

OUTSPORTS Interview

Look Your Best In 2008

Trust Your Nose To A Face Expert See Photos & Patient Forms
www.FaceChange.org

Join Outsports
Outsports Store

Make a Donation

Sport Sections

- Baseball
- College
- Basketball
- NBA
- NFL College
- F'ball
- Gay Games
- Olympics
- Tennis
- Softball
- NHL
- Women's Sports
- More

Interact

- Clubhouse
- Athlete Registry
- Discussion Board
- Polls
- Letters

Local Sections

- Local Events
- Local News
- Local Teams & Leagues

Features

- Community Outreach
- Featured Articles
- From The Wire
- Jock Talk
- Making A Difference
- Out Athletes
- Out on Campus

Regular Columnists

For the Eyes

Locker Rooms

Publicist is helping athletes come out

By [Cyd Zeigler jr.](#)
Outsports.com

While he's best known for his work with entertainment celebrities, publicist Howard Bragman has certainly made a name for himself in the world of sports. The openly gay publicist, called by some "the best publicist in the business," has worked with athletes and sports entities his entire career. In 2003, he repped Esera Tuaolo as he came out of the closet. Since then, he has also been the publicist for the coming out of golfer Rosie Jones, WNBA player Sheryl Swoopes and former NBA player John Amaechi.



We talked with Bragman about his four gay-athlete clients, the issues they've faced, and what he's learned in a long sports-related P.R. career.

Outsports: Who was your first sports client?

[Howard Bragman](#): When I started in this business, one of my first big clients when I was a young man was Anhuesser Busch. I did their PR in a 10-state region in Chicago. So I learned every kind of sport PR. Budweiser would have bowling and baseball, and Michelob would have golf and sailing. So I got to work with dozens of professional athletes, through their good graces.

OS: What did you learn?

HB: I learned how it worked. In college, one of my best friends was on the football team. I've always had jocks as friends, I think because there's a reality and a grounding, and something I've always found in athletes is excellence. People like to equate athletes with stupidity, and God knows there are stupid athletes, but that's not what I've found. I've found that people who make it at the highest level of college sports and pro sports are for the most part really intelligent and dedicated people. I didn't want to hang out with dummies. Anybody who assumes that somebody who is a jock is stupid is being very naïve and short-sighted, and they don't know how the sporting world works.

OS: Who is a particularly intelligent athlete you've interacted with?

HB: Years ago for Budweiser I had to work with [boxer] Sugar Ray Leonard, and I found him a pleasure to work with. [Olympic speed skater] Eric Heiden. [Hall of Fame baseball player] Mickey Mantle; we didn't talk

Click with Someone

Game on.
connexion.org

Connexion is a community of 107,000 people from around the globe. Get connected to LGBT people through networks of friends for dating, conversation and fun.

Join now and start creating your community of fun active friends. Absolutely Free!

[Read more...](#)

Premium Advertising on Outsports

Advertisers

Stunning Olympian Sculptures

EXHIBITED AT THE LOUVRE
World renowned sculptor Danielle Anjou has created a powerful and sensual series The Olympians. The Diver was exhibited at the Louvre in Paris, France in the prestigious Societe National des Beaux Arts in Dec.

[Picture This](#)
[Catch 'em](#)

Other Sections

[About](#)
[Outsports](#)
[Anti-Gay List](#)
[Cartoons](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Entertainment](#)
[Gay Sports](#)
[News](#)
[Olympics](#)
[Outsports in the Media](#)

[Outsports](#)
[Ring Of Honor](#)

[Contribute to Outsports](#)

[E-mail](#)
[Outsports.com](#)

[Advertise on Outsports.com](#)

nuclear physics, but he was a real gentleman. I was a young P.R. guy and Mickey Mantle had to go to a parade, so they sent me to go along with him. We're in Benton Harbor, Mich., in the middle of nowhere at the Blossomtime Parade. We got in the night before, and that morning I wake up in my bed and I hear a knock at my door, and there's Mickey Mantle and he's like, "Oh, I went down and got some coffee and donuts and I thought you might like one." Those are the little things you remember. And I think he wasn't a bad athlete, either.

