

## **“My sexuality is something I’ve never had to worry about”: Why do women feel more comfortable coming out in football than men?**

For Brandon Gregory, the difference between men’s and women’s football is simple. “I still have apprehensions about holding my boyfriend's hand at a men's game,” he explains. “Whereas at a women's match, I wouldn't even think about it, I'd feel totally comfortable, totally safe.”

Brandon’s view is widely held within the LGBTQ+ community. Women’s football is seen as a much more welcoming and inclusive environment than the male equivalent. The belief is starkly illustrated by the sheer number of openly gay women within the female game. Seven of the England squad triumphant at the Euros, including player of the tournament Beth Mead, are LGBTQ+.

Sophie Griffiths has played football since she was just eight years old and has been openly gay since she was 16. She has played for a variety of teams during her career including Cardiff Met University, Cheltenham Town and her current side Worcester City. She has felt welcomed for the vast majority of her football journey, with her sexuality considered normal by her teammates.

“I feel like my teams have just been so accepting,” she says. “I think it is the norm now. It's very much an accepting environment where you don't get much homophobia and everybody supports each other. My sexuality is something I have never really had to even worry about.”

Much of the difference is reflected in the dominant form of identity felt by male and female players. For LGBTQ+ men their defining social characteristic is the fact they are homosexual. They, therefore, challenge the traditional forms of heteronormative masculinity which are steeped within the men’s game.

In contrast, Sophie believes the dominant identity for LGBTQ+ female footballers is not their sexuality, it is instead the fact that they are women. Therefore sexuality is not considered to be an important issue.

“I think much of it probably stems from women trying to prove a point, even in the game of football. So regardless of your sexuality, you've always had to try and make people believe that you're as good as the men and you’re continuously trying to live up to that expectation. We've only ever really had to support ourselves as men haven't believed in us until the Euros.

“We've taken a feminist approach to creating the kind of society we want within female football, giving each other praise, accepting each other, being there for each other. There is not

the same tribalism that you see in the men's game which ultimately, I think, is a positive culture to be in."

For decades, female footballers have had to fight just to give their game a chance to receive the attention it deserves. The women's game has only recently started to properly grow in popularity with the hugely successful summer Euros taking the sport to new highs.

In the past, the lack of popularity has been negative with the women's game struggling to receive the attention it merits, but it has proved to be a positive for inclusion. The women's game is something of a younger sport meaning it has grown alongside the more liberal values of the modern day.

The relative lack of commercial interest means women's footballers, clubs and authorities do not have to pander to the same financial interests involved in the men's game. Women's football faces its own battle to be accepted in areas which are unfriendly to LGBTQ+ rights as they are often also unsympathetic to women's sport. Hence the quest for acceptance is again characterised by being female rather than sexuality.

James Laley, founder of Sheffield United's LGBTQ+ group Rainbow Blades, believes the women's game is in a position of strength when it comes to inclusivity whereas the men's game still has to shake off the outdated attitudes intertwined within it.

"The men's game has started with a much larger uphill struggle, stuck within the outdated forms of toxic masculinity," he says. "It's a culture that has been bred over decades but it does not seem to be the case in the women's game. It has had the opportunity to be more forward-thinking."

However, the women's game is by no means an LGBTQ+ utopia. Sophie believes both the men's and women's games have serious strides to make in the inclusion of trans people. The debate surrounding trans participation in sports is currently particularly tense leaving those who do not fall into historical gender categories wondering where they fit within football.

"There's a lot of things we need to improve on," Sophie explains. "I think we certainly need to improve trans inclusion within the game. I know it is a complex issue but ultimately I think you should have the opportunity to play the sport in the category you feel most comfortable given the physical and mental health benefits it can bring."

Furthermore, the game still being in its infancy, relatively speaking, on the world stage creates its own fears. Chase Newton, a member of LGBTQ+ club Mersey Marauders, believes the sport could enter the same geopolitical minefield faced by men's football when it comes to gay rights.

"I fear we could see a reverse effect in the women's game," he says. "At the moment it is very welcoming which is great but there are risks as it gets more popular. We've seen it is getting to the point where it is getting more funding and involvement which is good but as the commercial aspect continues to grow the same issues around international relations are inevitably going to crop up."

While it is clear women's football is by no means perfect, it is much further forward in its push for inclusivity than the men's equivalent. Perhaps the growth of women's sport will prove to be the catalyst to push for more progressive changes within the male game, making it a more welcoming environment for everyone.