Spokes Model

Triathlete Jim Howley in the race of his life

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For being such a big, bad jock, HIV positive triathlete Jim Howley sure is a squealer when it comes to riding roller coasters. Spend an afternoon with the 33-year-old, blond surfer-dude look-alike at Magic Mountain amusement park down the road from Los Angeles and you'll hear lots of nervous jitters and less than macho screams.

Maybe it's just release, because Howley has risen to the challenges that have come his way without showing much of a cowardly streak. HIV positive for a decade, he is a competitive athlete, the founder of his own organization, Athletics Instead of Depression and Sickness (A.I.D.S.), and is most recently, the star of a personal exercise video produced by the Physicians Association for AIDS Care (PAAC).

"I don't necessarily like to call myself an advocate," Howley says. "I'm a person who cares, a person who's been there." Sharing that became the basis for A.I.D.S., his effort to speak about HIV awareness and safer sex to groups from junior high to college. His message: Have a positive focus in your life because HIV is a disease that targets you when you're feeling vulnerable, inferior or one down on everybody else. "You don't really see 50-year-old successful white businessmen getting this disease." Howley tell his audiences, "because they can say 'no' a lot faster than anyone else can." So if it's help in saying "no" that teens needs, he offers advice on that, while with older audiences he gives concrete how-to advice.

Either way, he usually ends up telling them his own story. "I know the day I got this disease," he starts. "I know exactly when it was, who it was. And I also know that I knew about HIV at that time—even though it was back in the early '80s. But I didn't have the guts to make that person do what I should have—because I felt one down. With athletics I never feel one down anymore."

Ten years ago, on the other hand, the situation seemed hopeless. "I just didn't care," Howley recalls. "There was nothing you could do except kill yourself. I knew more people who killed themselves back then than actually died." He ignored what he knew while he tried visualization, mystical approaches and 12-step programs.

Howley didn't seek any traditional medical advice until 1989, when he got scared. Then he not only tested positive as he expected to, but learned his T-cell count was below 200. "Don't go into

any crowded movie theaters," one doctor said mysteriously after giving him the results. Another doctor told him he'd live 16 months. In his early months seeking treatment, in fact, Howley encountered more than his share of horror-show specialists with "don't upset the apple cart" attitudes. When he realized he knew more than a lot of the doctors, Howley became an early, self-guided experimenter with combination therapies. Howley pays his early doctors a backhanded compliment: "They forced me to become an informed consumer quickly."

His personal adjustment to being HIV positive was even quicker. "It was like a giant switch clicked on in my body and I said, 'I'm going to do this, I'm gonna fight.'" He sat by the window, drinking glass after glass of orange juice and came up with the challenge—he wanted to compete in a triathlon. And he wasn't an obvious candidate: "Sure, I owned a bike. But I was also a recovered cocaine addict, and I still partied all the time." His first run ended with him walking back form the end of the block. His first swim workout didn't take him much farther; he couldn't swim an entire lap.

Amazingly, Howley persevered, and after only eight months of training (and possibly a world record in its own right) he completed his first triathlon. Five years, some 36 triathlons and a bout with deadly testicular cancer later, he is in fantastic cardiovascular shape and this season participated in a full schedule of triathlons Although Howley's T-cells these days are closer to 20, his dream is to compete in the world-famous, wickedly difficult Ironman competition in Hawaii.

Without a doubt, the mental highs and physical conditioning of Howley's athletic competition have bolstered his health. They tally with the treatment supervised by Dr. Gary Cohan, who supports Howley's training regimen with testosterone-replacement therapy and stresses the importance of retaining lean muscle mass. That's the message of the exercise video that PAAC will distribute featuring Howley and his story. "I want people in Kentucky, or wherever, to realize how important keeping themselves in shape is," he explains. "They've got tot know that there are simple things they can do at home that will help them stay healthy."

Taking control is key for Howley. "I do what I want to do. There's not one day I don't do what I want to." But equally important to this determined man is letting go. Today, he's enthusiastic about the support of Dr. Cohan, along with counseling and, he stresses, "the incredible support of my circle of friends and my lover, Randy. I have the best friends and the best relationship I could ask for and that's where I draw my strength."

"I do everything it's in my power to do," he continues, "but I know enough sometimes to stand back and let someone else be my hero. You can't do it all alone."

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