I've had a great time with athletes. At my last company, we worked with Leigh Steinberg for years, we worked with Marion Jones. I've always done that. I'm better known for celebrities than sports, but athletes are celebrities. And most athletes want to do the same thing that most celebrities want to do: They want to break out of their mold and develop a "brand."

OS: Steinberg has been painted by some as a homophobe, especially for his dealings with the University of Hawaii and their dropping the "Rainbow" from their nickname. How have you found Leigh on the issue of sexuality?

HB: We've talked about it. We talked about rumors about some of his athletes and things, and how he can handle that. But he's always been a gentleman to me. I've known the man for 15 years, and we've always had very good and very fair dealings, and he's treated me like a gentleman. If somebody is truly homophobic, they're not going to hire me. Let's be clear. There are other routes to go.

OS: What's the craziest issue you've had to deal with for a sports client?

HB: I wasn't doing the day-to-day at the time, but I think the Marion Jones stuff was pretty crazy. That was a little wild.

OS: What was your worst experience with an athlete?

HB: It was O.J. Simpson. About 25 years ago I was in the Chicago office of Burson-Marsteller, and they were at the time the biggest PR firm in the world. I did a lot of media relations. One of our clients was a huge financial firm, and they were having a golf tournament. They paid tens of thousands of dollars for this tournament. O.J. was coming in for the tournament on Friday, and I was supposed to get OJ some publicity on Friday for the tournament. Irv Kupcinet had a PBS show called Kup's Show. His wife Essie produced it. It was the most eclectic show you would go to, because everyone who was in Chicago for the weekend would go do it Friday afternoon. O.J. was just a surly son of a bitch. We were in the car headed to the show, and I was telling him the name of the sponsor, and if you can mention it, please do. In the green room, it was me, O.J., Buddy Rich, and a short man in a brown suit. Essie came in and brought Buddy and O.J. into the studio. So me and the little man in the brown suit were left in the room, and the man asked me who was OJ Simpson. And I'm a smartass young kid, and I said, "well, he's a very famous rabbi." And his jaw dropped and said, "that man's a rabbi?" And then the light went on and I thought, this guy really doesn't know who O.J. Simpson is, so I let him off the hook, and I said, "I guess you don't watch football much." And the guy said, "I'm the Israeli correspondent for the Chicago Sun-Times, and I've lived in Israel for the last 25 years." Of course, I felt like a jackass. And, of course, O.J. never mentioned the client on air.

OS: Have you ever found your sexuality to be either a stumbling block or an asset in representing sports figures?

2007.
anjou-sculpture.com

[Read more...](#)

[Advertise on Outsports](#)

HB: It's certainly an asset for those who want to come out of the closet. Beyond that, I haven't found it a really big issue. I feel like I'm judged on what I do and not on my orientation. Certainly in the old days, when I worked for Anheuser-Busch, I wasn't out of the closet, but I wasn't in the closet either. But it wasn't relevant.

OS: As a publicist, would you ever encourage an athlete to stay in the closet?

HB: If they're not ready emotionally, absolutely. The first male to come out of the closet on a team sport while they're playing certainly has to understand that the scrutiny is going to be intense. As John Amaechi mentioned, and as I believe, you have to be pretty indispensable before you have the balls to do that. This guy named Edward Bernays, he's sort of known as the father of public relations, said a P.R. person has different jobs. The first is to present the client to the world. And the second is to interpret the world for the client, and I take that very seriously. I talk a lot of times to my client about timing, and the right time to do things. And that's one of the biggest mistakes I see in the P.R. world. Just because you can get press doesn't necessarily mean you should get press at that time. So I try to help them understand what the right time is. That being said, I always tell people I've never had a bad experience with someone coming out of the closet.

OS: Other than sports figures, what other celebrities have you helped come out.

