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Out of the Locker Room, and the Closet

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THE night before the pinnacle of his National Football League career, Roy Simmons was already a wreck. Among the posse of some 20 family members and friends he had invited to Tampa to watch him play in the 1984 Super Bowl were his three current lovers -- two women and one man. They were all staying at the same hotel, and each required attention that even Mr. Simmons, a 290-pound offensive lineman for the Washington Redskins known for his speed, found exhausting.

To keep his furtive gay life a secret, he had cultivated a reputation for being the life of the party. He constantly juggled deception and compartmentalization, while placating those of both sexes closest to him.

The pain and the shame that Mr. Simmons now says he felt were eventually inflicted on others, in the way he disclosed his sexuality. One day in 1992, years after his retirement from the N.F.L., he appeared on national television on "Donahue" with a former girlfriend to discuss what he had never told her (or almost anyone else): that he was gay.

To former teammates and to friends and family, including the estranged mother of a daughter he had fathered, the show was jaw-dropping. One of Mr. Simmons's younger brothers was watching and burst into tears. But even as Mr. Simmons's disclosure stunned those closest to him, he dropped out of sight.

Then in 1997 he got the news he dreaded most: he was H.I.V. positive. Now, after living privately with the condition for six years, Mr. Simmons has decided to discuss it publicly for the first time, on the

eve of World AIDS Day tomorrow. The only other professional team athlete to admit having H.I.V. is Magic Johnson, the Los Angeles Lakers star.

Mr. Simmons, 47, said he wants to reach athletes who may still be in the closet and as tortured as he was. Even at a time when the right of gay couples to marry is being affirmed, as in Massachusetts two weeks ago, and when gays are visible in most professions and in entertainment, men's professional sports remain a fortress of denial.

Mr. Simmons is one of only three N.F.L. players known to have publicly discussed being gay -- all after retirement. The others are Dave Kopay, who announced his homosexuality in 1975, and Esera Tuaolo, a former nose guard who retired in 1999, after nine seasons, and revealed he is gay last year on the HBO show "Real Sports."

Mr. Simmons would never have dreamed of declaring himself gay during the four seasons he played for the New York Giants and the Redskins, for fear of destroying his career.

"The N.F.L. has a reputation," he said, "and it's not even a verbal thing -- it's just known. You are gladiators; you are male; you kick butt."

His isolation was compounded by the stigma of homosexuality among blacks, he said. Like many black men who simultaneously cultivate a macho, hyperheterosexual image while living what they call "the Down Low" -- a deeply hidden bisexual or predominantly gay life -- Mr. Simmons simply could not come out of the closet. He lived a dual life, attracted at times to women, and he believed that by admitting he also liked men he would be rejected by his family, teammates and coaches.

The refusal of some black men to be forthcoming about their sexual preference for men, or even to wear condoms during sex, is thought to be spreading AIDS among black women at an alarming rate. Black

women represented 64 percent of all new AIDS cases among women in 2001, according to the federal government.

By the time Mr. Simmons learned he had the virus, he had already contemplated suicide and had been in drug rehab twice. He had thrown away chances to shine on and off the field, had lost all his money, had lived for a period on the streets. ROY SIMMONS was reared in Savannah, Ga., primarily by his maternal grandmother, Loulabelle Simmons, who worked as a housekeeper. He lived with five brothers and one sister in a narrow row house on the city's west side.

One day when he was 11, he said, a woman on his street asked him to vacuum for her. She left, but her husband was there. As Roy was leaning over to do the vacuuming, the man bumped his behind. "Then he called me in the bedroom, turned me around on the bed and pulled my pants down," he recounted.

Mr. Simmons said no one had ever warned him about inappropriate touching or neighborhood predators. "I wasn't educated," he said. "I wasn't told how parents tell their kids today."

The memory of being raped still brings tears to his eyes. He refused to tell his mother, out of shame, but did tell a cousin of hers, and the news spread to the household, which responded in shocked silence. "Nobody seemed to know what to do," Mr. Simmons said.

