

Tests of Courage

Thomas Hitzlsperger and Holger Gertz

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PROLOGUE

Saturday 15 May, 2010. Olympic Stadium, Rome. My brother is out there in the stands. Actually, he's already in the car so that we can get going as soon as the whistle blows on the last game of the season, Lazio versus Udinese. Just as we arranged. My final appearance in Serie A. I've been dreaming of tonight for a long time: I just want to go home. It's eight hours back to Munich in my Mini Cooper, which is packed up with everything I've had with me in my hotel room here in Rome for the last five months. I hadn't made any other plans beyond sticking it out for as long as I had to, and then getting away from here. Through the back door. Trying not to run into too many people who would tell me what a shame it all was, and how things could have gone differently. It would all be over soon.

There was just the matter of one last match in this venerable stadium, where Andreas Brehme had won Germany the World Cup in 1990. Where I, twenty years later, had been substituted on in the 37th minute and then off again in the 69th minute in the game against Bari. One of the most mortifying experiences of my time in Italy.

But today, unlike the past few months in Rome, a place hadn't been reserved for me on the substitutes' bench. Today I was in the starting eleven. I didn't really know why. The coach had barely said a word to me for months. For a moment, I felt something like joy again. I was being given the opportunity to play, which had become an unfamiliar feeling for me. I hadn't been selected for the World Cup in South Africa in the summer, and hardly anyone was interested in the footballer Thomas Hitzlsperger any more. So I resolved to at least score one goal before leaving Italy. After all, how many players can say that they have scored in the Premier League, in Serie A, and in the Bundesliga?

At this point, the future of my football career was not my main concern. Because in the summer of 2000, something had become clear to me: football had shaped the course of my life so far, but if it continued to do so, then I would have a big problem to deal with.

There had been signs, and so far I had managed to suppress them. But now I needed to finally acknowledge something to myself: I was gay.

At first, telling the world that I was gay as a professional footballer felt like the worst thing imaginable. I was certain that it would mean the end of my career, the end of my time in the world of football. As time went on, I began to feel torn: I had no idea how to continue my life in football while being openly gay, but I just couldn't give up without a fight. There had to be a way of making it work. It was time to prove my courage.

I had proven it a few times in my life already. When I was 17, I travelled to Birmingham for a training trial without asking for permission. When I was 18, I transferred to Aston Villa despite resistance from both my current club, FC Bayern, and my father. I grew up on a farm with six older siblings, and we were taught that what mattered most was the community, always putting yourself second, and not standing out. If I didn't want to give in and hide myself away, I would have to test the boundaries again and again.

I loved football and I loved men. Could I reconcile these two things somehow? I wanted to try, but I had to go about things carefully. So in the summer of 2010 I undertook my first attempts to seek out examples where there weren't any, and to find out whether the world of football really was closed to gay men.

The following 14 years became a journey full of surprises and contradictions, overturned preconceptions, and countless discoveries that I would never have thought possible. It was partly because of this journey that I decided to write this book together with Holger Gertz: to look back, but also to the future. To reflect on my life and the moments that made me, and to talk about the issues that have become important to me over this time.

On May 15, 2010, when I thought that I was done with football, I scored the goal I was looking for. A long-range shot with my left foot. It wasn't unstoppable, but the Udinese keeper granted me this little moment of glory. I celebrated with my teammates one last time before a new and even more meaningful chapter in my life began.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

The 'day of days' should actually have been January 9, 2014. A Thursday. Thursday is when the newspaper *Die Zeit* comes out in Germany. But if they have a truly earth-shattering story that can't be held back, they publish an article the day before. And once the article is out there, so is the story – or at least, the subject of the story. And the subject of this story was me. So the day of days was brought forwards by a day, to January 8, 2014.

I was sitting in my apartment on Wörthstraße in Haidhausen, Munich. When I recall how I felt back then, I remember the excitement of the moment and my curiosity about what was going to happen. I was feeling so many different things at the same time, some of them contradictory. That's what happens when you get to a point of no return. It was a moment of extremes: maximum tension but also maximum relief that I had come as far as I had. It had been a long road so far. I had stumbled a few times and taken several wrong turns. I had been hurt and battered, and not just physically. At times I had struggled to get anywhere, and it would have been so easy to simply give up. I could have completely lost my bearings – but then again, that feeling had been very familiar to me for many years.

