

# Association football and the representation of homosexuality by the print media: A case study of Anton Hysén

## Abstract

In March 2011 Anton Hysén (a semi-professional footballer currently playing in the Swedish fourth division) became only the second association football (soccer) player of any professional disposition to publicly declare his homosexuality whilst still playing the game. This article provides a textual analysis of the print media's reaction to Hysén coming out and examines whether, in 2011, they portray more inclusive notions towards homosexuality than they did in 1990 when British footballer Justin Fashanu came out. The results advance inclusive masculinity theory as a number of print media sources (mostly British) interview Hysén in the weeks immediately after he came out and publish articles that challenge homophobia. Highlighting a change since 1990, a significant number of articles stress the need for the key stakeholders in football (players, fans, clubs, agents, the authorities and the media) to accept gay players.

**Keywords:** *media; football; homosexuality; homophobia; hegemonic masculinity; inclusive masculinity*

## Introduction

Male sport, throughout its contemporary history, has often forced boys and men to demonstrate socially acceptable notions of masculinity (Birley 1993; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990). The popular contact team sport of association football (or soccer), provides a historical example of this where masculine embodiment (including physical strength and power as well as the demonstration of heterosexuality), identity and expression have been engrained in boys and men since the game became synonymous with industrial working life in the nineteenth century (Dunning 1999; Walvin 1994). The relationship between sport and the media also began in the nineteenth century and has led to the constant reinforcement of traditional male values ever since; in particular through the almost exclusive coverage given to male sport (such as with the example of football in Britain) by the large number of media sources now in existence (Clayton and Harris 2009; Connell 1995; Griffin 1998; Nylund 2007). Within this analysis, Harris and Clayton (2002), Vincent (2004) and Vincent and Crossman (2008) have all highlighted the gendered nature of sports coverage within the English print press. Here, they argue, newspapers provide a dual approach to readers through the promotion of masculinity, manhood and superiority whilst simultaneously misrepresenting those who do not conform to these traditional values.

From the 1980s there has been increasing academic attention paid to sport and masculinity. Initially placed at the heart of this analysis was homophobia and how the whole industry (including the fans, fellow competitors, the media, and the club or team they represented) for any gay athlete was intimidating and unwelcome (Griffin 1998; Messner and Sabo 1990; Plummer 1999; Pronger 1990). In contextualising this, Connell (1987) advanced hegemonic masculinity theory to highlight the existence of a stratification of masculinities within a hierarchical structure that placed gay men at the bottom. Indeed, it was at this time (22 October 1990) that the professional footballer, Justin Fashanu, came out via an exclusive interview with the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun* under the headline ‘£1m Football Star: I AM GAY’. Rather than find the industry supportive, the immediate reaction was one of hostility with former team mates, fans, the media and even his own brother, John, publicly stating their disapproval. A week after his brother’s exclusive, for example, John agreed to an exclusive with *The Voice* newspaper under the headline ‘John Fashanu: My gay brother is an outcast’. Facing a charge of an alleged sexual assault in the U.S., Justin Fashanu committed suicide in 1998.

Since Justin Fashanu, and at the time of writing, only three other footballers have come out; former French international Olivier Rouyer in 2008 (once he had retired from the game), Anton Hysén in March 2011 (whilst still playing the game) and Major League Soccer player David Testo in November 2011 (he was without a club contract when he did so). The major difference from what Fashanu experienced is that numerous empirical studies on men (particularly young men aged 16-24) have highlighted a change in attitudes and behaviours towards homosexuality across different cultures within sport and wider society since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Adams 2011; Adams, Anderson and McCormack 2010; Anderson 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2011; Anderson and McGuire 2010; Campbell, Cothren, Rogers, Kistler, Osowski, Greenauer and End 2011; Kian and Anderson 2009; McCormack 2010, 2011a, 2011b; McCormack and Anderson 2010a, 2010b). Presented with this evidence, Anderson (2009a) advanced inclusive masculinity theory to highlight how multiple masculinities can co-exist without any hierarchical arrangement in cultures of decreasing homophobia. Within this theoretical framework, Anderson (2009a) argues that various forms of masculinity retain equal cultural value.

