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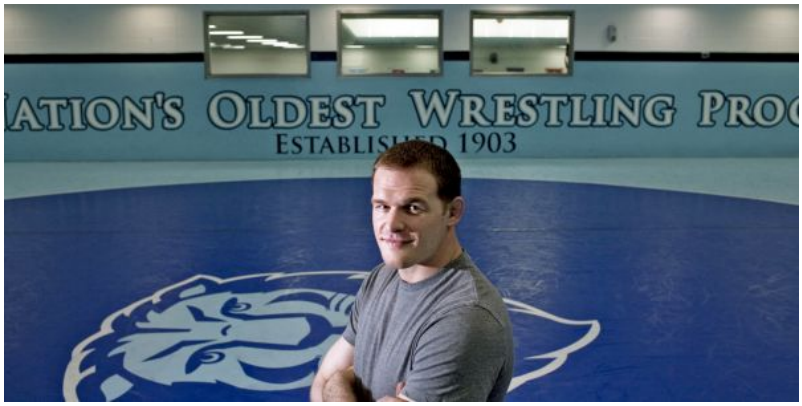
An Unlikely Ally Preaches Tolerance and Respect for Gay Teammates



Melanie Burford for The Chronicle

Hudson Taylor, an assistant wrestling coach at Columbia U. and a straight advocate for gay athletes, founded a group called Athlete Ally that now claims 13,000 supporters.

By Robin Wilson

Richmond, Va.

In a room full of college athletes, an image of a wrestling match flashes up on a screen. "I used to rip people's arms off," says Hudson Taylor, a three-time All-American wrestler for the University of Maryland at College Park.

But Mr. Taylor, who graduated in 2010 with his team's all-time pin record, isn't here at Virginia Commonwealth University to tell players about his wrestling prowess. He's just trying to connect with them before getting to the tough stuff: a talk on how they should treat gay teammates.

"If we want a guy who can play and play well," he says, "it doesn't matter what he looks like, where he comes from, or who he loves."

Hudson Taylor wrestles at Columbia. Because of the hands-on nature of wrestling, he says, its athletes often face taunts about gayness—and respond with anti-gay slurs.

A 6-foot, 200-pound straight man with cauliflower ear speaking out about what it's like to be gay in college sports is an unlikely prospect. But two years ago, after taking a job as an assistant wrestling coach at Columbia University, Mr. Taylor started the country's first nonprofit organization for straight supporters of gay athletes, called Athlete Ally. So far it has attracted 13,000 people, including college and professional athletes from a variety of sports—football, tennis, ultimate fighting—who've pledged to try to end homophobia in sports. Mr. Taylor just helped write the National Collegiate Athletic Association's first-ever handbook on how to support gay and lesbian teammates, and he helps train NBA rookies on the subject. Athlete Ally has

catapulted him into the media spotlight, with several TV appearances in April when the Washington Wizards player Jason Collins became the first athlete in a major American sport to come out publicly.

Nobody knows for sure how many college and professional athletes are gay. Few come out, and often only when their careers are over. Hearing regular, casual anti-gay comments makes it hard for athletes both closeted and out to remain in the game, Mr. Taylor says. In the last couple of years, he has traveled to about 60 campuses, including Pennsylvania State and Princeton Universities and the Universities of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles, talking to players about the effects of homophobia. Even if it makes them squirm (it does).

"We're seeing a climate now where athletics departments realize the importance of this," he says, "even though we are at the very beginning of these conversations."

Visiting colleges at the invitation of athletics departments, Mr. Taylor, 26, often meets with coaches and administrators, but spends most of his time with students. He pushes them to consider how welcoming they would be if a player came out. Would it matter if he or she was a new recruit or a trusted teammate? What do coaches say or do to influence the climate for gay athletes?

Female athletes, who tend to have more out teammates than men do, are usually more comfortable with the conversation. But Mr. Taylor doesn't go easy on anyone.

In his visit here at Virginia Commonwealth, Mr. Taylor asks four men's teams how they would react if a teammate told them he was gay. "It's OK, as long as he doesn't try no funny stuff," a basketball player replies. Another wonders: "What if the brother brought a dude home?"

Then comes the question Mr. Taylor hears from male athletes on every campus: What if a gay player makes a move in the shower?

Besides assuring athletes that few people have sex on their minds after a grueling workout, Mr. Taylor tries to explain that any anxieties players might have about a gay teammate are their problem, not the teammate's.

