

GO! Athletes: Using Personal Narratives to Overcome Homophobia in Sports

Carlos Hernandez, Lypheng Kim and Mie Sara Lai 04
December 2013

LGBT and Athletics

The sporting world at its best represents values to strive for—community, teamwork, commitment, sacrifice and self-discovery. The climate toward LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) inclusion in sports has been hostile or indifferent. The general concern has been that people who choose to share their entire selves with their teams will be met with hostility, thereby creating unsafe spaces for LGBT athletes to fully embrace the athletic experience. From collegiate to sponsorships, the exclusionary environment has led to outright hostility. From 1980 to 2007, Penn State women's basketball coach Rene Portland kicked anyone off the team if she suspected she was a lesbian. Despite denying being a lesbian in 1981, Billie Jean King, professional tennis player, lost all commercial sponsorships when an ex-partner sued her. Based on these cases, any LGBT athlete who sought to feel wholly part of the team would surely have been

greeted with animosity.

As the Supreme Court of the United States heard arguments over the constitutionality of gay marriage, various media outlets reported that public perception was shifting towards a more inclusive view. For the first time in history, an American president went public with his support for gay marriage. These milestones marked a social climate that might have paved the way for additional progress across all spheres in society. In April 2013, the conversation turned from gay marriage to LGBT athletes in professional sports when the top selection in the WNBA draft, Brittney Griner, came out to the public as gay. While other professional athletes have come out as gay, they have done so during retirement. Griner will represent a key figure in how the major American sports adapt to LGBT athletes. Several weeks later, Jason Collins, currently an NBA free agent, was the first male professional athlete to come out as gay to Sports Illustrated. Between Brittney Griner and Jason Collins, the conversation regarding how the major American sports, media and fans were prepared to greet this newly exposed group reached its peak.

GO! Athletes

Despite recent fascination over how professional sports accepts LGBT athletes, student organizations have been making tremendous efforts to educate communities on the benefits of inclusionary practices in athletics. Rather

than wait for the world to offer up a LGBT professional athlete role model, these groups sought to become pioneers for their successors. GO! Athletes represents that kind of group. The GO! Athletes model followed the successful efforts of Paul Farber, who started PATH—Penn Athletes & Allies Tackling Homophobia—in 2003 when it was the only LGBT student-athlete organization in the country. PATH’s mission is to promote dialogue and create a safe environment for LGBT individuals in the UPENN athletic community. Having been involved in PATH since its early years, GO! Athletes executive director Anna Aagenes sought to bring those two communities together because, she says, “there was so much misunderstanding, false stereotypes and athletes that still did not feel safe coming out to teammates or coaches.” Originally called Our Group from 2008 to 2012, the organization relaunched as GO! Athletes in 2012. Later that year, in December, GO! Athletes became a 501(c)(3) organization. With the mission to bring together a national network of LGBTQA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, ally) student-athletes to support each other in their experiences coming out and battling homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism and other forms of intolerance in the world of athletics (GO! Athletes, 2012). GO! Athletes offers:

1. **Confidential peer support for LGBTQ student athletes**
2. **Consultation for coaches, staff and team leaders**

on how to be inclusive and create safe team environments

- 3. An active network of out LGBTQ students to empower one another on a local and national level**
- 4. Educational materials to create your own GO! Athletes chapter**
- 5. Speaking events such as deynote presentations or panel events**
- 6. Workshop facilitation on LGBTQ inclusion in sports**
- 7. Mentoring (coming soon)**

GO! Athletes carries out these activities with the ultimate objectives of increasing visibility by educating, supporting, advocating and leading LGBT athletes across the nation. The GO! Athletes network is made up of approximately 15 universities across the country including University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, Berkley, University of Miami in Ohio and Brown University. While each organization is affiliated with GO! Athletes and has access to all GO! Athletes resources and staff, programming, missions and activities are driven by each school. Therefore, each chapter can cater to the needs of its constituents because each uniquely understands the circumstances on its own campus.

