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Running head: WHY ARE THERE STILL NO GAY PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL PLAYERS IN MEN'S MAJOR LEAGUES?

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**Why are there still no gay professional association football players in men's major leagues?**

**Revisiting the views of football fans in the United Kingdom.**

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## **Abstract**

In a survey of 3,500 association football fans conducted by members of the research team over a decade ago, most participants predicted that at least one gay football player would feel comfortable enough to disclose their sexuality publicly by 2014, and that many other players would follow this lead in the following years. Ten years on, gay players can be found in all major sports, but association football remains an outlier. Using an anonymous online survey, we invited football fans to advance their own views on why events have not transpired as expected. A sample of 2663 participants revealed: (a) 95 percent would welcome openly gay players, meaning by implication, football culture is a more gay-friendly environment than wider society; (b) Participants attributed the continued silence of gay players to football's gatekeepers e.g., agents, managers, and owners; (c) Paradoxically, homophobic language is used by fans but is not considered malicious.

**Key Words:** Football; Fans; Players; Homosexuality; Masculinity; Agents; Managers; Owners.

**Introduction: Element of Risk**

In June 2020, Thomas Beattie, a former professional football player, who started at Hull City and spent much of his career in Canada and Singapore, came out as gay. Then 33, Beattie announced that he felt “liberated,” but that, for a gay professional footballer, declaring his sexual orientation “adds an element of risk” (BBC, 2020). Beattie joined a select group of professional footballers who have waited until their competitive career is over before declaring themselves to be gay. The “element of risk,” as Beattie called it has been tested only once in the professional game: in 1990 Justin Fashanu disclosed his homosexuality after a newspaper expressed its intention to publish its own disclosure.

Fashanu (1961-98) offered his own version for a fee to *The Sun*, which published the revelation on its front page (The Sun, 1990). He was 29, but long past his peak and, no longer the star player he was in the early 1980s, when he transferred from Norwich to Nottingham Forest in England’s top tier. From 1982, Fashanu was an itinerant athlete, moving to several clubs and eventually to North America. While there is no evidence that he endured homophobic chanting or jeering from crowds, newspapers sometimes made fun of him and, when playing for Scottish team Heart of Midlothian, he was dubbed “Queen of Hearts” (Jones, 1998). In 1998, he took a job as a coach at Maryland Mania, of Baltimore, an A-League club in the United States (US). Whilst working there, Fashanu was accused of sexual assault involving a 17-year-old student. After being interviewed by police, Fashanu returned to England, though Maryland's police warned that he could be extradited back to the US. Fashanu was found hanged in a London garage, the verdict being that he committed suicide. He was 37 (Donnelly, 1998).

Since then, professional players have remained in the closet. American Robbie Rogers came out while announcing his retirement in 2013 after being released by Leeds United (King, 2017). Soon after, Rogers rescinded his intention to retire and signed for LA Galaxy in Major League Soccer (MLS). But MLS was something of a backwater compared to the major leagues of Europe, South America, Africa and Asia. So, Beattie's later assertion remains exactly that: an assertion, a forceful statement of belief, but not of fact.

In 2011, research published by two of the present authors, suggested that the so-called element of risk, though popularly accepted, was minimal (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011). Football fans were assumed to be hostile towards homosexuality. Notoriously aggressive towards rival players, fans, it was thought, would bridle at any player with audacity enough to disclose his gay orientation. Openly gay players, it was hypothesized, would face an intimidating, angry and perhaps damaging reaction from enraged fans. The research, by contrast, presented a starkly different portrayal of fans: 93 percent of those in a 3,500 strong sample, expressed a relaxed approach to openly gay players. Findings overwhelmingly indicated that most football fans were liberal minded and welcoming to LGBT people. Furthermore, most of the fans surveyed predicted that there would be an openly gay football player in the world's elite leagues by 2014 (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011). Ten years on this prediction was unfounded, and so became the stimulus for the current research project. Again, using an online survey as the research instrument, we invited association football fans as participants to advance their own views on why events had not transpired as expected. Remember: in the interim, no gay professional player from the major leagues of football have openly declared their sexual orientation.

## **Materials and Methods**

When researching such a sensitive, private and often secretive area such as sexual identity and preferences, the effort was made to create a method of gathering reliable information in a systematic and structured way that did not violate confidentiality (Murray 2014, p.3). A web-based survey was used to capture the thoughts of a sample of football fans. Using a simple technique of ‘qualitative follows quantitative’ (Hesse-Biber, 2010), the research uses closed questions to outline key trends that are shared by participants in the sample. This is immediately followed by open questions designed to aid in the explanation of key trends through the acquisition of rich contextual information (Cashmore et al, 2018; Walser et al., 2021). Our research focused on two main issues. First, we wanted to ascertain if fans would personally welcome a gay male football player to their club, and secondly, we asked fans to explain why they thought male professional football players tend to wait until their competitive career is over before coming out as gay men. The survey was promoted on over 150 fans forums across the UK, where a member of the research team has previously acquired the permission from the respective moderators to use their platforms to conduct academic research. At the outset of the study, ethical approval was granted from the university ethics committee at one of the authors institutions and in the survey itself we closely adhered to the guidelines established by The Association of Internet Researchers concerning privacy, harm, informed consent, and deception when engaging with participants.

