

Gay Athletes Feel Unwelcome in Australian Sport: Youth Sport a Particular Problem



- 80% reported witnessing or experiencing homophobia in sport, including straight participants
- Highest number of gay men who believe they are not 'at all accepted' in sport
- Australian sporting organisations recommit to efforts to tackle homophobia

Online editors: Infographics and country rankings available

The world's first international study on homophobia in sport, which was initiated and led by Australians, has uncovered widespread homophobic behaviour, particularly in youth sport and among fans. The study's findings have prompted calls for a zero tolerance approach towards homophobic discrimination and training for coaches, teachers and sport officials to help them support LGB athletes. **In response to the findings, Australia's five major sports have reaffirmed their commitment to tackle homophobia in sport and will be working with Bingham Cup Sydney 2014, Australian Human Rights Commission and Australian Sports Commission to develop a Pride in Sport Index.**

The "Out on the Fields" study was conducted by Repucom, overseen by a panel of seven international experts from six universities, including Melbourne's Victoria University on behalf the Bingham Cup Sydney 2014 (World Cup of gay rugby) and a coalition of LGBTI sports, including the Federation of Gay Games and You Can Play. Nearly 9500 participants of all sexualities took part, including 3006 gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight Australians (1316 were straight). The study focused on issues of sexuality in team sports and compared the six major English speaking countries.

The study revealed particular problems for male athletes, youth team sports and in school physical education classes. While gay men in Australia were the second most likely to participate in youth team sports (only slightly less than New Zealand), more than 1 in 5 (22%) decided not to play team sport. Many cited negative experiences in PE class (43%) and fear of discrimination (36%) as reasons for not participating.

A significant majority of participants (70%) including those under 22, believed youth team sporting environments are not safe and supportive for LGB people. This may explain why Australian gay male youth were the second most likely to be in the closet (again slightly lower than New Zealand) with more than half (55%) saying they were worried about bullying and more than 1 in 3 (37%) worried about discrimination from coaches and officials.

"We were all alarmed and surprised by the extent and depth of the homophobia that the study found in Australian sports, the findings were much worse than we expected, particularly in youth sport and the result that 80% of Australian participants believe that LGB athletes are either not accepted, accepted a little or only moderately accepted in sport is very alarming. Compared to other countries, gay men in Australia were the least likely to feel welcome in sporting culture" **said Andrew Purchas, an openly gay rugby player and founder of the Sydney Convicts, Australia's first gay rugby union team.** Purchas was also President of the 2014 Sydney Bingham Cup, which initiated this study as part of a wider series of initiatives to tackle homophobia in sport. This included an historic, joint commitment in April 2014 by Australia's five major sports to 'eliminate' homophobia from sport.

Alex Blackwell is one of the most successful gay athletes in the world. The Vice-Captain of the CBA Southern Stars and has won five world cups. She has also captained the NSW state team to 10 consecutive national championships. "It was disappointing for me to see that a fear of being bullied as well as a fear of discrimination from coaches and officials is keeping so many lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in the closet. We must find ways to end homophobic behaviour and also ensure coaches, officials and teachers have the training and resources to be positive role models for all players on a team regardless of sexuality," said Blackwell.

While "Out on the Fields" found widespread concerns about homophobia in youth sport it also revealed issues among fans. Spectator stands were identified as the most likely sporting environment for homophobia to occur. Most participants (75%) believed an openly gay, lesbian or bisexual person (such as if they showed affection) would not be very safe at a sporting event.

Jason Tuazon-McCheyne is the president of the 'Purple Bombers' a supporters group of fans of the Essendon Football Club. They are also working with the AFL to help the sport create a safe environment for LGBTIQ supporters and players across the league.

“I’m not surprised that so many people believe an openly gay, lesbian or bisexual person would not be safe at a sporting event. Many of our members have heard homophobic language and also feel unwelcome in Australian sporting culture which is why we go to games as a group and support each other. We are now working with the AFL to ensure there are systems in place to report and address discriminatory language and I hope these same approaches will also be adopted and used by all Australian sports,” said Tuazon-McCheyne.

