



In the steps of a hero

One man's 9/11 sacrifice lives on in a competition for gay rugby players, writes **Helen Crompton**

Ian Roberts is soaking up the sun in Palm Springs with partner Daniel whose mobile he's borrowed for the interview. Just as he's getting into the swing of the Q&A, the former international rugby league player turned actor gets spotted by fans.

It doesn't happen so often these days, he says. "I'm probably recognised in the most obscure places around the world and most of that is to do with being the gay rugby guy who came out," Roberts laughs.

That was back in the mid-1990s when the international front row player instantly became the poster boy for gay sportsmen and his image graced dozens of newspapers and magazines challenging stereotypes by presenting as an alpha male

homosexual.

Today, Roberts says: "When being gay stops being news, it will stop being an issue. Before I came out I used to think I was doing the right thing by protecting the image of the game. I realised by 1994 that I was doing the exact opposite. By hiding who I was I wasn't protecting the game at all. It was kind of making a joke of it."

Roberts narrates a new documentary, *Walk Like a Man*. It's the story of the Bingham Cup, an amateur, biannual event established to honour the memory of Mark Bingham.

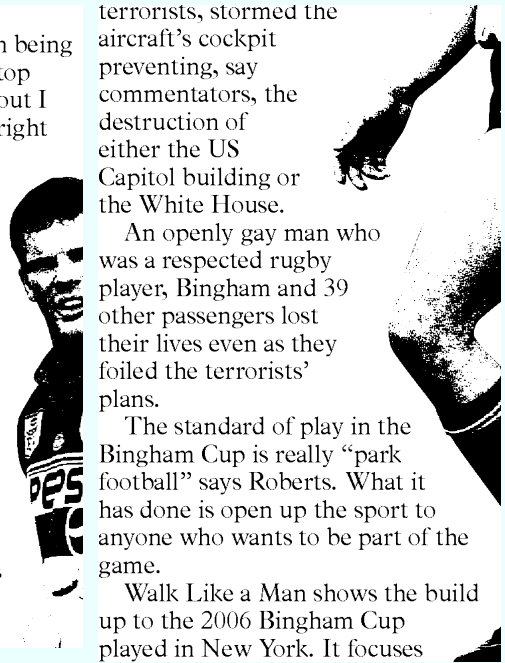
Bingham, along with others on the fated United Airlines Flight 93 hijacked by 9/11

terrorists, stormed the aircraft's cockpit preventing, say commentators, the destruction of either the US Capitol building or the White House.

An openly gay man who was a respected rugby player, Bingham and 39 other passengers lost their lives even as they foiled the terrorists' plans.

The standard of play in the Bingham Cup is really "park football" says Roberts. What it has done is open up the sport to anyone who wants to be part of the game.

Walk Like a Man shows the build up to the 2006 Bingham Cup played in New York. It focuses



The Sydney Convicts and the San Francisco Fog competed for the Bingham Cup.



on two top teams: sentimental cup favourites The San Francisco Fog; and challengers, the Sydney Convicts. The commitment and the passion verging on fervour of the players, is palpable. Their amateur status takes nothing away from the effort they put in. The opposite, says Roberts.

“It’s come one, come all. It’s not about sexual persuasion, but about not judging people for their sexual persuasion. It’s about the commitment. I think it actually carries more weight than professional rugby which becomes all about money, not

Ian Roberts when in the Manly Sea Eagles.

about the game itself. To me it is just a really positive story about a bunch of guys who want to play rugby without having to go through all the shit that goes with it and be openly gay.”

At this point Roberts pauses then adds: “I’m quite proud of SBS in taking a chance and getting behind this because it (being gay) is still a taboo subject.

“It sounds like a silly thing to say, but I forget that I am gay. I get reminded I’m gay all the time when I’m walking down the street holding my partner’s hand and someone will give us a funny look. Only then I think, ‘Oh yeah, it’s a gay thing they’re dealing with’. But don’t dare ask me not to hold my partner’s hand. Because it’s those people who need to carry the burden of uncertainty and confusion about it.

“I’ve been in a couple of relationships where my ex-partners were uncomfortable to hold hands in public and to me that’s about not treating yourself as equal and carrying someone else’s stuff and to me it’s unacceptable.”

Roberts has also had to deal with trauma in his personal life, including the death of Sydney teenager Aaron Light who disappeared in 1997. He describes Light as a “dear, dear friend” and says he was shocked and saddened not only because the teen lost his life in dubious circumstances but also because he had fallen off the radar, with his body only being discovered in 2002.

Roberts first met Light when playing for the rugby team Manly which, as a community exercise, arranged for players to visit sick children in hospital. A few years later he met Light again when the teen lived on Sydney’s streets. Light disappeared before he was due to give evidence in a sexual assault case.

Roberts involvement with the Bingham Cup documentary, he says, is a good counter balance to the negativity that some make of the private and individual matter of sexual persuasion.

Walk Like a Man airs on SBS, tonight at 7.30.