

# Ex-ADN sports editor recalls coming out gay in 1980's Alaska

By E. Ross

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*Roger Brigham did not write a coming-out column in the Anchorage Daily News after telling his editor that he was gay in 1982, because he did not want to become a political lightning rod. Twenty-nine years later, he still writes a sports column, now for a San Francisco gay paper, and he told his personal story to OutSports.com.*

*Here, in his own words, are his memories of being sports editor for the ADN, a high school coach in Anchorage, a wrestler and a gay man in Alaska in the 1980's.*

I was one of those guys who grew up aware that he was 'different,' but unaware that the mysterious difference was my sexuality. I knew my friendships with guys seemed to matter to me more than to them, but I didn't think much about it. It was only in my mid 20s while I was living in Kodiak that I realized my sex drive wasn't stuck in neutral: I was gay and no matter how many wonderful girls I met and dated, I was never sexually attracted to any of them and so I stopped dating entirely. Then over the course of a year or so it finally clicked in that I was sexually attracted to some men. So I was what you would call a 'late bloomer.'

I lived in Alaska in 1977-1986. I was the editor (and then assistant publisher) of the Kodiak Daily Mirror from 1978 through 1980, then returned to Anchorage in January 1981 to work for the Daily News, first as a sports reporter, then as a news editor, then became sports editor in 1982.

When I joined the Anchorage Daily News in January of 1981, it was the first time I was able to talk with other gay men in the relatively safe environment of gay bars. I rarely met anyone there I was attracted to, but it was the first time I started to have truly open personal conversations with other gay men. And a lot of lesbians, too: many of the women who worked in the Daily News composing rooms were my dance buddies. They would always make sure they cleared my pages to the press room in record time, then I'd meet up with them to go dancing until 2 a.m. And I had told another writer, my best friend at the newspaper, that I was gay. Being a devout Catholic, he told me he could not accept my sexuality, that he thought it was wrong. But he did not tell anyone at the paper and we remained very good friends, perhaps because we both liked to talk about writing and life and did not drink.

During that first year at the ADN, it occurred to me that the editors and reporters did not seem to know who to contact in the gay community when they had relevant news questions. So on the one-year anniversary of my hiring, I walked into Editor Howard Weaver's office and told him I was gay. It was an almost confrontational statement. Years later, when I wrote my first sports column for the Bay Area Reporter, on my introductory column I used the headline, "I'm Bart Simpson; Who the hell are you?" It was an homage to that moment.

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. But the Daily News had always been a defender of individual rights and social justice and respected a diversity of individuals.

Almost three decades later, Howard told me it was the first, but not the last, such talk he had with his reporters.

None of the wrestlers ever asked me about my orientation, but a few of the coaches did. I started taking my boyfriend to social events with me, and I told all of my fellow wrestling coaches who asked that I was gay. I never encountered anything less than continued acceptance and respect. I suspect some coaches who didn't ask me suspected I was gay, but perhaps it would have made them uncomfortable to ask. I think more coaches knew, but if it was a problem for them they didn't say anything: I was more valuable as a resource than an enemy.

It was easier coming out as gay in the sports community for me than it was coming out as a jock in the gay community.

A few months after I came out, I heard about an event being held in San Francisco called the Gay Olympics or some such thing, and that it would offer wrestling. I flew to California with my singlet and shoes and went to Kezar to try to get in the tournament. The wrestlers there, including an odd feisty little duck in my weight class named Gene Dermody, were very encouraging and wanted me to be able to get on the mat, but the Gay Games officials on Castro Street said it was too late to register and they wouldn't let me in. Hell, I would have written very positive front page stories that would have been picked up by other newspapers, but they wouldn't bend the rules. That was my rocky intro to the Gay Games. I was so ticked off I didn't even return to Kezar – I couldn't stand the thought of watching and not being able to wrestle. So I watched Glenn Burke play for San Francisco in the basketball and softball games, flirted with the players from Boston, and I went to the bodybuilding competition where I heard Tom Waddell give an inspiring speech. That's when it sank in that I'd missed a chance to be part of something historic. That stuck with me years later when Gene and I met for real for the first time and I got a chance to get involved. [In 2006, Roger participated in the Gay Games, and later he became an officer of the Federation of Gay Games. - Ed.]

