

ROBBIE ROGERS

with **ERIC MARCUS**

**COMING OUT
TO PLAY**

*"Rogers made history."
—SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*



**COMING OUT
TO PLAY**

ROBBIE ROGERS
with ERIC MARCUS

PENGUIN BOOKS 

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

penguin.com

A Penguin Random House Company

First published in Penguin Books 2014

Copyright © 2014 by Robert H. Rogers

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

“Leeds, Leeds, Leeds (Marching On Together)”

Published by Barry Mason Music, administration by Copyright Administration Services Ltd.

Words and music by Barry Mason and Les Reed; copyright © 1972 R.A.M. Music Ltd. and Barry Mason Music Ltd.; copyright renewed.

All rights for R.A.M. Music Ltd. in the U.S. and Canada administered by Universal – Polygram International Publishing, Inc.

All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard Corporation

Photograph credits

[1](#), [2](#), [6](#), [7](#), [10](#), [11](#), [13](#), [14](#), [15](#), [16](#), [22](#): Courtesy of Theresa Rarick Rogers

[3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [8](#), [9](#), [12](#): Courtesy of Robert H. Rogers Jr.

[17](#): Charlotte Observer / McClatchy-Tribune / Getty Images

[18](#), [24](#): Jeff Gross / Getty images Sport

[19](#): Stephen Dunn / Getty Images Sport

[20](#): Drew Hallowell / Getty Images Sport

[21](#): Jamie Sabau / Getty Images Sport

[23](#): Tom Jenkins / Getty Images Sport

[25](#), [27](#): Courtesy of the author

[26](#): Danielle Levitt / August

[28](#): Victor Decolongon / Getty Images Sport

[29](#): Jason Merritt / Getty Images Entertainment

[30](#): Carlos Serrao

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Rogers, Robbie.

Coming out to play / Robbie Rogers with Eric Marcus.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-698-16805-3

1. Rogers, Robbie. 2. Soccer players—United States—Biography. 3. Gay athletes—United States—Biography. I. Marcus, Eric. II. Title.

GV942.7.R623A3 2014

796.334092—dc23

[B]

Penguin is committed to publishing works of quality and integrity. In that spirit, we are proud to offer this book to our readers; however, the story, the experiences, and the words are the author's alone.

Version_1

*For my family,
with so much love and appreciation*

CONTENTS

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[1 CRACK-UP](#)

[2 MY TWIN](#)

[3 "BORDERLINE PRODIGY"](#)

[4 GOLDEN BOY IN A GOLDEN FAMILY](#)

[5 YOU'VE GOT TO BE CAREFULLY TAUGHT](#)

[6 COLLEGE MAN](#)

[7 A DREAM COME TRUE?](#)

[8 MY CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON](#)

[9 THE BIG LEAGUES](#)

[10 WILL THEY STILL LOVE ME?](#)

[11 FIRST TIME](#)

[12 THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE](#)

[13 NOW WHAT?](#)

[14 BACK IN THE GAME](#)

[POSTSCRIPT: FEBRUARY 2014](#)

[PHOTOGRAPHS](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although this book is a very personal effort, it required the help of many great people to make it all possible. First and foremost I would like to thank my family, including my beloved mother, Theresa Rarick Rogers; my devoted father, Robert H. Rogers, Jr.; my dear sisters, Alicia, Nicole, and Katie; and my loyal little brother (and favorite childhood playmate), Tim, for their love and support, and for opening up and sharing their personal stories.

Many thanks to my editor at Penguin Books, Patrick Nolan; Maxwell Reid, Patrick's assistant; and Steve Ross, my agent, for taking such good care of this project from beginning to end and for making everything run so smoothly. (Thank you, Max, for coordinating all the photographs!) Special thanks to Nick Misani, who designed the book's beautiful cover, to Lavina Lee, my eagle-eyed production editor, and to Bronwen Pardes, for masterfully transcribing the many hours of recorded interviews despite the fact that I talk so fast it's sometimes hard for my own family to understand me.

Debra Ware, Business and Community Liaison Director for the Leeds United Football Club in the UK, went above and beyond to welcome my coauthor to Leeds and provide an open door to Leeds United facilities and staff. I will also be forever indebted to Will Martin at the Just Grand! Vintage Tearoom in Leeds, for coming up with the perfect title, *Coming Out to Play*.

Finally, I am beyond grateful to Greg Berlanti, for inspiring me in so many ways. And, last, thank you to Eric Marcus, for being such an amazing cowriter and becoming such a good friend over the course of working together on this book.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Robbie Rogers. My sister Alicia calls me “Robber,” but only when she’s being affectionate and wants to make me smile. Mom calls me “Robbie” or “Dearheart” and a lot of other embarrassing things. Grammers and Grandpa call me “Obbie Ogers,” not because they have a problem with their *r*’s but because *I* used to and they still like to think of me as their little grandson even though I long ago made peace with the entire alphabet. Most everyone else calls me Robbie.

Until recently I was best known as a professional soccer player who dabbled in fashion. (I have a men’s clothing line.) I’ve played soccer in one form or another for twenty-two of my twenty-six years and during that time I’ve done what I’ve had to in order to fit in and excel in the game I love.

My fans know that I played for the Columbus Crew in Ohio for five seasons, was voted All-Star, and was named to the MLS Best XI, one of the biggest honors for a player in Major League Soccer, when we won the 2008 MLS Cup. They also know that I played for the U.S. Olympic soccer team in the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics (one of the highlights of my life), that I left the United States in 2012 to play “football” in England for Leeds United, and in May 2013 joined the LA Galaxy.

What I’m best known for now is having “blazed a trail,” as NBA player Jason Collins said, when I returned to soccer after a very brief retirement and became the first openly gay male athlete to play in one of the top five team sports in North America.

Those are the bare outlines of my life. And while the various media have filled in some of the details since I came out publicly in February 2013, I’ve been uncomfortable with the shorthand versions of my life that I’ve seen and read. So in the pages that follow I’ll tell you the story of my life behind the headlines, how I lived with a secret that just about destroyed me, how I came to free myself from that secret, and how, despite all my fears to the contrary, I found the kind of acceptance, support, and love that I never believed was possible.

