Tommy Morrison Wants You To Believe

Boxing's Next White Hope fired Dr. David Ho, doesn't use condoms and says HIV doesn't cause AIDS. And he won't be satisfied until the world feels the same

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It's just a living room, done up in Middle-Class American, with the requisite television the size of a small refrigerator and the stack of videos beside it; and the portrait photos of three red-cheeked children on the wall; and the three-seat sofa and the reclining chair; and it's really all Tommy Morrison, who grew up in a fractured household in Jay, Oklahoma ever wanted for himself. "I'm just a normal guy" is his mantra. But this isn't Morrison's room. It belongs to the family of an HIV positive 26-year-old named Aaron Shriver, who now sits sprawled in the plush leather chair, legs extended, in his blue jeans and Eskimo Joe's baseball cap. Across the room, poised atop a couch as though at any moment he will spring to his feet, an arm slung over the back for balance, Morrison radiates intensity. Ordinary living rooms have become his venues for combat, prettied-up boxing rings. A former top heavyweight contender (and briefly the champion of the weight class as ranked by the World Boxing Organization), Morrison hasn't stopped fighting since shortly after his own positive test result in February 1996. His opponent isn't AIDS, but the medical community that has linked it to HIV.

To Morrison, HIV is a benign virus and AIDS a fraudulent collection of symptoms. "AIDS has been here since creation, but it doesn't do anything," Morrison all but shouts across the room. Shriver nods. A few days before, following a tearful telephone call from Shriver to Morrison's mother, the ex-boxer had driven his pickup here to Chelsea, about half an hour outside Tulsa, crossed the railroad tracks that run through the center of town, and visited Shriver and his family. Since 1994, Shriver had been treating HIV with AZT and other medications. But he felt himself getting progressively sicker. Morrison came to talk up his strategy of "natural hygiene," a term he remembers reading, but he isn't certain where. It's a regimen of exercise, vitamin intake, healthy eating and no medicine. "I don't even take aspirin," Morrison says. "You know why? Because I'm not sick."

Morrison believes it is the medications used to treat HIV, not the virus itself, that initiates a breakdown of the immune system. "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is something that's easily cured," he told the Shrivers. "The human body was made to cure itself, but we keep putting lots of shit into it." To his surprise, they didn't need much convincing.

"I knew the treatment was killing me," Aaron Shriver says now. "It was taking a toll on my body,

physically and mentally. Every time I'd eat a pill I'd say, 'Aaron you are going to die. This pill is for people who are dying.' But everything you hear about HIV, you have to take this stuff."

Hearing this brings Morrison to his feet. At 28, he's a big man with oversized arms, maybe not in fighting shape but not far from it. He wears a tiny diamond stud in his left ear, a depiction of Jesus Christ on his t-shirt and a wide-open face that shows emotions bigger than life, like a drive-in movie screen. "This kid was perfectly healthy before he started taking the medication," he says. "He knew something wasn't going right. All he needed was me to put him over the edge."

When Shriver learned he had acquired HIV from a dirty needle, he considered it a death sentence. Like Morrison, he no longer believes that. "I'm tired of being the victim of this," he says. He has stopped taking his meds: "I was feeding myself death."

"'Cause you knew how it was going to make you feel," Morrison replies.

"Let me show you something," Shriver says. He leaves the room and returns with a plastic bag half-filled with white-and-blue pills -- a month's supply of AZT. Morrison picks it off the table and gauges its heft. "Wow! Look at all that poison," he says. "A big bag of pills that looks like death. No wonder someone gets sick. They get people who are totally healthy and give them poison, and their bodies start breaking out into infection or fever or diarrhea, whatever.

The body is trying to get rid of the toxins... "

"And then they give you a pill for that... "

"That's right!" Morrison says. He's standing in the middle of the wall-to-wall carpet now, his arms out in front of him like the boxer he was, booming his message through the living room and the empty house beyond, preaching to the converted. "They treat the symptoms! They treat the symptoms of the symptoms of the symptoms, and they poison you," he says. He takes a breath, wraps his will around his emotion, gets it under control.

