

## Michael Sam's coming out is a challenge to the vicarious masculinity that American men derive from the NFL

*In February, Michael Sam, a college football player eligible for the National Football League's draft, came out as gay. If signed, he would be the first openly gay player in the NFL. [Sara L. Crawley](#) reflects on Sam's announcement, and the reactions of those both in and out of the NFL. She argues that while his homosexuality is a challenge to the vicarious masculinity that American men derive from the NFL, Sam's desire to not become an activist means that the heteronormative nature of elite sport in the US is unlikely to change.*



Gay rights seem to be [gaining political ground across the US](#), and homophobia seems to be fading. Seventeen states have now ratified same-sex marriage, pop icons no longer hide their sexuality, and military sexual assaults gain prominence in the news. Traditional heteronormativity (belief in heterosexuality's normative superior morality) seems to be taking a cultural beating.

So, why is football player Michael Sam's announcement that he is a gay man national news? Recent pre-draft comings out among women athletes drew no fanfare. The Women's National Basketball Association's [Brittney Griner is an example](#). The answer is that the National Football League (NFL) is the holy grail of masculinity in the US— the lynchpin of *vicarious masculinity* for all American men. This is not about Michael Sam, the player, or about sex per se, but about the entire pop-culture American male audience's claim to dominant masculinity. Even the couch potato who consumes pounds of chicken wings and limitless beers in front of the TV can claim purportedly "natural" dominance of the male body by aligning himself with elite male athletes, especially the cyborgs of American football.

It is not accidental that "the National Football League continues to be the most lucrative sports league in the world." The Dallas Cowboys franchise is reportedly worth more than [\\$2.3billion](#) — more than twice the average worth of European football (soccer) teams. The popularity of American football feeds the pop-culture, video game-induced imaginations of boys and men alike. Like professional European and South American football (i.e., soccer), the radical fandom of American football is about the exclusion of women and the purported demonstrable dominance of (all?) male bodies over (all?) female bodies through alignment with the vehicle of the elite male athlete. Though women can and do enjoy watching football and soccer, they cannot lay claim to the vicarious fantasy that "I have a body like that" (which, of course, very few males actually do)—and not surprisingly there is no equivalent women's football. Pop-culture presence of the elite male body retains masculine dominance in a world where men have been forced to encounter women as equals in the workforce, in law and government, and [increasingly in childcare](#) as a post-recession necessity. Further, American football produces a distinctly American narrative of masculinity that is larger than nature, and consumption is at an all-time high.



Michael Sam By Marcus Qwertyus (Own work) [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

American football is a metaphor for war and American world dominance in the technology-infused popular media. Unlike soccer that features the natural, unaided male body finessing *the ball* past opponents while generally avoiding noticeable body contact for fear of a rule violation, the game of American football is to directly and powerfully control *the body* of other players, moving the ball and the opposing team's bodies so as to take over their territory. Further, American football turns the male body into the stuff of sci-fi films — massive postmodern cyborgs using technology (helmets, shoulder and body pads, sports drinks, intravenous fluids, personal cooling devices, etc.) to transform the human body into superhuman appearances and performances, distinctly American in the display of physical dominance and consumption.

How is any of this about sexuality? Part of the iconic status of athletes has been the alignment of athleticism with virility — in part due to impossibly sculpted, beautiful bodies but also playing success and dominance as traits of masculinity. American masculinity is about obtaining whatever one wants, in which the traditional prize has been beautiful female bodies—preferably lots of them. In this way, vicarious masculinity — the audience's ability to make claims about what it means to be an American man via specific iconic heroes—has been implicitly heteronormative. Reported comments from would-be NFL peers like Saints linebacker Jonathan Vilma that he would be [uncomfortable showering with a gay teammate](#) harken back 20 years to the Gays in the Military debate exposing the issue as straight men's expectation they should be the objectifiers, not the objects from sexual objectification. Of course, women who broke down the entrance barriers to the military 20 years prior to that found the concern over men's fear of objectification (by men) laughable — and the widespread problem of military sexual assault today would seem to confirm the ongoing problem of the belief in a right to sexual dominance.

Will Michael Sam ruin this longstanding fantasy of “natural” heterosexual dominance for straight men in America? Or will his coming out be too much for an NFL team to risk potential loss of profits by spoiling the game's popularity? As the early May NFL draft approaches, some bloggers are already predicting that Sam will be shunned, while others take a more sly position that Sam (6'2" and 261 lbs.) was always too small for the transition to pro as a defensive end. Still others predict it is unfathomable that Sam will not be drafted, given that he was the SEC (reportedly the most talented conference in college football) Co-Defensive Player of the Year.

Yet another twist is, of course, that Michael Sam is a Black man from the Deep South. Though he reportedly thrived at the University of Missouri in the conservative Midwest, his reception in conservative settings for the NFL is uncertain. Sexual politics around Black men has long been fraught with fear of hypersexuality, both hetero and homo. Further, some argue that negative attitudes toward homosexuality are related to [protecting an already embattled Black masculinity among Black men](#).

It would seem that Michael Sam's decision to come out publicly might risk his personal pro football future. Nonetheless, Sam's position that he has no intention to be an activist and only wishes to be a good football player (*Sports Illustrated* magazine, 2.17.2014) suggests he has no plans to create a kinder, gentler game. As a result, the morality of this distinctly American form of dominant, vicarious masculinity — the fantasy of implicit violence of elite male bodies and the unspoken metaphor of US global domination — remains unquestioned. The only issue

is whether gay men will be allowed into this elite fraternity.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Sara L. Crawley is associate professor of Sociology at the University of South Florida and regularly teaches in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies. Crawley's research focuses on gendered performances of the body in everyday life, especially with regard to sexuality and sports. Co-authored with Lara Foley and Constance Shehan, Crawley's first book, *Gendering Bodies*, explains how the social world shapes our physical bodies and how our bodies shape the social world.



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