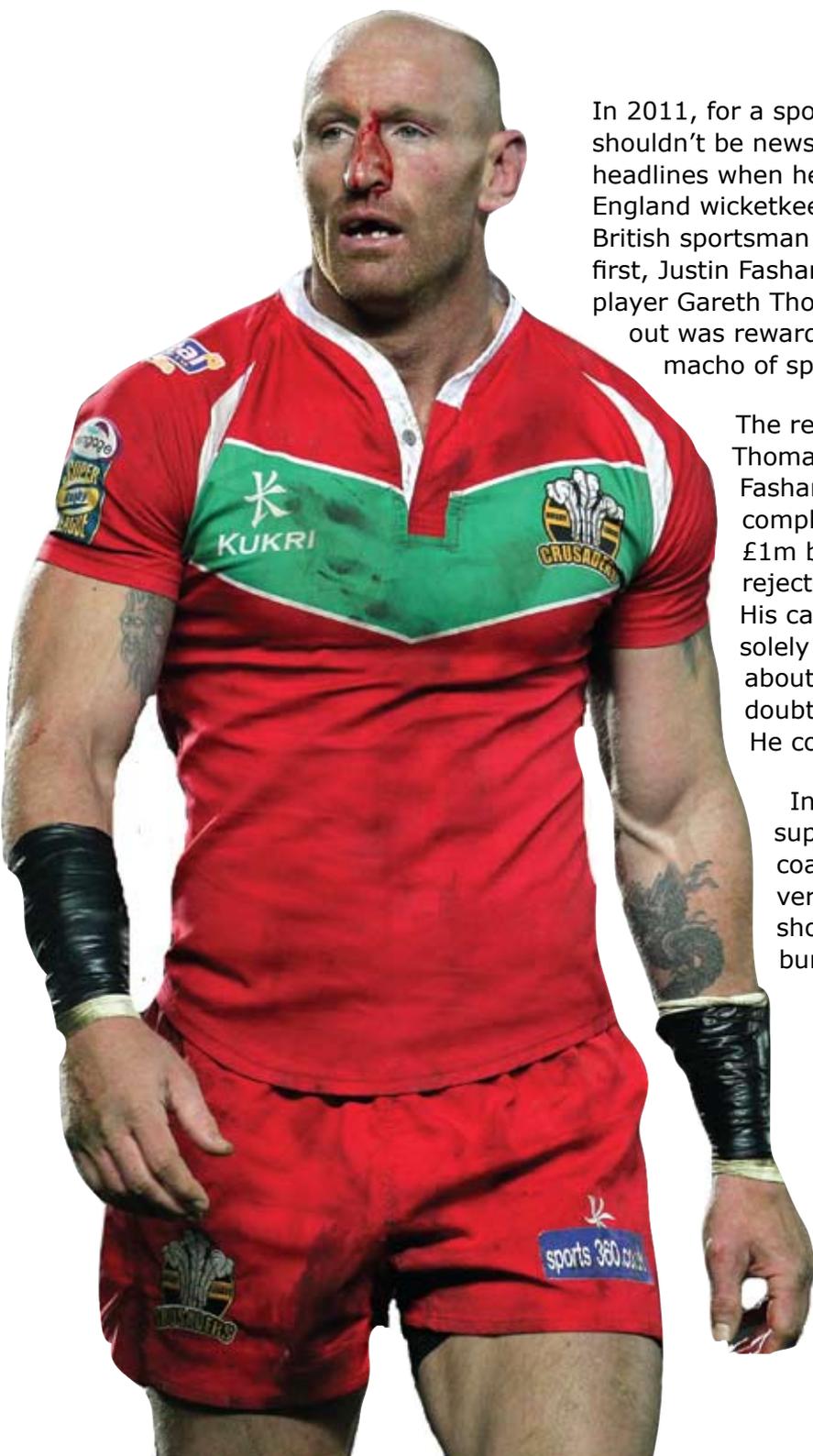


Time to come out to play?



In 2011, for a sportsman to disclose his sexuality shouldn't be news - but cricketer Steven Davies made headlines when he revealed that he was gay. The England wicketkeeper, is only the third professional British sportsman to come out of the closet since the first, Justin Fashanu, in 1990. The second, Welsh rugby player Gareth Thomas, found his bravery in coming out was rewarded by a warm reception in that most macho of sports.

The reactions encountered by Davies and Thomas were almost entirely supportive but Fashanu's experience, back in 1990, was completely different. He was the UK's first £1m black player, but suffered abuse and rejection after he revealed that he was gay. His career and his life went downhill - not solely because of the pressures brought about by his revelation, but there is no doubt they added significantly to his decline. He committed suicide in 1998.