Part of the influence on decreasing cultural homophobia is, according to Anderson (2009a), through the media and their changing presentation of homosexuality (particularly in men). Indeed, Nylund (2004) challenged scholars to examine for any disruption or resistance

to the presentation of dominant, traditional masculine practices within the sporting media. Despite the presence of research on how sport reporters address gay men who come out in sport (Kian and Anderson 2009), limited research (Probyn 2000) has been conducted on openly gay men still playing their respective sport (Kian and Anderson's 2009 paper focused on former National Basketball Association (NBA) player John Amaechi who came out four years after retiring). Although British sport has seen rugby player Gareth Thomas (2009) and cricketer Steven Davies (2011) come out whilst still playing their respective sports, the purpose of this article is to focus on the reporting of Hysén by the print media as he is still actively playing some form of professional football (he is a semi-professional footballer playing in the fourth division in Sweden for Utsiktens BK). It analyses whether attitudes, opinions and views of the print media have changed towards the presence of gay footballers since the early 1990s when Justin Fashanu came out and if more inclusive notions of masculinity are reflected in the ways in which the print media discuss homosexuality in football (and sport more widely).

### **Sport and masculinity theory**

The scholarly focus given to sport and masculinity in the 1980s (Messner, 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990) led to Connell (1987) formulating hegemonic masculinity theory. Basing this theoretical explanation on Gramsci's (1971) concept of Hegemony, which explained how a ruling class legitimises its position and secures acceptance of it from the lower classes, Connell suggested the creation and maintenance of a stratification of masculinities within an intramasculine hierarchical structure. Those boys and men that aspired to one hegemonic archetype of masculinity were rewarded with the most social capital and resided near or at the top of this hierarchical structure. At the heart of this analysis was homophobia and occurred at a time which Anderson (2009a) suggests consisted of "homohysteria" (the fear by boys and men of being thought homosexual). Anderson (2009a) argues that this was created by the virus AIDS and led to boys and men publicly raising their social capital through violence, sexism and homophobia. For Connell (1987), this then helped boys and men maintain or improve their position in the hierarchical structure. Heterosexual men who did not conform were marginalised, with gay men at the bottom.

To put this in practical terms, there was evidence of 'homohysteria' in the reporting of Fashanu's homosexuality within some sections of the media in the days following him coming out in October 1990. Under the headline of 'Fine of the times', for example, Hunter

Davies in the *Independent* newspaper (31 October 1990), as part of a wider article, wrote a small piece detailing how the Football League (responsible for all ninety-two professional league clubs at the time) had announced the following fines: “Justin Fashanu: A slap on each wrist, but gently, and a kick up the bum, but carefully, for not revealing the names of his best friends in football”. (Fashanu in his exclusive article with *The Sun* stated how he had slept with gay Members of Parliament (MPs) and other fellow footballers). In another article constructed through United Press International and titled ‘Can gays play soccer, Germans wonder’ (25 October 1990), Tom Seibert quoted Dusseldorf player Michael Schuetz’s reaction to Justin Fashanu: “one wouldn’t play that hard against someone like that, because there would be a certain fear of AIDS”.

Since this time, however, numerous empirical studies have provided examples of decreasing levels of homophobia. Within these, Anderson (2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2011) and other scholars (Adams, 2011; Campbell et al. 2011; Cashmore and Cleland, 2011; Clayton and Harris, 2009; McCormack, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Southall, Nagel, Anderson, Polite and Southall, 2009) have all produced findings which challenge hegemonic masculinity theory (in and out of sport). In his wide ranging empirical projects, Anderson found cultures of decreasing homophobia and argues that hegemonic masculinity theory does not explain this adequately. Advancing inclusive masculinity theory as a result, Anderson (2009a) argues that rather than having a stratified hierarchy of masculinity, there is evidence of multiple masculinities coexisting harmoniously with equal cultural value. For Anderson (2009a), the hegemonic form of conservative masculinity has lost its dominance as a social process. This is not to say that boys and men no longer maintain traditional views, but he argues that they are no longer hegemonic. Indeed, McCormack (2011b), in his ethnographic research on British school settings, highlights that in a culture of decreasing homophobia, various masculinities can flourish equally in a ‘hierarchy without hegemony’. Although a hierarchy exists, it is not down to hegemonic domination; rather it is down to popularity through the possession of charismatic, authentic, emotional and social fluid variables.