My "low point" in Alaska was when my boyfriend, who was in the Air Force, told his superiors he was gay: he wanted to stay in the service, but he did not want to hide who he was. This was well before DADT. What followed was a humiliating inquisition in which they wanted to know every detail of his sexual life so they could be certain he really was gay and wasn't just saying it so he could get out of the service. Fact is he loved the service and wanted to stay in. The entire experience really politicized my attitudes regarding the rights of gays to enlist in military service.

I didn't write a 'coming-out' piece for the Anchorage Daily News for several reasons. One, although I was exceedingly well known, I was not what one would call a celebrity and I had no desire to be one. Two, when I write as a journalist, I am trying to tell other people's stories, not my own. I try to be the medium, not the message. Third, I was dead certain that many

parents would have had a homophobic reaction to having a queer wrestling on the mats with their kids. I was not even 30 yet and I really did not want to become a political lightning rod: I just wanted to write, to wrestle and to coach. Lastly, I wasn't ready to tell my parents yet. My parents had always told me all they wanted for me to be in life was happy. But they lived thousands of miles away in the Midwest and did not have the opportunity to see on a regular basis that I was indeed happy. So I did not come out to them [until] some years later when I moved to California and was able to visit them pretty regularly.

I had one friend who got jumped coming out of a gay bar in Anchorage, and a former colleague was knifed and left for dead at his cabin in the woods, to which he had retired to write the great American novel or some such thing. He had to crawl miles back for help and barely survived. When I went to say 'hey' to him in the hospital, he just about grabbed me by the collar and pleaded with me pretty threateningly not to breath a word in print about his being gay, something he adamantly denied. I told him to chill; I just wanted to know if he wanted me to line him up with some work to get him back on his feet financially.

But honestly, I never encountered any homophobia personally. I think subconsciously I operated on the assumption that individualism was so accepted in Alaska that nobody would hassle me about my sexuality as long as I did not force the issue ... So I led by quiet example.

In the early 1990s, while I was working in upstate New York, there was a gay ballot issue in Anchorage. That friend I had come out to wrote a piece opposing the legislation, and in the column wrote about our talks on the subject of homosexuality. He did not name me in the article, but sent me a copy. Of course, I wrote a long and passionate rebuttal piece at his invitation which the Daily News ran in place of his column the next week. I was told that my column, and the inclusion of a same-sex couple in one of their Valentine's editions, drew more letters than any other pieces they ever ran. Much of the mail was negative but an overwhelming amount was positive. Many people tracked down my address in New York and wrote me beautiful thank you letters. [Roger's "Letter to a Friend" (found in the ADN archive, which unfortunately does not have public access) is an excellent commentary, and as true today as it was when published in 1992. - Ed.]

I have the fondest memories of the spectacular beauty by which I was surrounded in Alaska and the phenomenal support I got from everyone I met. I was the editor of a daily newspaper when I was 24 years old; that just doesn't happen anywhere else in the country. Alaska was the best place I ever lived; I would never have left if it weren't for the fact that I had gone as far as I could in sports journalism there and wanted to explore my profession more. I still talk occasionally with friends at the Daily News and get emails from wrestlers I coached in Anchorage.

To the young gay people of Anchorage: Know that you have the strength to survive and endure and are blessed to be doing it in the most beautiful of all places. The beauty of Alaska is not just the beauty of rugged mountains surrounded by the Northern Lights: it is also the beauty of the rugged heart inside you.

Roger's story as presented here on Bent Alaska came from the personal memories he shared for the [OutSports profile](#), from [Wrestlers WithOut Borders/Don Jung Hall of Merit](#), and from my email correspondence with Roger. I appreciate his willingness to write and talk about his life in Alaska in the 1980's.

The OutSports article started with Roger's coming out in Alaska but focused on his years in San Francisco. In the 1990's, Roger faced numerous health problems that forced a temporary retirement from sports. For his comeback, he became involved in gay wrestling groups and youth coaching. He is currently struggling with kidney failure. He lives in the Bay Area with his partner of 20 years, Eduardo Guardarramas, and writes a [sports column for the Bay Area Reporter](#).