

Frequently Asked Questions about LGBT People in Sport

1. How are LGBT people discriminated against in sport?

In athletics as well as other school settings, individual athletes sometimes call LGBT people names, spread rumors about them, or encourage others to avoid contact with them. Athletes may refer to opponents or people whose sexual orientation is not known with epithets such as, "Get that "faggot" or "bunch of dykes." Coaches sometimes require LGBT athletes to keep their identities hidden or try to encourage the athlete to change their sexual orientation. In extreme cases LGBT people in athletics are physically threatened or their property is vandalized. Some coaches or schools have informal policies that prohibit lesbians and gays from their teams or they do not give lesbians and gays fair treatment in playing time or coaching attention. Some college coaches play on the fears of high school recruits and their parents by spreading rumors about lesbians or gay men at other schools. This is called negative recruiting.

2. What does "transgender" mean?

Transgender, a new word for many people, is the self-chosen term of many people who do not conform in dress, appearance, or identity to traditional gender norms. Females who do not have a "feminine" appearance or identity or males who do not have a "masculine" appearance or identity often identify themselves as transgender. "Transgender" is a term that relates to a person's gender identity, not to their sexual orientation. Transgender people are not necessarily lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but people often assume that their non-conforming gender expression indicates that they are. A related term, "transsexual," refers to people who choose to change their gender through surgery and/or hormone treatment. Many transsexuals also identify themselves as transgender.

3. How does discrimination against LGBT people affect straight athletes and coaches?

When LGBT people in sport are stigmatized, many young men and women go to great lengths to avoid association with lesbians and gay men by monitoring their appearance, mannerisms, and relationships with peers. In women's sports, the lesbian label is often used to discourage women from challenging inequities between men's and women's sports. If women fear being called lesbians, this can be an effective way to intimidate women into accepting less than equal treatment. When young male athletes express hatred of or engage in violence against gays or lesbians, they are acting on irrational fears and prejudice rather than reason and values of respect. When people participate in the harassment or discrimination against any group based on stereotypes and fears, they diminish themselves and do not take advantage of opportunities to learn how to challenge social norms so that everyone is treated respectfully.

4. In what ways do the experiences of white LGBT athletes or coaches differ from LGBT

coaches and athletes of color?

LGBT coaches or athletes of color must contend with prejudice against LGBT people as well as prejudice and discrimination because of their race. Because of this, the experiences of LGBT athletes or coaches of color are often different from those of white LGBT people. For example, they may feel less willing to identify themselves as members of two groups who are discriminated against. In addition, LGBT people of color sometimes find it difficult to find support among white LGBT people or straight people of color, which places them in a difficult and isolated position. The more everyone can understand the connections among different discriminations like racism and heterosexism, the easier it will be for people of color who are also LGBT to find support and safety among coaches and teammates of all races and sexual orientations.

5. How can coaches address the use of “fag” and “dyke” as slurs and put-downs in the game or locker room? By players? By coaches?

Prevention is always the best way to address name-calling or put-downs of any kind. Coaches should make it clear as part of team policies that name-calling of any kind by anyone is unacceptable. Coaches and parents can also set a powerful example by avoiding name-calling or put-downs to motivate athletes. When name-calling is used, the situation can be an opportunity to help athletes and coaches understand its negative consequences and how it can affect the overall climate of a team. Coaches who take this opportunity to talk with athletes and other coaches about name-calling will find that it becomes less of a problem and that team interactions improve.

6. What should coaches do about straight players who refuse to accept LGBT teammates?

Many people have prejudices of some kind against different groups of people. Being part of an athletic team can be an opportunity for all athletes to learn how group prejudice is based on demeaning stereotypes that dehumanize individuals and limit our ability to make friends and work together as a team. Encouraging athletes to examine their prejudices through informal discussion and formal educational programs can be helpful for many athletes. It is important to make it clear that, regardless of their individual prejudices, everyone on the team must be treated with respect and dignity. This expectation is crucial to developing effective teamwork and a climate of safety for everyone.

