

## Does homosexuality have a place in modern football?

Henry Cowen considers whether homosexuality is football's last taboo and urges the Football Association and supporters to send homophobia the same way as racism and hooliganism



By [Henry Strong](#), Sports Editor (2010/11)

Tuesday 24 November 2009



Justin Fashanu, seen here playing for Torquay United in 1993, was Britain's first openly gay footballer

The story of Justin Fashanu might not be too familiar to everyone. The first, and so far only, professional footballer to come out as gay; he was found hanged in a garage in Shoreditch in May of 1998. Fashanu had been accused of sexually assaulting a 17-year-old boy and in his suicide note he stated that, in his eyes, he had already been presumed guilty and did not want to cause any further embarrassment to his family and friends. It was later revealed that police were going to drop the case.

Homosexuality in football has generally been a no-go area, similar to gays in the military perhaps. There is a culture of fear about homosexuality in football, the generally tolerant and liberal attitude towards homosexuality in the UK is not reflected on the terraces. As an ardent football supporter I have sat at grounds and winced as fellow fans have screamed "poof" at a certain player, perhaps because he wore gloves or had long hair. Other players have been even more unfortunate; they act differently and thus get branded as gay. Often by the media who revel in spreading rumours about top players, we've all heard the Player X or Player Y, who are apparently secretly gay.

The most famous example of this is the ex-England left-back Graeme Le Saux. Le Saux was a happily married man, he had children in fact, and yet because he read the Guardian and liked going to art galleries he was a "poof". In his autobiography "Left Field" Le Saux says he was treated like an outcast, by fans and teammates alike. This changing room culture of banter, prevalent in University teams as well as at the highest level, is telling of the general attitude to homosexuality in sport. It appears that it is not welcome.

A quick glance down the list of notable gay and lesbian sports people sees that there are golfers, tennis players and figure skaters, but no man from the world of Football, Rugby or Cricket. It is clear that there

must be gay men playing these sports, why do they not feel they can come out? Do we believe that if a footballer came out his career would be ruined, like Le Saux suggests in his book; "I felt that if it came to be accepted that I was (gay), I would be unable to continue as a professional footballer". Why is homosexuality the last remaining form of prejudice on the terraces?

Outside the UK there have been players who have come out as gay. There are some for whom their coming out has not negatively affected their careers, for some reason this is predominately women; Martina Navratilova and Amelie Mauresmo to name but two. There are some whose character has been retrospectively questioned; NBA star John Amaechi being the prime example. A Google of Amaechi's name leads to frighteningly draconian articles inferring Amaechi went into NBA primarily to access male changing rooms.

So it seems that in some sports it is acceptable to be gay. John Curry, a 1976 Olympics champion, did not face chants of "queer" or "faggot" from figure skating fans. Does this suggest that as a society we are still inherently homophobic? Rio Ferdinand got away with a slap on the wrist when he used the word "faggot" on Radio 1, but had he used racist language the nation would have been up in arms.

Does this mean that our attitudes to homosexuality aren't as progressive as we would like to think? I would vouch that actually the answer is no. The problem is the herd mentality of sport fans, especially those sports seemingly identified as masculine. Fans on the Kop, or at the Stretford End will most probably individually be tolerant towards sexuality, they wouldn't shout abuse at Sir Ian McKellen or Sir Elton John, but when surrounded by fellow fans they will see a slight left winger miss and decide that it is acceptable to question his sexuality.

Many gay right groups suggest that to end this culture of homophobia we need a brave individual to come forward and come out, some even are extremely militant and openly discuss the names of players they suspect of being gay. This doesn't help, but the idea of an individual putting an end to this archaic herd mentality is laudable. Ian Roberts, an Australian Rugby League player, came out and prompted a great reaction from colleagues who said it was important to "be true to yourself", if this could happen then maybe fans will realize the true homophobes are in the minority.

A YouGov survey of over 2,000 football fans asked whether they would mind if a player at their club was gay, and two thirds said it would not be an issue. The same survey, from a report by Stonewall, asked whether the FA were doing enough to prevent homophobia and 50% of fans said they were not. The Chief Executive of Stonewall, Ben Summerskill, said the results showed "football is institutionally homophobic" and what we need is a culture of acceptance.

We need the FA to have a campaign similar to the one they engineered against racism, we need supporters to stop spouting homophobic rubbish from the stands and we need managers and players to come together and make a stand against such action so that gay footballers feel accepted, so that there is never another Justin Fashanu and so that homophobia in football is resigned to the history books.



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## 11 comments

~J 24 Nov '09 at 10:34 am

Great article; I'd argue with one thing, though. "Why is homosexuality the last remaining form of prejudice on the terraces?"

I don't think it is. We still have racist chanting at football matches every now and again, women aren't allowed to compete on the same stage as men and there are other forms of discrimination in place, still. I don't think any fans really care about religion, class etc. but I think that it's the loud, aggressive nature of football fans anyway. I doubt that many of the people chanting are actually homophobic, racist etc. and I

also doubt that many of them think that the referee is a w\*\*\*\*r but it's often just part of the culture and really needs some fixing by the FA, imo.

 Report

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Dan

24 Nov '09 at 11:13 am

Interesting article Henry. Don't know if you caught this story recently?

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/article6882842.ece>

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Henry Cowen

24 Nov '09 at 12:06 pm

~J, thanks for your compliments, I understand what you mean and I acknowledge that racism hasn't been eradicated but it has come so far from the days of throwing bananas at top black players. It has all but been removed from the game. Having said that I do remember watching Zheng Zie play for Charlton and it certainly hadn't stopped then. So in essence perhaps homophobia isn't the last accepted form of prejudice, but it's certainly the form of prejudice the F.A have done the least about. I've just read the article, Dan. I hadn't seen it before but it's very interesting. Still can't see it happening in football though which is a crying shame. Interesting to see he had a positive reaction but then they got lots of homophobic texts in.

