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9 Sports Heroes and One New Campaign

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For LGBT History Month, I wanted to call attention to some of the LGBT, gender barrier-breaking heroes who mean the most to me: nine kick-ass athletes. And since it's National Coming Out Day, it's a good day to highlight a new campaign, The Last Closet [1], which seeks to end homophobia in men's sports. On their website, you can join the campaign [2] asking league commissioners to take action on homophobia in their leagues. You can also check out some great videos [3], including interviews with one of last year's LGBT History Month icons, transgender Division 1 athlete Kye Allums.

And now, check out my LGBT sports inspirations:

Billie Jean King - Tennis

?Without her, I don?t know if any of us would be here.?
Serena Williams

A warrior for gender equality on and off the court, Billie Jean King became a 1970s cultural icon, winning 12 Grand Slam singles titles and defeating Bobby Riggs in the ?Battle of the Sexes?. In 1972 she became the first tennis player and first woman to be named Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year. As an activist, Billie Jean?s impact ranks along side Muhammad Ali, Jackie Robinson and Arthur Ashe. She made it okay for women to be jocks and fought for equal prize money. Along the way she founded the Women?s Tennis Association, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and inspired millions of people worldwide in the fight for equality.

Martina Navratilova - Tennis

"Arguably, the greatest player of all time. Male or female"
Tennis historian, Bud Collins

Martina Navratilova had swagger. Martina was one of the first female athletes to use weight training and she practiced cross-fit before it had a name. She won a record 74 consecutive

matches, 18 Grand Slam Titles and was the first female athlete to earn $1 million in a single year. Martina?s rivalry with Chris Evert is one the greatest in all of sports and is the subject of many books and an ESPN documentary, ?Unmatched.?

Jerry Smith ? Football

?If you love a guy, you love him?that's all there is to it,?
Hall of Famer Bobby Mitchell, on his teammate Jerry Smith

In a 13-year career for the Washington Redskins, Jerry Smith helped revolutionize football?s tight end position. In his career Smith caught 421 passes, including 60 touchdowns, a record for tight ends at the time. He was named All-Pro twice and held several NFL records that stood for years.

?In a career full of brave performances,? The Washington Post?s Tom Boswell wrote, ?Smith never had a more courageous play than the one he made ... when he became the first well-known American athlete to say he had AIDS at a time when the public was unaware of it. It was an act of heroism. And a significant one.?

Jerry Smith died in 1986; his teammates served as pallbearers at his funeral.

Angela Hucles - Soccer

Angela Hucles led the U.S. national soccer team in goals scored during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, helping the United States to secure the gold medal. During the quarterfinals, she scored a goal in the 12th minute to help the Americans defeat Canada, and two goals in the team¹s 4-2 win over Japan in the semi-finals. Angela is a member of the Advisory Board for You Can Play, a campaign dedicated to fighting homophobia in sports. In 2011 Angela married her partner Anne Reed in Massachusetts.

Seimone Augustus ? Basketball

Two-time Olympic Gold Medalist Seimone Augustus is one of the 10 best players in the world. In 2011 Seimone was voted Finals MVP in leading the WNBA?s Minnesota Lynx to the title.

Augustus graduated from Louisiana State University (LSU) in 2006. Her uniform number (33) was retired by LSU on January 9, 2010, making her the first female athlete in school history to receive that honor. During her collegiate career Seimone was a three time All American and won the Naismith College Player of the Year in 2005 and 2006 while leading the LSU to three straight Final Four appearances. Seimone is engaged to LaTaya Varner, her partner of six years.

Mildred ?Babe? Didrikson Zaharias ? All-Around Athlete

?The Babe is here girls. Who?s coming in second??

The world?s greatest all-around female athlete got the nickname Babe, after Babe Ruth, when she hit five home runs in a baseball game. Her deeds are so prodigious they seem exaggerated. Babe was an All-American basketball player, an expert diver, roller skater and bowler. Once at a track meet she set five world records in one afternoon and won the team championship, despite being the only person on her team. She also won two gold medals in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, won a blue ribbon for sewing at the Texas State fair and could type 90 words a minute. At age 23 she taught herself to play golf and became the world?s greatest female golfer. Babe won a total of 82 tournaments and became a founding member of the Ladies Professional Golf Association.

Greg Louganis - Diving

Greg Louganis is the greatest diver ever; he is the only male diver in Olympic history to sweep the diving events in consecutive Olympic Games.

Megan Rapinoe- Soccer

If you watched the 2012 Summer Olympics you know that Megan Rapinoe is hella cool, crafty and fun. Her goal-scoring celebrations alone are worth the price of admission. Rapinoe scored three goals and had a team high number of assists to lead the United States to a gold medal. Two of those goals were equalizers in the USA?s epic 4-3 semifinal win over Canada.

Orlando Cruz ? Boxing

?I have always been, and always will be, a proud gay man,?

With those words, Orlando Cruz became the first active male athlete in any major sport to come out. Cruz is the 4th-ranked featherweight (126lbs) in the world. As an amateur Cruz represented Puerto Rico in the 2000 Summer Olympic Games.

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