

palgrave▶pivot

**SPORTS
JOURNALISM
AND COMING
OUT STORIES**

Jason Collins and
Michael Sam

William P. Cassidy



Sports Journalism and Coming Out Stories

William P. Cassidy

Sports Journalism and Coming Out Stories

Jason Collins and Michael Sam

palgrave
macmillan

William P. Cassidy
Department of Communication
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL
USA

ISBN 978-3-319-62769-4 ISBN 978-3-319-62770-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-62770-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017945821

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2017

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: © saulgranda/Getty

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, my sincere thanks to Shaun Vigil of Palgrave Macmillan for looking at my work in this area and seeing the potential for a book.

Thank you to Sage Publishing and *Communication & Sport* for allowing the use of my article “Inching Away From the Toy Department: Daily Newspaper Sports Coverage of Jason Collins’ and Michael Sam’s Coming Out.”

Thanks very much to Matthew Bebar, Frank Gogola, Ryan Mack, Pat Nix and Reynaldo Sustaita for serving as coders for the research studies conducted for this book.

Thank you to Nick Bosshart for his coding help and excellent work as my research assistant.

Sam Babin, gentleman and budding scholar, took a huge load off of my shoulders by offering to put together the index for this book. I truly appreciate his kindness.

Kim Rinker, Dr. Leo Chan, and Dr. Kate Cady, great friends and colleagues, were always strong sources of enthusiasm and encouragement along the way. Thanks also to Dr. Joe Abisaid and Dr. Andrea Guzman for their support.

Dr. Betty La France, also a great friend and colleague, deserves special recognition for putting up with my endless ruminations about issues both big and small as I slogged my way through this work. She provided impeccable advice that was always administered with an abundance of grace, wit, and wisdom. Thank you.

I am eternally grateful to Chris Hine of the *Chicago Tribune* and Cyd Zeigler of *Outsports* for taking time out of their busy schedules to speak with me. Their insights and comments have been invaluable.

Finally, thank you to Jason Collins and Michael Sam for their bravery.

CONTENTS

1	Sports Journalism, Jason Collins and Michael Sam	1
2	An Overview of Media Coverage of Gay Male Athletes	37
3	Comparing Sports Journalism Coverage of Collins and Sam	57
4	The Kiss	77
5	The Status of the Conversation	91
	Index	105

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Distribution of stories about Jason and Michael Sam by 5-day time periods	62
Table 3.2	Three dimensions of framing in coverage of Jason Collins and Michael Sam	63
Table 3.3	Overall frequency of attributed comments by source affiliation ($N = 1972$)	69
Table 3.4	Frequency of attributed comments about Jason Collins and Michael Sam by source affiliation ($N = 1972$)	70
Table 3.5	Overall paragraph block distribution of attributed comments by eight prominent source types ($n = 1454$)	71
Table 3.6	Paragraph block distribution of attributed comments about Jason Collins and Michael Sam by eight prominent source types ($n = 1454$)	72
Table 3.7	Overall views expressed in attributed comments about Jason Collins and Michael Sam ($N = 1281$)	73
Table 3.8	Views expressed in attributed comments by seven prominent source types about Jason Collins and Michael Sam ($n = 871$)	73
Table 4.1	Overall frequency of attributed comments about “The Kiss” by source affiliation ($N = 207$)	85
Table 4.2	Overall views expressed in attributed comments about “The Kiss” in stories by Sports Journalists and Non-sports Journalists ($N = 207$)	86
Table 4.3	Means of tone of attributed comments about “The Kiss” by four prominent source types	86
Table 4.4	Means of overall tone of stories about “The Kiss” by Sports and Non-sports Journalists	87

Sports Journalism, Jason Collins and Michael Sam

Abstract This chapter provides an overview of this book which examines how Sports Journalists covered the coming out stories of National Basketball Association (NBA) veteran Jason Collins and football All-American Michael Sam, who was drafted by the St. Louis Rams of the National Football League (NFL). This chapter also introduces the reader to sports journalism's status as "the toy department," an area perceived as having lower and less rigorous standards than other forms of journalism. However, the bulk of this chapter offers a detailed account of the events surrounding Collins' and Sam's respective coming out announcements.

Keywords Jason Collins · Michael Sam · Sports journalism

Sports journalism, despite its popularity, has struggled since its inception in the late nineteenth century to be taken as seriously as other forms of journalism (Oates and Pauly 2007; Wanta 2013). Many contend that Sports Journalists are not held to the same standards as their colleagues who report on other subjects (Oates and Pauly 2007; Rowe 2007; Salwen and Garrison 1998; Whiteside et al. 2012). For example, Hardin's (2005) survey of newspaper sports editors found that nearly half (43%) believed that "receiving free tickets, travel or tokens" (p. 69) does not compromise a sports reporter's objectivity. In addition, 39% felt that coverage favors home teams. The legendary sportswriter Red Smith

referred to sports sections as the “toy department” of newspapers (Fink 2001), while Salwen and Garrison (1998) make note of a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors by A. Bartlett Giamatti, then president of Major League Baseball’s National League, stating his belief that newspaper editors didn’t pay attention to the sports section. As a result, he said the standards applied to sports coverage were not as rigorous or as consistent as they were for other forms of journalism.

In response, Sports Journalists have made attempts to be taken more seriously by strongly endorsing and formally adopting ethical guidelines for their work (Garrison and Salwen 1994; Oates and Pauly 2007). Indeed, 90% of newspaper sports editors surveyed by Hardin (2005) said that ethical standards for the sports department should be the same as those used by the newsroom.