Our approach when promoting the study on the fans forums was to provide a brief overview of its scope that included a link to the survey. The link guided potential participants to an information sheet containing a more detailed overview of the aim of the study, their role as a participant, the level of confidentiality afforded to them, the storage of their data, and the contact details of the

lead researcher and the university ethics committee that had approved the study. It also reminded participants that by continuing to the survey questions that they had understood their role as a participant and by submitting their response they had provided informed consent for their data to be used to advance academic research. As the survey was self-selecting, fans could just ignore the initial post made on the fans forums or decide to not proceed with the survey once they had read the participant information sheet. For those participants who completed the survey, at the end they were further reminded that ‘by clicking finish, you are giving your consent for your views to be used as part of this research project’.

The survey was conducted from March 2020 to April 2020. Of the 2,663 fans who submitted a response, 95 percent self-identified as male and 5 percent female. With regards to the age, participants were simply asked to state their specific age rather than their broader age range.

The authors are aware of the criticisms of online surveys that adopt non-probability sampling methods through participants self-selection. For example, we appreciate that probability sampling techniques are thought most effective for making valid inferences about a population on account that each member of the chosen population has equal probability of being chosen for the sample due to its random selection of participants. Conversely, we recognize that non-probability sampling techniques, like ours, cannot guarantee that all individuals in the population have an equal chance of being chosen, making the generalization of findings more difficult (Cleland et al., 2020; Gray, 2018). However, given that the intention of the work was to encourage a large sample of football fans to share their perspective, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences relative to a sensitive subject (attitudes towards gay football players), much like other research in this area, we

felt that a non-probability, self-selecting sample was the right approach (Walser et al., 2021; Cleland et al., 2021a; Cleland et al., 2021b; Cleland et al., 2021c; Cashmore & Cleland 2012). One of the advantages of online surveys is that they allow the participant to complete it in their own time and avoid the potential bias of social desirability that can occur on a subject like this with face-to-face research (Cleland et al., 2020). We offered no incentive for participation in this survey; instead, our aim was for participants to complete it as honestly as they could. Of course, we are aware that some participants may seek to try and distort the findings, hence why we collected the sizeable sample. Despite this, we make no claim to be representative of all fans of football clubs across the UK.

For analysis purposes, closed-ended data was examined via descriptive statistics, whilst the open-ended responses were inductively analyzed by each author in an initial period of open coding across first and second order phases to begin identifying any patterns and commonalities (Bryman, 2016). Once this was complete, all the authors then collaborated to collectively identify and verify the master themes emerging out of the open-ended data. The quotes used throughout the discussion represent the recurring themes that emerged from the data.

### **Discussion: Towards inclusive masculinity**

Of the 2,663 participants in our sample, 95 percent expressed a welcoming attitude towards openly gay players, and they were keen to emphasize their liberal views. “I don’t care if the guy is gay, straight or bisexual, as long as he gives 100% effort every game”, wrote an Exeter City fan in his fifties. Similarly, a 36-year-old participant explained: “like most fans I know I have no prejudice against anyone's sexuality, I only care if they are good enough to play for Crystal Palace”; whilst

a Woking FC fan (aged 35) emphasized: “Fans get a bad rap, but I honestly don’t think the majority of fans mind what sexuality a player is.” For our participants, then, it was thought unusual that football either had no gay players or offered so many impediments that gay players felt unable to express their true selves. In comparison, the 2019 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey revealed that 66 percent of the British population approve of same-sex couples, meaning about a third do not (Bulman, 2019). This is a surprising finding, especially as it indicates that attitudes are becoming less, rather than more liberal when compared to previous BSA survey editions.

While the comparisons are far from exact, this does suggest that football crowds constitute a more welcoming and inclusive environment than the rest of society and that fans have less “socially conservative” views in respect of gender and relationships. This may seem like a counterintuitive argument, but two research projects separated by ten years, with such compelling similarities in outcomes, indicates this is so. Football culture offers a more favorable reception to gay males than the rest of society, and the evidence continues to flow. For example, Magrath’s (2017) book, *Inclusive Masculinities in Contemporary Football* offers more evidence of liberal attitudes between and within a sample of Premier League football academy players. Similar findings are also expressed by Adams and Kavanagh in their 2017 research exploring masculinities and attitudes towards gay players among 14-year-old academy football players in the UK. In both studies the authors draw on Anderson’s (2009) theory of inclusive masculinity to describe this more welcoming environment.

