

Two Straight Athletes Combat Homophobia

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[Ben Cohen](#) is a world-class English rugby star, and Hudson Taylor is a three-time college all-American wrestler. They live on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. They barely know each other.



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Hudson Taylor, left, an American, and Ben Cohen, an Englishman, say they help spread a message to a broader audience.

But they have something quite unusual in common. They may be the only two high-profile heterosexual athletes dedicating their lives to the issues of bullying and homophobia in sports.

The question that each one frequently gets — besides “Are you gay?” — is why are they involved in something that does not directly impact them, or so it would seem.

That is just the point, they said. In much the same way that the hockey player Sean Avery’s recent endorsement of gay marriage resonated in large part because it came from an unexpected source, their sexual orientation helps the message cross to broader audiences, Cohen and Taylor said.

“It’s massively important,” Cohen said Friday in New York, a stopover on a cross-country campaign for his fledgling Ben Cohen StandUp Foundation. “Massively. Of course it is. I’m the other side of that bridge.”

Gay slurs have emerged into the public consciousness recently. The Los Angeles Lakers’ star Kobe Bryant used one against an N.B.A. referee and was fined \$100,000.

The Atlanta Braves pitching coach Roger McDowell was said to have made homophobic gestures and remarks to fans in San Francisco, and was suspended by Major League Baseball for two weeks. Widespread criticism of both men was seen as cultural progress by gay-rights supporters.

But in a world where no active American athletes in a major male team sport has declared his homosexuality, it remains rare for athletes to chime in on the issue of gay rights. Recent exceptions, beyond Avery, include Grant Hill and Jared Dudley of the Phoenix Suns, who recorded a public-service announcement decrying gay slurs in sports.

Cohen and Taylor are going much further.

Cohen, 32, just retired from a rugby career that included a World Cup title for England in 2003 and more than a decade with the Northampton Saints. Despite being married with 3 1/2-year-old twin daughters, he has long had a huge following among gay fans.

“They probably see me as a sex object, I suppose,” he said. His shirtless photographs have done little to squelch his popularity.

With the surge in the use of social media in recent years, Cohen — [whose Facebook page](#) has been “liked” by more than 150,000 people — began hearing more and more personal accounts from fans who have felt ostracized for being gay. Some said they quit sports because of the harassment, or had been shamed into staying closeted, unable to find support from friends, family and teammates.

“It brings me to bloody tears,” he said, as he read a few e-mails aloud. He wore a T-shirt that read, “I stand up with Ben Cohen,” and included his silhouette as a logo.

But his quest to get involved is even more personal. In 2000, Cohen’s father, Peter, was attacked by several young men outside the nightclub he owned. He sustained severe injuries, including bite marks to his face, and died a few weeks later.

With those experiences as a backdrop, Cohen started this year what he believes is the first anti-bullying organization led by a straight athlete aimed at helping the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. After a couple recent stops in England, he is promoting the campaign in Washington, Atlanta, Seattle and New York in the

next two weeks. Beyond raising his family on his English farm, he plans on making the foundation his postcareer priority.

“I can say something, and it can be so little for me,” said Cohen, scheduled to be a celebrity presenter at Saturday’s Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation awards in San Francisco. “But it can be so powerful for tens of thousands of people.”

Taylor, 24, finished a decorated wrestling career at Maryland last year and is an assistant coach at Columbia. In college, he said, he was struck by the disparity in how gay students in his theater classes were so warmly accepted and how easily gay slurs were tossed around the wrestling mats.

He [attracted national attention](#) when he wore a Human Rights Campaign sticker on his headgear. Earlier this year, he launched [Athlete Ally](#), asking athletes of all ages to sign a pledge to help end homophobia in sports. Several thousand have made the pledge. Taylor suspended plans for law school and spends much of his time speaking at schools, mostly colleges.

He usually asks his audiences if they have recently heard someone or something derided as “gay.” Almost always, everyone raises his or her hand, he said.

Most raise their hands when asked if they have heard the term, used as an insult, in the past day, Taylor said.

“In a lot of people’s minds, it’s not a straight person’s issue,” said Taylor, who will marry his longtime girlfriend in September. “That’s an obstacle that has to be overcome.”

Taylor said that heterosexual athletes rarely get involved in the issue because they do not see how it affects them. He called it a “chicken-or-egg problem.” Most male professional athletes, as far as they know, do not have gay teammates. And people are less likely to fight for a cause when they do not have personal connections to it.

“How do you make it personal?” Taylor said. “That’s the question.”

That is what Cohen and Taylor hope to answer.

On Friday, the two men got together for a quick hello at the West Village apartment where Cohen stayed for a couple of nights. Taylor had just driven from Maine, where

he spoke at Bates College and got most of its athletes to sign the pledge on Thursday evening. Cohen was about to leave for the airport and a flight to San Francisco, to be a celebrity presenter.

Their paths crossed, briefly, as they worked separately for the same cause.

“I love what he’s doing,” Taylor said over lunch Wednesday. “We need more Ben Cohens in this world. He has a platform that allows the message to carry farther and ring louder than my own. We need more allies in position of power to speak out.”

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