

Media Quotes from NFL player David Kopay

David Kopay came out in 1975. He was the first professional athlete in the world to come out as gay. David sacrificed his career and was blacklisted from jobs. Nearly 50 years later, at age 78, he thought there would be many more openly gay athletes and they would feel safe and welcome to play sports.

He is supporting this research with quotes to raise awareness of the lack of progress, strongly illustrated by this NY Times article from 1997. David also contributed to the timelines which document the evidence supporting the need for action and the responses by sports over the last half-century.

Why do you think homophobic language is still common in sport and gay kids who come out report being targeted with homophobic behaviour?

It saddens me to read about this. It's horrible to hear that kids are being targeted. It makes me want to cry. I've sacrificed so much to try and change this problem. I know most people don't mean anything when they use these horrible words but if you are gay you have no idea what people are thinking. They really need to stop this behaviour. It has been going on way to long.

The NFL and the other major sports have all done media interviews and said they care about this problem but I don't think they have done anything about it. Whatever they have done clearly is not working. The NFL has said black lives matter, which was long overdue, but they've never said gay lives matter.

Why did you come out?

I came out in 1975 after reading an article in the newspaper quoting an anonymous NFL player about how hard it was to be a gay athlete in sports. The athlete, who I knew was my former teammate Jerry Smith, was also quoted as saying there were many gay people in the NFL. The poor reporter was buried with hate mail from fans saying it was not possible for there to be gay football players, that no sissy could play a man's sport. There was a perception at the time that gay people were weak and defective and incapable of playing a sport like football. I came out because I was angry. I wanted to challenge the stereotypes of gay people. When I first spoke out, you never saw any positive images of gay folks anywhere.

What happened when you came out?

I was hopeful that by sharing my story with this journalist it would help change things. I thought coming out would make it easier for other athletes in the future to be open about their sexuality. I hoped to make a difference so others in my position would have the freedom to be who they are. I wanted people to be able to live the lives they want. I really had no idea of just how big a thing it would become. At the time no one was speaking up for gay rights and I just happened to be bold enough and angry enough to come out.

It was such a painful experience after coming out, it was horrible. I sacrificed so much and was blacklisted from everywhere. I couldn't get a job, couldn't get a coaching position, no one wanted to hire me. It was like I committed murder. I'm just lucky that my uncle was willing to offer me a job selling linoleum flooring in California. Who would have thought that the only job one of the most successful football players at the time could get was at Linoleum City. I sacrificed a lot but I don't have any regrets. I had no choice. I had to come out.

Why are there no openly gay NFL players, or any other players in the big four American sports?

I have often been asked if I thought that more gay athletes would come out in sport and I have always said it was just a matter of time. I could never have imagined that nearly 50 years later we would still have no openly gay athletes in America's big four sports. We have fewer openly gay athletes today than we did just a few years ago. We also don't have many around the world. We now have gay marriage but we don't have any openly gay athletes. It makes no sense.

A big problem is the player agents and team owners. It's all about money and the NFL is so rich. Money is the only way they will care about any issue. We need people to put pressure on the sports. Maybe we need the sponsors to start putting pressure on the teams? Money talks in sports and money would quickly change problems like this. I think all the big companies that sponsor sports teams, the ones that buy floats in our pride parades, we need them to help. They need to put pressure on the sports to take action. It makes me so sad that it is still a problem, that gay kids still feel unwelcome in sports.