Years later as an adult, he tortured himself wondering -- often while drunk or high on drugs -- if he would have been straight if he had not been assaulted. He blamed himself and suffered from a diminished sense of self-worth and confusion over his sexual identity. "I think all my life it affected me," he said. "The acting out -- the sex with the boys, the girls -- the drinking."

But however ambivalent he was about his sexual orientation, Mr. Simmons's athletic prowess was never in doubt. A star high school football player, he was recruited by college powerhouses like Florida

State, Notre Dame and Southern California. He chose to remain in-state at Georgia Tech. His coach, Pepper Rodgers, remembers that he was "a big, fast guy with a tremendous amount of talent."

Nicknamed "Sugarbear" at Georgia Tech for the warmth of his personality, Mr. Simmons liked to dance and joined the school's first black fraternity.

"Girls always gravitated towards Roy," said Kent Hill, a Georgia Tech teammate who later played for the Los Angeles Rams. "He was the sensitive one who helped them deal with issues."

As for his own issues, Mr. Simmons kept them buried deep. To have sex with men, he would first get drunk, a habit that continued well past college -- "a few cocktails to get over the jitters," he said. "There were bathhouses near campus, and I would just run to those."

His friends and teammates apparently never suspected. "No one in the world could have told me that guy was gay," recalled Eddie Lee Ivery, his roommate for a time.

Butch Woolfolk, a former running back who played with Mr. Simmons on the Giants in 1982 and who also played with the Houston Oilers and the Detroit Lions, said: "I played with four gay guys. Roy is the only one I didn't know about."

He acknowledged that if Mr. Simmons had revealed his attraction to men, it would have destroyed his career. "You can be a wife-beater, do drugs, get in a car wreck and the team will take care of you," he said. "But if you're gay, it's like the military: don't ask, don't tell."

Mr. Simmons was drafted by the Giants in 1979, in the eighth round. The team thought it had gotten a steal, said Ray Perkins, the head coach at the time. "He was an exceptional athlete for his size," Mr. Perkins said. "An exceptional athlete, period."

But new off-the-field temptations were everywhere, especially with the V.I.P. treatment given professional athletes in New York City. "New York is a hard place to play, especially if you're young," said Alvin Garrett, Mr. Simmons's best friend on the Giants. "It was too wild -- people day and night asking you to go to clubs, parties. We usually didn't turn down too many."

Starting N.F.L. salaries in those days were not nearly so rich as today, but Mr. Simmons felt flush enough on his \$40,000 base pay to move his three younger brothers, age 10 to 14, to live with him in New Jersey, and his mother a year later. A cousin and her son were also taken in. As the adored star of the family who had made it, he furnished the limos and cash. "He took on the provider role -- Roy would fix us breakfast and lunch and go back to practice," his youngest brother, Gary Simmons, remembered. "He treated us as if he were the dad and we were the children."

Cliques form on teams, and Mr. Simmons fell in with a drug clique, he said. Twenty years ago, the N.F.L. was more hands-off about drugs than today. The sternest reprimand that Mr. Simmons says he received was a lecture from Coach Perkins to stay away from three players "who are not good for you."

But he ignored the advice. He started giving theme parties -- the Passion Party, the Toga Party, the Magic Party -- while romancing several women at once. At the same time he was having an intense affair with a closeted man who posed as his best friend, and his drug problems were worsening.

In 1981, he was demoted from starter to sub by the offensive line coach and told he was not playing up to his potential. Even so, as the 1982 season began, Coach Perkins was planning for Mr. Simmons to anchor his offensive line. But the mounting pressures -- his hidden sex life, the demands of his family members, his drug use -- got to Mr. Simmons and, claiming mental fatigue, he quit the team. The press reported that he had family issues, but at the core were his destructive

secrets. "Football was my second love, and alcohol and drugs my first," he said.

Dr. Joel Goldberg, the team psychologist, whom Mr. Simmons confided in, said, "People tend to look at someone who's big and tend not to understand they have problems." Mr. Simmons had told Dr. Goldberg -- who did not practice clinical psychology but administered vocational tests and helped players find off-season jobs -- about his boyhood rape, but he did not get clinical counseling. "I didn't understand the trauma associated" with the assault, Dr. Goldberg said.

