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## They Can: Gay athletes come out--and help change Colby culture

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## GAY ATHLETES COME OUT—AND HELP CHANGE COLBY CULTURE

**T**wo-time national track champion Dominique Kone '13 is accustomed to the spotlight. But he was visibly nervous when he stepped in front of the camera in January for a video his teammate was making. While Kone has been interviewed at length about his success as a sprinter, this time he was talking about being gay.

Kone has been open about his sexuality since he revealed it to his entire track team at a meeting about two years ago. Since then he has been featured in an online video—for a national effort called the Fearless Project—about coming out as an athlete. Hundreds of students packed Page Commons at Colby in December to hear Kone speak about how coming out has made him a stronger athlete. While he is one of a number of openly gay athletes at Colby, Kone's status as one of the nation's fastest collegiate runners helps him to very publicly dispel misconceptions that gay male athletes aren't as strong, capable, or competitive.

For many people, "Differences in sexuality don't really fit into athletics," Kone said. But that's starting to change. ➤

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STORY BY RUTH JACOBS • PHOTO BY FRED FIELD

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*Facing page, from left, swimmer Sarah Kletzer '15, squash player Madeline Hunsicker '15, rower Pat Adams '13, and sprinter Dom Kone '13 are among gay athletes who have come out at Colby.*



# THEY CAN PLAY

"There's a snowball effect right now coming out of athletics ... initiated by some really fantastic students. And then it's great to see that administratively they're being supported. There's a lot of energy there," said Andrea Breau '03, who started this fall as the College's first gender and sexuality diversity program director. She has already conducted a training with coaches to help them understand how an improved climate for gay students can result in better performance and to give coaches tools and techniques to help make improvements.

A student club, Mules Against Violence (MAV), has made sexual diversity a focus of its workshops with male athletic teams and works on combating homophobic slurs and stereotypes about masculinity. Matt White '14, a MAV member and track athlete, is creating a video featuring coaches and dozens of varsity athletes, mostly straight "allies," for the You Can Play project, a collection of online videos of athletes expressing disapproval of homophobia in sports. Groups promoting a healthy athletic culture exist at other NESCAC schools, and the You Can Play project includes athletes from at least a dozen schools nationwide including UCLA and Princeton.

In his You Can Play segment, Kone credits his teammates for creating an environment in which he can excel. Kone and other gay athletes report a positive experience at Colby. But there is still work to be done.

Despite the efforts of many, Colby is not yet at the point where all gay people will feel comfortable sharing that truth about themselves. "My sense is that a lot of students know perfectly well who they are and they do not come out until after they leave Colby," said Margaret McFadden, an American studies professor who served on Colby's 2002 Queer Task Force looking at the climate for gay students and who remains steeped in these issues at Colby. A student's comfort level, she said, "really depends on the team. And that has to do with the larger culture's attitudes and assumptions about some sports and not others."

The larger culture plays a dominant role when it comes to the climate for gay athletes and other students at Colby. Progress has been made nationally when it comes to acceptance of homosexuality; the November votes in three states, including Maine, affirming gay marriage



PHOTOS BY JEFF POULAND

*Above, second from left, Tom Letourneau '13, a gay track athlete, is joined by teammates, from left, Brian Desmond '13, David Murphy '14, Chris Greenlee '14, and Justin Owumi '14 for shooting of a video for the national You Can Play project. At left, Matt White '14 shoots a segment featuring the women's ice hockey team.*

show that. And yet some students report that the use of homophobic slurs is common in locker rooms and on the field. "I can count on hearing 'pussy' or 'fag' every single time I go to the athletic center," said MAV leader and basketball player Jonathan Kalin '14.

Coaches and many straight student athletes recognize that work needs to be done. "Are we perfect? Absolutely not," said swimming and diving head coach Tom Burton. "Do we have ground to cover? Absolutely. Are we further ahead today than we were ten, fifteen years ago, five years ago? I think we are."

Swimming and diving is one of the teams with a history of openly gay athletes and, students say, a positive culture around it. Swimmer Patrick Sanders '08 recalls that he told Burton he was gay before he enrolled at Colby, because he wanted to be sure the team environment would be supportive. He felt so comfortable, he said, that he wore fluorescent pink shorts with Colby printed on the back, including when

the team went to meets. "Coach thought they were such a hoot," Sanders said. "It was something that I really wanted to make clear—that I was out and very proud. And my teammates were really supportive. ... It was an incredibly positive experience."

Almost a decade later, when swimmer Sarah Kletzer '15 announced to her entire team in December that she is gay, she received a round of applause. And since then? "It's just been normal," she said.

One of the things many female athletes fear is how coming out might change the locker room dynamic. "That was my biggest worry ... the whole shower thing," said squash player Madeline Hunsicker '15. And with good reason. Students report that one lesbian left her Colby team because teammates wouldn't let her shower with them. The issue stems from teammates being concerned that they're being viewed in a sexual way.

