

# Lafayette College Athletics

The Real Deal: Athlete Ally

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Gavin Studner '16 was tired of keeping his secret bundled inside him. He didn't want one more person, especially a student-athlete at Lafayette College, to feel the way he did -- different, alone, unfulfilled - because of their sexual orientation. "I'm no longer scared to admit I had a battle with depression," says Studner, a senior on Lafayette's tennis team. "I feel like people who are gay do have these battles and I want to show that the battle doesn't have to be as hard as they think it is."

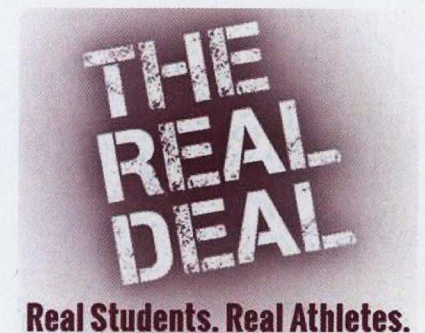
Studner, now mentally healthy, strong and thriving, showed how far he'd come in accepting his true self when he came out in the student newspaper as the first openly gay athlete at Lafayette College.

Since that article was published, three Lafayette students sent him Facebook messages saying his actions gave them the strength to come out as well. In addition, a Lafayette recruit, who is openly gay, has reached out to Studner for support.

"I realized it was my time to take a stand and come forward and accept who I am," Studner says. "[Those students reaching out to me] was the best thing that came out of it. It was truly amazing to have that kind of impact on people's lives."

Studner doesn't view his actions as courageous. He wasn't trying to put himself in the limelight nor did he take part in the story to prove anything to himself.

"For some reason, I can't feel that way," Studner says. "I still look to the future at the work that needs to be





done" at the College and in the community.

"But it's definitely changing in the right direction."

Field hockey player and Student-Athlete Advisory Committee co-chair Abbey Stefanides '16 credits not only Studner, but the Lafayette athletics administration for building awareness, understanding and acceptance among straight athletes toward gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender teammates.

Studner knows altering the way people think and speak about homosexuality is a group effort, and he believes he's on the right campus to make that happen.

Studner, Stefanides and the Lafayette athletics administration, under the leadership of Director of Athletics Bruce McCutcheon, researched ways to combat the close-mindedness toward gay athletes often found in locker rooms. Enter Lia Parifax '08 and her husband, Hudson Taylor, co-founders of Athlete Ally, a nonprofit organization dedicated to "educating, encouraging, and empowering straight athlete allies to combat homophobia and transphobia in sports."

Last fall, Taylor, who is straight and coaches wrestling at Columbia University, visited College Hill where he addressed Lafayette athletes and coaches. Studner joined him during the sessions and talked about the importance for others to not use gay slurs or make negative comments even if there are no openly gay athletes on the team.

"That only keeps gay athletes more closeted," Studner said. "My athletic ability grew when I became more comfortable and confident in myself."

"That made a big impact on my life."

And it gave Studner an idea: Why not start a branch of Athlete Ally on Lafayette's campus?

"We figured, 'Let's use this momentum and move forward with a brand that is already a national brand,'" Studner says. "People see Athlete Ally, and they can associate it with Leopard respect and ending homophobia at Lafayette."

McCutcheon took it one step further.

At a mandatory, student-athlete gathering at the start of every semester, McCutcheon usually is the only individual to speak. This semester, however, McCutcheon asked Studner to address the about 500 student-athletes in attendance. Studner talked about Athlete Ally's mission and the importance of bringing a branch to Lafayette.

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"I think we were able to get everyone on board," Studner says. "It's been all positive since then. The whole thing is, I want to leave Lafayette in a better position than when I first came here. I feel like starting Athlete Ally now, hopefully I'm helping future gay athletes have a safe and more comforting environment here. It's all about trying to improve the culture."

Since Taylor visited campus, a softball player has come out of the closet, says Stefanides. Studner knows student-athletes who haven't come out but are questioning themselves. Stefanides reiterated, "Gavin's had a lot to bear. He's been the sounding board for these people. We realize he's going to be gone in May, and we need to put something in place so people can go and let stuff out if they need to."

Studner and Stefanides have established a leadership group that focuses on recruiting underclassmen. One of their recruiting tools this semester was to ask fellow student-



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**- Gavin Studner '16**

athletes to sign the Athlete Ally pledge. In addition, the leadership group also asked the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) to get involved. SAAC, in turn, tasked teams with holding conversations about Athlete Ally and the issues surrounding homophobia.

"Just comfortable and unscripted," Stefanides explains.

Much of what LGBT athletes go through is anything but comfortable.

In two recent matches, Studner faced opponents who used gay slurs, and it was hurtful, she says.

"They did not know I was gay, but that was not the point," Studner says. "The point right now is you don't know who is gay. My idea is you can say anything you want about my tennis game but don't say anything about my personal life. That just really hit home and made me realize once again what my goal is: ending homophobia and this degrading language toward gays."

Studner alerted McCutcheon, who contacted the opposing school's athletic director and asked for a guarantee that there would be repercussions for the students' actions.

"They were implemented," Studner said. "Bruce took charge of the situation. Bruce has been incredible in fostering a safe and inclusive environment for everyone. Athlete Ally wouldn't be here if it weren't for him. A huge, huge thank you to him. He understands we aren't just trying to change the culture at Lafayette, but we are trying to change the culture at other schools, too, and he helped with that."

Next on the agenda for Lafayette's Athlete Ally branch is to talk to members of the Oaks Leadership Academy, a program developed to support student-athletes and coaches in their quests to become strong leaders in academics, athletics and life. It's important, Studner says, for those in the Oaks Leadership Academy to understand how to tackle situations when hurtful language is spewed and when the topic, in general, is brought up. There are also stickers set to arrive soon that have the equal sign on them and wristbands that say, "Leopard Respect."

"Yes, it's about ending homophobia in sports," Studner says, "but it's also about having respect in sports."&nbsp;



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