

ANTHONY CAMBER'S DISUNITED

In his latest novel, popular author *Anthony Camber* imagines what could happen if a prominent sportsman came out as gay. Here, *Alistair Moore (alimac30)* takes a look at *Disunited*, and puts some questions to the author.

In the UK, football (soccer) is a national obsession. On match days, towns and cities all over the country are filled with people dressed in team colors and replica kit, while the fixtures of the football leagues dominate the weekend TV schedules and, often, the headlines. The Premier League in particular, in which the top teams in the country compete for glory, produces footballers and teams that become global brands and marketing powerhouses. Even if you've never watched a football game you've almost certainly heard of David Beckham and Manchester United. The game, its fandom, and its culture are loud, passionate, and hyper-masculine. Football is as much about brawn and bravado as it is about skill and tactics; and it is, at present, no place for the gays.

In 1981, Justin Fashanu became the first black footballer in the UK to earn a transfer fee of £1 million, and in 1990 he achieved another first – he became the first professional footballer in the English leagues to come out as gay. Branded an outcast, he struggled to find a full-time contract with any high-profile football team after coming out, and the tabloid press ran stories of his supposed sexual encounters with unnamed politicians, pop stars, and other footballers. He later stated in *Gay Times* magazine that although he was offered large sums of money for these (largely untrue) exposés, he was “offered even more by others who wanted him to stay in the closet”. After moving to the US in 1998, a 17-year-old man from Ellicott City, Maryland, accused him of sexual assault; shortly afterwards, Fashanu took his own life. In his suicide note he claimed the sex was consensual.

Fashanu's coming out was a landmark moment, but it was certainly not a watershed. It was 22 years before another professional footballer came out in the UK, with player Robbie Rogers announcing that he was gay in February 2013. In the same announcement, Rogers retired from professional football, at the age of 25, with immediate effect.

Just one month earlier, in a remarkable display of prescience, Anthony Camber had published *Disunited*, his third novel, a story which contemplates what could happen if a footballer in 2013 dared to come out, and – more importantly – dared to stay in the game as an openly gay player. In *Disunited* we meet Danny Prince, a top player who falls – rather than intentionally steps – out of the closet. The aftermath of his very public outing is a brilliantly-written rollercoaster of highs and lows, violent backlash, shady characters, and some genuinely

horrific moments, with a great big dash of hilariously eccentric British humor thrown in for good measure.

Let's get one thing straight: I hate football; but *Disunited* is a gripping read, offering a keenly-observed insight into how a character with whom I identify navigates a culture with which I thought I never would. *Disunited* is in equal measures funny, touching, and achingly relevant, and will appeal to football lovers and haters alike. If, and hopefully when, a real-life Danny Prince decides to step forward, he may make a football fan of me yet.

With the full-time whistle blown, I was able to grab author *Anthony Camber* for a post-game press conference...

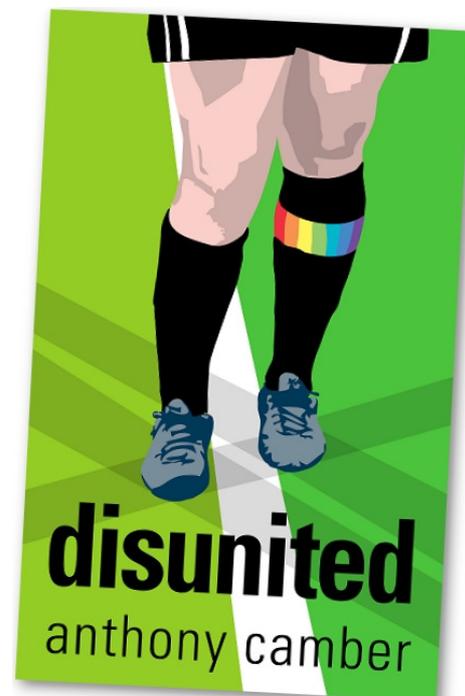
Give us a brief, spoiler-free summary of what happens in *Disunited*.

It's a coming-out story, but it's very much not a typical coming out. For most of us, coming out is a never-ending series of big and small personal events. Telling family, telling friends, work colleagues, and just living our lives being true to ourselves and visible, and correcting assumptions. But for Danny, the footballer at the heart of *Disunited*, it's different. He's closeted

because he has to be: nobody is out in football. As the book starts he's celebrating after signing for a top local team. It's a major step up the career ladder. But he's 21 and full of himself, so he celebrates in his local gay club and doesn't notice someone taking his photo. Before he's off the dance

floor it's spread to *Twitter* and *Facebook* and is going viral, and his agent's having kittens trying to keep a lid on the story.

