

Why I'm Praying for Openly Gay NFL Prospect Michael Sam

NBA center Jason Collins and University of Missouri defensive lineman Michael Sam aren't drinking buddies, but they may soon have more in common than a love for the sports at which they excel.

If reports from the *New York Times* and ESPN are accurate, Sam, who came out gay to his teammates during college, is poised to repeat Collins' professional basketball revelation in the football arena. Like Collins did in the NBA, Sam is set to become the first openly gay player in the NFL.

Like Collins, Sam has skills that are taking him to the upper echelon of the sports world. The first-team all-American was named the Associated Press defensive player of the year in the Southeast Conference—and his teammates named him Missouri's MVP. With such a positive experience in college, he has decided to brave the tougher NFL waters. The *New York Times* is suggesting the young star could become a symbol for the country's gay rights movement or a flash point in a football culture war—or both.

But I wonder: Is that what this talented 24-year-old really wants to be known for? Will his openly gay status be a distraction to the team that drafts him, considering the celebrations among gay rights advocates and the disgust of football-loving homophobes? (For clarification, a homophobe is not a Christian who opposes homosexuality. A homophobe has an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals, according to Merriam-Webster. The term has been wrongly applied to Christians who reject homosexuality as acceptable in God's eyes.) Can Sam maintain his stellar performance amid the cruel backlash he's unfortunately likely to receive? Will his teammates really

accept him, or will unspoken resentment impact team camaraderie? Oh, and should Sunday afternoon football really be the platform for the culture wars?

Clearly, NFL players aren't all in on openly gay players. Do you remember San Francisco 49er Chris Culliver's anti-gay remarks during Super Bowl media day last year? What about Katie Couric flat-out asking San Diego Chargers' Manti Te'o if he's gay? Let's not forget then-Baltimore Ravens linebacker Brendon Ayanbadejo and former Minnesota Vikings punter Chris Kluwe's off-the-field political move, filing an amicus brief that asked the U.S. Supreme Court to reject California's ban on same-sex marriage. Not last and not least, Kluwe said coaches pushed him out of a job and subjected him to homophobic language for his support of same-sex marriage laws.

Some—probably many NFL players—no doubt feel like New Orleans Saints linebacker Jonathan Vilma, who told the NFL Network he doesn't want a gay teammate. "I think he would not be accepted as much as we think he would be accepted," Vilma said.

Vilma is probably right, but so far the NFL is playing to political correctness. "We admire Michael Sam's honesty and courage. Michael is a football player," the league said in a statement Sunday night. "Any player with ability and determination can succeed in the NFL. We look forward to welcoming and supporting Michael Sam in 2014."

By his own testimony, Sam's life has been filled with pain. He told ESPN, "I endured so much in my past: seeing my older brother killed from a gunshot wound, not knowing that my oldest sister died when she was a baby and I never got the chance to meet her. My second oldest brother went missing in 1998, and me and my little sister were the last ones to see him. ... My other two brothers have been in and out of jail since 8th grade, currently both in jail. Telling the world I'm gay is nothing compared to that."

Indeed, Sam is likely to meet with much more persecution than he realizes. He believes he is mentally prepared, telling ESPN, "There will be negativity, negative reactions. I expect that. ... Everyone can say hurtful things and hateful things; I don't let stuff like that distract me. But there are going to be positives. The positives will outweigh the negative."

I'm not so sure the positives will outweigh the negatives or that he's ready for the backlash—or that he's considering how all the hoopla will serve as a distraction from what's really supposed to matter on the football field—football. There have been many professional sports players who were gay and didn't go to great lengths to hide it—but didn't feel the need to sit with major media and discuss it, either. Let me be clear: I stand against homosexuality. It is a sin and there's no getting around that. But shouldn't we, then, be praying for a guy who the radical gay agenda will use as its poster child? Shouldn't we be praying that he comes to Christ?

When Jason Collins came out as gay, I prayed for him. Likewise, I pray for the best for young Sam, which would be salvation, but I disagree that coming out as gay is his best professional move—or the best move for whatever team he lands on. I disagree with his lifestyle, and I am joining many others in praying that he comes to the knowledge of the saving grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Again, is being the first openly gay NFL player really what this talented 24-year-old really wants to be known for? Maybe now, but perhaps not in history. Will his sexual orientation be a distraction to the team that drafts him, considering the celebrations among gay rights advocates and the disgust of football-loving homophobes? It surely will, at least for a period of time.

Can Sam maintain his stellar performance amid the cruel backlash he's unfortunately likely to receive? I hope so. Unlike the Tim Tebow haters, I would not celebrate his demise.

Will his teammates really accept him, or will unspoken resentment impact team camaraderie? I think Vilma's answer was spot on. Oh, and should Sunday afternoon football really be the platform for the culture wars? Absolutely not.

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