

# Opinion: Being gay should not matter in professional sports

By Phil Taylor, Sports Illustrated

The most difficult conversation of Patrick Burke's life did not come on the day his younger brother, Brendan, revealed he was gay. That was a relatively easy talk, at least for Patrick, now a scout for the Flyers. It was just after Christmas in 2007, and he was 24, five years older than Brendan. They were bringing in Patrick's luggage from the car after a scouting trip when Brendan told him, and for Patrick it didn't change a thing. Why would it? They were brothers. Just to make sure it wasn't one of Brendan's jokes, Patrick made him swear on the Stanley Cup that he was serious, the way the brothers often did, because hockey runs in the Burkes' blood. Brendan, then the student manager of the Miami (Ohio) men's hockey team, swore accordingly. "I love you," Patrick told his brother. Then he told him to grab a suitcase.

No, the hardest conversation of Patrick's life came a few days later, after he'd had time to think about the years that his brother had felt the need to keep his sexuality secret. He thought about the stereotypes he had joked about in front of Brendan and how he had casually used the word gay as an insult. They weren't hateful comments, just unthinking ones, but Patrick could hear them now the way Brendan must have heard them then. He would later learn why Brendan had quit his high school hockey team before his senior season: As a closeted gay player, he was uncomfortable with just that type of locker room banter.

"I had to sit down with my little brother, my best friend, and apologize," says Patrick. "I said, 'I'm sorry if I made your life harder. I'm sorry if I ever made you think that because you're gay, I would love you any less.'" It was Brendan's turn

to reassure him. Whatever Patrick had said in the past hadn't changed the way Brendan felt about him. They were brothers. "He said, 'I knew you loved me,'" Patrick remembers. "But still I couldn't believe some of the things I had said."

You may know what came next, that after Brendan came out publicly in November 2009 and after his father, Maples Leafs president and general manager Brian Burke, not only accepted him but also accompanied him to Toronto's Gay Pride parade, fate bodychecked the Burke family into the boards. On Feb. 5, 2010, the SUV that Brendan was driving slid out of control on a snowy Indiana highway and into the path of an oncoming pickup truck, killing Brendan, 21, and Mark Reedy, 18. It was a tragedy deepened by its cruel timing—Brendan's life was over just as he was beginning to live it openly. The Burkes have dedicated themselves to gay activism in his memory ever since, and their latest project is the You Can Play initiative cofounded by Patrick.

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