

# Activating Change Through Allyship

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Athlete Ally

Like many athletes, I started playing sports at a young age. My earliest memories take me back to wrestling mats and arenas and early-morning drives with my father as we traveled to find the best competitions and open tournaments. We spent thousands of hours (yes, thousands) together in the car preparing for matches and talking about life. Though these conversations focused mainly on wrestling technique and tournament brackets, more often than not my dad found a way to weave lessons about decency and morality into discussions about athletic achievement. As he talked about his heroes—the New York Yankee legends of the 1950s who lifted American spirits in the wake of World War II—my father set up a hierarchy of sports-based integrity that is still with me:

*Athletes become worthy of the greatest respect not when they win at their sport but when they stand up for the dignity of others and represent something bigger than themselves.*

My father emphasized integrity because he knew what I was up against. As a young wrestler, I was learning to inflict pain to force submission. In such a grueling contact sport, he wanted me to become a “respectful competitor.” Win, lose or draw, each match was an opportunity to learn, enjoy the camaraderie of competition, and show respect for another human being.

Through my sport experiences—as a Division I wrestler at the University of Maryland and as a coach at Columbia University—I’ve found that respect is linked inextricably to the unity of team. Every team I have been on has been filled with loyal and generous men who would do anything for a teammate in need. They would give the proverbial grimy, sweat-soaked shirt off their backs if they felt it would help. Few nonathletes understand the intensity and primacy of the bond that develops through shared times of intense struggle and celebration—hours of practices, heavy moments in the locker room after a tough loss, and the exhilarating highs of unexpected victory. This form of respect stems from familiarity and a shared identity.

At the University of Maryland, this familial bond was as strong as any blood tie. We cried together when our coach accepted a job at another school. We swelled with collective pride when our athletic director reinforced the department’s motto:

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*500 athletes, 27 sports, one team.* As a wrestler, I have been blessed to be part of my sport's familial culture and to witness how respect is at the culture's core, not only among athletes but also among parents, coaches, league officials and fans. However, I have also come to realize that respect in athletics has a comfort zone that does not easily extend beyond defined margins.

Unfortunately, many have been forced to exist outside these margins. Before the passage in 1972 of Title IX, the landmark legislation that made it illegal to deny women equal access to federally funded educational programs, women were relegated to the sidelines of sports. Before 1947, when Jackie Robinson became the first black player in Major League Baseball, African Americans were denied the right to compete with white players as equals. While much has changed for these groups, the culture of sports does continue to marginalize. This is particularly true for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) athletes.

I have never been on a team with an openly gay wrestler though I have likely met and befriended countless without knowing. With stereotypes about LGBT people pulsing through the athletic experience, this is no surprise. As an athlete in gyms, locker rooms and on bus rides, I can attest to the prevalence of anti-LGBT attitudes and language. My teammates frequently demeaned those who did not measure up to distorted standards of masculinity or femininity with both homophobic and sexist slurs. Most often, the slurs were tools of humor—generic, strangely impersonal arrows that targeted just about anyone and anything. Calling someone “gay” was as common as calling someone a “jerk.”

It was only as a college student that I began to question this. Didn't the nature of competition push sports to accept anyone with talent and perseverance? Homophobia and sexual prejudice seems wholly unaligned with the inclusivity and diversity necessary for winning. Nonetheless, I have no illusions that ending homophobia is going to be as simple as telling a closed-minded teammate that setting aside fear or stereotypes will improve performance, or that team diversity is simply the right thing. But I also believe that by appealing to individual honor, the honor of the team, and the sense of fairness that is ingrained in every athlete, change is possible.

The help we need will come from a corps of athlete-leaders who want to rise above a culture that marginalizes others. Even if they do not use anti-LGBT language themselves, they feel disrespected because others on the team do. The help will also come from coaches, parents, league officials and fans. As a wrestling coach, I know the influence I have to model positive attitudes and conduct. And, I know the influence my father had when he placed human dignity at the top of my list of competitive priorities.

I started my advocacy at a time of breathtaking societal change toward LGBT equality. The military's “Don't Ask Don't Tell” is now history, and marriage for gay and lesbian couples is legal in 37 states and the District of Columbia. With these changes as a backdrop and with a renewed national focus on anti-LGBT bullying and harassment shaking our sense of complacency, sports at every level are responding with actions that were inconceivable only a few short years ago. In professional baseball alone, several teams have contributed videos to Dan Savage's “It Gets Better” project, and more plan to; professional hockey players and team executives have marched in LGBT Pride parades; and college coaches in such disparate sports as volleyball and lacrosse have stood proudly in support of LGBT inclusion.

