Introduction

In February 2013, a 25-year-old ex-Leeds United footballer, Robbie Rogers, who was playing in the United States, publicly revealed that he was gay. He simultaneously revealed that he was quitting football, saying that, ‘For the past 25 year[s] I have been afraid: afraid to show whom I really was because of fear’ (Rogers, 2013). Despite this fear, Rogers’s peers took to social networking websites to reveal their support for him. Compatriot, and current player, Stuart Holden posted on Twitter, ‘Much love and respect to my boy … Proud to be your friend bro’. Similarly, another compatriot and retired player, Kasey Keller, also posted on Twitter, ‘The bravery of Robbie Rogers is commendable. I hope he realises that he doesn’t need to retire. He will be more supported than he knows.’ Keller’s reference to Rogers’s quitting the game is particularly interesting, perhaps denoting that he feels football culture would be accepting and tolerant of Rogers’s homosexuality – despite Rogers’s fear. Similar support was shown for Anton Hysén, a Liverpool-born Swedish footballer who came out in 2011 (Cleland, 2014).

This overwhelmingly positive response to Rogers aligns with recent academic studies into the relationship between homosexuality and men’s team sports in the western world. Inclusivity towards sexual minorities among heterosexual athletes is the norm (Adams, 2011; Adams and Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2009, 2011b; Bush et al., 2012; Dashper, 2012), despite fears of homophobic abuse (Anderson, 2002, 2011b). It is, however, easy to see how a gay male athlete might fear the negative repercussions of coming out.

The reaction faced by Rogers and Hysén stood in stark contrast to the last openly gay professional footballer, Justin Fashanu, who remains arguably the most ubiquitous example of homophobia in football. In 1990, having learned that details about his private life were about to be revealed in a national newspaper, Fashanu became the first gay professional footballer to come out (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011). The result was catastrophic: Fashanu suffered vilification from his manager, fans, fellow players, and even members of his own family. Fashanu’s manager, Brian Clough, goaded him due to his frequenting of gay bars. In his autobiography, Clough recounts a conversation with Fashanu:
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‘Where do you go if you want a loaf of bread?’ I asked him. ‘A baker’s, I suppose’. ‘Where do you go if you want a leg of lamb?’ ‘A butcher’s’. ‘So why do you keep going to that bloody poofs’ club?’

Such episodes affected Fashanu’s performance and he spent the remainder of his playing career in the minor leagues outside England (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011). After his suicide, in 1998, the coroner argued that he was overwhelmed by the degree of prejudice he had suffered (Ponting, 2012). What can be deduced from the Fashanu and Rogers examples is the extent to which not only has the wider culture come to support homosexuality, but so has professional team-sport culture.

This chapter explores the reasons for these previously high levels of homophobia. It is structured chronologically, first explaining the foundations of homophobia in modern western sports; then discusses the extreme homohysteria of the mid 1980s, before detailing the reasons for the contemporary decrease in cultural homophobia and its manifestation in sport. We conclude with a discussion of the lack of openly gay footballers in the contemporary game, and some potential reasons for their absence, outside of overt homophobia.

Foundations of homophobia in sport

Much of our cultural obsession with competitive team sports came at the beginning of the twentieth century; a result of a cultural hysteria that men were going soft (Anderson, 2009). With western societies shifting from primarily agrarian economies to industrial societies, for the first time in history, the majority of the population lived in cities. Cancian (1987) shows that during this epoch, the social structure of work changed significantly, requiring men to sacrifice their physical health in dangerous factories or coal mines for the well-being of their families. Sport served as a vessel for this indoctrination.

Football (soccer) provides a historical example of masculine embodiment, demonstrated by physical strength and power. Throughout much of Europe it has been engrained in boys and men ever since the industrialisation of working life in the late nineteenth century (Dunning, 1999; Walvin, 1994). Here, instead of working as a family on the farm, men worked in factories, structuring them away from their families and leaving women to care for the children (Hartmann, 1976). Cancian (1987) describes this as a separation of gendered spheres: here, men increasingly grew more masculine and women more feminine.