My hope is that by reading the story of my life in greater depth you will learn something from my experience. While I wouldn’t change anything about my life as I’ve lived it—because I wouldn’t be where I am today if not for all the experiences I’ve had, both good and bad—I wish I’d known the high price you inevitably pay when you choose to keep a secret that compels you to live a lie.

It’s a cliché to say that the truth will set you free. But as you’ll see, that’s exactly what happened to me. And it’s that wish to live an open and honest life that inspires me now to share my story with you.

Robbie Rogers
February 2013

CRACK-UP

I was out cold before my face hit the ground.

February 18, 2012, *should* have been one of the happiest days of my life. Instead, I was crumpled in a heap on the stunningly green pitch (what they call a sports field in England), unconsciously breathing in the scent of freshly cut grass.

If I'd been able to hear anything—and I guarantee you that I wasn't hearing a thing because my brain was still seeing stars—I could have heard a pin drop, because the twenty-one thousand soccer fans in the stands that sunny afternoon were holding their breath to see if the motionless American, who'd just made his debut at the historic Elland Road soccer stadium with their beloved Leeds United, was dead or alive.

Just the day before, I was as conscious as I'd ever been when I saw my name posted on the game-day roster at our training grounds for a match against the Doncaster Rovers. I can't say I was surprised to see my name as much as I was relieved to finally have the chance to play after a month of training with my new team. Being placed on the game-day roster was no guarantee that I'd actually get to play because I wasn't in the starting eleven (the eleven "footballers" who are designated to start the game). But if you don't get on the bench in the first place, there's no chance you'll be called in as a substitute.

It turned out to be a very dirty, ugly game—not much possession, not great passing—but even so, I enjoyed watching and just being there. The Leeds fans are very passionate. From the start of the game they're always chanting, singing, and cheering for their team.

Going into the second half the score was 0–0. There were five of us on the bench, and once the second half started the coach sent us to warm up at the side of the field, first two of us and then the other three. For a few minutes we jogged and stretched to get ready to possibly go in, and then went back to sit on the bench. And then I got called in.

You don't have a lot of time between getting called and the start of play, but in the few seconds it took to get from the bench to my position on the pitch I thought, *This is Leeds United. This is Elland Road. I'm playing football in England. I'm so proud and excited just being on this field where there's so much history and so many great footballers have played.*

Since I was a little boy kicking a ball up the steep driveway of the house where I grew up in Southern California, I'd dreamed of playing professional soccer in England. They have the biggest leagues and the most devoted fans, the game is always fast and competitive, and the greatest players want to go there. And now, having worked so hard to make this dream come true, I was running onto the pitch for an English team for the first time. If I was at all nervous in that moment it was only because I was making my debut and was eager to make a great first impression with the fans. I had no idea just how big an impression I'd make.

I was only in the game for eleven minutes when one of our defenders kicked the ball up in the air.

As it was coming down I challenged for the ball in hopes of winning possession for our team. I could see I was in a good position to head it toward our striker or the opposing team's goal. So I was backpedaling fast, thinking that I could connect with the ball and flick it off the back of my head. And at the same time, one of their defenders was racing flat-out from the opposite direction so he could flick the ball off the front of *his* head toward *our* goal. We both launched ourselves off the ground to meet the ball, but instead of connecting with the ball, my opponent head-butted me straight in the back of my head with the front of his—I was knocked out midair.



If anyone had known the real Robbie Rogers—and up to that point I'd made sure that no one did—they might have said it would take a blow to my head to get me to face facts about my life. But as I lay paralyzed on the field, fighting my way back to consciousness, all I could think was, *Where am I and how did I get here?* Good questions to consider in that brain-numbing moment—facedown in the grass, an ocean and a continent away from home.

I was a twin. I don't know how I sensed it without anyone ever telling me, but one day when I was six or seven years old I asked my mother if I'd had a twin brother. But instead of telling you what my mom told me happened to my twin, I thought I'd let her tell the story because she was there:

We lived in San Pedro (which is part of Los Angeles) on Seventh Street in a little Spanish-style house right down the street from my office, where I had a legal practice. I was in the middle of a trial, but for some reason I needed to go to the house and either I'd forgotten my key or the key didn't work. There was a side window that I'd always left open a crack, so I decided to climb in, not even thinking that it was a foolish thing to do considering that I was three months pregnant. The window was maybe four feet off the ground and I'm only five feet tall, so it was a bit of a struggle to get up to the window, and I slipped and fell.

It wasn't until I had some spotting and bleeding later that day that I realized there might be a problem. So I called my doctor, John Roller, who was a dear friend. In fact, he'd delivered two of my mother's children. He said, "You need to come in right now." And I said, "I'm in trial, but I'll come in after court today." Sometimes I think about my behavior at that time and wonder, *Was I nuts to wait?* But I waited and once he examined me he told me I was having a miscarriage and that he wanted me to go to the hospital for a D&C (dilation and curettage, which is a procedure to remove any remaining tissue from the pregnancy). I said, "No, I can't, I'm in trial." As you might imagine, I was extremely upset and was probably in denial about what was happening to me and by focusing on the trial I didn't have to think about losing my baby.

So the doctor said, "I'm going to give you a prescription that will at least slough off the majority of the lining of your uterus, and I want you to promise me you'll get it and take this medication tonight." I promised I would and I did. I don't know how I managed in the days and weeks that followed, because I had just lost this child and went through a postpartum depression of sorts, but I dealt with the trial, and looked after my two young daughters, and kept going.

Approximately four months after this miscarriage, I was still feeling like I was pregnant and called John. He said that he thought I was just going through a difficult time after the miscarriage and needed more time to grieve the loss. But at five months I still had that feeling, so I called John again and said, "I know you think I'm crazy, but I think I'm pregnant." He said, "Well, maybe you got

pregnant again. Weirder things have happened.” So I went to see him and after examining me he said, “You *are* pregnant.” I said, “How far along?” And he said, “Five months!” I had no idea that I’d been pregnant with twins. In those days they didn’t do routine sonograms, which would have shown two heartbeats before the miscarriage and one after. So I remember thinking, *Oh, my gosh, what if I’d had the D&C?* I would have lost the second baby without even knowing it.

