

Strength in diversity

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After what never needed to have been said was said, the things that had to be said were said and the fashion statement that followed was fabulous and powerful and emboldening and unifying.

Welcome to the fight against homophobia in rugby, where enlightenment progresses with two slurs back, one leap forward.

We begin this particular chapter in 2015 with Israel Folau, currently the highest paid player in Australian rugby. Besides being a ferocious player, Folau is described as a devoutly religious family man and, overall, a kind and loving person. In 2015, he denounced gay slurs yelled by fans at a match, addressing the subject of homophobia by telling a radio station, "Rugby's a game of inclusion where everyone is welcomed in. I don't think there's any of that within this club and also within the game of rugby." He appeared on a cover of a gay publication promoting the Bingham Cup, the international gay rugby championship.

Cool.

Fast forward to last year, when Australian voters are being polled on same-sex marriage. Folau tells the world he does not support marriage equality and plans to vote no. In a move rife with symbolism, he and New Zealand netball star Solonaima Maria Tuta'ia are married on the same day the polling results showing overwhelming support for same-sex marriage are announced.

Gay activists grumble. Then Folau is baited earlier this year by a shit stirrer on Instagram who asked Folau what was "God's plan" for gays. Relying on a passage from Corinthians, Folau replied, "HELL ... Unless they repent of their sins and turn to God."

With that, the hounds of social media were released.

Folau's original Instagram post was quickly deleted, but reports raced across Twitter and Facebook telling the world what a nasty little homophobe Folau was. He met with the head of Australian rugby, who reported he had been contrite and admitted he could have phrased his response with a more positive spin (whatever the heck that means, Folau denied it). His wife told him on social media to stand by his beliefs.

Some fellow players told Folau they admired his relationship with God and wanted to be like him (Folau, that is - not God). Brad Weber, a halfback for New Zealand's All Blacks, condemned the homophobic sentiment, tweeting, "My cousin and her partner, and my aunty and her partner, are some of the most kind, caring, and loving people I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. To think that I play against someone that says they'll go to hell for being gay disgusts me."

Let's catch our breath before we go forward. Let's pause a moment to let context and circumstance catch up with our outrage.

Let's go back to the 1960s. John F. Kennedy and then Lyndon Johnson are in the White House, Dwight D. Eisenhower having run off into the sunset warning us of the military-industrial complex. Woodstock isn't Woodstock yet, and the Summer of Love hasn't been loved yet.

I do not yet know I am gay. I have friends who are Southern Baptist or Catholic or Christian fundamentalists. I am surrounded by them as I play sports or speak in class or work in the lab or go to a dance. And one thing they tell me over and over and over again without much provocation is that I am going to hell.

This has no reference to my nascent sexuality, anything I say, or anything I do. They tell me I am going to hell because I do not share their belief in their religion in all of its particulars. Nice game, good job on the term paper, you make a good point and, by the way, you're going to hell.

As I did not believe in hell in the afterlife (for me, hell was something we do to ourselves in the here and now), I was not particularly concerned about what their religion told them about such a fate. But even at my strongest and most rational best, I absorbed the concept that there were a lot of folks walking this earth I knew and respected and cared for who believed I was cursed, who placed an asterisk on whatever affection or respect they felt for me, an asterisk that would haunt their image of me no matter what I said or did - and there was no arguing with it.

In those days, we did not have the kind of endless high-speed access to every social comment made across the globe kids face today. These days, young vulnerable minds and hearts are exposed to an endless onslaught of judgmental invective — unyielding condemnations devoid of nuance or compassion.

We all know the harm such public displays of damnation can have in social media echo chambers and that is why this kind of shit-stirring is so disgusting. It is not going to change anybody's mind on anything — but it can unintentionally crush and destroy young lives. Again and again we learn of young athletes who contemplated (and sometimes completed) suicide because of the messages of hate that consumed them at every turn.

Thankfully, folks are speaking up in favor of acceptance without trying to parse the degree of homophobia someone like Folau does or doesn't have, or whether he should or shouldn't be suspended.

The All Blacks and the Black Ferns, New Zealand men's and women's rugby teams respectively, have posted a [video on YouTube](#) as part of a campaign to promote diversity and acceptance.

The plot of the film is simply stated - the men's and women's team are shown preparing to play in Japan and when they tug on the front of their jerseys, the colors of the rainbow are revealed.

The visual impact is beyond words. Beyond inspiring. Beyond empowering.

Search YouTube for the words "Diversity is Strength," and you will find a bunch of white-nationalist crap that portrays the concept as crap. But at the top of the pile is the All Blacks-Black Ferns video with its stirring narration.

"The next enemy is truly formidable and deeply devious," the narrator tells us as the teams head to the stadium. "It is discrimination — an enemy that cannot be fought alone and must be defeated together. It will take more than 15 - it will take thousands ... millions ... Join our team."

Don't like what Folau said? Think folks need to get past it and be more supportive? Want people to know there is solid support for them in rugby and other sports?

Then go to YouTube and check out "Diversity is Strength." Watch the video and think about how you felt as a young athlete in sports caught on the cusp between strength and suicide. Then post the link to the video. Let others hear the things that need to be said.

Then live a life of change.