Anderson (2009, 2010) argues that the value of competitive (particularly combative) team sports was bolstered during this time, largely because of the establishment of the modern homosexual identity (Anderson, 2010). He argues that because heterosexuals cannot socially prove their heterosexuality men had to socially prove, and reprove their heterosexuality by aligning their gendered identities with an extreme (orthodox) form of masculinity while simultaneously denouncing homosexuality. Kimmel (1994) argued that men, desiring to be thought straight, had to prove and reprove their heterosexuality through hypermasculinity; so much so that masculinity essentially became synonymous with homophobia.

Anderson (2009) illustrates the emergence of the modern gay identity through the British trials and conviction of famed poet, playwright and author Oscar Wilde. His 1895 conviction for ‘gross indecency’ established what a sodomite/pervert/homosexual ‘looked like’. But it would take the works of Sigmund Freud a decade later to implicate sport with a heterosexualising project.

Freud noticed that city dwelling resulted in elevated rates of same-sex sexual activity. Rather than attributing this to the increased chances of men with similar desires being able to meet under the cloak of anonymity, however (the sociological explanation), he instead attributed the...
increased visibility of homosexuality to the separation of children from male role models. Although some have argued that Freud was sympathetic to what we now call gay men, that he wanted to figure out how homosexuality was caused so that he could encourage its prevention, Freud also thought it was the product of ‘inversion’, a form of gendered wrongdoing. In his 1905 book *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud wrote, ‘the presence of both parents plays an important part. The absence of a strong father in childhood not infrequently favours the occurrence of inversion’ (146). While Freud’s theories have been categorically disproved as the aetiology of same-sex sexual desires (LeVay, 2010), they carried cultural weight at the time, sending a largely homophobic population into moral panic. Freud highlighted a problem – that boys did not have enough male influence – and sport provided the answer: time in the company of a coach, a male role model who could provide the requisite male (and moral) vapours.

Anderson (2009) argues that this was part of the project of muscular Christianity, and that it was at this point that sport (which was not needed for physical fitness) became organised, culturally valued, and nearly or fully made compulsory for young boys to ‘play’. Accordingly, sports like football were culturally valued as this provided sufficient masculinity for the prevention of feminised or homosexual boys (Anderson and McCormack, 2010; Chandler and Nauright, 1996).

There were of course other reasons that team sports were valued for boys. For example, sport helped teach the values of self-sacrifice and obedience to authority needed in both factory work and the military. However, the key factor was that sport accentuated the extreme version of masculinity that western culture demanded. This is why women were excluded from sport for so long: women who competed equally alongside men would disrupt the myth of men’s athleticism and women’s frailty (Burton-Nelson, 1994).

Throughout the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, masculinity was associated with heterosexuality, and sport was the primary vessel for masculinising boys. Hence, men who played sport were not thought likely, or even possible, to be gay. However, this began to change in the mid 1980s. Here, extreme masculinity in sport took on renewed importance for boys and young men, as it was a central tool in heterosexualising men in a culture of what Anderson (2009) calls ‘homohysteric’.

**Homohysteria**

In describing the construction of masculinities, Anderson (2011a: 7) describes a culture of homohysteria as a ‘homosexually-panicked culture in which suspicion [of homosexuality] permeates’. He argues that in order for a culture of homohysteria to exist, three social factors must coincide: (1) the mass cultural awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation within a significant portion of the population; (2) a cultural zeitgeist of disapproval towards homosexuality; and (3) disapproval of men’s femininity or women’s masculinity, as they are associated with homosexuality.

Anderson (2011a) describes homohysteria as a concept to analyse one’s own culture, historically, or for making cross-cultural comparisons. Either way he describes three conditions that a culture (might) move through. The first is where a culture is highly homophobic, but that the citizens do not readily believe that homosexuality exists as a significant portion of their population. Exemplifying this, in much of the Islamic world today, as well as throughout much of Africa, homosexuality is thought to be ‘only’ a western phenomenon (Frank et al., 2010). By contrast, a homohysteric culture is aware that homosexuality exists in a significant enough population that anyone can be gay (even if closeted). If this culture also looks negatively upon homosexuality, the stage for ‘homohysteria’ is set.
Exemplifying this, Anderson suggests that homohysteria manifested in the United States in the 1980s. This was because of the increased awareness of the growing normalcy and frequency of homosexuality, alongside extreme homophobia. Anderson adds that, in the United States, homohysteria was heightened by an increasingly noisy fundamentalist Christianity that was opposed to and consequently demonised homosexuality (Anderson, 2011a), which was made culturally salient through HIV/AIDS and the large number of even gender-typical men who acquired it through same-sex sex. It is in this homohysteric culture that boys and young men (particularly those unmarried) needed to establish and re-establish themselves as heterosexual by aligning their gendered behaviours with idealised notions of extreme masculinity. This is something that Kimmel (1994) describes as ‘masculinity as homophobia’. Accordingly, it is between the years 1983 to 1993 that Anderson argues that boys in western cultures needed to, more than ever, use masculine sports in order to prove their heteromasculinity (Pronger, 1990). This is because, homosexuality is not readily visible (like gender or race): ostensibly, anyone can be gay.

