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From hegemonic to inclusive masculinities in English professional football: marking a cultural shift

Lindsey Gaston, Rory Magrath and Eric Anderson

ABSTRACT

In this article, we conduct a generational study of measuring progress towards the inclusion of homosexuality in professional sport. We accomplish this by interviewing an openly gay football player, Anton Hysén, in the year 2017, using the precise same questions about the relationship between his homosexuality and sport that were asked of the first openly gay professional footballer in 1992, Justin Fashanu. We thus measure difference in attitude according to the 25 years that have elapsed between the interviews. Our results emphasize two themes: First, the near-total acceptance of being gay within professional football today, compared to 25 years ago; and second, the social praise that is levied upon today's openly gay sportsmen, compared to the social stigma placed upon Fashanu.

Introduction

On 22 October 1990, Justin Fashanu came out of the closet as the first openly gay professional football (soccer) player in the world. After learning that details about his sexuality were about to be revealed in a national newspaper, Fashanu agreed to an exclusive interview with British newspaper *The Sun*, whose headline read: '£1 m Football Star: I AM GAY'. The result was catastrophic: While he initially claimed that he was accepted by his teammates, Fashanu suffered severe backlash and vilification from his manager, fellow players, football fans and even members of his own family (Magrath, 2017b). Although the admission of his sexuality did not end his career outright, Fashanu was never able to secure a full-time contract with a professional club after his public statement (Mitchell, 2012) – and eventually retired from professional football in 1997.

In a 1991 follow-up interview with the magazine *Gay Times*, Fashanu admitted that he was unprepared for the negative reactions, as well as the damage that occurred to his career as a result of his coming out (Marshall, 1991). In a similar televised interview on British television¹ in 1992, Fashanu spoke of the stress that coming out placed on his professional career as well as his relationships with his family. The negative description he painted during these interviews of the impacts of being a gay professional athlete served almost as a warning sign to other closeted football players who might be grappling with a similar decision of being honest with their sexuality and coming out as a professional athlete.

Eventually, in 1998, having been accused of sexual assault by a 17-year-old boy in the US, Fashanu fled back to the UK, and committed suicide. It is generally accepted that his appalling mistreatment was a contributing factor in his suicide. Indeed, as Magrath (2017b, p. 63) wrote: 'It can be argued that he [Fashanu] was something of a 'trendsetter' – symbolic of the fractious relationship between football and homosexuality'. Thus, unsurprisingly, Fashanu remained the only openly gay professional footballer for over two decades.²

Then, in 2011, Liverpool-born Swedish footballer Anton Hysén publicly revealed that he was gay. The response toward Hysén stood in stark contrast to that of Fashanu: he was widely supported and celebrated by members of the media, and by fellow teammates (Cleland, 2014). Similar inclusivity was apparent when two other footballers – Robbie Rogers and Thomas Hitzlsperger – came out of the closet shortly after Hysén (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016; Cleland, Magrath, & Kian, 2016).

This article thus investigates and compares the coming out experiences of the world's first two openly gay active professional footballers – Justin Fashanu and Anton Hysén. To do so, we compare Fashanu's responses to a 1992 British television interview with those of Anton Hysén, who the first author interviewed in person. This article therefore focuses on Fashanu and Hysén's 25-year difference in descriptions of how they felt coming out as gay men affected their career as a professional footballer. These episodic periods are important because they signify generational differences: one player came out in a culture in which homosexuality was stigmatized, and the other in which homophobia is stigmatized.

The relationship between football and masculinity

Much of the cultural obsession for competitive team sport came at the beginning of the twentieth century; a result of a cultural hysteria that men were going soft (Anderson, 2009). With Western societies shifting from primarily agrarian economies to industrial societies for the first time in history, the majority of the population lived in cities. Cancian (1987) shows that during this epoch, the social structure of work changed significantly, requiring men to sacrifice their physical health in dangerous factories or coal mines for the well-being of their families. Combative and competitive team sports like football served a vessel for this indoctrination.

Football provides an historical example of masculine embodiment, demonstrated by physical strength and power (Dunning, 1986). Throughout much of Europe, it has been engrained in boys and men ever since the industrialization of working life in the late nineteenth century (Taylor, 2008). Here, instead of working as a family on the farm, men worked in factories, structuring them away from their families and leaving women to care for the children (Hartmann, 1976). Cancian (1987) describes this as a separation of gendered spheres: here, men increasingly grew more masculine and women more feminine.

