



What men's sports can learn from women's sports about safety for LGBTQ+ fans

BY E. NICOLE MELTON

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It's Pride month, and in women's sports, signs of support are everywhere. Out-and-proud athletes, fiercely supportive allies, and leagues unapologetically champion LGBTQ+ inclusion.

But look at men's sport and you'll see a different story.

Sure, many men's organizations are showcasing rainbow-themed logos, but nearly 90% of LGBTQ+ individuals believe homophobia is an ongoing problem in sports, and 67% think the spectator space is unsafe for LGBTQ+ fans. The context for those studies is men's sports — meaning they have a long way to go.

As Kevin Durant's leaked Twitter messages illustrate, offensive anti-gay language remains an issue among top athletes. Further, anti-gay fan chants saturate many sports settings, and LGBTQ+ allyship is actually going down. Among straight men age 18-34 — a key demographic for the industry — recent reports show only 35% identify as allies.

Considering the market of LGBTQ+ fans is growing, and the community has \$1 trillion+ in spending power, how can men's sports combat homophobia?

When these organizations figure it out, everyone will benefit. Fans will feel safer, enjoying games without fear of being targeted because of their sexual orientation. More allies will speak up, as research shows fans follow organizational leadership; when teams reject prejudice and discrimination, fans are more likely to do the same.

Men's sports teams and leagues need to step beyond rainbow rhetoric and ask tough questions about LGBTQ+ fan safety. They should seek answers from women's sports.

Here are lessons to learn from the inclusive culture of women's sports:

Build up LGBTQ+ advocates and allies

Women's sport hasn't always been filled with rainbows. In fact, many female athletes have felt forced to conceal their sexual orientation. But a fundamental culture shift occurred in 2012 when athletes like Simone Biles and Megan Rapinoe came out — loud and unapologetically — and used their platforms to inspire change.

The ripple effect is seen across women's sport. More athletes are coming out and more allies are supporting LGBTQ+ inclusion. Every team has a pride night and has become a safe space for LGBTQ+ fans. Leagues now recognize their role in creating change. Consider the WNBA, which has amplified the voices of athletes like Layshia Clarendon and Renee Montgomery — effectively leading a social justice movement.

Key decision-makers outside the league office also ensure athletes are represented authentically. Lindsay Kagawa-Colas, sports agent for Wasserman and co-founder of Athletes for Impact, doesn't pressure her clients to stay in the closet or keep politics out of sports. Instead, she ensures her athletes have a platform to fight for the causes they value. And people want to hear about this side of an athlete's life.

Men's sport is catching on in some ways; Landon Donovan, the U.S. soccer legend who coaches San Diego Loyal SC, showed advocacy during a 2020 match when one of his openly gay players heard a homophobic slur from a competitor. The opposing team's coach scoffed while Donovan pulled his team from the match — signaling sport is no place for homophobia.

Build policy to fuel LGBTQ+ inclusion

Rainbow-themed branding won't cut it, as evidenced by the negative reaction from fans after the Premier League launched its "Rainbow Laces" campaign. Men's sport organizations need clear direction on how to support LGBTQ+ fans, coaches and athletes.

Teams can start by implementing gender-inclusive restrooms, hosting Pride Night, and supporting openly LGBTQ+ athletes, coaches, and employees. But they also need to implement zero-tolerance policies regarding LGBTQ+ abuse.

In 2010, for instance, anti-gay chants became an issue at Yankee Stadium. The team implemented a zero-tolerance policy, ejecting fans who engaged in anti-gay

language. Additionally, the organization took a proactive approach, meeting with fan community leaders to emphasize the organization's commitment to inclusion. Brands can help, too, by eliminating partnerships with athletes who engage in anti-gay behaviors.

Address the hyper-masculine culture

In the competitive arena of sports, an overly macho culture — I'm more of a man than you — remains. This culture seemingly fuels the anti-gay culture that persists in men's sport.

How to address this? Start by acknowledging that men, and their varied expressions of masculinity, come in all shapes and sizes. Don't simply put men in an ultra-macho box and assume they just want to drink beer and objectify women. Embrace their diversity, share their stories — just as those in women's sport have embraced diversity.

As we see in women's sport, changing the conversation takes buy-in at all levels. Leagues and teams should only work with brands that share their value of inclusion, and brands should only support sport organizations that create safe and inclusive spaces. All parties must work together to shift the culture. When they do, change can happen, and it can happen fast.

Fandom has a unique ability to unite and liberate. Let's learn from women's sport and unapologetically support LGBTQ+ inclusion.

LGBTQ+ inclusion is not a distraction. It's a value-add that will in turn grow the business. Pull back the rainbow curtain and start doing the work needed for all fans to feel safe.

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