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## Homophobic attitudes in sports: Fan behaviour in stadiums and online spaces: A comprehensive review

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### Abstract

This comprehensive review explores the persistence of homophobic attitudes in sports, focusing on fan behavior in stadiums and online spaces. Historically, sports have perpetuated heteronormative ideals, marginalizing LGBTQ+ athletes. Male heterosexuality is often equated with athleticism, leading to stigmatization of gay and lesbian athletes, especially in team sports where camaraderie can be disrupted by disclosure of sexual orientation. Such discrimination begins at the school level, with LGBTQ+ athletes facing harassment and identity crises, which extend into professional arenas. Psychological impacts, including anxiety, depression, and social isolation, are widespread among athletes who conceal their identities to avoid prejudice.

Efforts to combat homophobia have shown mixed results. Policies like anti-harassment units and awareness campaigns have fostered inclusivity in certain sports, such as British football and the Major Hockey League. Shifting societal norms and evolving masculinities have also contributed to reducing stigma, particularly for female athletes. However, homophobia remains entrenched among fans, as evident from online posts and homophobic chants in stadiums. Research highlights a disconnection between fans' professed attitudes and their behaviors, often justified as harmless banter. Younger fans appear more accepting of LGBTQ+ athletes, signaling a generational shift.

The review underscores the need for sustained efforts, including stricter policy enforcement, awareness initiatives, and support systems for LGBTQ+ athletes. Only through such measures can sports become a truly inclusive domain, free of prejudice and discrimination, allowing athletes of all sexual orientations to thrive.

**Keywords:** Homophobia, LGBTQ+ athletes, fan behavior, sports discrimination, inclusivity, mental health, policy enforcement

### Introduction

“All sports for all people.”

Pierre de Coubertin

According to the aforementioned quotation, the founder of the modern Olympics wanted sports to be inclusive and accessible to all. Even though the quote was uttered in the 20th century, its validity is still being questioned in the 21st. Although we view sports as a symbol of harmony and solidarity in today's world, sports have traditionally been associated with men, and as a result, female athletes are frequently referred to as "mannish." alternatively, "masculine." It is evident that the LGBTQ community is discriminated against and on the receiving end of different types of stigma from sports. This issue is not something new and going on since decades. As research highlights, sports have historically been shaped by heteronormative ideals that marginalise those who don't fit the mould (Anderson, 2010) <sup>[1]</sup>. In the past, LGBTQ+ athletes have been forced to conceal their identities in sports arenas or face harsh penalties. A significant portion of the conservative sports culture associates homosexuality with weakness and male heterosexuality with strength. Male heterosexuality is seen to be validated by involvement in sports. Because of this, gay athletes frequently have to hide their sexual orientation and, like lesbian athletes, play the heterosexual role. Scholars have argued that gay men will have more difficulty coming out when playing team sports (Compared to individual sports), even though no such research has specifically looked at attitudes towards gay men across sport types (Individual, team). According to research, individual athletes may find it easier to break through because they are more likely to set their own goals and operate in a more solitary environment than team athletes. Coming out

with any personal information that would threaten to undermine or break those bonds is extremely risky for any gay athlete participating in team sports because the bonds that athletes form with one another are so important. It could be disastrous for a college athlete's career and experience if they are shunned by their teammates. That's why so few people who participate in team sports can take a chance (Jacobson, 2002) <sup>[13]</sup>. Before the turn of the twenty-first century, LGBTQ+ identities were rarely visible in sports and frequently had a negative impact on professional athletes' careers, as demonstrated by the experiences of Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova, and Greg Louganis (Kidder, 2013) <sup>[15]</sup>. Following their public disclosure of their sexual orientation, King and Navratilova encountered criticism from organisations and sponsors in addition to their fan base. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ athletes has serious negative psychological and physical effects. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that stigmatisation in sports can result in negative mental health consequences, such as feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Melton & Cunningham, 2014) <sup>[24]</sup>. In addition, homophobia that has been internalised by LGBTQ+ athletes who hide their sexual orientation due to fear of discrimination can worsen mental health problems (Cosh & Tully, 2014) <sup>[6]</sup>.