In 1983, Mr. Simmons wanted his old job back. He reported a week early for training. But in his absence the Giants had traded for other offensive linemen, and Mr. Simmons was cut by the new head coach, Bill Parcells. He was picked up by the Redskins and used on special teams to block on kickoffs. In January 1984 he went with the team to Super Bowl XVIII in Tampa, Fla. Mr. Simmons said he snorted cocaine the night before the game. The Redskins were trounced by the Los Angeles Raiders, 38-9. That night, Mr. Simmons said, "I remember driving down Highway I-95 South in a rented car with a bag of cocaine snorting it, and when it was finished I turned around and came back."

He was cut by the Redskins the following season, and after he spent a brief term in the second-tier United States Football League, his professional career ended in 1985. He had never saved any money or invested in a house. When he retired, he had little to show for his career except a drug habit and a secret sex life.

Shortly before New Year's 1990, a teenage cousin of his warned one of Mr. Simmons's girlfriends that he had a longtime male lover. Mr. Simmons was so taken aback, so embarrassed and infuriated, that he caught a plane to San Francisco and disappeared from his family. He plunged into that city's gay culture, he said. He drank and took drugs

and lived on the streets for a while. He was knifed in a fight. He was looking for trouble, and he found it.

After six or seven months, he entered a 90-day rehabilitation program. He successfully completed it, got a job in the high-tech industry, began living with a man and sang in various church choirs. It was during this time that he appeared on "Donahue."

He made the connection with the show through a longtime friend, Jimmy Hester, a former busboy at a New Jersey restaurant popular with Giants players. Mr. Hester, who is white and always knew he was gay, had bonded with Mr. Simmons over their common love of black music. In the early 90's, Mr. Hester was working in New York as a publicist, and through him Mr. Simmons agreed to appear on television, with the prospect of a free trip back east. He said he did not think through the consequences of suddenly coming out on national television before discussing it with his family, many of whom did not know.

For his younger brother Gary, the news was overwhelming. "It took a long, long time for me to accept it, for the family to accept it," he said. "I probably had a nervous breakdown. I was hysterically crying. I was confused, disappointed, hurt."

Back in San Francisco, crossing the Golden Gate Bridge one day, Mr. Simmons thought seriously of suicide. But he remembered his grandmother's warning that suicides go to hell. Instead, he said, he called Mr. Hester again and pleaded, "Get me out of here." Mr. Hester went to his aid.

For the last decade, Mr. Simmons has struggled on the road back. He learned he had H.I.V. while working in a drug rehabilitation center in Hampton Bays, N.Y. After remaining sober for years, he relapsed for several months in 1999 and again in 2001, he said. He has now been sober for two years. Lately he has been supervising a group of mentally ill recovering drug addicts in a Long Island halfway house. He has taken the AIDS drug Viracept and has remained free of AIDS

symptoms. But in May he stopped taking the drug to try a fasting and detoxification program at a health center on Martha's Vineyard. He dropped 40 excess pounds, his ankles are no longer swollen and his skin is clearer, he said.

Feeling better than he has in years, he will appear tomorrow night at an AIDS benefit in New York, and he is booked for television interviews and a public service announcement for cable TV. On Thursday, Mr. Simmons told the daughter he had with a high-school sweetheart that he was H.I.V. positive. He said he hopes that by telling his story, he will help prevent other men in his situation, especially blacks, from putting male or female partners in harm's way. "I'm sure there are those out there who are suffering, and if I help just one person, it's worth it," Mr. Simmons said. "You have to free yourself, and let it go. The secrecy and all that stuff brings on sickness."

To his surprise, he has found that old teammates and family members are not shunning him. A younger cousin, Al Harrington, a forward for the Indiana Pacers of the National Basketball Association, sent him a new wardrobe. His former high school coach wants to put him in the school's hall of fame.

Five of his Georgia Tech teammates have an annual softball game on Memorial Day, and they are hoping that next year Mr. Simmons will show up.