"Boy, I get mad," he says. "But if somebody told you something, and you found out that if you'd followed their direction, you'd have died, well, that's enough to spark anybody. That's where my fucking motivation comes from. These guys tried to kill me, and they're killing a bunch of other people, and it ain't right. And I'm not going to let it happen."

Living rooms aren't Morrison's only outlet for his proselytizing. As part of the probationary terms of suspended sentences for a weapons violation and an assault charge against his ex-wife, he gives speeches to high school and college students. But he'd do it anyway, he says, to spread the truth.

"I need something to motivate me," he says. "Boxing was there, and then it was yanked away, but this other stuff is there now. Like defying conventional wisdom. I run into people in airports I haven't seen in a long time and they're like, 'Man, you look good,' and I'm puzzled because I forget what most people believe. And then it's like, 'Oh, but there's so much you don't know.' And I don't get down off my soapbox for an hour."

Morrison takes pride in his candor, but he has had enough bad publicity in his short, out-of-control life to make him shun controversy. So in speeches to students he offers up a sanitized version of his own weird science. “You can’t go in and say to kids they’re not going to get AIDS from sex,” he says. “They’re not, but you can’t say it. You can’t say, ’Here’s my wife, she doesn’t have it and we fuck all the time,’ because the media will pick it up and call you insane. So I tell them, ’This is what you’re told, this is what I think, this is what I’ve done. And look at me: I’m healthy!’”

Morrison’s lifestyle, too, now has the trappings of normality. He lives on a ranch near Jay and works as a boxing commentator for Fox Sports. He has all but stopped drinking -- though he was cited for driving while intoxicated near Kansas City recently, a function of wine with dinner at the home of a friend, he says -- and is no longer a regular in the barrooms and clubs of Tulsa. Unlike many ex-athletes, he has money in the bank.

Nine months ago, in a surprise ceremony, he married his longtime girlfriend. He had pursued her for years while his reputation as a hell-raiser kept her at arm’s length. “She was afraid of me because of what she’d heard,” he says. “She thought all I wanted to do was get in her pants. She’d actually only been with one guy her entire life, the guy she went out with before me. We didn’t have sex until right before we got married.”

Now they have unprotected sex. Why use a condom, Morrison believes, when HIV can’t hurt you? “We haven’t changed one thing, and she tests negative every single time,” he says. “I’ve shown her everything I know, and she’s content with it. Basically, she’s giving me her life. She’s saying, ’Here, whatever you’re doing, I’m doing.’ That’s how certain I am; there’s no way I’d ever do something to hurt that woman. Because there is no fucking way you can get HIV from sex. It’s scientifically impossible.”

Morrison won’t comment publicly on how he acquired the virus. He was first diagnosed in February 1996, after a blood test in Las Vegas. He was scheduled to fight Arthur Weathers that night as part of a three-bout contract that would culminate with Mike Tyson. Instead, he was suspended. He heard of the test result from his manager, Tony Holden, left his hotel and flew home. “I was as uneducated as anyone else about HIV,” he says. “I didn’t know what to think.” He landed at the Tulsa airport after midnight and saw a crowd huddled around a TV in the airport bar. As he approached, he realized they were watching videotape of him. That’s when he knew what a big deal it would be.

In northeastern Oklahoma, he is considered a hero. There aren’t many national figures from this part of the country. “I’ve read that Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley never turned down an autograph request,” he says, “and I try to be the same way.” Everywhere he goes in Tulsa, where he keeps an apartment, he is greeted with a handshake, a backslap, a bit of conversation. When his periodic indiscretions put him in the news, the locals in this corner of the world forgive him.

“I’m just like they are, except that I became a millionaire,” Morrison says, speeding his pickup past the Sonic drive-throughs and convenience stores that serve as topography along the prairie landscape. But Morrison stepped more quickly than most from adolescence to adulthood. He was a seventh-grader when he skipped a year of school, forged an ID and began fighting adults for

winner-take-all paychecks in bars and roadhouses. These were Tough Man competitions, essentially street fights with gloves. “I was 13, had an ID, said I was 21,” he says. “I was working at construction sites, going to titty bars. They could tell I wasn’t legal, but nobody cared. The ID looked good, so they were covered.”

