

## STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

**B**elieve it or not, the summer just gone by marks an entire decade since **Mark Tewksbury** won his gold medal at the Barcelona Olympics for the 100-metre backstroke. Why does it feel like just yesterday? Because unlike so many other Olympic champions who move onto lucrative endorsement deals only to slowly fade away (quick: name another 1992 Olympic champion), Tewksbury has remained in the public eye and the subject of continued fascination.

Canada couldn't get enough of its new national hero, and as Tewksbury parlayed his gold medal win into product promotions, charity pitches and a successful career as a motivational speaker, it seemed to outsiders as though the young man had it all. For Tewksbury it was the opposite. National heroes are not supposed to be secretly gay, and as the twenty-four year old Olympic champion went through the motions of meeting the expectations and demands of those around him, he was, as he told me recently over the phone from his home in Montreal, at the lowest point in his life.

When gay rumours eventually surfaced (aided by sightings of Tewksbury at gay hot spots), his agent and others vehemently denied them, sending a clear signal to Tewksbury that being who he was wasn't acceptable.

It took an escape to Australia in 1994, from everyone and everything, to help him discover and come to terms with his identity. When, after being back in Canada for two years in 1998, he made the public announcement confirming his homosexuality, it was a declaration that caused mixed reactions: front page headlines, accusations of outing himself as a career boost,

## SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO MARK TEWKSBURY



a few yawns from some who felt it was old news, and the cancellation by a financial institution of Tewksbury's six-figure speaking contract for being 'too openly gay'.

The attention to Tewksbury's private life has yet to cease - everything from his love life to his recreational habits have fallen under scrutiny - but the Olympic champion has made a choice to keep moving on no matter what, determined to live life to the fullest. Living quietly and privately in Montreal, studying French full time as part of his role as honorary co-president of the 2006 Montreal Gay Games, Tewksbury is probably closer now than ever before to actually having the ideal life it once seemed he had. Or, if not, he's at least working on it. In our conversation we looked back on the ten years that have flown by since he claimed gold; Tewksbury candidly sharing his intimate thoughts on what has often been a trying journey played out for all the world to witness.



The road you've been on hasn't been without a lot of negative pressure, whether that's being in the closet when you won gold, feeling the need to get away and find yourself in Australia, or even the way you came out publicly. During these times you must have felt alone and misunderstood.



Oh my God – I still feel lonely and misunderstood. I think that's part of the human condition. I'm just grateful that a young age I found myself in a sport that teaches you about betterment, about improving.



Your life would have been very different if you hadn't discovered swimming.



For sure. My life is completely shaped by my experience as an athlete.



But in a bigger sense than that. I've read that at one point you were contemplating suicide and that swimming was the one thing you wanted to live for.



Listen, if I was just a gay kid in Calgary I don't know what I would have done. Sport was more than just the actual sport itself, and the biggest thing that helped me was being able to travel, see the world, and see with my own eyes that there are lots of ways to live your life.



That it doesn't begin and end within the walls of Calgary.



But it was still difficult. I wished things were different than they were.



Do you wish now?



No, not really. There is no sort of finale to self-improvement, but I think there are certain conclusions you reach, and mine was to put my life first and always keep checking myself. Awareness is a really good thing, but it's a difficult place to get to. You have to be really honest with yourself and honest with the people around you.



Which is hard.



That to me is the catch. Whether it's gay culture that has enormous influence on the way we think we should be living our lives, we all have an idea that we should be living our lives a certain way, instead of just going: 'wait a minute, how am I living *my* life?'



You reached dizzying success at twenty-four - an age where a lot of gay boys worry only about what to wear to the club on the weekend, meanwhile you're on the cover of *Time*. What's it like to have that spotlight at twenty-four, and what's it like when it starts to lose its intensity, because at some point that can't continue



I had a sort of international repute for many years. But being in the news is a bit different than releasing a movie or something. Because it's not like I had to be 'hot' for my next project. This was the reverse. I *did* something and then I was in the news, as opposed to *creating* hype in the news.



Were you aware of all that at just twenty-four, though?



No, I just realized as time went by that my little circle of recognition slowly grew. I went from being known in Calgary, and then known in sports circles of the world, but when I won the Olympics I wasn't prepared for what that is.



Can anyone prepare for what that is?



I was just kind of numb. The fact I won in itself was a numbing, shocking achievement. And then everyone shares in it, which is what you're talking about with the press and the intensity. And quite frankly, it never goes away. I don't mean the intensity, but once people have shared that experience with you...to this day people still come up to me like it just happened and they're shocked when I say it was ten years ago.



Your name's obviously going to be forever preceded by 'Olympic gold medallist' – is that what you want to be remembered for most?



