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Gay athletes share innermost stories

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The G-Force bench looks on during their game at U of T's Varsity Arena.

Nick Lypaczewski

Among the messages members of G-Force, an all-gay hockey team, wanted to deliver at U of T's Hart House last weekend was that gay hockey players hit just as hard, aren't trying to date all their teammates and, most importantly, are just as qualified to handle a puck as any straight man.

In a heartfelt, open forum last Friday, American-based G-Force members Blake Anderson, Dave Farber and Andrew Goldstein shared their most intimate personal experiences as openly gay athletes.

While openly gay people are visible in just about every profession, many gay athletes tend to keep their sexuality a secret, something G-Force hopes to see change.

"We have to get to a point where we're no longer afraid to step on the toes of people who are just completely behind in the way they think about accepting other people and dealing with these sorts of situations," said Farber.

Gay athletes who choose to keep their sexuality a secret from their teammates and coaches are put into a culture where anti-gay slurs and implications are synonymous with poor play.

According to Farber and Goldstein, coming out in the locker-room and confronting the stigmatization took a lot of time and courage but the reactions they got from their coaches and teammates were warm.

For Goldstein, a big part of his coming out to his teammates came from seeing another gay athlete admit his sexuality.

In his high school lacrosse locker-room which, Goldstein admits, was a fairly homophobic place, his teammates were reading an article about a high school football captain who came out to his entire team during a meeting.

According to Goldstein, his teammates showed admiration at the bravery it took for the player to admit so boldly who he really was.

"You have no idea how much that meant to me. I think that played such a role in me being able to come out later especially knowing I could be that person for a whole other group of people," he said.

For Farber, coming out to his hockey team was, "by far and away" the hardest thing he'd ever had to do, harder than admitting he was gay to his family.

He told a few people on his University of Pennsylvania team between terms and hoped for the best next fall. After a while, things returned to close to normal.

"I honestly think that I didn't give enough respect for people's ability to change," he said.

Farber was eventually named captain of the team.

Farber says an open and honest environment is the only way to produce the best hockey.

"If you don't know that (a gay teammate) is having a terrible time because he just broke up with his boyfriend and that's why he's missing every pass . . . (when) he can't tell you or you can't tell him about your personal life your team play is going to suffer."

Sitting in the back row in Hart House for the forum was a very notable attendee.

Toronto Maple Leafs general manager Brian Burke took in the discussion and spoke afterwards about the possibility of an NHL player coming out of the closet.

"I'm afraid we're still a ways away at (the NHL) level. I think it's a wall that's going to be eroded over time rather than a door that's kicked in," he said. "I personally think the world is ready for a player to come out. I think he'd find there are plenty of people to accept gay athletes in any setting. I think they'd actually be surprised how accepted they'd be."

Burke's son Brendan publicly admitted he was gay last November and acted as an advocate for gay rights until his death earlier this year.

According to RyePRIDE events assistant Mo Riazi, panels like this teach people about a number of issues.

"These panel discussions are there to inform and educate students . . . (They're) not only about queer issues but rather the matter of creating a freedom from discrimination," he said.

G-Force doesn't just tour the United States and Canada playing hockey and holding panels; they also offer an important service for other gay athletes. The Athlete Buddy System (ABS) pairs gay athletes with G-Force members to discuss how to come out to their teammates, coaches and family.

Rams men's hockey head coach Graham Wise has never coached an openly gay player but says they'd be treated respectfully.

"We treat people as individuals and we treat everybody the same way," he said.

There's a deep precedent for gay athletes in North America. The NFL's David Kopay, Esera Tuaolo and Roy Simmons have all publicly admitted that they're gay. The same goes for the NBA's John Amaechi and MLB's Billy Bean.

Comments (1)

hockeyfan writes:

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what a great article and effort by the g-force!