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**SPORTS // ANN KILLION****World Cup Pride Houses offer safe space for LGBTQ fans: 'A lot to worry about'**

By **Ann Killion**, Sports Columnist

May 31, 2026





A flag rests outside the SF LGBT Center in San Francisco on Thursday, Feb. 19, 2026.  
Benjamin Fanjoy/For the S.F. Chronicle



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**World Cup Pride Houses offer safe space for LGBTQ fans: 'A lot to worry about'**

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The upcoming World Cup is a challenge for soccer fans interested in coming to the United States. There are barriers everywhere: ticket gouging, lodging costs, travel obstacles.

And the fundamental issue of whether visitors will feel welcome and safe.

Pride House United 2026 is one effort to address that issue.

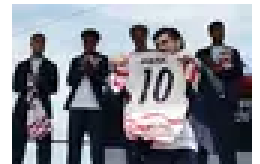
“We are taking an intentional stance to create the joy and the safe space that we can, and the community that we can control,” said Zac Brown, executive director of Pride House San Francisco. “We’re not going to control the way the federal government works. But we can make sure the people who have decided to be here have some joy.”

In recent months, several entities, including the ACLU and Amnesty International, have issued travel advisories for visitors coming to the United States for the World Cup. They warn that immigrants, racial minorities and “LBGTQ+ individuals have been and continue to be disproportionately targeted and affected by the administration’s policies and, as such, are most vulnerable to serious harm when traveling to and/or within the United States.”

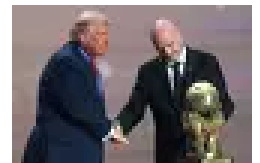
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Pride Houses, which grew out of the historic Olympic model of hospitality houses, provide a welcoming space for LGBTQ+ fans, athletes and their allies during sporting events. Originating with the Olympic movement in Vancouver 2010, and expanded to other events, this will be the most extensive effort connected to a World Cup, with a presence in all 16 North American host cities.

The San Francisco Pride House is a particularly robust endeavor. Though the “San Francisco Bay Area” World Cup games will be taking place 44 miles south in Santa Clara, the local Pride House is at the SF LGBT Center at 1800 Market St.

“For the LGBTQ population, San Francisco is an iconic city that resonates with a lot of people for safety and inclusion,” said Danielle Thoe, a Pride House SF board member and co-owner of Rikki’s sports bar in the Castro. “So we’re pretty confident that if you are an LGBTQ person and you’re coming to a game in the Bay Area, you’re probably gonna find some time to come to San Francisco.”

FIFA has always been problematic for the queer community. Soccer’s governing body has been ineffective or uninterested in curtailing homophobic behavior of fans. It now makes a habit of awarding the prized men’s World Cup to countries openly hostile to gay rights: Russia in 2018, Qatar in 2022 and Saudi Arabia in 2034.

In today’s climate, that includes the United States.

“The United States is a real nightmare, in terms of queer travelers and ICE raids and racial profiling,” said Keph Senett, a trustee for Pride House International who lives in Canada. “We are having conversations with our partners in the States that are certainly unprecedented.”

The travel advisories warn of risks that include arrest, detention and deportation. They state: “For transgender and nonbinary persons traveling to the United States, recent memoranda and federal regulations suggest that travelers must apply for visas using sex assigned at birth.”

“There’s a lot to worry about,” Senett said. “Will I end up in detention? Will my social media be examined? Will my rights be respected? Will I be safe?”

It makes an effort like the Pride House more critical than ever.

“International football, or soccer, belongs to all the people,” Senett said. “People all over the world have a love for the beautiful game. That’s part of Pride House, saying we belong here and we are celebrating it. We’re part of sport. We exist. We aren’t erased. Our trans siblings are not erased.”

Each Pride House is locally organized. [The San Francisco Pride House](#) is already up and running and will have extensive programming throughout the World Cup, including all of Pride Month, which begins Monday. There has already been the first of a three-part speaker series, in conjunction with the Commonwealth Club, “Safe Play: Creating Inclusion in Sports.” A welcome party is scheduled for June 11, the first day of the World Cup. The next night will be the Big Gay Watch Party, at Beaux in the Castro, when the U.S. team opens against Paraguay in Los Angeles.

The first World Cup Pride House was a small effort in Rio in 2014. Russia, which had adopted strict “anti-gay propaganda” laws, made it clear Pride Houses were not welcome. Neither was it feasible in Qatar, where it is illegal to be gay (as it is in Saudi Arabia). Organizers knew that the 2026 World Cup presented an opportunity.

“Sports are a space that generally have not always been inclusive of the LGBTQ community as well as other marginalized groups,” said Thoe who, along with

Brown, is a member of the [San Francisco Spikes](#) soccer club. “The biggest tournament in the world has been hosted in spaces that are not welcoming or inclusive to LGBTQ folks. So it’s important that we as a community stand up and explicitly say, ‘No. Soccer is an inclusive place. You are welcome here.’”

In the current climate, safety is a concern, even in a welcoming city like San Francisco. Brown and Thoe said security concerns are being taken seriously. Thoe, who has been disturbed by seeing anti-trans stickers placed around the Castro, says they are ensuring that the space feels safe and inclusive in all ways.

This is a fraught moment for the queer community. But events like the World Cup provide an opportunity for visibility and connection.

“I’ve seen moments of regression for our community,” said Cyd Zeigler, the founder of Outsports and a board member of Pride House Los Angeles, tied to both the World Cup and the 2028 Olympics. “I have to keep reminding people in my community that this will pass. ... The push forward is not going to stop. You can’t stop us from sharing our stories and building compassion.”

Senett said, “I think the organization (of Pride Houses) is a real testament to the resilience of our community. I would not have blamed anyone for saying, it’s just too much right now. Instead people have pulled through with incredible initiatives.”

The many obstacles surrounding this World Cup seem to be having an impact on tourism. [Current projections are trending below](#) what was predicted.

“We’re not seeing the tourism hit we were expecting when this was initially planned,” Brown said. “A lot of things go into that, including that the draw the Bay Area received was not the most tourist friendly.”

But Brown is optimistic that the San Francisco Pride House will be successful.

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Thoe said, “In a time like this, it’s really important to give people that outlet to let their hair down and just be in community.

“With people they love. And the sport they love.”

May 31, 2026



**Ann Killion**

SPORTS COLUMNIST



Born in San Francisco and raised in Marin County, Ann Killion has covered Bay Area sports for more than a quarter of a century. An award-winning columnist and a veteran of 13 Olympics, several World Cups and the Tour de France, Ann joined The Chronicle in 2012. Ann has worked for the San Jose Mercury News, the Los Angeles Times and Sports Illustrated. She is a New York Times best-selling author, having co-written "Solo: A Memoir of Hope" with soccer star Hope Solo, "Throw Like A Girl" with softball player Jennie Finch and two middle-grade books on soccer, "Champions of Women's Soccer" and "Champions of Men's Soccer." She was named California Sportswriter of the Year in 2014, 2017 and 2018. She has two children and lives in Mill Valley.

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