

Coming out to his team via a research study

For a gay college soccer player, being true to his research meant sharing his story with his team. It was a stressful decision that paid off in the end.



By [Nils Sundin](#) For [Outsports.com](#) (June 2nd, 2009)

In the fall of 2008, I was beginning my senior year season as a four-year starter on the St. Ambrose University [men's soccer team](#) in Davenport, Iowa. I had finished up a semester abroad in London the previous spring, where I spent five months being exactly who I wanted to be. I was an openly gay man living in a large urban community, traveling and meeting new people.

The best part about meeting all these new people in London was not having a past. They didn't know me as a girl-chasing soccer player; I could be open about who I was from the get-go. This experience left me feeling empowered; I knew this was the type of life I wanted to live.

For the first time I was comfortable in my own skin and had feelings of elation. I knew upon my return to St. Ambrose things might return to the way they were -- me in the closet due to the fears of disrupting my athletic career. Soccer has been a huge part of my life; I wanted to keep it that way. I wanted to continue living my life the way that felt right, but I didn't know if these dissimilar parts of my life could come together.

Keeping a secret

During my four years at St. Ambrose I had developed close friendships with many of my teammates, some of who were my roommates and closest friends. There were two guys in particular who knew me really well, and they knew everything about me. They even knew the one secret that I kept separate from my soccer career, that I was gay. Since they were my roommates, I felt they had a right to know who I truly was and I was happy that they did. But, I didn't consider them the norm. I thought I had chosen the two guys who could respectfully handle this type of situation, a responsibility I did not trust with everyone on my team.

It had been a long stressful journey keeping this secret from my teammates. At this point in my life there were others on campus who knew about my sexuality and it was a constant burden worrying about the two groups colliding.

It's not that I didn't get along with all the guys on my team, but I didn't know how they really felt about playing with a gay teammate. If you sat around and listened to some of the conversations on and off the field, you would naturally assume they were homophobes. Some of the vulgar language and homophobic discourse they used left me feeling scared to have some members find out. None of this behavior was ever directed towards me in particular; most of seemed to be in the everyday banter of a sports team.

Upon entering my senior year season last fall, and after the grueling preseason training subsided, I began my normal course load. Among my rigorous academic schedule was a writing class that had very little content structure. You could write about anything as long as you stuck to the designated structure. I found myself writing about personal experiences that led me to explore topics of homosexuality, masculinity and sport.

I came across an article written by Dr. Eric Anderson called "Openly Gay Athletes: Contesting Hegemonic Masculinity in a Homophobic Environment." I was floored by the subject matter. The article consumed me because it hit so close to home. The article outlined personal stories of gay athletes and analyzed them using sociological theories. It was comforting to read that there were other people out there like me, who had gone through similar experiences. I loved reading their stories, and listening to their fears, worries, and triumphs gave me something to hope for.

The article was so moving I contacted Dr. Anderson in hopes of furthering my research. Within days I was shocked to receive a reply that offered support and encouragement from him. We began a correspondence

concerning different literature that would help me with my project and eventually moved onto more exciting opportunities.

He was doing research at the time on masculinity as it relates to soccer teams in the United Kingdom, the U.S. and Canada. He proposed to do research at my university given my specific situation. At first, I was excited about the opportunity to facilitate this type of research. It would be such a great opportunity for me to see this type of work being done and I would be able to work alongside a seasoned scholar. I brought the idea up to my coach, and as an academic, he enthusiastic.



My coach had become an important part of my life over the past three years (both athletic and social), and he always put me in the driver's seat when it came to handling my situation. He had known about my sexuality for about two years and our relationship had grown considerably since. He was there for me to lean on when I was going through a difficult situation and offered advice that pushed me in the right direction.

As we began to make arrangements for Dr. Anderson to visit, our most pressing concern was the team. We were on track to have the most successful season in school history and didn't want to add any unwanted stress that would affect us on the field. For his research, Dr. Anderson would be spending a week with us doing individual interviews and spending as much time as possible with us as a group.

Coach first introduced the idea to our four captains and they seemed supportive of the idea. The following week he introduced the idea to the entire team; he told them there was a researcher coming to study masculinity and that we would be the subjects. He made it clear that this was something that I was involved with and that it may help me in the future. There were a few random questions and some jokes, but everyone was genuinely supportive.

