

A mask lacrosse could do without

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You can write a law to ban homophobic discrimination, but until it is erased from the human heart, can we ever say it is really gone? And when one person steps out of the closet to open opportunities, can that act really free him or others if he and they are not prepared to deal with come what may?

Such is the juncture at which Kyle Hawkins finds himself.

After being hired in 1998 as the first adult coach of the Missouri Men's Lacrosse Team, Hawkins built the club program into a regional powerhouse. In 2006, after having engaged in a two-year anonymous online dialogue regarding his frustrations and options as a closeted coach in a conservative sport in a conservative state, he finally came out after another winning season on the field. This month he was told by Mizzou, which is governed by non-discrimination rules that protect sexual orientation, he was no longer their coach.

They said it wasn't because he was gay. Not being brain dead, nobody is buying that.

Hawkins leaves Mizzou after a 6-9 season with an overall 127-58 record, including a Great Rivers Lacrosse Conference championship in 2004; nine members on the All-Conference team and 13 Academic All-Conference in 2006; and eight members receiving conference honors this season. He was told May 4 in a meeting with team leaders, an assistant coach, faculty advisers and a university official eight reasons he was being fired, none of them mentioning he was gay. Among the reasons given: dissatisfaction with his practice regimen and the coach's reputation outside the school.

"Those are laughable," Hawkins said. "A week and a half before the meeting, they had sat in front of the ESPN cameras and said what a great coach I was."

"It was an ambush," he told the *Bay Area Reporter*. "I sat in the room where they said we were supposed to meet and they made me wait 20 minutes. They all walked in together. It was almost funny when they all entered in one group. I laughed.

"It became apparent later that they had met previously somewhere else and discussed what they would and would not say. Later some people told me they had been advised not to give me anything in writing."

Of course not. Why should an organization associated with an institute of enlightened learning wish to have evidence of its actions and motives in written form rather than oral hearsay for consideration in any court, be it civil, criminal or the court of public opinion? Socrates was not given an instruction sheet when handed the goblet of hemlock.

"I built this program from almost nothing to what it is today," Mitchell told the *B.A.R.* "The press has kind of assaulted them because they consider the reasons bogus. I've lost some respect for a couple of the people involved in this process. Not all, but some. The team president (Andy Mackley) has been great. He's been placed in an awkward situation and he's trying to do the best he can with it."

Mackley, a junior who briefly played for Hawkins in high school, called the decision "strictly business" and hailed Hawkins as a "pioneer" for his decision to be known as one of the few openly gay coaches in college sports. "His personal life had zero to do with our team," Mackley said.

Hawkins decision to out himself came after long, anguished discussion on Outsports.com beginning in 2004.

"I didn't hold a press conference," he said. "I didn't write a book. I was trying to find a group of closeted supportive coaches. I didn't find them."

He did find a shrink, who advised him to date women "just to be sure."

[Note to therapist: Not good to use women as experimental objects or guinea pigs. Some have been known to get testy with the insincerity. Of course, we have not seen any statistical advice on the patients who think they are straight you have advised to try same-sex just to be sure....]

What he did was post an anonymous message in September 2004. He listed his options at that point, the last one a self-described "half-joke"):

- 1) Be gay, leave my career, family and region.
- 2) Be gay, stay in my career, and region, lose my family, and watch my team and career eroded by homophobia.
- 3) Be gay, stay in my career, change my region, and struggle to be some sort of gay poster child for gayness.
- 4) Be closeted, stay in my career, and continue to be successful, although ultimately alone and unhappy.
- 5) Hope the cancer returns soon, and die a young successful coach whom everyone remembers fondly.

His parents have not spoken to him since he came out to them. His players initially said they supported him, but now the program - nothing in writing, natch - has asked him to leave. His religion and his sport remain dear to him His emotions and prospects now?

"It changes every 20 minutes or so," Hawkins said. "I would say there is some anger, but who isn't angry after getting fired? I'm excited about the future. There are so many opportunities opening up for me, plus things I haven't even considered yet. For my own mental health, I am looking more toward the future. The people who know me know that I am not a poor coach."

He's been in contact with a few interested NCAA II and III programs. He's spoken with the LGBT rights groups.

"I would say that people who use my situation as an excuse not to come out should not kid themselves," he said. "Every situation is individual."

"But I am against anybody who says everyone needs to come out. Coming out is a very individual decision affected by a wide range of influences. Anybody who says everyone needs to come out after a certain time or a certain age or a certain benchmark hasn't really given it a lot of consideration to it. It's an individual process."

But first things first. Right now Hawkins is preparing for his summer camp, a process made more difficult by the lengths Mizzou is going to to distance itself.

“I have to get camp taken care of and that's in July,” he said. “They’re still letting me have it although they're putting new restrictions on it. Last week they removed the camp brochure from their Web site, put that they 'thought' I was still running a camp, and said I could not continue to call it the Mizzou Camp. And I should not count myself as the Missouri Coach, which I don't.

“I already ordered all the stuff, the shirts and the equipment. I can't un-order that. It's just a big hassle. The fact is, in the long run they benefit from the camp.”

Karen Mitchell, the team's faculty adviser, told the *Associated Press* that Hawkins “was just no longer compatible with a club sport. He's made lacrosse his life.”

Hello! The club's Web site indicated the team liked the accelerated competitive class Hawkins brought. It said, “In 1999, the team joined the USL MDIA (US Lacrosse Men's Division Intercollegiate Associates) and elevated to an "Associate Status" program (which voluntarily adheres to all NCAA rules and regulations, both on and off the field). The program has not had a losing season since joining the USL MDIA and has made regional playoffs each year. In 2004 the team won the Great Rivers Lacrosse Conference title and appeared in St. Louis in the national tournament. This was the first post-conference championship the Tigers have ever played in. As high school lacrosse grows and improves in the state of Missouri, the team has also grown and improved.”

Mitchell might consider that Hawkins came out of the closet because he was looking for something in his life beyond lacrosse but want to remain integrated with his family, religious community and sports program. She might also suggest to the players that they read the NCAA brochure on its philosophy regarding diversity, including sexual orientation.

There is no page in it that says a team can strengthen itself by adhering to closeted, hypocritical bigotry rather than embracing honest and open diversity. I suggest the club drop that stratagem from its playbook.

In writing.