He returned to school and played football while continuing to make money fighting in bars under the name James White. He planned to play in college, but in his senior year, on a lark, he entered a regional Golden Gloves boxing tournament in May 1988. He had no formal boxing knowledge, two weeks to train and an army duffel bag filled with sawdust to beat on. But he traveled to Kansas City and won the heavyweight division, a real-life Rocky. That led to the national Golden Gloves, and then, it being an Olympic year, to the Western Region Olympic trials and the national trials in Concord, California. Eight fighters in each class were invited to Concord from across the country, including Morrison -- two months removed from head-butting in sports bars.

He lost, but by then Morrison was being touted as the Next White Hope. It didn’t hurt that he was related by blood to John Wayne -- born Marion Morrison -- and seemed so unpretentious. “Everybody was telling me how much money I could make, with my ability and my personality,” he says. By November he had moved to Kansas City and turned professional. His nickname, like Wayne’s, was “Duke.” After two years, he was undefeated and featured opposite Sly Stallone in *Rocky V*.

But for a kid from rural Oklahoma, Kansas City was the fast lane. He never fell into drugs, but he did about everything else. He’d train for fights and win them all, but they were little more than pit stops between parties. “In the heavyweight division, if you’re a Top 10 guy, you only have to fight once or twice a year,” he says. “So there’s usually nothing to stay in for at night. And I couldn’t handle that.”

He says he never got into a scuffle out of the ring, though he was accused of many. “I never punched a girl, never hit a guy,” he says. But he admits to sometimes waiting until a friend or hanger-on had passed out drunk, then shaving off an eyebrow as a souvenir. He did it at a party once to someone he barely knew and got sued for it. He lost $8,000. “There was a time when I couldn’t have farted in an elevator without someone wanting to sue me,” he says.

Morrison’s string of casual trouble kept him in the headlines. It scared away endorsement deals, but his success in the ring kept getting him fights. He beat George Foreman to win the championship of the WBO, one of several alphabet-soup organizations that promote championship belts. He lost the belt but stopped the formidable Razor Ruddock on the way back up. Tyson was on his radar screen.

And then he tested positive. “He was white, and he had some talent, and in this wonderful world of boxing that goes a long way,” says Ross Greenburg, executive producer of HBO Sports, which telecast four of Morrison’s bouts. “He had a questionable chin, but a lot of heart. I do not honestly believe he would have been heavyweight champion of the world, but his heart willed him to win fights he shouldn’t have won. He had personal demons he had to attack, but he seemed to have

overcome them and was training hard. We'll never know."

There used to be a sign by the road at the Jay city limit declaring it the hometown of Tommy Morrison, WBO heavyweight champ. Two days after he tested positive, the sign was taken down -- officially or unofficially, Morrison never learned. And one man joined a health club, discovered Morrison worked out there and asked for his money back. "He figured out we'd be laying on the same bench or something," Morrison says. "He was afraid he'd get infected by my sweat."

Mostly, though, his celebrity helped him. Calls and letters came rolling in. Stallone left a message suggesting a German doctor; athlete friends he'd made in Kansas City's pro sports community made recommendations. There were folk remedies, antigovernment manifestos, miracle cures. Morrison read them all, looking for a way to make HIV seem nothing more than normal. A month after testing positive, he was talking of a visitation from God.

"I believe that this virus is going to disappear from my body," he said during an interview. He had sent for studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and devoured conspiracy-theory research such as Peter Duesberg's *Inventing the AIDS Virus* and Richard Willner's *Deadly Deception*. He was ready to believe.

Holden and Stuart Campbell, his attorney and close friend, urged a more conventional course. They contacted Dr. David Ho, the pre-eminent AIDS researcher who later became *Time*'s Man of the Year and serves as a physician to Magic Johnson. Ho agreed to treat Morrison. But Morrison refused to take various medicines, citing his own research and a spiritual vision. "All Dr. Ho did was do my bloodwork," Morrison says over a boxer's breakfast of strip steak, four eggs, two orders of hash browns. "And then he tried to give me the damn medication. The top guy in the field doesn't even understand that HIV isn't a germ, it's a virus. It's not alive, so you can't kill it -- which is why, 13 years later, we're no closer to a so-called cure."