After telling me how incredible this was John got very pensive and said, “Because of the medication I prescribed for you the baby may have birth defects.” Both my doctor and I were Catholic, which is one of the reasons we were so close. He told me that he wouldn’t perform an abortion, but that I might consider consulting with another physician and discussing this option, which I never did. I told him, and I don’t think he was surprised, that I was “looking forward to having the baby and whatever gift the Lord gives me.”

Through the rest of my pregnancy I was extremely worried and I prayed, “Please Lord, you’ve given me this child, please take care of him and protect this little boy.” Then on Mother’s Day, May 12, 1987, Robbie was born. John was there to deliver him and he was overjoyed and pranced around the room with this child in his arms, and said, “He’s perfect! Everything about him is perfect!” And then Robbie urinated on him and John added, “Everything works!” Later, John told me that he’d kept a secret from me. He said, “The last time I delivered a baby on Mother’s Day, the child was very malformed and passed away, and I didn’t want to share that with you until after the birth.” No wonder John had been so relieved.

I never said a word to my children about Robbie’s twin, so I was shocked when Robbie asked me about his twin brother. He said, “I was a twin, wasn’t I?” I’d probably pushed the memory so far down that it took me a moment before I realized what Robbie was talking about. In a way, it was so eerie.



So that’s the story of my unnamed twin. But there was one other thing I told my mother when I first asked her about my brother. I said, “I know I had a brother and before he died, he gave me his speed.”

“BORDERLINE PRODIGY”

I’ve always been known for my “explosive speed,” as any number of sports journalists have observed over the course of my career. But whether my ability to run fast comes from my twin brother, God, the universe, or just my genes, to me it was just me. So what I did on the soccer field came naturally and didn’t seem at all exceptional, although I was happy to put my apparent speed to good use against my opponents.

In later years, after I’d started playing professional soccer, reporters writing about my athletic skills helped provide me with some perspective on the gifts I’d been given and when they first became evident. For example, a 2008 article in the *Columbus Dispatch* newspaper said I’d been a “borderline prodigy in soccer and judo” since I was five. What the article didn’t note was that by the time I was five I’d already been kicking a soccer ball for two years and playing team soccer for one.

In the Rogers family it was inevitable that I’d be involved in sports because sports were central to my family’s life even before I showed up on the scene. My two older sisters, Alicia and Nicole (Coco for short), were already playing soccer and competing in judo before I was out of diapers. By the time I was three I often went along to soccer practice and games, and to keep myself occupied I kicked around a ball on the sidelines, running back and forth and never stopping until it was time to go home.

I don’t know if it was my right-footed or left-footed kicking skills (which my father helped me hone), or just the fact that I never stopped kicking the ball that caught the eye of one of my sisters’ coaches. But he approached my mom and suggested they enroll me in AYSO (American Youth Soccer Organization), even though I was only four and younger than any other players. After that, if I wasn’t playing in an AYSO game, I was at home practicing my kicking or organizing neighborhood games or juggling the ball around the house. My mom and dad really encouraged me to play because they saw how good it was for me and were happy about the lessons I learned from being on a team. (Though my mom wasn’t so happy the one time I kicked the ball in our living room, which was totally against the rules, and destroyed a treasured family heirloom vase—I was so upset that Mom wound up comforting me.)

My first team was called the Purple Octopuses, and then at the end of my first season I was recruited to the “Select” league and a team that was made up of the best players from local AYSO teams. And from there, at age seven, I got recruited to play for the South Bay Gunners, which for a time was an all-Hispanic team, except for me. (I was also two years younger than all of the other Gunners.) While soccer was an increasingly popular sport for kids my age, among Hispanic immigrants soccer was already the number one sport for boys, just as professional soccer is the number one team sport in the world (with the exception of the United States).

What I didn’t know at the time was that none of this was free. My parents had to pay a fee (my mom thinks it was about \$1,000) just to be on the league team, and then there was the cost of travel

whenever we played a team far enough away from home that we needed to stay at a hotel. It would have been bad enough (and costly enough) if I'd been an only child and soccer had been my only sport, but until I was ten years old, soccer was just one of my two major sports, because Alicia and Coco also competed in judo. And whatever my sisters did, I had to do, too. So very quickly I joined them in class, in competitions, and then on the winners' podium.

Like my very talented sisters, I won multiple regional championships in judo. (Alicia, Coco, and I all won all three regional championships in our age groups—the triple crown—at least twice. People come from all over the country to compete at these championships, so they're actually considered national competitions even though they cover certain regions.) Between judo and soccer we got to travel all over California and from New Jersey to Hawaii and many places in between. My sisters even got to go to Japan and England, and my parents paid for it all. I can't imagine how much financial pressure that put them under, but they never said no.

With three of us playing two sports—and at some point we added my brother, Tim, and sister Katie to the mix—the daily practice and competition schedule was insane. I don't know how our parents managed it, especially since they had a joint law practice that kept them pretty busy. On a typical weekday one of my parents would leave work early (after going in at six-thirty or seven in the morning) to pick us up after school and drive us to soccer practice, then we'd get a quick dinner, and then go on to judo practice. If we were lucky, we got home by nine and then did our homework. Later when I'd given up judo and was playing soccer for the Palos Verdes Raiders, my evenings were my own, except on those occasions when my mother would pick me up after club soccer and take me to ODP. That's the Olympic Development Program, which is a national program designed to identify young players who show skill and talent, and then develop them so there's a pool of great players for the national team to draw from.

Weekends were in some ways more intense than the weekdays because we'd all pile into the car and my parents would get us to six soccer games and a judo tournament in two days. That was even more demanding than it sounds, because those games and tournaments were typically in different places at different times. Mostly I loved it, but sometimes it got to be too much, so Timmy and I would hide our dad's car keys so we could just stay home and chill. Dad always found them.

When it came to games and competitions Mom and Dad always encouraged us to do our best, but never came down on us for losing. That didn't mean we had the option of not playing. We had to play a sport—at least one—and we had to go to practice. My parents were careful not to limit me to judo and soccer and made sure I had opportunities to try other sports, like baseball and football. I also skateboarded and surfed—I still surf.

