As Cool as Ice

Rudy Galindo skated his way from the trailer park to the winner's circle. Having HIV isn't about to take away any of the trophies he's won along the way.

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On the ice, Rudy Galindo is pure focus. His powerfully muscled legs propel him around the arena, whizzing by the edge of the rink with so little margin for error that onlookers jump back from the Plexiglas divide as he flies by. But Galindo is oblivious -- he notices nothing, not the gaggle of school kids wearing warm-up suits and grins who gather on the perimeter to watch the national skating champion, nor the two guys on a break from lifting weights next door who are checking out more than his jumps. Even though the ice is lousy and he had to wait more than an hour to squeeze in a 45-minute practice, he just keeps turning toe loops and landing doubles as naturally as the rest of us put one foot in front of the other to walk. Galindo is in that place -- half hypnosis, half fantasy -- that athletes refer to as the Zone.

Only last March, he was sitting on a hospital bed, waiting for the results of a chest X-ray and trying to figure out why the nagging cough he'd nursed through two months of a show skating tour wouldn't go away. Then he overheard one doctor out in the hall say to another, "Yeah, he's definitely HIV positive." There was no focus in that moment -- just panic. *This is it*, Galindo recalls thinking. His sudden withdrawal from the Goodwill Games would have to be permanent. He was never going to skate again, never going to see his nephew or niece skate in their own competitions. He was going to die a terrible death from AIDS, just like his older brother and his two former coaches. *I'm only 30, but the game is over.* He was fighting back tears when a nurse approached him. "Can I have your autograph?" she asked. Too shocked to argue, he dumbly signed something and went out to the car, where he and his sister took turns crying.

Only a month after *that* he was sitting across from Katie Couric in the *Today Show* studio and telling her and millions of breakfasting Americans that safer sex is "not just an empty slogan." When he's on the ice, HIV is just one more thing that he leaves behind to enter the Zone. Outside the rink, his HIV status is a way for him to use the celebrity spotlight for something bigger than a winning routine. Witness Rudy Galindo, rags-to-riches skating star, once again proving that no bad break can come between him and the overwhelming centrifugal force of a perfectly controlled spin.

What gets us to hold our breath when a Galindo hovers in the air for a second longer than seems humanly possible is the same thing that makes us wince at the body's fragility. And as sports reporters delve ever deeper into the health condition of their stars in the name of breaking news --

from a blister on Andre Agassi's hand to Darryl Strawberry's cancer treatments -- increasing attention is paid to the moment when an accident, age or even AIDS interferes with our hero's ability to turn in a feat of unparalleled performance.

Galindo's own history has been well covered: That he ever became one of the best skaters in the world was a bet against long odds. He grew up in a trailer park in San Jose, California, the son of a Mexican truck-driving father who was on the road a lot and a mother who had undiagnosed manic-depression for most of his childhood; his older sister, Laura Galindo-Black, was his *de facto* parent. Where Laura went, Rudy went, and so when she enrolled in ice-skating lessons at a nearby rink, he strapped on some skates and took to the ice with a natural gift and dogged grit. His parents encouraged his interest as a potential entry into American culture.

Still, he never quite fit in -- a Latino, flamboyant gay boy in a sport that rewards conservatively attired golden youth with its highest honor, that perfect 6.0 score. But he managed to become one of the best pairs skaters, winning the junior world's championship in 1988 (and consecutive national pairs titles the next two years) with Kristi Yamaguchi, only to be dumped unceremoniously by her in 1990 when her singles career seemed more promising. He almost dropped out of skating then, but fought his way back to an uneven solo revival. His father died suddenly of a stroke in 1993, and the next year he spent eight months balancing his training schedule with the daily nightmare of caring for his brother as he died of AIDS.

As an amateur, Galindo struggled to survive on the small grants provided by the U.S. Figure Skating Association and money Laura made from coaching. For added savings, Laura also became Rudy's coach. When, just a few months before the 1996 national championships in San Jose, Galindo's car broke down, he climbed on his brother's 10-speed and biked the eight miles to and from practice every day. And when he nailed eight triple jumps in a row to win the men's singles skating national championships in front of a hometown crowd -- his chances to place at all were so low that he was left out of background press materials -- it was one of the greatest upsets in skating history. Suddenly, at age 26, it wasn't a struggle anymore. He was hired for the Campbell's Soupsponsored skating tour, placed third at the world championships in Edmonton, Canada, and turned professional six months later. As the nation's first Latino skating champ, he hired an agent, began giving interviews and became a kind of Mexican-American cultural treasure -- a far cry from the childhood when his family lied about their address to send him to an all-white school.