Anderson (2009) argues that the value of competitive team sports was bolstered during this time, largely because of the establishment of the modern homosexual identity (Anderson & White, 2017). He argues that because heterosexuals cannot socially prove their heterosexuality, men had to socially prove, and reprove their heterosexuality by aligning their gendered identities with an extreme (orthodox) form of masculinity while simultaneously denouncing homosexuality.

Thus, at this time, competitive team sports such as football were thought to provide a mechanism to reverse the apparent softening of boys' masculinity (Radar, 2008). Football therefore exposed a 'clear hierarchical structure, autocratic tendencies, traditional notions of masculinity and the need for discipline' (Carter, 2006, p. 5). Boys and men, desiring to be thought straight, were able to reprove their heterosexuality through repressing pain, concealing feminine and homosexual desires and behaviours (Kimmel, 1994). It was, therefore, through football that boys and men could demonstrate what Burstyn (1999) calls 'hypermasculinity' – so much so that masculinity became essentially synonymous with homophobia.

These claims took on renewed cultural significance during the mid-1980s. At this time, football acted as a bastion of exclusive masculinity (Wellard, 2002), and became a central tool in heterosexualizing men in a culture of what Anderson (2009) calls 'homohysteria'. It was in this cultural period, the epoch in which Fashanu came out, in which Western societies had become increasingly aware that homosexuality existed – but maintained strong antipathy toward sexual minorities (Loftus, 2001). This was primarily facilitated by the spread of HIV/AIDS, which became intimately associated with the gay community. Consequently, and partly as a result of extremist tabloid reporting, homosexuality was pathologized as a danger to public health (Weeks, 1991).

Sport in a context of homophobia

Because of increased intolerance towards sexual minorities, men's competitive team sport of the 1980s was a social institution principally organized around the political project of defining certain forms of masculinity as acceptable – whilst denigrating others (Crosset, 1990). In the UK, football was thought to associate boys and men with masculine dominance by constructing their identities and sculpting their bodies to align with hegemonic perspectives of masculinist embodiment and expression (Magrath, 2017b). Boys in competitive team sports were therefore permitted and expected to exhibit, value and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity (Pronger, 1990).

Men's homophobia has also played an important role in an intra-masculine stratification traditionally found among males (Plummer, 1999). Accordingly, research has shown that organized, competitive team sports were highly homophobic in Western cultures (Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990). This is because sports, particularly contact sports, have an institutional culture in which hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined: an athlete is thought to represent the ideal of what it means to be a man – a definition which is predicated in opposition to what it means to be feminine and/or gay (Connell, 1995).

It is for this reason that in his study of gay recreational athletes in the Netherlands Hekma (1998, p. 2) observed, 'Gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise'. Similarly, Pronger (1990, p. 26) said that, 'Many of the (gay) men I interviewed said they were uncomfortable with team sports ... Orthodox masculinity is usually an important subtext if not *the* leitmotif' in team sports. While no academic research examining attitudes towards homosexuality among

British athletes exists from this time, the experience of Justin Fashanu is clear evidence of the intolerant attitudes which existed at this time.

Exemplifying the extent of homophobia of the time, both the British Social Attitude Survey and American General Social Survey highlighted elevated homophobia. Close to the end of the decade, homophobic attitudes hit an apex in Western cultures: in 1987, 75 per cent of the UK population believed that same-sex sex was 'always wrong' or 'mostly wrong', compared to 77.4 per cent in the US (Clements & Field, 2014; Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2015). Although this figure had declined by the time Fashanu came out in 1990 – in the UK, it had reduced to 69 per cent – it still remained significant enough for him to be widely discriminated against.

Sport in a context of inclusivity

Since the turn of the millennium, however, cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in the Western world have drastically improved (Keleher & Smith, 2012). This shift has also reflected in contemporary sport, something documented in a plethora of academic evidence (Adams, 2011; Adams & Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2011a, 2011b; Anderson et al., 2016; Batten & Anderson, in press; Magrath, 2017b, 2017c). Indeed, this is further evidenced by the growing number of gay male athletes coming out of closet in recent years, including: Jason Collins (see Kian, Anderson, & Shipka, 2015), Tom Daley (see Magrath, Cleland & Anderson, 2017), Thomas Hitzlsperger (see Cleland et al., 2016) – as well as other who have not yet been academically studied: Michael Sam, Steven Davies, Robbie Rogers, and Keegan Hirst.