In differentiating the archetype of hegemonic masculinity from hegemonic masculinity theory, Adams et al. (2010) refer to the masculinity typically found in sport as orthodox (principally centred around heterosexuality and hypermasculinity). As illustrated earlier, this form of masculinity has been a historical feature of team sports, resulting in the subordination of boys and men who did not conform to these values (Dunning, 1999; Messner 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Plummer, 1999). Highlighting a shift away from

orthodox masculinity, of particular significance within inclusive masculinity theory is the rejection of homophobia, compulsory heterosexism, stoicism and sexism. This reconfiguration of masculinity, for Anderson (2009a), has led to previous suspicions of homosexuality no longer causing boys and men to face any threat to their heterosexual identity. To provide an example of this, in his 2008b paper, Anderson studied a group of heterosexual boys who, after leaving the American football team, chose to join college cheerleading. Anderson was interested in their construction and portrayal of masculinity and from his findings split the boys into two groups: one orthodox and one inclusive. He concluded by suggesting that both orthodox and inclusive notions of masculinity can operate together within the same environment with equal cultural value.

### **Sport, masculinity and the media**

There have also been changes in the presentation and discussions of masculinity within the media since the 1990s and, for some (Cashmore, 2004; Clayton and Harris, 2009; Coad, 2005; Simpson, 1996), a new kind of sporting identity has emerged: the metrosexual man (a man who displays behaviours and styles stereotypically associated with homosexuality). Sportsmen like David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo and Gavin Henson have provided a resistance to the traditional hegemonic value of male team sports and have instead shifted the focus of male sport consumption towards the 'look' and appearance of men (Adams et al. 2010; Clayton and Harris, 2009). Proven with Justin Fashanu, media coverage has for a long period of time focused on the presentation of historic masculine traits (partly due to the high number of male sport journalists) and avoided any discussions surrounding homosexuality in men, whilst over-reporting it in women (Griffin, 1998). However, the presence of openly gay sportsmen like rugby player Gareth Thomas and cricketer Steven Davies and the support they have received has begun to mark a shift in the representation of masculinity and homosexuality in the media.

Indeed, the ways in which the media have reflected changes to the historic definitions of masculinity (certainly within sport) in their presentation of articles has only happened since the beginning of the twenty-first century. When Beckham was pictured wearing a sarong in 1998 he was pilloried in the British tabloid press who initially tried to emasculate him (Clayton and Harris, 2009). At the time he was also blamed for England's exit at the 1998 World Cup (he was sent off against Argentina in a game England eventually lost on penalties), but what quickly followed was "acclamation and imitation, in what appeared to be

the dawn of a transformation of male footballing identity” (Clayton and Harris, 2009: 132). Even the tabloid press in Britain bought into this change with an article in *The Sun* in 2003 stating that Beckham is “the perfect role model for every generation. A clean-living, honest, decent, caring, gentle bloke...on the outside he is 21<sup>st</sup> Century man personified, a glamorous, handsome fashion icon” (Clayton and Harris, 2009: 135).

Notwithstanding the success of Beckham and to a lesser extent Ronaldo (who also suffered tabloid attempts at emasculation), other footballers who are not seen conforming to traditional masculine values have found life more difficult. Although Beckham provided some resistance, it has been argued that a working class culture of masculinity is firmly embedded in British football (Boyle and Haynes, 2009; Roderick, 2006). Sol Campbell, playing for Portsmouth in a Premier League match against Tottenham Hotspur in 2008, suffered homophobic abuse which eventually resulted in a number of boys and men being charged with homophobic chanting. Ex-Chelsea defender, Graeme Le Saux, also suffered homophobic abuse throughout his playing career, most notably from Liverpool’s Robbie Fowler in a Premier League match in 1999 when Fowler bent over and made a homosexual gesture towards Le Saux. However, the big difference between these two incidents and Justin Fashanu in 1990 was the largely supportive role the media played (Le Saux’s autobiography detailing the extent of his homophobic abuse was serialised in *The Times* newspaper).

