Media Quotes – retired NFL Player Ryan O'Callaghan

Ryan O'Callaghan (Offensive Tackle) was drafted by the New England Patriots in 2006, and then played for the Kansas City Chiefs from 2009 – 2010. He came out publicly in 2017, and talked about his constant thoughts of suicide which seemed to be preferable to coming out as gay. He has since dedicated his life to changing the culture in sport. Last year he shared [his story](#) and talked about the change that is needed in his book "My Life on the Line: How the NFL Damn Near Killed Me, and Ended Up Saving My Life." Earlier this year he also started a [foundation](#) which focuses on supporting LGBTQ youth to thrive in sport.

What did you think of research that shows most LGB youth hide their sexuality in sport and those who come out are more likely to report being the target of homophobic behavior?

When I was growing up the thought of coming out in sport scared me to death. I hid myself in football and could never imagine a life after football because it gave me my identity. Being a football player helped me prove to others that I was not different. I feared they would reject me if they found out I was gay. Looking back, I think a lot of that fear was in my head, because most people are accepting of gay people but there are still team owners who are homophobic. There are also always a few guys on every team who are homophobic. Coming out puts a target on your back that these guys might try to exploit. People in sport say they are accepting and comfortable with gay people but we need them to become allies and speak out when they see or hear behavior that makes gay people feel unwelcome.

The biggest problem for me was not overtly homophobic comments or language. Instead it was the constant talk about women which sent a message that being gay was incompatible with this environment. When I was 14 years old I just wanted to fit in and be accepted by my teammates and the coaches. Coming out as gay in high school sports immediately makes you different from everyone else and puts you at a disadvantage socially and with the coaches. We can't sugar coat this or pretend this isn't the reality. We need to fix this problem.

The other problem is the throw away comments or jokes about gay people that every guy hears when they grow up. When people do something wrong in sports, they often get called a fag, or the term 'that's gay' is used to refer to something weak or negative. As adults we know that these kinds of comments are thoughtless but kids don't have the life experience to know if the guys around them actually hate gay people. This is why this language is so harmful to kids who are gay and it needs to stop.

How do we create a sport environment where gay kids feel they are unwelcome?

I don't think we will change this culture with the current approaches being used by the NFL and the other sports. I think it's good for LGBTQ people to hear professional players say positive things about gay people and for the Leagues to be part of pride parades. These things help raise awareness in the broader community that we still have a problem. We should not deny this.

We often hear stories from athletes who come out in college about being accepted by their teammates. I think this shows things are starting to change, but they are not changing where it matters the most. It is still very hard for kids to come out in high schools.

We need to start being honest about the fact we have a long way to go. It has been nearly 50 years since David Kopay came out, yet many young people still see being gay as incompatible with being a good football player. We need to focus on changing the language and culture in youth sports that creates this impression.

When David Kopay came out in the 70's he often said in interviews that he thought it would only be a matter of time, perhaps a decade, before other players came out. It has been nearly 50 years and there are no openly gay players in the NFL. I am worried that in 50 years we will still be talking about this because change is occurring so slowly. This is why I have dedicated my life to trying to solve this problem.

What needs to happen to create change?

The only thing that matters to a kid playing football in high school right now is whether he is accepted by his teammates and coaches. He is not going to do anything to risk being rejected. Coming out as gay makes him very different than everyone else. This is why I focus most of my energy on educating young people and coaches at high schools about why their comments and jokes are harmful.

We all need to focus on changing the culture in youth sports because focusing on adult sports is too late. Kids make the decision to drop out of sports when they are young. This is also when they make the decision to hide their sexuality to be successful in football. This is also when we see a lot of kids self-harming after they hear people use homophobic language.

We need to focus on young people and we need to break the cycle of the anti-gay language and the negative stereotypes about gay people that are still being passed from one generation to the next. Kids hear the language being used by the older players and the coaching staff and they start using this language to fit in and be accepted. When these kids get older, they pass this language and behavior on the next generation. We also need to use approaches that actually work. I'm really glad that researchers are helping us figure out what works and what doesn't. We need to stop doing things that don't work, and start focusing on approaches that are based on science and evidence that they actually help to change the culture in sports.