Anderson continues to explain that because men’s masculinity is/was associated with heterosexuality in western, industrialised cultures, boys in a culture of homohysteria are/were required to elevate their display of masculinity to prove that they were not gay. In other words, they used culturally endorsed sports to distance themselves from what Anderson (2009: 51) calls ‘the spectre of the fag’: ‘Men attempt to associate with masculinity and disassociate with femininity. They self-segregate into masculine enclaves within the larger feminized space and perceive that excluding women and gay men from their peer circles raises their masculine capital.’

Anderson suggests further that participation in organised team sports is less important for the construction of heterosexuality in a culture where homosexuality is not believed to exist as a significant demographic of the population. He uses Iran as an example. While homophobia is intensely high in Iran, in 2007, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed that, ‘in Iran we don’t have homosexuals like in your country’ (cited in Anderson, 2009: 86).

Anderson suggests that homophobia is so high in Iran that few people come out of the closet, leaving the perception that homosexuality is too small a proportion of the population to raise suspicion that one’s friends or family members could be one of them: accordingly, boys in Iran will have less need to distance themselves from cultural suspicion of homosexuality. It is this mass denial that homosexuality exists in large numbers which permits Iranian men to walk together in public holding hands.

Finally, homohysteria cannot exist in a culture that is not homophobic. In contemporary western culture, for example, and particularly for youth, a large body of research has shown that homophobia has dramatically decreased in western cultures (Anderson, 2009, 2012; Keleher and Smith, 2012; Loftus, 2001). Consequently, the gendered behaviours of boys and men are likely to be radically different, as a result of boys who no longer fear being culturally homosexualised (McCormack, 2012). This is something that Anderson (2011a) describes as post-homohysteria.

**Homohysteria of the 1980s and early 1990s**

The increased awareness of homosexuality led to homophobia in western cultures hitting an apex in 1988. During this epoch, the 1987 British Social Attitude Survey reported that 63.6 per cent of the population thought homosexuality was always wrong, a sharp increase in results of the same survey in 1983.

Unsurprisingly, research conducted around this time (Clarke, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990) found homophobic attitudes were also reflected in sport. Messner (1992: 24) said that ‘The extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering. Boys (in sports) learn that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is unacceptable.’
Furthermore, Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001: 47) described men’s sport as an arena for the development and emphasis of men’s masculinity, with heterosexual athletes, ‘unwilling to confront and accept homosexuality’. Indeed, Hekma (1998: 2) argues that, ‘gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise’. Consequently, Cashmore and Cleland (2011: 1) argue that football is not known, ‘as a paradigm of liberalism’. Such homophobia was predominantly manifested by the use of homophobic discourse (Hekma, 1998; Plummer, 1999).

In football, this intolerance of homosexuality was shown with the coming out of Justin Fashanu in 1990. As discussed previously, Fashanu’s coming out resulted in widespread condemnation from those within football culture. Around this time, one notorious chant heard from fans (and occasionally still is) was, ‘he’s gay, he’s dead, he’s hanging in the shed; Fashanu, Fashanu’. For this reason, it can be argued that Fashanu was something of a ‘trendsetter’ – a demonstration of the incompatibility between homosexuality and football.

**The new millennium and diminishing homohysteria**

In 2002, however, Anderson conducted the first research on openly gay high school and collegiate athletes, and found that although gay athletes frequently heard anti-gay language spoken by their heterosexual teammates and opponents, only half judged levels of homophobia on their teams through the amount of homophobic language used. This half of the 2002 sample suggested that the term ‘that’s gay’ and the use of the word ‘fag’ were indicative of homophobic attitudes among those who used them; the other half argued that this was not the case.