"Your insecurities aren't enough reason to maintain an environment where gay athletes don't feel comfortable," Mr. Taylor says. "That's a [expletive] burden to put on anyone."

The Sticker

At Columbia, Mr. Taylor's job is to wrestle with the team's upper-weight athletes. He's been on the mat since he was 6 years old. Like all wrestlers, he's heard two questions over and over: "What is that spandex thing you're wearing?" and "Are you grabbing one another?"

With such close contact between competitors, wrestling tends to draw homoerotic innuendos. To counter that, says Mr. Taylor, wrestlers learn to be hyper-assertive of their masculinity. "The easiest way to do that," he says, "is to use homophobic and sexist slurs."

He heard lots of them growing up. But attending the country's top wrestling school, Blair Academy, in New Jersey, he was an unconventional athlete. He joined the chorus and acted in

theater productions, snagging the lead in *Little Shop of Horrors* his junior year. And he developed an affinity for magic, including card tricks, which helped keep his mind off competition (he still carries a deck of cards in his pocket wherever he goes). Mr. Taylor wrestled so well that he earned a full athletic scholarship to Maryland, starting in 2005.

After spending most of his first semester playing video games and partying, he says, he nearly flunked out, with a 0.6 grade-point average. Then he met a girl who helped him get his act together, and he went on to become team captain and an academic All-American. Off the mat, he was a nerd who wore thick plastic glasses, created his own major in interactive performance art, and read books on philosophy and women's rights. A former coach likened him to Clark Kent: a charming, mild-mannered, inquisitive guy—until he donned his singlet and headgear and became a pinning machine.

As a freshman, Mr. Taylor was sitting in a theater class when a classmate named Matt stood up and announced he was gay. "One person in the back of the room slowly started to clap," Mr. Taylor says. "The next thing I know, everyone is giving Matt high-fives and hugs."

Then the wrestler walked across the campus to practice. "The guys I should see eye-to-eye with, I hear them using casual homophobic and sexist comments. 'Stop being a fag' or 'You need to man up.' And it makes me realize: That's not the legacy I want to leave behind."

So Mr. Taylor started instigating discussions among his teammates on respect and tolerance. Over time, the debates wandered into philosophy, religion, and feminism. Then Mr. Taylor took a more controversial step, trying to push his teammates a bit further. He plastered a blue-and-yellow equality sticker from the Human Rights Campaign on his Maryland wrestling headgear. (The campaign is the nation's largest gay-rights lobbying group in the country.)

The sticker backfired. It turned the debates between Mr. Taylor and his teammates nasty. Some felt he was using the team to make a political statement they disagreed with. They tried to destroy the headgear and threatened to heckle Mr. Taylor when he wore it. "I lost friends over that," he recalls. He eventually quit wearing the sticker when he saw it distracting the team from its main mission: winning matches.

Akil Patterson, then an assistant coach with Maryland's team, had been watching the conflict escalate. He asked Mr. Taylor if he might want to talk about his views to Outsports, a Web site about gay athletes. As a football player for Maryland, Mr. Patterson had been in the closet; he left for a Division II team in 2005 after a Maryland coach, he says, called him a "faggot." But once he graduated, he returned to Maryland to work with the wrestling team, came out, and is now director of programs for the Terrapin Wrestling Club.

He thought Mr. Taylor could be a better advocate for gay athletes than he could be himself, Mr. Patterson says. "I am not an activist or a writer," he says. "Hudson has a bigger vision. If someone on his team was gay, he wanted them to know they could take their boyfriend to a wrestling match, or to the wrestling banquet."

Mr. Taylor agreed to an interview with Outsports, and the response stunned both him and Mr. Patterson. E-mails from strangers—gay athletes, siblings, parents—poured in. "They said, 'I can join a sports team or go into a locker room now and not be afraid because of what you're doing,'" Mr. Taylor recalls. That made him wonder: "If a wrestler can get 2,000 e-mails, imagine the impact of entire teams speaking out, professional athletes speaking out, as allies."

When a lawyer approached Mr. Taylor saying he could help turn the effort into an organization, Mr. Taylor accepted the offer, along with his girlfriend, Lia A. Mandaglio, now his wife. In 2010, Athlete Ally was born.

Thirty professional athletes have signed on as allies so far, spreading the group's message in formal and informal talks with other players. And chapters have started on around 20 campuses, usually after players contact the group.