Although there are still many obstacles to overcome, I am continually encouraged by the forward motion of sports in the direction of *doing* the right thing. I am keenly aware of what Princeton University philosophy professor Kwame Anthony Appiah sees as “a growing appreciation of the obligations each of us has to other people” to alter the unacceptable.” One day,” he writes, “people will find themselves thinking not just that an old practice was wrong and a new one was right but that there was something shameful in the old ways.” However, before this change happens, we must understand why coaches, athletes, and fans are so ingrained in the “old way” of doing things in sport. What barriers prevent us from actively promoting inclusion in sport? To answer this question, we first must look at the structure and taken-for-granted practices that permeate throughout our sport settings.

## Industry Archetypes: The Enemy of Inclusion

Industry archetypes are the enemy of inclusion. In every industry there are patterns of behavior that are copied, emulated, and reinforced generation after generation. As we go through life those who are older and wiser teach us how we are “supposed” to look and act to excel in our industry. These industry archetypes are a filter through which authenticity is lost. Unfortunately, in most industries, the archetype for success is a white heterosexual male. As such, upward mobility in a field necessitates covering any characteristic that does not conform to the industry archetype for success.

At the beginning of our journey through life, the possibilities for whom we can become and what profession we wish to pursue are less restrictive. Most people have played sports, or have considered a very different career path than the one they are on now. But as we commit to our paths and professions, those who buy into their industry archetype are rewarded, while those who diverge ultimately end up taking a different path altogether. In this way, even those individuals who bring diversity to the senior leadership of an organization have likely had to sacrifice particular aspects of their identity to fit the mold encouraged by the industry.

As someone who has been a member of the athletic community since the age of six, the athlete archetype is the ideal with which I am most familiar. Sports are built upon a competitive reward structure where one’s ability to participate is dictated by the coaches who have been trained to uphold and reinforce the athlete archetype. Those who get more playing time have bought into the blueprint outlined by their coaches. As such, the noninclusive aspects of sports have been built to repeat themselves. Those who excel in sports conform, those who conform become the example, and those who become the example teach future athletes how to excel.

While coaches play an integral role in replicating the athlete archetype, the athletes themselves also communicate these ideals. This is done most notably in the jokes, insults, and social actions that we encourage. For male athletes, femininity is the antithesis of the athlete archetype. Homophobic and sexist slurs, stories of opposite sex attraction, and the discouragement of nonmasculine interests or attire are often central to locker room banter. In this way, male athletes pressure one another to conform to an orthodox concept of masculinity based on a narrowly defined athlete archetype.

Despite the challenges that our industry ideals pose, the future is not without hope. We must find new ways to celebrate our diversity. We must tell the stories of athletes and executives who are actively defying their industry archetypes. Only by expanding our understanding of the possible, can we redefine the preferable. I hope to see more individuals living outside the gender binary and more men and women and genderfluid individuals living their lives not according to what their industry encourages, but according to what their authentic identity demands.

## **Creating Change in Sport Communities**

In an effort to redefine the culture and ensure sport is an environment where all identities thrive, we founded Athlete Ally—a 501c-3 nonprofit organization—to provide public awareness campaigns, educational programming and tools, and resources to foster inclusive sports communities. We aim to mobilize Ambassadors in high school, collegiate, and professional sports who work to foster “allyship” in their athletic environments.

An Athlete Ally can be any person — regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity — who takes a stand against homophobia and transphobia in sports and brings the message of respect, inclusion and equality to their athletic community. Athlete Allies include competitive and recreational athletes as well as coaches, parents, teachers, league officials, sports fans, other sports participants and advocates around the globe. The word “ally” has historically applied to straight allies, but it’s not just about who you are or who you like, it’s about what you stand for. No matter how you identify, being an ally means honoring the unique experiences of LGBT individuals and championing respect in your own way.

One of the primary ways Athlete Ally encourages inclusivity is through the Campus Ambassador Program. This initiative is led by a volunteer network of student-athletes, coaches, and administrators who work to support the principles of respect and inclusion within their athletic communities. We assist Ambassadors in their efforts by providing resources on how to (a) initiate dialogue about Athlete Ally’s mission to teams, coaches, and leaders on campus; (b) encourage peers to confront homophobia and transphobia in sports; and (c) use social media and networking strategies to spread the message. More importantly, we articulate why it is so imperative to have those in the sport community spread the message of inclusion. Athletes, coaches, and administrators hold a certain status in society that allows them to influence the attitudes and behaviors of others. It sends a powerful message when a head coach, team captain, or entire team publically states that they will respect and welcome everyone on their team—no matter how they identify or whom they are attracted to.

