

books

Blitzing Bigotry

Former Oregon State University football player tackles life in and out of the closet

by Michael A. Knipp

Unscientific statistics suggest that one out of every 10 men is homosexual. National Football League team rosters consist of more than 2,000 men. You do the math.

But who is or isn't hiding is neither here nor there—speculation always has adverse effects. Besides, while it's inevitable that closed closets plague every sports league, it's the open ones that are more intriguing.

Like Esera Tuaolo's. A graduate of Oregon State University, he was a defensive lineman for the Green Bay Packers and Atlanta Falcons for nearly a decade before deciding that truth outweighed touchdowns. In his new book written with John Rosengren, *Alone in the Trenches: My Life as a Gay Man in the NFL* (Sourcebooks, 2006; \$24.95 hardcover), he candidly describes his journey to the breakpoint—a personal junction soaked in the scars of murder, molestation and the Mexican Mafia.

True, his story dabbles in more drama than *Days of Our Lives*, but it hasn't halted his evolution as a free man. With partner Mitchell Wherley and their two children, Tuaolo lives happily in Minnesota without ever regretting his decision to dispel the internal anguish of a false quest for fame, fortune and the "American dream."

Michael A. Knipp: Many chapters in your biography describe a fairly troubled life for you. As you look back, does that still ring true?

Esera Tuaolo: I guess that anyone who looks back into their life will say that the pain and struggle they faced made them the person they are today. When I think back and consider all that I've been through, or when I read the book, I still tear up and cry. I still can't believe that it happened to me. So, yes, I guess that still rings true. It's real for me every day. You just have to work through it.

MAK: At age 6, you witnessed the murder of your aunt Sina by neighbors in Hawaii with whom your family had been feuding. Was she an intentional target, or were they aiming to kill

someone else? As a child, that must have been difficult to witness.

ET: No, my aunt wasn't the target; the target was my father. She was a bystander. To tell you the truth, as a child I didn't understand what was going on. All I saw or heard was chaos. And at that time, I didn't know the meaning of death, and I didn't understand that when they took my aunt she wasn't coming back to visit the next weekend.

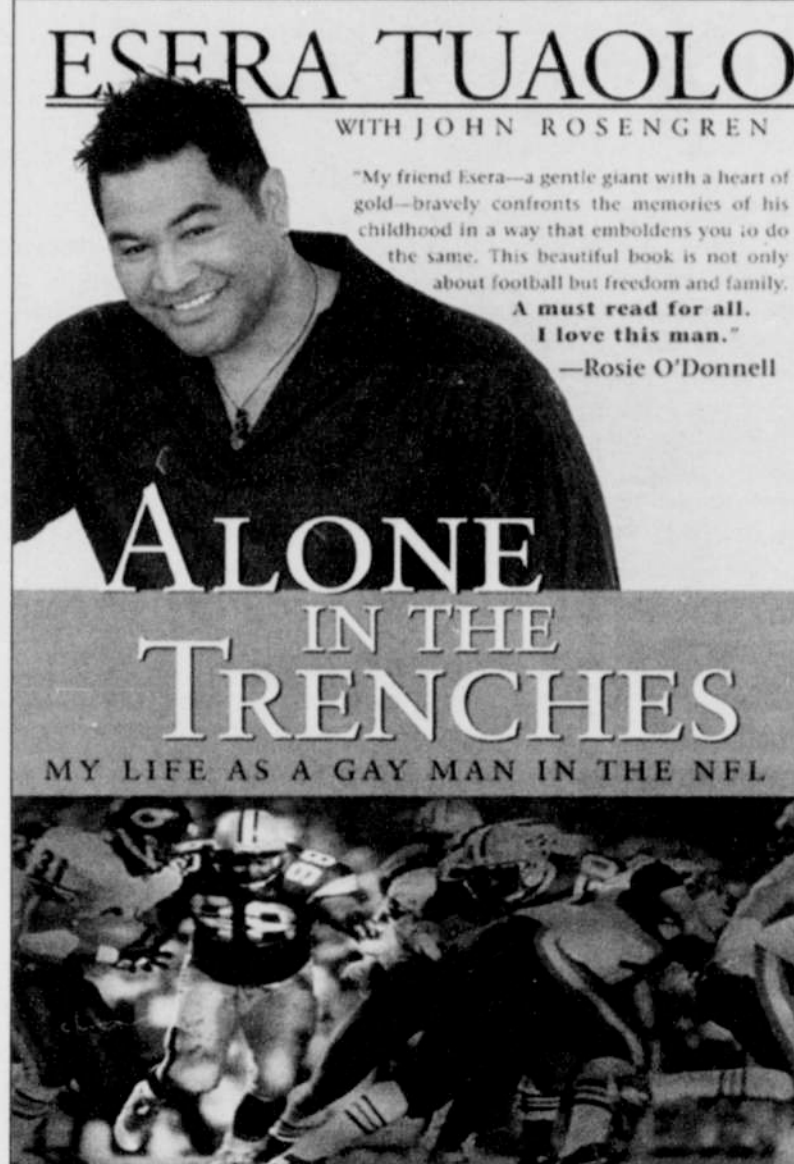
MAK: Later, your dad's cousin Fafawia—a man who you say in the book molested you—was bludgeoned to death by the same neighbor who went free for your aunt Sina's shooting. With all of this murder at such a young age, how were you affected?

