



Thomas, Gareth (b. 1974)

by Linda Rapp

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Very few male professional athletes have publicly come out as gay at the height of their careers. Among the small number who have found the courage to do so are two internationally acclaimed rugby superstars: Australia's Ian Roberts and Wales' Gareth Thomas.

The man who would become one of the most celebrated rugby players in Welsh sports history did not grow up with ambitions that would take him far beyond the little village of Sarn in southern Wales where he was born on July 25, 1974. His father was a postman, and Thomas was set to follow in his footsteps.

Thomas came relatively late to the sport of rugby, not taking it up until he was a teenager. He was motivated more by the wish to have an activity in which to participate with his friends than by a passion for the game, but he quickly showed abundant talent and became enthusiastic about playing.

Once Thomas finished his schooling, he took a job with the post office but also continued developing his rugby skills, playing on a club team in the nearby village of Pencoed. His abilities won him a spot on the Wales Youth team in 1993. His play caught the eye of Gerald Williams, the coach of a team in the neighboring city of Bridgend, who recruited the promising youth.

Thomas was tall—six-foot-three—but skinny, and he knew that he needed to add bulk and strength to succeed at the next level; therefore, he began a weight-training program that would give him an imposing, muscular, 225-pound physique.

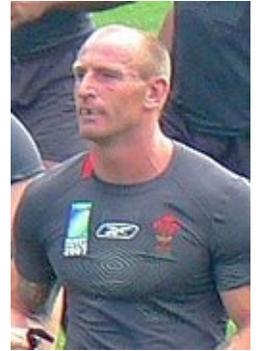
Initially, Thomas juggled his post office job and rugby, sometimes beginning a day's work at 4:30 in the morning and then giving his all on the playing field in the afternoon; but eventually he left his job as a postman for one in operations with the Bridgend club in order to concentrate on his career in sports.

His efforts were rewarded with an invitation from the Welsh Rugby Union to take part in the training camp that would select the national team for the 1995 World Cup—an invitation delivered into his hand at the local post office by his ecstatic father.

It was the chance of a lifetime, but Thomas hesitated on the drive to Cardiff, fearing that the greater scrutiny that would come with being a member of the national team might bring to light the homosexuality that he had so assiduously concealed and with which he was particularly struggling as a male athlete.

Thomas had recognized that he was gay at around sixteen years of age and had had his first sexual experience with another young man at eighteen, but he tried to repress his feelings.

Of his initial encounter he told Helen Weathers of the *Daily Mail*, "At the time it felt right, but afterwards it felt wrong, and I promised myself it would never happen again. . . . I used to pray constantly and ask God:



Gareth Thomas in 2007.
Photograph by Flickr contributor Manuel.
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'You have given me this great talent to play rugby. There must be some kind of answer.' But there wasn't one."

Even showing up a day late for camp with no good excuse, Thomas made the national team and turned in a stellar performance in his first outing for Wales, scoring three goals against Japan.

Playing for one's national team earns a rugby player a cap—sometimes presented in physical form and always tabulated as a mark of honor for an elite player. By taking the field for Wales, Thomas was on his way to setting a record for caps for his country.

Thomas remained on the Welsh national team until 2007, finishing with an impressive one hundred caps.

When not playing internationally, Thomas continued his career in Welsh rugby and was a favorite with fans, who cheered for the sports hero they called Alfie. Thomas had been tabbed with the nickname as a teen when one of his friends decided that his red hair and large nose were reminiscent of the features of the title character in the American television sitcom *ALF*, a fuzzy extraterrestrial.

In the case of the character, ALF stood for "alien life form." The feelings of difference that Thomas harbored often left him thinking of himself as something of an alien being as well.

Thomas's prowess has drawn the admiration of coaches and fellow players throughout his career. Commented Steve Hansen, former coach of the national team, "He's an athlete's athlete—he's big, strong, fast, and powerful. But not only that, he brings with him attitude, bags of courage and bravery. You don't often get a package of qualities like that in rugby."

Thomas stayed with the Bridgend club until 1997, when he went to Cardiff, where he played for four years before returning to the team in his own home region.

Thomas was constantly fearful that his sexual orientation would become known, spelling an end to his career in sports.

"I knew I would never be accepted as a gay man and still achieve what I wanted to achieve in the game," he told Weathers, adding, "I became a master of disguise and could play the straight man down to a tee, sometimes over-compensating by getting into fights or being overly aggressive because I didn't want the real me to be found out. . . . But when you withdraw into yourself, you start to feel lonely, upset, ashamed. You create this inner world which is dark."

Despite the tough-guy image that Thomas projected, there were occasional rumors and speculation about his sexuality among players and fans, and sometimes a cat-call during a match, but, backed by his teammates, Thomas derided them.

Thomas had a long-term but on-and-off relationship with a girlfriend, Jemma, whom he described to Weathers as "the nicest, most caring, understanding, prettiest girl I ever met." Nevertheless, he continued to seek occasional sexual encounters with men even though doing so left him with feelings of guilt and self-loathing.

"It was such a confusing time because I had amazingly strong feelings for her, yet I knew I had taken who I was and put it into a little ball and pushed it into a corner," he stated.

Thomas proposed in 2000, and the couple wed in 2002. Thomas truly hoped for a long and stable marriage despite his recognition—and if not acceptance—of his homosexuality.

"I felt confident I could keep this other part of me locked away indefinitely. I still felt attracted to other men, but I squashed those feelings. I decided I could accept the attraction, provided I never did anything about it," he said.