Despite the more inclusive nature of masculinity evident in sport and a small number of male sportsmen coming out, the perceived orthodox culture of contact team sports has clearly forced many more gay men to remain in the closet. Thus, it can be suggested that the origins of hegemonic masculinity theory remains as sportsmen desire to be associated with the hegemonic form and present themselves as heterosexual in order to conform to an image of what is expected of boys and men in sport (Gareth Thomas was married when he came out). However, perhaps the metrosexual appeal of modern sportsmen (in particular footballers) and the increasingly fluid social structures people now operate in (Bauman, 2005) has been reflected in the ways in which the print media now discuss homosexuality in football (such as with the example of Anton Hysén).

## **Method**

A textual analysis (see Silverman, 2001) was carried out on all print media articles located on the search engine Lexis Nexis that mentioned the coming out and reaction to Hysén over a one month period from 9 March 2011 (the date he came out in an article with Swedish

football magazine, Offside) to 9 April 2011. The reason for this length of time was to give the print media an opportunity to possibly interview Hysén and/or react to his coming out in more feature-type articles. Over the research period, 29 articles or editorials were initially found, eventually reduced to 17 once duplications and other wire reports were taken into consideration. 88 per cent (n=15) were published in British newspapers and 12 per cent (n=2) were from other countries.

To compare the status and interest in Hysén, a similar study using Lexis Nexis was conducted by Forman and Plymire (2005) on the French tennis player Amélie Mauresmo. At the time of their study, Mauresmo had reached the Australian Open final and had just come out as gay and was thus a more recognisable person in sport compared to Hysén. Conducted over a longer time frame (15 January 1999 to 28 March 1999), their study found an initial pool of 327 references, eventually reduced to 74 once the wire reports and other duplications had been taken into consideration. Similarly, Lexis Nexis was also used by Kian and Anderson (2009) in their textual analysis of newspaper coverage on the coming out of ex-NBA player John Amaechi in February 2007 and the reaction to homophobic comments made towards him by ex-NBA player Tim Hardaway during the same month. Echoing the lack of media interest in Justin Fashanu in 1990, Kian and Anderson (2009) state how there was little coverage given to Amaechi's announcement until Hardaway's homophobic comments were made. Thereafter, several newspapers focused on male homosexuality in sport.

Whilst a numeric content analysis of sports media coverage exists (see, for example, Pederson, 2002), the approach taken here was to interpretively analyse the text for any explicit or subtle meanings within each article (Silverman, 2001). As this can often be found to be a highly subjective process, two researchers examined how masculinity and homosexuality were constructed and framed in all of the words within the selected articles. Initially we worked separately using inductive levels of coding to begin highlighting common themes within the data (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Once the notes had been compared, we started to draw out the main themes surrounding the print media's narrative towards Hysén and homosexuality in football. Overall, three dominant themes emerged from the textual analysis: (1) the inclusive presentation of homosexuality; (2) the contention that clubs, players and fans attitudes lag behind others; (3) the comparisons between football and other sports.

Although some media sources across the world reported Hysén coming out, for a large majority of print media sources the event was clearly not newsworthy. This could say two things: (1) Hysén is not a big enough name (in fact, a number of those media sources that did cover the story mentioned that he is presently a fourth division semi-professional footballer playing in Sweden); (2) that the print media accepts homosexuality more than was the case when Fashanu came out in 1990 and, as a result, do not feel the need to make a point of his coming out. This was evident with no North American print media coverage given to Hysén like there was with John Amaechi.

## **Results**

As the first piece of research to empirically analyse the print media's reaction to an openly gay football player still playing the game, the results presented a clear change from the environment Justin Fashanu faced in 1990. The biggest difference was that although immediate headlines and short news in brief stories appeared, such as the *Daily Star's* (10 March 2011) headline of 'Football gay 'out'' and subsequent very short article (73 words), very quickly feature articles developed from which a textual analysis could take place.

