



GameChangers
Season 1: Episode 1
Jason Ball

- Seth: Welcome to *GameChangers*. The show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who have taken the road less travelled and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson.
- Jason: We're here to shake up politics, and whether we win or not I think we're going to do that.
- Seth: Today's guest is best known for his work with Pride Cup, an initiative that has grown over the last six years from the grass roots of regional football into a national movement for LGBTI+ pride and inclusion across sporting codes. Jason Ball is an entrepreneur and activist and will be running as the Greens candidate for the hotly contested seat of Higgins in the upcoming federal election.
- Seth: Jason, thank you so much for joining us today.
- Jason: Thank you for having me in, Seth. It is a pleasure to be here.
- Seth: To kick things off, I wonder if you could tell us a bit about Pride Cup?
- Jason: Sure. Well, the idea came from all the way back in 2012 when I made the decision to share my story with the media of what it was like to be gay and play football, what it was like to hear homophobic language on the field, what it was like to be in the closet, what it was like to feel that I had to choose between being myself and playing the game that I loved, and I came out in the hope that it would drive cultural change within the AFL so that more players and athletes and officials can feel comfortable to be themselves in that environment.
- Jason: I could never have imagined back then that today I would be involved in this organization that is rolling out rainbow sporting games across the country coupled with education to help players and coaches challenge homophobia and drive that change.

- Seth: What kind of change have you seen over the last five years? It's been quite widely accepted and taken off then?
- Jason: Yeah, it certainly has, and it didn't happen overnight. Back in 2012, I launched a petition calling on the AFL to do more to tackle homophobia, and the issue was quite relevant in the media at the time because there had been an incident on the field where a player was heard issuing a homophobic slur to another player, but he had gotten off on a lot lesser penalty than say a racist slur so there was a lot of commentary happening in the game about whether or not homophobia was fair game.
- Jason: And I know when I was growing up, hearing words like faggot and puffta and homo, using the word gay as an insult, that was constant whether it was coming from over the fence or from the opposition or even my own teammates, and every time I heard those words it felt like a reminder that if any of my teammates found out about my sexuality that I wouldn't be accepted. And I ended up hiding my sexuality from my teammates for a good 10 years, and it was the language that was one of the biggest barriers to be feeling included and accepted.
- Jason: We started off with a project with the AFL Players Association where we got some of the biggest names in the AFL to take a pledge that they wouldn't use homophobia language to encourage others to also take that pledge. We eventually got... We started off asking the AFL to do a pride round in the same way that they have an Indigenous round and a multicultural round within the game.
- Seth: Which they now do, correct?
- Jason: Which they now do across both men's and women's, but back then they weren't really ready for that idea, and it was down to my local football club, Yarra Glen, who sort of led the way I suppose. We were like well if you're not going to do it, then we are. And down at the grassroots level, we painted our 50 meter rainbow and we created rainbow jumpers for both of the teams, we created education programs for the players and coaches, and we got national media coverage for this day. The crowd was four times the size of a normal game of Country Footy, and many of the people who came along were part of the LGBTIQ community who said that they felt welcome for the first time at a Country Footy match. That was really us proving that there's a demand for this. That is can be done a really tasteful, appropriate way, and on that day the AFL announced that if any AFL clubs at the top level wanted to do this that they would have their support.
- Jason: Fast forward to a couple of years later, the St. Kilda Football Club and the Sydney Swans held the first pride game at Etihad Stadium where we had the 50-meter line there painted in a rainbow, and they paid homage to the fact that it was something that came from the grassroots. My teammates from Yarra Glen in amateur footy formed the guard of honour when the St. Kilda players ran out onto the ground, and I got my face on the cover of the Footy Record.
- Seth: Wow!
- Jason: And I got to toss the coin at the start of the game. And from it going national, back at the grassroots level we had more and more clubs signing up wanting to do a Pride

Cup. But at that stage, there was no infrastructure, there was no support. Everyone was just calling me and saying, "What do we do? We want to a Pride Cup." And I can only do so much. I'm only one person. That was the motivation to create Pride Cup Australia, a new non-profit organization with the goal to work with any sporting club at any level in any code to help them hold a Pride Cup.

Seth: What other kind of sports have gotten on board as part of that?

