

sports

Public eager to see pro sports player come out

By MARK GOEBEL

Billy Bean, Esera Tuaolo, Dave Kopey: not exactly household names. They are, however, the sum total of professional team players who have come out of the closet, albeit after they retired.

Not a lot to go on in terms of role models, let alone hope that a current player in pro team sports will declare his homosexuality. Yet the hot topic among gay sports fans the last year or so is when and who will be the player to come out of the closet à la the Broadway hit play "Take Me Out."

Everyone remembers the brouhaha last summer fueled by an item in the New York Post that a Met—rumored to be Mike Piazza—was gay and was thinking about coming out of the closet. "In this day and age, [being gay] is irrelevant, said the nine-time All Star. "I don't think it would be a problem at all."

One year after the Piazza incident, however, we are still waiting for one of his fellow major leaguers to come out—or for somebody in pro football, hockey or baseball to take the plunge. With more than 3,000 active players in the four major professional sports it seems obvious that at least a few, if not a few dozen, are gay.

Rumors have floated for years about this player and that player, but the level of gossip seems to have been raised a few notches the last couple of years.

From Troy Aikman to Keith Hernandez, there hasn't been a lack of potential candidates. Last summer, Out magazine's editor has said he is dating a major league player.

It has been almost a decade since several fairly well known television and movie actors such as Ellen Degeneres and Rupert Evert came out with no apparent damage to their careers. Even Members of Congress, including a Republican, have been outed and survived.

All that said, are we likely to see an out major pro sports player any time soon?

Dan Woog, author of "Jocks" and "Jocks 2," is the most vocal of a group of sports insiders who think that the gay barrier in professional sports will most likely be broken by an athlete who is out in college or the minor leagues and is so good that pro sports can't pass him up.

"His ability will outweigh any discomfort a professional team might have about him being gay," said Woog. He added that a player comfortable enough with his sexuality to be out would make it easier for his teammates and coaches to be comfortable with it, also. "The focus then would be on his athlete abilities and leadership on the field."

"Let's face it, a player currently in the big leagues has too much to lose," Woog concluded. Unlike other sectors of the entertainment industry, reporters

covering sports are more circumspect about digging into a star's personal life. So don't look for an athlete to be outed by the press anytime soon.

"Most guys in the sports media are uncomfortable with social issues, even criminal behavior on the part of an athlete, let alone rumors that somebody is gay," said Luke Cyphers, editor with ESPN: The Magazine.

Craig Lazarus, who produced ESPN's groundbreaking story on gays in sports five years ago, says the issue is on many more radar screens today than in 1998. Reporters often talk about which players might be gay, according to Lazarus. But their musings never make their way into print.

The media's reaction to the allegation in the New York Post that former Dodger star pitcher Sandy Koufax was gay with the likes of Keith Obermann rushing to attest to Koufax's heterosexuality shows that being called gay is about the worst thing that can happen to an athlete.

In addition to the potential adverse reaction of teammates, coaches and fans, the reason most often given by sports insiders and agents that a player shouldn't come out is the risk that an out athlete would lose his endorsements or endorsement potential.

According to an ESPN poll, 63 percent of sports fans said they wouldn't care if their favorite athlete was gay. The poll also revealed that 80 percent of respondents would buy a product endorsed by a gay or lesbian athlete.

Bean and Tuaolo argue that being out would have taken too much emotional energy. "To be competitive at a professional level, an athlete can't afford any distractions," said Bean, the one-time second baseman for the San Diego Padres. "Coming out and all that involves would probably impact a player's concentration."

Tuaolo, who lived with his boyfriend during his playing days with the Minnesota Vikings, said that he never contemplated coming out. "It would have made playing impossible," he said.

The Viking lineman retired during his prime because he was having difficulty dealing with his double life. Tuaolo said a couple of reporters with the Minneapolis Star knew about his personal life but didn't pursue the story. "I lived in fear that someday one of them would," he said.

Cyphers said if a current player comes out it would probably be a star. "Their team would be much less likely to let them go and their endorsements wouldn't be as much at risk as an average player's would."

It's fair to say, based on recent events (the Piazza and Koufax affairs and anti-gay language in locker rooms and playing fields), it may be some time before we witness a gay Jackie Robinson.

sports

Yes, real water sports

By MARK GOEBEL

It is summer and high season for water sports. Take your mind out of the gutter: I'm talking about backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly and such.

This weekend, the International Gay and Lesbian Aquatics holds its annual championships in Palo Alto, Calif. Team New York Aquatics is sending 18 swimmers and 18 water polo players. TNYA is one of the world's top GLBT swim clubs. At the last Gay Games in Sydney the team won more than 75 medals and set a dozen Gay Games age-category records.

The 180-member TNYA was founded in 1990 by a group of gays and lesbians swimming with Red Tide, one of New York's swim clubs. "We wanted to focus on preparing for the Gay Games in Vancouver and thought forming our own club was a good way," says Phil Hess, a member of the club's Board of Directors.