"I still feel like I have to avert my eyes and not make people uncomfortable," said Jayde Bennett '13, who plays basketball and soccer. "Just because you're a girl doesn't mean I'm into you. They're my teammates. I don't see any of my teammates in that

way. And so I don't want them to feel uncomfortable about it."

But gay students agree it hasn't been a problem on most teams. "No one is under the illusion now that just because you're gay means you're interested in them, and so that's not a common thing now," said Hunsicker.

The shower issue is a concern among some lesbian athletes at Colby but reportedly is not a concern for gay male athletes ("Once you get in the locker room it's all business and you're focused on athletics," said Kone). Stereotypes about gay athletes' deficiencies, however, are focused around men. Gay men are often perceived as physically weak, so gay male athletes have to combat the assumption that they can't be accomplished at their sport, male athletes reported. "They expect gay men to not be good at sports, and then, when one gay athlete is good it completely catches them off guard," said Kone.

This stereotype is supported by professional sports. Though some professional male athletes have come out after retirement, there is not a single openly gay male athlete playing in top level American professional football, basketball, or hockey, according to national media. "I really think that that fact says something about the culture of athletics," said Tom Letourneau '13, a member of the track team who is active in Colby's LGBTQ club The Bridge. "There are many, many LGBTQ professional athletes who all have come out after their time in the major leagues."

Role models help, Colby athletes say. In some ways, elder teammates who are openly gay are the most important in helping younger teammates feel comfortable. Three openly gay athletes on the track team in Kone's sophomore year were key to helping him come out to his team. "I was able to look at these athletes and see how other people were treating them," Kone said. "It's kind of like a cycle where I saw that they were accepting them so I came out, and then now younger athletes can see that they're accepting me, and then they're going to treat the next generation of athletes the exact same way. So it's going to keep cycling through. But if you're on a team where there's currently [no] out athlete, that cycle of not knowing how they're going to react is just going to keep repeating itself."

Once Kone came out and there were

four openly gay runners on the team, coach Jared Beers '01 thought it was important to make a concerted effort to create a more affirming environment. While he deflects credit to the athletes themselves, Beers does play an active role. "It's important to me that all the guys know that I'm affirming, and we talk about it a couple times a year," he said.

And if a student belongs to a team where slurs and homophobic trash talk—including the use of the word "gay" in a derogatory way—are commonplace, he or she is likely to feel uncomfortable being open with the team. MAV asks male athletes to consider how words they may use casually are fraught with stereotypes

**"Coming out made me the athlete I am today."**

**—Dom Kone '13, national champion sprinter**

and negativity and how that can affect a teammate's comfort level. "I feel very safe myself as a white heterosexual upper-class male at Colby, and I guess I just would like everybody to feel that same kind of like comfort or safety to express who they are without feeling inferior," said Kalin. Staff members involved are enthusiastic about the role MAV plays. "The magic happens when the peers are talking to each other," said Breau.

Another MAV member, White, who is creating the You Can Play video, is hoping to help create an environment that is not just accepting but affirming for gay students. "I want everybody to feel like they can step in front of their team and come out as a sophomore and have an applause erupt," he said, referring to Kone's experience. "'Cause it's great. And Dom talks about how he's so much happier

now. And so I think that giving everyone that opportunity, regardless of sport, is something special and something that shouldn't be that hard to do."

Since coming out to his team—and then to the campus community—Kone has shared how he believes it helped him to become a better athlete. In her first training with coaches, in January, Breau used Kone's story to illustrate why it's important for coaches to be actively engaged in creating an accepting, if not affirming, environment. "By coming out," Kone wrote in the narrative Breau shared, "I was able to focus and concentrate more on other aspects of my life, specifically athletics, and learned to not be so concerned with my image. In my opinion, coming out made me the athlete that I am today."

The notion that being comfortable can improve athletic performance is embraced at the highest levels of athletics at Colby. "You have to create a culture that's safe and inclusive [in which] people trust each other," said Director of Athletics Marcella Zalot. "Because no one's going to reach their potential individually or as a team if you don't create that kind of culture."

Students credit Zalot for actively working to help create that culture, and she's quick to embrace any initiative that aims to do so. "They have generally recognized as a department the impact that athletic culture has on the campus. And on a campus with no Greek life, sports teams tend to play, or are seen to play, a larger role in the social life on campus," said rower Patrick Adams '13. "So they [coaches and administrators in athletics] recognize the vital importance of creating healthy athletic cultures on and off the sports field."

With a culture change in the athletic realm that seeps into the broader culture at Colby, another benefit can emerge. As students graduate, they take their positive attitudes with them.

Burton, who coached Sanders and is friends with a number of former swimmers on Facebook, has seen it happen. When Sanders announced his engagement via social media, Burton saw wishes pour in. "To watch all of our alumni swimmers posting about 'Congratulations—so cool,' all of that stuff," he said, "it really shows that [with] the culture of our program. ... what they learn while they're here continues on forever. And I think that's very cool." 