

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection

Note: This week's AoW is an opinion piece.

Why Michael Sam's coming out is not an unnecessary 'distraction'

Source: Nico Lang, guest blogger / *Los Angeles Times* February 15, 2014

On Sunday, college football star Michael Sam stood on the precipice of making history. The University of Missouri lineman and NFL draft hopeful came out as gay in an interview with the New York Times, potentially making him the first openly gay NFL player. Before his announcement, Sam was projected to be a mid-to-late-round pick in May's draft. But according to Sports Illustrated, his stock may be falling. There has been some negative reaction from NFL personnel; in the SI article, one source labeled Sam's sexuality an unnecessary "distraction."

"There are guys in locker rooms that maturity-wise cannot handle it or deal with the thought of that," an assistant coach, who wished to remain anonymous, told SI. "There's nothing more sensitive than the heartbeat of the locker room. If you knowingly bring someone in there with that sexual orientation, how are the other guys going to deal with it? It's going to be a big distraction."

Former Vikings punter Chris Kluwe, an outspoken LGBT rights activist, called this argument out for what it is: bogus. In an interview with the Huffington Post, Kluwe argued that the word "distraction" is code for intolerance, used to avoid dealing with the very real and entrenched culture of homophobia in the NFL. It's a way to impede the history of progress in sports, dating back to Jackie Robinson and Billie Jean King.

"You can look at all those quotes that were said in that article," Kluwe said. "They could very easily have been lifted from a paper right around the time Jackie Robinson was entering Major League Baseball. They're almost word for word. It's like, wait a minute, we've had this struggle before. We already know how it turns out; why are we doing this again?"

Instead of looking at Sam's coming out as a moment of history, the Boston Globe's Christopher Gasper believes that the NFL is hiding behind the "distraction" angle as a way to say that having the added attention of a gay player would hurt a team. He argues it's simply the "rationalization of prejudice and fear" rather than having any basis in reality.

"Teams overcome outside distractions all the time.... The Patriots overcame the distraction of Aaron Hernandez being charged with murder to go to the AFC championship game this season. The Miami Dolphins missed out on the playoffs, but not because of the fallout from the Jonathan Martin hazing imbroglio. They were 4-4 when the scandal broke and went 4-4 in its aftermath."

In a heartfelt broadcast for WFAA, Dallas' local ABC affiliate, news anchor Dale Hansen reminded us what a sad and dangerous message it sends to gay players to suggest that they are less acceptable than convicted criminals and bullies.

"You beat a woman and drag her down a flight of stairs, pulling her hair out by the roots? You're the fourth guy taken in the NFL draft," Hansen said. "You kill people while driving drunk? That guy's welcome. Players caught in hotel rooms with illegal drugs and prostitutes? We know *they're* welcome. Players accused of rape and pay the woman to go away? You lie to police trying to cover up a murder? We're comfortable with that. You love another man? Well, now you've gone too far!"

Like many in the NFL, Hansen confessed that he's not always comfortable with gay people, but he believes discomfort shouldn't stand in the way of equality. After all, Missouri didn't let Sam's sexuality become a distraction in the locker room, and all signs show it didn't hurt the team. As Dave Cullen argues in the Daily Beast, it might have actually helped them win.

"Sam came out to his team at Missouri last August: How did his 'distraction' affect the team?" Cullen asks. "Mizzou won the Cotton Bowl, finishing fifth in the final AP poll. And Michael's teammates elected him MVP. That's the goofiest part about the kerfuffle: It's not a theoretical discussion. Michael Sam has already run this experiment.... He just spent three years in the closet at Mizzou; then half of one out. He knows which one was easier."

Of course, Cullen mentions that having the first openly gay player will entail a "brief readjustment" period, and to pretend it won't overlooks the very real obstacles Sam will face. However, the NFL shouldn't assume that these challenges are a bad thing. Sam was a leader on the field because he embraced adversity, playing with his full open heart. Honesty and courage make a team stronger. They don't distract from playing football; they're a crucial part of it.

Not every team is going to be up to the challenge of Sam, but that shouldn't be a reflection on his ability to win games. If a team is willing to pass up Sam and take a pass on progress, it's a comment on theirs. If Michael Sam is the biggest distraction in your locker room, your team already lost.

Possible Response Questions:

- This is an opinion piece. What do you agree with? What do you disagree with? What argument is not made here?
- Predict how Sam's first year in the NFL will be.
- Pick a passage and respond to it.