

## Toronto GM Burke's Story Sheds Light on Anti-Gay Sports Environment

Written by Matthew Coller  
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Brian Burke was merely trying to honor his son. But his standing in hockey has shed light on the issue of the anti-gay culture which exists in sports. Not just across hockey, not just across professional sports, but across all sports.

Burke, the general manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs, lost his son Brendan in a car accident just months after he revealed that he was gay. Last week Burke marched in a gay pride parade in Toronto. The intention was to show respect, the result was good conversation.

[National Post writer Bruce Arthur](#) told Brendan's story from his family's perspective. Homosexuals are denigrated and dehumanized in sports communities, take the Blackhawks' locker room white board during the Stanley Cup for example: Next to Chris Pronger's name read, "is gay." Arthur made the issue human. Here's an excerpt:

*Two months earlier Brendan had revealed to the world that he was gay. A student manager for the hockey team at Miami University in Ohio, he took up the mantle for tolerance in sports, agreeing to come out publicly in an article on ESPN.com. When he had come out to his father a year earlier — his bluff, macho, tough, Irish Catholic father — Burke didn't have to take a breath and wonder what to say. "This won't change anything," he told his son.*

Burke said he didn't think there was anything heroic about being there for then and honoring his son now. Indeed. But Burke's openness in allowing the media to cover his story, to allow his to affect lives of gay athletes and the parents of gay athletes is heroic. In 2005, [NBC hired Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates to study](#) how the public views gay athletes. The study found that 68 percent of near 1,000 surveyed said it would hurt an athlete's career to be openly gay. Brendan Burke wasn't an athlete, he was a student manager of the Miami University in Ohio men's hockey team, but his father's prominent position in sports gave a voice to sports writers, athletes, executives and fans to ask: "Is enough being said? Is enough being done?"

[John Fischer](#), who runs a New Jersey Devils blog, wrote that fans should take it as a responsibility to work to combat bigotry. In the NBC study, nearly half said that America needs an open discussion on homosexuality and sports, yet until now, at least in hockey, there's only been silence. Fischer, who generally asks fans their favorite Devils player, finds himself asking strong rhetorical questions:

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*Why would a gay person want to play the game if the banter in the locker room is disparaging of homosexuals, as if same-sex relations are a bad thing? How can anyone at any level of the game at any position on any team possibly think about coming out of the closet if being gay is the subject of derision and insult?*

Here's another rhetorical questions: Would we be asking these questions without Brendan and Brian Burke's story?

Another hockey writer [Derek Zona of Copper & Blue](#) wrote about persisting homophobia in hockey. Zona responded to anti-gay e-mails in response to a story written about Burke. The conversation continued with Zona's cause and effect of homophobia on individual athletes:

*The anti-gay culture is pervasive throughout all levels of hockey and it's not likely to change any time soon without a giant push in the right direction from the NHL. There are still over 15,000 near-adults playing higher-level amateur hockey in North America. Of those, some 3,500 are playing Major Junior or NCAA Hockey. As sure as Brian Burke is that there are gay men in professional hockey, I'm sure that there are many times that number in the amateur ranks. Yet these kids are left on their own, far from home, far from any support system, invariably alone, a gay kid playing a sport in which gay men are reviled, living in fear of being discovered. There is nowhere to go, no one to talk to, and nowhere to turn but inside themselves, and that loneliness and fear [almost certainly impacts their on-ice performance](#) and, to a greater extent, their careers.*

The NBC study found that 42 percent said if ESPN created a television special on the accomplishments of gay athletes, viewers would be enraged. Only 22 percent said people wouldn't be enraged. The story of Brendan and Brian Burke may have enraged 42 percent, but it also brought it to light for those who had never considered the struggles of homosexuals in sports.

Martin Luther King Jr. said "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

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