There has also been a growing body of research which documents how these liberal attitudes are also present in UK and US football culture. Adams's (2011) ethnographic research among a US university football team found inclusive attitudes towards sexual minorities, with athletes challenging orthodox notions of masculinity. Anderson (2011b) found similar inclusivity among a university-based football team in America, while Adams and Anderson (2012) highlighted a decrease of heteronormativity and increase in social cohesion when they observed the first-ever first-hand account of an athlete's gay athletes coming out with researchers present.

This inclusivity has also been documented in UK football. While issues of access have prevented direct access to the 'impenetrable fortress' (Roberts, Anderson, & Magrath, 2017, p. 337) of professional football, Magrath (2017b) and Magrath, Anderson, and Roberts (2015) rely on data from the next best available group of footballers: that of Premier League academy players – essentially the *next* generation of professional players. In doing so, he shows that these young, ostensibly heterosexual men, aside from those who adopt fundamentalist religious perspectives, espouse generally positive attitudes towards increased social and legal rights for sexual minorities (see also Magrath, 2017a). Thus, he contends that 'the hypothetical inclusivity articulated by these men serves as a roadmap for when one of their teammates does come out (Magrath, 2017b, p. 169)'.

However, these changes of attitude are not merely restricted to football players. Beyond the field of play, Cashmore and Cleland (2012) show that homophobia among football fans has also dramatically declined. Using online methods, they show that 93% of 3500 participants held no objection to the presence of openly gay players. The same research also held football clubs at governing bodies responsible for the 'culture of secrecy' regarding gay professional footballers in the UK. Magrath (2017a) further evidences this shift by interviewing 33 football fans from various clubs in the UK, showing that all but three participants would be supportive of an openly gay player for their club.

Moreover, later research also shows that this acceptance among fans also extends to online forums: Using data from 48 forums of various British football clubs, Cleland (2015, p. 137) provides 'empirical evidence of a changing cultural context of football fans towards sexuality through the frequent contestation of homophobic posts in online discourse'. Comparable findings were evident in Cleland et al.'s (2016) research examining fans' online response to Thomas Hitzlsperger's coming out in 2014.

This shift towards inclusivity is also evident in contemporary sport media. Indeed, a number of openly gay athletes have been widely praised and celebrated in the media after coming out (Kian & Anderson, 2009; Kian et al., 2015; Magrath et al., 2017). Most significant for this research, Cleland (2014) shows that in the period after his coming out in March 2011, Anton Hysén was widely praised in the British sport media. He was also praised for making a stand as the first openly gay footballer in over two decades. As this article examines, the response to Hysén represents a marked shift from the reaction to the last openly gay professional footballer – Justin Fashanu.

Theorizing the shift

We theorize the shift of homosexuality as unacceptable to sportsmen in the twentieth century to homophobia being unacceptable to sportsmen in the twenty-first century with Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory (see Anderson & McCormack, 2016a for a reformulated version). This theory emerged from research finding more inclusive behaviours of heterosexual men and the changing dynamics of male peer group cultures in the US and UK. This body of research has shown that many young straight men: reject homophobia; include gay peers in friendship networks; are more emotionally intimate with friends; are physically tactile with other men; recognize bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation; embrace activities and artefacts once coded feminine; and eschew violence and bullying (see McCormack & Anderson, 2014a for a summary of these findings).

Given the sustained decline in homophobic attitudes in the US, UK and other Western countries in the past few decades (Clements & Field, 2014; Twenge et al., 2015), it is tempting to argue that the change in gendered behaviours is explained by decrease in homophobia alone. While initially persuasive, it is not sufficient because similar tactile and open expressions of masculinities exist in other cultures where homophobia is present. In Iran, for example, the erasure of homosexuality affords Iranian boys and men more social permission to display gendered behaviours – such as holding hands with one another – which are deemed unacceptable in Western countries (see Hamdi, Lachheb, & Anderson, 2016).

