



Sports: Gay Male

by Jim Buzinski

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In 1993 the Canadian Broadcasting Company produced a radio documentary on gay athletes in professional sports entitled "The Final Closet." It examined the fact that there were no openly gay male athletes in any of the major professional North American team sports--football, baseball, basketball, and hockey.

In the early years of the twentieth century, that is still the case, although signs of change are on the horizon.

While some lesbians have come out at the height of their athletic careers, including five at the 2000 Summer Olympics, most gay male athletes have stayed firmly in the closet.

Justin Fashanu, an English soccer player, and Ian Roberts, an Australian rugby star, are notable in that they declared their homosexuality while still active in team sports. A handful of male athletes in individual sports have come out while still active, including figure skating champions John Curry and Rudy Galindo, 2000 Olympic diver David Pichler, and six-time Olympic equestrian Robert Dover, but they remain very rare.

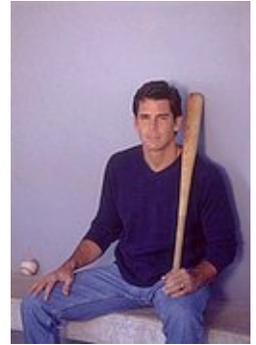
"Some closeted gay male athletes realize that they have a lot to lose by 'coming out.' As long as they stay 'in the closet,' they can share the benefits of hegemonic masculinity," observe Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo in their 1994 book *Rethinking Masculinity*.

The roster of athletes whose homosexuality became known after their careers ended has ranged from Olympic gold medalists to champion figure skaters to players who were solid performers but never household names.

They include, among others, Bill Tilden, a Wimbledon and United States Open tennis champion from the 1920s; Greg Louganis, who won four Olympic gold medals in diving in 1984 and 1988; Bruce Hayes, a gold medal swimmer in the 1984 Olympics; Tom Waddell, Olympic decathlete in 1968 and founder of the Gay Games; Mark Tewksbury, a gold medalist at the 1992 Olympics and a founder of the Outgames; David Kopay, a professional football player whose 1977 autobiography is the first book to deal with an athlete's homosexuality; and professional basketball player John Amaechi, who came out in 2007, only four years after his retirement.

Despite the paucity of out elite athletes, the question of what athletes might be gay is a popular one among gay fans. Fans in each sport pay close attention to clues and discuss these between themselves and in online discussion boards. Rumors about the sexuality of an ex-heavyweight boxing champion and a legendary track and field star have been rampant for years.

Occasionally, rumors about the possible homosexuality of elite athletes spill over into mainstream media, as in the public flap in 1996 that ensued when sportswriter Skip Bayless aired suspicions that Dallas Cowboys quarterback Troy Aikman might be gay.



Billy Bean retired from professional baseball in 1995 and has since become a prominent activist for gay rights. Publicity photograph provided by Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau. Courtesy Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau.

Aikman called Bayless's comments "criminal" and other journalists criticized Bayless for sensationalism. But the complaints against Bayless were themselves homophobic, equating as they did homosexuality and something heinous. The attacks on Bayless prompted the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination to note that "Speculation about Troy Aikman's sexual orientation is not the problem. The problem is homophobia perpetuated by the NFL and biased journalism."

Pre-Stonewall Athletes

For decades "Big Bill" Tilden stood alone as an example of an athlete who was known to be gay. In 1949 the National Sports Writers Association named him the most outstanding athlete of the first half of the century. His accomplishments in the 1920s are legendary: seven U.S. Open titles, three Wimbledon championships, seven U.S. clay court titles, and six U.S. doubles championships.

It was not until Tilden's athletic skills began to fade in the 1930s that his homosexuality became known in the tennis world. In the less-tolerant era of the 1930s he was ostracized and gradually excluded from major tennis tournaments.

Twice--in 1946 and then in 1949--Tilden was arrested and jailed for "contributing to the delinquency of a minor" as the result of incidents involving teenaged boys in Los Angeles.

He died in 1953, at age 60, according to his biographer Frank Deford, "in his cramped walk-up room near Hollywood and Vine, where he lived out his tragedy, a penniless ex-con, scorned, forgotten, alone."

