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Edited by David Leonhardt

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COMING OUT

A Gay Baseball Player, in Statistical Perspective

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Justin Wolfers

Until this week, no active baseball player associated with a Major League Baseball team had ever publicly come out as gay. David Denson, a prospect playing for the Helena Brewers in one of baseball's rookie leagues, has finally ended that streak.

My colleague Billy Witz has detailed the human interest story here. But baseball is a game with a statistical bent, and I thought it worth putting Denson's decision in that perspective.

Estimates of the proportion of American men who identify as gay or bisexual vary. One recent government survey suggested 2.2 percent; in a recent Gallup poll, 3.3 percent of adult men were willing to tell an interviewer that they identified as gay, bisexual or transgender. The same survey noted that 4.6 percent of men 18 to 29 identified as gay, bisexual or transgender.

There are 30 major league baseball teams, each with 40 men on their roster (all of them active once September callups take place), yet none of these

1,200 players have acknowledged being gay. If baseball players are as likely to be gay as other men their age — let's go with an estimate of 1 in 25 — then the odds that none of these men are gay is one in two sextillion. A sextillion comes after a trillion, quadrillion and quintillion; it is a thousand billion billion.

There are a further 46 Class AAA teams, 30 Class AA teams and 82 Class A teams, none with an openly gay athlete on their rosters. If these teams averaged 30 men on their roster (roster size varies by league), there would be nearly 5,000 more minor league players, none of whom have publicly identified as gay. The odds of that might be greater than one in a Googol (one followed by a hundred zeros), but not by much.

Denson, 20, plays at the level below Class A, in the Pioneer League, which is a short-season rookie league in which most of the players have been signed straight out of high school.

The Minor League Player Encyclopedia run by Baseball-Reference.com lists over 222,515 “players, managers and other people from minor league history,” and notes that their lists “may be missing players.” Yet until now, none have come out during their playing careers. At least two former players, Billy Bean (the former Tigers, Dodgers and Padres player, not to be confused with the Oakland A's general manager of “Moneyball” fame, Billy Beane) and Glenn Burke, came out, but only after retiring. Bean is now serving as Major League Baseball's first ambassador for inclusion. An active umpire, Dale Scott, came out at the end of last year.

Of course there may be reasons that gay men are either more or less likely to play baseball than straight men, so perhaps my 1-in-25 estimate is not quite right. But even if the proportion is much lower, the point remains that there are probably dozens of gay men currently playing for teams associated with Major League Baseball.

Denson's decision to come out of the closet puts baseball one step closer to being in sync with the broader American public, who have become more

accepting of same-sex relationships, but it still seems to have a long way to go to catch up.

Justin Wolfers is a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan. Follow him on Twitter at [@justinwolfers](https://twitter.com/justinwolfers)

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