These issues are present in not only in professional sports but also in college level sports. LGBTQ athletes are often the targets of harassment or assault in school sports settings, which is where stigmatisation often starts (Knoester & Allison, 2021) <sup>[16]</sup>. LGBTQ collegiate athletes frequently experience an identity crisis as a result of the pressure to adhere to heteronormative standards, as shown by the researchers Pariera *et al.* (2021) <sup>[26]</sup>. In another study of LGBTQ+ athletes participating in collegiate sports, Krane *et al.* (2010) discovered that a significant number of them had increased amount of stress as a result of prejudice from coaches and teammates. Athletes described being made fun of for their sexual orientation and being kicked out of team events, which made the environment emotionally unsafe. The study demonstrated how the pressures LGBTQ+ athletes already experience in high-performance environments were exacerbated by these discriminatory practices (Krane *et al.*, 2002) <sup>[18]</sup>. To find out the coping mechanism, Pistella *et al.* (2020) <sup>[27]</sup> conducted research on gay and lesbian athletes in Italy and found that many of them adopt a "don't ask, don't tell" mentality, keeping their sexual orientation a secret to prevent discrimination. LGBTQ athletes experience greater feelings of loneliness as a result of this concealment, which also helps them internalise stigma. In the same year, Teideman and Spacey supported the presence of don't ask, don't tell attitude within the homosexual athletics and argued that better support networks are required if LGBTQ athletes are to stay away from coping strategies that repress their identities (Teideman and Spacey, 2020) <sup>[29]</sup>. The presence of this type of mentality to avoid discrimination is not new as in 2013 Cavalier said that LGBTQ athletes choose to remain silent as a coping mechanism in settings that do not actively support LGBTQ identities, avoiding talking about their sexual orientation to avoid prejudice and discrimination. But often coping with these discriminations and stigmatisation is more difficult than it seems and they left significant impact both physically and psychologically. In 2012, Griffin investigated the impact of prejudice on LGBTQ athletes and found that a great deal of athletes experience ongoing

stigma, which causes serious psychological distress. The study discovered that because of the hostile environments they face in sports, LGBTQ athletes frequently suffer from depression, anxiety, and social isolation. Furthermore, a lot of athletes are compelled to hide their identities, which exacerbates the psychological strain and internalised homophobia. Four years later another study supported the finding of Griffin which claimed that Because of their exclusionary actions in sports, LGBTQ athletes frequently suffer from psychological and physical effects. LGBTQ athletes often report feeling excluded by their peers and coaches, which can lead to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. The study emphasised that physical health consequences, such as chronic stress, are caused by this alienation (Krane, 2016) <sup>[17]</sup>. It can be said that people with whom the athletics spend most of the time are the real cause behind these mental health conditions rather than the outsiders such as the fans. A recent study in Germany argued that LGBTQ athletes experience heightened feelings of alienation due to the absence of support from coaches and teammates (Hartmann-Tews *et al.*, 2022) <sup>[12]</sup>. Gurgis *et al.* suggested that we should focus on changing and introducing new policies to deal with these negative attitudes. According to them policies like anti-harassment unit, where they can report any discrimination and continuous awareness programs are to be done (Gurgis *et al.*, 2022) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Although in 2013, Magrath *et al.* claimed that in Britain if you consider academy level football players, presence of homophobia among the teammates is low. According to them all of the players are in favour of gay men coming out on their team; they have no issues with sharing rooms, changing in locker rooms, or having social or emotional relationships with them. The only concern is homosocial joking because they don't want to offend a gay teammate (Magrath *et al.*, 2017) <sup>[19]</sup>. Just a year ago similar claims were made by Bush *et al.* (2012) <sup>[4]</sup> when they presented the first quantitative analysis of attitudes towards having a gay male teammate among British university athletes. 216 male athletes from various sports were given questionnaires when they first started at a well-known sporting university in England. The findings indicated that upon entering the university, there was hardly any homophobia and, upon leaving, there was none. Attitudes were strongly linked to participants' geographical upbringing (Magrath, 2015) <sup>[22]</sup>. To come in this conclusion, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with 17 young British footballers and the data revealed that nearly half of the participants held conservative views on homosexuality. Others showed greater tolerance, especially regarding legislation on marriage equality in the UK (Magrath, 2015) <sup>[22]</sup>. Initiatives taken by the big clubs such as using rainbow shoe laces and rainbow armband for the captains during match were very impactful in reducing the stigma and normalising the participation of homosexual sports person in football (Magrath and Stott, 2019) <sup>[20]</sup>. Changing masculinities has fair amount of impact on reducing sexual orientation related stigma in sports. According to the researchers, now-a-days there is less amount of correlation between heterosexuality and masculinity, which makes gender norms more ambiguous. This change is especially apparent in male team sports, where athletes feel free to express their feelings for one another without worrying about being classified as gay (Anderson, 2015) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Not only in British football but this shift of mentality is evident in various part of the world and in different sports. As Mortazavi (2017) <sup>[25]</sup> argued that anti-discrimination policy played such important role in reducing homophobia in Major Hockey League which was one of the first league that took steps to protect LGBTQ athletics. The movement towards inclusivity in culture has been the driving force behind these policies, especially since a number of prominent athletes came out in public. Author stated that although changes in policy have set the stage for a decrease in homophobia, these measures still need to be strictly enforced in order to be successful (Mortazavi, 2017) <sup>[25]</sup>. According to a US based study claimed that attitude towards homosexual athletics is changing because the overall acceptance of homosexuality in society is improving. It is the result of changes in gender norm and lack of fear of judgement when a person is engaging in non-heteronormative behaviour (McCormack and Anderson, 2014) <sup>[23]</sup>. A year later in 2015 Anderson and Bullingham came with similar argument where they claimed that there is less pressure on female athletes to hide their sexual orientation as a result of the growing acceptance of female homosexuality in society. According to the study, athletes who identify as openly lesbian are increasingly able to compete without worrying about prejudice. In addition, team sports are becoming more inclusive and athletic performance is taking precedence over sexual orientation (Anderson and Bullingham, 2015) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### Perspective of Fans