He could not keep that resolution, however, and cheating on his wife only added to his burden of confusion and guilt.

In 2003 the Welsh Rugby Union reorganized, and Thomas became a member of the Celtic Warriors, a team created by merging the Bridgend and Pontypridd clubs. After only a year, however, the Warriors lost the financial support of their backer, and the club went out of existence. Thomas decried the development and its potential impact on the future of Welsh rugby, noting to Paul Newman of *The Independent* that "the majority of the really big players for Wales have come from [the Bridgend area]."

Following the collapse of the Warriors organization, Thomas was recruited by and signed with European powerhouse Toulouse.

But Wales still needed Thomas—at least in the opinion of Coach Scott Johnson. Thomas's years of heavy drinking had made some people skeptical of choosing him for the squad, but Johnson recommended him for the final spot on the Wales national team roster, and, in an even more controversial move, Thomas was named captain by Head Coach Mike Ruddock.

He responded with outstanding play in 2004, and the following year, again as captain, led Wales to victories over all five other competitors in the Six Nations Championship. In addition, his Toulouse team won the rugby championship of Europe, the Heineken Cup. Fans elected him the BBC Wales Sports Personality of the Year.

During a game with Toulouse in January 2006, Thomas suffered a concussion—far from the first during his playing career. As usual, he had a test, received medical clearance, and continued to play.

As soon as Thomas landed back in Wales a few weeks later, he went directly to a BBC Wales studio to appear on an interview show. Rugby-player-turned-sports-journalist Eddie Butler immediately accused him of leading a players' revolt against Head Coach Ruddock, who had recently resigned.

Both men's tempers flared as Thomas's vehement denials and challenges only drew repeated accusations from Butler that Thomas had undermined Ruddock, the man who had appointed him to the captaincy, allegedly in hopes that Coach Johnson might advance to the post.

Still seething from the ugly incident, Thomas went home to watch the recorded show with his family. Just as the broadcast began, however, he suffered a seizure and collapsed. Doctors determined that he had had a mini-stroke brought on by stress so severe that it had elevated his blood pressure enough to collapse an artery to his brain, so recently traumatized by the concussion.

The doctors refused to speculate on whether or not Thomas could ever resume playing rugby. They told him to limit his exercise to walking for the next six months.

Shortly after this blow, doctors brought the Thomases more bad news: the fetus that Jemma Thomas was carrying had died. The pregnancy, like her two previous ones, ended in a miscarriage.

The pressure of Thomas's situation bore so heavily on him that he had suicidal thoughts as he walked along the high cliffs near his home.

"It wasn't that I really wanted to die," he explained to Weathers. "I just wanted everything to be different, for it all to go away."

But he knew it would not and could not.

He decided to come out to his wife, who was shocked but still remained with him when he returned to Toulouse to begin playing again.

"At first, we both felt that we couldn't just walk away from each other," recalled Thomas, but the couple soon realized that the marriage could not survive. They divorced, but without rancor; neither has had anything but good to say of the other.

When Thomas returned to Wales, he was reunited with Johnson, who was not the head coach of the Welsh team but instead at the helm of the squad for their opponent, his native Australia.

Sensing that something was dreadfully wrong emotionally with Thomas, Johnson approached him, revealed his suspicion that Thomas's disquiet was due to his homosexuality, and volunteered to broach the issue with some of Thomas's Welsh teammates, with whom Johnson was, of course, well acquainted.

As good as his word, Johnson returned in a couple of hours—a terrifying interval for Thomas—with Martyn Williams and Stephen Jones, two of the most illustrious members of the team, both of whom expressed support. Williams asked why Thomas had not told them before.

The answer was fear. Internet sites were buzzing with commentary and speculation about the reason for the break-up of the Thomases' marriage, and both of his teams, Wales and Toulouse, had been contacted by tabloid newspapers seeking to out him. Thomas's teammates circled the wagons to let him come out on his own terms.

He quit Toulouse shortly thereafter, thus eliminating one potential source of leaks, and came home to play for the Cardiff Blues.

Thomas came out publicly in December 2009 on the eve of a match between Cardiff and his previous team, Toulouse. When he informed his teammates of the impending announcement, they were supportive, and his parents feted his return home by popping a bottle of champagne to celebrate "the start of the rest of your life."

Glbq rights activist Peter Tatchell hailed Thomas for acknowledging his homosexuality during his sports career. "It is very positive Gareth has come out while he is still an active player," he stated to Jamie Doward of *The Guardian*. "Many of the sports people who have declared their homosexuality have tended to do so after their careers were over. . . . Hopefully this will ease the way for other gay and bisexual players to also come out."

Thomas reported to Gary Smith of *Sports Illustrated* that he had already heard from gay youth who had given up sports but were inspired by his example to return. Other gay men also wrote to tell Thomas how encouraging his decision to come out had been for them. Tens of thousands of fans—both glbtq and allies—joined Facebook and Twitter pages supporting him.

In order to help young Britons who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation, Thomas has become a spokesman for ChildLine, a telephone counseling helpline. The service is not limited to glbtq concerns but is an invaluable resource for youngsters who have few if any other places to turn for confidential help with their questions.

Thomas has also become a patron of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History Month in Great Britain.

For his courage and accomplishments, Thomas was at the top of *The Independent's* 2010 "pink list," the newspaper's annual roster of leaders in the glbtq community in Great Britain.

In April 2010 Thomas joined the Wrexham Celtic Crusaders, but a groin injury requiring surgery sidelined him in the summer. He has signed a contract for the 2011 season, however, and is optimistic about his future on the field and off.

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