But Galindo is even more famous for another first: He was the first skater to come out as gay at the peak of his career -- a revelation included, with little fanfare, in Christine Brennan's *Inside Edge*, a 1996 exposé of the "underbelly" of a skating world rife with back-stabbing, knee-bashing (à la Tonya Harding), jealousies and conflicts. (He also had a guest role, as himself, on *Will and Grace*.) But he certainly isn't the only gay skater out there. Hillary Schieve, a San Francisco-based pro skater and longtime friend of Galindo's, says that skating is a very political sport. "It's also very manipulative," she says, pointing to instances in which routines considered "too gay" by the judges were scored low. Galindo, she says, is training so hard and still skating so well that it would be hard for professionals to hold his serostatus against him. "If you're gay or HIV positive," she says, "you have to be so good that the judges can't find any excuse for not giving you first place.

Because otherwise they will.” The other big-name gay skaters she knows who are positive have become more willing to talk about their status since Galindo came out, though none would speak on the record with *POZ*.

The first afternoon I sit down to talk with Galindo, he’s just woken up from a nap. He moves slowly through his sister’s house, about a half-mile from his own, both high up in the hills above Reno, Nevada, and about as far as you can get from a trailer park without moving to Lake Tahoe. As we settle onto a green striped couch in a big, light-filled living room, he is apologetic and a little groggy. “It’s the Sustiva,” he says. "The dreams I have are wild. My doctor said they would be vivid, but they feel so real. The other day I dreamt about a roller-coaster ride that went through a haunted house. All these killers were in there, and I was trying to duck, but I could actually *feel* their fingers on my back."

When he started the drug in March just after getting his test results, he was taking it in the morning and kept getting dizzy on the ice. He recently switched his dose to pre-bed, which now makes him less disoriented when he’s awake. But other than the dreams and a brief, small rash on his arm, the Sustiva (efavirenz) and the Combivir (AZT/3TC) aren’t giving him any grief. And his viral load -- which was 127,000 when he had pneumonia and tested positive -- is down to 300.

Galindo relaxes almost immediately as he curls his legs up on the couch, hugging his knees to his compact frame. Even when he’s at ease, he’s a knot of barely controlled energy. Just 5 foot 6 -- make that 5 foot 8 in skates -- with a kind, open face, he looks much younger than his 31 years. His dark hair shows flecks of reddish dye. He speaks rapidly, the Valley-girl dialect thickly laced with sarcasm and a strong sense of irony. An appealing mix of childlike enthusiasm and quick-study skills have made him a well-spoken and well-paid AIDS posterboy (“HIV is not a death sentence anymore,” he says at regular intervals during the interview). But profit motive or not, once Galindo had accepted the fact that he was positive, he was eager to step up and speak out about prevention.

Surprisingly, he has no close HIVer friends. “Everyone around me with HIV who I’ve known, like my brother and my coaches, they’ve all died,” he says. The whole notion of surviving with HIV, staying healthy and living a long life, therefore, presented a bit of a learning curve for this champ. “When I first found out -- the first two weeks were the hardest,” he says quietly. “I spent all day lying here” -- he pats his hand on the couch -- “crying and feeling sorry for myself.” The urging of Laura and his doctor returned him to the ice after missing less than a month’s training. “I trust my doctor,” he says. “It’s like in skating -- when you have the best coach, you leave it up to them to make decisions. I was waiting for him to tell me it was OK.” And just as Galindo had long turned to the familiar routines of practice and performance to cope with his difficult home life, his brother’s illness and his father’s sudden death, he went back out. “I’ve always used skating as an outlet. It was like a safe haven. I started working on new programs and getting my mind off it. And the exercise helped, too.”

There was never any question that he *wouldn’t* go public with this news, he says. “It was something that I don’t think I was ever going to hide,” he says, adding that Laura completely

supported that decision. “I thought, ’It will make me feel better about everything if it’s out in the open.’ Also, I knew the skating world would always wonder why I withdrew from the Goodwill Games. I knew they were going to treat me like I was hiding something.” So he called Christine Brennan, now at *USA Today*, and she broke the story with an exclusive interview.

Just a month after learning he’d tested positive, still stomaching the initial side effects of his drugs, Galindo was making all the required stops on the media circuit -- *People* magazine, *The Today Show*, *Dateline* -- fielding calls from such fans as Tipper Gore (with whom he had once shared a ride on Air Force Two) and educating himself at the same time.

And even though the news was still so fresh that he’d occasionally break down mid-interview, he kept at it. “It was easier to sit there in front of Katie Couric and Jane Pauley and talk about this than to talk about any gold medal that I’ve won,” he says with conviction. “I felt like I could help people more with this.” And he figured that if the other skaters -- “all straight and married,” he says -- whom he worked with on the Tom Collins “Champions on Ice” Tour already knew when he went back on the road, he would be able to skip most of the awkward moments. “The first day back was hard because everyone was looking at me,” he says like a little boy after starting a new school. "I was kind of worried about being in the same shower with the other skaters, even being naked with them -- that everyone would be looking to see what HIV looks like. You never know how people will react. But when they forget their makeup, they use mine. Also, it’s not a contact sport, which probably makes it easier. I’m out there by myself, and there’s no harm to any other skaters. I tell them, ’*You’re* a danger to me if you’re sick.’"