While it's quite evident that homophobia in sports has significantly decreased over the past few decades and sports associations are trying everything to get rid of homophobia from sports, you can't deny the presence of it within the fans. Criticizing homosexual sport star on the internet and homophobic chants in the stadium is still very common things. When Kian *et al.* in 2011 <sup>[14]</sup> investigated the online post of football fans they found the negativities surrounded homosexual players and they understood that online anonymity allows hegemonic masculinity to thrive unchecked after all those strict steps from media and football associations (Kian *et al.*, 2011) <sup>[14]</sup>. With open eyes it is very much visible that there is a disconnection between what the fans are claiming about their attitude and their behaviour. 30 male fans who claims that they don't possess any negative attitude toward a homosexual player took part in an interview where they were questioned about their homophobic chanting within the stadium, the data showed that the fans claimed that they use these chant just to support and motivate their team and there is no intention of stigmatisation or discrimination (Magrath, 2018) <sup>[21]</sup>. Studies were done to explore the presence of homosexual banter within the stadium and on online fan forum as the survey done by Evans in 2023 <sup>[7]</sup> highlighted the presence of homosexual themed banter even today after all these years, especially in emotionally charged matches, and this finding supports the outcome of previous study which claimed homophobia persists, especially in heated match days (Fletcher *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[8]</sup>. As we previously discussed that policies taken by clubs and association such as using rainbow shoe laces had huge impact to reduce homophobia in sports but recent studies have also shown us that younger fans are more comfortable to accept homosexual athletics than the older ones. This claim was established by Hansen *et*

*al.*, in 2023 when they conducted analysis of the responses given by the fans of English premier league on twitter. In Spain the stories are a little different though. Researchers have seen that in Spain people who act in homophobic ways frequently do so in an effort to project a masculine image (Velez & Piedra, 2018) <sup>[30]</sup>. In Italy things are not very different. Scandurra *et al.*, 2017 <sup>[28]</sup> argued that the presence of sexist and homophobic sentiment in Italian football is undeniable and homophobia among supporters frequently perpetuates gender norms, inciting animosity in both physical and virtual arenas. In this review a comprehensive analysis of this widespread problem of homophobia in sports, both at the professional and college levels, is provided. Despite significant progress in recent years towards inclusivity, homophobia is still pervasive, particularly in fan cultures and certain sports settings. According to research the sports world continues to be a challenging place for athletes who do not fit traditional heteronormative norms, despite changing societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people. Finally we can conclude by saying that awareness camp, policy enforcement and LGBTQ support system must continue to develop. Only through continuous efforts we can make sports a truly inclusive space where athletes of all sexual orientations can succeed without worrying about prejudice or discrimination.

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