It took me about five minutes to realize I hated both football and baseball. Mom remembers all of this a lot better than I do:

Robbie was always a talented athlete, always. When he was in intermediate school one of Robbie's coaches wanted him to play flag football because he was so fast. I went to Robbie's first formal game and he made three touchdowns. When he got off the field he said it was the stupidest game because all they do is hand you a ball and you have to run with it. He never played it again.

It was the same with Little League. When Robbie was seven or eight I enrolled him in Little League and soon after, the coach said, "This kid has real athletic talent. You should forget about soccer and judo. There's a lot of money in baseball. He's incredible on the bases." Robbie didn't like standing still, so he got

very good at stealing bases. At the end of his first season, when we asked Robbie about playing the next season, he said, “Did you know that Coach So-and-so said to step in front of the ball just so I could get on the bases? I never want to play that sport again. It is so stupid. You run around the bases for a few seconds and then you stand in the middle of a field and wait for the ball to come to you.” That was the end of baseball.

My sister Alicia recalls that one of the reasons I hated baseball, which isn't something I remember was that I was so afraid of the ball hitting my “privates.” She said, “During the one season Robbie played Little League, they took pictures of him and you can see he isn't really paying attention to the camera because he was so busy guarding his privates.” Not surprisingly, none of these photos survived.



To me it didn't matter how many sports I was good at because from the start I was most passionate about soccer, and soccer ruled my moods. If my team won, I was happy for the week. If we lost, I'd get depressed and my mother would try to cheer me up. The best, of course, was winning a championship, and the first time that happened I was nine or ten years old and my team, the Gunners won the State Cup.

We were the best soccer team in our age group in California and winning that championship put me on top of the world, especially since I'd scored one of the goals. After we won we were so excited that we celebrated as if we'd just won the World Cup. But we were kids and to us it probably felt better winning that championship than it did for a professional soccer player being the best in the world. I loved the competition and also loved the feeling of accomplishing something great with my team—and it was that feeling that motivated me to keep playing long after my childhood.

Early on, there were rewards that went beyond just the sheer joy of winning. My parents, especially my dad, would reward me with things if I hit certain benchmarks (which, come to think of it, probably wasn't the healthiest sort of arrangement). For example, my dad might say, “If you score six goals in a game, we'll get you a cat.” I got a cat. Then he said, “If you score seven goals in a game, we'll get you a snake.” I got a snake, and frogs, and toys (water guns were a favorite), and my bike.

I also learned to make deals of my own with my parents, like, “If I score today I want you to take me for sushi.” I think they would have taken me anyway, but it was a nice incentive I set for myself, and my parents were happy to go along with it. (One time, when I was playing professional soccer for the Columbus Crew in 2010, I had the chance to pay my mom back and told her in advance of a game we were set to play on Mother's Day that I'd score a goal for her, which I did. We were playing against New England and that goal won the game 3–2—and it was my first goal in nearly a year!)

Beyond my passion for playing soccer, I was also a huge soccer fan, along with all the other soccer-playing kids in my neighborhood. So we constantly talked about our favorite teams and players. My favorite was Arsenal Football Club. Arsenal is an English team based in the north of London. From the first time I saw Arsenal I became a huge fan and fell in love with the way they played—at times it was almost an art form, so they were fun to watch early in the morning on television while I sat on the couch having some breakfast. Arsenal's nickname was “the Invincibles” for the 2003–2004 regular season because during that time they never lost a game in the Premier League.

Arsenal in those days was an incredible mix of guys who were very talented, including Dennis Bergkamp, Thierry Henry, Robert Pirès, Freddie Ljungberg, Nwankwo Kanu, Ashley Cole, and Gilberto Silva. They were all stars in their own ways, but Arsenal's biggest star and my favorite Arsenal player was Thierry Henry—he was fast, technical, and scored amazing goals. But my all-time favorite player when I was growing up never played for Arsenal, and he wasn't even English. His name is Zinedine Zidane. He was a French midfielder and played for Juventus, Real Madrid, and a few other clubs; he was a true artist on the field and I hoped that one day I could be even half the soccer player he was.

Not all of my soccer friends followed a British team like I did, but most of them followed a team somewhere in the world, whether it was Italy, Spain, or Germany. It's hard to explain, but you developed a really personal relationship with your favorite team, even a continent away. Whenever we played soccer in the streets of my neighborhood, I always called my team Arsenal. And we'd play against teams named for real Arsenal opponents, like Manchester United, Liverpool, and Arsenal's biggest rival, Tottenham Hotspurs. We almost always won.

It's sort of amazing to me that I ever organized those games, because outside of sports I was a very shy child. My mother tells me that I was the kind of kid who would cling to his mother's leg when a stranger came to the house. And when she took me to school for the first time I wouldn't let go. She recalled, "Part of my heart was ripped out because that little guy . . . I'd pull one hand off and there would be an automatic flypaper reaction and his hand was right back where it started. I was finally able to peel him off me, but he was inconsolable as the teacher led him into school. So when I got to the office I called the school and fortunately by then he had settled down. He was a gentle, loving, tender child, but in moments like that my heart ached for him."

It's not like I don't recognize myself in my mother's description, because in a lot of ways I'm still shy, but when it came to sports, something happened to me and I was confident, competitive, even fearless. On the soccer field or competing in judo, no one ever got to see the child who was terrified of leaving his mother on his first day of school.



I loved competing in both soccer and judo, but it was too much. There wasn't any time to just be a kid and when I was ten years old I told my mom I'd had enough. I said that I just couldn't do both and wanted to quit judo. I explained that I'd miss judo, but I enjoyed soccer more. Judo is an individual sport and soccer is a team sport, and I really enjoyed being part of a team. If I'd had any doubt about my decision at the time, it disappeared later when I realized soccer could help me go to college on a scholarship. But the fact that I enjoyed it more than judo really made the decision easy for me, and I never looked back.

It wasn't until later in my life that I realized all that running around had been too much for my parents, too, and for my mom in particular. In my family, we all see my mom as a powerhouse who never runs out of energy. But she's actually this tiny person—she says she's five feet tall, but I'm not so sure if she's even that tall, and she's as thin as a rail. With a full-time job and five children to look after and with all those sports to get us to and all of the money it took to keep it all going, Mom was struggling to stay above water. Of course as a child I couldn't see that anything was wrong, until my parents' marriage shattered, like a fragile treasured heirloom that got knocked to the ground by a soccer ball.