In order to account for this, and historically and geographically situate Inclusive Masculinity Theory Anderson (2009), introduced the concept *homophobia*. Homophobia is defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay. A culture is homophobic if it meets three conditions: (i) the culture maintains antipathy towards gay men; (ii) there is mass awareness that gay people exist in significant numbers in that culture; and (iii) the belief that gender and sexuality are conflated. When these conditions are met, homophobia is used as a tool to police gender, as people fear the stigma of being socially perceived as gay. A recent Feminist Forum debate in *Sex Roles* evaluated the concept, also providing a substantive review of the changing nature of masculinities (McCormack & Anderson, 2014a, 2014b; Negy, 2014; Parent, Batura, & Crooks, 2014; Worthen, 2014).

Homophobia is central to understanding IMT because it is the concept that enables an explanation of social change. It describes the social conditions in which homophobia polices men's behaviours: homophobia only regulates men's behaviours in settings that are homophobic. The theory contends that in homophobic cultures, men's behaviours are severely restricted, and archetypes of masculinity are stratified, hierarchically, with one hegemonic form of masculinity being culturally exalted – just as Connell (1995) described happening in the 1980s and early 1990s. As such, Inclusive Masculinity Theory values Connell's conceptualizing regarding the multiplicity of masculinities with decreasing social esteem in homophobic cultures.

The contribution of IMT is that it connects men's gendered behaviours with the social trend of decreasing homophobia, explaining variance between cultures and generations. The theory contends that a profound change in masculinities will occur when homophobia decreases. It argues that the stratifications of men become less hierarchical, and that more diverse forms of masculinity become more evenly esteemed (Anderson, 2009). In this context, femininity in men becomes less stigmatized, and the narrow set of behaviours and activities that are valued by men expand. Non-conforming masculinities also experience less regulation.

Inclusive Masculinity Theory thus contends that the driver for decreasing homophobia is improving attitudes towards homosexuality in broader society. However, while the new dynamics and behaviours are founded upon the condemnation and rejection of overt forms of homophobia, this is not just the result of changing attitudes: Structural changes that include shifts in the law and greater access and prominence for sexual minorities in a range of social institutions are important (Weeks, 2007), as well as social shifts in the organization of society from away from industrial economies, the growth of the Internet, and processes of individualization where social institutions have less influence on moral values (Beck, 2002). These broader changes appear to support decreasing homophobia, as same-sex desire and sex are framed as forms of love that individuals have a right to engage in (Twenge, 2014).

These shifts in gendered behaviour have occurred primarily among young men and much of the scholarship adopting this theory has focused on the millennial cohort, and has recognized the importance of generation in attitudes and behaviours (see also Keleher & Smith, 2012). However, as other articles in this special edition show, there are significant differences in attitudes towards homosexuality and masculinity between millennial men and those aged over 65 in western and eastern countries. And, in addition to having staying power (Magrath & Scoats, this edition) as men age, these new masculinities are posited as a central challenge to the past systems of inequality of sexuality from which they emerged.

Method

Data for this study were collected through the use of a structured interview with Anton Hysén. The Hysén interview schedule was created off the transcript from the BBC 2 interview based television programme *Open to Questions*, which originally aired on 13 January 1992. This interview had a run time of approximately 35 min and consisted of a programme format in which the presenter, John Kelly, along with a studio audience, asked Fashanu about his coming out process and his perceived impact that coming out had on both his personal and professional life. Hysén was then asked the exact same question in the exact same order as Fashanu was 25 years earlier.

At the conclusion of the Hysén interview, a transcript was created that was used to provide a comparison to the responses of Fashanu. The transcripts were examined to find similarities and differences in both the initial responses to the questions as well as their explanations of their responses. As a result of this narrative analysis, this article first examines the acceptance of being gay within professional football today, compared to 25 years ago; second, the impact that coming out has had on both athletes' careers; and third, the social praise that is levied upon Hysén today, compared to the social stigma placed upon Fashanu.

It is worth noting that Hysén's knowledge of Fashanu was limited prior to his coming out, he claims that Fashanu did not have any direct impact on his coming out process. This is important because Magrath (2017b) has described Fashanu's coming out as a trendsetting event. Until Hysén, Fashanu's experience essentially served as a warning to other gay footballers: if you are a closeted footballer who decides to come out, you too will suffer marginalization, discrimination and ridicule from teammates, coaches and supporters. This will ultimately lead to a downward spiral in your personal life and professional career, eventually culminating in suicide.