Jason: Well, just a couple of weeks ago we actually got together the ten CEOs from Victoria State Sporting Association, so AFL Victoria, Net Ball Victoria, Basketball Victoria, Cricket Victoria, et cetera. We got them all together, and we had them sign a pledge of pride, which was a commitment to working within their codes to create an inclusive culture for LGBTIQ people, to invest in education and awareness raising whilst also helping us launch our organization, which is one really great way that clubs can get on board with this cause. We are now working across all sorts of different codes we're seeing Pride Cups, not just in Aussie Rules Football but now in cricket and in basketball and in water polo. Any team sport can get involved and show their colours of support.

Seth: That must be really exciting. Especially seeing it grow from that grassroots level to come to this point.

Jason: Yeah, definitely. I think looking at community sporting clubs, that is the focus of Pride Cup. That is where 90% of people play sport, and what we have found is that the sporting club is often the heart of a community especially in a regional area. And when they get on board with an issue, it creates ripple effects and it changes hearts and minds. I know many people who grew up in Hamilton, which is sort of an hour north of Warrnambool out in Western Victoria, who had a terrible time coming out in that town. But they came back when their town did a Pride Cup, and when they did they were greeted with rainbow messages in all of the shop windows. In Gippsland, the local power station lit up their cooling towers with rainbow lights on the weekend of their Pride Cup, which is just such an amazing welcome for people coming to that town for this event.

Jason: And it was really the sporting club that drove it. I don't think any other event has put LGBTI people, those rainbow colours and alleys on the front pages of regional papers quite like the Pride Cup.

Seth: One of our previous interviews was with Laura Youngson, who works with Equal Playing Field, and her big thing is gender equality across sport. Prior to that, I had never realized what a vehicle sport can be for this kind of cultural change.

Jason: Absolutely. Our vision is a world where LGBTIQ people feel included and accepted, and we absolutely believe that sport has the power to get us there.

Jason: Some research came out in 2015, a couple of years after I came out, that showed that my story wasn't an isolated one. It found that 80% of Australians had experienced homophobia in sport, and the impact that that had was that 87% of young gay men who played sport felt the need to be in the closet. They didn't feel comfortable to come out. Or they stopped playing sport usually around the age of 15 or 16, and that has the flow and effects of them missing out on all the positive

aspects that come from playing in sport whether that's the physical activity of running around, the mental health impacts that flow from that, or just the social aspects of being connected in a community, which sporting clubs bring.

Jason: For us, that was a real driving force behind this work is that when it comes to LGBTIQ inclusion in sport, the results for health and wellbeing are two-fold. Both, it's challenging an environment that has traditionally been seen as pretty homophobic, and we know that homophobia is bad for people's mental health and wellbeing, but also we're giving people access to all of the good outcomes that sport and recreation bring by making those environments more inclusive.

Seth: I guess I have a structural question, which is kind of about the evolution of Pride Cup. In 2018, you were part of the Melbourne Accelerator Program, and that was working with Pride Cup as well, correct?

Jason: Yeah, we were the first non-profit to ever be accepted into MAP, the Melbourne Accelerator Program, which was so exciting, and that program was incredible in terms of helping us scale. We had this idea. We had been part of an incubator program called Progress Labs, which gave us the bones of setting up a new organization. Registering for an ABN and getting a business strategy together and fundraising plan and our social impact model, and then when we graduated from that program, the Accelerator Program was this amazing next step. It enabled us to really apply all of the amazing minds that the University of Melbourne Network have access to across different industries. And we were really interested in seeing how we cannot just be reliant on government grants for our program. It was through the Accelerator Program that we got the skills and the know how to launch an online store so that we could sell rainbow sporting merchandise to create our own revenue in order to help fund the education programs that we were wanting to roll out. And if it wasn't for the Melbourne Accelerator Program, we definitely wouldn't have been able to do that.

Seth: I was wondering, because I mean it's been six years between the Accelerator Program and your initial thought and petition around that. Do you feel like having that time to lay your foundation and then be able to just focus on scaling changed the capability of what you could reach? Or do you think if you tried to do the Accelerator Program earlier it wouldn't have been as positive an outcome?

