



Taking the Mark

By Erin Handley

Jason Ball has been playing AFL football since he was five years old. He said “it’s always been a big part” of his life, but there was a time when he thought he would be cut off from the football world. Not because he wasn’t good at footy, but because he was gay.

“I figured out that I was gay when I was about 12 or 13 years old,” Ball said.

“I fought it for a very long time, and it took me quite a while to come to terms with it because I felt that I would be letting my ... community down.”

Jason developed his football skills and began playing for the Yarra Glen Football Club. He dreaded the prospect of coming out to his teammates, because the language and culture of footy made him expect the worst. The jokes and slurs in the football club were tinged with homophobia, and for Jason, they served as a constant reminder that if he came out, he wouldn’t be accepted.

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“The football club was kind of this bastion of homophobia in terms of the types of language and slurs used around the club,” Ball said.

“Faggot was the first word of every sen-

tence. That was just part of how they talked. And it was used to mean ‘soft’ or ‘weak’. As I got even older there were jokes about how disgusting gay people are – it was this sense of joking around to assert your heterosexuality.” Jason said that players would act ironically in a “gay” way to highlight that they were not.

“I feared getting bullied, I feared getting kicked off the team, and so it was this constant battle for me to hide that side of who I was.”

Although Ball expected to be ostracised, he says that in all honesty, he didn’t know what to expect. “I had nothing to go upon. I had no examples of gay football players, I had no examples of anyone within footy talking about this issue ... all I had to go upon were the slurs and the hostility.”

Ball has now become a gay football icon. In speaking out about homophobia in the AFL, Ball has become precisely what he needed as a teenager. He admits that it “would have made a world of difference to me when I was young if I had of known of gay AFL players or if I’d seen the AFL playing the No To Homophobia ads ... that would have completely transformed my outlook.”

Jason has received overwhelming media attention in the past few months due to his campaign for change.org. The campaign involved a petition calling for the AFL to air No To Homophobia advertisements during the 2012 grand final, and to hold a “Pride Match”, which would help create a more inclusive and respectful culture towards the LGBTI community within the sporting arena.

The timing was significant – homophobia had been a sore spot for the AFL following an incident where St Kilda’s Steven Milne levelled a homophobic slur at Collingwood’s Harry O’Brien in August last year. Milne was fined \$3000 for reportedly calling O’Brien a “fuckin’ homo”, although the Magpie did not make a complaint.

Ball saw this as a missed opportunity for O’Brien to point out that although he is not gay, homophobic insults have no place on the football field.

Ball’s personal story of homophobia he experienced in the country football league made an impact. The petition gained over 28,000 signatures, Ball received a call from AFL CEO Andrew Demetriou, and the No To Homophobia advertisements were played during the two preliminary finals.

Anna Brown, from the Human Rights Law Centre, and a convener for the Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, played a vital role in the development of the No To Homophobia ads. She was impressed that the AFL was the first sporting organisation to announce their support for the campaign.

“The AFL is really a microcosm or a reflection of attitudes in the broader community,” she said. “Playing the ads in the finals means that more people hear our message.”

Brown said that the advertisements were developed as part of a “two-pronged ap-

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proach to tackling homophobic harassment”. The first prong was law reform – outlawing homophobic, transphobic and biphobic harassment and vilification. The advertisements are the manifestation of the second prong – a social marketing campaign to encourage individuals to take a stand against homophobic harassment.

Legal and social change is crucial, Brown intimates. “At the moment we don’t have any Federal Protections against discrimination, although hopefully this will change soon,” she said. “That’s something that gets lost in the marriage debate. Discrimination has very real impacts on the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people. LGBTI people lose their jobs and are denied access to critical services simply because of who they are and who they chose to love.”

The advertisements deliberately focus on everyday scenarios and the homophobic comments that are uttered regularly in the workplace.

“Everyone knows that punching someone in the face and calling them a faggot is horrific, a hate crime,” Brown said. The No To Homophobia campaign instead targets less

overt types of harassment that can accumulate and prove all the more detrimental for their subtlety.

For many LGBTI people, such harassment is “extremely damaging ... it can actually lead to depression, self harm and even suicide, and that’s why we see such high rates of suicide in the LGBTI community as compared to the mainstream population,” Brown said.

Brown is hoping for “an increase in people in normal, everyday situations actually speaking up and saying ‘Hey, that’s not on’ – resolving these sorts of issues in a way that doesn’t necessarily lead to expensive legal proceedings or a formal complaint.”

Screening the anti-homophobia advertisements was a positive step to tackling homophobia in football, but as Ball points out, “that’s not going to solve the problem on its own – there’s still a lot more that can be done.

For Ball, the AFL has been reactionary rather than leading the fight against homophobia, unlike the English Premier League, which has “really owned the issue”.

In the past, the AFL has taken a stance against issues such as racism and violence against women. Homophobia appears to be the next frontier to triumph over.

The AFL has more reasons to publicly condemn homophobia than other subcultures. The football world is peppered with homophobic taunts and stereotypes, and this in turn influences societal perceptions about the gay people.

Ball holds that if the AFL are not part of the solution, then they are part of the problem. “We’re not asking them to tackle global warming or solve poverty in Africa or anything like that. So long as homophobia is part of football culture ... it’s in their court to do something about it or else they are part of the problem,” he said.

Ball thinks that “almost without a doubt that there would be gay AFL players” who are unwilling to come out in the current football climate.

“I think that statistically they have to be there,” he said. “I always thought maybe I was the only one, but since launching my campaign I’ve heard from a lot of people at different levels of football who are gay, whether they’ve come out or not.”