Hysén, however, only became more aware of Fashanu after his own public announcement of his sexuality, stating in a post interview comment, 'I didn't hear too much about him until after I came out, so it didn't really affect me'. Although the two players are often compared with one another (e.g. Cleland, 2014), this comment makes sense given that Hysén had not been born when Fashanu came out in 1990.

Finally, Hysén was not aware of the 1992 interview, nor was he told that the questions would mirror that interview. Thus, his responses were not prepared or planned in advance of the interview. Instead, unlike some previous research which highlights the importance of media training on professional footballers' responses in interviews for research purposes (see Magrath, 2017b), Hysén's responses represent genuine, spontaneous answers to the questions posed to him.

Professional impact of coming out

One of the most significant difference between Fashanu and Hysén is their account of how coming out had impacted their football careers. In his television interview, Fashanu stated, without any reservation, that his decision to publicly announce his homosexuality had a negative impact on his career. His response to the question 'How has coming out affected your career' was clear, immediate and without hesitation. He said, 'Very badly, very badly. For somebody who has the pedigree and background that I got, I found that a lot of doors closed'. Fashanu continued to describe how friends, coaches and the club chairmen shut him out of sport:

There was a lot of backlash. I could not get a job, the bottom line, I could not get a job. So, I think it affected me quite badly. Also, many stories that were subsequently written about me that I was supposed to have done. If I would have done all the things the paper has written about I would have quite an enjoyable life, I think.

In contrast to Fashanu, however, Hysén's account of coming out was remarkably different for his football career. Coming out did not close doors, but in fact opened doors to other opportunities of fame which would have otherwise been closed. In response to the same question of, 'How has coming out affected your career?', Hysén said:

I can't really say it affected me in anyway negatively in football at all. It is really super and very positive today. I have done so much stuff since coming out, both in and out of sport. There is mostly just positivity.

Exemplifying the cultural response to Hysén's coming out, his global popularity increased. Prior to his announcement, Hysén was a footballer contracted to Utsiktens BK – a relatively small club competing in the third tier of Swedish football – and dreaming of following in father's footsteps of playing for Liverpool in the English Premier League. But being openly gay as a football player plucked him out of relative football obscurity and positioned him on to the front page of both sporting and pop cultural news. In short, for a period of time, Hysén became not only the face of the gay athlete, but a cultural celebrity (Anderson et al., 2016).

Since his coming out, Hysén has secured sponsorship and endorsement contracts, including men's clothing and accessory lines and health and fitness products. The demand for public appearances increased, allowing him opportunities to speak at public and private engagements. He was given television appearance opportunities as a guest, a host and as an actor. His new level of fame allowed him to participate and win season seven of *Let's Dance*, Sweden's version of *Strictly Come Dancing* or *Dancing with the Stars*,³ in 2012. Finally, Hysén's new popularity found him being courted by Sweden's Eurovision Song Contest team to represent his home country – even though he does not sing. He thus turned the opportunity down.

In fact, Hysén can only recall one negative incident, which was quickly rectified. 'I think I've only heard only one person say a bad thing in the entire time. It's mostly been all positive. People have mostly been like, "wow, this is great"'. Hysén made a similar statement in a previous interview:

I think I've only had one thing happen (taunts from the crowd) and that was a game one week after coming out. It was a voice who said 'gay' and someone said 'shut the fuck up and sit down' directly after. None more after that. (Taylor, 2016)

Thus, unlike Justin Fashanu's experience after coming out – one which was characterized by continued harassment by fans, players and the media – Hysén has had the opposite experience.

When asked to compare himself to Fashanu, and to explain the difference in reception, Hysén suggests that a shift has occurred in how gay people and gay athletes are viewed by the public. He adds that this shift is found equally in sport. Evidencing this, Hysén was able to remain with the club he was contracted with when he came out. Subsequently, Hysén has received contracts with two other clubs since his announcement, while Fashanu failed to secure a full-time contract with any team (at any level) after his coming out.

Social significance of coming out

The results of this generational comparison within sport are clear: whereas Fashanu suffered for proclaiming his sexuality, Hysén has benefited. This is also true of each athlete's relationship to their respected cultures more broadly.

