



## COMING OUT STORIES

# Pro hockey announcer thrives as out gay man doing what he loves

*Jonathan Kliment decided to be himself as he pursues his dream of broadcasting one day in the NHL.*

By [Jonathan Kliment](#) | Jul 16, 2020, 12:10am PDT



Jonathan Kliment

have been around hockey in one way or another since I was about 3 months old.

I am adopted and my father was a big hockey guy. He played in the Thursday night men's league and through his work had season tickets he split with his boss. So early on I went to a lot of Binghamton Whalers and Rangers American Hockey League games. I still remember my first jersey was from the Hartford Whalers.

As I grew up in Binghamton, N.Y., I went from being a fan to playing the game. I played in house leagues and eventually on my high school team. People would often say things in the locker room like "that's so gay" and using other derogatory terms I won't repeat here.

As a teenager dealing with figuring out who I was as well as what I wanted was made more complicated considering the way people I found myself relating to acted. For a long time, it was hard for me to accept since I didn't see myself as the typical "gay guy" reflected in movies and on TV.

This was the 1990's and early 2000's and change was starting to show. "Will and Grace" was on TV, Ellen had come out and the gay character wasn't just some over-the-top comic relief. They were real people with real lives, but as a kid in high school and playing on the hockey team I just wasn't ready to put that out there. In my own head the two could not connect.

Eventually you have to stop playing a kid's game and in my junior year I stopped playing, but got a job working game nights with the American

Hockey League's Binghamton Senators. At the end of the season my boss recognized my passion and asked me to be his assistant. I spent a lot of time doing inventories, helping with orders, opening the mall store locations for holidays, and when my boss would go on vacation I was the one responsible for making sure things ran smoothly.

It was around this time I finally got comfortable enough with who I was to start venturing out as a gay man. I went out on dates, started seeing someone, and was finally able to say it aloud to my folks as well as myself. That was a big moment for me.

Unfortunately, my self-confidence away from the rink was gone when I got to work. As soon as I arrived at the rink I immediately zipped up about that side of my life. I am sure part of that had to do with my early life experiences of just not having those two sides relate and that they couldn't meet.

I spent so much time trying to find myself and the way that I could make a relationship work while thriving in a career in hockey that I muddied relationships and made people feel unimportant. This left me constantly questioning how I could have both a happy home life and a successful career.

It took getting let go and having to step away from hockey to find out. I was devastated after putting in so many years and hours. Not having gone to college I really didn't know what was next for me professionally and my personal life was not exactly in the greatest place either.

The truth was this was probably the best thing that could have happened. I spent a couple of years in menial jobs. I was literally driving a bus at one point. However, I took advantage of the free time during the hockey season to watch every game I could.

## **Maybe I was wrong about being able to be myself in hockey. I decided to chase my real dream of broadcasting.**

In 2011, I saw a commercial featuring Sean Avery, then with the New York Rangers, for marriage equality. I had to pause for a moment. Hockey players supporting gay marriage? Maybe I was wrong about being able to be myself in hockey. I decided to chase my real dream of broadcasting.

I found an online program so I could go to school and work and I went back to school. I started with getting my diploma from the American School of Broadcasting. I was very fortunate to be able to work after just getting my diploma. I called the local community college that I knew had a hockey team and told the athletic director I was looking for a chance to establish some tape and that I would love to broadcast the team's games. The first season went so well they asked me to do the National Junior College Athletic Assn. tournament. I was able to do that for the final three years that school had a team.

That was the first chance I had where I was open about who I am and I can't begin to explain the relief. It didn't run me out of the business. I got to bring **You Can Play** to the organization and promote it live on air,

which I have continued to do even as I moved into the professional side of it. It was so freeing to not have to worry about keeping a secret.

I made a conscious decision to be open about being gay because I wasn't afraid any more. I took that stand that I am good at this, I can do this job, and if you have a problem with me it is not going to stop me from being the best I can be.

At the same time, I continued on with my schooling to get both a bachelor's and master's degree at Full Sail University where I graduated valedictorian from my Bachelor's program. I looked forward to working again. Hockey had been missing from my life for a few years and getting to go in with no shadow hanging over my head of "what if they find out?" was beyond freeing.

Being able to just focus on what I am doing and being myself regardless of what else is going on in my life has allowed me to keep dreaming and continue to push myself towards the next rung.

Hockey still has those around it who bring a macho attitude, but I believe the people in the game have made changes to that. With the help of programs like You Can Play and Hockey is for Everyone I have seen not only a shift in attitudes, but a shift in culture.

Jonathan Kliment with minor league baseball mascot Rowdy the Rumble Pony.

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People don't immediately jump into the stereotypes and the ignorance that not too long ago ran rampant. It still isn't easy and there are always

going to be people who aren't forward thinking and are difficult to deal with. But as a whole I truly believe it has gotten much better than where we used to be. Is there still room to grow? Yes of course there is. You see that now more than ever with what is going on, but with allies in the game things are getting better.

## **One day I hope to be calling a Hockey is for Everyone game at the NHL level.**

Working in the Federal Prospects Hockey League for the last two seasons has been amazing, but one day I hope to be calling a Hockey is for Everyone game at the NHL level.

Just as I had to come to terms with who I am as a person, coming to terms with what I want to be was just as tough a journey. For me, that is personal success with my partner and professional success in this career I have chosen.

I have talked with people about wanting to make this journey and there is never a template as a broadcaster, but as a gay man trying to find his footing I didn't have a role model to look up to and think "if he can do it so can I."

I hope that somewhere out there is a kid who thought as I did, but then can see me doing what I truly love and feel like they can chase their dream too. That would make the whole journey feel worthwhile.

*Jonathan Kliment, 35, is the broadcaster for the Federal Prospects Hockey League's Elmira Enforcers and the Perfect Game Collegiate*

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*Check out our **archive of coming out stories**.*

*If you're an LGBTQ person in sports looking to connect with others in the community, head over to **GO! Space** to meet and interact with other LGBTQ athletes, or to **Equality Coaching Alliance** to find other coaches, administrators and other non-athletes in sports.*

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