he instead went to the University of Washington, where his brother was a member of the team.

There Kopay excelled in football and joined the Theta Chi fraternity. In 1963, as co-captain of the team, he led the Huskies to the PAC-10 conference championship and an appearance in the Rose Bowl.

Kopay was drafted by the San Francisco '49ers in 1964 and spent ten years in the NFL. In his first year, he emerged as the '49ers' leading rusher, though the following year he lost his starting position. He was traded to the Detroit Lions in 1968, to the Washington Redskins in 1969 (where his coach was the legendary Vince Lombardi), to the New Orleans Saints in 1971, and to the Green Bay Packers in 1973.

As a player, Kopay was known for his toughness and tenacity rather than for any outstanding natural talent. A hard worker who was aggressive and versatile, he was a real asset to the teams for which he played. Often playing in pain and despite injuries, he earned the respect of his teammates for his perseverance.

During his time as a professional football player, he was keenly aware of and conflicted by his sexual feelings for men. He went to a gay bar in Detroit; and he had a few sexual experiences, both heterosexual and homosexual, in Washington (including with Redskins teammate Jerry Smith, who died of AIDS in 1986).

While in Washington, Kopay acknowledged to himself that he was gay, and entered therapy to deal with what he perceived as a problem. At the suggestion of his therapist, in 1971 he married; the marriage lasted little more than a year.

Kopay's public coming out was precipitated by a series of articles published by the now-defunct Washington

(D.C.) *Star* on the presence of gay athletes in professional sports. The series was written by Lynn Rosselini, who was criticized for not revealing any of her sources, despite the fact that the only professional athletes who would talk with her insisted on preserving their anonymity. Kopay alone agreed to be identified, and his forthrightness set off a media firestorm.

Kopay was booked on the *David Susskind Show*, debated gay rights with homophobe Anita Bryant, and became a hero in the gay community. A somewhat reluctant celebrity, he nevertheless acquitted himself well as a role model, especially for young athletes struggling with their sexuality and with homophobia in sports.

Following the interview in the *Star*, Kopay sought opportunities to pursue a coaching career, but none came forward then, and none has to this day. Still, despite the cost his coming out may have entailed, he has no regrets. In his autobiography, he described his honesty about his sexuality as "the best thing I've ever done."

Kopay currently lives in the Los Angeles area, where he works as a sales manager for a floor-covering firm. His experience has inspired other gay and lesbian athletes to come out, though almost none from the NFL. (Roy Simmons, a former New York Giants tackle, and Esera Tuaolo, who played with the Green Bay Packers, the Minnesota Vikings, and the Atlanta Falcons, remain the lone exceptions.)

Although Kopay does not consider himself a gay activist, he regularly supports gay causes and speaks publicly about being out as a gay athlete, as well as about the complicated relationship between sports and homosexuality.

In September 2007, Kopay pledged a gift of \$1,000,000 to the University of Washington's glbtq center.

"I continually hear from people all over the world that my act of coming out—especially when I did in 1975—has empowered them in their search for self and to see their vision," Kopay remarked. "Hopefully, my million-dollar pledge will influence others to support the university and the Q Center to continue to help others to do just that."

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About the Author

Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.