Liquid Lunch

World record holder James Ballard makes a splash

December 1, 1994 By Evan Forster

In merely one minute and 27 hundredths of a second, James T. Ballard dealt an enormous blow to the prevailing myth that people with HIV are necessarily frail and helpless. The lithely muscled, 6’4“ swimmer wrinkles his boyish face as he recalls the men’s (age 35 to 39) 100-meter backstroke at Gay Games IV in New York City. ”I didn’t feel like I was going very fast in the water, so I said to myself, ’Let’s see what you can do.’“ Coming in first, he touched the wall and turned to the timer to ask how fast he had gone. ”I think you went a .002,“ said the young man. ”Then I think I just broke the world record.“ ”That’s nice,“ was the timer’s response. ”Yeah,“ Ballard grinned, ”it is."

It was especially nice because less than 10 weeks before his world record breaking win, the 36-year-old Los Angeleno was bedridden, recovering from AIDS-related hepatitis. But after a month in bed, Ballard got right back into the water, going from swimming little more than 30 minutes a day, three times a week in March, to two or three hours daily by June. His decision to resume training so soon after being ill should come as no surprise. A mediocre swimmer at 14, Ballard snuck up on his competition to become one of the world’s fastest by 15. “I suppose I was clean-cut and focused,” he recalls of his first days as a swimmer. “If there was anything in my path, I was not going to go down easily.”

A successful real estate finance lawyer in love with a volleyball player from Toronto, the adult Ballard seemed to have no obstacles in his path until a friend casually mentioned that a lover of Jim’s ex had recently died. “Two degrees of separation,” Jim thought to himself. Shortly after that conversation, his world was rocked by two slips of paper: A positive test result from the clinic and a “Dear John” letter from his lover.

“When that person walked out of the door after I tested positive,” Ballard recalls, “I thought that I would never have a relationship or get involved with someone ever again. I was going to a number of funerals and figured that mine was just a short time away. I was in shock: I was just stumbling around for what seemed like months to me.”

Actually, it took Ballard nearly a year of confusion and depression to come to the resolution that if in fact his life might be shortened, he couldn’t waste any of it. Hence, Ballard, the ever prudent lawyer, developed his Three Year Plan.

“The fastest I had ever seen anyone go from testing positive with a health T-cell count to a point where they were not able to function was in three years,” explains Ballard. As a result he holds to his rule that “If it can’t happen in three years, it doesn’t exist.” Rather than make any plans or promises to do something four or five years from now, Ballard prefers, as he says, “to just keep everything in a time frame that’s manageable.”

After a year of physically debilitating reactions to antivirals resulting in the painful decision to leave indefinitely his demanding law practice, Ballard is managing his life well, thank you. These days he’s usually at home, immersed in a pile of photos taken for his latest venture: A greeting card publishing company that appears to be on the verge of success. During the off-hours, Ballard’s at the pool swimming and coaching for West Hollywood Aquatics. In addition to exercise, Ballard credits his sustained health to AZT, ddC, Chinese herbs and a positive relationship with his new HIV negative lover (a doctor, no less) whom the swimmer delights in describing as “not only one of the most handsome, but one of the most intelligent and supportive people in my life.”

Ballard still sometimes fears losing the quality of this life to AIDS. He thinks of the situation in the ironic terms of *The Andromeda Strain* where, he says, “instead of being at the top of the food chain you become lunch for a little virus.” Accustomed to a highly competitive environment, however, James Ballard knows better than to waste his precious energy concentrating on the adversary in the next pool lane. After all, it’s his race to win.

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