Michael Sam Understands That Football Is a Business. That's Why He Felt Comfortable Coming Out.

By John Culhane

The Missouri Tigers' Michael Sam, No. 52, reacts after a play against the Oklahoma State Cowboys in the 2014 Cotton Bowl.

Photo by Kevin Jairaj/USA TODAY Sports

Like most folks who follow the progress of LGBTQ rights, I was fascinated by the recent revelation that an athlete at the University of Missouri is gay. I'm talking, of course, about the unnamed *swimmer* whom football player and NFL prospect Michael Sam dated last year.

Several articles have referred to Sam's "openly dating" the swimmer as evidence of his

increasing comfort with his sexuality. He was public enough about the relationship that his teammates knew about it. So his coming out to the football team was the natural next move in his step-wise process. As we all know by now, that process culminated in the public avowal of his gay identity last weekend.

But I can't find any mention of the swimmer's name anywhere, and that's revealing. It might just be that the anonymous aquaman isn't completely out, and folks are respecting his privacy. That benign account seems unlikely, though, because anyone Sam was openly dating would expect the football player's reflected celebrity to make his own identity quite public.

My guess is that the swimmer wasn't named because he doesn't matter. Or at least his sexuality doesn't, not to the general public, anyway. But why not? Both teams are Division I powers at the same school. But, the Olympics aside, no one really cares about swimming. (I should know. I swam for a Division I team. We perversely reveled in our marginal status.) And we're past the point of scouring college sports to find and then celebrate obscure gay athletes. It's gotten too hard to keep track of them all.

High-level football, though, is something else. And not because—or not mainly because—it's the most testosterone-heavy, het-identified mainstream sport around. If Sam had been at a different school, or even been a so-so player with no prospect of continuing his career beyond Missouri, the story would have died quickly. (Remember Conner Mertens? Me neither.)* This story has had such a big impact only because Sam is ticketed for the National Football League, where he'll soon become the first active, openly gay player. Ever. And since Jason Collins didn't manage to hook on with a team in the NBA after coming out last year, Michael Sam will be the first openly gay player in any of the four major sports: baseball, basketball, football, or (sort of) hockey.

Through his brick-by-brick coming out process, Sam gained the confidence to take this plunge. He's smart enough to understand the risks, and he has calculated that his prodigious defensive skills will be a sufficient bulwark against the homophobia that might derail a lesser player's chances of being drafted. (He will probably be picked up by an NFL team, but after reading Emily Bazelon's piece on Richie Incognito's relentless bullying of Miami Dolphins teammate Jonathan Martin and another teammate who was suspected of being gay, I'm more worried than I was before about what will happen to Sam once he's there.)

Michael Sam knows what football at this level is: a business. Responding to the tired canard that straight players won't be able to deal with a teammate's gayness in the locker room, Sam had this to say: "It's a workplace. If you've ever been in a Division I or pro locker room, it's a business place. And people want to act professional."

"Workplace." When I heard that, I thought of another recent college football story: the Northwestern University players who have filed a petition to unionize. They're arguing that they're

employees, while the school (and the NCAA) continues to pound the "student-athlete" drum. Sam's straightforward statement is hard to argue with. Whether in Division I or the NCAA, football players' lives are highly controlled in a way most of us wouldn't put up with in our jobs. Was Michael Sam consciously boosting the players' argument for unionizing when he spoke?

That seems unlikely; but after hearing the guy, almost anything seems possible. His honesty and clarity of purpose are astonishing. He also seems ready for whatever crap he has to deal with. As he said, after growing up in a home marked by relentless tragedy, "telling the world I'm gay is nothing compared to that." He'll need to hold onto that perspective once he's in the merciless NFL.

***Correction, Feb. 18, 2014:** This post originally misspelled the first name of Conner Mertens.*

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-Michael Streiffert

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