Ho refuses to comment on Morrison's case. He refers inquiries to the esteemed researcher Dr. Robert Schooley, head of infectious diseases at the University of Colorado Medical Center in Denver. "What Morrison is doing is actually not a method of battling HIV, it's a method of denial," Schooley says. "We know enough now to know that the cause of AIDS is incontrovertibly HIV, and that the drugs we have to treat it prevent disease from spreading and cut mortality rates. Telling people HIV doesn't cause AIDS is a very convenient thing for the Peter Duesbergs of the world to be doing because it lets patients continue to do things they want to do. Unfortunately, it's wrong."

When Morrison refused to take medication, Ho's office stopped treating him. That was fine with the boxer, who perceives doctors as the unwitting endpoint in a conspiracy among the pharmaceutical giants and the U.S. government. "AZT, ddI, all that stuff is very toxic," he says. "AZT rids the body of the virus, but it brings your immune system down with it, so you catch a cold and die." He calls himself the most educated person he knows regarding HIV. "I don't know how I know the things I know," he says. "I just know I'm right. I haven't been sick in five years. And if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

True to his word, Morrison even managed to fight last September against a designated patsy,

though he had to go to Tokyo to find both a governing body that would sanction him and a willing opponent. He earned only expense money and donated his winner's purse to Knockout AIDS, a fundraising foundation he helped create that is designed to send HIV positive children to championship bouts, make sure they have enough healthy food to eat, and do other similarly good deeds. Other than that, Morrison is almost completely detached from the HIV positive community -- so much so that when the gay newsmagazine *The Advocate* called his house for a scheduled interview, Morrison responded with insults and invective because, he says, he figured it was a friend pulling a prank.

So far, Morrison and Knockout AIDS have seen little of the estimated $500,000 his Tokyo fight was supposed to raise. But he has planned a celebrity golf tournament in Nashville to make up the difference. He would raise money by fighting again, he says, or even resume his career. But he's afraid -- not of infecting an opponent but of falling back into the lifestyle he had in Kansas City. As it was, much of the partying-induced puffiness of his earlier bouts was gone for his latest bout. "You should have seen him in Tokyo," Campbell says, shaking his head. "He was in terrific, terrific shape."

To Campbell, those rippling forearms are exactly what has Morrison deluded. "Until your body says, 'Hey, you've got a virus,' who tells him? His doctors, whom he doesn't trust or believe anyway," Campbell says. "If your body tells you you're sick, you're going to listen. But until then, it's really, really hard to say, 'Look, Tommy, you've got to start taking these drugs.' And then it's too late. You get a cold and it turns into pneumonia, and you go in and find out you have AIDS. And I think that's what'll happen with Tommy. I pray it doesn't, but I'm worried it will."

Since leaving boxing, which he calls God's will, Morrison has led a full, fulfilling life. "I'm enjoying the hell out of being married," he says. When he isn't on the road giving speeches or broadcasting fights, he spends time teaching and training Brenda Rouse, a female boxer who is billed as the top-ranked contender in the 112-pound flyweight division. At a martial-arts studio near his Tulsa apartment, he extends his arms with padded gloves and lets Rouse work on her timing, her technique, her footwork.

They slide across the carpet, Rouse throwing staccato punches that crack like rifle shots. Morrison shows the same intensity in his eyes he had in Aaron Shriver's living room. "In boxing, you never stop learning," he says, wiping the sweat from his forehead during a break. "You start thinking you know it all, it's the beginning of the end. Be a sponge! Absorb every kind of information you get about life, then decide for yourself what works."

Outside the gym the day is bright and the March air is warm, the first warm day in a while. After the training resumes the crack of Rouse's punches carries out the open door and into the sunshine. Morrison has mentioned getting back to the ranch before too long and maybe going fly fishing, for it's a shame to waste a day like this indoors. But he's in no hurry. He knows he has all the time in the world.

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