7. What should coaches do about players who are uncomfortable with lesbians or gay men in the locker room?

When players express concerns of this kind, they are usually based on stereotypes that depict lesbians and gay men as sexual threats. When players react out of unfounded fear based on stereotypes, coaches have an opportunity to work with these athletes to help them overcome their fear. In actuality, lesbians and gay men in the locker room are focused on the same things that their heterosexual teammates are: the upcoming game, how or how much they will play, a paper due for a tough class, caring for an injury, or laughing and talking with teammates. Everyone's privacy should be respected in the

locker room. No athlete should engage in any activity that invades the privacy of another regardless of sexual orientation. If anyone in the locker room engages in this kind of activity, this behavior should be addressed without regard to sexual orientation.

8. How can athletes play on a team with LGBT people when their religion is against homosexuality?

One of the strengths of democratic living is that tolerance of different religious perspectives is expected. As a result, each member of a team is entitled to her or his personal religious beliefs and should be protected from having others criticize or try to change them. Another strength and challenge of democratic living is working effectively with others even when members of the group do not share common personal beliefs. Learning to interact with teammates respectfully and productively, even when personal or religious values are not shared, is an important skill for all team members. Many schools have non-discrimination policies that require that everyone on a team be treated fairly regardless of sexual orientation or religion. In this case, working effectively across differences is not only a positive value for teams, it is a legal requirement.

9. What can an athlete do if she or he believes a coach might be discriminating against them because of her or his sexual orientation or gender identity (for example receiving less playing time or coaching attention)?

The athlete can make an appointment to talk to the coach and ask him or her to help them understand the coach's decisions. The coach may have performance or strategic reasons that she or he can explain to the athlete. If the athlete still believes that the coach is singling her or him out for unfair treatment, he or she can ask a teammate whose opinions they respect and in whom they can confide for their perspective. If the athlete still believes that they are being discriminated against, she or he can contact the office on campus that addresses discrimination at the school. Usually these contacts are confidential and, once the athlete gets more information from this office, she or he can decide how to proceed with the complaint through informal or formal procedures. There are also national organizations that provide legal assistance to people who think they are being discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity: National Center for Lesbian Rights, American Civil Liberties Union, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, Lambda Legal Fund.

10. What can a coach do when a parent, recruit, or a reporter asks, "Do you have lesbians/gay men on your team?"

Perhaps the most accurate response to a question like this is "I assume so" or "I assume we will have in the future or have had in the past." Coaches can then follow up with this question, "Why do you ask?" to invite the asker to elaborate on her or his concerns. Coaches could also say that they expect to have a diverse team and see this as a great opportunity for athletes to learn how to respect differences and still work together as a

team. In any case, the idea that having lesbians or gay men play on a team or coach a team is becoming more accepted in athletics as stereotypes are increasingly challenged and as coaches take more leadership in setting a respectful tone. The more coaches can take questions like this in stride and respond without fear, the less a problem it will be. If the school has a non-discrimination policy, the coach can also note this.

11. What can a coach do if a player comes out to her or him?

First, the coach can be proud to have developed a trusting relationship with the athlete that enables the athlete to feel that she or he can come to the coach with this information. Coming out to a coach, who has power over an athlete's career, can be a great risk. Second, the coach must respect the athlete's confidentiality. This personal information is the athlete's to share with others, not the coach's. If the athlete is seeking counseling, the coach can provide information about school counseling services or other resources that are gay-friendly. The coach can reassure the athlete that he or she respects his or her privacy and can ask for the athlete's advice on how to best support her or him. Many coaches in this situation want to be helpful, but do not believe they know what to do. Coaches can rely on their best instincts for how to respond to any athlete who shares important personal information with them. Coaches do not need to be an expert to respond in a positive and supportive way to an athlete who comes out to them. If coaches need to consult with someone, they can contact resources on their campus, in the community, or talk to another coach who can provide information, support, or guidance.

