

## Sports culture holds negative view of gays

### Taunts, stereotypes abound on field of play

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Published on Mar 14, 2008

**SPECIAL REPORT SECOND IN A THREE-PART SERIES:** Burlington Post reporter Herb Garbutt examines the challenges facing gay youths in Burlington

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Dennis Yeo still remembers the day that changed his life, though he would rather not.

A 14-year-old student who excelled academically and was two years younger than his Grade 11 peers because he had skipped grades, Yeo was in the school's study hall with two friends. He was quietly reading when he noticed someone standing behind him. Yeo turned to see the captain of the junior football team. Behind the quarterback, his teammates formed a circle that surrounded Yeo and his friends.

"Why don't you get on your hands and knees?" he said to Yeo. "I know you want to."

Yeo had yet to tell anyone, even his family, that he was gay. But in high school, you didn't have to make a public declaration. Being different was enough to be singled out.

Yeo believes it was the culture of sports that drove his tormentor to humiliate him.

"I don't think men understand the difference between sexuality and masculinity. They figure they have to nurture their masculinity and what better way than exerting your power over someone else," said the Burlington resident. "Everything that goes on in society is exacerbated in that jock world."

While the event that forever changed Yeo took place in the 1960s, in a much more conservative time, Yeo contends not much has changed.

Sarah (the names of students in this story have been changed), a successful Burlington high school athlete who has only told her close friends that she is a lesbian, agrees with Yeo's assessment of the sports environment.

"A lot of teenage guys seem to have all their social interactions centred around proving how masculine and



**EDUCATE THE ATHLETE:** Burlington resident Dennis Yeo said he was bullied by the quarterback on his high school's football team. He believes athletes try to prove their masculinity by "exerting power over someone else. Everything that goes on in society is exacerbated in that jock world."



**CHANGE NEEDED:** Dennis Yeo says the homophobic taunts he was subjected to in high school have had a profound affect on his life. He says high-school athletes, like the ones who tormented him, should have mandatory sensitivity training.

heterosexual they are," she said. "The sports culture is less accepting of gays, especially gay guys. I think it ties in with adolescent boys trying to prove their masculinity, which athletes tend to be particularly determined to do."

It was the sports culture that convinced Brock Stacey to give up sports in high school. He played basketball in Grade 9 at Nelson High School but after coming out in Grade 10, he decided not to play.

"I didn't want to make myself or anyone else uncomfortable," he said. "It was upsetting because I was good at sports and if it wasn't such a big deal to other people, I would have kept playing."

You don't have to look any further than the four major leagues to realize that living an openly gay lifestyle is not widely accepted in the sporting world. Only six professional athletes in the four major team sports have publicly announced they are gay. (If you're keeping score: National Football League three, Major League Baseball two and the National Basketball Association one). All did so after they retired.

Yeo can relate. After finishing university he became an elementary school teacher. Afraid of losing his job and later his pension, he kept his sexuality a secret except for a select few people.

"I came out socially, but I couldn't afford to do it professionally. I was afraid I'd be fired -- it doesn't have to be for your sexuality," he said. "For an athlete to come out, their sponsorships, endorsements revolve around the talent they have. They make big bucks. You would be putting it on the line. A lot of them probably think, I can put it off. I can be gay when I'm 35."

If ever. The National Hockey League is still shut out in coming out. In the 90-year history of the league, more than 6,000 players have played in the league -- none of them were gay, if you're willing to believe that.

David, a 22-year-old college student from Oakville, said he's not surprised athletes don't reveal their sexuality, given the way gays are viewed. He faced the same issues as a gay high school athlete.

"Many athletes, as well as non-athletes, believe that being gay makes you less of a man; it makes you more feminine. It's a huge misconception and one that a gay man deals with every day in every aspect of his life. When it comes to sports, it is viewed that the gay man is less physical, less athletic, less talented."

Bob Stacey, a phys ed teacher at Nelson High School and a self-described 'man's man' who coaches the school's football and basketball teams, said his upbringing in a sports environment may have contributed to him being caught off guard when his son, Brock, told him he was gay.

"I was naïve to my own son," he said. "Grade 12 and 13 girls would bring him home and he was in Grade 9 and I thought, 'Geez, he's got something going.' He was fun, attractive, but not a threat to them. And I was in my own athletic world, pretty naïve, maybe even to (the point of) ignorance."

It was by no means easy for Brock Stacey to come out. But the homophobic nature of sports may be underlined by the fact that his brother Zack was targeted for more abuse than his brother.