In short, inclusive masculinity theory traces the journey that men’s sports cultures have taken over time as they have kept pace with dominant social attitudes and ideological perspectives. It argues

that sports, as reflections of the time and space in which they are played, were originally infused with heteronormative practices of the late 19<sup>th</sup>–late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that this has led to the advancement of sports cultures as a space to reinforce and cultivate a particular type of masculinity that accentuates heteronormative practices and seeks to denigrate marginalized groups of men with alternative sexual orientations (Messner, 1992; Connell, 1990). But where sports cultures were once synonymous with homophobia and homophobia (i.e. a heightened state of homophobia, such as that witnessed in the 1980s, when the Aids pandemic and the rise of Christian fundamentalism were forces), Anderson (2009) reminds us that sport’s sub-cultural attitudes are rapidly becoming more inclusive.

In our liquid modern existence where ‘traditional’ “patterns of acceptable behavior cannot be expected to keep their shape for long” (Bauman, 2007, p.1), it appears that homophobia is losing its cultural relevance. Within wider society, people challenge what now appear as archaic views regarding same sex relationships (Watt and Elliot, 2019) and the effects of this have been felt by our participants too. One Sheffield United fan (aged 62) explains: “I used to hear ‘faggot’ and ‘shirtlifter’, and ‘puff’, but these were used in society in general, not just in football. We’ve all moved on a bit since those days.” A Hartlepool United fan in his forties concurs, “fans are simply more inclusive these days”, while a Port Vale fan (aged 42) argues that due to widespread support for same-sex relationships, gay slurs are largely ineffective in modern society. He affirms: “everyone knows there’s no disgrace in being gay!”

The point our participants make is that football crowds are no longer hostile spaces for virile displays of hegemonic masculinity, and these findings draw parallels with a range of studies in

men's football. For example, whether in professional football environments (Magrath, 2018; Roberts et al., 2017), in media representations of gay athletes (Schallhorn & Hempel, 2017) or within and between fan groups (Cleland et al., 2021), evidence indicates that football cultures are becoming more inclusive. Of the few comparative examples that directly relate to football fans in western European nations, (such as Norway and Germany) evidence suggests that fan cultures tend to mirror this trend towards inclusivity (Krovel, 2016; Walser et al., 2021), though football fans in eastern European countries (such as Poland) are thought not to be as liberal minded (Kossakowski, 2018). Notwithstanding this exception, one serious implication of these increasingly common and liberal findings, is that every gay professional who conceals his sexual identity either indefinitely or until his competitive career is over, inadvertently perpetuates what has become a myth. Football culture is not the forbidding environment gay players suspect it is, but their reluctance to come out while playing contributes to this belief.

There is, of course, no practical way of demonstrating this, though the case of Gareth Thomas is serviceable. Rugby is an analogous sport to football. Thomas was the Welsh rugby captain; he came out in 2009, aged 35, becoming one of the first professional athletes to do so. He was married to a woman at the time and divorced the following year. At the time of his disclosure, it was predicted the macho world of rugby would be unforgiving and Thomas would have to endure hell on earth for the remainder of his career. But nothing largely happened aside from one notable incident when Castleford Tigers were fined for crowd comments aimed towards Thomas (*The Guardian*, 2010). Notwithstanding this, rugby fans were more grown-up than anyone suspected, and Thomas, far from being condemned as a symbol of moral decay, was lauded as a hero (Anderson et al., 2016). Why would anyone suppose association football would be much different? There is an answer, and everyone is involved.

### **Other Sports and Other Players**

Sports with openly gay athletes are not exactly the norm, but there are multiple examples. NBA's Jason Collins was a Washington Wizards center when he came out in 2013 (Kian et al., 2015). Puerto Rican boxer Orlando Cruz came out in 2012 (Mannix, 2012). Danell Leyva, a gymnast, competed for the US in the 2012 and 2016 Olympics (Bregman, 2020). In 2014, Gus Kenworthy won the silver medal at the 2014 Sochi Olympic games for skiing; a year later, the freeskiier made headlines again when he came out (Ritschel, 2019). Michael Sam came out in 2014 and was the first openly gay man to be drafted in the NFL, but he retired just one year later (Iqbal Khan, 2017). Also, from the NFL, Ryan Russell announced he was bisexual in 2019, though he is currently undrafted (Reimer, 2020). Whilst scholars may pontificate on the career circumstances of Sam and Russell, none of the athletes mentioned above have complained of homophobic abuse from crowds.