GOLDEN BOY IN A GOLDEN FAMILY

“Your mother has moved out,” my father said to me as he hung up the phone in my Aunt Leanne’s condo in Chicago. This was shortly before I quit judo and I was in Chicago with my dad to compete in a tournament. Dad was in tears, but I couldn’t make sense of what he was saying until he said, “Your mother wants to divorce me.” I was in shock and started crying myself.

As far as I knew, my parents were happily married. It never occurred to me to think that they weren’t. You ask some people whose parents divorced and they can tell you they saw it coming, that their parents argued, that they were cold toward each other, that they were like two strangers living together. Not my parents. They were masters at keeping up appearances. And I guess I was, too, because despite how upset I was when my dad broke the news to me, I won the judo tournament in Chicago and I remember being happy about it. I don’t think I was playacting, but I was able to put it on the back of my mind while I competed, which was how I dealt with just about everything that was upsetting. Throughout much of my life sports served as my escape.

To me—and, I’m guessing, to people looking in from the outside—my family was picture-perfect. And in most ways, up until that phone call, it was. My parents, while working together in the successful legal practice, were raising five athletic kids in a comfortable house next door to my grandparents (who lived in the house where my mother grew up) in Rolling Hills Estates, an affluent, semi-rural community in the hills above Los Angeles.

When people imagine the perfect Southern Californian childhood, my childhood was close to that ideal. Leaving aside the fact that we were always running from one practice or competition to the next with never enough downtime for any of us, growing up in Rolling Hills Estates meant almost total freedom to roam and explore. Many houses were set on large pieces of land and some people kept horses, goats, and even a few cattle. Scrambling over hills, hiking along horse trails, and bushwhacking through the undergrowth, you’d never believe we were an hour’s drive from downtown Los Angeles.

Rolling Hills Estates, where we’d moved when I was five (we’d been living in a working-/middle class neighborhood in nearby San Pedro before that), is a community of eight thousand people, located in Palos Verdes, which is a peninsula in southwestern Los Angeles County. Rolling Hills Estates is just one of several little cities perched on that peninsula above Torrance and just east of the Pacific Ocean. It’s the kind of place where you can walk or ride your horse to the general store after school to buy ice cream and supplies for horses (saddles, stirrups, bridles, halters, reins, bits, harnesses) at the same time. I didn’t ride when I was a child, but my mom did when she was growing up.

Like most of our neighbors, my family was socially and politically conservative and very Catholic. But because of all the sports my family was involved in, and given the range of people who came through my parents’ law firm, I was fortunate to meet a lot of diverse people who weren’t just like us.

In some ways, my family is a bit of a contradiction. Most everyone votes Republican no matter what and is conservative in how they present themselves. But my family is also open and accepting. My mom is very loving and will hug people she has just met—my whole family is very physically demonstrative—but she goes to mass every day and she expects her children to be married before living with a partner.

I loved that my mom and dad were both very affectionate. We all did. When I was growing up, my dad loved having us on his lap, hugging us, giving us kisses. When I was really young, before we got so busy with judo and soccer, I especially liked the weekends. We'd wake up early and Dad would make breakfast for us while my brother and I watched superhero cartoons. Then my dad would take all of us for a long walk to the park in San Pedro near our house, and then on our way back we'd stop at the bakery and he'd get us a treat. Back home we'd all lie on the couch piled up together while Dad watched golf and we'd all fall asleep, Dad included.



My older sisters remember the tensions that came before my mom decided to move out, but I was too young to see it. I've since come to understand that every family has its problems and challenges whether they're visible or not, but until that phone call in Chicago I had no idea that my family was anything but perfect. And then all of a sudden we weren't.

For a short time Mom moved next door to my grandparents', and my sisters, brother, and I were sent to stay with one of my aunts up in Washington State for a few weeks. It was so strange because we went from having this intense, highly scheduled life to suddenly no schedule at all, and no one really told us what was going on. And then we moved back home and split our time between our mom's house in Rolling Hills and my dad's place in San Pedro (which was the same house we'd lived in before we moved to Rolling Hills).

For the first couple of months we switched off every week, which was way too hard for everyone, especially when you added our already packed practice and competition schedule. It was just too hectic and disorganized trying to get to school in one place and practicing in another while living in two different places at the same time. So one by one my sisters, brother, and I decided to live with our mom full-time. I know my dad was heartbroken, because he probably felt we were choosing Mom over him, but it was just easier to live in Rolling Hills with our mom, near our schools, and next door to our grandparents, which was also where our Aunt Lisa lived. We all loved Aunt Lisa, or "Lollie," as we all called her.

Aunt Lollie was my mother's youngest sibling. (My mother is the second of seven children.) And she moved back in with our grandparents to help my mom right after my parents separated. She'd been really involved in our lives from the time we were little. Before she left for Revelle College at the University of California, San Diego, she babysat my sisters. Once she was in school she'd sometimes bring us there to visit with her. After my parents separated, Aunt Lollie and my grandparents really helped keep things together.

We jokingly called Lollie "the Sergeant" because she'd gather us all up and make sure we behaved. She made very clear that she adored each of us equally, but I felt like I had a special relationship with her, which I'm guessing was how we each felt about our aunt. At that moment in my life, with my parents having a rough time, my Aunt Lollie was the most important person in the world to me. She'd come over to the house and we'd hang out on my bed and she'd ask questions about soccer and school.

And then she was gone.

~~There was a nighttime police chase and the woman being chased turned off her headlights. Aunt Lollie was driving through an intersection when the woman came through at 110 miles per hour, T-boning Aunt Lollie's car, killing her instantly. She was thirty-two years old.~~

After Aunt Lollie died, I talked to her a lot in my prayers, saying that I hoped she was with God and was being well taken care of. To this day I miss her terribly, and a couple of years ago I got a tattoo on the inside of my bicep in memory of her.



