

OUT at the Olympics

Meet the members of Team GB waving the rainbow flag high this summer in Paris **BY ELLA GAUCI**

Growing up, Sarah Jones didn't see anyone who looked like her playing hockey on TV. In fact, she didn't see any women playing hockey on TV at all, let alone LGBTQIA ones. As she entered her late teens, she soon loosened her grip on her trusty hockey stick and dropped the sport altogether. It wasn't until she went to Loughborough University and watched its women's team play that she was inspired to give it one last go.

This summer Sarah will compete with Team GB Hockey at the Paris Olympics. Sarah is just one of many openly LGBTQIA athletes who will be competing in this year's sporting competition. Just a decade ago at the 2012 Olympics, there were only 23 out Olympians who took part in the Games. Fast forward to the Tokyo 2021 Olympics, and that number had increased eightfold.

The Olympics is generally considered to be one of the greatest showcases of global sport. By positioning LGBTQIA stories on this stage, it can help queer communities around the world to feel seen and celebrated. Athletes like American soccer star Megan Rapinoe and Dutch speed skater Ireen Wüst have been showcasing the talent and power of the LGBTQIA community ever since the 2012 London Olympics.

Historically, women's sports have often provided safe spaces for the queer community, especially in team sports like football, rugby and hockey. For Sarah, it was actually in her local hockey club that she saw gay women for the first time. This community was reinforced at university, and for the first time the idea of being a "gay athlete" was a label that

resonated with her.

While being out in the public eye didn't always come naturally to Sarah, she knows the power of the visibility that a platform like the Olympics can provide. During the 2021 Olympics, approximately 3.05 billion people watched the Games from all around the world.

"When I look back at me not having anyone who looked like me when I was younger, even if I only help one person, [being out] is a worthwhile thing to have done," Sarah tells me. "It took me quite a while to understand the importance of that. The more people that are out, the more likely that someone watching the TV feels seen."

Ever since Heidi Long can remember, she has been one of those viewers who have been glued to the Olympics. Every four years, her family would all come together for

weeks to watch the Games, tuning in at all times of the day to see some of the most iconic athletes compete. Burning deep down inside, she knew that one day she wanted to be on that global stage too.

She began as a rower at school and even travelled across the pond on a rowing scholarship to study at the University of Virginia. When she came home it was only a matter of time before she got selected to row with Team GB at the Paris Olympics. Heidi came out as bisexual two years ago, and competing as a visibly queer athlete is vital for her.

"As an openly bi athlete on the world stage at the moment, I have been so supported by teammates, friends, and coaching and support staff around rowing," she shares. "On a rowing team, you do so much together. You become really close friends. You're able to be your most vulnerable self and have these honest conversations about how you feel. I think rowing and other sports for women can give people a safe space for who they are. It creates an environment where you are able to come out."

The visibly out athletes at this year's Games are doing far more than just working to bring home those medals. They are showing audiences everywhere that it is ok to embrace your authentic self. That the LGBTQIA community is not only here, but strong. Powerful. Olympic in greatness.

"You can only start to think you can do it if you see other people achieving it around you," Heidi smiles. "Part of our message is to inspire the next generation that they too can do it. We want to bring the nation together. Sport is such an iconic part of our society – we want to keep that flame alive." **D**

Left: Rower Heidi Long;
right: Hockey player
Sarah Jones.



Tickets for Team GB House in Paris – where live entertainment meets in-person athlete medal celebrations – are available at teamgb.com/house

Photo: Daniel Lewis

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