The AFL are currently looking into the possibility of holding a Pride Match between last year’s grand finalists, Hawthorne Hawks and Sydney Swans, although there is scope to include more clubs.

Ball isn’t confident that the AFL will

hold a Pride Match this year, but says “I’m willing to be patient for the moment.” The AFL, he says, “don’t want to be seen as tokenistic or grandstanding” – they want to be able to substantiate a big event like a Pride Game with policies, education, and training for players. Developing these programs and consulting with the gay community will take time, Ball says.

Ball was invited to address the new draft-ees at the AFL Players Association induction camp in January this year, but outside of the AFL, he has been focusing on grassroots footy events to involve the wider commu-

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nity. One such project is the Rainbow Cup, organised by Global Footy, who for the past five years have held the Harmony Cup (which promotes multicultural participation in footy).

Ball’s own Yarra Valley Mount District football league is also considering its own pride round in the Yarra Valley. “I think that’s going to be quite substantial ... the fact that this is country footy and they’re doing it off their own back – it’s not the AFL forcing it on anyone. They want to do it. They feel a sense of ownership over me and Yarra Glen.”

The issue of homophobia and the AFL gained even more attention when Brock McLean from the Carlton Blues and Dan Jackson from the Richmond Tigers decided to walk alongside Ball and his teammates in Victoria’s Pride March, held in February this year. It was an historic step, with McLean and Jackson becoming the first AFL players to take part in the march.

McLean’s sister Ellie is gay, and though her agonising decision to come out to her family, he witnessed the acerbic culture of shame and silence surrounding homosexuality.

"I've always supported my sister no matter what," he confided.

For McLean, the problem with homophobia reaches far wider than the AFL: "Society has a problem with homophobia," he said. "We're still living in the dark ages so to speak ... and the fact that we're still having this conversation is quite sad really."

"Some of the language that we use that people think is harmless but can have a massive effect on someone who might be hiding their sexuality," he said.

McLean acknowledges that his high-profile status as an AFL player presented him with an opportunity to take a stance against homophobia. "The AFL is such a powerful tool in Australia, it's almost like religion. They've got the opportunity to do some wonderful things in terms of stamping out homophobia – not just in sport but in society."

"Personally I don't feel like I'm going out of my way to do anything different. I'm just standing up for something that I truly believe in," he said.

Likewise, Daniel Jackson is humble about the impact he made in his decision to march with Ball and McLean and the Yarra Glen Football Club.

"Initially I was probably a little bit hesitant – I didn't want to draw too much attention to myself, I wasn't sure how it would be perceived," he admitted. "I was amazed at the support we got and the appreciation everyone gave us, just for going and attending – we really didn't do that much."

He said that the Pride March was an enlightening experience, where it became especially apparent to him that "calling someone gay or calling something gay is really offensive for the gay community".

"I think it's something that a lot of straight people never really consider," he said. "They do it in such a nonchalant way and they just assume that it's not hurtful to gay people."

Jackson's decision was also informed by his work with headspace, Australia's National Youth Mental Health Organisation. The statistics around youth suicide and young people requiring psychological and psychiatric treatment alarmed him.

"When I found out the rate of suicide among young people who were gay was even higher, that shocked me, and saddened me as well – that young people couldn't be proud or comfortable with who they are. And they'd hide it, and that in itself was creating all these distresses."

In 2010, Jason Akermanis opined in his *The Herald Sun* column that gay AFL play-

“Discrimination has very real impacts...LGBTI people lose their jobs and are denied access to critical services simply because of who they are and who they chose to love.”

ers should “stay in the closet”, claiming that “Locker room nudity is an everyday part of our lives and unlike any other work place,” and that coming out “could break the fabric of a club”.

Jackson disagrees, and suggests that it's not worth adding fuel to the fire of negative comments made by an older generation of footballers.

"I personally think that if someone was to come out at any club they'd be fine," he said. "We have such a close bond with all our teammates. We already accept them for who they are, so if they were to come out and say they were gay ... it would just be taken in its stride and it wouldn't really change anything."

This optimistic outlook proved true for Ball, whose fears of rejection and harassment weren't realised. He didn't come out to his teammates, but it slowly dawned on them that he was gay. One by one, they let him know that they knew, and that it wasn't a big deal. "That was the start of a new phase of my footy life where I felt like this huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I could talk to these guys about anything now and I never felt more a part of the club than

after that moment."

"I had been involved in the club for so long and they've known me for so long that they don't necessarily see me as gay or straight – just Jason, I'm just their mate," Ball reflected.

Ball clearly has a bond with his team; he described them as "real heroes" for their decision to walk alongside him in this year's Pride March. This camaraderie is exactly what Ball, McLean and Jackson all love about footy.

"The thing that I love the most is just the camaraderie," Jackson said. "Going in there every day and hanging out with your best mates."

"It's sort of like having 40 brothers or 40 best mates," McLean said.

McLean aptly pins down the main issue for gay AFL players: "I think it's just a fear of the unknown – how they'll be received, what sort of reaction they'll get from their teammates, from fans, from sponsors, from fellow competitors, from the leagues that they play in."

For him, there needs to be a cultural shift. "It's up to everyone involved to be able to create an environment ... that says 'Well we don't care what race you are or what your sexual preference is – we're going to treat you the same as everyone else,'" he said.

Until that culture can be formed, AFL players grappling with their sexuality will continue to be gripped by a fear of the unknown, as Ball was.