

# Of butterfly wings and bricklayer dreams

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For more than a decade, Outsports has been the best website for LGBT athletes and sports fans to exchange information and catch up on news. Its founders and operators, Jim Buzinski and Cyd Zeigler, doggedly record incidents of sports homophobia and have provided a safe forum for one athlete and coach after another to find the courage to come out. Those coming-out stories then provide inspiration for still others to come out, and brick by brick, one of the most homophobic arenas of our lives becomes just a little bit smoother to travel.

Such reflections have fluttered through my mind this month with the ongoing publication of Outsports' list of the 100 Most Important Moments in LGBT Sports History, documenting post-Stonewall moments of note selected by Outsports and four longtime followers and sports activists: wrestler Gene Dermody of San Francisco; Pat Griffin of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network's Sports Project; and authors Patricia Nell Warren and Dan Woog.

I was asked to participate in the group discussions but had to beg off because of journalistic conflict, as I was already doing a smaller but similarly themed list of my own. Outsports does not list the events in any particular order, at least not through the 50-plus moments published so far – though one assumes no-brainer moments such as football player Dave Kopay's coming out in 1975, the 1982 launch of the Gay Games, and the founding of Outsports itself will be clustered at the top – but publication of the list should prove to be of help to future historians.

First, the sheer spread of events illustrates the diversity of people and disciplines the LGBT sports movement affects. Second, by reordering the events into chronological sequence, one gets a real sense of the acceleration of awareness and the strength of the movement springing from North America and now rebounding back from Europe and Australia. And third, when one realizes how many of the moments are actually homophobic attacks or slurs or setbacks, the sense deepens of how isolated so many closeted athletes must still feel today.

I was similarly isolated when I did the thing that landed me at No. 52 on the Outsports list: In 1982, shortly after being named sports editor of the *Anchorage Daily News*, I came out at work. Wonderful gent that he was and is, then-managing editor Howard Weaver did not can my ass. I was one of the few openly gay high school coaches in the country and the first openly gay sports editor at any major metropolitan daily newspaper.

I can think of only two instances in which homophobia cost me jobs. Offset against the fact that I was able to cover virtually every major sports event in the world, from the World Cup to the Super Bowl, from the Olympics to the World Series. I repeatedly landed great jobs in New York and California. The people I worked for and with remain loyal friends.

In the three decades since I came out, I have met many fellow journalists, athletes, and coaches who remain closeted, either professionally or from their families. I have always respected their decisions and understood their thinking. But I have also had to resist the Cher-in-*Moonstruck* impulse to slap them hard and say, "Get over it!"

Get over the fear. Get over the false security of the closet. Get over the lack of faith in yourself, the lack of confidence in your pluck and your grit.

I came out of the closet because I never chose to go into the closet. I was blessed with an unfathomably deep lack of sexual self-awareness throughout my adolescence, always psychologically attracted to masculine male friends while always exploring (unsuccessful) physical relations with girls, never really making sense of it all. It was not until my early 20s that I started to emerge from my sexual ambiguity. The idea of lurking in a closet seemed so dark, confining, and unappealing I set out to tear it down as quickly as I could see it coming up.

It is a bit funny seeing my coming out in somebody else's list of "most important" moments. Fact is, coming out is one of the most selfish acts you can do, right up there with breathing air and eating food. You don't do it for anyone else: you do it so you can live.

But then, we come down to butterflies flapping their wings and bricklayers laying bricks. Butterflies fly that they may eat and breed, and a bricklayer bricks so he may collect his paycheck and endure another day. The difference is the butterflies are never aware of how beautiful they are for those who watch or of the tornadoes they may set off in other climes, but the workman has the joy of his handicraft, can enjoy the feel of mortar and the weight of brick. It is his choice what sort of house or temple or monument for which he labors. He may not live to see the structure finished, but he can die knowing the beauty of the moment of applying the mortar, tapping the brick, and the pleasure of being a small transient part of a bigger, more enduring legacy.

I came out because I knew I lived in a dangerous world. I came out because I never wanted to get stabbed in the back, never to be hunted down from behind. I wanted my adversaries in front of me where I had a chance to fight and defend.

But Lord, I have gotten so much more than that from it. I have been able to coach scores of men and women and help them become stronger people. I have been able to found two sports initiatives – one a youth wrestling support program in San Francisco and another a national networking group for LGBT coaches – and received life-sustaining gratitude in return. For the past two decades I've been able to share all of this joy with the best man anyone could ever dream of.

And now I'm nestled between Kirk Walker becoming the first NCAA Division I men's coach, in softball at Oregon State in 2007; and Amelie Mauresmo winning the Wimbledon women's singles championship in 2006.

Each isolated, but not alone. Selfish acts done by unselfish people. Just three bricks in a tower, from the top of which you can see the butterflies off in the distance, fluttering prettily in the afternoon sun, stirring up storms.