### ***The inclusive nature of the print media towards homosexuality***

Reflecting the increasing acceptance of homosexuality by sections of the tabloid press, in an article titled 'Gay ace Hysén is a model pro', published in *The Sun* newspaper (18 March 2011), Charlie Wyett states how Hysén has "displayed enormous courage" by making his sexuality public. Referring to more British sportsmen deciding to come out whilst still playing their respective sport (like Gareth Thomas and Steven Davies), Wyett states how "the wait continues for a Premier League or Football League player to break this sporting taboo".

Although Kian and Anderson's (2009) research on Amaechi suggested that it would be the media, rather than players, who would find it difficult to accept an openly gay sportsman, this was not the case when reviewing articles concerning Hysén. Rather, the speed of trying to interview Hysén by a number of British newspapers suggests that the print media are interested in presenting the stories of gay sportsmen. Although not directly stipulated, a number of feature articles reflected the traditional concept of masculinity proposed by Connell (1987) by suggesting that Hysén was "brave" in seeking to challenge these traditional values often found within football. However, the opinion and style portrayed in



these articles was one of inclusivity, through the continual challenge to homophobia and the need for football's key stakeholders to accept gay footballers for who they are.

Lots of articles mentioned Justin Fashanu and the need for football to learn from the treatment he received. This was reflected in a large feature article written by Patrick Strudwick in *The Times* (22 March 2011) after he had interviewed Hysén. Strudwick writes how "I congratulate him, tell him it's big news in Britain and say that we had the first footballer to come out – Justin Fashanu, in 1990". Stating how Hysén "has caught the media off guard, refusing to conform to football's heterosexual diktats", Strudwick openly states his inclusive thoughts towards the presence of gay footballers:

In time, I suggest, it will be more than just a media mushroom cloud: Hysén will have to come to terms with being an historical figure, the Buzz Aldrin of gay footballers. He looks stunned, humbled and stutters a few "ers" before composing himself. "I've done something for everyone now so I just hope we can all learn from this. It feels great".

Similar to the findings surrounding ex-NBA player John Amaechi when he came out in 2007, these examples of inclusive narratives support the notion that the traditional hegemonic coverage presented by the print media towards homosexuality in male sport is now changing across much of the Western world (Adams et al. 2010; Clayton and Harris, 2009; Kian and Anderson, 2007; Nylund, 2004, 2007). Sportsmen like Gareth Thomas and Steven Davies have shown that gay men can still display and present historic notions of masculinity and the print media are increasingly reflecting this in what they present to their readers.

### ***The contention that clubs, players and fans attitudes lag behind others***

Although inclusive responses existed in a significant number of articles, there was also a wider examination on the reasons why there is a lack of openly gay footballers. Within some of these, as well as support for Hysén's decision, there were also references to the more orthodox notions of masculinity which the print media suspect remain present in modern football (Adams et al. 2010). Marcus Christenson and Giles Richards in the *Observer* (13 March 2011), for example, refer to Hysén coming out as a "ground breaking decision", as "footballers, for the time being, are staying silent". However, they then quote Hysén as being sceptical of his future career potential:

"Me coming out may have a bearing on my career...I may not play in the top flight but I still want to show that it isn't such a big deal. I am a footballer – and I am gay. If I perform as a footballer, then I don't think it matters if I like boys or girls".

Similarly, in a lengthy article about football in general by Sam Wallace in *The Independent* (14 March 2011), at the end he discusses Hysén under a sub-title of ‘Torrent of abuse ensures taboo will remain in place’. Praising Hysén, Wallace refers to him as “measured” and “sensible”, but highlights that the culture of football will continue to prohibit other players in coming out. For example, Wallace discusses how the decision by Hysén to come out “may well have a negative effect on his career. All of which points to this unfortunate taboo continuing, despite Anton’s best efforts”.

