



A coach's guide on how to handle an athlete coming out

Deciding to come out is an enormous decision to make, and coming out to team mates and coaches can be especially difficult given the importance that the athlete may place on acceptance from these people. Any gay athlete who has taken this decision will not have done so lightly. They will have been closely examining the team environment and culture, the attitudes and behaviour of their team mates and your own behaviours to assess the likely response they will receive. If they have decided to openly express their sexual identity, as a coach you are in a position to oversee this process and you have the ability to ensure that coming out to you and the team is a positive experience for the athlete.

Here are a few pointers to help you:

- Thank the athlete for being open with you and acknowledge the trust they have placed in you in telling you this.
- Make it clear that their sexual orientation will not impact on the way that you treat them within the team.
- Demonstrate clearly that the athlete has your full support in their decision and offer your assistance if they require it. Do not assume they will need your help or advice but make clear that it is there if they need it.
- If the athlete has come out to you but remains closeted to the rest of the team make clear that they have your support if they decide to come out to the entire team. Do not put pressure on them to do so if they do not yet feel comfortable. It is your responsibility to ensure confidentiality until the athlete decides to come out, do not discuss their sexuality with any other individual unless asked to do so by the athlete.
- If they decide to come out to the entire team offer you support and assistance in doing so, this may involve creating an opportunity for them to address the team. They may wish to tell an individual on the team first to build support and confidence gradually. However they choose to do it you should facilitate their wishes as best you can.
- Make your support for the individual clear to the team; foster an environment of openness and respect for all allowing the team to follow from your lead.



- Deal with any discrimination or problems that the athlete encounters from teammates, parents, supporters or other coaching staff. Allow the athlete to come to you with problems and talk with them before making any interventions on their behalf. They may want to deal with it themselves.

These are some general points to assist you in how to respond to an athlete coming out on your team. However, you must be flexible and adapt to the situation as necessary. It is important to remember that the majority of people's experiences of coming out to their team mates are positive and your response as a coach will be crucial in ensuring this is the case.