Finding the Track to Acceptance

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Tina Hillman starts her day at the crack of dawn — around 7 a.m. to be exact. She gets dressed for her day ahead. She may choose to wear a sweater if it's cold or a light, breezy T-shirt if it's warm. She starts her morning warm-ups not long after finding a comfortable fit for the day. Hillman, no stranger to injuries as national shot put champion for the Iowa State track and field team, goes through tedious physical training in preparation for her upcoming meet. She attends her classes, does her homework and then heads off to practice to fulfill her responsibilities as a student-athlete.

Hillman is one of many athletes playing for universities around the world. She carries the hope that this time, on this field, her team will find victory. She hopes for great weather and good competition to prove her skills. And when she looks into the stands of cheering fans, she hopes that they can accept her true self, because she is a pansexual woman.

“Pansexual basically means that I love someone for their personality,” says Hillman. “In a way, I’m gender-blind. [To me], gender is not a defining factor for whether or not I like someone. I could like someone who is female or male or gender nonconforming or gender fluid because I just love people.”

But the all-American athlete is an image that is hard for our society to shake. They are seen as natural leaders of their teams and winners of their designated sport and most definitely not gay. Even in 2016, retired basketball player Jason Collins and professional boxer Yusef Mack brought out hostile reactions from a lot of people by coming out of the closet. According to an interview published by Broadly.com, this kind of environment can create a fear among other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or asexual (LGBTQA) athletes to express their sexual orientation. For this very reason, Hillman hadn’t always seen her sexuality so clearly.

Growing up in Dover, Delaware, she spent years confused and afraid of her feelings towards the same sex when she fell in love with her eighth grade best friend. Coming from a household that saw her sexual orientation as wrong, she saw her attraction as rebellious. Hillman had always known how her family and friends felt toward any sexual orientation that wasn’t the “standard” relationship between a male and a female. They even took her to anti-gay events to help instill this view.

“I remember being taken to an homophobic pep rally when I was a kid. It was definitely ingrained that it was all wrong,” recalls Hillman.

But these pep rallies along with her upbringing only helped to conceal Hillman’s true feelings for her best friend. “I had been definitely taught that it was wrong,” recalls Hillman. “It had been frowned upon by my mom and she was very religious. I was falling in love with [my best friend] and I was very confused about it because I had been raised in a very Christian, conservative household and [again] taught it was wrong.

Never fully feeling that her family would accept her, she continued to internalize her pain. “I felt a lot of conflict within myself. I felt like I was being really rebellious. I felt like I was being a disappointment to my family, to my religion. It was a really hard time for me I didn’t know what to do with my feelings and I kept telling myself that I was punishing myself for it.”

Realizing that she was not only attracted to the opposite sex while in middle school, Hillman told her best friend how she felt about her and hoped this would be her first step in discovering who she was. “I confessed to her, but unfortunately that did put a damper on the friendship and we went our separate ways in high school.”

But Hillman, in the spirit of a natural romantic, fell again for her new best friend in high school. “Then two years later, I found myself falling for my other best friend, who was also a woman,” Hillman chuckles.

This time, Hillman did not allow herself to hide in her own shadow. As an up-and-coming star shot putter at her Catholic high school, St. Thomas More, Hillman began to feel comfortable enough to start dating women.
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“As an up-and-coming star shot putter at her Catholic high school, St. Thomas More, Hillman began to feel comfortable enough to start dating women.
After finding solace in his local church, he felt ready to express who he was to the world and help others who were still feeling uncomfortable. "If I knew an athlete who was trying to come out, I think I would first start by pointing them to the LGBTQ student services," says Spick. According to Spick finding the right people to talk to can be one of the best decisions LGBTQA can make when trying to come out. "No matter who you are or when you're coming out, it's important that you have resources and it's important that you have people that you can turn to for that support. We will work together and find you those resources to help you come out," says Spick.

As for Hillman, she just wishes she had had someone to comfort her younger self when she began to realize she was pansexual. "The first thing I would tell her is that it is going to be okay. There were many nights when I would cry about it. I would feel completely rejected, especially by some members of my own family and I would wonder if it was ever going to get any better."

"And it has. It's gotten a lot better," Hillman says with a smile.

"But at this point, I decided that it was natural because there was absolutely nothing wrong with what I was feeling. I loved her, so why is that a bad thing?" But as word spread around her conservative high school that the notable athlete was dating another girl, a mutual friend of Hillman and her girlfriend told her mother. "Her mom freaked out and told my mom. I went home one day and my mom was crying and was upset," says Hillman. "It was just sad...No one wants to see their mom sad because they like someone."

Finding peace within herself did not stop Hillman's family from holding their own views on her sexuality. "There were conflicts with my mom at the time, but my dad was very accepting. But that's not to say that my mom doesn't love me (because) she definitely does and we've worked through this," says Hillman. But I know for a fact, she doesn't completely accept it. "For a lot of people who identify as LGBTQA, it can be a hard journey to express themselves to their friends and family. And as an athlete, where your masculinity or femininity is closely linked to the sport you play, the reality can be even harsher.

Just like the unspoken rule practiced in the military, it's not uncommon for LGBTQA athletes to feel the same sense of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." "I actually had teammates who were seniors when I was a freshman (who) knew about my sexuality, but I could tell it was definitely an (off‐limit or taboo) thing," says Hillman. "They only talked about boys. They didn't ask me about my love life, they didn't ask me about who I was interested in because they knew."

"Eventually, what I did was ask about how they felt about it, [when] I started becoming more comfortable with [my sexuality]. And they said 'Yeah, just don't come on to me', 'we just don't need to talk about it', " she says. "It was definitely a 'hush hush' thing."

When it comes to asserting their sexuality, athletes tend to feel an unusual amount of pressure. "Some observations I've made about [gay athletes], is that the sporting world tends to be very traditionally gendered," says Benjamin Spick, the education and outreach coordinator for the LGBTA Alliance here at ISU. "I think this can be difficult for LGBTQA people because so often we transgress those gender binaries."

Spick has spent the better part of his undergraduate years telling his "coming out" story and helping educate the public about the implications of hushing your sexual identity. And just like Hillman, Spick also felt shame and rejection about who he was. "And I knew at that time that I couldn't talk about that with my family or any of the people in my life."

"In a way, I'm gender-blind. Gender is not a determining factor for whether or not I like someone...I just love people."
After finding solace in his local church, he felt ready to express who he was to the world and help others who were still feeling uncomfortable. “If I knew an athlete who was trying to come out, I think I would first start by pointing them to the LGBTQ student services,” says Spick. According to Spick finding the right people to talk to can be one of the best decisions LGBTQA can make when trying to come out. “No matter who you are or when you’re coming out, it’s important that you have resources and it’s important that you have people that you can turn to for that support. We will work together and find you those resources to help you come out,” says Spick.

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“They only talked about boys. They didn’t ask me about my love life, they didn’t ask me about who I was interested in because they knew.” Seeing her teammates attempt to disregard a part of who she was, Hillman felt it was time to speak up. “Eventually, what I did was ask about how they felt about it, [when] I started becoming more comfortable with [my sexuality]. And they said ‘Yeah, just don’t come on to me,’ we just don’t need to talk about it,” she says. “It was definitely a ‘hush hush’ thing.”

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