

CHIP ALFRED, WRITER



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Levels the Field

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A QUEER SOCCER PLAYER LEVELS THE FIELD.

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feedback@philadelphiaweekly.com

It's a sweltering Saturday afternoon in Fairmount Park and Perry Monastero is schmoozing with his Philadelphia Falcons teammates after soccer practice. He's aching, sweaty and exhilarated all at the same time. "I feel like I can conquer the world again," he says with a grin. After 13 years of playing with the Falcons, a queer soccer club, Monastero says it's something he doesn't ever want to give up.

"The goal of the team is to build community—both on and off the field," says Monastero. "By being there in an out presence, we serve an important cultural purpose."

It's apparent this team holds a special place in Monastero's heart. "Many of the people closest to me in my life are people I've met through the team." The Falcons, identified as queer but including a number of straight allies, are a perfect example that attitudes are changing. "Sexuality is less of an issue than it used to be. People just want to play soccer," he says. "It's great to feel like you're ten or fifteen years old again running around and having a good time."

But when Monastero was 15 and playing high school sports, he found himself running straight into a hostile situation. "There were a few players on the team that identified me as queer and made my life absolutely miserable," he remembers. And the taunting didn't stop at the pool or on the soccer field. Bullying and threats followed him through school like a monkey on his back. After his guidance counselor singled Monastero out and told him he was the problem, he knew his only option at the time was to quit extracurricular activities altogether. "She tried to teach me to deny who I am. I was dumbfounded."

Like many queer kids struggling with sexual identity, Monastero became depressed and isolated. After high school, he made a crucial decision that would affect the rest of his life. "Let me do something to make things easier for the next generation of queer youth," he thought. He landed a job with a philanthropic company that focused on LGBT causes and he was hooked. A queer activist was born.

For five years, Monastero, 41, led the Delaware Valley Legacy Fund (DVLFF), which supports the needs of queer organizations. He takes particular pride in DVLFF's Racial Equity Initiative, which has successfully developed LGBT leadership in communities of color. "There is racism in the queer community, unfortunately," Monastero acknowledges. He learned that funding for LGBT organizations on the national level was being distributed disproportionately to the population. Too much money was going to white-run and white-serving groups, and not enough to communities of color. Monastero was determined to even the playing field. He started to move the needle in the right direction, but



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as for the bigger picture he admits, "We still have a long way to go. Until we engage all of the diverse groups within the community on LGBT leadership issues, we will not win equal rights."

"The ability that I have to make change will come because of the things that I feel passionate about," says Monastero, who in 2000, started OurNightOut, a once-a-month networking party of LGBT professionals and friends. One of those passions is supporting LGBT families. "There are already eight million children in this country being raised by openly LGBT parents. People need to stop pretending that this isn't happening." Monastero is working on a pilot project with the National Adoption Center and the Human Rights Campaign to improve access to adoption and surrogacy resources for queer couples. "We're going to make it easier for more queer families to exist."

Monastero feels fortunate to be working as the director of development and marketing at the Mazzoni Center, a culturally queer health and advocacy center as well as a catalyst for change in the LGBT community, but in his mind, there's more work to do and new ideas to pursue. One thing he dreams about is founding an LGBT college. "LGBT colleges could be policy centers, maintaining our history, building our cultural organization, and increasing our credibility with mainstream society," he says. He acknowledges it might be an uphill battle getting this project off the ground. "How can we do this when we're still fighting for our rights?"

But no matter how challenging the field may become, or who the players are there's no doubt Monastero is in the game for good. ■