Athletes in the 1970s

While Tilden remains a distant figure to most sports fans and students of gay history, David Kopay has achieved fame as a gay icon despite the fact that fame eluded him on the athletic field.

Kopay was an overachieving player with five National Football League teams from 1964 to 1972. During this time he wrestled with his sexuality and eventually decided to be honest with himself and the public.

Kopay gave an interview in 1975 to the *Washington Star* in which he declared his homosexuality. He is believed to be the first professional athlete to have taken such a step. In 1977 he wrote his autobiography, *The David Kopay Story: An Extraordinary Self-Revelation*. The book has remained a perennial favorite with people coming to grips with their own sexual identities.

Kopay, who remains active as a speaker, is an important figure in that he exemplifies the fact that gay men can and do compete as athletes. He has spoken of his frustration that there was no parade of others who followed his lead.

Kopay told the cable sports network ESPN that a liaison with Jerry Smith, a star tight end with the Washington Redskins from 1965 to 1977, was "my first real coming-out experience." Although Smith died of complications from AIDS in 1987, he never publicly acknowledged his homosexuality.

One elite athlete did follow Kopay in coming out publicly in the 1970s, however. Soon after winning a gold medal in figure skating in the 1976 Olympics, John Curry held a press conference to announce his homosexuality.

His courageous act was discounted in the athletic world, partly because figure skating was considered more artistic than athletic and was not associated with the exaggerated masculinity of football. Nevertheless, Curry's forthrightness inspired other skaters, including the 1976 Olympic bronze medalist and Canadian champion Toller Cranston, to a new openness.

Athletes in the 1980s

The 1980s was a time of transition for gay male athletes. "Though athletics have always had homosexual participants, open discussion of their experiences or rights has been taboo. It was not until the 1980s, for example, that sport scientists, physical educators and athletic administrators began to formally discuss homosexuality," write Messner and Sabo.

For most of the decade, no active major athlete declared his homosexuality. In 1982, Glenn Burke, who had played for the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Oakland Athletics in the 1970s, revealed his homosexuality in a *Sports Illustrated* article, but his story--and the reactions to it--did little more than confirm the homophobia so prevalent in professional baseball.

Journalists covering the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles heard reports that two gold medal winners were about to declare that they were gay. But no one ever stepped forward.

On a parallel track, however, the decade saw the emergence of a vibrant gay and lesbian recreational sports scene. The vitality of sport in gay and lesbian communities was demonstrated by the San Francisco debut in 1982 of the Gay Games, a quadrennial event conceived by Dr. Tom Waddell. By 1990, Gay Games III in Vancouver included 9,500 registered athletes, a seven-fold increase from 1982.

The decade closed with two sports figures having very public coming-outs, one on each side of the Atlantic. Dave Pallone, a baseball umpire, was fired in 1988 for his alleged involvement in a teen-age sex ring, charges that were later deemed groundless. Pallone contended in his book *Behind the Mask* (1990) that he was really fired for being gay, having privately come out to then baseball commissioner Bart Giamatti.

Pressure from some team owners caused his firing, Pallone contended, and Giamatti's widow has said the firing was a decision her husband later regretted.

Also in 1988, Justin Fashanu, a star English soccer player, revealed that he was gay. He is believed to be the first gay male athlete in a team sport to come out during his career. Fashanu had a difficult life afterwards, as he exhibited often erratic public behavior. In 1998 he committed suicide in London at a time when he was wanted in the United States on charges of sexually assaulting a teenager in Maryland.

Athletes in the 1990s

The 1990s saw an increased tolerance of gay life in the Western world. Bill Clinton was elected President of the United States in 1992 while publicly courting gay voters, and gay men and lesbians became more visible than ever. Gay issues began to be featured regularly in movies and television shows and in the news media.

The sports world, while still lagging behind in its acknowledgment of gays in its midst, especially men, was not immune to these changes.

The American basketball star Magic Johnson announced in 1991 that he had acquired the virus that causes AIDS. Although Johnson insisted that he contracted the disease from heterosexual contact, his admission nonetheless sparked coverage of AIDS and, by extension, gay issues in the one place where they had been all but invisible: the sports world.