He says that although he can’t pinpoint when he got infected, he waves generally toward the difficult period after Yamaguchi went solo and he fell into a casual methamphetamine habit, barhopping and unsafe sex -- about which he has spoken in public with unprecedented candor. “I never had that concept drilled into me,” he says. “It’s just like when I’m skating. You’re told, ’Make sure you dip your shoulder into this jump,’ and after years you just do it and land the jump. I never had that about safe sex.” (In his 1997 autobiography, *Icebreaker*, he called on the skating association to mandate AIDS education for its skaters.)

Though he delayed getting tested, he doesn’t necessarily regret that fact. “If I knew I was positive back then, before winning the championships, I probably never would have won,” he says. “I would have quit skating. I don’t even think I would have had the money to take care of my treatment. Medicine, blood work, doctor visits -- I can see how it all adds up. I’m lucky that I have insurance and the money to pay for it.”

Skating, like most sports driven by ever-younger competitors, is its own little world, made up of a small number of kids, their parents and their coaches. Once they reach a certain level of competition, most skaters, like Galindo, forego school for private tutors. With grueling practice schedules, a young skater’s world can easily narrow to just a handful of handlers, who may be more invested in the kid’s success than his or her self-esteem.

Even the relatively more mature pro-skating circuit is remarkably insular and sheltered. Galindo

moved to Reno so he could be close to his sister, one of the top-ranked coaches in the world and still very much his mother-figure. When he's on tour for eight months of the year, it's all about performing and traveling. He watches movies in his hotel room, keeps a journal, talks on the phone to friend and fellow skater Tara Lipinski, knits sweaters for Laura's son, Tyler, 2, or daughter Marina, born in April -- and gets lonely.

His love life is, sadly, on ice. "Right now, I don't even want to have sex," he says. "I want to use my time to speak about living with HIV." His pneumonia put him off going out to smoke-filled gay bars. "Anyway," he continues, "I've always been single. I used to get more dates *before* I became famous. It's weird. And if I couldn't get a date then, now that I'm openly HIV positive, forget it." He laughs, but his eyes don't. "It's funny, because some people have said, 'You're going to meet people now that you're HIV positive.' I don't know. I don't want to jeopardize anyone, and if I met someone I would tell him I was positive." He pauses. "I hope I do meet someone. But right now I just love that I can show that I'm still an athlete."

Keeping yourself in good shape isn't so hard when it's also your job. "I used to be lazy about working out," he says. "Now I think, 'You have HIV -- get on that stairmaster right now!'" The first day he was supposed to take his meds, he procrastinated and stared at them sitting on the table. Then he said to himself: "Wait a minute. Ten years ago I could put stuff up my nose that was essentially rat poison, and these pills are supposed to help me. *I can do this.*" Adherence is easier, sometimes, than dragging himself to the rink when he's feeling tired. ("Rudy's so regimented with his training that taking medicine is like a routine," Laura says, all pride and approval.) He's also got some powerful motivation in the form of his late brother, who stopped taking AZT but never quit partying -- even as his health failed. "He didn't take care of himself," Galindo says. "And I think there are lots of reasons. He just gave up. But I'm totally the opposite."

He's also learning Spanish so he can make bilingual TV spots for the National Minority AIDS Council, for which he is now a spokesperson. "My dad spoke the language, but never to us," he says. And just five years into his pro career -- the average skater, body willing, lasts about 10 or 15 years -- he doesn't have any intention of quitting. "I think I'm on the right track," he says. "I can continue as long as I keep healthy and I'm strong." He gets nervous about getting his blood work back the same way he frets in the moments before judges' scores light up the board. And he skates on, allowing the lights and the applause to envelop him in a safe and reassuring glow.

To reconcile the grace and power of a Magic Johnson or a Greg Louganis or a Rudy Galindo with our knowledge of how a virus can slowly break body and soul is to accept that these superathletes are, finally, like us, merely human. And maybe *because* they traffic in a market where their sole commodity is unparalleled physical prowess, they are not at all immune to sleepless nights, AIDS fears and other sorrows. But there's something that keeps them pushing, that made a young Rudy Galindo rise at 4:30 every morning and drive his body until it did things only a handful of others in the world were capable of. That awesome combination of ambition and athleticism is what defines a champion. For Galindo, being a champion now means winning his way back to hope every day. "People think I should have been crazy by now with everything that went on in my life, but I don't think about that," he says, straightening his highly developed legs. "You know, I cry a little bit and

it makes me feel good. But I’ve got to live and I’ve got to continue and I’ve got to be strong.”

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