

DAVE KOPAY: ONLY NFL PLAYER TO OPEN THE DOOR - Seattle Times, The (WA) - August 7, 1988 - page C11

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It's a strange niche Dave **Kopay** has carved out for himself in the world of sports, not to mention the worlds of psychology, sexuality and linoleum.

Eleven years after stepping out of the closet, publicly proclaiming his sexual preference, **Kopay** remains one of a kind - the queer football player. That's his description, not mine.

And it's not entirely accurate. He's a former football player.

Kopay played at the University of Washington and for 10 years in the **National Football League**, for the San Francisco 49ers, Detroit Lions, Washington Redskins, Green Bay Packers and (briefly) Raiders. He was a running back, one of those sub-superstar types who make a career of being a little tougher than the guys who are a little faster.

And he was tough. "I could get as crazy as anyone," he says.

In 1977 he wrote a book about his life as a homosexual and a football player. The book caused a big stir. A lot of people had evidently assumed you couldn't be both. **Kopay** set them straight, so to speak.

Eleven years later, Dave is the first, last and only football player to have come out of the closet. A few other athletes - the late Redskin receiver Jerry Smith, former Dodger Glenn Burke, tennis' Martina Navratilova - have had their sexual preferences disclosed publicly, but not on their own terms.

"The closet is so deep in the sports world," **Kopay** says.

He dismisses the notion that no gays are coming out of the athletic closet because there are no gay athletes. He says he knows enough of them to dispel that myth.

There are probably several reasons more don't come out. The AIDS epidemic has cast a pall, certainly.

Also, society is gradually becoming more aware of gays, but the last people we're likely to accept as homosexuals are our own children and our sports heroes. It will take much more courage for your favorite quarterback to come out of the closet than for your hair stylist or stock broker.

Another reason might be the **Kopay** factor. When Dave came out, his playing career was just about over. He wanted to go into coaching, felt highly qualified, but couldn't get a phone call returned. He thinks he knows why.

“After the fuss made about me, it doesn't surprise me (that others have stayed silent),” **Kopay** says. “Also, maybe it's because they haven't had to do it for their own well-being.”

Kopay had to. His public coming out remains a singular act of courage. He's not a crusader, not an intellectual spokesman for the gay community.

“I haven't had any training to be an authority on being a queer,” he says, laughing.

He just felt the need to be honest.

For a year or so after the book came out, **Kopay** was in demand on the lecture-interview circuit. Eventually he resettled in Los Angeles, where he grew up. He is a sales manager at Linoleum City in Hollywood, a business started by his late uncle. He sells floor covering to movie art directors and set designers.

Kopay is still a big football fan and a huge Dodger fan - “My happiness rises and falls on whether the Dodgers win or lose.” His right knee is shot from football, so he can't play tennis or jog, but he works out, stays in shape.

And now, after years of relative obscurity, he is edging back into the limelight. His book (“The David **Kopay** Story,” written with Perry Deane Young), has been republished, with an update on the last 10 years.

He doesn't expect to make any money off the paperback, but **Kopay** hopes to help other people who are confused, as he once was, about why they don't seem to fit into straight society.

“I've had a lot of people come in the store and say, ‘Dave, the book has changed my life, made me feel so good about myself.’”

Kopay is gratified by the letters and phone calls. He writes in his book that there is a common theme: “They say, ‘You have shown that an ordinary man can also be homosexual.’”

“Well, I know what they mean by that. Nobody thinks of himself as ordinary. But we all had been terrified by the stereotype of homosexuals as silly, ineffectual people. Being a strong athlete and being a homosexual seemed like such a contradiction, many people would burst out laughing when you just said the words ‘gay football player’ together.”

Kopay still feels somewhat uncomfortable being a spokesman by virtue of being the world's only admitted gay football player.

“I did a TV show the other day,” he says. “What can you say in eight minutes? I'm thinking, ‘This is not the proper way to do this.’”

Why am I putting myself through this? But what I can do is change some people's impressions. That's important.

“I know there are some gay athletes recently retired who haven't spoken out. Well, that's something I can do, and maybe they don't have to. It's something an Olympic champion maybe can't do, but I can.”

Kopay can, for instance, shoot down some misconceptions.

“I guess some guys don't come out because they don't want to be associated with the whole leather scene,” **Kopay** says. “I don't understand that scene myself. That's the weirdest scene in the world.

But that's a small percentage of gays. There are heterosexual leather scenes, too.”

To those who are offended that **Kopay** shared dressing rooms for 10 years with football players, he points out that female sports writers can have free access to male locker rooms.

“I wasn't cruising the locker rooms,” **Kopay** says.

As for the threat of AIDS driving gays into sexual seclusion, **Kopay** says, “My lifestyle hasn't changed much (in the last few years).

I practice safe sex, and I never was very promiscuous anyway.”

Kopay's living room decor includes helmets from his NFL stops.

His hallway - “My Hall of Fame” - is lined with framed mementos of his career, from his starring role in the 1964 Rose Bowl to clippings of his coming out, including a newspaper debate with Anita Bryant.

The wall is a reflection of his life, that he is proud of his football achievements and just as proud of his courage in going public with his homosexuality.

Not that **Kopay** has life completely figured out.

“I often feel too gay for the straight world and too straight for the gay world,” he says.

But **Kopay** notes that other gays are more tolerant of his love for sports than they were a decade ago.

“Now it's OK to be a sports fan,” he says. “I went to a Fourth of July party, I wanted to watch a Dodger game on TV, and I did.

There was no, ‘Oh, you butch number, you.’ ”

Still, it's likely to be at least another decade before Dave **Kopay** is thought of as simply a former NFL player, rather than a novelty item, “the queer football player.”

“It's too bad it's still such a big deal,” **Kopay** says.