Furthermore, the coming out of many of the 26 openly gay athletes interviewed was much more positive than the athletes were expecting. Participants were surprised at the inclusivity they experienced from their teammates, many regretting not coming out sooner. However, the acceptance faced by these athletes led them to have perhaps overstated their positive coming-out experiences. Anderson (2002: 874) refers to this reverse relative deprivation as being, ‘largely experienced by the fact that they were not physically assaulted or verbally harassed – the opposite of what most expected before coming out’.

Since Anderson’s pioneering study of gay male athletes on ostensibly heterosexual team sports, there has been a growing body of research on openly gay male athletes (Adams, 2011; Adams et al., 2010; Anderson, 2005, 2009; McCormack and Anderson, 2012). These have also found a challenge to the traditional notions of hierarchically structured masculinities, instead finding that as homophobia decreases, masculinities soften. As a result, masculinities are seen to exist, ‘in a horizontal (not stratified) alignment’ (Anderson and McGuire, 2010: 251).

Evidencing the western shift into post-homohysteria, Anderson used sport-team initiation rituals in the United Kingdom, where he monitored behaviours over a seven-year period (Anderson et al., 2011). During this time, same-sex hazing activities were phased out in line with the decrease in cultural homohysteria. Earlier in the study, male athletes were forced to kiss one another as a form of doing something stigmatised to prove their worth, loyalty and desire to be on the team. But by the end of the study, team members willingly engaged in same-sex kissing, not as a form of hazing, but as a mode of homosocial bonding and support.

Furthermore, Anderson, Adams and Rivers (2010) found that 89 per cent of young, heterosexual British undergraduate men had kissed another heterosexual male on the lips. Theorising this, Anderson argues that (for male adolescents) Britain has moved into post-homohysteria.

Homohysteria in sport also diminished rapidly over this decade. Evidencing this, in 2011 Anderson replicated his 2002 study with openly gay athletes through Internet searches and snowball sampling, enabling a comparison to be made between temporal epochs. In the 2011
study, it was found that gay athletes had had an even more positive experience than the athletes from the 2002 study. Anderson found that, regardless of the sport played, when athletes came out to their team they were not treated any differently. Also, athletes in the 2011 sample did not judge the level of their teammates’ homophobia through the use of homophobic language. Use of the words ‘gay’ and ‘fag’ were not interpreted as homophobic. Supporting this, scholars have argued that the reason athletes and others dismiss these terms as homophobic insults is that the social context of this language use has changed (Lalor and Rendle-Short, 2007; McCormack, 2012; McCormack and Anderson, 2010). Most significantly, however, whereas Anderson found more individual sport athletes in his first study, he found as many team-sport athletes in his second (including soccer players, American football players, and ice hockey players).

Bush et al. (2012) then provided the first quantitative account of British university athletes’ attitudes towards having a gay male teammate. Questionnaires were given to 216 male athletes from all university sports when they began at a major sporting university in England. Students were again surveyed when they left three years later. The results showed that the strength of one’s athletic identity is associated with lesser degrees of support for gay team-sport athletes upon entering the university, but that this effect does not emerge upon exiting. Perhaps more importantly, Bush et al.’s (2012) research shows that decreasing homophobia is particularly prominent among young, educated middle-class white men, as the authors concluded that there was very little homophobia upon entering the university and none upon exiting.

Football culture and homosexuality today

Within contemporary professional British football culture, Cashmore and Cleland (2011) have challenged the traditional masculine/homophobic beliefs of the sport. Using mixed online methods, they found that 93 per cent of 3,500 respondents – including 62 professional players, referees, managers and coaches – have no objection to the presence of openly gay players, arguing that homophobia has no place in football. A footballer’s ability to play football was seen to be the only criterion on which he is judged – their sexuality is seen as something unimportant. It therefore appears with Cashmore and Cleland’s findings that football culture is not only becoming more acceptant of sexual minorities but that they are overwhelmingly in support – some resenting being labelled as homophobic.

Despite this, these same fans who fiercely deny homophobia any place in football habitually barrack players with homophobic epithets (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011). Fans interpret a great deal of this as good-natured banter, claiming exploiting weaknesses in your opponents is a necessity. Magrath (2012) further explores the nature of this discursive regulation, examining for cohort differences between young men (18–25) and 15 older men (38–45), finding that there is a consistent lack of homophobia among both.