Articles and broadcasts dealt with the possible transmission of the virus on the field of play; and the media, in several examinations of the topic, conceded that there were gays competing at the highest levels of sport, even if they remained closeted.

In 1992, Roy Simmons, who had been an offensive linebacker for the NFL's Washington Redskins and New

York Giants in the early 1980s, came out on a national television talk show, "Donahue." Following the revelation, Simmons faded into obscurity, but in 2003, on World AIDS Day, he revealed that he had been diagnosed with AIDS in 1997.

In 1994 the Gay Games were held for the fourth time. They coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion, considered to be the beginning of the modern gay rights movement. Moreover, they were held in New York City, the media capital of the United States.

The week-long event commanded unprecedented coverage of gays and lesbians in sports. The daily newspapers in the city covered the Games from several angles and printed schedules and results. The city's television stations produced features, including one in which they interviewed gay athletes playing flag football about their reaction to the news that the quarterback of the New York men's team was straight. In a sense the tables had been turned.

The Gay Games in 1994 were also notable for the crossover into the gay sports scenes of open athletes from mainstream sports. A spokesman for the Games was Bruce Hayes, a swimmer who won a gold medal at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Hayes would go on to set recognized master's swimming records at the Gay Games.

Tennis great Martina Navratilova, an open lesbian on the women's professional tour, also lent her star power to publicize the event. But the biggest revelation at the Games came from Greg Louganis, who publicly came out, ending years of speculation.

There has probably never been a better male Olympic diver than Louganis. He won two gold medals at the 1984 Summer Games and two more in 1988. As he revealed in his 1995 autobiography *Breaking the Surface*, during his years of competitive diving Louganis wrestled with his sexuality. The Gay Games seemed an appropriate forum for him to come out. When Louganis also revealed that he was HIV-positive, the story was again front-page news.

America seemed to be growing more tolerant of gay athletes in its midst, but the situation, for at least one athlete, was far better in Australia. Ian Roberts, a star in the rugged and macho world of rugby, came out in 1995 while at the top of his game. His general acceptance by the other players and fans was a signal that the playing field was becoming safe for some elite gay athletes.

Roberts never shied from discussing his homosexuality or confronting the myths that help to keep many gay athletes deeply in the closet. "I take offense at the old locker room argument which assumes a man cannot, in any circumstances, control his urges," Roberts said in a 1996 interview. "Any self-respecting human being can respect the rights and ways of another human being. The idea, then, that gays can convert, or want, heterosexual guys, is ludicrous. We want to play the game, not the field."

While Roberts excelled in the hyper-masculine world of rugby, Rudy Galindo was a champion in figure skating, a sport where artistry counts as much as athleticism and where rumors of homosexuality have always thrived. Not only had Curry and Cranston come out publicly, but other skaters had been widely known as gay, at least among skating circles.

Hence, Galindo's coming out was not exactly earth-shattering news, but its timing was perfect. He came out just as he won the U.S. men's figure skating title before his hometown crowd in San Jose, California, in 1996.

Galindo's story became familiar to many with the publication the following year of his book, *Icebreaker: The Autobiography of Rudy Galindo*. The skater was back in the news in April 2000, when he told *USA Today* that he was HIV-positive.

In 1998, Canadian Mark Tewksbury, who set a world record in the backstroke at the 1992 Olympics, came out publicly. He would go on to become a gay activist and one of the founders of Outgames.

Within a seven-month period from September 1999 to April 2000, the *New York Times* twice featured articles about openly gay male athletes on its front page. And both of these athletes were subsequently featured on various national television news programs.

One was about Billy Bean, who played professional baseball for three teams before retiring in 1995, primarily, he said, because he didn't want to continue living a lie. Bean has talked about the split personality he was forced to exhibit, which included playing a game grief-stricken on the same day his lover died.

Bean's story, which originally appeared in the *Miami Herald* but took on national status with the *Times'* prominent treatment, struck a chord with many in the gay community. Bean has since become a prominent activist for gay rights.

In April 2000 the *Times* again featured a gay athlete, this time a seventeen-year-old high school football player from Massachusetts, Corey Johnson. The story told how, with the help of his supportive school and parents, Johnson had come out to his team during his senior season.