There are 50,000 professional footballers, according to Fédération Internationale des Associations de Footballeurs Professionnels (FIFpro), the Netherlands-based worldwide representative organization of professional footballers. It seems untenable that the world's most popular and culturally diverse sport does not have a single openly gay player. Notwithstanding the great many limitations of surveys of sexual self-identification, consider the Office of National Statistics' (OFNS) 2018 finding - that "4.4 percent of people aged 16 to 24 years identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual." And 2.5 percent of all men were more likely to identify as gay or bisexual than women (OFNS, 2020). We should exercise caution in accepting such statistics as accurate reflections of social reality, but we use them merely to highlight how implausible it would be to assume that there are no gay professional footballers in the world's major leagues. Collin Martin of the U.S.,

Andy Brennan of Australia, and Anton Hysén of Sweden, are currently the only professional footballers who are openly gay and these all play in minor leagues where they have little visibility. Coincidentally, all have been warmly welcomed by the media, fellow players, and the general public at large (Cleland, 2014). So, the question remains: what are the reasons for absence of gay football players in elite leagues?

When we refer to “reasons,” we acknowledge that there is no single cause, nor objective explanation; only subjective motivations or justifications to be made. In the present study, our interest was in discovering what a sample of football fans believed. Frequently maligned and habitually accused of being the principal reason for gay players’ inhibitions, fans themselves have their own ideas. Most accept that they are easy targets, but discern real culprits are what some call ‘gatekeepers,’ meaning the people that control access to players. These are players’ personal agents, their clubs’ managers, and the owners of their clubs. But, before moving to some of the reasons identified by fans, we should consider a factor largely ignored or dismissed by respondents in the research.

Players are conscious that they are privileged: they are young men, who are very well-paid (average Premier League salary is over £3 million, or \$4.2 million (US), per year) and they enjoy the status of celebrities (Ingle, 2019). However, they do not control their environments, which are highly structured, organized and regulated in a way that makes them predictable. Most players do not raise many questions: why spoil a winning streak? Affluence has a way of stifling rebelliousness. Concomitantly, the precarious nature of the work of professional footballers is worth considering too. For example, Roderick (2006) reminds us that players are continually

judged for their ‘attitudes’, however ill-defined and inconsistently applied this concept might be. Their playing careers are largely held at the mercy of decision makers: coaches, trainers, physiotherapists, and others who share knowledge and shape opinion as they meet on the training pitch, in the treatment room, and in the corridors of the football club. Furthermore, it is possible that players may simply and reasonably choose not to mention their sexuality at work. We do know however that players contribute to a playful form of dark humor, otherwise known as ‘banter’ that circulates in dressing rooms, where ego maintenance (i.e., face saving) is a high interactional priority (Roderick 2006; Roberts, et al., 2017; Rivers & Ross, 2021). Players are also likely to be aware of football’s history with hazing rituals where players initiate new recruits into the group by testing their readiness to accept a new set of power structures (Parker & Manley, 2016). It is possible, therefore, that players could be discouraged from disclosing their sexuality over the concerns they have about the reaction of other players, though recent evidence has revealed inclusive attitudes amongst football players with wholly positive outlook towards increased social and legal rights for sexual minorities and a rejection of homophobia (Magrath et al., 2015; Magrath, 2017; Dixon, 2020b; Gaston et al., 2018).

Thus, whilst research indicates that professional football environments are increasingly accepting of LGBT people, football players, cannot know for sure what might happen should they decide to make their sexual predilections known. Our research provides every reason to surmise they would not suffer at the hands of fans and could be fêted as a result. But there are no guarantees and players themselves are likely to rely on the advice of trusted others.

## Agents

“Agents are mostly a cancer on the game in the modern world”, wrote one Rangers fan in his thirties. He continued, “their primary goal is profit rather than the best outcome for their player.” A Bristol City fan in his twenties adds “agents are egotistical people who care about their bank balance more than anything, and I believe that this plays a major part in why players choose to not come out”. In fact, 63 percent of our sample shared the view that agents were likely to prohibit players from disclosing their sexuality publicly. So, despite an enduring but largely insignificant presence in the history of the game (Rossi, 2018) participants are aware that agents have assumed prominence in the post-Bosman era that has witnessed greater value contracts on offer, more out of contract football players attempting to negotiate their next move, and corporations buying entire clubs and seeking to recruit leading players (Horne et al., 1999).

Agents act on behalf of owners to scout, sign and often negotiate financial terms. They also manage business, contractual and other financial matters for players, taking a percentage of earnings as their commission. This can be as much as ten percent (Poli, 2010). So, for example, if an agent secures an endorsement contract on behalf of a player, which requires the player to appear in an advertising campaign, for underwear, cologne, a chain of fast-food outlets or any other kind of product or service, and agrees a fee of \$1.5 million (not an unrealistic figure), the agent would take \$150,000 commission. Because agents’ earnings are linked directly to those of their clients, they are conservative – if for no other reason than they have no interest in changing a profitable arrangement. Consequently, within the player/agent relationship, tension exists between the necessities of economic activity, and the social, physical, moral and self-development of the player (Kelly & Chatziefstathiou, 2018).

