

Minister vows to tackle 'unacceptable' homophobia in sport

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Policies to combat homophobia in sport are virtually non-existent. Whereas governing bodies are compelled to deal with racism or face funding cuts from Sport England, homophobia is not even mentioned in the present guidelines. An official at the funding quango said that he was "not aware" that anti-gay attitudes were prevalent. So it has been left to events such as the Gay Games and all-gay teams such as Stonewall FC, who play in the premier division of the Middlesex League, to change attitudes towards homosexual sportsmen.

The notion that governing bodies can be trusted to root out homophobia in the absence of outside pressure is laughable. Many of the officials and coaches who are in positions of responsibility are former athletes who have imbibed, and now help to sustain, the anti-gay orthodoxy. Homosexual labels such as "faggot" and "poof" are accepted terms of abuse and are widely used in sporting circles without fear of disciplinary action.

The commercial sensitivity of the issue was highlighted when three out of five of Britain's highest-profile athletes, who might have been expected to use their position of prominence to denounce discrimination in all forms, refused to endorse a statement condemning homophobia. Tim Henman, David Beckham and Paula Radcliffe either personally or through their representatives declined to be associated with this sentiment: "I condemn homophobia and believe that it has no place in sport or society." Only Matthew Pinsent and Peter Nicol gave their unhesitating support.

FULL TEXT

Matthew Syed on moves to wipe out bigotry in the changing-room.

"THE aggression in the changing-room was very difficult to deal with. I never admitted to being gay but the rest of the team sensed something. The anti-gay atmosphere was frightening. It was intolerable having to live a lie but it would have been impossible to cope had I actually come out."

This is just one of more than a hundred e-mails sent to The Times in response to an article published in January examining sexual orientation in sport. The scale of the response provides conclusive proof of the blatant discrimination suffered by gay men participating in sport in modern Britain. Many have been forced to give up the sports they love and, in some cases, excelled at. So much for the Olympic ideals of understanding and friendship.

"As a young gay man, I found it incredibly difficult to participate in sports at school, even though I believe I was good and a worthwhile member of various teams," another wrote. "Even though I am now 21 years old, I actually believe that this has contributed to me not coming out to members of my family and friends. The issue was that serious."

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The derisory progress has prompted Richard Caborn, the Minister for Sport, to undertake to get to grips with the problem personally. "The Times has raised an issue of great importance," he said. "Discrimination in sport is unacceptable, whether by race, sex or creed. I am determined that the Government will now play a full part in ensuring that governing bodies eliminate it at all levels."

An important policy announcement is expected in the near future and it is hoped that this will impose a mandatory obligation on governing bodies to adopt policies to combat discrimination against gays and that this will encompass severe disciplinary action against players or coaches who persist in homophobic discourse or behaviour. It is also anticipated that there will be a publicly funded publicity campaign against homophobia, similar to those already successful in combating racism.

But there is a key difference between policies towards race and sexuality and it lies with the athletes themselves. The success of prominent black sportsmen has been pivotal in transforming attitudes, both by repudiating the notion of white athletic supremacy and by generating respect within sporting circles towards those from ethnic minorities. And there lies the problem.

The vast majority of gay men who have reached the top have been too intimidated to come out and by concealing their sexuality have unwittingly provided support for the bigoted ideology that says that elite sport is too tough for the stereotypical, weak-wristed queer.

Not that they should be blamed for their reticence. The experiences of the handful who have been brave enough to declare their sexuality have, with few exceptions, been deeply unpleasant. Justin Fashanu, the footballer, was called a "bloody poof" by Brian Clough, his manager at Nottingham Forest. Greg Louganis, the Olympic gold medal-winning diver, was discriminated against by his contemporaries and subjected to systematic abuse. Martina Navratilova estimated that coming out lost her \$12 million in sponsorship income.

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Doug Woog, an American soccer coach and author, believes that it will not be an existing prominent athlete that breaks the vicious circle. Speaking to a conference in Boston this year, he said: "Everyone thinks that we're going

to see a professional sportsman say when they lift a trophy 'I'm here and I'm queer'.

"Instead what is going to happen is that some young person who is competing today as an openly gay high school or college athlete will come up through the ranks. Do I know this young person's name? No, but I do know he's out there."

In the meantime, gay sportsmen are looking to Caborn, along with an initiative to be launched by the Football Association in September, to start the process of fighting the rampant homophobia within British sport. Otherwise, the experience of another who e- mailed The Times in January will still be the norm a decade from now.

"It is only from the safety of my front room as a television viewer that I feel comfortable indulging my passion for sport," he wrote. "It was perfectly clear from a young age that, as a gay man, I would not be able to both be open about my sexuality and have a tolerable life as a participant."

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