By engaging in acts of inclusion, such as signing a pledge to respect and welcome all persons, immediate changes start to happen. Inclusive behaviors begin to tear down the traditions and practices in sport that do not promote a culture of inclusion, diversity, and respect. As this new culture develops, LGBT athletes and coaches feel supported and more comfortable expressing their true identity, which leads to significant improvements in their mental and physical well-being. Moreover, teams that foster inclusive climates tend to perform better—meaning they win

more games—than teams that do not create these environments. Considering these benefits, it is baffling why some athletic departments do not educate and empower their athletes to be advocates for inclusion.

## Using Sport to Create Change in Society

As we strive to create more inclusive environments within sport, we should also realize that sport serves as a powerful mechanism to create change in our surrounding communities. Specifically, athletes, university athletic departments, and governing bodies such as the NCAA can rally together to voice their support for policies and legislation that prohibits discrimination based on one's sexual orientation or gender identity, and speak out when laws fail to protect marginalized groups. Similarly, athletic communities must speak out when legislation adversely affects LGBT individuals. Doing so demonstrates how such laws do not align with the values of sport, such as fairness, respect, and inclusion.

One example of this form of advocacy is the #Final4Fairness Campaign, which was initiated by Athlete Ally to raise public awareness about Indiana's discriminatory religious refusal law. Considering the NCAA Men's Final Four Basketball Championship was happening in a state where businesses could refuse service to people who are LGBT, it was an opportune time to mobilize the support of the sport community. Thousands of sports fans and a number of professional athletes signed on to support the campaign, including Athlete Ally Ambassador D'Qwell Jackson of the Indianapolis Colts.

## Moving Forward

While we have witnessed tremendous progress in terms of creating more inclusive sport spaces, there are still challenges that we must address as we move forward as allies for inclusion in sport. For instance, we need to understand and discuss how other forms of prejudice (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, etc.) interact to affect one's sport experiences. LGBT athletes and coaches of color experience instances of both sexual prejudice and racism, whereas female LGBT athletes and coaches of color experience the triple threat of sexual prejudice, racism, and sexism. As a way to encourage dialogue on multiple marginalized identities, Athlete Ally has partnered with Huffington Post to publish a *Voice to Voice* segment, which features LGBT and ally people of color leading the movement to end homophobia, biphobia, sexism and transphobia in athletics. The discussions focus on the intersections of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, and how those relationships influence LGBT inclusion and allyship in sports.

Finally, it is important to realize that allyship extends beyond LGBT inclusion in sport, and can be a powerful way to promote change on a variety of issues. For instance, one of the most troubling trends has been the termination of extremely successful female coaches. Take for example, the disputed firing of Shannon Miller, the head coach of the University of Minnesota Duluth's women's hockey team. Miller has coached the Bulldogs to five national championships, the most in NCAA history. Despite her winning career, the justification for her termination was due not to a lack of success, but because of budget constraints and a belief that

her higher-than-average salary was not the best use of department funds. While the impetus behind her firing is still being debated, the impact of her termination is not. Veteran female coaches with winning records and high salaries do not have the same level of job security as their male counterparts. One reason for this disparate treatment is that women do not have vocal male allies among coaches. The silence of the male coaching community is an implicit endorsement of this biased culture. While job opportunities for a coach of either gender remain limited, the lack of opportunities for women as compared with men is without defense. Until those who benefit most from this bias start calling attention to this inequality, the number of women coaching at the highest level may continue to decline.

## **Conclusion**

I have spent the last four years of my life tirelessly working to end homophobia and transphobia in sports by educating and empowering more allies to speak out, but this work has taught me that systems of oppression are not mutually exclusive. We cannot end one form of discrimination without simultaneously addressing others. Allyship is not an identity; it is a philosophy that requires a person to act against all forms of bullying, bias, and discrimination. If we are ever to reach a time where prejudice is spoken of in the past tense, then we will need those who hold a privileged status to vocally and proudly identify as allies for those who are marginalized, and to begin holding themselves and the larger sports community accountable for a culture they continue to help create.