

Over one-third of former American football players had sexual relations with men, study says

A study of former high-school American Football players has found that more than a third said they had had sexual relations with other men.

In his study of homosexuality among sportsmen in the US, sociologist Dr Eric Anderson found that 19 in a sample of 47 had taken part in acts intended to sexually arouse other men, ranging from kissing to mutual masturbation and oral sex.

The 47 men, aged 18-23, were all American Football players who previously played at the high school (secondary school) level but had failed to be picked for their university's team and were now cheerleaders instead. They were at various universities from the American south, Mid-West, west and north west.

Dr Anderson, now of the University of Bath, UK, said the study showed that society's increasing open-mindedness about homosexuality and decreasing stigma concerning sexual activity with other men had allowed sportsmen to speak more openly about these sexual activities. He found that this sex came in the form of two men and one woman, as well as just two men alone.

He said that the sexual acts described differed from acts of 'hazing' or team-bonding that often include pretend-homosexual acts.

"The evidence supports my assertion that homophobia is on the rapid decline among male team sport athletes in North America at all levels of play," he writes in his study, entitled 'Being masculine is not about whom you sleep with...Heterosexual athletes contesting masculinity and the one-time rule of homosexuality'. It will be published in the journal *Sex Roles* in January.

"These findings differ from previous research on North American men who have sex with men, in several ways. First, previous research describes heterosexual men in heterogeneous group sex as men symbolically engaging in sexual practices with other men. However, I find informants actually engage in sexual activity with other men. But this does not mean that they are gay.

"Second, my informants do not feel that their same-sex sex jeopardizes their socially perceived heterosexual identities, at least within the cheerleading culture. In other words, having gay sex does not automatically make them gay in masculine peer culture."

Dr Anderson, of the University's Department of Education, said the same situation was also true for the UK.

He believes the positive portrayal of homosexuality on television, the ease with which homosexuals could gradually 'come out' by using the internet, the ability for straight men to talk with gay men on the internet, and the decline of religious fundamentalism has made homosexuality and homosexual acts considerably less controversial for university-aged men. This had made revealing the fact they had engaged in homosexual acts easier.

He said the study was not biased by talking to sportsmen who were now cheerleaders, which is often seen as a feminine activity. Those he interviewed were selected to represent men that considered themselves traditionally masculine, typical American Football players.

Dr Anderson was the first openly gay male high school sports coach in the US. He left coaching after one of his students was assaulted because it was assumed that he was gay. Dr Anderson is now working in the field of sport sociology at the University of Bath, and is the author of *In the Game, Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*.

“Men have traditionally been reluctant to do anything associated with homosexuality because they feared being perceived gay,” he said. “There has been pressure on them to conform to the notion that being male is about having traditionally masculine traits, in terms of dress, behaviours and sexual activities.

“But as more men are open about their varieties of sexuality, it becomes less stigmatized to be gay or to have sex with men. It is increasingly not a problem to act in otherwise non-traditional ways.

“I see this in other areas of my research too, including how men behave in straight nightclubs, where I find that university-aged men dance as much with each other than with women, and how heterosexual men are increasingly free to wear clothing styles or colours that once were taboo for them.

“This isn’t something that would have happened ten or twenty years ago. Times are changing and they are changing rapidly for men of this age.”

Source: University of Bath

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