If my family wasn't what it seemed once you looked below the surface, then neither was Rolling Hill Estates, and the older I got, the more clear that became. The most obvious evidence that things were not quite as they seemed were the parties and the drugs. I started going to parties the summer after eighth grade. These were insane parties, unlike anything I've ever been to since. They were always somewhere in Palos Verdes at someone's giant mansion while their parents were away for the weekend or on vacation. Imagine four hundred kids in togas, a live band playing music, kegs of beer, and people doing drugs, just like you've seen in the movies. It was all these kids with too much money, having fun and getting into trouble with absolutely no adult supervision. It wasn't like I didn't drink, too, although I was a quick learner, so it only took getting sick a couple of times to discover my limits. But I didn't do drugs, other than trying pot a few times, which made me tired, anxious, and paranoid.

I was definitely *not* one of those unsupervised kids, and after my mom saw what went on with my two older sisters at Peninsula High School and heard about all the trouble other teenagers in our community were getting into, she decided to send me forty miles east to live with my cousins in Huntington Beach so I could attend Mater Dei, a private Catholic school. It happened to be a more convenient place for me to live because of where I had to go for soccer practice, but that wasn't the primary reason my mother sent me there. She just wanted me far away from Peninsula High School, and I don't think she minded that Mater Dei conducted routine drug tests.

When my mother first told me she wanted me to go to Mater Dei, I was outraged (in the way only a teenager can be outraged at his mother) because I didn't want to leave all of my friends who were going to Peninsula, and besides, I complained to my mother, my sisters were both going there, too. It just wasn't fair. But then I went to visit Mater Dei and thought it was a really cool school with a nice campus. And much to my surprise I wound up loving it—the history, the tradition, the school pride, and the school activities, the football games, and even the school uniforms. I'd wear khaki, gray, or blue shorts with a navy blue, maroon, or gray polo shirt, with a pair of Converse or Vans sneakers. This made it easy to dress well, because everyone had to dress in the same kinds of clothes. I've always liked dressing well, but I'm also Californian, so I like my clothes to be casual.

After a year of living with my cousins I moved in with my soccer coach's parents, Gene and Luanne Theslof. (My coach, who was also one of my first mentors, was Nick Theslof.) And that turned out to be perfect because I wasn't driving yet and Nick could take me to all of my trainings and games. By then Nick had invited me to play with the Orange County Blue Star, a Professional Development League team that he coached, in addition to my club team, the Palos Verdes Raiders. Most of my teammates on Blue Star were college players from the local area, which was a lot of fun because I got to play with guys who were a lot better than I was, but I could still outrun them. So it

was a chance to learn a lot and also to show off a bit to guys who had a lot more experience than I did. This included Jürgen Klinsmann, a legendary German footballer who played for a time with Blue Stars using the alias “Jay Göppingen” (and in 2011 was named head coach of the U.S. men’s national soccer team).

My mom always seemed to know what was best for me. And lucky for me, at that age I didn’t have a choice about doing what she said.



I think one of the lessons you learn growing up is that things are usually a lot more complicated than they look on the surface. Just because something seems golden, like your family or your community, doesn’t mean that once you scrape away that shiny outer layer things will look as good underneath. And the same could be said for me when I was a teenager, because, just like my family and the community in which I grew up, I looked pretty golden, until you scratched the surface. In fact, if you were to ask my brother and sisters, they would tell you that in our family I was the golden child who almost always got his way. From the outside I was a stereotypical, all-American boy who was into sports, never got into trouble, and was nice to his grandparents.

I have to admit that with all the attention I got and all the success I had in judo and later in soccer I felt pretty golden. Some people who knew me might have thought I was a bit spoiled. Then as I grew into my teens I began to understand that while I may have felt golden and looked pretty golden to the people around me, I had this one huge flaw. And from everything I’d learned up to that point in my life I knew that if I ever let anyone see my flaw I’d be guaranteed disappointment, condemnation, and maybe even rejection from my family, friends, God, and the soccer community.

Yet long before *I* came to the realization that I had anything to hide, those who knew me best could already tell that I was different from other young boys. They could sense that little Robbie Rogers, who loved his bow ties, vests, and dress shorts—and notwithstanding his status as a soccer and judo prodigy—was a “fairy.”

YOU'VE GOT TO BE CAREFULLY TAUGHT

You don't grow up hating yourself by accident. You don't learn to lie about your true nature on a whim. You don't pretend to be straight just for the fun of it. You have to learn and be taught these things and I was a good student.

There's a song from the 1949 Rodgers & Hammerstein musical *South Pacific* called "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" that reminds me of my experience growing up. The first line of the song is, "You've got to be taught to hate and fear." The lyrics go on to talk about prejudice and describe how children are taught to hate people who are different from them and to hate all the people their relatives hate.

My family and church would never have tolerated the kind of prejudice described in the Rodgers Hammerstein song. But gay people were another story, and growing up I heard and saw plenty that made me think that being gay was bad, defective, and sinful. I guess if you're straight and taught to hate gay people that's not as big a problem, because then you don't grow up hating *yourself*, although teaching children to hate anyone is wrong and I think deeply held prejudice of any kind is soul-destroying. But when you teach a child who is gay (or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender) that his fundamental nature is somehow bad, you create a situation where that child grows up hating himself and feels compelled to hide his true feelings, no matter what the cost is to him and those around him. And that's what happened to me beginning in early childhood.

Just a quick disclaimer before I say anything more: My parents did not set out to knowingly hurt me. They were taught by their parents and church to believe certain things about homosexuality and gay people that were widely held beliefs at the time. My goal in sharing my experiences with you is not to trash them (or other family members, or teammates, or friends), but to give you insight into my experience growing up as a gay kid in a world that was filled with hate and prejudice. It was a world in which I learned to hide anything about myself that might have given anyone any idea that I wasn't the All-American Straight Golden Boy they wanted to believe I was—and that I desperately wanted to be.

It all started with *My Little Pony*, a cartoon TV program I liked to watch when I was a very young boy. The show was built around a cast of characters based on the colorful and highly decorated plastic pony toys manufactured by Hasbro. I can't tell you why I loved *My Little Pony*, but I did. (Ironically, my favorite pony was the blue one with wings and a rainbow-colored mane and tail—for those who don't know, the rainbow flag is a symbol of gay pride.) The fact that I loved *My Little Pony* in the first place was the problem, because the *My Little Pony* TV show and the *My Little Pony* dolls that I collected and played with were designed for and marketed to girls.