There was also reference to orthodox views presented in a lengthy article by Peter Strudwick in *The Times* (22 March 2011). Asking Hysén why he had chosen to come out, Strudwick wrote:

The prospect of a negative reaction from fans and the public didn’t deter him. “Why should I care?” he says, pulling a face of bored annoyance. “You can call me ‘gay’, ‘fag’ – I don’t care. I have my family and friends support. There have been some negative [comments]. People start thinking you just want the attention of the media. I don’t read much of it, though”. This is undoubtedly wise: after our interview, the Swedish channel TV4 removes its article about him from its website because of the volume of hate-filled comments.

Indeed, other print media sources across the world also highlighted the thoughts of those involved in Swedish football as to what reaction Hysén is likely to face. An article published in *The Nation* newspaper in Thailand (15 March 2011), for example, discusses Hysén coming out and refers to the Swedish sports columnist Mats Olsson’s appearance on Swedish television where he stated that the decision could prove “costly” and would “unlikely affect” the macho crowds in the stands.

As well as the reaction outside of the game, some of the media sources who actually travelled to Sweden to interview Hysén naturally asked him about the response he has received from within it. For example, Charlie Wyett in *The Sun* (18 March 2011) wrote:

Hysén insists the reaction to his news has been extremely supportive: “I did tell some of my team-mates a while back. No-one really cared...I understand why footballers are afraid of telling the truth. Obviously the first worry is the reaction of team-mates, that fans will make comments. Maybe they fear the family will say ‘we don’t want you’. Those reactions, particularly from your family, are a big thing. But you have to be strong”.

Likewise, in an interview published in the *Daily Mail* by Alex Kay (21 March 2011), Hysén refers to football as:

“a macho culture. I’ve not seen it yet but you hear about these people who make comments about the showers and stuff. Because people think, “oh, he’s gay, he must like every guy in the world”.

It's ridiculous. It's a stupid, judgemental stereotype. We have to teach people it's not like that. People shouldn't care what you do with your private life".

In another lengthy article, this time in the *Guardian's G2* section of the newspaper (29 March 2011), Patrick Barkham also reflects on his interview with Hysén. Barkham notes how Hysén is “a bouncy, articulate athlete” who, in reference to being born in Liverpool, is “currently walking very much alone”. Referring to what Justin Fashanu faced, Barkham states:

a generation on, when gay men and women play prominent roles in every other kind of entertainment, it looks increasingly bizarre that world football has no openly gay players – apart from Hysén.

Recognising that “dressing room “banter” is notoriously Neanderthal”, it is suggested that Hysén has the support of all of his team mates, but Barkham notes that “nine of the team are under 22” [years of age] and, perhaps, is purporting that they are more liberal and inclusive in their views towards masculinity (as suggested by Adams, 2011; Adams et al. 2010; Anderson, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2011; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Campbell et al. 2011; Kian and Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; McCormack and Anderson, 2010a, 2010b).

However, in debating why no other footballer has come out, Barkham suggests the existence of more orthodox views, in particular from individuals who hold senior positions in football:

homophobia is rife in global football, from the top to the bottom. When Fifa last year awarded the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, where homosexuality is illegal, president Sepp Blatter sniggered that gay fans “should refrain from any sexual activities” if travelling there. “Thank goodness only healthy people play football” said Vlatko Markovic recently, vowing there would be no gay players while he was president of Croatian football. In 2009, Max Clifford claimed he advised two gay Premiership players to stay in the closet because football was “in the dark ages, steeped in homophobia”. Last year, Gordon Taylor, head of the Professional Footballers' Association, casually remarked that homophobia was not high on the Premiership's agenda after no footballers would front the FA's anti-homophobia video campaign.

