

Leagues of their own



Flag football players gather in Seattle last October for Gay Bowl XXIII. The annual tournament of the National Gay Flag Football League draws players from across the United States and Canada. This year's tournament will be held in Austin, Texas, from Oct. 31 to Nov. 3. NATIONAL GAY FLAG FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Athletes find community, confidence, 'family' in LGBTQ+ sports organizations

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

When the 2024 Summer Olympic Games get underway in Paris in July, some 10,500 athletes from 206 nations will compete for medals in 329 events across 32 sports. With the Eiffel Tower rising majestically in the background, they'll try to embody the official Paris 2024 slogan: "Games Wide Open."

"It is an invitation to the world to come and experience new emotions together," Paris 2024 President Tony Estanguet said of the slogan when he unveiled it in July 2022. "It's a power — the power to open our hearts and minds, to stop seeing differences as obstacles. ... Our Olympic Games will be those of perfect parity."

Although it's a noble vision, not every athlete feels a sense of "perfect parity" when they compete. LGBTQ+ athletes, in particular, often struggle to reconcile the spirit of the Games with the reality. Instead of "new emotions"

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Adrian Hyrylainen-Trett



Adrian Hyrylainen-Trett has competed in golf, dancing, running and power lifting at the Gay Games, an international alternative to the Olympics that emphasizes participation and inclusion. FEDERATION OF GAY GAMES



“I didn’t know what a gay basketball player looked like, because in the ’70s and ’80s that wasn’t a thing.”

Mark Chambers

Mark Chambers founded the National Gay Basketball Association. COURTESY OF MARK CHAMBERS

fueled by unity and inclusion, many feel stifled by old feelings that are rooted in discomfort and division, says Adrian Hyrylainen-Trett, 45, a London-based athlete who has competed in golf, dancing, running and power lifting — not at the Olympics, but rather at the Gay Games, an LGBTQ+ alternative based on three core values: personal best, participation and inclusion.

“As a kid, I loved sports. But then I lost that from probably age 13 to 25 due to coming out,” says Hyrylainen-Trett, who is nonbinary and living with HIV, both of which make it complicated to participate in traditional sports leagues and competitions. “I was working out my sexuality, and working out who I was, and team sports really weren’t the easiest place to be.”

When Hyrylainen-Trett found their way back to athletics as an adult, events like the Gay Games made sports feel good again.

“The Gay Games is not just about being competitive. It’s also about being able to join and do your best,” says Hyrylainen-Trett, who serves as the

games’ vice president of external relations. The Gay Games differ from the Olympics by being inclusive of people on antiretroviral drugs and people receiving hormone replacement therapy, by welcoming athletes of all skill levels, and by taking place only in LGBTQ+-friendly cities and countries. “We provide a safe space where people can compete at any level.”

Established in 1982, the Gay Games takes place every four years in host cities around the world. It celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2023 — a year late on account of the pandemic. Valencia, Spain, will host next, in 2026.

In the meantime, LGBTQ+ athletes in the United States are embodying the same principles locally that the Gay Games promotes globally with the help of dedicated leagues that prioritize players instead of points.

Proud to play

When his basketball team won a silver medal at the 1990 Gay Games in Vancouver, Mark Chambers didn’t just celebrate. He transformed.

“I grew up a little gay Black boy in Northern California thinking I was the only gay basketball player in the world. I didn’t know what a gay basketball player looked like, because in the ’70s and ’80s that wasn’t a thing,” says Chambers, 59, of Long Beach, California. He played basketball in middle school and most of high school, but quit his senior year as he was coming to grips with his sexuality. “I was trying to figure out who I was, and it just didn’t seem like the right place for me to be.”

He returned to basketball years later when he answered an ad in an LGBTQ+ newspaper seeking players to join a team for the Gay Games. “My whole world changed,” says Chambers, who recalls meeting a “ragamuffin group of guys” whose ranks included “sissy boys who could snap smoke and dunk on you.” “Looks can be deceiving. ... It just blew my mind that I wasn’t alone.”

Chambers went on to conceive the National Gay Basketball Association (NGBA) in 2002. Today, the league has more than 1,000 players on more than 100 teams registered in cities across the country.

“NGBA is a place where you can be who you are, play the game you love and be welcomed without judgment,” Chambers says.

Being welcomed without judgment is what drew O.T. Porter-Fisher to

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LGBTQ+ sports. A former college basketball player, he'd quit sports when he began questioning his sexuality. Because he felt intrinsically different from his heterosexual teammates, he ostracized himself.