Similar to Cashmore and Cleland’s findings, Magrath found that these men differentiated between ‘banter’ and ‘real’ homophobic chanting. Some fans engaged in chants such as, ‘Does your boyfriend know you’re here?’ arguing use of such discourse is merely used as a ‘sporting technique’ to motivate athletes to perform more effectively (Adams et al., 2010). These chants were commonplace at matches involving Brighton and Hove Albion Football Club, due to the geographical link with British LGBT communities. Like McCormack (2012), Magrath also found that there was a stigmatisation of anything genuinely homophobic or abusive, and these fans refused to join in out of protest.

These fans were also posed hypothetical questions, and all participants said they would not join in with any form of homophobic chanting if they were aware of any gay men present at the match, for fear of causing offence. It can therefore be argued that football fans who
participate in homophobic chants exhibit a form of social distance between their attitudes and their behaviour. In other words, Magrath (2012) found no form of intellectualised homophobia among these football supporters.

Anderson (2009) describes these improving social conditions (including the inclusion of gay men in sport) as inclusive masculinities. Here, he suggests that instead of homophobia being compulsory the way it was in the mid 1980s, for today’s young men (to which professional and semi-professional football players belong) it is instead homophobia which is no longer socially acceptable. Evidencing this, Magrath et al. (2013) found that among 21 players at a Premier League academy homophobia was not acceptable, irrespective of one’s racial or class demographics. All aspiring professional football players anonymously interviewed maintained that homophobia was not acceptable; that they would come to the aid of a gay player being bullied or harassed; and that if their best or worst teammate were to come out, it would have no impact upon how the athletes viewed or related to their teammates.

While inclusive masculinities have been found in a number of team and individual sports across the western world (Anderson, 2009), Cleland (2013) adds to the research on football and the inclusion of homosexuality. Cleland found inclusive attitudes when analysing discussions and narratives of homosexuality on 48 football fan message boards, including fans challenging homophobic sentiment, arguing that footballing ability is valued the most.

Where are the gay players?

This chapter has identified the social and historical contexts of how sexualities and masculinities have been perceived and their cultural shift in contemporary society. Highlighting the shift of increasingly positive and inclusive attitudes of both football players and football fans, it can be argued that football is no longer an overtly, or perhaps not even a covertly, homophobic culture. This is exemplified by the different reactions faced by Justin Fashanu in 1990, and Anton Hysén and Robbie Rogers more contemporarily. Moreover, the acceptant attitudes of both contemporary football fans (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011; Magrath), and young footballers (Anderson, 2011a) also illustrate this.

Nevertheless, one of the continuing issues despite this inclusive culture is the number of openly gay professional football players in British football. This also appears to be a similar issue in the top four American sport leagues (American football, baseball, basketball and ice hockey). Anderson (2005) highlighted multiple rationales for the lack of openly gay athletes in professional sport, on which Ogawa (forthcoming) summarises: (1) gay men in these leagues remain silent about their sexuality – the ‘silence’ hypothesis; (2) gay men choose not to play sports – the ‘non-participation’ hypothesis; (3) gay men are less likely than straight men to achieve professional status – the ‘selection’ hypothesis. He refers to the second and third hypotheses as the ‘non-existence’ hypothesis as both imply a non-existence of gay male athletes.

Due to a small number of gay athletes coming out previously, the silence hypothesis is often the most assumed explanation for more openly gay athletes not coming out. In football, Cashmore and Cleland (2011: 1) describe this as ‘a culture of secrecy’. Ogawa (2014), however, maintains that the aforementioned silence hypothesis is, ‘an untenable way of understanding the silence among all athletes’. He suggests that gay men might just not be physically demonstrative enough to play sport at the professional level of combative sports. He doesn’t discount that some gay men are capable of playing at the elite level, but he suggests that at the tail end of a muscular distribution, a small biological difference can exaggerate the effect. Anderson (2005), however, takes a more balanced perspective. He suggests that the absence of the openly gay professional athlete at the professional levels of most team sports exists because of a variety of reasons. Evidencing this, he
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shows that only about 2.7 per cent of the population identifies as gay in the first place (Laumann et al., 1994), but then his research (2005) along with that of Hekma (1998) shows that once gay men come out in sport (at younger ages) they tend to drop out. Anderson suggests that this is because they find a life of gay friends, clubbing and sex more appealing than sport.