Hess added that, although many team members compete in IGLA sanctioned events, TNYA welcomes swimmers of every ability and age. "We have a swimmer who is 77 and several who are more than 60, and many of the club's members swim for recreation alone," he stresses.

A handful of TNYA members are ex-college and high school swimmers who burnt out and gave up the sport for a while but wanted to get back in the pool. Bruce Hayes, an Olympic Gold Medal winner in 1984, belonged to the club until he moved to Spain recently.

The team's top swimmers include Barbara Love, who competes in the 60-65 age group, Todd Cooper, 40-45, Karen James, 30-35, and Hugh McGowan, 25-30.

"The bulk of our competitive swimmers are in their mid-30s to mid-40s," said Tom Malcolm, TNYA president. "But in pool-deprived New York most of our members are just looking for a place to swim with like-minded people," he adds.

TNYA holds practices daily in either the mornings or evenings (sometimes both) at several of the city's pools, including John Jay College on the Upper West Side and Asphalt Green on the Upper East Side. "Our members generally attend one or two practices a week, and there are 20 to 30 at each session," says Malcolm.

It took him five years after moving to New York in the early 1990s to work up the courage to join TNYA. "I joined for the exercise, basically just to swim laps," he says. "The practices were so well organized and the coaching so good that I improved much faster than I thought I was capable of. I started competing in swim meets after about a year."

Malcolm adds, however, that team practices are structured so club

members of all abilities get the personalized help they need. TNYA has 16 coaches, all volunteers, many of whom swam in high school or college. Robb Volte started the program several years ago and worked his way up to TNYA head coach.

Coaches are on at least once a week and teach all levels of swimmers. "Many advanced swimmers have to work on the same basic techniques that beginners do," says Volte.

Volte gets tremendous satisfaction out of coaching. "It is gratifying to see people respond to coaching and improve," he says. "When somebody puts together a good swim, whether they are a beginner or advanced, I am very proud."

A former competitive swimmer, Volte will continue to focus on coaching, and in particular preparing the team for the 2006 Gay Games in Montreal.

Volte, Malcolm and Hess agree that while it is great to win, team members strive for their personal best. "It's a nice bonus if that happens to result in a medal," they say.

Speaking of medals, even Mark Spitz's record seven Gold Medals in the 1972 Olympic Games doesn't match Kathleen Romano's 13 medals in the Sydney Games. Romano, 57, didn't start swimming competitively until six years ago.

Granted she got her six gold, five silver and two bronzes in a lightly contested age category. But it was still a huge accomplishment for somebody who suffers from a heart problem and couldn't swim the entire length of a pool without stopping to rest when she joined TNYA.

At first Romano focused on getting through practice. "I was happy the boys let me play," she says. Romano was inspired watching the New York City Gay Games in 1994. "I was determined to compete in Amsterdam and figured swimming was the way to do it," she says.

Romano credits her teammates' support and the team's coaches for her success. She would like to see more women (the team currently has about 30 female members) and at IGLA events. "Both organizations are committed to doing more

outreach to the lesbian community," she says. "There are many exceptional lesbian swimmers. The guys are very welcoming."



Gay blades

By MARK GOEBEL

Drama, elegance, athleticism, and, of course, great outfits are all attributes of what is probably the most popular spectator sport in the gay community: figure skating.

The Super Bowl may be the most watched sporting event of the year overall. But if Nielsen measured what gay people watched, the World Figure Skating Championship would probably be the top-rated event.

No wonder. When done well, figure skating is like a Broadway musical or Puccini opera on ice. Who can forget the pure physical talent of the many great skaters the Soviet Union produced? Or the soap opera-like feud between Tanya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan, the courage of gay skating heroes Rudy Galindo and Brian Orser, and, for fans of a different era, the elegance of Peggy Fleming and Dick Button?

For a growing group of gay men and women, however, figure skating isn't just about sitting in front of the tube watching the latest World Figure Skating Championship.

They're out to compete in one the most difficult sports to master. Anybody who has tried on a pair of ice skates knows how tough it is to move around in them without falling, let alone jump, do a twist or two in the air and then land upright.

Never too late to start

Ben Bobkoft, 33, who started figure skating six years ago, has done more than master the sport. He has risen to the elite of the country's amateur ranks, winning his age category at the 2002 United States Adult Nationals, only two rungs below elite skaters such as World Silver Medalist Timothy Goebel.

Like any skater who takes the sport seriously, Bobkoft put in several hours of practices three or four times a week learning the moves and jumps required at sanctioned national events. More than three years after his friend's death, in 2001 Bobkoft competed at his first Adult Nationals taking fifth in his age category.

"The fact that I was so close to winning a medal made me work even harder," he says.

In 1994, figure skating was part of the Gay Games for the first time in large part due to International Gay Figure Skating Union successful campaign to convince the New York organizers of the event to include the sport.

Laura Moore and Arthur Luiz founded New York-based IGFSU in 1993 to provide an inclusive environment for lesbian and gay skaters.

IGFSU has 250 members worldwide



Howdy, sailor! Who can forget gay skating heroes like Rudy Galindo? (Photo by Michelle Wojdyla)

(55 in New York), including skaters, coaches and judges. "Our membership includes novices to skaters who have competed at elite events," says IGFSU co-President Bradley Erickson.