A day in the life. I had been mulling it over in my mind for so long. At times the thought of today had terrified me, but then at some point I began to long for it so that I could finally free myself from the pressure of anticipation. I needed to speak out. I had no idea whether anyone out there would be interested in what I had to say – after all, the world was still reeling from the news of Michael Schumacher's skiing accident a week earlier, which had left him in a coma. I felt unsure of whether my story really was that earth-shattering, and whether it would justify the early article in *Die Zeit*.

But I wanted to talk. And the time for talking was now.

I had learned that I needed to be prepared (and never more so than today), so that the momentum of what I was setting in motion wouldn't overwhelm me. Or my family. I had informed them of my plans a couple of weeks beforehand, to make sure that nobody would be caught off guard. Not all of them had known my secret. I told them that I had planned an interview that was due to be released soon, and that I had no idea what would happen next.

I had also called the German national coach Joachim Löw and manager Oliver Bierhoff. And I had hired a communications consultancy agency from Cologne that specialised in PR crises. I knew that I had to manage everything in a smart and professional way. But I wasn't going to let myself get talked out of anything any more. I wasn't going to let some consultant (or anyone else) dissuade me from doing what I wanted to do. I told them all: this is my plan. And part of my plan was that I would go to ground for a while after the day of days. Once everything was out in the open, I wanted to be far away. As far away as possible.

For now, though, I was still sitting in my Munich apartment in Haidhausen. Despite the tension of the situation, I was calmed by the feeling that I had thought of everything. Like a pilot who has double checked all the instruments before take-off. Everything was under control. It felt good to be at home, in the safety of my own apartment. I was poised ready to watch everything unfold around me. Today was going to feel like watching a film – but one in which I also had a role. I emailed Moritz Müller-Wirth, the editor of *Die Zeit*, and spoke with him on the phone a couple of times. Together with the journalist Carolin Emcke, he had been a trusted companion over the past few years. The two of them had become my confidantes, and it was to them that I had given my all-important interview.

The edition of *Die Zeit* containing my interview would be printed at around midday on January 8, which meant that the people in the printing office would already have seen it. I had learned that this was a key moment in the news industry. It meant that my story was already out there – even if it was still within the four walls of a printing office. There was no turning back now.

At 11:49, *Die Zeit* published an article on its website under the headline “Thomas Hitzlsperger announces he is gay”. It was accompanied by a photo of me, dressed for the season. In a grey coat with the collar turned up, to protect me from the January cold. But it would take more than a coat to protect me from the coming storm. I would need armour, not just clothes. “As the first high-profile gay footballer, Hitzlsperger explains why he has kept silent for so long in an interview with *Die Zeit*”, said the story.

Now it was all out there.

What next?

The article had barely been published when the servers at *Die Zeit* became overloaded and crashed.

At least I had an answer to my question of whether anyone would care about what I had to say. My phone began to vibrate and didn't stop all day. *Hey, cool. Well done. Good for you.* My email inbox was overflowing with endless requests for interviews. With the communication consultancy's help we had come up with a strategy in advance: we had recorded video messages in both German and English for anyone who wanted an interview, and these were uploaded online. On the homepage of *Die Zeit*, you could click on me and listen as I explained that “[t]he fact I'm talking about my homosexuality doesn't matter to my family or to my closest friends. It's more important for people who are homophobic, who discriminate against others because of their sexuality. Those people now know that they have a new opponent.” It almost sounded like a declaration of war – which is exactly how it was supposed to sound. We had made sure that there was nothing overly-sentimental about what I said, and that I didn't come across as excessively proud, or whiny, or self-important. It was all about being armed and ready. But I didn't want to

play the hero either. I needed to be objective, and to keep on top of the situation as it unfolded. After all, I hadn't been 'outed'; I had come out of my own accord, and that made a huge difference.