12. What can a coach do if a player wants to come out to the team?

Young lesbian and gay athletes have many reasons for wanting to publicly claim their identities. Keeping such an important secret about oneself is stressful and has negative effects on athletic and academic performance as well as relationships with friends, family, and teammates. It is unfair to ask an athlete who wants to come out to teammates to keep a secret that has such debilitating effects. Coaches might advise the player to consult with a counselor first to talk about this decision and to decide how to do it in the most positive way. The coach in this situation plays an important role in making sure that the player who is coming out is supported and ensuring that the rest of the team responds in a positive way. Coaches can find resources at their school or on the Internet to help them develop a plan to support the player and her or his teammates. The decision by a gay or lesbian athlete to live openly and honestly can have positive effects on her or him as well as the rest of the team when the coach takes leadership to ensure a positive reaction.

13. Why are some women athletes so concerned about appearing ultra-feminine off the playing field?

Unfortunately, the lesbian label in women's sports is still used in an attempt to intimidate

some women athletes, to make women feel as if they do not belong in athletics, or to make them feel self-conscious about their athleticism. Though this is changing, some women still try to accentuate their feminine appearance or their heterosexual interests as a way to “prove” that they are not lesbians. In actuality, a woman’s appearance is unrelated to her sexual orientation, but femininity is stereotypically associated with heterosexuality. We are still working toward a sports world in which athleticism is a human quality unrelated to gender or sexuality. The more women and men can express their genders in ways that are comfortable for them rather than to conform to gender stereotypes or avoid being called gay, the closer we will be to this ideal.

14. Why don’t more LGBT athletes and coaches come out?

When LGBT athletes and coaches keep their identities a secret, it is usually because they fear being discriminated against or harassed. They also fear losing friends or being ostracized by their teammates or families. Sometimes LGBT athletes and coaches believe that coming out would distract attention from their athletic accomplishments and put them in the public spotlight for their sexuality rather than their own individual or their team’s performance. As more schools, coaching associations, and other athletic governing organizations enact inclusive non-discrimination policies and sponsor educational programs for athletic staff and athletes, the climate in athletics will become safer for more LGBT athletes and coaches to identify themselves. This in turn will reduce discrimination and harassment as other athletes and coaches, as well as fans and the public learn to accept LGBT athletes and coaches as a part of the athletic arena.

15. Will openly gay, lesbian or bisexual athletes or coaches affect team chemistry?

No single response adequately answers this question. Some teams do not respond well to having an openly lesbian or gay teammate or coach, and their ability to work together suffers. Some teams improve their team chemistry after learning that one of their members is gay or lesbian; it draws the team closer together, and they perform better. How a team responds depends on several factors that team captains, coaches, and athletic directors can take some leadership to address. A team’s response is guided by how these leaders set the tone, how supportive they are, how they integrate this new information into the day-to-day life of the team, and how they set expectations for respectful interactions among the team. If a coach perceives this situation as a team crisis or is not supportive of the individual athlete, it is much more difficult for a team to overcome the prejudices and fears of some team members and team chemistry can be negatively affected. On the other hand, when athletic directors, coaches, and captains take leadership, an opportunity is opened for everyone to learn and grow and a team can improve their ability to work together on and off the playing field.

16. Are women athletes more comfortable with a lesbian teammate than men are with a gay teammate?

It is difficult to make such a broad generalization about men and women. The individual team and the leadership on that team make more of a difference than whether it is a

men's or women's team. However, many research studies indicate that heterosexual men, in general, are more uncomfortable being around gay men than heterosexual women are about being around lesbians. Perhaps as a result, it has long been assumed that it is more difficult for a gay athlete to be open about his sexuality than it is for a lesbian athlete to be open about her sexuality. Regardless of these assumptions, the determining factors on both men's and women's team is how the coach and captains respond to an openly gay or lesbian team member. They set the tone for the rest of the team.