It was an uplifting tale of tolerance and respect for difference. The story included an anecdote about his teammates joining Johnson in singing the disco anthem "It's Raining Men" on the team bus after a game.

The Future

Neither Bean nor Johnson were stars in their sports, and their stories became public only after their competitive athletic careers were over. This familiar pattern has existed since Kopay first told his story in 1975.

In the major North American team sports of football, baseball, basketball and hockey, plus in individual sports such as tennis and golf, not a single athlete had come out as gay during his career as of November 2000. The same also holds true for prominent athletes in major college sports.

At the 2000 Summer Olympics there were six openly homosexual athletes, but only one of them--U.S. diver David Pichler--was male.

Bean and Kopay, speaking at a San Francisco symposium on gays in sports in March 2000, were not optimistic that this situation will change any time soon. There is still too great a stigma attached to homosexuality in the male locker room, they said, and too great a fear that disclosure would cost an athlete dearly in salary, endorsements, and fan support.

The example of professional football player Esera Tuaolo's widely publicized coming out on HBO's "Real Sports" in October 2002 may give some cause for optimism. As with other elite athletes, Tuaolo, who played in the 1990s with the Green Bay Packers, the Minnesota Vikings, and the Atlanta Falcons, waited until he had retired from active participation in football before he told his story of the pain he experienced in the closet, including feelings of depression and loneliness, even thoughts of suicide. His announcement received a great deal of attention and elicited mostly positive comments from former teammates.

Others, however, hinted darkly at the violence that would be directed toward an openly gay professional football player, and San Francisco 49ers running back Garrison Hearst gratuitously proclaimed, "I don't want any faggots on my team," a remark that he apologized for after it sparked an uproar in the gay and lesbian community of San Francisco.

A similar reaction greeted the coming out of National Basketball Association player John Amaechi, who did so in 2007, four years after his retirement.

During his playing career, Amaechi was aware of speculation about his sexual orientation. He even called his homosexuality "an open secret" among sports writers; nevertheless, he did not make any public declaration about it because of possible negative reaction from other players or coaches. "It would be like an alien dropping down from space," he said. "There'd be fear, then panic. They just wouldn't know how to handle it."

After retiring, Amaechi returned to his native England, where he works as a commentator on the weekly telecast of an NBA game and heads the ABC Foundation, which builds sports centers and offers mentoring and athletic programs for children.

Of Amaechi's coming out, his publicist, Howard Bragman (who also represents two prominent lesbian athletes, basketball star Sheryl Swoopes and golfer Rosie Jones), said that Amaechi is "an activist for a lot of different causes and thought it was silly that he wasn't an activist for the LGBT community, so he decided there was no reason for him to stay in the closet."

While reaction to Amaechi's coming out was mostly positive, former NBA player Tim Hardaway used the occasion to announce his homophobia. "You know, I hate gay people, so I let it be known. I don't like gay people and I don't like to be around gay people," he told a Miami radio station, and proceeded to obsess about having gay players in the locker room. In response, superstar players Shaquille O'Neal and Charles Barkley condemned Hardaway's comments. After he was publicly rebuked by NBA commissioner David Stern, Hardaway issued a half-hearted apology.

Still, the fact remains that active players, at least on the major competitive level, are reluctant to come out. Sports is still the final closet for gay men in society.

In the popular imagination, the terms "gay" and "sports fan" seem like oxymorons. But this particular stereotype--like many others--is inaccurate. Gay men have not only participated in athletics to a far greater degree than is acknowledged, but they follow sports with the same intensity as their heterosexual counterparts.

Not only are there specialized websites devoted to gays in particular sports, such as Rainbow Ice (www.plover.com/rainbowice), which follows gays in figure skating, but also Outsports.com (www.outsports.com), a website launched in 2000 for gay fans and athletes, which attracts tens of thousands of hits each month.

The popularity of such sites help disprove the theory that gay men are not interested in sports. Lively discussions on Outsports about all aspects of sports by a diverse readership demonstrate that love of athletics is shared by gay and straight men alike.

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