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Dan again

24 Nov '09 at 12:22 pm

I have to disagree ~J, the sectarian divide between Rangers and Celtic fans is obvious, but it also exists (due to the cost of attending a match, not always on the terraces) between Liverpool and Everton fans, Man Utd and Man City fans, Blackburn and Burnley fans to name a few sets. Indeed it was such a divide that often prompted the formation of two clubs within a city or area. While some of these divides may have faded with the general decline in piety (especially in the white, lower middle-classes), they are still ingrained within many clubs. At Valley Parade, every week without fail some young lad of 15-16 leads a hundred or so through a rendition of short ditty about the Bishop of Rome, the team that play in Beeston and the IRA. He obviously doesn't have a clue what lies behind the song, but hey-ho, great fun for any Catholics in his vicinity.

In terms of homosexuality being the last form of prejudice, I genuinely believe most fans see footballers on a spectrum, with the 'real men', the Norman Hunters, Dixie Deans, Nemanja Vidics at one end of the spectrum (and usually confined to history) and the modern footballer at the other end of the spectrum. The less masculine a player appears, the harder it is to win fan support; every time the player goes down he is a 'tart' or a 'poof'. The less masculine he is perceived to be, the better he must be to win approval. Now imagine that an openly gay footballer takes to the pitch, he's fighting to escape those stereotypes from the off. If he happens to also be a tricky winger who goes down under the slightest of tackles, then he's got no chance.

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Harry Patch

24 Nov '09 at 3:14 pm

It's just the culture at football games to be abusive. It should be tackled but we get morons like Harry Redknapp or Roy Keane saying "well the fans pay their money to voice their opinions". Problem is, what they say is never interesting or constructive - i get bored of watching games next to some tool who shouts bender every time James Beattie walks/runs nearby

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Henry Cowen

24 Nov '09 at 3:17 pm

In terms of rivalry between clubs (apart from when it infringes upon religion which is only Rangers v Celtic) surely it's just about hating each other because we think we should. I'm an Ipswich fan and I will happily say I hate Norwich but I have nothing against them really, even if I do want them to lose.

When there is religious issues brought up, players are reprimanded. Think Gascoigne and Healey mimicking the flute to Celtic fans, Gascoigne was fined £4,000. However, when Fowler bent down in front of a free-kick taken by Le Saux and displayed his backside, suggesting Le Saux was interested, he refused to take the kick. Le Saux was booked for time wasting and Fowler was not punished by the F.A. Not setting a great example is it?

Finally, Dan - "He's fighting to escape those stereotypes from the off"

But why is it that these stereotypes are so engrained in the minds of football fans, and if an England player came out as gay do you think fans would support him? Man City are the only football team classed as a gay friendly business by Stonewall and when the survey discussed above was released all 20 Premier League managers refused to comment, what will it have to take for these boundaries to be broken down?

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Dan

24 Nov '09 at 4:56 pm

I would again disagree with the dismissal of religion as a division, but accept it is not as pressing an issue as others.

What I would say is that I do believe football is institutionally racist, sexist, and homophobic. This has been masked by gradual shift from the game as a working class sport to a middle class one, which perhaps reflects the widening decline of the working class, as a by-product of the death of manufacturing. The lower middle class has learned that it is not acceptable to air racist views. That does not mean that they are not there. It has taken concerted effort from a succession of governments to get a bunch of middle aged, upper-middle class white men within the structures of the FA to accept this reality and again I believe they have accepted it without challenging their beliefs (the structure is still white, coaches are still white, managers are still white).

Unfortunately there has been no pressure on the FA to act with regards sexism or homophobia and as such there has been no real check on such behaviour.

Football is inherently homophobic, sexist, and racist because society is inherently homophobic, sexist, and racist. This is a by-product of a patriarchal society that has existed for centuries to protect the interests of white men. I think we have fooled ourselves into believing that progress has been made in the fight against any prejudice; it may be less hostile for black footballers today and I'm sure one day it will be less hostile for gay footballers, but this is purely because the middle class fans will come to accept that they may not air homophobic views.

The views will never leave the terraces though, let alone the pubs - the only affordable place to watch regular football.

Homosexuality will remain a taboo in football until homophobia becomes taboo. But just as homosexual footballers are hiding their sexuality now, homophobic fans will merely hide their homophobia in the future.

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Dan

24 Nov '09 at 4:56 pm

In my opinion of course – didn't mean to sound sanctimonious.

Really enjoyed this article.

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Henry Cowen

24 Nov '09 at 5:55 pm

Didn't sound sanctimonious to me, thanks very much for your comments. I think it's possible that it is in hope more than expectation that I seek a football without homophobia, perhaps it is latent in society. The only thing I will say is that the F.A, the Premier League, the PFA etc etc will be active about the other forms of prejudism. Kick it Out was a fantastic campaign that has all but eradicated racism, and top female players are increasingly involved with the men's first team – in terms of advertising new kits and stuff, obviously not playing, and women's role in the game is certainly on the rise. However, the action they've taken against homophobia? Essentially non-existent.

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Jake Farrell

25 Nov '09 at 7:41 pm

Great article

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~J

26 Nov '09 at 3:39 pm

Indeed, Dan, I wasn't commenting fully on it all; though I wouldn't exactly call the Kop-end lower class, there are still a lot of other issues in football. It's predominantly a "manly" sport that doesn't tolerate others very well; and I think many of the issues in football highlight that there are still problems in the wider world, even if some of the issues aren't as visible as they used to be. Some good points in the above comments but I won't go into them – I agree with most of them though :P

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