ET: With Fafawia, I guess I was relieved, because after my aunt's death I understood that when you die you don't come back. I knew then that he wasn't going to hurt me anymore. So death, in a strange way, was also a savior.

MAK: As a means toward extra cash, you once worked as a bodyguard for a Mexican mafia kingpin named Boss. How scared were you? Do you think that psychologically you put yourself in these types of dangerous situations in order to actually "feel" something grand because you had to quell a major part of your emotions from everyone around you?

ET: I guess society often thinks of the mafia as Italian because of how the media portrays the mafia in movies like *The Godfather*. But really it wasn't about feeling something grand. Or hiding my identity. It was about making money. When you're poor and you find a way to make things work or to get out of a situation, you stick with it. Yes, it was terrifying being in those situations, and I thank God for watching over me, because when I look back, if I would have gotten busted, my life would have changed for the worst.

MAK: As a former professional football player, what can you tell me about homophobia in the NFL?



ET: There's a lot of unspoken homophobia. Like I tell people, it wasn't like every day I walked into the locker room and I heard "faggot" this or "queer" that. But when the topic was brought up, it made me feel unsafe because what I saw and felt was hate and fear and rage. And these guys were like family. They were my teammates. When you're living in fear and pretending that you're not, being in the locker room was not a comfortable place to be.

MAK: Without outing anyone, are there other gay guys in the NFL? As an out former player, do any of those guys confide in you? How do you help them?

ET: I hid behind my defensive lineman stereo-

type. It was easy to do, because I fit that stereotype. I was a big guy who fought hand-to-hand combat for a living. Who would suspect I was gay, even though that was my greatest fear? The same is true today. And who knows who's gay and who's not? Regardless—and much like David Kopay and others before me—I offer others an ear and a shoulder to lean on when there is little other than fear to hold on to. We share the same stories, and it's great sometimes to let it all out when there's an understanding of what's going on. Discretion is what I offer, and that—in this business—is a peace of mind.

MAK: With all that you've learned, what would you have changed about your past?

ET: Nothing. The past made me who I am today. I am now living an honest life, and I can truly say that I've earned it. If I hadn't struggled and questioned and feared, I would not have the strength or opportunity to touch people's lives. Or be in a position to save lives. I get thousand of e-mails

from GLBT youth around the world that say my life story has given them the strength to continue on or make difficult decisions. Just today, I received an e-mail from a straight guy who coaches high school sports. He said that he works really hard to make his teams a safe place where people can be exceptional without being fearful. He said he has no doubt there are kids who have played or currently play who are struggling with many of the things I talk about in my book. I am so grateful to be in a place and a position to help others. My past is very much a part of my present. And it's good. 10

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