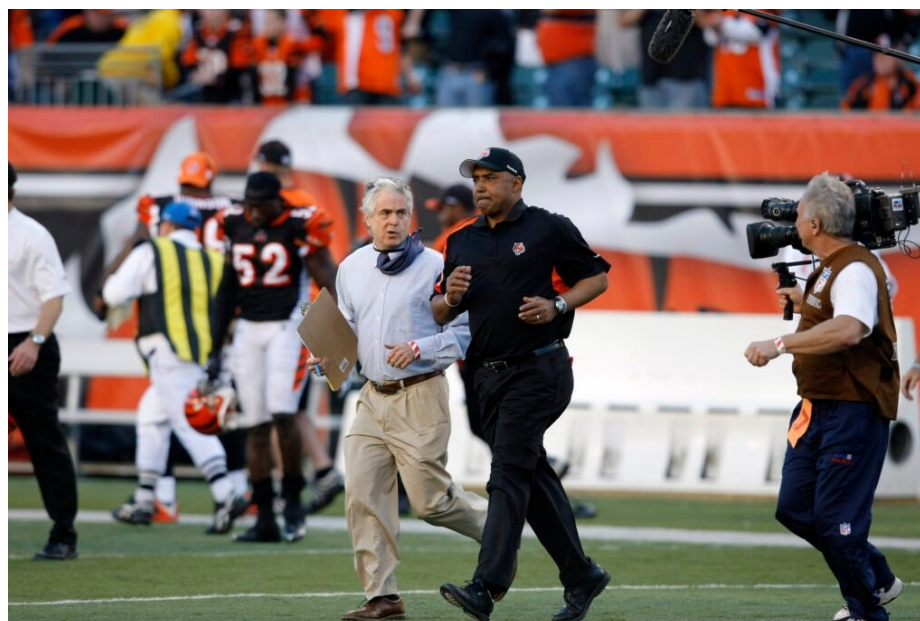


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Posnanski: Jack Brennan, the NFL's unlikely trailblazer, comes out

By [Joe Posnanski \(/author/joe-posnanski/\)](#) 4h ago

You might not know the name Jack Brennan, but he is one of those people who has quietly, behind the scenes, made the NFL more interesting, more gripping, more fun. Jack was the public relations director for the Cincinnati Bengals for more than 20 years, and he was a sports journalist at two Cincinnati newspapers before that. He has been at the very center of a quirky and wonderful Cincinnati sports scene.

How would you describe Jack? It isn't easy. There really isn't anyone quite like him in sports.

"Jack is just an excellent human being," NBC's Peter King says. "That should be what everyone knows about him."

Yes, an excellent human being — funny but also earnest, loyal but also committed to what's right, devoted to football without ever losing sight of football's failings. I'll tell you a quick personal story about Jack, one that was so common he doesn't even remember it. One day when I was a columnist at the now-defunct Cincinnati Post, I got into a heated argument with a Bengals player in the locker room. Well, that's not right, "heated argument" suggests

that there was a back-and-forth, and there really wasn't. He didn't like what I had written. And he threatened to do really bad things if I ever wrote anything about him ever again.

This wouldn't be the last time an athlete or coach really went off on me. But it was the first. I was still young and unsure, and though I put on what I hoped was a brave face, I was pretty shaken up. Jack stepped in during the confrontation and managed to quiet things down, but that's what a public relations director is supposed to do.

Later though, when everyone else had forgotten the incident, Jack pulled me aside, and we just talked about it. I don't remember specifically what he said, but what I do remember was how kind he was, not just to me but also to the player. Without saying the words, he helped me understand that what I had written, while fair in spirit, was unnecessarily mean just so I could get in a couple of sharp-edged jokes. He helped me, even as I tried to push through my own anger, see things through that player's eyes. I believe he not only made me a better journalist that day, he made me a better person.

That, I think, is what Peter King means when he calls Jack "an excellent person." Just about everybody who ran across the Cincinnati Bengals during Jack's time has a story like that.

Of all the words people would use to describe Jack Brennan, the one I doubt anyone would use was "private." Jack seemed the most open of books, a married father of three, a Texan who grew up loving and playing football, a prankster who would put crumpled up paper on your car windshield to make you think you'd gotten a parking ticket.

He seemed just about the least likely person in the world to have a secret. But he did.

"All throughout," he writes in a book he is working on, "I was secretly a cross-dresser — a guy with a visceral and sexual urge to wear skirts and high heels and play-act as a woman."



He is one of the first men in the NFL to come out as queer, joining the handful of players and others — mostly on the periphery — who came out during their playing days or after their retirement. He finds it striking that he is the first man to come forward who was directly connected to the NFL games and regularly working in the locker room.

He is doing so because he thinks that as a married cross-dresser, maybe he can help people develop tolerance and understanding. “I think the mindset of the culture is that there are straight people and queer people and that there’s a big line between them, and never the twain shall meet,” he says. “And I hope that by coming out, maybe I can help some people see that there is no big line, that people are many different things, and queers are not so fundamentally different as to be constantly defined by it.”

Jack likes to point the scene in the television show “Community” when Dean Pelton is approached about coming out as gay and cries out that he is only two-sevenths gay.

