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Danielle Wong | Sun Nov 07 2010 17:51:00 | [Be the first to Comment](#)

Mac athletics and queer student group partner to fight homophobia in sports

Memories of being bullied in high school can deter queer students from joining a university sports team, but McMaster University's athletics and recreation is setting its sights on changing that.

Athletes and department staff, decked out in maroon Marauder gear, are marching for the first time in the campus Pride Parade Monday afternoon to promote inclusivity and unity with a historically-marginalized group, said sports leagues and camps co-ordinator Andrew Pettit.

The department also partnered with the Queer Students Community Centre (QSCC) to organize "Positive Space" training for all their full-time recreation staff and several part-time employees last week, Pettit said, adding it was the first time they came forward as a group to participate in the program.

"The idea is not just to walk and support," he said. "(It's) actually to know the issues and challenges that face them, to take a more educated approach to supporting them. ... It's a really positive step forward."

QSCC co-ordinator Tabatha Fernandez-Sardina Bradley, 21, said marching together is a sign of solidarity.

The two groups have been stereotypically polarized, she said.

"In high school, it's always the jocks, the gays. And reaching out and showing that isn't true goes such a long way to making McMaster an inclusive community."



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But they still have many myths to dispel on both sides, the political science student said. “We all survived middle school and high school. There’s always this knee-jerk reaction (that says) ‘Oh, it’s sports. I can’t do that. ... They’re going to call me nasty names,’” she said. “It’s ignorance, not malice. You don’t know what you’re saying is hurting somebody.”

Pettit agreed. While improvements have been made to debunk homophobia in sports, athletics is still an area where it’s acceptable to make comments that are unintentionally insensitive, he said.

McMaster is a thoughtful community, Pettit said, but there are still phrases used such as: “You’re tired — man up!” and “Don’t be gay, let’s go!”

Fernandez-Sardina Bradley, who is an avid swimmer, said members of the QSCC community tend to participate in individual sports, but are wary of team sports.

“It’s not that gay people aren’t into sports; it’s just we tend to gravitate toward sports that are self-reliant and (in which) we won’t have to hang out in the locker-room afterward,” she said.

QSCC member and life science student Spencer Jenkyns, who is trying out for dragon boating and hopefully soccer at McMaster this year, agreed.

“In individual sports, there’s not so much interacting with everyone else,” the 26-year-old said. “(In) team-based sports, you have a multitude of different opinions. It’s difficult to come out from that. It still is.”

Pettit, who is working on higher participation rates from historically marginalized groups this year, said by showing up in maroon for the parade Monday, it gets the discussion going and signals a welcome to other groups.

But the shakeup in sports culture won’t be overnight, he said.

“There will likely be some angst on both groups’ part. ... How do we redefine (ourselves into) a more positive sports culture going forward? There’s going to be some angst around that change, but I think we have enough strong people committed to ideals that we’ll get there.”

One first step is training their literal whistle-blowers, such as referees, to stop athletes who call other players offensive names for example, and use the moment as an educational opportunity, Pettit said.

Fernandez-Sardina Bradley said she is already seeing a change in the McMaster sports culture. Two weeks ago, the department had e-mailed her a proof of an ad for the semifinal football game against Queen’s University that referred to “queens,” and asked her how she felt about it, she said.

After her input, the ad campaign was redesigned.

Something as small as that e-mail helped create a positive atmosphere on campus, Fernandez-Sardina Bradley said.

“That meant a lot of me as a person, as a service. ... Five years ago, that would not have happened.”

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