Former college football captain was openly gay

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Brian Sims led his Bloomsburg University team to Division II Championship game
By Cyd Zeigler jr.

In the autumn of 2000, we at Outsports had run the story of Greg Congdon, a high school football player in Troy, Penn., who had been run off the team because he was gay. At the same time, 100 miles away, a very different football story was unfolding.

Defensive tackle Brian Sims was the captain of the Bloomsburg University football team. He had grown up an Army brat with two Army colonels for parents. The family settled in Pennsylvania for Brian’s high school career, and he ultimately suited up for the nearby Bloomsburg. Playing in Division II, the team’s record midway through the 2000 season was 4-2, and they were setting their sights on a Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference championship. What he and his teammates didn’t know was that they were in the middle of what would become the longest season in Division II history; And Sims was about to tell them he was gay.

Actually, Sims said he didn’t come out to his team: "My team came out to me."

Someone Sims had dated shared a class with the quarterback of the football team, Eric Miller. Sims believes that the jilted lover wanted Sims kicked off the football team, so he told Miller that he had been dating Sims. Soon after, Sims was out on the town with Miller and longtime friend and teammate Fran Gregor. After a couple drinks, Miller asked Sims if he was gay.

It was the question Sims had been fearing for years. He knew many of his teammates probably suspected that he was gay, and he was right.

"He’s the captain of the football team, he’s a good-looking guy," Gregor, his good friend and teammate through high school and college, said. "In the dorms, there were nights
when girls would literally stumble into our room and climb into bed with him. And five minutes later, they would leave."

At the time, Sims was actively dating men. While living with nine of his teammates, he was able to hide his romantic life from these very close friends. He had first realized he was attracted to men in junior high school and in high school had a long-term affair with a fellow athlete. It wasn't until he was in college that he realized he was gay, and it wasn't until that night that he told any of his friends.

Despite his suspicion, Gregor never talked about Sims' sexual orientation until that night. No one did. Not having talked about it with anyone, Sims feared how divulging that he was gay would change his team and how he fit on it.

"I knew it was going to happen, I just didn't know how or when," Sims said. "I feared it would change the dynamic in the locker room. You're spending four or five hours a day with your friends, and that's what I played for. I cared that my team would still be comfortable around me. I was concerned that in the locker room guys would be uncomfortable around me."

Despite the fear, Sims told them he was gay. They spent much of the rest of the night talking about the revelation, mostly making sure that Sims was in good shape emotionally. Word spread to the rest of the team slowly. It was before MySpace and Facebook; In 2000, no one was Tweeting about anyone's sexual orientation. The guys Sims told that night didn't hold a team meeting, but slowly more and more teammates found out.

"I think it genuinely came as a shock to most people," Gregor said. At 6-feet, 260 pounds, Sims didn't fit the mold that most of the guys on the team had for gay men. In his senior year, he bench pressed 225 pounds 37 times. He was a "guy's guy": No limp wrist and no feather boas. "I wouldn't call Brian your stereotypical gay man, whatever that may be."

As teammates found out, in the locker room no one moved away from Sims. No one shied away from him. His being gay became just more fodder for locker room teasing,
like someone's fat mom. Sims said he also became the dumping ground for every question his teammates had about gay people.

"Straight guys tend to be the most curious about sex, in general," Sims said. "My team asked me everything you can possibly ask a gay guy about sex, and in the crudest terms possible."

Both Sims and Gregor said they never heard a single negative comment about Sims' sexuality the rest of the year. Part of that was the timing. They were in the middle of a season for which they all had high hopes, and by the time most of the team found out about Sims, they had started talking about the playoffs. After starting the season 1-2, they ran off 11 straight wins and reached the 2000 Division II National Championship game. With the preparation and frenzy surrounding the team as they inched closer to the playoffs and then started winning playoff games, the sexuality of one of the team's most respected players was the furthest from players' concerns.

"We made a hell of a run that year, going to the national championship game," Gregor said. "Everyone was just really focused on the goal at hand, and [Sims being gay] was just put on the backburner. It didn't play a major role on our team. I don't think anybody was concerned that it would get out to the press or anything."

It also helped that Sims was good. Very good. He was the captain of the team and he was a first-team all-conference player that year. While his team got beaten badly by Delta State in the national championship game, 63-34, Sims said he recorded three sacks in the game.

"By the time it happened, I was the longest-running starter on the team," Sims said. "I had a lot of success on the football field. And I think that bought me a certain amount of leeway with this group."

Gregor agreed: "Had he been a scrub sitting on the bench and not really part of the team, I'm sure he would have gotten ridiculed and made fun of. I'm sure it would have been a much worse road for him had he not been a good player and the captain of the football team."
On the contrary, Sims said because he was a good player many of his teammates found the positive side of having an openly gay man on their team.

"It became a funny sense of pride for a lot of my teammates and close friends," Sims said. "Pennsylvania is not an extremely liberal state, especially central Pennsylvania. Football players are not what I would consider particularly exposed people, especially college football players. But I think it became a sense of pride for all of them. 'Not only is this guy an All-Conference player, and not only is he a starter, and not only is he a good friend of mine, but I'm all right with the fact that he's gay.' And I started seeing a lot of that."

Sims remembered one night when he was on a date. They were sitting in the back of the room at a candlelit table enjoying a quiet evening. Several of his teammates came in and were sharing some drinks at the bar. Out of Sims' earshot, one of the other patrons apparently made a comment about the two fags on date.

"Three or four guys on my team literally picked him up and threw him out the door," Sims said.

Many of his teammates came to him over the coming months, pulling him aside to privately apologize for anything they may have said over the years that offended him. He specifically remembered a 6-foot-3, 350-pound teammate "crying his eyes out" thinking he may have offended Brian in the past. "It was very affirming for me," Brian said.

Still, after the season ended and Sims had graduated, Gregor, who was there for one more semester, said players did talk more about Sims' sexuality and asked more questions about it. And as new players came in and younger players rose up the ranks, the story of the "gay captain" grew.

"After he graduated, it was more talked about after he left," Gregor said. "Younger guys who didn't really know him talked about it. Guys would say, 'I can't believe that guy was gay and was the captain of the football team.' I won't say it became a legend, but it was
more talked about after he left than it was when he was there."

About four years ago, Sims brought his now-fiance to a team reunion. Both of them were accepted with open arms. Sims said he "lost track of him halfway through the night because he was off with half of the football team getting bombed somewhere."

Sims said would have liked a shot at the NFL, but a 6-foot defensive tackle wasn't on anyone's radar screens, and he was never given the chance in college to play fullback or linebacker. Instead, he got his J.D. from Michigan State and now works for the Philadelphia Bar Association. One of his most recent projects was to draft a resolution on behalf of the Bar Association in support of recent state legislation protecting against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. He is also on the Board of Directors for Gay and Lesbian Lawyers of Philadelphia.

"Our Constitution is very specific," Sims said. "It either says separation of church and state or equal protection. And there's not a valid policy argument to be made for why there isn't complete 100% equal rights for LGBT folks. There just isn't. The only argument that can be made has to trace back to religions norms. I happen to pay taxes to a government that says it won't base how it treats me on what a religion has to say about me."

Talking about the law and legal protection for gay people, it's clear Sims is as passionate about this work as he was at any time on the football field.

"My experience will be the norm soon. Pretty soon, it's not going to matter if you're a gay guy on a football team, and you're parents aren't going to freak out if they find out you're gay. Will it be different? Interesting? Yes. But it's so close to not being an issue, and I want to push us beyond that point."