But Brennan wants to come out because, as a cross-dresser who worked in the NFL for so long, he feels he has a unique insight into the NFL and its culture.

“It’s not like I feel the NFL or the Bengals are oppressively homophobic or anti-queer,” he says. “Not at all. The Bengals provided a great work environment, and the NFL office, I always thought, was socially progressive. I always sensed that they were sharp enough to realize that being on the right

side and progressive side of this was good for business.

“Yet, all through my years of being in the league — and this goes for the NFL sportswriting community, too — it’s almost like it was magically, wordlessly scrubbed free of the idea that anybody is anything but textbook straight. You just never hear a word of anybody being otherwise. It’s assumed, it’s in football’s DNA, that nobody is queer — it’s just anathema to the goals of toughness and winning. And this goes beyond the locker room, it’s there even in marketing, ticketing, the equipment room, the training room. It’s kind of hard to describe, but it’s just silently and unmovably there: Nobody could possibly be anything but straight.”

According to Brennan, this hurts the NFL in a way it might not have considered. He remembers how a gay friend was absorbed by the Michael Sam story a few years ago. Sam had been the SEC defensive player of the year at Missouri when he came out as gay. He was drafted in the seventh round and failed to make the St. Louis Rams. Jack, who was still working in the NFL at the time, felt like Sam had been given a fair chance, but his friend — a huge NFL fan — felt sure Sam was denied his opportunity because he was openly gay.

“I could feel real pain in his voice when he talked about that,” Brennan says. “He got a little bit emotional. I think there are many people like him, people who really like football and want to get even more into the NFL, but it hurts them, pains them, that football seems to naturally turn away from queer and gay people. It’s like they feel uninvited to this world.”

From the inside, Jack says he almost never heard anything that was plainly homophobic or demeaning. Instead, there was overwhelming silence about it all, as if a person like Jack Brennan could not exist. His wife, Valerie, was terrified the Bengals might find out he felt compelled to dress up and publicly present as a woman. She feared he would lose his job.

But Jack himself didn’t think the Bengals would fire him — he believes in the basic goodness of Bengals owner Mike Brown and others in the organization. What he did fear was that they would reassign him because coaches and players would not be able to understand and would feel uncomfortable with him being around the locker room.

He also feared being the subject of derision and scorn, a fear he has faced time and again in recent months as he has written his book and come out for the first time to many friends.

“When I was working,” he says, “I was terribly afraid of people finding out,

but it never crippled me enough to stop dressing. I'm obviously not as afraid now, but culture breeds self-shaming in queers. It's particularly hard to come out to male friends I've known for years in very heterosexist and traditionally male environments. The process is really only just beginning now."

I asked Jack if he thinks the NFL could become a more welcoming place for LGBTQIA+ people, and his answer was interesting — he said that while locker rooms are most certainly "dens of masculinity," he has seen signs of tolerance he has found encouraging and heartening. He talked about one unnamed player on the Bengals who was rumored to be gay. He felt sure that everybody in the locker room and front office was aware of those rumors, and yet, when that player was involved in an unrelated incident, the entire team rallied around him.

"It was, from my perspective, like they were saying that while maybe they did not quite feel his lifestyle was 'fine,' they were all players on the same team, and that trumped the queer issue," he says. "It was all-for-one and one-for-all. The goal was to have a good football team and win games, and as for the rest of it, well, it's not something we need to talk about. It was don't ask and don't tell. That's not ideal, but it is a form of tolerance, I think."

As for Jack's own lifestyle, he believes that nobody around him on the team — or in the media — ever suspected anything. Looking back, he is a little bit surprised his secret never came out. Cincinnati is a big city, but it can also feel like a small town, and he was out in public fairly often dressed as a woman. I asked if there were times he wished people found out.

"There's a bit of a price to pay when you cannot be your whole self with people," he says. "But I don't look back and wish I had told people 10 or 30 years ago. The younger I was, the more I just couldn't do it. The shame and humiliation, as I perceived it, would be something I would never be able to get over. I never even considered it until I was approaching retirement, and I knew I wouldn't do it until I actually was retired, even though it would have been braver to do it sooner."

"But now I feel like I need to come out. It's still scary, writing this book, telling more people. I actually came out to the Bengals before this story. I did it a few weeks ago because the team owns the rights to the photo of me and Marvin Lewis that's running here, so I needed their permission to offer it up, but I would have told Mike Brown in advance regardless of that. I felt I owed it to the Bengals that this not come as a surprise. That was nerve-wracking, to tell Mike Brown. But he responded as I thought and hoped he would, with kind words. He even mentioned his respect for Jan Morris, a transgender female author and historian who climbed Mt. Everest as a man. I had not

heard of Morris, but Mike is extremely well-read.”

“I feel like I want to become more genuine to people around me and not hide anymore. And maybe, I don’t know, someone else will see this and it will help them.”

(Photos courtesy of Jack Brennan)



Joe Posnanski ([author/joe-posnanski/](#)) is a Senior Writer at The Athletic. He has been named national sportswriter of the year by five different organizations and has won two Emmys as part of NBC’s digital Olympics coverage. He is the author of five books including “The Life and Afterlife of Harry Houdini,” released in October of 2019.

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