The POZ Decade-1999

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The Naked Truth

Even before 1999, "barebacking"—*Raw! Natural! Skin-on-skin sex!*—had already been through one controversy cycle. In 1995, porn star Scott O'Hara published a no-condoms-for-positives creed in his 'zine *Steam*, and in 1997, *POZ*'s Stephen Gendin shared his own condom-free experiences in "Riding Bareback." It wasn't long before the oh-so-naughty word went mainstream, popping up in *Newsweek* and on *ER*.

By 1999, however, a genuine barebacking subculture, nurtured by the Internet, had established itself, and in February, *POZ* seized the moment with its "Boys Who Bareback" issue, featuring Michael Scarce's groundbreaking "A Ride on the Wild Side." Gay men of all statuses expressed their "condom" and "crisis" fatigue; their intense need to connect and to share cum; their HIV-meds complacency; so-called bug-chasers even fetishized the idea of HIV transmission.

Before the inflammatory February issue left the *POZ* offices, one staffer threatened to quit, saying the piece's "harm reduction" guidelines encouraged barebacking. A furious flap followed. At a packed forum in New York City, some slammed *POZ* for having glamorized unsafe sex: The "Boys" cover featured self-proclaimed barebacker Tony Valenzuela naked on a horse—sans saddle. Others defended condomless sex as negotiated risk and new prevention. The contentious event triggered forums nationwide and got the mainstream press gasping again.

Valenzuela had seen it all before. In 1997, the well-known activist enraged a big gay confab by giving a speech on why he practiced unsafe sex. "Even at work, I still get people saying, 'You were ballsy,'" reports Valenzuela, now 35, who works with gay adolescents in Los Angeles and is finishing a degree in creative writing. "But it's always in private."

Today, with infections rising, gay men's love/hate relationship to rubbers remains unresolved—even as the White House uses fake science to attack condoms as unsafe. "The Internet and crystal use have created a moment where more and more men are [barebacking]," says gay psychotherapist Michael Shernoff, who doubts the community has the will to mobilize around the issue. But, he says, just "getting people to talk about HIV status—that's harm reduction."

Man of the Year: Greg Louganis

Compared to most superstar athletes, champion Olympic diver Greg Louganis never really sought out the spotlight. But when the four-time gold-medal winner published his bestselling 1995

memoir, *Breaking the Surface*, the spotlight came crashing down on him: In the book, Louganis revealed that he had known his HIV-positive status when he hit his head against the diving board during the 1988 Olympics and bled into the pool; the admission sparked ugly accusations of irresponsibility. (HIV cannot be transmitted in a chlorinated swimming pool—*duh*.)

As he later told Barbara Walters, Louganis agonized over whether to disclose to the attending doctor or the Olympic committee. Although that explanation didn't necessarily assuage his critics, the controversy had a silver lining. "A lot of good information was getting out there," Louganis told *POZ* in 1999.

Since then, Louganis has remained the handsome, graceful athlete whose face lit up Wheaties' boxes (until he came out as gay, that is). Our March 1999 Louganis profile, "Dog Days in Malibu," portrayed a thoughtful man who had survived domestic violence, HIV and fame and dedicated his second act to diving, AIDS advocacy and, increasingly, his dogs. He has been a leading backer of Pets Are Wonderful Support (PAWS), a nonprofit that helps HIVers care for their pets. "To get a dog when you're positive is a commitment to go on living," he told *POZ*. "That dog will be around for 15 years." His second book, a loving guide to canine care called *For the Life of Your Dog*, was published in 1998.

Today, Louganis lives a quiet life in Malibu. Though he does the occasional turn as an actor, TV commentator and person living with HIV, he is mainly an accomplished dog trainer and shower—and the proud owner of Nipper, Dobby and Gryff. Like everything else in Louganis' life, they're hard-won—and all the more appreciated for it.

'99 Personal Best
Unplugged by Joe Westmoreland

In June 1999, after three and a half years, my Hickman catheter was finally gone. I'd endured hours-long intravenous infusions of ganciclovir to arrest my CMV and save my eyesight—and the catheter stuck out of my chest just below my rib cage. I couldn't get it wet for fear of infections: light showers OK, but no swimming.

Then, a miracle: My medicine became available in pill form. When I escaped the catheter my acupuncturist pal, Sheila, knew what a victory it was. We drove out to the beach at Bellport, Long Island, on a perfect day: warm, not hot; cotton ball clouds in a bright blue sky. Moments after we arrived, I tossed down my towel and raced into the water.

When the first wave washed over me, so did a rush of warmth and pleasure. I turned to give Sheila a big grin—then got slammed by a monster wave. Another one dragged me along the bottom. This was all wrong: There was no undertow in my dream reunion with the sea.

When I came up gasping for air and spitting water, Sheila was doubled over with laughter. I struggled back to my towel, laughing, too. For a moment, I'd forgotten not just about my catheter, but all my health problems. I felt wonderful, alive.

Joe Westmoreland has written our “Sick and Tired” column since 2003.

Celebrity BUZZ

Esquire’s March cover starred **Madonna, Tom Hanks**, amfAR’s **Sharon Stone** and **Mathilde Krim**, and others spelling out “The four letter word we all forgot about.” Inside, veteran AIDS reporter Laurie Garrett’s panicky prophecy of massive HAART failure and “a new AIDS crisis” made HIVers choke on their pills. *POZ* shot back in June’s fifth-anniversary issue: *Our* cover celebs—Shawn Decker, Raven Lopez, Andrew Sullivan and Rebekka Armstrong—spelled out “We’re Still Here Dammit!” And we are.

Hey! Days

January
Plagued by scandal, the Morning Party, a Gay Men’s Health Crisis cash cow, gets the ax. The rest of 1999 is rocky for the nation’s biggest ASO, and top dog Joshua Lipsman bails in November, after a 10-month tenure.

March 1
Former national ice-skating champion Rudy Galindo announces that he’s positive, creating a major visibility moment for HIVers: Galindo gives face on *The Today Show, Dateline* and in *People*.

April 13
Fomer ACT UPer Michael Cunningham nabs a Pulitzer for *The Hours*. He tells *POZ* the book’s suicidal PWA diva was based partly on celebrated *New Yorker* writer Harold Brodkey, who died of AIDS in 1996.

June 16
The first of several disruptions of Al Gore’s prez campaign by AIDS activists thrusts the arcana of global drug pricing into the spotlight—and sparks lightning-fast changes in Clinton’s trade policies.

December
Despair-fueled IV drug use in the economically blighted former Soviet Union gives that region the dubious distinction of the steepest rise in infections in ’99—youth are especially hard hit.

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