These tensions were not lost on our participants. For example, a Hamilton Academical (Scotland) fan in his fifties wrote “agents may be genuinely concerned about how newspaper gossip may adversely affect their player.” However, others remained more skeptical: “Agents make their money by manipulating and ultimately scaring their clients into concealing the truth”, explained a 45-year-old Grimsby fan, while a Sunderland fan in her forties added: “Agents attempt to avoid negative publicity that makes their players less valuable in transfer dealings”. A Glasgow Rangers fan (aged 66) maintains: “it’s all about protecting the potential loss in the value of the player”; while a Dover Athletic fan in his thirties surmises: “it’s all to ensure their own income is unaffected.” Adding to this, a Walsall fan (aged 21) explains, “they apply pressure onto the player to act as a brand rather than a person”. Here, our participants remind us that elite footballers are akin to human brands: that is, well-known individuals who generate a significant level of revenue in the marketplace (Park et al., 2019).

But, whilst fans were skeptical of the motives of agents, they assumed that for football players, the opposite is probably true. That is because, whilst football players are perceived to be task focused, beyond this, they are thought to be impressionable, naive, and therefore, more likely to implicitly trust those professional ‘industry experts’ that are closest to them:

I get the impression players trust them (agents) with almost every aspect of their career so if they're (players) keeping their sexuality a secret it makes sense that it'd be the agent telling them to do that (Port Vale fan, aged 30)

The implicit trust of agents by players is echoed by Roderick (2006, p.129) when he explains that the relationship between the agent and the player recognizes few personal boundaries, and yet, it is “typically characterized by potentially divergent interests”. Much like our participants, Roderick recognizes that in the economic context of the football transfer market, players are not only workers and clients, but they are also commodities. So, should a client, perhaps a high-profile international player, with a portfolio of advertising deals, express his wish to declare his homosexuality, an agent may remind him of a morals clause in his contract, which makes it possible to cancel the arrangement if the signee participates in some form of transgressive behavior.

For instance: “If at any time, in the opinion of the company, the athlete becomes the subject of public disrepute, contempt, or scandal that affects the athlete’s image or goodwill, then the company may, upon written notice to athlete, immediately suspend or terminate this Endorsement Agreement and athlete’s services hereunder” (This is abstracted from the publication *The Fashion Law*). Only a liberal-thinking agent possessed of progressive tendencies and an egalitarian spirit would encourage a client to take what is, after all, a risk. If the client’s earning suffer, so do the agent’s. Hence an agent would probably advise against testing the terms of the contract by coming out. But, we ought to consider the possibility that the agent could be wrong.

Participants were aware that agents are likely to want the appeal of their clients to be as broad as possible to maximize future revenue streams, but as one Brighton fan (aged 58) suggests “once a few athletes come out, the money-making potential could work in reverse.” A Norwich fan in her fifties makes a similar assumption:

I personally think the next major footballers to come out would be whole heartedly welcomed into the football world and would be a major draw and image builder for their team and sport. These players would attract huge media and sponsorship interest with companies desperate to target specific markets.

The point our participants make is important and beyond conjecture. That is because, celebrities away from sports have not suffered commercially after declaring their sexuality: Ellen DeGeneres, Elton John, Cynthia Nixon and Zachary Quinto are among the dozens of entertainers who have opened-up with impunity. The afore-mentioned Gareth Thomas endorses several products, including Guinness. But the response of agents may be close to that of the late publicist Max Clifford, who, in 2012, affirmed that he had ‘helped’ several Premier League players who were gay to protect their sexual identity in order to preserve their (and presumably his) careers (BBC, 2012).

### **Owners, Managers and Coaches**

44 percent of participants believe football club owners have an influence in maintaining silence. On the surface, to mention football club owners at all makes little sense; after all, what has an owner to lose or gain? No one has accurately discerned why plutocrats and entrepreneurs buy clubs. Practically every major association football club in the world loses money, or, at best, breaks even; so, there is no pecuniary gain involved. Presumably, the status of owning a prominent club is valuable (Millward, 2013). Some owners name stadiums after their companies and use clubs as marketing vehicles (Dixon, 2020a). Some may have political motives (e.g., use of a football club as an escape investment from a country with weak institutions or in political crisis, or to promote

an investor political campaign in their domestic country) (Cook & Fallon, 2015). But there is no obvious reason to suppose that having openly gay players would lessen the status of owning a club or impair the marketing value of the club. This was recognized by our participants too. “Owners would probably be supportive”, said a Southampton fan in his forties. Similarly, a Newcastle fan in his forties explains “a player coming out as gay would make no difference to an owner”. However, a female Arsenal fan in her twenties held more cynical views: “some of the biggest clubs in the world are financially supported by owners from countries where homosexuality is illegal.” Likewise, a male Everton fan in his fifties argues that fear of owners will “vary depending on the club situation - Saudi owners, anyone?”