Several sports editors interviewed by Salwen and Garrison (1998) expressed concerns that “Sports Journalists are too parochial in their knowledge and their focused interest in sports” (p. 99). And perhaps even more importantly, a number of those interviewed felt the most pressing problem concerning sports coverage was “the need of sports journalists to expand their knowledge beyond ‘the game’ to include law, medicine, business, politics, and sociological matters that have become increasingly relevant in sports journalism” (p. 99). The increasing visibility of gays and lesbians in sports (Kian et al. 2015) is an example of one such issue, particularly in light of the advances made by the gay rights movement in recent years. This book investigates how Sports Journalists covered the coming out stories of Jason Collins, a 12-year National Basketball Association (NBA) veteran who came out in 2013, and Michael Sam, a football All-American from the University of Missouri, who was drafted by the St. Louis Rams of the National Football League (NFL) in 2014 after announcing he was gay. Both these news events were hailed as historic not just in terms of sports, but in society in general and offered opportunities for Sports Journalists to broaden their horizons by addressing the issues inherent with athletes coming out, especially in relation to the broader issues of gays and lesbians in society. Although this project does not purport to assess the overall capability of sports journalists to go “beyond the game,” an examination of Collins’ and Sam’s coming out stories can offer insight into whether or not the toy department label is accurate regarding coverage of gay athletes.

The remainder of this chapter offers a detailed account of the events surrounding Collins’ and Sam’s respective announcements. Chapter 2

gives an overview of other research examining gay male professional athletes, goes into further detail about sports journalism as “the toy department,” and outlines the theoretical (media sociology) and methodological (content analysis) approach taken in this book, which is centered around three studies examining sports journalism coverage of Collins’ and Sam’s coming out stories. The results and details of those studies are provided in Chaps. 3 and 4. Chapter 5 assesses the study results in terms of the long-enduring “toy department” moniker given to sports journalism. The book concludes with a discussion of what has—and hasn’t—happened since Collins and Sam came out and includes insights from interviews conducted with two prominent gay Sports Journalists.

JASON COLLINS

“I’m a 34-year-old NBA center. I’m black. And I’m gay.”

With those words, Jason Collins became the first openly gay athlete active in one of the “big four” American team sports. He made the announcement in a first-person article posted on the *Sports Illustrated* Web site on April 29, 2013. The announcement also appeared in the May 6, 2013, print edition of the magazine, which featured a smiling Collins on the cover.

“I didn’t set out to be the first openly gay athlete playing in a major American team sport,” he wrote. “But, since I am, I’m happy to start the conversation.”

Prior to his announcement, Collins was largely unknown to all but the most ardent NBA fans. Although he was an Honorable Mention All-American at Stanford University and a first-round selection in the NBA Draft, Collins averaged just 3.6 points and 3.7 rebounds per game during his 13-year career playing for seven teams. However, at 7-feet-tall and 255 lb, his strong defensive skills, physical play, and reputation as an excellent teammate kept him in the league longer than most.

The well-travelled journeyman even joked in his announcement about a “parlor game called Three Degrees of Jason Collins. If you’re in the league, and I haven’t been your teammate, I surely have been one of your teammates’ teammates. Or one of your teammates’ teammates’ teammates.”

Collins felt he needed to go public after Rep. Joe Kennedy, his former roommate at Stanford, told him he had marched in the 2012 Boston Gay Pride Parade.

“I was proud of him for participating but angry that as a closeted gay man I couldn’t even cheer my straight friend on as a spectator,” Collins said. “If I’d been questioned, I would have concocted half-truths. What a shame to have to lie at a celebration of pride. I want to do the right thing and not hide anymore. I want to march for tolerance, acceptance and understanding. I want to take a stand and say, ‘Me too’.”

The national debate about same-sex marriage also played a key role in his, decision to publicly come out.

“It was extremely tough not to say anything while the [Supreme Court] justices are debating something that has a direct impact on my life,” he stated (Wise 2013).

In his announcement story, Collins wrote that his maternal grandmother was worried he might encounter prejudice and that he was unsure of how others would react.

“I’m a pragmatist,” he said. “I hope for the best, but plan for the worst.”

However, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Collins’ coming out was celebrated by such luminaries as Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Bill Clinton. Obama said he was impressed by Collins’ courage, while Clinton said “Jason’s announcement today is an important moment for professional sports and in the history of the LGBT community. It is also the straightforward statement of a good man who wants no more than what so many of us seek: to be able to be who we are; to do our work; to build families and to contribute to our communities” (Jackson 2013). Collins was also a guest in Michelle Obama’s box during the President’s State of the Union address in January 2014 (Zeigler 2014a).

“Not even in my wildest dreams could I have imagined all this—the response,” Collins told *The Washington Post*, just a few days after his announcement. “You’re always thinking, ‘I’m going to make this happen in my own words, on my own terms, and I’ll deal with the repercussions and consequences.’ And it turns out the country was really ready for something like this. It’s been remarkable” (Wise 2013, para. 4).

Collins also received an outpouring of support from fellow NBA players and coaches, as well as retired NBA greats. Shaquille O’Neal tweeted “I am so proud of my friend, Jason Collins for showing all of us what leadership looks like.” Kobe Bryant also tweeted that he was proud of Collins, and Collins’ former coach Doc Rivers said “He’s a pro’s pro. He is the consummate professional and he is one of my favorite ‘team’ players I have ever coached” (Zeigler 2013).