In contrast, Thomas received great support from his family, colleagues and coaches, as well as from fans. He spoke very movingly on the Ellen de Generes show in the US and elsewhere about the burden that had been lifted and about

SOME ISSUES:

Why do you think it is difficult for gay sports people to reveal their sexuality?

If most people are accepting of homosexuality in sport, what prevents footballers in particular from revealing their sexuality?

Do you think this will change over time?

See: http://youtube/X3OnU_hNVrA

Photo: Mike Egerton/EMPICS Sport

the warm glow of support. But he also admitted that he only found the courage to make his decision at the end of his career, saying he 'could never have come out without first establishing myself and earning respect as a player'. He had certainly done that - having played for his country more than 100 times. Yet this muscular 16 stone, 6ft 3in rugby hero still needed to muster all his courage to make his announcement.

Steven Davies, however, is at the other end of his career. He is not an established member of the national side and potentially might have put his future at risk if reaction had been different. He says, 'I have to play my best for Surrey and get back in the England side. I want to be remembered as a good cricketer not a gay cricketer.' Despite that assertion he hopes his example will be of use to others: 'Gareth Thomas' story helped me. It showed me it can be done. He was brave enough to stand up and say who he was. If I can help anyone else like he helped me, that would be great.' The fact that he felt confident enough to make a statement at this early stage of his sporting life suggests that attitudes have changed significantly.

So... if it is now possible in cricket and in rugby, why are there no openly gay players in the top ranks of our national game? Ellis Cashmore, Professor of Culture, Media and Sport, and Jamie Cleland, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Staffordshire University conducted an online poll of fans' attitudes through the Topfan website. The conclusions of the first phase of their report are shown in the green box.

It would seem that the fans are not the problem but that there may be issues within the football hierarchy and the media.

When Fifa last year awarded the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, where homosexuality is illegal, president Sepp Blatter joked that gay fans 'should refrain from any sexual activities' if travelling there.

This brought a strong response from John Amaechi, the former NBA basketball star who revealed he was gay in 2007: 'It's not just his reaction but the fact that an entire room of sports reporters thought this something worth laughing about,' Amaechi said. 'He is football. This is football's

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM TOPFAN PHASE 1

- 93% of fans think there is no place for homophobia in football
- 7% think that football is no place for gays
- 60% want gay players to 'be brave' and come out, but ...
- 40% don't think gay players should be forced to come out, mainly because it's a private matter and straight players don't have to declare their sexual preferences
- More than 90% think the only thing that matters in football is how the player plays ... not his sexual preferences
- More than 80% think Max Clifford, who said football is stuck in the 'dark ages' is part of the problem not the solution
- More than 60% disagree with Gordon Taylor's 'cowardly' decision not to support an anti-homophobia campaign
- Fans believe gay players choose not to come out to protect their commercial value, not because they fear the reaction of fans or team mates
- Many fans see parallels between black players in the 1970s/80s and gay players today
- 3,500 fans, players, managers, coaches and referees have participated in the research, which continues at www.topfan.co.uk

'He is football. This is football's attitude. This man, who giggles like a six-year-old when asked a perfectly reasonable question'

attitude. This man, who giggles like a six-year-old when asked a perfectly reasonable question. This is yet another case where the epic, archaic, neanderthal ignorance of someone who wields the power to summon kings, princes, presidents and prime ministers uses that power not to foster positive change but to further entrench bigotry.'

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 can be seen from the survey results, fans very largely opposed these attitudes.

As Professor Cashmore points out: 'There was a very strong argument from the fans about performance on the field of play. As far as they're concerned, this is the only thing that matters. If a footballer plays well, that's the only thing that counts. Fans blame the media for keeping gay players in the closet, so to speak. Many think the response of personnel at the club would probably be supportive, though by no

means all fans thought other players would accept gay team mates. Some thought other players would turn sharply against them. Some thought managers would transfer them.'

Apart from the media response, the fear of ruining lucrative advertising deals might be another reason why footballers

hesitate to reveal their homosexuality. Professor Cashmore again: 'One fan put it bluntly when he said players don't want to risk their 'brand' by declaring their sexual preferences. It's a powerful argument, but it opens up a question: would it actually hurt a professional footballer if it were known that he was gay?'

The question remains open. Recently one young footballer did come out as gay: Anton Hysén, the son of former Liverpool defender and Swedish international Glenn Hysén. Although he is part of a footballing dynasty, he is currently only playing in the fourth tier of Swedish football and working in the local Volvo factory to support himself. No more illustrious players have taken the opportunity to imitate him. As Hysén says, 'Where the hell are all the others? No one is coming out.'

Max Clifford claimed he advised two gay Premiership players to stay in the closet because football was 'in the dark ages, steeped in homophobia'

Sources: *Topfan and others*
www.topfan.co.uk