

Social and Cultural Attitudes towards LGBTQ+ in Britain from the 1950s

Information sheet 1: LGBTQ+ Representation in Sport (1950s–1980s)

The 1950s and 1960s

Sport reinforced traditional gender roles, with men expected to be masculine and women discouraged from competing in "male-dominated" sports. There were no openly LGBTQ+ athletes in professional UK sport; coming out would have ended their career.

The partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 did little to change attitudes in sport. Football and rugby – players and fans – were very homophobic, reinforcing masculinity.

Female athletes who defied gender norms were often suspected of being "too masculine" or faced discrimination.

The 1970s to the 1990s

LGBTQ+ activism increased, but sport remained largely resistant to change. Gay clubs and social spaces began organising informal sporting events, creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ athletes outside mainstream sport.

The **HIV/AIDS crisis** led to increased homophobia, making it even harder for LGBTQ+ athletes to be open about their identities.

Justin Fashanu (pictured in 1981) was the first openly gay professional footballer in Britain. Fashanu faced intense discrimination, from players, his club manager Brian Clough, fans, even his own brother. He committed suicide on 2nd May 1998, aged 37. His story highlighted the deep-rooted homophobia in football and the challenges LGBTQ+ athletes faced.



(Photo: Allsport UK/Getty Images)

"I had been in the UK in the eighties and Justin was a big name then and the attention he got was nasty really. I think he felt comfortable in the New Zealand environment, away from any dramas in relation to his private life where he could play football and have an adventure."

(David Chote, team-mate at Miramar Rangers FC, New Zealand)



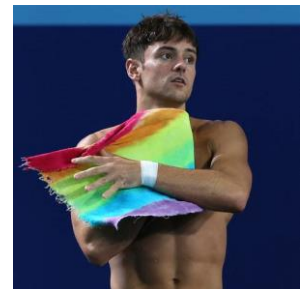
The front page of The Sun newspaper, October 1990

An example of the attitude of national newspapers towards homosexuality. Note that for The Sun newspaper, being gay is something to “confess” and is a major news story.

The 21st Century

There have been significant developments regarding LGBTQ+ sportspeople, highlighting the changes in social and cultural attitudes since the second half of the 20th century.

- **Rainbow Laces Campaign** (2013-Present) was started to tackle homophobia in sport. The campaign has encouraged greater LGBTQ+ inclusion across football, rugby, and other sports.
- The rise of LGBTQ+ football clubs, such as **Stonewall FC**, has provided safe spaces for players to compete without fear of discrimination.
- Discussions about **transgender athletes** have shaped policies on inclusion, with organisations working to ensure fair participation while addressing concerns about gendered divisions in sport.
- Increasing numbers of openly LGBTQ+ athletes at major sporting events, including the Olympics and Paralympics, have helped normalise LGBTQ+ visibility in elite sport.
- The rise of **esports and non-traditional sports** has expanded the definition of athleticism, allowing more LGBTQ+ individuals to engage in competitive gaming and niche sports.



British Olympic and World Champion, Tom Daley