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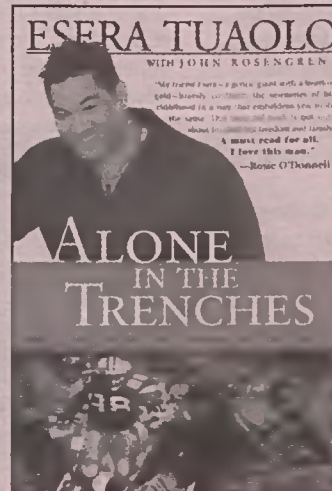
Esera Tuaolo, ex-Carolina Panther, tells all in new autobiography

by J.S. Hall

Coming out on the heels of Roy Simmons' autobiography "Out of Bounds,"

Esera Tuaolo's "Alone in the Trenches" chronicles what it was like to spend nine years on five different NFL teams as a closeted gay man. Only the third former NFL player to come out publicly (and one of the sports' few Polynesian players), Tuaolo came from impoverished circumstances. He played football partly because of his natural talent at the sport, partly because of the boost it gave his meager self-esteem, but mainly for the money and opportunities it offered. "Football gave me a college scholarship, the chance to buy a house for my mother, the opportunity to travel, and much more," he readily admits.

While both "Out of Bounds" and "Alone in the Trenches" concern gay



men who passed as straight while playing in the NFL, the two books could hardly be more different in tone and content. Whereas

Simmons' memoir ruefully chronicles the excesses of a man who descended into addiction and criminal behavior, Tuaolo's autobiography isn't nearly so sensationalistic. Like its author, the book is modest, sincere and heartfelt, but nevertheless contains its share of surprising revelations.

Growing up in a grass hut with a dirt floor on a Hawaiian banana plantation, Tuaolo saw one of his aunts killed in front of him, felled by a neighbor's bullet intended for his father. When Esera was 10, his father died unexpectedly, and the family struggled; his mother sent him to live with an older brother who beat him, and whose girlfriend sexually molested him.

Even as a young child, Tuaolo knew he liked other boys, and also quickly learned what most people thought of that sort of person. As he explains, "In Polynesian culture, it's okay to be a faafafine, an effeminate and affected gay man. ... To be masculine and gay was not okay. ... being gay meant someone was weak."

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