England’s Premier League clubs’ owners are an international clique, about 35 percent typically from England, the others from a variety of countries, many of which have cultural and legal prohibitions on LGBTQI+ groups (Bezants, 2018). Russia, for example, decriminalized homosexuality but punishes the promotion of homosexuality. Homosexual relations have also been decriminalized in Asian countries like China and Thailand but cultural taboos remain. But in predominantly Muslim states, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, homosexuality is a criminal offence. At the time of writing (Spring 2021) half the 20 Premier League clubs are owned by citizens of countries where homosexuality is a crime or constitutes a challenge to popular morality. It would be unusual if club owners from such countries were passionate advocates of LGBTQI+ rights. Of course, it is true that corresponding football clubs tend to embrace some of the pro-LGBT campaigns implemented by Premier League authorities, but this is to be expected. Owners of football clubs in England are always likely, outwardly at least, to reflect in their club the prevailing values of the customer base to minimize any potential disconnect between fans and

their object of support (Lawrence, 2018). Even so, some owners have been accused of using football as a vehicle for ‘sportswashing’, that is where sport is used as a tool to legitimize the reputation of a nation state, despite known human rights abuses and widespread regressive attitudes (Doward, 2018). There is no evidence that any football club owner has consciously involved themselves in moral or personal issues that impact on the players and there is never likely to be. Any intervention by owners would be conducted in strict secrecy. But it is likely that owners influence the code of interpersonal behavior that is considered right or acceptable at a particular club. And it is within the realms of possibility that owners make their views and principles known to employees of the club.

Managers and their coaching staff are considered by 39 percent of football fans to influence gay players’ decisions to remain silent. It is, of course, probable that several managers and coaches are themselves gay or bisexual and are complicit in the concealment (and this is not too strong a word: gay players and others associated with football clubs deliberately hide their sexual orientations). Again, there is no evidence that any manager or coach has deterred gay players but consider: the statistical average of a Premier League manager’s job tenure is fourteen months (Cunningham, 2020). A manager is usually judged solely on results and occasionally on acumen in the transfer market and, even more occasionally, on performance when assessed against resources. But overwhelmingly, managers and their coaches survive if their teams win more games than they lose, and falter if they do not.

Managers learn from other managers. Some complete coaching courses, but management skills are largely a product of observational learning i.e., observing carefully and modeling one’s own

conduct, attitudes and responses on those of others, usually more senior and experienced managers (the professional status of football managers in the UK is a relatively new phenomenon, heralded by the creation of the UEFA Pro License in 1997). For our participants this has one important implication. “Today’s managers have never witnessed the management of a gay player.” These words from a Liverpool fan in his thirties offer a sobering thought. Having never been exposed to the management of gay athletes, managers, and their staff, are no doubt unprepared for creating an environment that is conducive to providing gay players with the confidence to openly disclose their sexuality with the freedom afforded to their heterosexual colleagues. In elite football, management skills are concentrated elsewhere.

Intuitively, every manager and coach is aware of the efficacy of task cohesion, meaning the commitment shared by players during competition and a team’s collective actions on the field of play. Publicly, they may espouse a belief in camaraderie, togetherness and off-field friendship, but these constitute social cohesion and research suggests this does not necessarily translate into task cohesion (Filho et al., 2014). Both forms of cohesion are preferable for a manager or coach; but, given options, task cohesion is a priority (Baird et al., 2020)

So, managers and coaches would not be unduly concerned about potential disruption to relationships between players should one or more players decide to break their silence. Of much greater concern to managers and coaches is the impact a crowd’s response might have on a player, or indeed, all players (Otte et. al., 2020). While our research provides evidence that crowds are overwhelmingly relaxed about gay players, managers and coaches no doubt share the popular, mistaken perception that fans would react hostilely to an openly gay player.

Managers and coaches, like players, rarely miss the chance to share the old saw about crowds lifting competitors and inspiring them to improved performances. There is no evidence to suggest this is the case (If anything, crowds affect referees rather than players; thus, as Sors et al. (2019) point out, home advantage is a function of referees' reactions to fans, not players'). Perception is more important than reality in this instance: no manager wishes voluntarily to expose players to what they anticipate will be a rancorous crowd and risk losing competitive potency as a result. In the absence of data, we can only surmise and develop arguments inferentially; there is at least some purchase in the fans' contention that managers and coaches act as a barrier that any gay players has to cross before arriving at the decision to come out.