One of the initial questions posed to Fashanu in the 1992 interview was why decided to come out. When asked, 'What finally convinced you to come out?' Fashanu began his response to the question with what appears to be an attempt to reject the title of 'gay', as he stated that he was prepared to sleep with both men and women.

In his answer, and throughout the duration of the interview, he also employed language that defended his masculinity by explicitly referring to himself as 'macho' and 'aggressive'. One way he did this was to implicitly suggest that he was either bisexual, or to reject that gay men were static in their sexual orientation. Thus, Fashanu both broke down stereotypes of homosexuality while simultaneously erasing bisexuality as a cultural option (Anderson & McCormack, 2016b; Magrath et al., 2017):

The media would like to, and I think people would like, to put sexuality as you are gay or you are straight, or you are this. I don't look at it like this. I look at it as the fact I was prepared to sleep with a guy as well sleep with girls. So, I said to myself, 'does that make me gay or does that make me straight, or whatever?'

Fashanu's response could be read as a rejection of the binary nature of sexuality and the implicit recognition of bisexuality, though the tone of his voice has a more defensive stance. Alternatively, this could be interpreted as a level of discomfort or uncertainty regarding his internalized homophobia. Interestingly, there is no other evidence that Fashanu was bisexual. Instead, his response is consistent with Anderson's (2005) research on gay men who came out in the 1990s, which showed that many of them proclaimed to be bisexual – or still maintained interest in females – in order to nullify some of their own social stigma.

Fashanu continued his attempt to disassociate masculinity from his personal understanding of being gay:

Young people, old people, need to know it is okay to allow yourself to express your sexuality ... Justin Fashanu who got the reputation of being a very macho aggressive footballer has to come out and say 'yes, this is what goes on in my life,' then I will do that because the stereotypical view of a gay person is not necessarily what is going on.

Throughout the rest of the interview Fashanu attempts to distance himself from the title of gay. Toward the end of the interview, Fashanu even speaks about the possibility of existing in a heterosexual relationship:

I had lots of girlfriends. I still have girlfriends and I love women and they are beautiful creatures. My situation is that I found that I was attracted to guys as well. Now does that mean that I am gay? I don't know ... In five years' time, I could be married and have

kids ... I don't think you can say that you are going to be homosexual for the rest of your life, just as you cannot say I am going to be heterosexual for the rest of your life.

When asked the same question, 'What finally convinced you to come out?', Hysén was much lighter in tone with his response to coming out, with almost a hint of surprise that people would care about his sexuality. His tone suggests a greater level acceptance of his sexuality, or at least that Hysén is much more comfortable with his sexuality than Fashanu:

For me, it's like this: you have to be comfortable with yourself. I never felt that you have to do it just to do it. But at the end of the day, you will feel a lot better by doing it. It matters what you do on the pitch, it does not matter who you sleep with. I don't really think it means anything for me ... I was already out to my friends and family before the public announcement.

When asked for more details about the moment he decided to make the public announcement, Hysén said:

People from the magazine *Offside* came and asked me. They heard about my story so they just asked and said it could help a lot of people and I did not know that. I did not know it was that big of an impact to do that so I just told myself if it might help people, just be yourself, of course I would do it any day of the week. So, there were never really any doubts of anything.

Both Fashanu and Hysén state that their decision to come out publically was fuelled by the notion that it could help others and/or potential dispel stereotypes of what it is to be gay. While Hysén does not have any regrets, Fashanu suggested to the BBC that he would have done things differently knowing the negative impact. When Fashanu was asked, 'You spoke about not having regrets about anything but now since you coming out, all this has happened to you, what do you think? Would you have done it differently?' he answered:

I would have prepared myself differently ... I did not think the backlash would have been as strong as it had been. I did not think that it would be a big deal, so I would have prepared myself better. But I would do the same again. The bottom line is, be true to yourself.

When Hysén was asked this question, 'Would you have done it differently?' he said: 'Absolutely nothing. I would not have done anything differently'.

In interviews with both Fashanu and Hysén, each player discussed matters of inter-personal strength. This is perhaps not surprising, given their occupation. Both also discussed the importance of being true to oneself. However, the difference in which these players inter-personal attitudes intersected with society were vastly different. Fashanu suffered an overwhelming degree of prejudice (Magrath, 2017b). This included rejection from his teammates, fans, his brother John (also a professional player), and his manager at the time, Brian Clough, who boastfully recounted an infamous homophobic exchange with Fashanu in his autobiography. Hysén had the opposite: total acceptance. The only similarity between their narratives concerns how they were received within the gay community, who considered both a role model.