HB: The very first ones were Dick Sergeant [the second Darin on "Bewitched"] and Sheila Kuhl [California State Senator, who was on "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis"]. And I did that in 1991. And then I worked with Amanda Bearse after she came out, and then I helped Mitchell Anderson right after he came out. And then I've had clients, a la Bruce Villanch and Sandra Bernhard, along the way who deal with the issue. When anybody comes out, it makes an amazing difference. I remember when Dick came out and thought, "I haven't been on Bewitched for decades," and we called him a retroactive role model. But flowers and letters and notes started coming from people, and you realize, this guy can change the world.

OS: If Tim Hardaway came to you tomorrow and asked you to rep him, would you?

HB: I don't think I would. And I say that as the guy who reps Isaiah Washington. Because it's got to be about more than just the money for me. And before I signed Isaiah, we talked for a couple hours. We knew people in common, and I really feel like he screwed up, but I think it was a screw up instead of being a homophobe. I look at the situation where the guy has played gay roles in his career. And I think somebody who's truly homophobic wouldn't do that. But Tim Hardaway's a little different for me. I like to be someplace I'm proud of, in representation. With Isaiah, we have a chance to talk, to have a real dialogue. He's really beautifully positioned to have a real dialogue.

OS: How did you get introduced to Esera?

HB: I was at my other P.R. firm, and one of our publicists got a call because he represented Donny Osmond, and Donny's manager also represented Esera. Even before I started working with athletes who came out, I had taken other people out and had done probably as much as anyone else in the GLBT community, in terms of P.R. I've represented the AIDS Ride, we did work for HRC, work for GLAAD. So, it wasn't a big stretch for me. And that we knew sports was the second part of it.

OS: What were the biggest differences between Esera's story played out in the press and how John's did four years later?

HB: I don't think it's just Esera and John. I think it's Sheryl Swoopes and Rosie Jones. Everybody has a different reason for coming out. Everybody has a different story. Everybody wants different things from their coming out. And taking out men is very different from taking out women. When you take Esera and John Amaechi, you're breaking a stereotype. When you take out a female golfer or basketball player, you're reinforcing a stereotype. My business is the opposite of cookie-cutter. The campaigns we tailor for each one of our clients are very personal. We want to make sure what the client is looking for is met. In Esera's case, he wanted to tell his truth. John Amaechi's goal was to get on the New York Times best-seller list, which we did, and to have a credible speaking career in the U.S. And we achieved all of that.

OS: How did John's story unfold in those first few days of February?

HB: I will tell you how it all unfolded. I was working backward from the date of ESPN the magazine and the book coming out. Then Leigh Steinberg calls me a week before the Super Bowl and asks, "will you go to Florida and do P.R. for my party?" Here you put a publicist at a Super Bowl party, and there are 25 journalists there, and my eyes light up, and I say, "Guys, I've got a big story. In a couple weeks, I've got a former NBA player coming out of the closet." And they started writing about it virally. And that Wednesday is one of those days you never forget. His identity was out there, and I had a real fear that the story would go away, but ironically a lot of media outlets who said they weren't sure when I pitched the book, as soon as it went viral, they had to have it. And then it just went ballistic after that.

OS: How well do you know Dave Kopay?

HB: Very well. I've known Dave about 20 years.

OS: How did you meet?

HB: We met at events in L.A., and I've always been a big fan. And I just think he's a really good guy, and a true pioneer who doesn't always get the recognition he deserves, because we have such a nice ageist society. I consider Dave part of my family in L.A. He comes over for holidays. I just think he's an exquisitely courageous guy. He's just a kind, gentle soul with a very true heart. Dave has been great to me. When Esera came out, he sat down with him. When John Amaechi was in L.A., we had dinner with him. And it really provides a lot of comfort to those guys to know someone has come before them, and he's living to a ripe old age, with a happy life, and there's life beyond coming out.

OS: When people ask me what advice I have for athletes coming out, I always say three things, and one of them is, "call Howard Bragman." What would your recommendations be?

