

Commentary On Dating A Teammate

Taylor Priestley

Commentary On Dating A Teammate

Romantic relationships within a team setting are often viewed as taboo, risky, or inherently disruptive. Yet these dynamics occur far more often than coaches or administrators acknowledge, especially LGBTQIA+ athletes who may already feel pressure to conceal aspects of their identity. In this commentary, my goal is not to persuade coaches to encourage or discourage these relationships but to highlight the emotional and performance-related consequences that secrecy, stigma, and team culture can create for student-athletes. By sharing my experience, I hope to encourage more inclusive, thoughtful, and supportive environments in sport.

When I entered university, I did not understand that I was bisexual. I knew I felt different, but I never recognized my sexuality as a defining part of who I was. That changed the moment I met one of my teammates—and that realization shaped the next four years of my life in complicated, confusing, and transformative ways.

Dating within a team setting is undeniably tricky. Is it appropriate? Risky? Selfish? In my experience, it is all of these things at once—and the opinions of coaches, teammates, athletic directors, athletic trainers, and strength and conditioning coaches vary wildly. What felt even stranger was hearing people in my athletic circle express strong views about romantic teammate relationships in abstract scenarios, while unknowingly commenting on the very dynamic I was experiencing right beside them.

As a freshman, I was impressionable and desperate to fit in. One night in my dorm, an upperclassman began gossiping about her suspicions that two teammates were romantically seeing each other. My heart pounded—not only because her comments mirrored my own situation, but because my crush was sitting in the room listening.

“I just don’t think dating a teammate is acceptable,” she said. “Honestly, it’s pretty disrespectful to everyone else on the team.”

The discomfort in the room was heavy. That word—*disrespectful*—echoed in my mind. I had never viewed my feelings as disrespectful. Attraction is not a choice. I was not trying to disrupt anything. I simply cared for someone.

To avoid suspicion, I nodded along. What hurt most was watching my crush quietly leave the room. The comments affected her, too.

At first, we could not talk about our feelings openly. Our connection lived in glances, shared moments, and intuition. Over time, in private, she finally expressed her feelings. She admitted she was scared—of judgment, rejection, and the fallout within the team. I shared the same fears. The judgment was not always loud—it showed up in subtle ways. During our program’s pride-themed games, I studied every teammate’s reaction, noting who felt “safe” and who did not. Negative moments stuck with me more than the positive ones.

We started dating my second year and kept it secret for three seasons. Only a few trusted people knew. People often asked, “How did you live with a secret relationship?” My answer was always the same: *It felt better when no one had an opinion*. I could have stayed quiet forever if it meant protecting us from hate, judgment, or backlash.

My sophomore and junior years were the hardest. I dealt with heavy insecurity and low self-esteem. Hiding such a big part of my life took a toll on my mental health and, as a result, my physical performance. Sometimes I wondered how my confidence—and even my athletic development—might have looked if I had felt safe enough to be honest.

After our senior season ended, I finally told my coach. “I KNEW IT,” she said with a smile. Instantly, it felt like a 300-pound weight lifted off my shoulders. I then called a few teammates. Their reactions were overwhelmingly supportive. For the first time in years, I felt like I could breathe.

Although my coach and team did many things to promote inclusion—supporting pride-themed games, encouraging open conversations about identity, and emphasizing respect within the program—I realized that team culture alone is not enough. You can have an inclusive team, inclusive policies, and inclusive messaging, yet still feel unsafe if the people around you reflect society’s broader stigmas. What truly shapes an athlete’s experience is not only the environment a coach tries to create, but how teammates interpret, internalize, and react to the norms and biases they see outside the team. Even in a supportive program, the fear of judgment rooted in societal attitudes made it difficult for me to fully trust that I could be open about my relationship. Ultimately, it does not matter how inclusive your team appears on paper—it matters how that inclusivity is living in everyday interactions, comments, reactions, and behaviors.

Yes, I chose to keep our relationship hidden. I lacked the confidence to confront possible judgment from the team and the broader athletic community. That fear shaped everything.

Today, my partner and I are about to celebrate our three-year anniversary. Being teammates, best friends, and partners all at once was not easy—but moving beyond the secrecy has strengthened us. We learned resilience, communication, and how to support each other under pressure.

Unexpected romantic dynamics can occur within any team—whether friendships or relationships—and secrecy often makes them more complicated than transparency. What matters most is not policing relationships but cultivating an environment where athletes feel safe, respected, and understood.

During my four years, I watched friendships form and fall apart. Yet teammates still found ways to leave personal baggage at the door and remain professional. Romantic relationships can operate under the same principle when athletes feel supported rather than judged.

This is possible when athletes feel safe enough to be themselves. Coaches play a critical role in shaping that environment through their language, reactions, and openness to differences.

There is not a perfect blueprint for navigating intra-team relationships, especially for LGBTQIA+ athletes. But secrecy, stigma, and fear can have lasting emotional and physical impacts. I often wonder how my experience—and my performance—might have looked if I had felt less anxious about being honest sooner.

By sharing my story, I hope to help coaches, staff, and teammates understand what is at stake. Inclusive behaviors and practices do not just support identity—these behaviors support performance, confidence, and overall athlete wellbeing. If opening up about my experience helps raise awareness and reinforces the need to welcome these stories, especially for athletes who feel alone, then sharing it matters.