

**OUR STRAIGHT MATES**

With Matthew Myers



# STEADY EDDIE

Is Eddie McGuire as homophobic as he appeared at the Winter Olympics when he clashed with ice skater, Johnny Weir? Matt Myers gets his side of the story.

**DNA: Let's start with that infamous incident at the Winter Olympics in February. The comments you made about ice skater Johnny Weir's costume were labelled homophobic.**

**Eddie McGuire:** Well, it was a comedy segment and no one was actually having a go at anyone. I have very close gay friends and the one thing I'm always conscious of when I'm on air is having the same friendliness and banter I have with my friends. But I do it in a way so it doesn't become a situation where rednecks can come off the back of it and use it to go to that next level of vilification. I know it's a very fuzzy and fine line, and I've always been very careful over the years for that not to happen. **A lot of Australians see it as our laidback style of humour.**

I've spoken to a number of gay friends and gay people in the television industry – to check just in case I was missing something – and they think it was blown out of proportion. People can question the quality of the humour but certainly not the intent. We weren't poking fun at gay people. We were poking fun at the dress sense of the skaters, which was a major issue at the Olympics.

**Did you smooth things over with Johnny Weir?** When Johnny came in I took him aside and we talked through things. He got it straight away and he ended up becoming a regular on our show. He knew where we were coming from and that we weren't vilifying him. Hopefully he will

opposed to the theatrics. It's a double-edged sword because Johnny Weir believed that he was knocked over in the judging because of the extreme flamboyance of his costume compared to his athletic ability. To be honest, I think that's where we started to connect. There's no right or wrong in these things. I'm not defending it or saying that we were totally terrible, but there are always blurred situations. I tend to be a polarising character these days, but I am gay friendly and I hold that as a badge of honour.

**Have you seen *Brokeback Mountain*?**

I saw it on a plane but I want to watch it through properly. I love films, documentaries, exposés and feature stories that break the stereotype and take you inside the emotional context of a situation. Any work of art or journalism that takes you to another place and gives you a different view on life is great. When it strikes a chord with the intimacy of two human beings, regardless of what their sex is, that's what makes these films beautiful. They touch the soul and you walk out feeling a better person.

**Many people don't expect to find gay men in typically hetero situations, such as the army and the AFL. How do you see it?**

My philosophy has always been very strong on homosexuals in the AFL. I got a commendation from the United Nations for the work we did when the first HIV-positive

We did a lot of work with the Pink Magpies. I deliberately wanted the Pink Magpies to be an organic group, not something that I pushed from up at the top to look like a PR stunt. And Richard [Watts], who ran the Pink Magpies, did a fantastic job. What we did was show that Collingwood are absolutely against any vilification, whether it be racial, sexual, religious or anything else.

**Do you think you have an understanding of what gay people go through?**

I think that I know the sensitivities of my gay friends but the truth is I will never know that struggle, because I haven't had it. I know my own personal struggles and I'd like to think I have a good grasp on the Aboriginal issues in Australian Rules football. But, like an onion, every time you peel one layer back and you think you've got it covered, another one comes through and you realise you don't know half the story.

**You've achieved so many things in your career. Is there anything you haven't tried that you want to?**

There are a lot of things in media that I would like to do. I've tried to break the stereotype of being stuck out in Broadmeadows, being a migrant kid from a low socio-economic background. I do have very liberal views and I'm very strong on social justice. The major reason I was into Australia as a republic was not because of the Queen but because of the opportunity for every person who lives in Australia to be able to be the best they possibly can and hold the highest office. Every person should feel that this is his or her country where everybody is treated equally. That's my mantra.

**From Rob Lowe to Jerry Seinfeld, you've met some interesting people. Has there been a standout for you?**

The best was when I was introduced to [boxer] Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter, who was wrongly tried and the basis of the famous Bob Dylan song, and Nelson Mandela. That was a big introduction. They came together and Nelson Mandela shaped up into a boxing pose and Hurricane Carter put his hand up and then they just hugged. That was a wonderful moment. Two icons that had been wrongly vilified and had to fight and give the best part of their life up for the cause.

**On to a serious question. The AFL footy shorts are much looser these days compared to the skin-tight days of the '90s. On behalf of all Aussie gay men and straight women, can you use your powers to reverse that?**

[Laughs] Well, the fashion's got to come back soon! But I guess we'll look back on the 1990 premiership and see that the boys were not leaving much to the imagination. ★

**"I tend to be a polarising character but I am gay friendly and hold that as a badge of honour."**

come to Australia and be a guest at my house!

**So you made a new friend?**

We developed quite a good rapport and discovered we have a lot more in common than we would have thought. We both come from small-town suburbs with interesting mentalities on a range of things. What's disappointing for me is that the light-hearted comments did cause hurt to some people. When you do comedy it's always close to the line. I see comments about myself on the internet on a daily basis – cartoons and that sort of stuff – but you just have to go along with it.

**The *Brokeback Mountain* comment really angered some people.**

The *Brokeback Mountain* reference was a reference to the shirt. I spoke to a gay television executive who asked about it and when I explained the shirt he suddenly got it. We also laughed at the hetero blokes' costumes in the curling. Most fair-minded people think the costumes have been over the top. In fact, it got to the point where they are actually looking at getting the ice-skaters to dance in their national costume so they can be judged on their performance as

footballer came to be. At the time there was an amazing outpouring of hysteria, but we received a lot of letters from the major gay bodies saying that we did more in 20 minutes on *The Footy Show* than they had been able to do in the last ten years to de-stigmatise AIDS and HIV. That was one of the best things I've ever done on television. I felt I made a difference. So I am very conscience of young men who might be questioning themselves and worrying where they are going in life.

**You've said before that you'd be rapt if Collingwood was the first club to have an openly gay player. Can you imagine a player coming out on *The Footy Show*?**

I'd love to do that. Surely there have been players who are gay. I've had my suspicions and there are a couple in particular that I've known quite well and they've nodded to me and I've winked to them, but they didn't want to take that next step in making it public. I wouldn't do it for the sake of a story but if they wanted to go forward and do something I would be in a good position to offer them a haven to express themselves.

**And of course there was the Pink Magpies [Collingwood's gay supporter group].**

*Who Wants To Be A Millionaire: Hot Seat* screens 5.30pm weekdays on the Nine Network. The *Triple M Breakfast Show* is on Monday to Friday 6am to 9am.