HB: Be real comfortable in your timing. And make sure you tell the relevant people in your life before they see you on a network morning show. I won't mention names, but I had an instance where an athlete came out, and this person's ducks weren't quite in a row. It made for emotional stuff, particularly with family, and that's stuff you have to get out of the way ahead of time. If you're dealing with the emotion of your family, it's hard to deal with the media at the same time.

OS: Are you presently working with any sports figures who are thinking about coming out?

HB: No, I'm not. I'm working with sports figures, but nobody who's about to burst out of the closet. I think if somebody wants to come out of the closet as a professional athlete, it's great. But I don't think they have a clue how much attention there's going to be. John and I joke about the fact that, he was a journeyman NBA guy, but he wasn't a brand name. This is a guy who wasn't a star, came out three years after he stopped playing, and John has done more than 350 interviews since he came out, to give you an idea. And that's with us turning down most of the Fox ones.

OS: Why'd you turn down the Fox interviews?

HB: Because we had a bad experience, and we didn't want to replicate that experience. And you don't need to put a client in a position where they're uncomfortable. And I don't need to support media outlets that sensationalize it.

You know, One thing that I find is that first real interview is very, very important. In the case of John Amaechi, the first interview was ESPN televised, and then ESPN the Magazine. With Rosie Jones, we wrote an op-ed piece. It was very important with Esera, it was Good Morning America. With Sheryl, we did a slew of interviews. We did it en masse. The first time you tell your story, it's very important, and I work with my clients to make sure they tell their story well, to make sure they're prepared for the kind of questions that are going to come out. And there's some nasty stuff that comes out when you do this. Some of the homophobic stuff about the locker room. It gets to be silly. But, at the same time, you have to prepare your client to answer those questions. With John, we had prepared ahead of time and we did a media training. But you always have to refine it as you go. It took John about two days, and we had answers for everything. And then you get to go on TV and you get to be fearless, which is a great thing, because, if you're not afraid of any of the questions, there's a confidence you have, and you get to be extraordinary.

OS: The only question of mine that John will not answer is whether he has slept with an NBA player. Was that from your prodding?

HB: No, that was a personal decision on his part. And the other thing that was controversial was when Sheryl Swoopes came out and Sheryl felt she wasn't born gay. And we got a lot of grief, and we talked about this at length. And my ultimate feeling was, if we're about anything, it's about freedom, it's about anybody's own experience, and if this is honestly her belief and her experience, I'm not going to discount that for the sake of political correctness. And I heard grief from a lot of people, media people, P.R. people, activists called me saying, "How could you let her say that?" Well, it was her truth, and how could I deny her her truth? And if you're coming out to live in your truth, why should you lie for the sake of political correctness?

OS: I think that's a great philosophy. We've heard about a number of athletes thanks to John's story. He really opened a lot of closet doors.

HB: John was the biggest ever, in terms of the amount of attention. It even shocked an old P.R. guy like me. I think it shocked everybody. It shocked John, it shocked you. We thought it would be a story, but the level of play it got was kind of amazing. You're supposed to end these stories saying, "I hope for the day when athletes coming isn't news," right? That's what the ending is supposed to be. But it isn't really the ending. We're into the change process. Everyone takes it in a new direction. And what we learned with John was, the stigma no longer goes with the athlete, it goes

with the homophobe. And I think that's huge progress.

A horizontal banner advertisement for the University of Phoenix. On the left is the university's logo, a stylized eagle with wings spread, next to the text "University of Phoenix". To the right of the logo, the words "NOW OFFERING" are written in large, bold, white capital letters. Further right, the text "Earn your degree online." is displayed in a smaller font. Below this text is a blue rectangular button with the white text "Learn More". At the bottom of the banner, the text "Bachelor of Science in Communication" is written in white. On the far right of the banner is a small, square photograph of a young woman with dark hair, looking upwards and to the right.

University of Phoenix **NOW OFFERING** Earn your degree online.
[Learn More](#)
Bachelor of Science in Communication

April 30, 2007