



When I was young, my parents made me try the usual sports for young boys: hockey and soccer. I hated that. Next, they suggested volleyball. In my neighbourhood, it was new at the time. The teams were mixed, but mainly girls. I tried it. I ended up liking it.

Once I was in CEGEP, I joined the intercollegiate volleyball team. It started to be less fun. In volleyball, like with most masculine team sports, people encourage each other by shouting, "Let's go, guys, let's stop playing like fags!" The slightest missed ball could cause the coach to say, "Don't attack like a queer."

Because I knew that I was gay, but I was still very deep in the closet, I was afraid to miss the ball, because I imagined that someone was going to figure out that I was gay. The more afraid I was, the more I missed my services, my attacks, my receptions. My love of the sport ended up being squashed by my nerves. In 1985, I was around 18, and I stopped playing.

In 1992, five years after coming out, I read in *Fugues* magazine that there was a gay volleyball league. I was intrigued.

"Why do gay people play volleyball together? Do they grab each other's asses on the court? Do things happen in the locker rooms?" So I went for the first time, a little standoffishly, telling myself that I would just leave if I was uncomfortable.

Wow! Practices were serious and demanding, but above all, I noticed that nobody treated each other like a fag or a queer. I was just surrounded by people who loved volleyball who, like me, wanted to play without the usual homophobic atmosphere of team sports. What an incredible difference! What a freedom! The other surprise for me: little by little, I became a better player. Without the fear from before, my self-confidence and my confidence in my physical abilities took over.

All the of the teams in my league were part of the Ligue de volley-ball récréatif de Montréal. Almost every month, we played for an entire day against teams from other leagues. We were the only gay teams.

I remember the mocking laughs, the disparaging remarks that we heard from the other side of the net. We were the queers that had to be beaten. That they were going to beat, of course. But because we were practising twice a week, it was our teams that won more often than not!

Sometimes, when we won, some players didn't even want to shake our hands. They were embarrassed to have lost to us. Our victories also taught them something they never could have imagined: gay people can be good at sports.

It was at that moment that I understood the impact that we can have by being openly gay. The power of authenticity. By being ourselves, volleyball players and gay, and above all by showing up in numbers, as a team, we were changing mindsets about homosexuality.

One gay person alone on a team of straight people might have had an effect on their way of perceiving us. But a lot



of gay people together, who are having fun, who play well and who rack up wins, that was stronger in fighting prejudices.

Over the years, we won the respect of most of our adversaries. From time to time, straight players from other teams asked us if they could play with us, even if they weren't gay. We gladly welcomed them. They saw that we had fun, that we were a good group. They were dead on.

Our league was also part of the North American Gay Volleyball Association (NAGVA). We were part of competitions in New York, Baltimore, and Toronto, on top of organising our own annual NAGVA tournament. The atmosphere was great! The caliber was strong too. Oh boy! We didn't win as often in that case. But, my God, did we have fun at those tournaments! It was really a beautiful period in our lives. We all made friends all over North America. I still see some of them today, even 20 years later. I will never forget those years.

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