

Super Bowl or Gay Equality Bowl?

Is it too much to ask that the focus of this Sunday be on football and not on “gay rights”? Will I be branded as a homophobic bigot for daring to make such a request? (I can answer that already: Yes!)

Last week, Fox News ran the headline, “Baltimore Raven linebacker [Brendon Ayanbadejo] uses Super Bowl spotlight to promote gay marriage,” reporting that, “Hours after Ayanbadejo’s team beat the New England Patriots on Sunday, paving their way to football’s biggest game, the three-time Pro Bowl special teams player wrote an email to gay marriage proponents asking how he could use his time in the limelight support the cause.”

In his email he asked, “Is there anything I can do for marriage equality or anti-bullying over the next couple of weeks to harness this Super Bowl media?”

Earlier in 2012, his outspoken support of same-sex “marriage” brought a compassionate and carefully worded response from teammate Matt Birk, a six-time Pro Bowl center and “a Harvard-educated Catholic and the married father of six children.” In an editorial published in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Birk wrote that “we all have family members and friends whom we love who have same-sex attraction,” but he gave clear reasons why marriage could only be the union of a man and a woman, also pointing out how “no-fault divorce, adultery, and the nonchalant attitude toward marriage by some have done great harm to this sacred institution.”

But that was October, 2012, and Birk was not planning to use the platform of the Super Bowl to campaign against redefining marriage. In contrast, Ayanbadejo stated that his “ultimate

goal after the Super Bowl" was "To go on Ellen's show, to be dancing with her, to bust a move with her." (According to reports, the Ellen DeGeneres show has already reached out to him via Twitter to see about his appearing on her show next month.)

On Tuesday of this week, San Francisco 49ers cornerback Chris Culliver expressed his views on gay players in the NFL during a one-minute, recorded interview with comedian Artie Lange, saying, "I don't do the gay guys, man. I don't do that. Ain't got no gay people on the team. They gotta get up outta here if they do. Can't be with that sweet stuff." And Culliver made clear that he would not welcome a gay teammate, explaining, "Nah. Can't be ... in the locker room, nah. You've gotta come out 10 years later after that." (Has anyone explained how or why the topic actually came up during the interview?)

The 49ers are, of course, based in San Francisco, and so it was no surprise that two days later, Culliver offered a contrite apology, explaining that "that's not what I feel in my heart" (really?) and adding, "I'm sorry if I offended anyone. They were very ugly comments. Hopefully I learn and grow from this experience and this situation."

Jim Harbaugh, the coach of the 49ers, was quick to renounce Culliver's initial comments, stating, "I reject what he said. That's not something that reflects the way the organization feels, the way the rest of the players feel." (It should also be noted that the NFL already has a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation.) And Culliver wanted to add that he loves San Francisco, with obvious reference to its large, openly gay population.

And even though Brendon Ayanbadejo wanted to focus on the Super Bowl as he met with the media this week, since gay issues were now back in the Super Bowl news, he stated that, "Hopefully I'll be able to win a Super Bowl and do the entire media circuit so I can talk about these things." (For the

record, he and Birk have reportedly become closer friends as a result of expressing their differences.)

What are we to make of this? On the one hand, even though I passionately differ with Ayanbadejo, he can be commended for his zeal and devotion—after all, to him this is a matter of fairness and equality—but now is the time to focus on football, not on social issues. Win or loss, he'll have plenty of media opportunities in the future.

As for Culliver, his “sweet stuff” comments are regrettable and his timing was awful, but is it so wrong for an athlete to say that he wouldn't be at home with openly gay teammates? I've heard firsthand from a number of straight female softball players who were very uncomfortable with the strong lesbian presence on their teams—they have reported being pressured personally by their lesbian teammates—to the point that some have quit playing entirely. And since a professional football team develops deep personal bonds between the teammates, is it wrong to think that, at times, two straight men might relate differently than a straight man and a gay man, or that they might feel differently about standing around naked in the locker room? (Call it homophobic if you will; I call it perfectly understandable.)

But the real issue is this: In the week before the Super Bowl, the focus should be on the game and on the team, not on same-sex “marriage” (really, what in the world does this have to do with the game?) and not on whether a player would be at home with a gay teammate (how in the world is that relevant?).

Is it really too much to ask that, just for one week, we can enjoy a game without being drawn into the debate about homosexuality?

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