Relationship with the gay community

Fashanu and Hysén shared similar feelings when it came to being a role model. First, both acknowledged that they are/were, regardless if the title was wanted or not. Second, both spoke about receiving gratitude about their coming out from gay people; principally about how they found these sportsmen to be influential in their own coming out.

During his television interview, Fashanu spoke about young gay men discussing with him their struggle of being rejected by family members. He recalled one young man who approached him:

I was in Canada and this guy came up to me because I am reasonably well known in Canada. He had been at home in one of the provincial places and he told his parents he was gay and his parents said he needed to sort his life out or get out of their home. He left his home and finished up as a male prostitute on the street of Toronto and felt that he did not have any friends and this that and the other. He came up and started to talk to a group of us, and we basically said you got hope, you can do this ... And anyway, we were going to keep corresponding because I was coming back to England [but the story finished] that he committed suicide. He jumped off a hotel and died.

While the story has a tragic end, the anecdote illustrates that Fashanu was a recognizable figure in the gay community and, as a result, people saw him as a potential source of strength or role model. However, Fashanu couched his response with two other tactics that, might come from strong interpersonal beliefs, but nonetheless serves as a defence against cultural criticism. Namely, he tells the television audience that other players are hypocrites, and he avows his allegiance to the belief in God.

I don't go out of my way to be a role model ... When I first started in this business, people kept talking about being a role model. That is such a crock. The majority of personalities when you actually look at their lives, opposed to the kind of image that is being constructed, [it's] so different. What I have tried to do – and I am no great Shakespeare – what you see is what you get. And if that influences other people, then praise God.

Hysén's language also reflects a reluctance of being a role model but expressed a greater acceptance of this role, but he does not otherwise defend his coming out from the potential criticisms of either sportsmen or religion:

Of course when people look and see what you have done people are going to look up to you and ask you questions and say thank you ... So I feel yes and no, but I do it in my own way.

Moreover, this is also made more explicit with his engagement with past gay pride events, as well as his willingness to continue to be involved in the future suggests that he is open to assuming the status of role model.

While Hysén sees a role for himself within the gay community, Fashanu was clear in his lack of participation at pride events and did not express much interest in being included: 'I don't have too much contact with the gay community'. When asked directly about his current and future participation in pride events he responded, 'Not something I'm into at the moment. I'm into just surviving and getting on showing that whether one is a gay, straight, or heterosexual person, it is not really important, as long as they can do the job'. Hence, Fashanu seems to have mitigated invoking extra stigma against his sexuality for associating with sexual minorities, and advocating for their equality. Hysén, on the other hand, is both inter-personally and socially free to associate with homosexuality, and (should he choose) advocate for further equality.

Discussion

Justin Fashanu came out of the closet as the world's first openly gay professional footballer in October 1990. The immediate response was one of severe, overt homophobia. Having had an average career in English professional football, including being the first black player to command a £1 m transfer fee, he was widely ridiculed by those involved in the game – fans, teammates, coaches, and the media. Following this announcement, he never played professional football again: the remainder of his career was restricted to a range of lower league and semi-professional clubs, predominantly across England and Scotland. Eventually, he committed suicide in 1998.

Given the extent of discriminatory attitudes toward sexual minorities in Anglo-American cultures at the time (Clements & Field, 2014; Twenge et al., 2015), the response towards Fashanu is likely unsurprising. HIV/AIDS had become entangled with the gay community, elevating cultural attitudes toward homosexuality. As Pronger's (1990) research shows, gay athletes were treated as pariahs, excluded and marginalized by dominant notions of masculinity attempting to prove their heterosexuality.

For football culture, however, the stage was set: Fashanu was a pariah and he became a symbol for the way football treated sexual minorities. As Magrath (2017b) retrospectively shows with the example of Graeme Le Saux, homophobia's presence in the game affected straight athletes, too; attaching stigma to anything or anyone who failed to conform to its strict, heteromale code. Football was, therefore, identified as the straight man's game, an institution hostile and unwelcoming for sexual minorities. Even as recently as 2009, then PR advisor Max Clifford, claimed to have advised gay players to remain in the closet, because football was stuck 'in the dark ages, steeped in homophobia' (Harris & Godwin, 2009).

