

Gay and Lesbian Sports Hall of Fame honorees inducted

By Ben Sanders

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More than 50 people gathered inside the Irving Harris Foundation reception hall in the Center on Halsted for the Third Annual National Gay and Lesbian Sports Hall of Fame induction ceremony on July 24.

"How many people here play sports?" founder, executive director and board chair of the Sports Hall of Fame Bill Gubrud asked those in attendance. Over half of the hands shot up in the air in response. "You see those hands? Now when Roger [Brigham] and Gene [Dermody] come up here and talk, know that the reason why we can do this is because Roger and Gene provided the access."

Brigham and Dermody were two of the nine inductees in this year's class, but they were the only ones who were able to make an appearance.

Dermody, a wrestler, coach and lifelong mentor, is an 18-time participant in the Gay Games, and participated in the very first one held in 1982. Today he's better known as the founder of Wrestlers WithOut Borders (WWB), which, according to its website, is "a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion and development of the noble Olympic wrestling sports of Freestyle Wrestling, Greco-Roman Wrestling, Beach Wrestling, and Non-Gi Grappling, as defined by WWB & FILA." When he took the podium to accept his award, he was met with a huge reception.

"I guess I'm the the only inductee who was kind of forced into this. It wasn't my choice. It just happened by accident," Dermody said. "I grew up in a family that is extremely athletic. My brother was a first-string forward for Dick Vitale in basketball, and I threw like a girl. Imagine what it was like? I was autistic, I was dyslexic, I was violent, I was angry, and I didn't know who to strike out at. And the gay part was the biggest thing; just the fact that I felt like I was on another planet.

"My father, who was a Navy boxer, was smart enough to say, 'I've got to do something with this kid,' because Ritalin hadn't been invented yet! He didn't know what to do with me! He was just scared that I was going to hurt somebody. He put me into wrestling, and the world just changed for me. I realized that I fit in with somebody."

Dermody went on to college and eventually become a longtime teacher and wrestling coach in New Jersey. While he was teaching he had to keep his sexuality to himself, but at those first Gay Games in 1982, he found a place where he could embrace the two biggest aspects of his life: wrestling and his homosexuality.

"When I came to the Gay Games, I was just so shocked at what I saw, that there were people like me who were gay and who liked sports. I told the school that I wasn't coming back. That was 1982 in September; the school had to scramble but I had to stay. I got a job in IT and worked for the same company for 30-something years and just retired. I'm successful today,

and I owe it all to wrestling. ... Don't let people tell you that sports is nothing. It's the key. It's the key to raising your kids. It's the key to changing everybody. It's the way to build your logical family."

After his closing remarks, he handed the microphone back to Gubrud, who introduced the next inductee: Roger Brigham.

Brigham, a sports writer, wrestler and coach, wrestled at Ohio Wesleyan University, where he was a two-year varsity letterman. Afterward, he coached at seven different high schools in Alaska as a volunteer over a nine-year period. Now, Brigham is a sports columnist in the Bay Area, a wrestling coach at Mission High School in San Francisco and a Chair of WWB. In addition, he's the founder of both the Golden Gate Wrestling Club, which, according to its website, is "a community-based wrestling and grappling club for all," and the Equality Coaching Alliance, which aims to bring together LGBT coaches. Like Dermody, Brigham has some history with the Gay Games: He was on the committee that helped reach an agreement with Chicago to become the host of the 2006 Gay Games, after Montreal lost the right to, and even won a gold medal at those same games...on artificial hips.

In addition to all of his accomplishments, Brigham happens to have a great sense of humor. At the beginning of his acceptance speech he tore open his button-up shirt to reveal a San Francisco Giants T-shirt, mocking the Cubs fans in the crowd who haven't witnessed their team win a championship, while his Giants have won three World Series over the last five years. It was the only time an audible "Boo" was heard throughout the evening.

For most of his speech, he talked about how important the city of Chicago has been for the Gay Games.

"Chicago has a legacy that no other city is ever going to have, and it's because of timing and it's because of volunteerism," Brigham said. "Chicago stepped up when the Gay Games was in its darkest hour, when there was the possibility that the Gay Games were going to fundamentally change, because the group in Montreal that had been awarded the contract decided that volunteerism sucks. They decided that the Gay Games model sucks...they didn't really care about the sports, they wanted to make money."

He continued to stress how important it is that volunteerism remains the model for the games.

"The point is, if the Federation [of Gay Games] did not have an alternative, if they had not decided to go ahead without Montreal, the Gay Games model would have fundamentally changed," he said. "The spirit of Tom Waddell (the former Olympian who helped found the games) of 'Do it for the sake of volunteerism. Do it for the service of other people! Do it to provide sports experience for those who might not otherwise get the benefit of it.' That would have been dead."

Lastly, he addressed what he said was the most important aspect of the Gay Games—one that's shielded from the public eye.

"People need to understand this: The magic of the Gay Games does not happen in the week of the Gay Games," he said. "It happens in the three to four years leading up, when teams and

clubs are working to come together, when they're finding the time in their schedules to train, when they're finding the ways to raise money with limited resource to be able to get there. It's when they're forming a bond. It's when they're building a family that may be more supportive than the biological family they were born to."

Other inductees included Chris Morgan, a world champion powerlifter; Dale Scott, the first out Major League Baseball umpire; Helen Hull Jacobs, who was a world number-one tennis player during the 1930s; Kye Allums, the first openly transgender NCAA Division I athlete; Robbie Rogers, an openly gay soccer champion with the LA Galaxy; Roy "Sugar Bear" Simmons, the second NFL player to come out as gay, who died last year from AIDS; and Megan Rapinoe, an Olympic and World Cup Soccer Champion who helped lead the United States to victory in the 2015 Women's World Cup.