Jason: I definitely think it took me the time to really understand what the communities' needs, what was going to work and what wasn't going to work. I remember very early on there were all sorts of different ideas floating around. One of them was to potentially have a rainbow around a football. We were actually inviting members of the LGBTIQ community to come and play the game. We just found that to be incredibly difficult within the structures of AFL. We ended up having a side program where we had AFL 9s, which is like touch football, as an opportunity for people to introduce themselves to the sport. AFL is not a game that you can just throw yourself into from the start. The fields are huge, it's a contact sport. If you don't know how to fall properly, you're likely to break a bone. We found other ways to get people involved in that, but it took a while to learn what was going to work and where the power was in this. And what we found is that community sporting clubs and straight alleys, actually there was an appetite for this.

Jason: And in order to bring it to them, what we have collectively done with the Pride Cup organization is take the collective wisdom and experience and know-how of the many different communities that had done a Pride Cup over the last six years and actually put that all into a document and templates that people can pick up and run with to make it easier.

Seth: Talking about your career now, you're running for the seat of Higgins as a candidate for the Greens, but how does that compare to your previous experience?

Jason: For me, it's an extension of I'm wanting to create positive change, and I think politics is a vehicle with which you can create systemic change for people lives. And although my personal story around being a gay sports person has driven me toward LGBTIQ inclusion in sport, I'm passionate about a whole lot of other issues as well whether that's taking strong action on climate change or a more compassionate approach for people seeking asylum or reducing inequality in the community. This is the second time I've run for office. I ran in 2016 for the Greens in Higgins, and we got a huge swing and set it up to potentially win at the next election. But these two competing things side by side were really interesting in that I realize that if my goal was to one day become an MP, I needed to hand over as much of the capital, the know-how, the idea, the vision for Pride Cup to a team of people to take it forward so it could grow and be the thing that it needs to be because there is a demand for it out there. I really set my sites on 2018 as being the year that we would set up Pride Cup in a way that I could step back from that so that it wasn't all about me.

Seth: Are you doing that now?

Jason: Yeah, we've now got, with our fundraising efforts... I mean, obviously the Accelerator Program includes a grant of \$20,000, which is amazing, which really helped us. We were also lucky enough to get some grants from VicHealth and the Victorian government, and we've also locked in our first corporate sponsor at about \$300,000.00 over three years to support the Pride Cup. That has enabled me to hire a team who can do the work, and I've been able to step back from the operations of Pride Cup and I'm now just a volunteer board director for the organization. I meet with the team once a week, but that's enabled me to step back and focus on my other goal and my other dream, which is to become an MP. It was a huge... We kind of condensed what would have been a 24 to 36-month process into 12 months, and largely that was supported by the Melbourne Accelerator Program.

Seth: That's perfect because I was going to ask how do you manage all of those spinning plates.

Jason: Yeah, look, it was hard. Last year pushed me to my limits when it came to both being involved in a startup, which is all consuming in and of itself, as well as announcing my candidacy and trying to set up a campaign, and I quickly realized that I was not going to be able to do both things. I felt that I wasn't giving my best to either because I was trying to do both at once, and the need to be able to step back from Pride Cup came apparent faster than I had expected, and if I hadn't had done that I probably would have been [inaudible] before the election campaign even started. I'm just so happy to now be in a space where I can both be focused on the campaign as well as have a little bit of time to myself to be able to recharge-

Seth: Which is important.

Jason: ... and be my best self and focus on my own wellbeing as well as now have an organization that can stand alone by itself to take that original vision forward.

Seth: It must be a little bit like seeing your child go off to school or something. I imagine there's a similar sense of pride there.

Jason: Yeah, and I quickly learned that what being a leader means is not necessarily doing everything yourself but rather finding other people and giving them the means to do the work and believing in them. For me, it was hard in the first year to hand over all of that, but I really enjoyed giving my co-founder, James, Lolicato, the opportunities to be in the limelight, and actually if we've got a speaking event for the Melbourne Accelerator Program, we had our demo day at the end when we graduated from that program. I'm like you're going to do it because you're the new face of this organization, and I'm here to help you in whatever way to make that. He didn't have the same abilities public speaking from me having practiced it, but I would say now we're on par. It's about realizing that you don't want perfect to be the enemy of getting something done and realizing that sometimes mistakes are going to be made, but people learn from those mistakes which overall equals the best outcome.

Seth: And it creates character as well, right?

Jason: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

Seth: What do you foresee the next few years looking like for you?

Jason: Yeah, I mean I feel like it's a win/win because if I win the election, amazing, I become an MP at the age of 31 and get to go to Canberra and fight for change and bring some more diversity to our parliament. We need more people from the LGBTIQ community. We need more young people in parliament. It's supposed to be a representative democracy. At the moment, it's not. That's the goal.