When he came out as gay at age 33, however, he felt just as different from the gay people he met as he'd felt around the straight people he knew.

"I didn't know you could be gay and masculine. I didn't know you could be gay and love sports ... I didn't fit the gay stereotypes, and that was a conundrum. Because even though I was out, I still felt hidden," says Porter-Fisher, 47, of Houston, who finally found his tribe when he joined the National Gay Flag Football League (NGFFL), of which he's now director of media and public relations. Established in 2002, NGFFL boasts more than 4,000 players across 28 affiliated leagues, all of which share the same mission: to build an inclusive community that celebrates diversity, athleticism and sportspersonship.

"When I joined NGFFL, I found a family. Most of the people who are closest to me ... are people I've met through this league. I even met my husband on the field," Porter-Fisher says.

Community and confidence

The social benefits of LGBTQ+ sports are significant, says Jake Quinton, 26, a doctoral student studying sports management at the University of Massachusetts. In 2022, he interviewed gay men about their experiences with organized sports and found that social connections are one of the most significant reasons that LGBTQ+ athletes play sports.

"Imagine joining a gay volleyball league, for example. You walk in, and you immediately have two things in common with everyone else in the room: You have your LGBTQ+ identity and you have your desire, interest or love of sports," Quinton says. "Those two commonalities are a really strong starting point for building relationships."

That was the case for Matt Williams, 33, of Washington, D.C. "Even though D.C. has a relatively vibrant gay community, I felt isolated for years after moving here. It was really hard to meet people," says Williams, president of Stonewall Sports, an LGBTQ+ sports organization offering about a dozen sports — including kickball, bocce, billiards, bowling and dodge ball — across



Founded in 2002, the National Gay Basketball Association now includes more than 1,000 players on more than 100 teams registered nationwide. NATIONAL GAY BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION



O.T. Porter-Fisher, a former college basketball player, quit sports when he began questioning his sexuality. Even after coming out, he struggled to feel like he fit in with other gay people. Then he joined the National Gay Flag Football League, where he says he "found a family."
NATIONAL GAY FLAG FOOTBALL LEAGUE

26 cities. "Stonewall gave me an opportunity to meet new people outside of the traditional spaces."

On any given Sunday in Chicago — home of Stonewall's largest chapter, where some 1,600 people play kick-

ball each spring and fall — the vitality of the LGBTQ+ sports community is evident in a rainbow of Stonewall T-shirts that permeates the "gayborhood" adjacent to the kickball fields.

"Leagues' popularity speaks to the demand for inclusive sports spaces and sort of refutes the stereotypes that exist about gay people being uninterested in sports or not good at sports," Quinton says. "Clearly, there is demand for them."

What starts on the field inevitably reaches far beyond it, says Angela Smith, executive director of the Amateur Sports Alliance of North America (ASANA), a softball league made up of more than 5,000 players across more than 450 teams in 29 cities.

"ASANA is a culture. It's a way of life. Once a week you get together with friends for an amazing day of softball and camaraderie and laughing," says Smith, 53, of Atlanta, who says ASANA differentiates itself from other LGBTQ+ leagues in several important ways. One is its focus on family, including partners and children. Another is the fact that it caters to "LGBTQ+ Women+" — including not only lesbians, but also transgender men and women and non-binary and agendered individuals. "We think everyone deserves a safe space to come and play softball with their friends," Smith says.

Safe spaces can be especially meaningful in smaller cities that lack LGBTQ+ gathering places, points out Williams, who says Stonewall's newest chapters include places like Fargo, North Dakota, and Gainesville, Florida.

And yet, it's not just community that athletes find in LGBTQ+ sports. It's also self-confidence and personal development, suggests Jeff Sloan, commissioner of International Pride Softball, an LGBTQ+ softball league with more than 18,000 players on more than 1,000 teams across 54 cities.

"Because of who we are — how we act, how we talk, how we look — a lot of folks in our community get marginalized and excluded from team sports and all the benefits that come with them, like learning how to coexist," says Sloan, 39, of Kansas City, Missouri. "There are critical skills that people in our community should be able to develop at an early age all the way through early adulthood, and they just aren't available because of discrimination and other issues that we face in sports environments."

Porter-Fisher agrees. "Sports allows people to push beyond their limits and their expectations. That's a skill that transfers into real life," he says, "It's so much bigger than the sport."

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