I have to give my mom some credit because when I asked for *My Little Pony* dolls for Christmas and birthday gifts (and we each got to pick out a new toy when another sibling was born), she let me choose whatever I wanted. And what I always wanted was a *My Little Pony* doll and another less-than-

masculine toy, this stuffed dog that had a flap on its belly with little puppies inside.

But I don't want to give my mother—or my sisters—too much credit, because they liked to tease me about the fact that I liked to play with toys that most boys had no interest in. They used to sing a song meant to torment me about “*My Little Pony* and baloney,” and they'd sing it back and forth until I started crying. I was very sensitive when I was a child (I still am), so it didn't take a lot to get me to cry. Still, I don't remember the teasing bothering me all that much. Though apparently it's not that way for every boy who loves *My Little Pony*. I recently read about an eleven-year-old boy who was a fan of the *My Little Pony* cartoon show and was teased so relentlessly that he tried to take his own life, which is beyond heartbreaking.

Other than the occasional teasing, my sisters were happy to play dolls with me. And my mother was content to let us enjoy ourselves. My father was another story, and on a few occasions when I was very young he made it clear that he didn't like his namesake playing with “girlie things.” I remember one time overhearing him say to my mother in a really angry voice, “I don't *ever* want to see him playing with dolls again! I don't want a fairy for a son!”

It would be years before I understood that the word “fairy” was a stand-in for “fag” or “homosexual” and that my father was afraid that by playing with dolls I'd grow up to be gay. What was clear from my father's tone of voice was that whatever kind of fairy he didn't want me to be, I figured it had to be pretty bad. After that my mother deftly shifted me away from *My Little Pony* dolls and over to more standard toy horses, which she would buy for me at the general store. Happily for everyone, as I got older and my brother Tim and I spent more time playing together, we only wanted toys that would shoot stuff. We'd set up little soldiers and go at it the way boys were supposed to play. That must have come as a huge relief to my father.

There was one other gender-bending thing I did as a child that made my dad insanely angry, and his reaction is burned into my memory as if imprinted there by a red-hot branding iron. My two older sisters and I liked to dress up and play a game they called “Cool Girls.” I was pretty young when we did this, so my sister Alicia has more complete memories of this than I do. Here's what she remembers:

My mom and dad both worked full-time and went on a lot of trips together, so after school and when they were away we stayed with Hilda, our adopted grandmother. She was the most amazing, loving, good woman and we were so blessed to have known her. We went to garage sales with her and we'd buy 1950s lingerie and other silky things. Then we'd come home and Hilda would do up my hair and Coco's hair in little curls. We'd put on these slips we'd bought and Robbie would, too—he did whatever we did. So we'd get dressed up—I chose the name Sara and Robbie's name was Robin and Coco was someone else—and we'd parade around the house and pretend we were cool girls.

One time we were playing in Hilda's back room when my dad walked in—he was just back from a trip or came by early to pick us up to take us home. He took one look at Robbie all dressed up and I could see him getting really angry because he was grinding his teeth. He didn't raise his voice very often, but when he did it was scary. He yelled, “My son will not be a faggot!” Robbie just froze. We all did. I remember the look of shock on Robbie's face, and his furrowed brow just beneath his perfect bowl haircut.

When I talked with my mom about this recently she recalled being at Hilda's house that day, too, and that dad also yelled at Hilda and said, "Don't let my son dress up like a faggot!" Here's what Mom remembers:

Rob was out-of-control angry and I told him that he couldn't yell at the children like that and he said, "He's going to grow up to be a fairy." And I said, "I don't care what he's going to grow up to be. You may not do this." I felt that as a mother I had to step in and say, "You're not going to do this to our son. He will be who he is, and if he wants to play like this with his sisters, don't you ever yell at him like that." Robbie's facial expression changed dramatically when his father yelled at him and he appeared extremely hurt.

That experience with our dad just taught us to be more careful when we played "Cool Girls," because it wasn't like we stopped. There was another time when my dad caught us and this time it was at home when we were still living in San Pedro. Alicia was probably eight, Coco was six, and I was four. We'd raided my mother's closet and used her scarves and whatever else we could find to make togas. I put a shirt on my head and pretended that I had long hair. We were on the second floor playing and running around and having a lot of fun, which probably explains why we didn't hear Dad coming up the stairs, but suddenly he was screaming at us. I was so scared that I have no memory of exactly what he said or what I said in response, but Alicia remembers that I said, "I'm pretending to be a horse. I'm not pretending to be a girl."

I have no idea how I knew to say that, but apparently I knew enough to know that what made my dad so upset was that his little boy was pretending to be a girl. As I came to understand much later, in Dad's mind that meant I'd grow up to be gay, which was something so terrible that the thought of it made his blood boil. (My father is now so supportive and pro-gay that it's hard to imagine he ever had any problem with me playing with dolls or dressing up to play "Cool Girls.") Of course, not all boys who play with dolls and play dress-up with their sisters turn out to be gay, but this boy did. And if there are any parents out there who still worry that their child's choice of toys has an impact on the child's sexuality, let me put your minds at ease. There is no cause-and-effect. Don't forget, I also liked to play soccer and was a judo champion, and that didn't make me straight.



Before I figured out what "fairy" or "faggot" meant, or that it had anything to do with my sexuality, I had a sense that I was different from other boys. In elementary school I'd hear my friends talk about girlfriends and I couldn't relate to it. I wasn't excited about the idea of having a girlfriend and couldn't understand why they *were*. I thought that maybe I was just afraid, but at first I couldn't put my finger on what the problem was.

One time, I remember watching an episode of *Dawson's Creek* on television and seeing a gay character, Jack McPhee, and I really took notice. It wasn't that I was attracted to Jack—at least I don't recall being attracted to him. There was just something about his character that felt familiar, that Jack and I shared more in common than simply his hair and eye color. But even before *Dawson's Creek*, when I watched movies or TV shows I was always more attracted to the guy characters than the girl

characters and didn't know why. Then, as I got older and realized that I was gay and understood why I was attracted to them, I didn't allow myself to have those feelings.

Maybe it sounds crazy, but I never really let myself feel attracted to other guys. It felt too dangerous. I told myself that I could never date one of my teammates, or any soccer player, any friend—anyone I found even remotely attractive, for that matter. I trained myself to say no, no, no to any feelings of attraction I might have had even before they surfaced. For most of my life, when I saw a good-looking guy it was like looking at a sibling, so I'd feel sick to my stomach if I allowed so much as a flicker of attraction to slip through.