Resistance from the athletic department

My coach and I then started to move this past the last hurdle: the athletic department. I thought that it would be smooth sailing given the team's support, but unfortunately this was not the case. The athletic department was immediately turned off by the idea. They had reservations about putting student-athletes through unneeded stress and felt that a verbal confirmation from the team as a whole was not reliable.

I think that it was the nature of the study that put them off. I was asked questions like, "Is this really an issue at our institution?" Which bothered me, because it made it seem like if it's not directly affecting us, then who cares? I was told that the athletic department was not only dealing with players being uncomfortable, but didn't want to hear from parents. Which I think is wrong, because we are adults, and we shouldn't worry about upsetting people when we are doing the right thing.

It was decided we needed to get approval from the school's Institutional Review Board, even though the final decision was ultimately on the athletic department. It usually takes up to three weeks to get something through the IRB and we didn't have that much time. I scheduled the appropriate meetings and sat down with various members of the IRB and they eventually approved the proposal and it was sent back to the athletic department. Despite the confirmation, the athletic department was still dragging its feet in order to close the window of time that Dr. Anderson had set aside to visit.

I celebrated with every success and mourned with every setback, the process was grueling. This was something that I created and I wanted it more than anything. So, with no option left, I consulted the school president. And, to my surprise, she backed the idea.

When Dr. Anderson was granted permission to come to our campus I felt like I had accomplished something. I was proud to have worked with so many different people to aid in this type of research. But now that the study was only two days away, reality began to set in -- for the first time, my teammates were going to be involved in a very intimate part of my life; I immediately was filled with anxiety.

Was it going to affect my team or my performance on the field? The next few days my mind was clouded with different emotions -- excitement, doubt, dread. The uncertainty made me extremely uncomfortable, and I had

endless conversations with my coach and my roommates. They all reassured me that this was going to be a good thing.

Their support and encouragement made me feel better, but deep down I didn't think they understood the magnitude of the situation. All it took was one negative attitude, one slip up, and all those who doubted the research project would win.

Coming out to the whole team

I had two days to ease my team into the idea of me being gay. It was the moment I had been dreading, bringing these two very important, yet vastly different parts of my life together. I had known most of the guys for three years and developed strong ties but I didn't know how the news would be handled.

I told my strongest allies first, telling them the situation and why I felt now was the time I needed to tell them. I was relieved to find out they all embraced the idea with open arms. They all seemed to make it clear that if it was going to help me that is all that is all that matters. Some accepted the news without batting an eye, almost like, "uh, yeah what else is new" type of response. But for others it was a kind of shock; they had no idea, but still had no complaints or concerns. I received nothing but encouragement from my team and I was finally able to breathe a huge sigh of relief. The feeling was surreal. After all this worrying and dread, all I got was some shoulder shrugs? I couldn't believe this was happening.

Dr. Anderson's visit went off without a hitch. The team enjoyed the presence of scholar and he facilitated some healthy conversations concerning issues of masculinity, homosexuality, and sport. Many of the guys were able to ask questions and get some straightforward answers from a professional in this field. For me, the time Dr. Anderson spent here was rather stressful.

I had brought this onto my team and I didn't want anything to go wrong so I was constantly worrying about one thing or another. But the study took place with no problems. The real results for me came after Dr. Anderson left and I was able to be myself with no spotlight.

The reality was that coming out had the opposite effect that I thought it would. I was not shunned by my team and ridiculed, I was accepted for who I was and became much closer with many of my teammates.

Our team went on to have the most successful season in school history. We finished with a record of 14-6-1 and were awarded the fourth seed in the NAIA national tournament. I was named defensive MVP by my team and awarded first-team All-Conference and NAIA Champion of Character.

But beyond the pitch, I was given much more. I was presented the chance to step out of my shell and be who I truly am. I feel lucky to have had the support around me to make these changes possible.

My relationships with my teammates have continued to grow because I have revealed this part of my life. The way things are now makes me wish that I did it much sooner. It has opened me up and given me a chance to be and do things that truly make me happy.

Nils Sundin, 22, graduated from St. Abrose University with a degree in English Teacher Education. He is going to teach English in South Korea for two years before going to graduate school, hopefully at the University of Bath in England.

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