

# HUFFPOST GAY VOICES



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## Unlocking the College Coach's Closet

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One year ago I started [Athlete Ally](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in an effort to educate and empower straight allies in sports to speak out against homophobia and transphobia. We began at a pivotal moment filled with promise for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. We saw more players come out, teams speak out, and allies take a stand than at any other time in history. But for all the progress that was made, one group remains in the shadows. It is sobering to admit that in 2012, almost all LGBT college coaches remain tightly closeted out of fear that admitting their sexuality will mean the end of their careers.

As a Division I wrestling coach and activist in this space, I have had the opportunity to speak to closeted college coaches around the country. Many fear that coming out would jeopardize their job security in an environment that provides few administrative options when discrimination occurs. These concerns exist among coaches working at private and public colleges and universities, including those with a reputation for progressive, egalitarian policies. It is no surprise, therefore, that openly LGBT college coaches are rare. For example, [Sherri Murrell](#) from Portland State is the only openly gay coach in NCAA Division I basketball, and [Kirk Walker](#) from Oregon State is the only openly gay Division I softball coach.

Like their straight counterparts, LGBT coaches are in a cutthroat profession that evaluates success game by game and season by season. While high-profile Division I coaches benefit from multi-year contracts and large salaries, the vast majority of us have short contracts that keep us moving from job to job. Though a coach's success is often measured by improvement against past performance, anything less than a championship title threatens his or her livelihood. This competitive reward structure validates termination for a wide range of "performance-based" reasons. It also compels coaches who fall outside the heterosexual norm to feel particularly vulnerable, because of the ease with which an administrator can mask a bias-motivated

termination. Accusing a coach of "inferior performance" or even of having a "negative attitude," for example, provides ample cover when the real reason lies elsewhere. The mere possibility that a coach's sexual orientation could play an off-the-record role in his or her job security is sufficient to keep many in the closet.

Negative recruiting, a practice common in women's sports, exacerbates LGBT coaches' job security concerns. In negative recruiting, college coaches try to discourage talented athletes from playing for opposing teams by claiming that they are filled with LGBT players or staff. Negative recruiting has enormous power to influence where talented high school players wind up. If a coach's ability to keep her job depends on winning games, and if winning depends on the strength of her recruiting class, then coming out may be too great a risk.

Right now, coaches who experience discrimination, whether overt or masked, have few administrative options. In many institutions, the athletic director (AD) has hiring and firing authority and near-final say regarding departmental decisions. Many coaches feel that they have few opportunities to engage in constructive dialogue about instances of discrimination, whether actual or perceived, through means other than reporting directly to the AD or his or her subordinates. Depending on the AD's tenor and style, the human resources environment may lack fair reporting and review procedures, leaving the LGBT coach feeling isolated and unprotected.

If college athletics is ever to be free of the obstacles keeping coaches closeted, we must first acknowledge the presence of LGBT coaches among college teams. Currently, the college athletic community devotes little time and few resources to identifying this population and assessing the challenges they face. In contrast, a confidential survey to be published by [Campus Pride](#) at the end of June will report over 500 self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual student-athletes from all [NCAA](#) divisions and sponsored sports. Another by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reveals that lesbian, gay and bisexual students are nearly as likely as heterosexual students to be on school sports teams (*i.e.*, 44.6 percent among LGB students and 48.7 percent among heterosexual students). These studies highlight the presence of LGBT players, making policy changes possible. And they help individuals who have kept their sexuality secret feel that they are not alone. Without similar research and attention devoted to LGBT coaches, our athletic community cannot eliminate the obstacles these coaches face.

LGBT college coaches are leaders. They are sources of knowledge and empowerment for thousands of students around the country. The athletic community must first acknowledge their presence to understand the contributions they make to their athletes, teams and schools. We must take responsibility for our role in keeping so many closeted and invest in the research necessary to improve their experiences. The policy changes that result will extend the progress seen in 2011 to new levels and break down barriers for which sports should have no tolerance.

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