

Gay sports pioneer: Roger Brigham is a sports journalist, coach, athlete and role model

By Cyd Zeigler

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When you get an email from Roger Brigham there is a tagline at the bottom of each one:

"Our greatest legacy is not what we achieve but what we teach."

So often these quotes are lofty mottos that we aspire to but could never achieve. Brigham has lived all his life by his tagline.

While the concept of an openly gay sports reporter today isn't so out of the ordinary, in the early 1980s it was heresy. And while sports reporters have come out in places like Boston and Los Angeles with an outpouring of support, Alaska isn't exactly considered West Hollywood North. Yet in 1982 Brigham came out of the closet not only while he was the sports editor for the *Anchorage Daily News*, but also while he was a wrestling coach at nearby high schools.

In his first year with the *Daily News*, Brigham had noticed that the newspaper didn't know whom in Anchorage they could go to when they had a "gay" story. So on the first anniversary of his hiring he marched into his managing editor's office and declared that he was gay.

"There were, of course, no legal protections in the workplace for gays back then, so I had no assurance I would still have a job," Brigham said. "But the *Daily News* had always been a defender of individual rights and social justice and respected a diversity of individuals."

Some colleagues, and in particular one Catholic writer he was close to, told him they couldn't accept his homosexuality, but Brigham remained at the paper and the paper flourished under his guidance. While he didn't write a "Yep, I'm gay" column, he was very out in the community often answering questions about his sexual orientation and bringing his boyfriend to social events. Thirty years ago and 4,000 miles away from Manhattan, Brigham was doing what still-too-few gay sports reporters are willing to do: Live their life honestly.

Brigham also embarked on another major milestone in 1982: He attended his first (and THE first) Gay Games in San Francisco. "Attended" is truly the best word to describe it. In Alaska, Brigham hadn't seen any information about the event and went to San Francisco with singlet in hand. Every tournament he had participated in had allowed same-day registration. But for some reason, the Gay Games mandated pre-registration and he was told he couldn't wrestle.

"I very patiently explained that no registration information had been sent to Alaska, I was the sports editor of the largest paper in the largest state in the country, and I would write positive first-hand stories and they would be syndicated nationally," Brigham said. "But they were adamant and turned me down."

The experience left a bad taste in Brigham's mouth for gay community leadership. That bad taste and coincidentally timed life changes prevented Roger from participating in the Gay Games for a generation. For the next two decades, Brigham followed job offers to Los Angeles, Albany, N.Y., and eventually the San Francisco Bay Area, all the while being out in the often homophobic world of newspaper sports departments.

Through the 1990s, health issues began to compound as he dealt with anemia, osteoporosis, diabetes and chronic renal failure. After the turn of the millennium came news that Brigham needed both hips replaced. Approaching 50, he saw his health issues forcing the end of his sports-participation career.

"It was the most emasculating experience," Brigham said. "When 9/11 happened, I went with my husband and my dog to watch a Fog rugby practice. There I was hobbling around on the sidelines knowing I was getting my hips cut out in a few weeks. I was surrounded by the kind of ferocious and gregarious athletes I had been surrounded by all of my life -- and I couldn't be part. I couldn't run out there and throw the ball and tackle a big fat guy lumbering up the pitch.

"As I wobbled there in the grey drizzle on the sideline, I realized that if I were in New York City, not only would I now have been unable to help with the rescue efforts or report on the tragedy, I could not even outrun the grey cloud emerging from the rubble to save myself. After having dealt with one serious medical issue after another for so many years, it was the lowest I ever felt."

Brigham decided then to try a comeback. While he hadn't participated much in "gay sports," he found the **Golden Gate Wrestling Club**, which happened to be gay and the only adult wrestling club in San Francisco. His first foray onto the mat with the club and with his two new hips left him tapping out every 15 minutes for a break from the pain. That first practice he also suffered a broken rib. He was hooked.

Brigham made a goal of not just attending the 2006 Gay Games but finally participating in the quadrennial event. It was a daunting task. No one had ever competed in a USA Wrestling meet on artificial hips. To accomplish the goal, Brigham knew he would have to do everything that Gene Dermody, the godfather of gay wrestling, told him to do.

What Brigham didn't expect was that Dermody's marching orders for him were to become chairman of then national gay organization Wrestling Without Borders and take a seat as an officer of the **Federation of Gay Games**, the organization that once told him he couldn't participate. In his time with those groups, Brigham has emphasized the growth of local gay-sports groups and has been at the forefront of bringing sanity to the drug testing of competitors who have a higher rate of HIV.

While Brigham's contributions to sports journalism and gay athletics are huge, his deepest legacy may be the one he's building with **San Francisco Alliance Wrestling**. The organization was founded in 2007 as an offshoot of the LGBT wrestling group, Golden Gate Wrestling Club. SFAW's mission is to provide access to the sport of wrestling for the city's youth. It's called "Alliance Wrestling" because not only is it an alliance of resources between

the city and Golden Gate Wrestling Club, it's also an alliance between straight people and gay people.

In his role with SFAW, Brigham is also the head coach of the Mission High School wrestling team. Brigham has built a strong reputation for himself not just at the school but also across high schools in the city. Not only does he produce some top-notch wrestlers, he also teaches life lessons that his athletes carry with them beyond the mat.

The response and results have been overwhelming.

"The city is asking us now to partner with them to offer youth programs," Brigham said. "We've been able to spark a rise in the number of wrestlers and the quality of the competition and provide inexpensive or free training for the high school kids -- at no cost to the taxpayers. And we are able to teach a lot of high school students from unsettled backgrounds good citizenship and self-reliance."

All of this has been in the midst of battles with his continued health issues, the latest of which is kidney failure.

"I have a sterile room set up in my house so I can inject a dextrose solution a few times a day through a tube in my belly leading into my abdominal cavity," Brigham said. "I am on a transplant wait list for a kidney from a cadaver."

Brigham points to one boy who came to him as a fat, insecure nerd who was deeply closeted. Just a few years later that young man is an accomplished athlete in multiple sports, is a highly respected team leader, and has come out of the closet.

"Three years ago he was desperate and saw no way to happiness," Roger said. "Now he knows how to take command of his life and relishes his life. I am so looking forward to see what he is doing in 10 years."

Much of who that young man becomes will be, as his motto says, Roger's greatest legacy.