

Matt Lister
Council Of Europe Speech

Intro

Hello and thank you for your time today. My name is Matt Lister, I was a canoe slalom athlete for Great Britain for over 10 years, winning medals at European and World Championships, narrowly missing out on 2 Olympic games. 2012 and 2016. I Retired in February last year.

And I'm gay.

I always knew I was different growing up, from a very young age I loved to dress up in my sister's clothes and play with her Barbie's.

In my early years at school I wasn't exactly prime candidate to be a successful professional athlete. I was a little overweight, geeky, useless at any sports that involved a ball. Not only did this keep me distant from my friends who would play football and rugby, it stopped me from thinking I could ever pursue a career in sport.

I had a lot of friends growing up, but I would still describe my childhood as lonely. As I progressed through my teenage years, I felt my peers had left me behind. The boys were starting to date the girls and vice versa, that didn't work for me, but I was too afraid to tell anyone how I felt. Being obviously different also branded me with a big target on my forehead for bullying. I was picked on, beaten up and called names daily.

I never felt I had a role model who fitted me that I could look up too. There were times that I felt so out of place, that I had suicidal thoughts. I know I am not alone in my community for feeling this way growing up in the closet.

Sport in the Closet

That brings me to my sport, something that finally made sense to me, although not at first.

I first tried canoeing when I was 6 years old, it wasn't until I was around 12 I began to go more regularly, but for the most part at the beginning I was just a nuisance. We would go to the local swimming pool on Sunday afternoon each week, and each week I'd spend 5 minutes doing what I was told, and an hour pushing people in and sinking boats. Until one week I was told I either did something productive at those sessions or I couldn't come back.

So I got enrolled into a grassroots scheme called 'paddle power' where you took part in competitions for all the different disciplines of canoeing, and for each one you

completed you got points. I went along to competitions in Sprint, Marathon, Whitewater Racing, Freestyle, Canoe Polo, Sea Kayaking and Slalom... I had done very well across all the different disciplines, but the one that grabbed me, probably because I had won my first few races there, was Slalom.

I was scouted by the British team and from the age of 15 I was training and racing full time. Slalom is a sport that is very heavy on technical aspects as well as physical. It can be quite a dangerous sport and with that can come a lot of 'macho/bravado' behaviours and attitudes. This wasn't such an issue, until there would a difficult move set in training, someone would say it was too hard, and one of the others would bark back 'don't be so gay'. It didn't happen often, and after years of being picked on at school, I'd built quite a thick skin, but still hearing people use the word 'gay' in such a negative way almost pained me to hear.

I'm an honest person, and I despised lying to anyone about anything, especially about who I truly was. It was making me miserable not being able to be myself, so at the age of 18 I decided enough was enough, and that it was time to come out.

Sport out of the closet.

Coming out I would say is still one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. When you've built up a life around you, friends, family, career, but in an instant all that can change and in my head, I could lose it all.

I am happy to say, my experience was more than positive. I had an unbelievable response coming out. Not just from family and friends, but also team mates, my international competition, even from complete strangers who approached me via Instagram, twitter or Facebook.

One of the best things about coming out was feeling so free on the water, I was happy and my results improved because of it.

I wrote a piece for the charity, RUComingOut. I basically did what I am doing to today, sharing my story of coming out. I didn't realize when an athlete comes out as gay publically whilst they are still competing, it's a big deal.

The story went 'viral' for lack of a better word. It was being retweeted and shared left right and centre and I was receiving messages from people all over the world congratulating me. Which I still find strange, being congratulated for being myself.

The story I wrote even reached two of the boys who had helped make my life a living hell whilst being at school. Both had beaten me up, called me names like faggot or poof, they both managed to get hold of my number and apologized profusely for the way they had treated me. One even commented that his now son liked to play with Barbie's too just like I did and he'd be horrified if his son's friends acted the same way to him.

I did however have one bad response from a member of another team at the European championships, the day before our qualification race. I knew word had spread quickly through the sport about my coming out, in canoe slalom, your business was everybody's business. One of the other competitors came up to me and told me that his father would have drowned him at birth if he'd known he was gay.

Suddenly all those feelings and emotions came back to me from school when I was getting called names and being beaten up. I had made such huge leaps forward and suddenly in my head I was back at square one. I completely shut down mentally from what I was supposed to be doing which was preparing for the race. But with it being the day before the qualifications for all of my other teammates I kept it to myself and tried to put it out of my mind.

It played on my mind through the entire race and after a rocky qualification, we blew out in the final. I have to put a large portion of that blame on myself because my head wasn't where it needed to be, and all because of one comment I had let get to me.

After coming out I felt a much tighter bond between my training partner and my coach, I was able to be completely honest with them for the first time in my life. I spoke to them about what had happened at the competition and together we worked through it as a team, they highlighted to me the incredible response I had had from everyone else for having the guts to come out, I couldn't let one bad response get to me.

Life After Sport

So life after sport, I would have to say that being gay and coming out has done nothing but open more doors for me.

I started working with LGBT charity Stonewall on their school role models program, where I was able to visit schools to share my experiences as an athlete, and coming out as gay. I was amazed to see that some of those schools now have LGBT focus groups and 'safe spaces' for their students, and during a couple of the visits, more students joined the groups and came out to their friends whilst I was there.

I became the LGBT Athlete Ambassador for the British athletes commission in 2015, this was the first position of its kind appointed by a players association. I took the role on to create a point of contact for athletes like myself who have felt lost with issues that aren't necessarily problems that a coach or a team mate would understand.

I was picked up by the UK's leading gay publication Attitude Magazine who wanted to run a story about my position at the British Athletes Commission and my retirement from sport. This then became a cover story and when it ran, they received such a great response they asked me to come back and work with them as their regular fitness writer.

Whats next?

So what needs to change moving forward? I think first and foremost the key is understanding that both society and sport need to move forward together, LGBT athletes need to be more in the forefront of the media to offer themselves up as role models for younger athletes trying to follow in their foot steps.

A lot of homophobia comes from misinformation or misunderstanding, this can be tackled very simply, by offering up the training required to understand members of the LGBTQ community, because among wherever you go in this world we are there!

There are athletes who believe that coming out as will damage their sporting career, that they'll lose sponsors or fans. More players associations need to have either an athlete in a role like mine, or a visible point of contact to get support to the athletes who need it most in these situations

There needs to be more of an active role from the LGBT community's allies. A gay person shouting about gay rights to gay people isn't going to get us as far as we'd like. Last year I worked with and supported Stonewall again with their rainbow laces campaign. Which saw an exchange of a pair of rainbow laces at every premiership football game over a weekend. Its acts like this that are so simple, but so necessary.

The LGBT community has come a long way, but it is highlighted further every day in the media, that we still have so far to go.