The Guardian published my announcement in English. I had played in England for a long time, and I was known to British fans and journalists as "*Der Hammer*". Now that I had revealed a new side to myself, the editors at *The Guardian* were trying to find a way of reconciling my on-field persona with my off-field identity. They tried to sum everything up with a headline that applied to both my playing style and my personal life: "*Der Hammer* was never afraid of a challenge".

I sat at home and watched as the situation developed. I read and replied to messages. There were endless phone calls. Everything was happening at once. Later on I went to visit some friends who lived in Munich's Dreimühlenviertel neighbourhood.

When the *Tagesschau* news programme came on at 8 o'clock in the evening, the top story was about benefit fraud among immigrants. Then they talked about the deployment of the German armed forces in the Mediterranean, and then the news that Greece was taking up the Presidency of the EU Council. I was story number four. "The former German international footballer Thomas Hitzlsperger has today set an example," presenter Susanne Daubner read. "He has become the first high-profile footballer to publicly state that he is gay." The story seemed to have made bigger waves than I had expected, because the report then showed a government spokesperson, Steffen Seibert, who had referred to it in a press conference: "On the whole, we are fortunate to live in a society where people respect each other. Regardless of whether someone is attracted to men or women." Cultural anthropologist Tatjana Eggeling said she hoped that my actions might "give many other people in football the courage to say: *that's exactly what I want to do. I want to tell people that I am gay or lesbian too.*" If we look at the situation now, almost exactly a decade later, her hopes have certainly come to fruition in the world of women's football. But has anything really changed in men's football?

At the time, however, I shared her hopes. Three days after my story came out, I was interviewed by Jochen Breyer for the German television channel ZDF. I looked a little bleary-eyed, but otherwise my usual self. People who watched the interview said that I came across as calm and collected. If that was true, then it was partly due to how carefully I had prepared for everything. But most of all it was down to how far I had come. For many people, my coming-out had been a surprise. They had only seen the final stage of my journey, as I dashed across the finish line, and had no idea where I had started out. But I knew. I could remember every step of the journey.

In my interview with Jochen Beyer, I said: "That should be the aim: for a player to be able to talk with his teammates in the dressing room about his boyfriend, just as others talk about their wives and girlfriends." If we look back on the ten years that have passed since, we have to ask ourselves: have we achieved that aim?

A few days later I disappeared. I needed to be elsewhere. San Francisco, Hawaii, Vancouver. But as I've learned, you can't just leave those kinds of days behind you. You always take your feelings with you. So what did I do in Hawaii? I logged in to Twitter, because I couldn't hold out any longer and I needed to know what was happening.

At the top of my Twitter profile stood the sentence "It gets better". Some people will recognise it as the motto of a video project that aims to support people in the LGBTQ+

community. The campaign was launched by the gay columnist Dan Savage in 2010, shortly after a 15-year old boy from Indiana took his own life. The boy's name was Billy Lucas, but to his classmates he was just a "fag". They ridiculed him, bullied him, tormented him. Until he hanged himself.

At the time, Dan Savage wrote on his blog: "I wish I could have talked to this kid for five minutes. I wish I could have told Billy that it gets better. I wish I could have told him that, however bad things were, however isolated and alone he was, it gets better." And then he launched a YouTube channel called "It gets better", where thousands and thousands of people – celebrities and non-celebrities, actors, police officers, gay men, lesbians – told their stories. A kaleidoscope of different tales, yet they were all somehow the same. Each person talked about how lost they felt as an adolescent, how they never felt a sense of belonging. They talked about how impossible it is for heteros to imagine feeling different. And how difficult it is, as a young person, to process and define this feeling of difference. But some of these stories were also about people who had come to realise that they weren't alone after all.

Don't give up: that's what everyone in the videos said to each individual watching them. It was a huge movement at the time, and I can remember devouring the clips myself. Because it was exactly at that point in my life that I really needed someone to whisper in my ear: *you're not alone*. It gets better.

Originally, the motto was primarily formulated to keep young people alive. It was a kind of emergency aid, like an infusion of courage. In the meantime, however, "It gets better" has become a kind of life philosophy – for me but also for many others.

It gets better.

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