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College Team Teaches a Lesson in Acceptance

By **KATIE THOMAS**

ONEONTA, N.Y. — The Oneonta men's lacrosse team marched two by two onto the field, sticks held with purpose for the final home game of the season. Beneath their helmets, the players flashed hard looks and cheeks smeared with eye black.

Tough and menacing is the team's reputation around this [State University of New York](#) campus in the foothills of the Catskills. Even Dan Mahar, the head coach, acknowledges his players are viewed as a bit "rough around the edges."

But this season, the team is developing a new reputation — as models of tolerance — after one of its captains announced in an online essay in February that he was gay. The senior, Andrew McIntosh, said he had not heard a single disparaging comment from his teammates.

"I was embraced with open arms," he said. "I had teammates come up and give me handshakes, and people saying it takes a lot of guts to do that."

Sports have long been viewed as inhospitable to gay men. The number of American male professional team athletes who have come out can be counted on two hands. In locker rooms, antigay slurs are tossed around as casually as borrowed towels. Yet for those who follow the increasingly common stories of athletes who decide to come out while in college, McIntosh's story is not an anomaly, but the norm.

"For some reason, people continue to think that gay people in sports will have a rough time, but we haven't seen in 10 years anyone kicked off their team," said Cyd Zeigler, the co-founder of [Outsports.com](#), referring to male athletes. The site published [the essay by McIntosh](#) and has served as a public home for gay athletes to tell their coming-out stories. Since the Web site began in 2000, Zeigler estimates that more than two dozen college and high school athletes have used the site to reveal that they are gay.

Still, for players who rely on an athletic scholarship or are beholden to a coach, "you're afraid of the unknown," Zeigler said.

That was the case for McIntosh, who started playing T-ball in kindergarten and by sixth grade had graduated to football and lacrosse. As he entered high school, sports became a refuge from what McIntosh described as confusing feelings about his sexuality.

“I took sports so seriously because I didn’t have a personal life,” he said. “That was my partner. I didn’t have anything to fall back on.”

Sometimes, that single-mindedness came at a cost. McIntosh said he tried to commit suicide after his team lost a football game and with it, a chance at the playoffs — one of several times he said he considered taking his life. He blamed his failure on the field on his attraction to men.

“I would think to myself, because you’re thinking that way, you lost the game,” he said.

In college, McIntosh’s discomfort with his identity led him on a path across New York State, first as a scholarship athlete at C.W. Post University on Long Island, then as a transfer student at SUNY Plattsburgh. He eventually arrived at Division III Oneonta College in the fall of 2008.

Being an athlete, he thinks, kept him from coming to terms with his sexual orientation.

“I just thought, you cannot be a gay athlete,” he said. “Gay and athlete don’t go together.”

At Oneonta, McIntosh made an impression as a confident, serious player. At 6 feet 2 inches and 215 pounds, he is an imposing defender and quickly became a starter. In the classroom, he earned good grades as an adolescent-education major.

Mahar said that bus drivers and high school recruits sometimes confused McIntosh for a coach.

“He has just very mature, very likeable qualities to him,” Mahar said.

McIntosh was just the kind of player that Mahar was trying to cultivate. Mahar was then in his second year as the coach and was working to improve the reputation of the team.

“We have some good players, but none of them are going to be drafted,” he said. “My job is to prepare them to go and get real jobs and to be successful after they leave Oneonta.”

One afternoon in the spring of 2009, Mahar pulled the team out of practice after some players described one of his drills as “gay.” Mahar said he had been hearing such language on the bus and during practice.

“Regardless of how you feel about whether being gay is right or wrong,” Mahar said he told the team, “the language is not appropriate.”

For McIntosh, it was a welcome signal.

“I had never heard a coach say that before,” McIntosh said.

That summer, McIntosh decided to confront his sexual identity. It had been a good year — he had adjusted well, and Mahar had recently named him one of four team captains for his senior year.

