



“We Need To Talk”

» Professional rugby nearly killed Daniel Conn. Now he’s helping others fight depression and advocating for his gay mates. (He also tells **Matt Myers** what happens in the post-match showers!)

DNA: You’ve had a successful career playing for the Canterbury Bulldogs, Gold Coast Titans and Sydney Roosters. What have been the highlights?

Daniel Conn: Overall I was blessed to play rugby league and every game was a highlight because I got to play with such amazing players, but I guess the 2010 grand final was a massive spectacle in my career.

You retired at 25 because of a neck injury that needed spinal fusion surgery. That must have been a huge decision. I played with that injury for a long time, using injections and painkillers, but it became unbearable. I had insomnia and it was causing problems outside of footy. I finally got a detailed MRI scan and the disc had actually floated down my spinal column and was pressing on a nerve. Within 48 hours I was in ICU getting surgery. I became quite sick and at one point was pretty close to dying. So, I called it quits. To be honest, I don’t think I’d be where I am now with a successful business profile if I hadn’t retired.

Your personal training business venture, F45, has really taken off. Yes, since I started the Functional 45 (F45) training business we’ve sold 240 franchises around the world. We’ve developed a system that isn’t intimidating. It’s high-tech, female-friendly and fun. The principle behind it is team training, which includes exercise monitors and trainers to motivate. Then there’s the big heart-rate unit that sends a file telling you how many calories you’ve burned, so it’s like a 3-D PT session.

You mentioned it’s female-friendly, what about gay-friendly? A lot of other gyms can be quite intimidating with the big guys, big weights and shirts-off scenario. But we go to areas like Surry Hills and Darlinghurst where a lot of our members are gay males, and the guys there seem to love it because there’s no intimidation, it’s upbeat and they get results. In fact, on a Saturday, every F45 around the world has a Hollywood session where a DJ comes in.

You must have a fair few gay mates these days then? Yes, a fair few! I’m a country boy, so when I came to the city, meeting gay guys was all a bit foreign to me, and I wasn’t sure how to take it. But now I’m an ambassador for

the Sydney Convicts gay rugby team. They're a great bunch of guys. My gay mates are just like any other mates.

In the pro sporting world have you ever known gay players? Obviously I'm not going to name names, but funny enough I played professional rugby with a gay guy, and I was the only one who knew about him. I was super-supportive of him and no one else needed to know. He was happy to confide in me, because he knew that it wouldn't faze me. It's interesting that some people frown upon and judge it, but for me it's just another bare bum in the shower as far as I'm concerned [laughing].

You had a role in the UK reality show *Geordie Shore* when it came to Australia. What was that experience like? It was very different for me. I had a fling on the show with a girl called Vicky Pattison, and then I went to the UK to do *Ex On The Beach*. It was about exes popping up on an island, but it probably wasn't really for me because I'm a pretty reserved person. Vicky is still a really good friend of mine.

This is DNA's Sexiest Man Alive edition. Who does Daniel Conn think is the sexiest? I'm a big fan of the athletes and guys who have plenty of swag, yet hold themselves really well. I guess that's what makes them sexy blokes? So I'll say Tom Brady.

You've recently spoken out about your battle with depression. Isolation is a big thing with depression and the less I talked about it, the more depressed I became. I've been battling this for ten years and I've only recently come

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out about it and, in doing so, I've had many people contacting me saying they're going through the same thing. I still suffer quite a lot from it. It's not something you can just fix straight away. There are treatments in place and different people need different treatments.

Has becoming an ambassador for Lifeline opened new doors for you? It is amazing and I've recently helped launch the *Out Of The Shadows And Into The Light* campaign. Most rural men, and also men that play footy, don't talk enough about mental health and we've lost a lot of young kids this year to suicide. Hopefully I can help other guys from reaching crisis point. I really want to target the outback areas where guys don't have that kind of help.

Do more high-profile people need to talk about mental health awareness? Yes, but I think they need to be educated on how to deal with people coming to them. One of the big things I had was people writing to me saying that they were suicidal. I wasn't equipped to handle that. I had about 15 emails in a week, all random people, and I got a template from Lifeline and tried to answer them as best I could. But it's very hard. I had one lady asking me if I could look after her kids, as she thought she was going to leave this world. It's pretty full on. So I'm teaching myself how to give better help to people. It's one thing being high-profile and speaking about mental health, but it's another to be able to help.

Gay men, especially teenagers, make up a large proportion of suicides. Are you aware of the issues gay people face growing up? I am aware of how scary it is for young kids who get bullied because of who they are, and how they feel. They can't help the way they feel. This leads to isolated and isolation leads to depression and depression can lead to pretty serious things. There has to be some people, including myself, who will stand up and talk about it openly. If people can't accept those who are gay, then they are the smaller person.

Is it true that footballers wear speedos under their shorts? Yep, I wore my Roosters speedos at every single game. The thing is, straight after a game we'd have an ice bath, but my Roosters speedos were also a bit of a good luck thing for

me. I still have them!

You have them on now, don't you! [Laughs] I do wear them a fair bit, to be honest.

Do you think speedos get a bad rap? I do, because I don't think people wear them the right way. I wore aussieBum speedos and they have a pouch to put your balls in, and they are the most comfortable things I've ever worn!

When playing rugby did you ever have your tackle grabbed or arse slapped in the showers? Arse slapped regularly! When you've got 20 blokes in the showers that sort of stupid stuff goes on, but it's all good natured. I once copped a boot in my tackle. I crouched down for about two minutes and literally didn't know if my testicles were still in place.

What was your craziest Mad Monday? It was up on the Gold Coast the first year we started the Gold Coast Titans. My best mate Brett Delaney and I have a bit of a bromance going on, and we decided to dress up as bride and groom. Of course, I was the bride! I did the whole strip of Surfers Paradise in a proper wedding dress with a veil and the works, and everyone up there loved it.

So, technically you've done drag. Technically I have! I can guarantee you that every Mad Monday there's some dressing in drag going on.

MORE: For more on F45 visit www.f45training.com.au. If you suffer from depression, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14. Follow Matthew Myers on Twitter @MattMyers1964.

