



# League of men has a ball in New York

Gay men take on sporting stereotypes in a rugby case-study, writes

## Larry Schwartz.

**H**ES over 195cm, weighs 112 kilograms and is described by former Wallaby Peter FitzSimons in a documentary on gay rugby players as "the hardest, toughest bastard who ever pulled on a boot".

"You know, it's quite flattering," Ian Roberts says. "Good for my ego."

The former rugby league star, who has embarked on an acting career since retiring from the game 10 years ago, says he is invariably cast as "a thug, stand-over man (or) doorman".

"It's almost like I'm never going to play Romeo," he says.

Speaking from Los Angeles, where he is looking for an agent to secure him more diverse roles in movies and television, Roberts concedes the thug image is ironically at odds with preconceptions.

"Unfortunately there's still that perception that gay men only fit a certain stereotype," says the former South Sydney Rabbitohs, Manly Warringah Sea Eagles and North Queensland Cowboys star.

Roberts celebrates his 43rd birthday this month.

He played one of Lex Luthor's henchmen in *Superman Returns* and had roles in movies including *Little Fish*, as well as in episodes of TV shows including *Blue Heelers* since graduating from the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney in 2004.

He narrates a new documentary, *Walk Like a Man*, in which rugby union team Sydney Convicts flies to New York City to compete in a tournament for gay players.

Roberts was a high profile player when he came out as a gay man a few years before retiring from the game a decade ago.

He says he quickly agreed when approached by Emmy award-winning producer Jim Morgison (*The Souls of New York*), who directed and produced the documentary with Patricia Zagarella.

"Jim rang me out of the blue about a year ago," Roberts says. "I said I would be glad to help. I respect what the boys are doing. I didn't see any of the footage before I did the narrating (but) I understood where they were coming from."

He says he agreed to narrate as a gesture of support because he believes players "shouldn't be looked down upon or attacked in any way

just because they happen to be gay".

The Sydney Convicts were among 30 teams competing in a biennial tournament initiated by the favourites, San Francisco Fog, for a cup named for Mark Bingham, the gay American rugby player who courageously stormed the cockpit of Flight 93 on September 11, 2001.

The San Franciscans have a lone lesbian team member whose parents believe she has succumbed to Satan. Also in the line-up is Leonardo "Buck" Gonzales, who went to Oregon on a football scholarship but kept quiet about his sexuality because "the sports world was just so homophobic".

One of the Sydney players is heterosexual but wants to honour the memory of a friend.

Another, Angus "Gus" Donald, didn't play rugby sooner because he feared "going into those hyper-masculine arenas" where he might be "found out".

Roberts has the words "what is it to be a man" tattooed on his right forearm. "It's not a question; it's a statement," he says. He went public about his sexual preference in 1995, three years before ending his career.



“They were the best (three) years of my life,” he says. “Two of those years I played for North Queensland. We hardly won any games (but) those were the best years of my career because I actually enjoyed playing. How can you enjoy playing when you’re not being totally honest?”

He had not pretended he was straight but “just kept quiet that I was gay”.

“It was like the worst kept secret in rugby league that I was gay. But just out of respect for me, people

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**play Romeo.**

IAN ROBERTS, actor

never used to bring it up.”

So widely admired was Roberts’ tough on-field performance, his candour about his homosexuality helped turn down the “voltage” of homophobic abuse in the schoolyard.

Peter FitzSimons’ remarks ring true, Roberts says; he was at the pinnacle of his career and his stance had helped ease “the ferocity of calling someone a faggot or pooffier”.

Roberts says the documentary reminded him of the rugby he’d play in the park when he was a teenager.

He suspects youngsters are more accepting of gays these days but the code is still so aggressive, “it could still be dangerous to be openly gay”.

He says he would never pressure gay players in the league, union, AFL or any other sport to follow his example.

“Everyone lives their lives as best they know how,” he says. But he now regrets he’d ever been “in the closet”.

“I wish I had been out all the time,” Roberts says.

*Walk Like a Man* screens Tuesday at 7.30pm on SBS.



Sydney Convicts players Tom Miller, left, and Ryan Nevin prepare for the Bingham Cup, a rugby union tournament for gay players in New York