As part of this article, Barkham also supports the accusation of football as “institutionally homophobic”; an accusation levied at the key stakeholders of the game by many groups (such as the organisation Stonewall, which campaigns for equality and justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals), as well as public figures like the British public relations advisor, Max Clifford. However, more independent research has begun to question these thoughts. Anderson (2008b), for example, has argued that orthodox views remain in sport, but they can operate alongside inclusive notions of masculinity within the same environment and carry

equal cultural value. Whilst the print media are demonstrating inclusivity through the acceptance and support given to Hysén, research by Cashmore and Cleland (2011) has also highlighted widespread support amongst football fans. Although they recognise that a minority of fans retain orthodox views towards masculinity, Cashmore and Cleland's empirical findings of 3,500 football fans from 35 countries across the world show that 93 per cent would support an openly gay player. Similarly, Wertheim (2005) refers to an American poll of 979 people interviewed regarding homosexuality in sport with 86 per cent stating support for gay male sportsmen. Highlighting a culture of decreasing homophobia in America, Wertheim also states how 79 per cent of those surveyed are more accepting of homosexuality than they were 20 years ago.

Furthermore, in Cashmore and Cleland's (2011) large-scale survey of football fans, 84 per cent of their participants suggested that players are under pressure from other parties in football to remain in the closet. Of these, 45 per cent blame agents and 46 per cent blame clubs for this culture of secrecy. Concurring with this, in an article by Nick Harris in the *Mail on Sunday* (20 March 2011), he reports on an interview conducted with Peter Clayton, the openly gay chairman of the Football Association's (FA) anti-homophobia advisory group. Clayton also suggests that rather than blame the overall environment within football (in particular the fans), clubs and agents are still advising gay players to stay in the closet because "they're afraid of the potential commercial ramifications".

### ***Comparisons between football and other sports***

As well as the orthodox comments recently made by leading figures in football (such as Blatter and Markovic), Patrick Barkham, as part of his article in the *Guardian's G2* supplement (29 March 2011), raises the reluctance of Premier League players to discuss homosexuality in football. Barkham puts this down to fear "as if they will be marked men simply for discussing the issue". After Hysén came out a small number of footballers took the opportunity to begin to raise their own thoughts through the media. Former German captain Philip Lahm and former Sheffield Wednesday captain Darren Purse stated that in their capacity as captain of club or country they would advise any player who approached them against coming out whilst Bayern Munich's German striker Mario Gomez stated the opposite and urged players to break football's last taboo.

Although there is reference to the environment of football in most articles, there were also a number of articles which made comparisons with openly gay men in other sports, like

Gareth Thomas and Steven Davies and the support they have received from the key stakeholders in rugby and cricket respectively. Highlighting the taboo still facing football, however, Alex Kay in the *Daily Mail* (21 March 2011) refers to the decision to come out by Hysén as a “huge step, even taking into consideration the support rugby player Gareth Thomas and cricketer Steven Davies have had since they came out”.

Likewise, in an article from a wider perspective concerning homosexuality in sport, ex-cricketer Ed Smith in *The Times* (22 March 2011) states that “it’s far broader than football alone. Most sports suffer from similar prejudices”. Despite rugby and cricket having two openly gay players who have been widely supported, Smith suggests that rather than demonise football, the low number of gay men in other sports should also be recognised. However, the often tribal nature of football in comparison to these other sports leads Smith to argue that:

Football shouldn’t just revisit the taboo of homosexuality. It should also tackle the absurd premise that buying a ticket earns people not only the right to watch sportsmen but also to abuse them.

## **Discussion**

This article has gone some way to addressing Nylund’s (2004) challenge to examine for any evidence of disruption or resistance to traditional masculine values within the sporting media. The findings presented in this article add another dimension to the arguments already in existence that progressive attitudes are being embraced towards masculinity and homosexuality in multiple sporting settings. Although this has been found in research on athletes (Anderson, 2005, 2011) and fans (Campbell et al. 2011; Cashmore and Cleland, 2011), it also supports research on the media’s response to homosexuality in American sport and their increasing acceptance of gay sportsmen in cultures of decreasing homophobia (Anderson, 2009a; Kian and Anderson, 2009; Nylund, 2004, 2007). This could be a result of the changing presentation of masculinity by the broadsheet and tabloid media and the recognition that the historic view of traditional hegemonic masculinity is now being challenged (Clayton and Harris, 2009).

