

# The coach persists

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***Sports columnist Chuck Culpepper reflects on his encounter with his former colleague at the Nike LGBT Summit in Portland.***

At our two-sportswriter lunch in Miami, during the Chargers-49ers Super Bowl week of January, 1995, he spoke of "when I check on out of here," referring bluntly to his impending death.

As he drove me toward the San Francisco airport, after my visit to his house in June, 1996, he halted, his body screaming that he go home immediately, our taxi-stand goodbye both abrupt and, I reckoned, final.

Catastrophic weight loss eroded him from 155 pounds to 108, and while healthy people tend to have [a count of] between 500 and 1,600 T-cells, AIDS once whittled his total down to 14. He once joked that "I was on a first-name basis with them, individually."

He spent two years on a six-month deathwatch.

All that while, however, nimble brains strained in unseen labs in various countries, trolling for solutions in the grueling puzzle of microorganisms. By the end of that same 1996, one such person, Dr. David Ho, became Time magazine's "Person of the Year." By last month, at the Nike LGBT Sports Summit in Portland, Ore., I felt a hand grab at the back of my neck -- persistently.

I felt briefly annoyed, of course, but turned to find Roger Brigham, whom I first knew in the 1980s as a colleague at the late, vivid Los Angeles Herald Examiner sports department, a writer who covered everything from the Lakers in the NBA Finals to the Dodgers in the World Series to the Olympics in Calgary and Seoul. Eighteen years had passed since our lunch in Miami, 17 since our aborted drive to the airport, almost 17 since I received an email with a small, shouting sentence: "My viral load is undetectable," and about 10 since I had seen him.

Now he shepherded wrestlers – wrestlers from the Bay Area, from Southern California, from Maryland, from Ohio, wrestlers from the Wrestlers WithOut Borders program – wrestlers for whom he serves as an adviser. That's in addition to the wrestlers he has coached since 2007 at Mission High School in San Francisco. And that's in addition to the high school wrestlers he coaches during off-seasons at San Francisco Alliance Wrestling. And that would be in addition to the adults he coaches at Golden Gate Wrestling Club.

He once was a marvel of 28 who did something inconceivable in an Alaskan sports department: came out of the closet during the barren gay prehistory of 1982. Now he's a marvel of 59, with artificial hips and dilapidated kidneys from the years of medications, yet with normal weight and 750-1,000 T-cells, and descriptions from an ensuing generation as "a role model" and "an inspiration."

Those phrases came from Christopher Quinteros, a sophomore at the University of California at Berkeley, who wrestled at Mission High and said of Brigham, "Day in and day out,

he would just show up to practice, and I would be amazed just to see him there. It just showed the compassion that he has for the sport and for us."

And: "It motivated us on and off the mat."

And, again: "It was amazing, how he would show up."

At times, Quinteros said, "Coach" would stop and hold his hip, or he might get down to show a move, then halt and tell them, "My dialysis is acting up." Of late the dialysis has forced his change from head coach back to assistant, but as he has coached through it across the seasons, do you suppose that might've taught the spritely teens anything?

"Sometimes he would put on his wrestling shoes," Quinteros said, a habit born in Brigham's youth and furthered as a two-year letterman at Ohio Wesleyan and as a volunteer coach at seven Alaska high schools in the 1970's and 1980's. Quinteros called him "a slow-tempo coach" who likes "emphasizing good technique." He taught "acrobatic" warm-up moves Quinteros didn't believe he could do but then mastered, a process that "gave me a lot of confidence."

Besides the whole, flipping inspiration of it, who knew sportswriters knew anything about sports?

"I loved every sport I ever played except golf," Brigham wrote in an email. "I always thought rugby was my best sport, combining my soccer skills with my wrestling skills, and being from Cincinnati, I tend to think in baseball terms; even today, when I am stuck on a problem, I will sometimes go into a windup or a batting stance to help clear my mind.

"But there is something about wrestling, something primal, that speaks directly to my soul. It demands a high level of integrity and an ability to analyze opponents quickly and accurately. If I fail in wrestling, I own the failure and have no one to hide behind; if I succeed, I know it is because there are many who trusted me and helped me to get where I am. It is also the most egalitarian of sports, requiring a team to have a diversity of body sizes and types. That aspect combines with a necessary degree of self-discipline and sacrifice to make it an ideal teaching medium."

So as the Nike LGBT Summit in Portland boasted a 7-footer, a Mr. Jason Collins who got a booming ovation as a surprise guest; and the gay former pro athletes, Wade Davis from the NFL and Billy Bean from Major League Baseball; and heterosexual allies who stoke a deep gratitude – the former college wrestler Hudson Taylor, the retired rugby player Ben Cohen – my hilt came the first morning, the morning after the reception where somebody grabbed my neck.

As I glanced across a room of a hundred people at a cluster of tables, I caught a sight that, for whatever reason right then, blew me away in a great big rush. My eyes happened upon a 59-year-old wrestling coach, and my brain pretty much thundered. Eighteen years after the lunch in Miami, 17 after the goodbye at the taxi stand and 10 years after he started coaching seemingly every wrestler in sight, there he sat. There he sat.

There he sat.