Jason: But if that doesn't happen, if we come close, we're there to shake up politics, and whether we win or not I think we're going to do that. If I don't win then I will have an organization to jump back into and to continue to push forward and create change in that way.

Seth: Jason, do you have any advice for young people who are interested in a career in advocacy?

Jason: Well, if you look at my example, what I did is I have found a gap in the market, I suppose, when it came to LGBTIQ inclusion in sport. I felt that this was an area that needed attention, and when I came out I was finding that there was a real demand for education and resources and information from this space, but there were no organizations dedicated to driving out so I went out and started one and proved the case to the government and to other NGOs to work with us to get that off the ground. And we now have what you could almost consider a couple of the first-ever paid jobs in LGBTIQ inclusion in sport through the Pride Cup organization that we have created, and it is really important that I think people can and should dedicate their entire lives to advocacy, but you do have to make a living.

Jason: You need to definitely not sell yourself short when it comes to that. Don't give away your time for free. Sometimes you can do that up to a certain point, but at some point you need to go out there and say, "Well I'm not going to do this work anymore unless I get paid for it." And you got out and you look for that funding. Whether that's from government, whether that's from philanthropy, whether that's from corporate sponsorship, and in the Pride Cup we have all three. We launched a crowdfunder to get us off the ground, we found some philanthropy grants, we found some government grants, we found corporate sponsorship.

Jason: I guess my advice though would be you probably don't want to do that too soon. It took us five years of running Pride Cups at a grassroots level and doing that on the side of work as sort of a pet project to really understand what was needed to actually create an organization and go out and getting the funding for it.

Seth: It sounds like when you are ready to take that step there's a need to be quite entrepreneurial and ability to network is part of that.

Jason: Absolutely. And I think, yeah, I definitely through the work that I had done over the five years as an advocate, and I guess as a spokesperson around issues relating to homophobia in sport, I had just been storing those up, I guess, over those years for this moment, and when it came I think within two days I had assembled a board of some of the biggest names across the sporting landscape who were willing to sign up to be part of this project. It definitely takes time, but saving up that capital and those relationships for the right moment and getting it out there in that snapshot, that was a key to our success for Pride Cup.

Seth: So, a bit of patience as well?

Jason: Patience, definitely patience.

Seth: Well, Jason, I have one last question and then we'll let you go. What's one thing that's not on your resume that you think has gotten you to where you are today?

Jason: The one that's not on my resume that certainly has shaped who I am and has gotten me to where I am today was a student exchange program that I did in 2005 where I went to the United States and went to high school there for a year, and I was thrown into Kansas, which is like the buckle of the bible belt. It was a bit of a culture shock for me, and it really taught me, or gave me the passion for what I now consider the tools with which to figure out the reality of the world, which is science and evidence and reason. In my humble upbringing, which was not particularly religious here in Australia, I hadn't really learned how to think critically, but when I was thrown into this situation where all of my school friends didn't believe in evolution and had some pretty warped views about gay people and marriage equality.

Seth: I imagine that was quite challenging in a lot of ways.

Jason: It was really challenging, but I... Going on a student exchange is about experiencing a different culture, and I was really there to learn and understand and connect, and I was inspired to find out what was true about the things that they were saying, and I had these two opposing world views. One is either religious text and dogma and the

other is observation and science, and I definitely gravitated towards the latter. And when I came back to Australia, I was so inspired by that here at the University of Melbourne, I was involved in founding the University of Melbourne Secular Society where we explored issues of separation of church and state and issues around science and religion, which was really going back to what my first foray into activism. I organized a protest on the steps of parliament house against the Pope because he didn't support condoms in AIDS-ridden African.

Seth: Right.

Jason: We organized the Global Atheist Convention here in Melbourne, which attracted 4000 attendees from across the world to come and hear from leading thinkers across science and philosophy and journalism and art. That experience of just that culture shock of getting thrown into a community that you are not familiar with and being challenged, I think, is one of the foundational things that has turned me into the person I am today.

Seth: Wow, it sounds very much like the match in the tinder box type of experience.

Seth: Jason, thank you so much for joining us on GameChangers. GamesChangers is recorded by Chris Hatzis and produced by Sophie Thomas. I've been your host, Seth Robinson.