Just Add Water

On *Project Runway,* Jack Mackenroth became one of the first openly HIV-positive reality-TV contestants. But when a MRSA infection, unrelated to his HIV, forced his exit, the champion swimmer knew exactly how to pool his resources.

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Dripping wet in a navy Speedo, Jack Mackenroth was trying to figure out why *POZ* wanted to watch him swim. “You don’t have to stay the whole time,” he said this past January, reaffixing his swim cap. “It’s going to be really boring. You just want to watch me do laps?”

We’d already spent five weeks watching the menswear designer compete on the Bravo network’s catty fashion brawl, *Project Runway*—where, in a preseason bio, the openly gay media darling became one of the first reality TV contestants to disclose that he is HIV positive. We’d sat with him during the December week that Bravo aired the episode in which he tearfully and prematurely departed because of a staph infection, unrelated to his HIV status. (It made him an unwitting poster boy for the recent mislabeling of MRSA as a “gay” disease, much as AIDS was initially and still is wrongly considered a gay condition.) We’d even gone drinking with Mackenroth and his brother at the Manhattan watering hole where fellow *Project Runway* contestant Kevin Christiana (evicted on week 7) tends bar.

But what we really wanted to do, after hearing Mackenroth say how fearful he was that his freak, nationally televised staph infection sent the wrong message about HIV-positive people, was see him do the breaststroke. Because it is in the pool that the all-American swimmer proves, perhaps once and for all, that anyone who thinks positive people can’t excel at the highest level of competition is, well, off the deep end.

Mackenroth, 38, might seem to invite comparisons to gay, HIV-positive Olympic gold-medal diver Greg Louganis—who in the 1990s had to convince the international athletic community that, no, you can’t contract HIV in a swimming pool. Like Louganis, he has the face and body to help sell any activist cause he might choose. But though he has discussed his HIV status openly since his *Runway* stint—and has posed naked and nearly naked for various fashion photographers—he is still calculating just how he wants to expand on his sudden celebrity. “A year from now, for me to say, ‘Oh, I was a guy on last season’s *Project Runway*’ isn’t that interesting,” he’d told us a few days earlier. “I’m memorable because I’m the guy who left. Could there have been a worse scenario? Totally.”

Today, at the pool, he stares into the water. Here is where the currents of his journey with HIV and reality-TV fame meet—propelling him toward a profound opportunity to influence how the media portray—and how a large audience perceives—people living with the virus. And then he dives in.

For the past 17 years, Jack Mackenroth has swum with The New York Aquatics (TNYA) team, among the largest and most respected in the country. Largely gay, the squad competes regularly at age-appropriate mainstream competitions. Mackenroth was honored as all-American three times and ranked 22 times in the top 10 by the national adult league, United States Masters Swimming, which comprises all U.S. teams. His proudest achievement, though, is having been one of four swimmers from TNYA to set a still-standing national record in the 200-meter mixed medley relay in Chicago's 2006 Gay Games. He swam the breaststroke and the group finished in 2 minutes, 1.42 seconds.

Mackenroth was born in Seattle, where his mother, Connie, enrolled her son (and his younger brother and sister) in a swimming class at the local pool. She feared that since they lived amid so much water in the region that he could drown if he didn't learn. Indeed, swimming quickly became the anchor of an otherwise choppy childhood. His parents divorced when he was 8, and he had a falling-out with his dad—which he says has left him virtually fatherless since he was a mid-teen. He says he also faced constant physical and verbal assault from fellow students at his private high school for being effeminate. It was his twice-a-day swim practices, he adds, that kept his life in order.

Even as his sexual orientation began to emerge and alarm him, his aquatic regimen barely left him time to contemplate it. "I woke up and I swam, I went to school and then I swam, I'd do homework, I'd practice the piano, and then I went to bed," he says. "That's what I did." (That and sewing together bizarre garments to wear with his '80s-hip Flock of Seagulls blond-teased tresses at Skoochies, a legendary 16-and-up Seattle dance club that was Mecca to, as Jack put it, "all the punks and all the little gay boys.")

By the time Mackenroth headed off to University of California at Berkeley, he was ready for a sabbatical from the aquatic life. He was a good swimmer, winner of many ribbons and trophies, but he was also skinny and small and not terribly powerful. Never nationally ranked, Mackenroth knew that joining the Berkeley swim team, a legendary squad that in his college years included Olympian Matt Biondi, would entail five-hour daily practices with little potential reward. "I was more into the college experience, into being away from home for the first time, coming out," he says. "I was burned out."