Innovation in Building a Shared Narrative

GO! Athletes shares its identity as a leader in the LGBT in

athletics movement with other entities like Outsports.com, the You Can Play Project and GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network). Common among these groups is their use of building community to increase awareness among LGBT athletes through the use of personal narratives. This approach offers “closeted” individuals and the general public a view of how prevalent, beautiful and varied LGBT athletes’ experiences can be. Aagenes says that what makes GO! Athletes innovative is that their “youth are using the resources that we [GO! Athletes] have and deeply connecting on a national level and forming friendships through our identity and sharing our identity process. There is no other group that helps athletes connect with other athletes in this way.” GO! Athletes taps into a deeply rooted acceptance of the concept of chosen family. Within this surrogate family, LGBT athletes find a safe space in their athletic world to share themselves, which historically has not been a possibility for others. This has been done most effectively through its grassroots, bottom-up approach to culture change. On Aagenes’s personal webpage, she received a comment from a woman who said, “I was a student-athlete in college in the South during the 1980s and was bullied and harassed after coming out. I know that many of our LGBTQ youth will be spared such horrible experiences because of the work that you are doing. You have a new fan down in Memphis, TN!” By educating athletic departments, coaches, teammates and peers, GO! Athletes disempowers hetero-normative perspectives

that allow for the locker room, bathroom and cafeteria to be hot spots for bullying. This education occurs as GO! Athletes members take their stories to conferences, universities and blogs. These approaches allow them to activate LGBT and ally communities to champion inclusivity. GO! Athletes hosts a weekly blog series called "Winning Wednesdays" in which LGBT athletes share their personal narratives. Winning Wednesdays reaches 7,000 people during an average week: During the Griner and Collins news cycles, Winning Wednesdays reached up to 25,000. These personal narratives offer support to student-athletes during their out processes because they give the students visibility. Aagenes says that if "you don't identify then you feel invisible."

Outcomes and Future of GO! Athletes

While the nation is witnessing a shift in public perception regarding LGBT issues, Aagenes considers sports to be the last frontier where homophobia remains an accepted way of life. In a May 2013 survey distributed to constituents, members agreed that GO! Athletes offered them the opportunity to begin addressing homophobia in sports by creating an out community of athletes. In response to what motivated someone to be involved with GO! Athletes, a respondent said that there were no "groups for out athletes and no one talks about these issues." Another respondent noted that, "learning about the experiences shared by other gay athletes and how to

use them to educate others" has been the most positive aspect of being involved with GO! Athletes. As a new organization, GO! Athletes has yet to collect quantitative outcomes. However, these responses demonstrate how influential personal narratives from professional athletes and peers can shape a movement.

Until the out athlete becomes common, GO! Athletes will continue to strive toward educating individuals through a variety of routes. Understanding that the replicability of the GO! Athletes model is critical to achieving its mission. GO! Athletes is proud of its presence in a booklet issued by the NCAA called "Champions of Respect." This booklet offers college athletic programs and athletes a resource on best practices regarding ensuring an inclusionary culture in schools. Being included in this resource signals recognition within the NCAA that GO! Athletes is a program well-suited for supporting LGBT student-athletes.

In addition to working to facilitate replicability, much effort has gone toward gaining exposure of the GO! Athletes mission and building infrastructure. In June 2013, the group sent approximately 15 members to the NIKE Summit in Portland, Oregon. There, attendees had the opportunity to connect with other organizations and individuals motivated by a similar goal. In the coming year, GO! Athletes aims to conduct workshops at ten universities and five high schools across the country. GO! Athletes seeks to fortify its operations by seeking grant

funding and by fund-raising through private and business donors. With additional funding, GO! Athletes will be able to expand its cadre of educational and promotional materials and offer additional support to its general operating costs. Through fund-raising, GO! Athletes also seeks to build a fund to allow members to visit schools that do not have the finances to pay for their visits. GO! Athletes will continue to remain a national leader in the inclusionary movement of LGBT individuals in athletics as they represent the role models youth need.

ARTICLE UPDATE: Guest writer Lypheng Kim, 18 years old, recently published his story on the GO! Athletes blog. To read Lypheng's story, visit <http://goathletes.org/go-athletes-blog/141-lypheng-s-story.html>.