Heavy Medals

HIVer athletes remind the Gay Games of their positive founder’s golden vision

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Participation, inclusion and personal best": The mantra of the Gay Games sang out over Sydney, Australia, for 10 sweaty days last November as hundreds of HIV positive athletes took their place with thousands of non-HIVers at the starting line. Drag hostess Claire de Lune told a packed Sydney Aquatic Centre of her 17-year positive status, and a local ASO set up an information line for positive participants. Braving airline travel with meds -- and drug tests at the event -- HIVers jumped extra hurdles to get to the global jockfest.

The Gay Games’ roots reach deep into the epidemic. Tom Waddell, MD, the Olympic decathlete who founded the Gay Games (a homophobic lawsuit nixed the name *Gay Olympics*) died of AIDS in 1987. In Australia, the Games and AIDS services are linked through the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation. Goldsmith died at age 30, two years after winning 17 of the 21 medals Australia brought home in 1982 from the first Games in San Francisco.

For Sydney bodybuilder Shane Hurley, prepping for the Games was a journey back from the brink through treatment, training and true grit. Four years ago, Hurley lay in a hospital bed -- all 66 pounds of him -- recovering from PCP pneumonia. Looking to rebuild his body mass, Hurley met personal trainer Ingrid Cullen at FitXGym, a local gym offering free sessions for HIVers. “She said, ’Well, if it goes to plan, we’ll put you in the Gay Games,’” Hurley recalled. “I sat back and said ’Oh yeah,’ not really thinking it was possible.”

When it came time to strike a pose in the packed auditorium of muscle fans, he was primed. “Everyone knew I was positive -- I registered under ’athletes with a disability’ because of being HIV positive and epileptic,” he said. “A lot of people were aware of how far I had come, and were saying, ’Well done, we’re proud to see you onstage.’” Win or lose, competing in the Games for an HIVer like Hurley gave the thrill of victory over the disease itself.

Ron Rodgers, a 19-year HIVer from New York, also beefed up to compete Down Under, but once there, he felt isolated from others who shared this triumph. “During my week in Sydney, I never met another ’out’ positive athlete,” Rodgers told *POZ* via e-mail. “Sure, I could ’recognize’ some of my fellow Physique competitors due to facial lipoatrophy, but there was never any discussion.” Still, Rodgers said he would be at the Games in 2006. PWA lounge, anyone?

For other positive jocks (and jock wannabes) dreaming of the Games, Hurley had this advice: “Just

say, ’Well, this is what I want to do -- Montreal in four years’ time.’ And with that goal, start planning what you have to do to achieve it.”

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