After graduating from Berkeley, he moved on to New York's Parsons School of Design in 1990. (*Project Runway* host Tim Gunn was the associate dean there then—and even signed Mackenroth's acceptance letter—but Mackenroth says he doesn't remember meeting him at the time.)

In New York, Mackenroth fell back in love with swimming. He was now broader, stronger, faster. He also commanded instant attention for his broad, clean-cut smile—one that helped pay his Parsons tuition via modeling gigs with Versace and Ford, among other agencies. Having joined TNYA, he

befriended Bruce Hayes, an Olympian (and *Vanity Fair* cover boy) who remains a teammate to this day. Mackenroth needed a friend. Only months after joining TNYA, in the pre-HAART era of 1991, he discovered he had HIV.

Mackenroth, who believes that he seroconverted sometime in 1990, got tested in the spring of 1991, when he developed throat ulcers. He came to the pool shell-shocked, Hayes said. “Hey, how’s your day?” Hayes remembers asking Mackenroth at the time. “Not very good,” Mackenroth answered. “I found out I’m positive.” The two went out to dinner, and Mackenroth opened up about his fears. These included the notion that the body in which he took such pride would be ravaged by Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions—as had happened to several other TNYA members. Hayes did his best to reassure him and keep him focused on the pool. “That’s actually when our friendship was cemented,” Hayes said.

Mackenroth said his self-pity stage was brief, and his dominating concern was his family’s potential anguish. “I could be dead in a few years,” he said. “For some reason, I could wrap my mind around that, that didn’t distress me out as much. I just thought, ‘That sucks.’ But then I thought about my family having to deal with me dying, and that would be horrific.” When he disclosed to his mother at a funeral in Los Angeles, “I was devastated and paralyzed with fear,” said Connie Mackenroth, a longtime nurse at Seattle’s Harborview Medical Center. “I was so sad for Jack. The fact that Jack was alone in New York dealing with everything just haunted me. A very dear friend of mine told me to go and see how he lived, that HIV was probably not the focus of his life and that he carried on as before. So I did go.”

What she found was that her son had redoubled his efforts to stay well, which meant plenty of swimming and weight lifting and healthy eating. He also was moving ahead with his post-Parsons career, opening a men’s clothing store called Jack’s on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. There he sold a few brands, like Diesel, but specialized in up-and-coming designers, throwing a few of his own shirts into the mix. He says he soon realized, however, the drudgery of being in business for himself. “I loved designing the store, getting the look of it right,” he says. “But then once that was over and it was about numbers and making a profit, I was like, “This is boring!’”

The next decade saw Mackenroth at a variety of similar jobs—he designed in succession for Tommy Hilfiger, Slate pants, “a company which I don’t want to name because I hate them,” and finally Weatherproof Active Wear, which Mackenroth refers to as “main-floor-of-Macy’s kinda of stuff.” Each job brought perks—he was gainfully employed, making a six-figure income, earning respect—but little of it was challenging his creative juices.

“It was fine, really,” Jack said unconvincingly. “What happens a lot is that people say, ‘Oh, you’re a clothing designer, that’s so exciting!’ Well, you know, when you’re a mass-market sportswear designer, you sketch out how everything should be measured and done and then send it to a factory in foreign country and it would come back three weeks later. People thought I worked with all these amazing fabrics and I did all this amazing stuff, but it was just one of those jobs where I could do it in my sleep. Menswear in that gear doesn’t really change. Maybe the colors change. We sell black, navy, gray, brown, maybe maroon and then, in the summer, tan, white, light gray and

navy and then throw in, like, red, as the crazy color."

For this reason, Mackenroth's devotion to TNYA and his swimming became his most important outlet. Better yet, Connie Mackenroth came to watch him swim. "You bet I saw Jack's record-setting relay. I was hollering and cheering and waving. I never get tired of seeing him swim." Around that same time, Jack set his sights on another competition: a burgeoning TV phenomenon known as Project Runway, which, he said, "seemed tailor-made for me."

"[Mackenroth] had a strong voice as a designer and is a unique personality," *Project Runway* co–executive producer Andy Cohen said. "He'd auditioned before and didn't make it, and the fact that he went away and worked on his portfolio showed that he was a serious competitor."

It clearly didn't hurt Mackenroth's chances with Bravo that he was also so forthright about his HIV status. When that information was included in Jack's preseason profile, it made him a groundbreaker who chose a distinctly different path than the only other openly HIV-positive reality show contestant in recent years, 2007 *Top Design* contestant John Gray. (The first and most notable reality-show star with HIV was Pedro Zamora in the 1994 season of MTV's *The Real World*, but that was not a competition.) Producers knew of Gray's status and had no plans to reveal it, but Gray chose in the second episode to explain to his fellow contestants that his medication was making him highly irritable. Gray was eliminated in the third round and then told *USA Today*: "I don't want to be the new face for HIV or be on the cover of *Out*."