Dr. Caroline Symons and Dr. Grant O’Sullivan, from Melbourne’s Victoria University, were both on the study’s review panel of seven international experts. Among other things, the panel assisted with the study design, data collection methods and reviewed the final report. “Some LGB people can thrive in sport, but many others feel compelled to remain closeted to keep playing or watching the sport they love, monitoring every word they say, to ensure they keep up the appearance of being heterosexual which is seen as the ‘normal’ way to behave. All this effort to hide their identity can distract from enjoying their sport which is why LGB athletes need to be supported by officials, coaches, teachers and also other fans,” said Dr. Symons.

Dr. O’Sullivan agreed, “The casual homophobic language such as jokes heard on the playing fields, in the locker rooms, in the stands and in the media can send the message that LGB people are not welcome in sport. Often this language is not meant to be hurtful but can be very damaging when heard by those struggling with their sexuality. Even more concerning is that early negative experiences in school sport and PE can lead to LGB people avoiding sport for the rest of their lives and missing out on all the physical, mental and social benefits that can come from being active and part of a team. I think that PE teachers, in particular, need to be trained on ways to support and also protect LGB students as teachers can often feel unsure on how to deal with bullying or bring up discussions on homophobia and diverse sexuality,” said Dr. O’Sullivan.

In recognition that there is still much to be done to make Australian sport welcoming to all, Bingham Cup Sydney 2014, the Australian Human Rights Commission and Australian Sports Commission have commissioned Pride in Diversity, Australia’s first and only not-for-profit employer-support-program for all aspects of the LGBTI workplace inclusion, to develop a Pride in Sport Index.

The Pride in Sport Index will be a benchmarking instrument to identify the shift in inclusiveness within sporting codes in Australia and will provide Australian sport with a blueprint for good practice and allow an assessment to be made on year on year progress.

The Australian Rugby Union, Australian Football League, National Rugby League, Football Federation Australia and Cricket Australia have expressed their support for a benchmarking index and expressed a willingness to join an advisory panel in partnership with the Australian Sports Commission and Australian Human Rights Commission to support the development of the Pride in Sport Index. This follows from the CEO’s of each of these sporting codes signing the Anti-Homophobia and Inclusion Framework for the Australian Sport one year ago, in the lead up to the Bingham Cup.

“Despite the disappointing Out on Field Study results it is very reassuring that Australia’s major professional sports are so supportive of the Pride in Sport Index.” said Purchas. “I am confident that over time Australia will be a world leader in ensuring that all sports are welcoming and available to all. I look forward to Australian sporting codes and clubs competing with each other as to who is the most inclusive.”

About the study

Out on the Fields is the first international study and largest conducted on homophobia in sport. The study focused on issues of sexuality which is why LGB is used rather than LGBTI or LGBTQ. It also focused on team sports and the English speaking countries (USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand and Australia). Global sports market research firm Repucom conducted the research (pro bono), while the study was initiated by organisers of Bingham Cup Sydney 2014 (the world cup of gay rugby) in partnership with a coalition of sports organisations, including the Federation of Gay Games, You Can Play, International Gay Rugby and the Australian Sports Commission. The study methodology and results were reviewed by a panel of seven academics from six universities including Victoria University (Australia), Penn State University, University of Massachusetts (USA); Brunel University London (UK); University of Winnipeg and Laval University (Canada). Data was collected through an anonymous 10-15 minute online survey which included multiple choice questions and an option to submit more lengthy details of personal experiences. It was promoted through social and traditional media and by sporting organisations, professional athletes, corporations and government. Around 25% of participants were heterosexual.

Full Report, Info Graphics (including art files), Country Summaries and Country Comparison/Rankings

www.outonthefields.com

Contact:

Erik Denison, Out on the Fields and Bingham Cup

Media Relations Manager

erik@binghamcup.com +61400996560