### **Contradiction?**

Fans are overwhelmingly in favor of openness: many of them embarrassed that their sport has failed to keep pace with social change. They are also irked by the media's portrayal of them as unwelcoming of gay players, insisting support is all encompassing. "If one of the best 11 at the club is gay, blue, Martian, or even previously played for Chelsea I will support him", explains one Queens Park Rangers fan in his fifties, while a Sunderland fan in his twenties adds: "If a player came out as gay now, like most people I would just shrug my shoulders and say, carry on as normal." In other words, our participants were keen to point out that football culture is not the truculent Neanderthal culture popularly depicted. As such, it is not genuinely a prohibitive force. Fans identify more likely retardants in agents, owners, managers, and coaches, as well as the media that perpetuates popular stereotypes of football fans.

Yet there is an extraordinary contradiction: while 95 percent of fans are self-consciously welcoming, 89 percent understand that the actions of other fans could potentially serve as a deterrent for players to disclose their sexuality. We arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that over nine out of ten fans are gay-friendly, but suspect other fans, perhaps those sitting next to them, are decidedly not. Further, they occasionally hear chanting, jeers, and sometimes barbed repartee among other fans, and some interpret these as homophobic and malicious – by which they mean deliberate and intended to be harmful. Remember these are most probably the jeers of fans who align themselves with LGBTQI+ interests. The only possibility is that all the homophobic heckling is from just five percent of the crowd. Logically, the people using what they consider homophobic language must be the same people who welcome openly gay players. How can this be so?

The parallel is far from clear, but imagine an airline pilot who wishes to alert passengers to turbulence ahead. “Please do not be alarmed,” he or she begins their announcement, knowing full well those words in themselves will create exactly the emotion they warn against. Or, on an everyday level, when someone prefaces a conversation with, “Nothing personal, but.” What follows is sure to be personal and so contradicts the lead-up. Many football fans can shout remarks they consider friendly, if acerbic, but with no malice in the full knowledge that they can be interpreted as abusive. For example, one Cardiff City fan (aged 37) explained, “too many people get hurt feelings over something so trivial. It's 2020, nobody really cares about anyone's sexuality.” Another fan of Dagenham and Redbridge (aged 48) pointed out: “its banter and banter is not generally malicious.” He continued: “In this day and age not many people would be openly homophobic in a malicious way, the same as they wouldn't be racist for the fear of a crowd backlash.”

Here, this participant recognises that crowds would no longer tolerate genuine homophobic slurs. And, whilst it might be difficult for others to discern, our participants implicitly understand the difference relative to their intentions to tease (as part of football culture), or to harm (as in the content of a homophobic slur). One Barnet fan in her sixties agrees. "I suspect the 'victims' of such songs often aren't even gay anyway. Certainly not when it's directed at a whole team (e.g., Brighton)". This is supported by a Queens Park Rangers fan in her forties who writes: "The only "homophobic" chant I've ever heard at QPR is "Olé, Olé, Olé... José Mourinho is gay!" Given that José Mourinho isn't actually gay, this just came across as a load of nonsense banter"; and a Hamilton fan explains: "The most I've heard would be comments about someone's colourful boots being a bit 'poofy!' but not that the player is homosexual or a homophobic slur. It probably doesn't even mean they think he is homosexual or care one way or another." One Millwall fan (aged 60) adds to this when he explains that some chants are simply misunderstood:

I've heard chanting that is associated with incompetence and cheating, being attributed to a slur against gay people. It was reported by the linesman and then via the referee to the home manager. A loudspeaker announcement cautioned people in the stadium about using homophobic language. The incident was investigated, and nothing was found. This is what I heard: "the referee is bent" and was called out about 6 times following a refereeing decision. The same decision drew a lot of booing too. The term "bent" has been used in English language to infer that someone is not a good person e.g., a bent copper [Policeman]; that car is bent [ It has been illegally repaired car, or two cars combined] etc. The use of

language that is truly homophobic or racist is diminishing through ongoing education by schools, sporting associations, sports clubs, and other responsible groups in society.

Some social commentators have argued that fans enter bubbles when they attend games of football: they suspend attitudes, values, sometimes identities for the duration of the game (Scott, 2019). But they are still functioning members of the society and, as such, remain familiar with the prevailing habitus – the way they and others of their social background perceive and are expected to react to the world. They are aware that, ten years ago, the content of their remarks would be dismissed as banter, that is – a mutually accepted, lighthearted form of dark humor (Dixon, 2013). But banter itself has undergone a redefinition and fans realize banter is now regarded as offensive, if not downright abusive. Friendly banter is an oxymoron. This does not prevent fans using it; but it means they are aware their intentions will almost certainly be misunderstood (Lawless & Magrath, 2020). This can cause conflict in the minds of football fans:

The only homophobic banter I have ever heard is the Brighton and Hove [BHA] trope. Not saying it's witty but it somehow amuses me, even if I am conflicted by my amusement. Football banter is often cruel and intended to "offend". Within limits, it is an ideal forum to let off steam, sometimes X-rated and any abuse is rarely intended to apply outside of specific fan rivalry... I would also imagine it (the BHA trope) would more likely be a source of pride for their fans to be associated with a location noted for its tolerance to the gay / lgbt scene...I would be strongly opposed to any other homophobic abuse if I heard any and, if repeated, would request the intervention of a steward.

