

Soccer study finds 93 percent of fans would support openly gay players

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There are over 500,000 professional footballers, yet openly gay players appear almost entirely absent. It is often claimed that the problem lies with an intolerant fan culture, but a new study reveals that 93% of football fans oppose homophobia and would support openly gay players. The study, published in the *British Journal of Sociology*, identifies conservative clubs and agents to be the sport's strongest barriers to change.

The study, led by Professor Ellis Cashmore and Dr Jamie Cleland from Staffordshire University, sampled the views of 3,500 supporters through an anonymous [online survey](#) in the first [empirical study](#) of [homophobia](#) in fan culture.

"It is commonly believed that [football](#) is not ready for openly gay players," said Cashmore. "In 2010 the English Football Association dropped a campaign to tackle homophobia, while the Professional Footballer's Association stated that such a campaign would be more appropriate when crowds are "a bit more civilised."

In stark contrast 93% of supporters stated that they opposed homophobia and would support openly gay players as only their performance on the pitch matters; giving lie to the popular conception that supporters create a culture of intolerance.

The research was the broadest yet conducted on [football fans](#). 83% of [respondents](#) were male, 2% were under-16 while 52% were aged 17-18.

While the majority of supporters were from the UK, with 85% supporting British teams, the survey received responses from 35 countries.

From the answers four clear ideas emerged which appear to represent supporters' attitudes to homophobia: the supportive attitude of fans towards homosexual footballers, comparisons with racism in the 1980's, the need for greater transparency from football's governing organisations, and the decisive role of clubs and agents in creating and maintaining a culture of secrecy.

"Even in light of this new finding the fact remains that there has only been one openly gay player in the history of British football," said Dr Cleland. "Fans blame agents who are afraid of losing their commissions and conservative clubs who wish to maintain the status quo. It is the market which controls football which prohibits gay players coming out."

"Almost every major announcement about homophobia in football assumes that supporters are hostile to gay players," concluded Cashmore. "We have provided the first evidence that gay players would meet with approval from fans of all ages and backgrounds, tempered of course by fans rivalry, which proves the idea of ingrained homophobia in fan culture to be false."

The researchers followed this project by collecting the views of [fans](#) and players over the past 30-years to explore the issue of racism in football. Their new project launches this week at www.topfan.co.uk, and invites views on whether Britain is regressing towards an uncivilized condition in which people are more inclined to casual aggression.

More information: Cashmore. E, Cleland. J, 'Fans, homophobia and masculinities in association football: evidence of a more inclusive environment', *British Journal of Sociology*, Wiley-Blackwell, May 2012,

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