Most IGFSU skaters focus on preparing for the Gay Games, but like Bobkoft, some compete at other U.S. and international sanctioned events, including the Winter Classic in New York and the Mountain Cup in Villard-de-Lans, France.

New York skaters generally practice on their own at Chelsea Pier's Sky Rink. Ice time ranges from \$7 to \$10 an hour and coaches run from \$25 to \$35 for half an hour.

Erickson, like Bobkoft, was a late-comer to figure skating. "I was inspired by the Gay Games in New York," he says. "I was determined to learn the sport despite the disadvantage of my height (he's well over six feet) and the fact that I didn't skate much as a kid or young adult."

Figure skating at the Gay Games in Sydney last year was a welcome contrast to the Amsterdam Games four years earlier, when the competition was recast as a public practice after disagreements between the Dutch organizers and skating unions.

New York skaters won 12 medals, three by IGFSU co-founder Moore, in Australia. The skating program at the Gay Games consists of three competitively judged categories — singles, couples, and ice dancing, broken into several age categories and by gender.

Not surprisingly, the Gay Games figure skating competition is best known for the creativity of its competitors. The choreography and outfits on display are on par with national and international events.

The Games also feature a handful of cross-dressing competitors, including National Age Champion Jay Kobayashi, whose Michele Kwan routine is famous in the skating world.

health and fitness

Gay men on 'juice'

By MARK GOEBEL

Let's face it, not many of us would pass up the opportunity to have a body of Adonis without having to spend endless hours at the gym or Monday on a trainer.

Who wouldn't rather go to the movies or shopping? Well unless you're blessed with incredible genes, if you want a "body of death" then be prepared to put in the requisite blood, sweat, and tears.

That is unless you are willing to cut the ultimate body-building corner and do steroids.

Maybe the jury is still out on the long-term consequences of steroid use. And maybe steroids aren't really any different from creatine or other sports supplements — just more effective. One thing's for sure: More gay men than ever are using steroids for non-medical purposes.

We all know someone who has gone from a weakling to Mr. World in a few months. There is only so much a person can gain by eating the right foods, taking legal supplements and working out.

The abuse (or use) of steroids is clearly not only an issue for the gay community. Pick up a newspaper and you'll see a story on the latest 'roid scandal.

Money and careers are on the line, so attacks on athletes caught using steroids have focused on the moral implication of their actions (translation: they're cheating) rather than on the potential long-term damage to their health.

For the average gay man taking steroids it's a different story. "Roids" are a ticket to a bigger more defined body — not to a seven-figure salary or national fame. Along with a "fab" body for many comes higher self-esteem and more attention at bars and clubs.

Steroids have been illegal in the U.S. since 1990 unless prescribed by a doctor for medical conditions such as AIDS (to combat wasting) and cancer.

Despite their status as a controlled substance, steroids are fairly easy to obtain. A myriad of suppliers have sprung up on the Web able to ship steroids to customers in the U.S. via FedEx or UPS: No more begging friends in Brazil or Mexico (where they can be purchased over the counter) or dealing with shady trainers, slimy doctors or run-of-the-mill drug dealers.

In addition, the last few years has seen the rise of a black market in the gay community fed by HIV positive men selling their prescribed steroids

Steroids are taken in four 8- or 10-week periods, or cycles, followed by an equal number of weeks of nonuse. A 10-week cycle costs from \$250 to \$400. The best bargains are generally found on the Internet. Many Web sites offer advice on what drugs to use with steroids, how to mask them before a drug test and how to flush steroids out of the body.

Injection (usually in a buttock) is considered the most effective way of taking them. There are, however, several types



You can achieve a buff bod through hard workouts at the gym — or by using steroids.

of steroids such as THG (the steroid at the center of the recent media frenzy and the subject of a grand jury investigation), which can be ingested.

How do they work? By elevating the body's testosterone level, thereby increasing muscle mass.

Do they really work?

The benefits of taking steroids are real. That's why they are so popular. A study by a team of researchers in California showed men who took steroids for 10 weeks and exercised regularly put on an average of 13 pounds of muscle and could bench press an extra 48 pounds, well beyond what non-steroid users achieved.

But the serious problems arising out of prolonged steroid use, including heart and liver damage, impotence and a psychosis called "roid rage" tend to be long-term. And, short-term side-effects sometimes can be offset by "stacking," using other supplements simultaneously; and many, including water retention, testicular atrophy, and acne, are reversible once steroid use has stopped.

That's the crux of it. With the serious health consequences of steroid use in the distant future and the benefits immediate it is hard for some people to resist.

Dr. Neil Roth of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, who works with professional athletes, says that no matter how carefully users administer steroids, their long-term health will be compromised.

Yet despite the recent spate of bad publicity and warnings like Dr. Roth's, it doesn't look like the drug's popularity will abate anytime soon. Law enforcement agencies haven't made steroid trafficking a priority and gay men seem to be as body obsessed as ever.