Two years later, however, in 2011, Swedish-born player Anton Hysén broke this mould. Son of former Liverpool player Glenn Hysén, he became the first openly gay professional footballer to come out for over two decades. In contrast to Fashanu, the response to Hysén was one of inclusivity and positivity. Numerous interviews with Hysén appeared in the British print media, all of which praised him for his bold step in announcing his sexuality – particularly given football's past torrid relationship with homosexuality (Cleland, 2014).

Drawing on interview data to compare the experiences of the two athletes, we present clear evidence of a generational shift occurring in their coming out stories. Indeed, Fashanu's television interview illustrated how coming out had had a disastrous effect on his football career, expressing regret for his announcement. In contrast, Hysén speaks of the positive response he received after coming out. In addition, Fashanu explicitly talks of 'doors closing' for him in terms of employment in the football industry, while the opposite was true for Hysén, whose commercial image improved exponentially. The latter of these points has proven to be the case with other openly gay athletes in recent years, too – such as Gareth Thomas and Robbie Rogers (Anderson et al., 2016) – suggesting that gay athletes are increasingly attractive commercial propositions.

The experience of both Fashanu and Hysén is also strongly consistent with Anderson's (2009) theory of Inclusive Masculinity. This theory widely acknowledges the importance of generational attitudes towards homosexuality, a prevalent finding in the present research (McCormack & Anderson, 2014a, 2014b). Inclusive Masculinity theory theorizes societal antipathy toward homosexuality at the time. This was a result of intersecting factors, inclusive of the political alignment of social issues with conservative politics and the cultural impact of HIV/AIDS on the social stigmatization of gay and bisexual men. Inclusive masculinity theory uses its operational mechanism of homophobia to predict that masculine sports would be hostile toward homosexuality in the 1980s and 1990s but inclusive today.

While it cannot be disputed that Hysén's story is one of social significance, it must also be acknowledged that he currently competes for a club and in a competition currently ranked relatively low in the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) ranking system.⁴ Neither do his club compete in continental competition – such as the UEFA Champions League or Europa League – and he also not currently worthy of selection for international footballing competition. Thus, it is not definitive proof that his experience is generalizable to English professional football, and its next openly gay professional footballer.

However, given that Cleland (2014) shows that the British print media reported Hysén's story in a progressive manner, coupled with the ever-increasing acceptance of homosexuality among British football fans (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland et al., 2016; Magrath, 2017c), and the acceptance of homosexuality among academy players in Britain (Magrath, 2017b; Magrath et al., 2015) it is likely that the next openly gay professional footballer will be equally as accepted as Hysén has been.

Despite this, however, and unlike Hysén's current club, it is important to note that the most elite professional football clubs are contractually obliged to compete in club and international competition which requires them to travel to countries where attitudes toward homosexuality are far less progressive than in the UK (Magrath & Anderson, 2017), and often punishable by harsh and archaic laws. Indeed, at the time of writing, the next two FIFA World Cups are to be held in Russia (2018) and Qatar (2022). This is, therefore, a problematic proposition, and it may be far less likely that an elite gay player comes out of the closet for this reason.

We conclude that, whilst it is tempting to attribute the lack of openly gay footballers to homophobia, the experience of Anton Hysén undoubtedly indicates the generational shift which has occurred in professional football. This article contributes to a growing body of literature which suggests that football has travelled almost full circle: homosexuality was once pilloried in football, as the example of Fashanu suggests. Contemporarily, however, the example of Hysén shows how the game has evolved into a welcoming environment in which homophobia is rejected, whether the game has openly gay players or not.

Notes

1. First broadcast in January 1992, this interview was aired on a British television programme called *Open to Question*.
2. While we recognize that former French player Olivier Rouyer came out in 2008 (before Hysén), we are referring here to gay players who were *active* at the time of their announcement.
3. *Strictly Come Dancing* (UK) and *Dancing with the Stars* (US) are television programmes in which celebrities pair up with professional dancers and perform various routines each week in a knock-out competition.
4. Each season, UEFA rank each of their member leagues according to teams' success and popularity of the league. The most recent rankings place Sweden in 21st place (out of 54), its highest position for over a decade.

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