Of course, the media has no-one of any significant stature within professional football to focus their reporting on with regards to homosexuality, but what is clear through the example of Hysén is that there has been a shift in the reporting of homosexuality by the print media in a globally popular team sport such as football. Although it could be argued that orthodox views of masculinity remain (such as with the examples of Graeme Le Saux and Sol

Campbell and the lack of an openly gay high-profile footballer), openly gay sportsmen like Gareth Thomas and Steven Davies and effeminate footballers like David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo have provided some resistance to traditional definitions of masculinity (Adams et al. 2010; Cashmore, 2004; Coad, 2005; Simpson, 1996).

To show the progress made with regards to homosexuality in sport, this article has shown how footballers like Hysén are now accepted far more than Justin Fashanu was when he came out in 1990. In previous analyses of the English print press, Harris and Clayton (2002), Vincent (2004) and Vincent and Crossman (2008) have all highlighted the gendered nature of sports coverage through the promotion of masculine values, whilst simultaneously misrepresenting those who do not conform. This article has shown that not one journalist questioned Hysén's masculinity across both broadsheet and tabloid platforms; instead they demonstrated inclusivity and acceptance for the decision he had made. Most British journalists who wrote about Hysén actually travelled to Sweden to interview him and all articles were written by men. Thus, for Anderson (2009b: 5), men in these positions can act as gatekeepers as they “maintain power to not only control much of the discourse related to sport, but they hire the next wave of workers within the sport-media complex”.

Of those articles analysed, a large majority of writers challenged hegemonic masculinity by portraying homophobia in a negative light. They also frequently stressed the need to accept gay footballers for who they are; players who should be recognised for what they can do on a football pitch. There was a narrative that football remains Neanderthal and that some of the key stakeholders in the game (players, agents, governing body officials) would advise players against coming out (as suggested by Cashmore and Cleland, 2011), but this was offset against a number of articles arguing that more needs to be done. There was no real narrative concerning the heterosexual nature of football and how masculine values are learnt at a young age (Birley, 1993; Connell, 1995; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990). Much more obvious was the concern that football needs to move with the times and reflect changes happening across wider society.

In fact, it is not just mainstream media sources which are reflecting a change in attitudes and opinions towards gay sportsmen. Other forms of empirical research are also highlighting how the environment is changing. Cashmore and Cleland's (2011) analysis of 3,500 football fans outlined how 93 per cent would accept a gay player, with on-the-field performance the most important aspect of their support for players. In a poll of 979 participants, Wertheim (2005) also found that 86 per cent of fans would support a gay male

athlete with a further 79 per cent more accepting of homosexuality than they would have been 20 years ago. Likewise, in a 2006 survey of 1400 professional athletes conducted by Sport Illustrated on whether players in the four main North American sports would accept an openly gay player, nearly 80 per cent say they would in the National Hockey League, 61.5 per cent in the Major League Baseball, 60 per cent in the National Basketball Association and 57 per cent in the National Football League.

Despite the reaction by the print media to Hysén and other forms of research stating how football (and sport more generally) is becoming less homophobic, still football faces difficulties in beginning to tackle homophobia. In March 2011 the British government began to try and support those sportsmen and women who want to come out by creating a sport charter which committed British governing bodies of sport (including the FA) to stamp out homophobia. However, it seems that football remains hostile to embracing homosexuality. Twice in just over twelve months a video against homophobia has been dropped because no professional footballers in England would support it. Thus, as suggested by Kian and Anderson (2009), although some progression has been made within sport, the heterosexual nature of contact team sport remains, as closeted gay players fear any repercussion from going against the normative order of traditional masculinity.

Overall, the changing culture of the sporting media, with two-way discussions offered by many print, broadcast and online platforms (Cleland, 2010; Kian and Anderson, 2009; Nylund, 2004), now plays a very important role in the construction of everyday life for many people. Although it cannot be assumed, the narrative that individuals engage with across all media platforms has the potential to shape and influence thoughts, opinions, values and beliefs in many different ways. As the competitive nature of communication and market share continues to grow for all media sources through new advances in technology, this further highlights the need for traditional print media sources to continue to reflect the views of society in order to retain readers. This article has demonstrated how this is now occurring through changes to the ways in which homosexuality in sport is now presented by the print media, in particular regarding openly gay sportsmen in a global sport such as football.

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