On the men's soccer team at Cornell, Atticus DeProspo, a left midfielder, came out this past semester. Last month he started a chapter of Athlete Ally on his campus, working with Beth A. Livingston, an assistant professor of human-resource studies there. At Benedictine College, a Catholic institution in northeast Kansas, a basketball player named Jallen Messersmith came out to his teammates before last season and is believed to be the country's first openly gay men's college basketball player. (Mr. Messersmith is talking to Athlete Ally about starting a chapter on his campus this fall.)

The fact that both men felt comfortable revealing their sexual orientations while they were still in the game could signal a changing campus climate. And Mr. DeProspo and Mr. Messersmith both report little difference in their relationships with teammates. Many already thought Mr. DeProspo was gay, he says. "I can still remember the one time I was called the F-word on the field by a kid on the other team who didn't even know I was gay," he recalls. "One of my good friends, a teammate, told him to knock it off. They've always had my back."

But incidents nationally suggest that some coaches use slurs as a way of criticizing players, whether they're gay or not. This spring Rutgers University fired its basketball coach, Mike Rice, after he was caught on video hurling basketballs and anti-gay jibes at players.

'Why Do You Care?'

Not everyone is comfortable with Athlete Ally's message, including some of those closest to Mr. Taylor. He is descended from the first evangelical Protestant missionary to China, he says, and his mother and sister attended Christian colleges. His family's policy on homosexuality is "Love the sinner, hate the sin," he says.

When Mr. Taylor first showed his parents the PowerPoint presentation he takes on the road to campuses, they said: "OK, but promise us you aren't gay," he recalls.

"There is still this weird question," he says. "Why are you so passionate? Why do you care?"

A straight man's involvement in gay-rights advocacy shouldn't be so unusual, Mr. Taylor insists. No minority group has ever waged a successful human-rights campaign without the support of the majority, he says. "Just like with the abolitionists, you don't have to be a person of color to support the cause."

On the door to the suite of offices Mr. Taylor shares with the other wrestling coaches at Columbia is a sticker of a rainbow flag. He got it from the university's LGBT resource center for attending a two-hour training session on examining biases. The sticker has not gone unnoticed by prospective students and their parents, and neither has Mr. Taylor's campaign.

"We had a recruit come in and I was gone, and the dad was like, 'Where's Hudson?'" Mr. Taylor says. "When the other coaches said: 'Oh, he's on his honeymoon,' there was a sigh of relief from the dad, like, 'Oh, at least he's not gay.'"

A couple of Columbia's wrestlers did not respond to e-mails and Facebook messages or prompts from Mr. Taylor to speak with *The Chronicle*.

As head wrestling coach at Maryland, Pat Santoro recruited Mr. Taylor and, now at Lehigh University, is still a close friend. He is effusive in his praise of his former wrestler, as an athlete and a person. But is Mr. Santoro an Athlete Ally? "I've never thought about it," he says.

Here at Virginia Commonwealth, the athletes seem open to Mr. Taylor's message, despite their uneasiness about the locker room.

"Student athletes are a lot more advanced on LGBT issues than staff are," says Ed McLaughlin, athletic director at the university. A few months after he took the job last summer, he fired an openly gay man as head coach of women's volleyball. The coach, James Finley, filed a complaint, but a university investigation found no wrongdoing. Mr. Finley is now head coach of women's volleyball at Seattle University.

The incident shook the athletic community here because Virginia Commonwealth has always prided itself on its diversity: Around 40 percent of its students are from minority groups. Mr. McLaughlin declines to talk about the controversy because it's a personnel matter, he says. And Mr. Taylor's visit, his second here, had nothing to do with the episode, says the athletic director.

Students who met the wrestler the first time wanted him to come back to speak to more VCU athletes, says Mr. McLaughlin. "They enjoyed his passion and his frank nature," he says. "It's dangerous to a university if students don't feel they can be who they are."

On this spring Tuesday, the university has gathered separate groups of male and female athletes from volleyball, basketball, soccer, golf, and track and field to listen to Mr. Taylor. When he asks if they've played with a gay, lesbian, or bisexual teammate, almost all of them stand up. Have they heard a coach use a slur like "fag" or "dyke"? Around half remain standing. When Mr. Taylor asks who has heard a coach call out a player for using an anti-gay remark, everyone takes a seat.