"It was harder on him because he was younger and he had to uphold the Stacey athletic image," Bob Stacey said, "when meanwhile he's got an older brother who's gay -- it doesn't quite fit -- so he started to get harassed."

"I know it's been weird for my brother," Brock Stacey said. "It's never been easy. It's almost been a fight, letting everyone know he's straight."

#### TEAMMATES' RESPONSE A CONCERN

Sarah says her sport is one of the most important things in her life. Her coach knows she is gay, and has been "amazing." Two of her teammates also know but she has been hesitant to tell the rest of the team because she doesn't know how they will react.

"I'm afraid to cause any kind of scandal that might screw the team up and I'm scared of losing the respect I

hope my younger teammates have for me," she said. "I don't want the Grade 9 girls thinking I'm hitting on them whenever I talk to them. I'm not."

That seems to be the big fear about having a gay teammate. When former NBA player John Amaechi came out last February, former NBA player Tim Hardaway weighed in with his opinion to Florida radio station WAXY-AM.

"You know, I hate gay people so I let it be known," he said, before discussing how he would deal with a gay teammate.

"First of all, I wouldn't want him on my team. And second of all, if he was on my team, I would, you know, really distance myself from him because, uh, I don't think that is right. I don't think he should be in the locker room while we are in the locker room."

Hardaway later apologized but NBA commissioner David Stern banned him from the league's all-star activities that were taking place that week.

The 'gay teammate will also be watching me or hitting on me' stereotype is just one of many that abound on the playing field. David says the assumption is that a gay athlete "is attracted to his teammates simply because they change together. It's a pretty narcissistic thought on the straight athlete's part, and those are the reasons why gay men are harassed in sports."

It's not just confined to males, though.

"There are stereotypes about lesbians in certain sports, such as rugby," says Sarah, "and butch-looking girls tend to be snickered at by the other team."

She says few people suspect she is gay, "mostly because I have long hair, wear makeup, etc. Stereotypes are certainly alive and well."

Sports are also rife with homophobic taunts. Comments directed at straight athletes are often not even considered inappropriate.

Earlier this month, Sports Illustrated ran an article on abusive college basketball fans. In recognizing one trend, author Grant Wahl wrote, "There may not be nearly as many incidents of racism and anti-Semitism in college arenas as there were in the 1960s, but in the year 2008 many fans are waving anti-gay signs." One, directed at UCLA's Kevin Love, read 'Kevin Loves John Amaechi.'

Players will ask 'What are you? Gay?' if they back down from a physical challenge. Even coaches who shout 'C'mon ladies' to an underperforming boys' team are reinforcing stereotypes.

"I try to educate," says Bob Stacey, whose own awareness of such remarks has increased since his son told him he was gay. "It's not fair to call someone gay or fag. We wouldn't allow anyone to use any racial terms so why do we allow this?"

Yet it happens.

"People use being gay as an insult and throw it back at me," David said. "In high school they said things like, 'At least I don't like men,' or 'You're pretty good for a fag.'"

Yeo says police officers have to go through sensitivity training and wonders why athletes don't have to do the same.

"If you want to play, you have to go through a day-long training. If that's available, why can't it happen?" he said. "I'd like to be able to talk to athletes, tell them how that one person changed my life. I wonder, are they doing that to anybody?"

Yeo spoke to high school physical education department heads and related his high school experience. He extended an offer to speak to the students on their school teams but hasn't had any takers.

#### PRO SPORTS SLOW TO TAKE STEPS

Professional sports have also been slow to address the issue of homosexuality. For the most part, the leagues appear to be content to ignore that there may actually be gay athletes in their leagues. As a result, little has been done to foster acceptance, much less tolerance.

For 11 years, the National Football League has held a mandatory diversity-training program for all rookies entering the league that dealt with issues such as racism. Yet it wasn't until last year that the league invited a gay speaker, former Atlanta Falcons' defensive tackle Esera Tuaolo, who played in the 1999 Super Bowl, to address the players.

Why did it take so long?

"I think that's happening because people didn't get that oppressing a gay or lesbian person is a diversity issue or a human rights issue," said Marcus Logan, executive director of HOPE (Halton Organization for Pride and Education).

Yeo feels that athletes are an ideal place to start to affect change because of their place in high school society.

"The jocks, they are the social leaders. I'd like to educate them about the damage they can do," he said, "that what they did as a thoughtless adolescent could have such an impact on someone's life."

See Sunday's issue for the final story in this series.

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