My growing sense that something was wrong with me came at around the same time (in 1997) that the character Ellen Morgan (played by Ellen DeGeneres) on the sitcom *Ellen* told the world she was gay. More than forty million people watched that episode (by comparison, the top-rated *Modern Family* was watched by around ten million viewers in a typical week in 2013). I can't imagine that my family watched *Ellen* or that episode, but even if we had I don't think I would have made any connection between what was going on with me and what Ellen Morgan (and Ellen DeGeneres herself) announced to the world.

When I was ten or eleven I also started to hear gay slur words and kids would say, "Don't be so gay," like gay was a bad thing, like you were doing something stupid. While I knew by then what gay people were, I can't say I had a real understanding yet that I was gay myself—or at least I wasn't willing to consider that possibility. But somewhere deep down I must have known because my ears perked up whenever I heard those slurs or heard about gay civil right issues on the news or debated by my family or discussed at church.

What I heard at church cut especially deep, because I didn't want to lead a sinful life. My understanding from Sunday sermons and from CCD class (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine class—Sunday school for Catholics) was that there was no place for homosexuality, that it was a sin, that it was evil. You couldn't live that lifestyle and go to heaven. What was a bit confusing for me was that there were lots of things in the Bible that you weren't supposed to do, but for some reason that no one seemed to explain, homosexuality was a really bad one and I wasn't about to ask why.

My parents would discuss gay stuff occasionally. It wasn't a big talking point, but when same-sex marriage came up, my parents (and later my mother and her second husband) would say that marriage was between a man and a woman. They never bashed gay people, but they talked about marriage being a holy union between a man and a woman and how that was in the Bible. Polygamy and incest are sins too, but homosexuality was somehow worse. They'd talk about what would happen if gays got married, that it was going to change all kinds of things and somehow undermine traditional families and lead to crazy stuff, like people marrying their pets.

The one time my mother said something that made me think she was really anti-gay was so incidental, at least for her, that she doesn't remember it. But I do. Vividly. I was probably thirteen or fourteen years old at the time and we were driving in my mom's Toyota 4Runner on our way to a sus place she knew I liked in Torrance. That was one of the great things about my mom: she always found a way to spend time with each of her children independently. So that evening it was just the two of us.

We had the radio on and there was an Elton John song playing—I don't remember which one—and just as we were crossing the Pacific Coast Highway Mom said something like, "I used to love Elton

John until he got all weird and gay,” or “I really like that song, but it’s too bad he’s gay.” I thought, *Gosh, my mom really said that? Elton John is one of the most talented musicians of our time, but then she finds out he’s gay and now she doesn’t like him?*

I loved Elton John’s music. He’s a great singer-songwriter and his music is something that makes you feel good. I always thought he was gay but that wasn’t an issue for me, and I didn’t see how his being gay could be a problem for anyone, but clearly it was for my mom. That really scared me. It made me think I could never say anything to my mother about what I already suspected about myself because she would think there was something wrong with me, too. We listened to the rest of the song in silence.

The only person in my family who ever spoke positively about gay people was my Aunt Angel, my dad’s sister. As I found out later, she suspected I was gay and wanted to make a point of letting me know that it was okay if I was. She lived in Florida and still does, so I didn’t see her often, but over the years when I visited with her she would talk about her gay friends and say positive things about them so I would know it was okay with her. She was always clear that she didn’t care whether someone was gay or straight. But I was totally clueless that this had anything to do with me, especially since my aunt would also ask me if I was dating any girls. I just assumed that if she knew I was gay she would never have asked about that.

It was really thoughtful of my aunt to try to let me know it was okay with her that I was gay, but later, once she knew I was gay, I explained why I never confided in her. I said, “Angel, you could have said anything to me about gay people. It wouldn’t have made me feel any better and I still wouldn’t have felt comfortable telling you. It was about me and what I thought about myself, not what you thought about me.” The sad truth was that I was so badly scarred by then, it didn’t matter what anyone else said. For me it was an internal battle and I couldn’t recognize when someone who loved me reached out to let me know that she accepted me for who I was. I had to come to terms with myself first. I had to recognize and accept that I wasn’t a bad person and that God put me on this earth for a purpose and not just to suffer.



While no one thing set me on the path to keeping silent about my sexuality, there was one experience that helped crystallize for me how painfully difficult it was going to be to reconcile Robbie Rogers the up-and-coming soccer player with Robbie Rogers the undeniably gay teenager. Before I explain my tortured reconciliation, I want to tell you about that crystallizing experience, which came during my sophomore year of high school, when I was invited to train with the U-17 (under age seventeen) national team at the elite IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, along with forty of the best young soccer players in the country. For the players who were ultimately selected to be on the U-17 national team, you got to compete against other national teams in your age group from around the world.

Even though it meant leaving Mater Dei, it was incredibly exciting to be invited to attend the Bradenton residency, but I almost didn’t go. First, because my mom objected to me going; she thought it wouldn’t be good for me to be away from the family. (She was right, and she wasn’t the only one—Jürgen Klinsmann, who was someone I looked up to and had become one of my mentors, thought it would be better if I was around my family, in an environment that was loving and supportive.) And, second, I almost *couldn’t* go because I’d developed a problem with my knee that made it excruciating for me to walk, let alone run. Here’s what my mom remembers from that time:

sample content of Coming Out to Play

- [read online The Sultan's Shadow: One Family's Rule at the Crossroads of East and West.pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [I Know You Got Soul book](#)
- [download Analytical Mechanics of Space Systems \(AIAA Education\) for free](#)
- [click Surviving Sexual Violence: A Guide to Recovery and Empowerment pdf](#)

- <http://www.celebritychat.in/?ebooks/The-Judas-Solution--Blackcollar--Book-3-.pdf>
- <http://flog.co.id/library/Health-Benefits-of-Organic-Food.pdf>
- <http://nexson.arzamaszev.com/library/The-Routledge-Companion-to-Aesthetics--3rd-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://paulbussman.com/ebooks/Surviving-Sexual-Violence--A-Guide-to-Recovery-and-Empowerment.pdf>