From the start, by contrast, Mackenroth suspected his visibility could be good for people with HIV/AIDS at a time when the issue has been removed from the front burner of public consciousness. He also believed then—as now—that this image of himself as the picture of HIV-positive health and well-being was a distinction that would make him more memorable to the audience and marketable in his post–*Project Runway* life.

Most of the show, save for the live finale and a reunion episode, was filmed at a breakneck pace during the summer of 2007. He got off to a roaring start, making fast friends with a group of other good-looking designers "Project Rungay" blogger Tom Fitzgerald called "the cool kids' club." Mackenroth even bested 12 others in week 3 to win a challenge in which the designers created a look for *Today* show contributor and former New York Giants football player Tiki Barber. Barber wore the winning design, a pink pin-striped shirt and black pin-striped pants, the following morning with Mackenroth on the program.

The victory would be short-lived. About 10 days into the taping, and after surviving four challenges, Jack noticed a bump in his nose. He suspected what would come to be his ailment, methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, more commonly known as MRSA, which he'd had twice before. But a doctor brought to the set prescribed a general antibiotic. The infection spread, Mackenroth's face began to swell and he realized he needed to be treated in a hospital. Given the demands of the show's fast-paced production schedule, the producers and Mackenroth agreed he'd have to do something unprecedented in American reality TV: He'd have to leave because of illness.

Might a more accurate initial diagnosis have saved him? Mackenroth doubts it. “Yeah, if I had said to the production staff, ‘I have MRSA’—which you can’t diagnose unless you go to the hospital anyway, you’d have to take a culture and all that stuff—ideally I would’ve said, ‘I need a Benzamycin IV drip twice a day in seclusion.’ Could I possibly have stayed on the show? I guess, but I think we made the right decision. First of all, it’s contagious.”

Fellow designers offered to finish Mackenroth’s week-5 garment if it would keep him in the game. “It felt like a piece of me was gone,” said Kevin Christiana of the scene when Mackenroth and Gunn entered the workroom to announce the decision. “It sounds very dramatic, but when you’re living together like that and the person you talk to most leaves, it sucks. I was crying.” Mackenroth, too, was crushed. He called his mother and Hayes from St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York. “He was devastated and heartbroken,” Connie recalls. “We both cried, and I had to promise not to tell anyone. I still feel sad about it.”

Worse than all that to Mackenroth, though, was that he felt responsible for tarnishing the healthy image of himself and others with HIV—an image he had hoped to boost. He prevailed upon the Bravo producers to hammer home the point that MRSA is a commonly contracted bacteria unrelated to his HIV status: “I didn’t want to be known as the Sick Boy, the HIV-positive guy who can’t handle the stress.” Says Hayes: “He kinda was like, ‘OK, this is what happened, now how am I gonna make the best of it?’ He really attacked it like an athlete in training. When you compete, you’re going to fail and then you pull yourself up by your bootstraps and move on.”

Within an hour of his final show’s December 12 airing, Mackenroth posted a ridiculously exuberant three-minute video of himself reenacting Jennifer Beals’ classic *Flashdance* number. It was public relations genius, taken by the show’s fans as a way of telegraphing to the world that he’s happy, healthy, even silly. So happy, in fact, that he’s drawn up plans for a menswear line (though he says he lacks the money to launch it). Cohen said Mackenroth is encouraged to audition for season 5, an idea that the show’s fans—including Fitzgerald—embrace even if Jack himself seems noncommittal. Despite a cameo in the upcoming *Sex and the City* film that came about through a friend, he doesn’t hold out much hope for an acting career. This spring he’s doing the HIV charity circuit, appearing as a celebrity guest at one function after another.

Clearly, though, Mackenroth enjoys his measure of fame and hopes to extend it beyond its predictable expiration date, keeping all options open. He won’t disclose his HIV drug regimen, for instance, because he envisions himself fielding offers from pharmaceutical companies and doesn’t want to be on record as taking a competitor’s treatment.

There’s also chatter about him getting a reality series of his own with *Top Chef* contestant Dale Levitski, whom he has seen romantically a few times. Would he put himself in a relationship for the purposes of a TV show? “If I liked the person, sure,” he answered with a smile. “Being famous or demifamous or whatever the hell I am, that’s fine, I didn’t do it for that. It’s been a great experience and I’m doing my best to exploit myself because I want something bigger to come of all this.”

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