It's fair to say there's a mixed reaction at his new team – from the other players and from the manager. The team sets him up with a beard, a fake girlfriend, but things don't quite go according to plan and overnight his life changes. He explodes out. For a sport like football, Danny is hugely newsworthy and the tabloids are quickly on his tail. And for a young man like Danny, it's a stressful and confusing and exciting experience. And we follow him on the roller coaster ride as the story expands and it's not so much Danny coming out, it's football.



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Are you aiming this book at the football community, the LGBT community, or both?

Neither! You don't need to know the intricacies of the offside rule or anything about real-life teams or players to enjoy it. It's a comic novel aimed at people who like comic novels. I'd hate people to think of it as a football book – it's like saying *Animal Farm* is about agriculture. The LGBT community will certainly relate to Danny in a way others can't, but I've had great reactions from straight readers too.

Has the football community picked up on the story at all? And have you had any negative reactions, from anywhere?

I've had a short review in the national football magazine *Four Four Two*. They seemed to like it. The national gay magazines haven't been interested so far, which is odd considering Robbie Rogers and their general keenness on having footballers on the covers. I haven't received any negative reactions. The book's had some pleasing and ego-boosting reviews.

Why was it important to you to write this story?

The idea for the book grew from a simple observation. Statistically it's highly unlikely there are no gay players in the Premier League – or in the NFL, or NHL, or NBA, or any major sport. It follows there are a bunch of closeted players – who knows how many? – playing now, earning fortunes, but afraid of showing their true selves. Like most professional team sports, it seems, football inhabits the society of a few decades back. This is utterly mad. I wanted to highlight this strange, old-new world, crumbling into the twenty-first century.

And it's dedicated to Justin Fashanu because I remember him as a player, and I saw what he went through. I was in the closet then myself. Football desperately needs a gay role model or two, so I tried to write one. Danny has his flaws, though, that's for sure.

Soon after you published *Disunited*, the real-life coming out of UK footballer Robbie Rogers hit the news. How does the story of Danny Prince in *Disunited* compare with what happened to Rogers?

I had a hunch a footballer would be coming out soon. It was a race against time, I thought, to get *Disunited* out before it happened. I said as much on my blog when I announced the book. I brought the release forward, and I'm glad I did.

The main difference, of course, is that Robbie Rogers retired from the game immediately he came out. I can't tell you how sad and angry that makes me. Not at Rogers, who I think wrote [a very moving post giving his reasons](#), but at the people at the top of the sport, people like the Football Association, who aren't doing enough to fight discrimination of all kinds. They're talking, making glossy brochures, but they're not acting. It is their inaction that leads to people like Rogers feeling they have no place in the sport that has been their life, their passion.

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What kind of a message does that send to the younger gay players out there, looking for reassurance from the powers that be that they'll be able to play the game they love and at the same time live true, honest lives like the rest of us? Why do they have to choose between the two, as Rogers felt he had to?

I wrote [a very ranty blog post about this](#) that you might like to check out before I burst a blood vessel.

It's probably fair to say that Rogers was not a high profile sportsman before his coming out. Is big-money sport ready for a big-name coming out?

Rogers certainly wasn't well known in the UK. But he did play for the US national team a few times, and they're no push-over.

You know, I think big-money sport is desperately ready. I actually think sponsors will pile on the first one to kick the closet door open – they're far more aware of how society in general has changed than those in the top echelons of the sports themselves. But for an individual it's a hard decision, balancing the huge positive PR against the knowledge that homophobia hasn't gone away.

As to realism, *Disunited* is a comic novel and as such gives a distorted, hall-of-mirrors view of the real world. If events proceed exactly as I've written I'll be very surprised and slightly disturbed. I bet there's a grain of truth in it, though. Just as in the book, I can't see the raging, venomous beast that is a stadium of football supporters being anything other than hostile, at least at first. I bet there'll be some conflict with other players too, and the tabloid press will go several varieties of nuts.

We'll see, sooner rather than later I reckon. I'm still betting on a top player coming out this year, probably over the summer, and carrying on in the sport. Within a few years we're more likely to see talented young players who came out aged 13, 14, 15, signing to teams. They won't be footballers coming out as gay, but gays coming out as footballers. “Mum, Dad, I've got something to tell you. I've signed for Arsenal.” “It's OK, we still love you, as long as you're happy.”

My greatest wish is that by the Qatar World Cup in 2022 – homosexuality is still illegal in that country – at least one team will field an out gay man who's married, and who'll take along

his husband. I cannot wait to see it.

How can our readers get hold of *Disunited*?

Your lovely, intelligent and downright attractive readers can buy the paperback from [Amazon](#), or if they prefer ebooks it's available in the [Kindle store](#), the [Apple iBookstore](#), the [Kobo store](#), and from [Lulu](#). All DRM-free.

And please tweet me photos [@anthonymcamber](#). I love that.