



## World First Study finds Homophobia Common in American Sports: USA scores worst of English Speaking Countries

### Summary

- 84% witnessed or experienced homophobia in sports, including straight men and women
- Americans are most likely to fear discrimination from coaches and officials
- Positive signs of change as more American youth “coming out” while playing sports
- Openly gay Football players unite in a demand for better support from coaches and officials

*Editors: Infographics and country rankings available*

On the one year anniversary of **Michael Sam** being drafted to the NFL (May 10), the world’s first international study on homophobia in sports has revealed widespread discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) Americans. Of particular note, given Sam’s story, and the on-going debate around whether homophobia impacted his career, **the study found gay male athletes in the USA were the most likely to remain in the closet due to fears of discrimination from coaches and officials.**

Americans were also the most likely to report witnessing or experiencing homophobia in sports, which contributed to the USA being ranked the lowest of the 6 major English speaking countries for inclusion of LGB people in sports.

In light of the study’s release, **openly gay college and former professional football players have joined America’s only openly gay professional athlete** in demanding a zero tolerance of homophobic language and behaviour as well as better training for coaches, teachers and officials.

“Out on the Fields,” **is the largest study of its kind ever conducted**, with 9494 participants of all sexualities including 2064 from the USA (363 straight). The research was conducted on behalf of a coalition of LGBTI sports groups, including the Bingham Cup (world cup of gay rugby) and the Federation of Gay Games. The data was collected and analysed by global sports market research firm Repucom which was overseen by a panel of seven international experts from six universities.

**LA Galaxy’s Robbie Rogers**, one of the world’s only current, openly gay male professional athletes said, “I was disappointed the study found so many people continue to experience and also fear discrimination but I hope this will start to motivate change at all levels. This change can start with every athlete or fan who decides not to use homophobic language even if it’s meant as humour. This kind of language is no longer acceptable because everyone should be able to enjoy sports without fear of discrimination. National and international sports governing bodies, including and NFL and FIFA, need to make committed and determined efforts to ensure LGBTI people feel welcome.”

### Young players experience homophobia

While the majority of American participants (78%), including young people, believed youth sport was not safe or supportive of LGB people, the study found some positive signs of change. **Youth in America are more likely to be ‘out of the closet’ than ever before.** Also women were much less likely than men to experience homophobia and American lesbians were far less likely to be “in the closet” than in other countries. The study also found LGB people played more team sports than expected, of those who played in their youth **29% of gay men playing American Football, while 33% of gay men and 57% of lesbians played basketball.**

**Mitch Eby, a defensive end at California’s Chapman University**, was the first openly gay active college football player in the USA. He came out last March, just weeks after Michael Sam became the NFL’s first openly gay draft prospect.

“I believe that Michael Sam is not on an NFL team because he is gay. He is a good enough football player to be playing in the league. However I don’t think it’s necessarily because of homophobia with respect to players, instead I think that coaches or owners are reluctant to have him on their team, worried all the attention he might bring would be a distraction.”

Eby continues, "Michael Sam showed a lot of courage and bravery. It takes a special person to pave the way for change and he opened the doors for so many more people to be confident with who they are and to know that they can accomplish anything. I think the study has shown we are moving in the right direction with more people coming out in sports but there is still a long way to go and many changes left to be made."

Other college and former professional football players also agree with Eby that homophobia is part of the reason Michael Sam is not playing in the NFL. This includes **Conner Mertens, 20**, the first openly bisexual college football player, who is a place kicker at Willamette University in Oregon, as well as **Brad Thorson, 27**, who played briefly with the Arizona Cardinals.

"I never allowed myself to entertain the thought of coming out as gay while playing football. In a large part, I think it's because homophobic language demeans gay men as weak and incapable, which I didn't relate to and didn't think it was possible to be a football player and be gay. I was also worried I'd lose my place on the team and my chance of playing in the NFL, which Michael Sam seems to have lost. The study has found there are a lot of gay men like me who are playing football and other sports and keeping their sexuality secret. I think sports will only change when more gay men decide to become more visible and get the support they need from coaches, teachers, officials and fans," said Thorson who now plays for the Gotham Nights, a gay and inclusive rugby team in New York.

#### Experts see generational shift

**University of Massachusetts Professor Pat Griffin** is a pioneer of homophobia in sports research internationally and is considered the 'grandmother' of the field. She was one of seven experts on the study's review panel. "One way to look at the American results is to acknowledge that there is a lag between perception and reality. Although things are changing for the better and there is more acceptance of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people overall, these athletes still fear discrimination. Unfortunately, Michael Sam's experience may reinforce these fears. However, I think we have a generation gap which reinforces the fears that LGB athletes have about possible discrimination. Most straight team members are fine with having an LGB teammate but high school and college coaches, professional sport team owners and officials still have a ways to go and this may affect how athletes feel about coming out," Prof. Griffin said.

#### Key Findings (Country summary/Full Study at [www.outonthefields.com](http://www.outonthefields.com)):

- 83% of gay and 63% of lesbian youth (under 22) said they were in the closet to all or some of their team
- 45% of gay and 18% of lesbian youth who remained in the closet said they feared discrimination from coaches and officials
- American gay men were the most likely to fear discrimination from coaches and officials
- 78% believe youth sports are not safe and supportive for LGB people
- 84% (including straight) said they witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport
- Half of gay men (50%) and lesbians (53%) and one in three straight men (33%) said they had personally been targeted with homophobia
- Of those who had personally experienced homophobia: 89% of gay men 82% of lesbians reported verbal slurs such as "faggot" or "dyke" while 29% of gay men and 19% of lesbians reported receiving verbal threats of harm

**Dr. Sue Rankin, who recently retired from Pennsylvania State University**, is another pioneer of homophobia in sport research and sat on the study's expert review panel. She was also an athlete and coach. "As one of the first openly lesbian NCAA coaches in the U.S. in the 1980's and 1990's, it was important for me personally to see how we have progressed regarding the inclusion of LGB athletes in sports. Frankly, we were all surprised by the extent of discrimination that was reported. It was particularly concerning to see so many have fears of discrimination. Another finding that stood out for me was that school PE classes are turning young people off team sports, which is the complete opposite to what they are supposed to achieve. Right now PE teachers and school coaches, in particular, receive little or no training on how to support and protect LGB youth, something that clearly needs to change," said Dr. Rankin.

### **About the study**

Out on the Fields is the first international study and largest conducted on homophobia in sport. The study focused on issues of sexuality which is why LGB is used rather than LGBTI or LGBTQ. It also focused on team sports and the English speaking countries (USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand and Australia). Global sports market research firm Repucom conducted the research (pro bono), while the study was initiated by organisers of Bingham Cup Sydney 2014 (the world cup of gay rugby) in partnership with a coalition of sports organisations, including the Federation of Gay Games, You Can Play, International Gay Rugby and the Australian Sports Commission. The study methodology and results were reviewed by a panel of seven academics from six universities including Victoria University (Australia), Penn State University, University of Massachusetts (USA); Brunel University London (UK); University of Winnipeg and Laval University (Canada). Data was collected through an anonymous 10-15 minute online survey which included multiple choice questions and an option to submit more lengthy details of personal experiences. It was promoted through social and traditional media and by sporting organisations, professional athletes, corporations and government. Around 25% of participants were heterosexual.

### **Full Report, Info Graphics (including art files), Country Summaries and Country Comparison/Rankings**

**Before embargo:** Please contact

**After embargo:** [www.outonthefields.com](http://www.outonthefields.com)

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