While it is possible that there is ‘some’ truth to the fact that gay men are morphologically differentiated from straight men (Bailey, 2003), this effect should represent itself mostly in sports like American football, which requires an extreme (in this case strength); but football requires athletes to be physically muddled: they must possess sprinting speed, but also endurance; they must be strong, but not too muscular. It is for this reason that we suggest the absence of the gay male athlete in football comes down to: (1) self deselection; and (2) the silence hypothesis.

When will gay male footballers start coming out?
The fact that few openly gay professional footballers have come out of the closet, despite the fact that western societies are rapidly moving towards the social acceptance – and even celebration – of homosexuality, suggest that the reason professional athletes remain in the closet are complex. Anderson (2005) has suggested that there are multiple reasons for this.

First, athletes predicate their master identities as that of sportsmen. This is accomplished because they play sport in what he calls a ‘near-total institution’. Academy players live together, go to school together, train, travel and compete together. Coming out to even gay-friendly teammates is difficult when one is different from the others. Athletes fear that their difference will interrupt the homosocial camaraderie, that they will be treated differently. Also, athletes know that while their academy friends might be ‘true friends’ they are also competition for selection to the next level of play in a rapidly decreasing opportunity structure. Athletes therefore perceive any difference, or distraction, as possibly impeding their progress.

Athletes are also afraid to come out of the closet because of the age of the gatekeepers of their sport. Older men, whose adolescence was in the 1980s, serve as their managers: when stakes are high, one over-conforms to norms in order to be selected. In other words, they must not only play well, but must exhibit all of the other emotional and personal characteristics that the coaches desire if they are to be selected for the next level of play. Athletes fear that coming out will result in deselection.

Finally, gay men do come out in sport. They often are out to their close teammates without choosing to come out publicly to the media (Anderson, 2005). Just because the media is not aware of one’s sexuality, does not mean that one is not gay. A primary example of this comes from an American football player for the San Francisco 49ers, Kwame Harris, who was recently outed after he was arrested for physically assaulting his boyfriend.

Collectively, however, before we begin to see more athletes coming out of the closet, we need to see a generation of young men who have grown up with an inclusive attitude towards homosexuality take to the seats of power within sport. Exemplifying a generational divide on this issue, following the award of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, FIFA president Sepp Blatter claimed that due to the illegality of homosexuality in Arabic states, gay athletes and fans should abstain from any sexual activity. His sentiment seems reasonable to him, yet unthinkable to today’s emerging players.

Concluding thoughts
Anderson (2005) has previously claimed that the world’s first openly gay professional footballer would be shrouded in positive publicity that they would be offered book contracts, movie deals
and a plethora of sponsorships. However, this is only because there has been a cultural lag (Ogburn, 1950) between attitudes towards homosexuality in society compared to football (Magrath, 2012). We now argue that with football now reflecting society’s social inclusivity towards sexual minorities, the ideal time for a gay footballer to take financial advantage of coming out has passed. Thus, if an active professional gay footballer does not come out soon, he may very well find that culture has progressed so far that companies no longer seek sponsorship of gay athletes. His coming out will perhaps hit the press for a day or two, but then the world will continue as normal. This, of course, is the ultimate sign of progress.

After the experience suffered by Justin Fashanu in the 1990s, it has been maintained by many that football would never again tolerate an openly gay player. Today, however, society is less concerned about who is or who is not gay. The public’s reactions following the coming out of footballers Anton Hysén and Robbie Rogers is testament to this: both received widespread support. The recent example of Thomas Hitzlsperger – a former German international footballer who played in the English Premier League for Aston Villa, Everton and West Ham United – also supports this thesis. Hitzlsperger became the first openly gay footballer in English football since Justin Fashanu. Interestingly, he felt the need to wait until he had retired from playing to reveal his sexuality, claiming that, ‘It was not always easy to sit on a table with 20 young men and listen to jokes about gays.’ However, he also argued that being gay was not a big issue in the changing room, supporting other recent comments by former England player Gareth Southgate and current player Anders Lindegaard.

In much of the research on the link between homosexuality and sport, many gay athletes have received a more positive reaction than expected after coming out. Most regret not coming out sooner (Anderson, 2002, 2011b). Following the immediate positive response of the latest outing, Hitzlsperger has received praise from players, fans and the media. We don’t suppose matters will be different for an active player that comes out in Premier League football.

References

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