Thus, the challenge for a researcher is not to make the illogical logical, but to find meaning in the meaningless. Our participants do not consider themselves homophobic and yet many have heard homophobic chants or remarks they consider malicious or toxic. Others have heard them but consider them harmless and part of football's banter. Football culture, like everything else, has been affected by the shifts in values, mores, and lifestyle over the past decade; football traditions change too. But not all of them: the customary exchange of insults remains. These insults can be jocular, but they can also be scathing. To outsiders, they might sound abrasive, venomous, or just plain nasty. To football fans, they are part of the usual raillery that accompanies games and to expunge them would be to deprive football culture of one of its time-honored features.

It is tempting to redesign Floyd Allport's concept *pluralistic ignorance* in a way that helps us understand psychological process at work in football crowds. Allport advanced the term in the 1920s, his effort being to explain how members of a group can privately hold beliefs and attitudes at variance with what they regard as prevailing norms. They adopt behavior that enables them to fit in. In the same way, as crowds collectively agreed to admire the *Emperor's New Clothes*, even though they saw only the naked potentate, people keep their private thoughts to themselves (see Bjerring et al., 2013).

The explanatory payload is that their behavior supports or even strengthens those norms, even while many -- perhaps the majority -- do not personally endorse them. Our inference in this context indicates that, while fans may have privately held beliefs incompatible with what they regarded as group norms, they actually changed them, possibly to conform with group standards, but more likely because of a genuine enlightenment as values of inclusiveness and broad-based liberalism

swept through all cultural spheres. We might describe this as *pluralistic enlightenment*. Beliefs and attitudes do not change spontaneously: they are shaped and modified by our group interactions. Fans, in this project, may once have held different values. Football culture, like every other aspect of cultural life is in constant change. So are the people who create and sustain it.

## **Conclusion**

Social research typically proceeds by an investigation of the conditions under which an event or a problem occurs. In this case, we posed ourselves a more unusual task: to specify the conditions under which something did not happen: gay male footballers did not declare their sexual identity even in circumstances that ostensibly permitted if not encouraged such disclosure. Why not? Speculation suggests it is because players dread the anticipated reaction of crowds. But, ten years ago, our research indicated over 90 percent of football crowds were receptive to gay players. So, the present research invited members of those crowds to advance their own views on why events have not transpired as expected ten years ago, when it was predicted by respondents that there would at least be one openly gay competitive player by 2014. Instead, gay players continue to conceal their sexuality during their playing career and discuss it openly in retirement, when they are removed from the crowds they apparently fear.

Fans offer what seems, to this research team, a plausible scenario in which a cluster of forces deter gay players from coming-out. Agents have an interest in maintaining the status quo. Owners have nothing to gain and are often educated and brought up in cultures in which homosexuality is regarded unfavorably. Managers and their coaches are more narrowly focused on playing concerns and probably suspect hostile crowds could affect a player's competitive performance. In addition,

an uncritical media rarely questions the orthodox conception of fans as bigoted and unlikely to welcome openly gay players. Respondents in this research believed that the combination of factors constrain gay players and deter them from being open about their sexual identity.

The anomalous aspect of this is that fans themselves are victims of the same misapprehension: while they declare themselves to be LGBYQI+ friendly and welcoming of openly gay players, they sense other fans are not so progressive in their attitudes. Their thought process seems to be: “I’m not homophobic, but some of the fans around me are.” This research suggests they are only half right: the others around them are as liberal as they are.

This irregular finding is complicated by the mockery, taunting and shouts of derision aimed at no one in particular, but often slighting gay men. Ten years ago, this might have been regarded as derogatory but good-natured ribbing. Fans accept that, while it may still be intended as ribbing in football stadiums, it is now widely construed as disparaging, pejorative and sometimes offensive. Only by addressing this apparent incongruity in football fans’ own terms do we approach the meaning of the self-contradiction.

The study, like its predecessor, contrives to offer a counterintuitive conclusion: the popular conception of football fans remains fatally flawed and football culture offers an environment that is significantly more LGBTQI+ friendly than the increasingly conservative wider society.

Players, gay and bi, who postpone coming-out until their retirement effectively add support to the misconception by warning other gay players of the perils of breaking the silence. The perils are products of their own imagination. Much more instructive would be the example of Gareth

Thomas. Gay players do not need the support of their clubs, leagues or any other authorities. There would certainly be a tumultuous crowd response initially, but it would be mischievous not malicious. Football culture retains some of its venerated customs, but it also moves with the times and the pervasive yet unquestioned belief that it is a crucible of homophobia has now taken on the status of myth – widely held but false.

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