“I started thinking: ‘What is the matter with me?’ ” McIntosh said. “ ‘Why can’t I beat this?’ That’s how I thought, too: ‘I’m going to beat this.’ And I finally just gave in and just said, ‘This is who I am,’ and I decided I don’t want to live this way.”

McIntosh told those closest to him first: two friends, his sister, his brother, his parents. His sister, who is also gay, directed him to Outsports.com, which McIntosh described as a revelation. Through the site, he became reacquainted with the story of [Andrew Goldstein, a Dartmouth lacrosse player](#) who in 2003 revealed to his team that he was gay. McIntosh tracked down Goldstein and sought advice.

“I didn’t feel alone anymore,” McIntosh said.

McIntosh’s family had known that something was amiss, but “I didn’t know what he was struggling with,” said his mother, Cathy McIntosh. She realized he was gay about a year before he broke the news, she said. “I figured he’d tell me when he was ready.”

Later that summer, McIntosh told his coach, broaching the topic first in an e-mail message. For McIntosh, telling Mahar and other athletes presented the greatest risk of rejection.

“I didn’t want to seem vulnerable,” he said. “I didn’t want people to think, ‘Oh, he’s not doing too well mentally.’ ”

Mahar said he tried to make McIntosh feel as comfortable as possible.

“I know that that was a very difficult and anxious conversation for him,” Mahar said. “I wanted Andrew to leave the office knowing he was supported, and this did not change anything as far as I was concerned.”

In his online essay, McIntosh wrote that his coach assured him that “if we had a roster of 30 players and 15 of them did not want to play on the team because I was gay, he would tell them to leave the team.”

Buoyed by the positive response, McIntosh told the other captains and some of his closest friends on the team. In January, he wrote a thank-you note to Outsports.com. Zeigler

suggested that he write his own story.

“Everybody has a story that some kid is going to connect with,” Zeigler said.

McIntosh agreed. But before it went online, he had to tell his team first. McIntosh asked the coaches to give him some time after practice one day in February.

“I just spoke right from the heart,” he said.

Several of the players said they were surprised, but ultimately unfazed by McIntosh’s news.

“It’s not every day that your lacrosse captain comes out to you,” said Joe Schofield, 20, a sophomore. “I was a little surprised, but it was kind of like, ‘Oh, that makes sense.’ ”

So how did a team that had once been reprimanded for using insensitive language come to embrace a gay teammate? Goldstein, the former Dartmouth lacrosse player, said the macho atmosphere ultimately did not mean very much.

“I think when they find out that the guy next to them — this is his life — it becomes real,” said Goldstein, who briefly played professional lacrosse and is now pursuing a doctorate in molecular biology at [U.C.L.A.](#) He was greeted with similar support when he told his Dartmouth team he was gay. “It’s not just some slur that they passed on from hearing from someone else.”

Zeigler says the experience of female athletes who are gay is very different. Although they are openly gay in larger numbers than men, he said female athletes had to fight the opposite stereotype — the assumption that all women who play sports are gay. As a result, female athletes who are gay have **sometimes encountered harassment** from coaches and fellow teammates. For male athletes, however, “the response is either indifference, or it’s positive,” Zeigler said.

Mahar said he had heard that a handful of opposing players had yelled epithets at McIntosh during games, and he said one opposing coach falsely accused McIntosh of using inappropriate language before a game — something Mahar said he believed was related to McIntosh’s sexual orientation.

Mahar said he planned to address the issue at a conference meeting later this year.

But McIntosh said he had never heard anything negative.

“It’s really at the point now where we’re just out there to play lacrosse,” McIntosh said.

In the locker room, McIntosh said, “it’s business as usual. We talk about life and how is your

day going.”

If anything, McIntosh and his teammates said, the situation makes for some good jokes.

On a team trip to North Carolina earlier this year, “some of us said, ‘I hope a girls’ soccer team shows up at the hotel,’ ” recalled Andy Morris, 20, and a sophomore. “Mac goes, ‘I hope a guys’ soccer team shows up.’ ”