

5 Questions About the Possibility of an Openly Gay NFL Player

In case you missed it this past weekend, the big news in sports had nothing to do with the Winter Olympics or with athletic triumphs and defeats. Instead, it was the news that a top college football player, **Michael Sam**, who is expected to be drafted in the NFL, declared that he is gay. It was deemed to be such big news that it was even the lead story on some non-sports news websites.

Here are five questions to help put this event in perspective.

1. What's the big deal? In the overall scheme of things, I'm quite aware of the significance of this announcement. After all, this is the National Football League, the ultimate testosterone-driven men's sport, where gay slurs in the locker room are still common. And if the NFL can accept an openly gay player, then "tolerance" has surely triumphed.

Looked at from another angle, all the hoopla surrounding the announcement is bizarre. After all, what Sam has declared is, "I'm attracted to other men," and for this, he has become a national hero.

What? This is something to be celebrated? Announcing you are same-sex attracted is a major media event?

Sam has basically said, "There is the possibility that I could be physically or romantically attracted to a coach or teammate," and for this, he is the new Jackie Robinson. (No, wait. The new Jackie Robinson was Jason Collins. For more on Collins, see below.)

2. Is it homophobic to be uncomfortable around an openly gay

teammate in the locker room? Certainly, any player who admitted to being uncomfortable in the locker room with Michael Sam would be branded homophobic, but can a male athlete in the prime of his physical life be faulted if he feels uncomfortable walking around naked in the presence of another gay athlete?

I don't doubt the players who say that their focus is on sports, not sex, and I don't doubt that many gay athletes have never given a hint of their sexuality to their heterosexual teammates.

But once they have made their announcement, how can everyone be expected to feel completely comfortable? And with the "bromance" type of close relationships that many players enjoy, would they be as physical and free with a homosexual teammate?

And since NFL players are hardly known for their sexual purity—with many notable exceptions—is it homophobic to think that Sam's hormones might be raging for men the way the other players' hormones rage for women?

3. Was Michael Sam's announcement selfless or selfish? Many have hailed Sam's coming out as courageous, honest and unselfish, apparently meaning that he did this for other young athletes in other sports, even though it put him in the media spotlight.

Looked at from another angle, it was more of a selfish act, and not only in the sense that Sam is suddenly a national celebrity. (As of Feb. 10, a Google search for his name yielded more than 3 million hits. Just one week ago, his numbers would have been a fraction of this.) What I mean is that professional football is all about the team, and the focus must be on making a joint sacrifice in order to win rather than drawing attention to oneself.

But Sam has now put his own desires—wanting to be out and

proud—above the good of the team, saying to everyone else, “Whether you’re uncomfortable or not, and whether this helps the team’s synergy or not, this is who I am.”

4. Has this helped or hurt his chances in the NFL? Some unnamed NFL executives and scouts have confided that Sam’s announcement has hurt his stock since it will bring a media circus that coaches don’t want and since it could affect locker room dynamics. And you can be assured that NFL owners are not likely to waste a top draft pick to prove they are not homophobic.

It’s also interesting that the NBA’s Jason Collins, never an outstanding player and admittedly at the end of his career, was not picked up by any NBA team last year after coming out as gay. (Oh, you didn’t read that in the news? How interesting.)

Does this contradict my answer to question 3? On the one hand, yes, since Sam’s announcement could hurt his level of entry into the league; on the other hand, no, since he has decided that the most important thing is that the world knows that he is attracted to the same sex.

5. Was it really necessary to come out? It has been reported that Sam’s sexuality was an open secret in his hometown, and I do understand the desire for a person to say to the world, “This is who I am.” I also understand his desire to live his life openly rather than secretly. After all, the right to come out of the closet is the most fundamental aspect of gay activism.

But since he is about to be drafted by the NFL, if his sexual and romantic attractions will not be brought into the locker room and will have nothing to do with his football career, why make it an issue now?

Why can’t he just play the game, keep his private life private (as many public figures do), and when his career is over, if

he wants to tell the whole world he's gay, he can do so then?

Instead, he has made his romantic and sexual attractions the dominant sports issue of the day. Is this something to be celebrated?

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