For a while that drove me nuts, that I was always being called 'the swimmer'. (Laughs) My conflict after the games was that I was overwhelmed, and it was so much to be this perfect Olympian when I felt less than perfect. And it was a very difficult period.



Did you ever feel like a fake?



Of course, in a way. I didn't feel like a fake because I was the champion, but I felt like I didn't want to disappoint anyone. I just thought, 'what would happen if they knew?' I wasn't sure. Who would have thought two months after winning the Olympics, which is supposed to be the greatest moment of my life, that I was unquestionably at the lowest point in my life?



That set you on a whole journey, including going to Sydney to explore yourself as far away from people as you could get.



Everyone here was begging me to stay; it was the high point of my career. Everyone kept saying, 'If you leave it's the end of your career.' And I just said 'I don't care. I can't do this right now.'



No one would blame you for being in the closet then, but when you think about that time, living with a girl for a while –



You know, that was not a big deal. I had a house and I rented two of the rooms out and it happened to be to two girls.



And that was it? I remember reading about that and it certainly wasn't reported as landlord/tenant.



That's how my agent put it out as - without telling me. *And these are the messages I got about being gay.* Someone would call with a rumour and my agent would respond on my behalf and I didn't even know about it until I read the bloody end product.



You've said before that by the end of all of this you felt bankrupt as a person with nothing to lose. Would you have done anything differently, or did you even know better?



I'm of the philosophy that your life is your life. And gee I wish I'd learnt that lesson in a year, and that I was all complete and happy as a human being at twenty-five, but guess what? I wasn't. And I don't think it could have been any different. Because the world I lived in at that time isn't the same as the one I live in today. In the biggest sense. *Will & Grace* was not on every Thursday, *Queer As Folk* was not on every Monday, people had no context of what gay was. I was for many people in Alberta, including my parents, the first gay person they were ever aware of.



Do you still feel there are expectations of you? Do you wish you could just go and do what any guy your age can do without repercussions afterwards?



For sure, but I'm living very privately and I don't look at the world that way so much anymore. When I first got famous and came out, I felt really scared and under scrutiny and didn't know who I was. Now all that has softened and I know who I am and I'm living quietly in Montreal and it's manageable. I think whatever you do in life you can't become a victim of it.



I got the impression that you felt misunderstood when you came out.



I felt a little misunderstood when I came out. It was reported strangely, as if my career was dying and I needed a boost for it. But my career is speaking to corporate Canada and America and it's never dulled for a minute. In fact, the *repercussion* of that decision hurt me; it didn't help me. That was a very personal decision. And that whole 'Oh, he needs to be in the spotlight...' thing. Even if I did, people should understand: don't buy into that part of American culture. There seems to be, in society at large, huge influence by America and the culture of celebrity. Being famous means nothing. It means nothing. It just means you are recognized by many people. It doesn't pay any money; it often makes your life difficult and inconvenient. I take it as a responsibility. If you can channel that energy into something positive, though, that's what you use it for. That's why I came out the way I did.



What's your take on the world of sports now?



When I speak of sport today, and when I've spoken about it with you, I'm surprised at how kind I am to it. For a long time I was like (dismissively): 'Oh. Yeah. I was an athlete', and for a long time not really embracing sport. I guess I was really hurt. It hurt to be an Olympic champion and be in the closet and not be able to share who I was out loud.



And exhausting.



*Exhausting.* And so I just pushed sport away. For me sport was in one corner and gay was in the other. But I never would have predicted in my life that I would live in Montreal and that sport and gay would be brought together in the form of the Gay Games. With, ironically, the third thing that I love, which is the whole idea of how you live your life, awareness and values and ethics, which is what I stood up to the IOC for.



Speaking of the Montreal Gay Games, what was all the fuss about over the \$100,000 cheque you were waving in Johannesburg during the bids? People claimed that to be a contributing factor to Montreal winning the right to host.



It's ridiculous. If you look at the bids for what they were, our bid truly stood out on its own merit. If you ask anyone who was there they will tell you the Montreal bid was the one to beat. So it was theatrics. That's all it was. And it was one of those things: 'should we do it, should we not do it, oh why not, let's do it.' That was just sour grapes.



You've called sports the last closet. What will the Montreal do for that?



Montreal is just the most ideal city in the world for this. They've already hosted the Olympics and have the Olympic stadium, and now thirty years later it can be done again with a whole new cultural vibe to it. Montreal thrives, there's so much to do and I've never seen anything like it.



What happens to you after the Gay Games are done in Montreal?



I am not sure what I will want to be doing in four years. If you told me four years ago that I would move to Montreal, learn French, compete in sports again - but this time compete with gay men and women - I would have never believed it. But it happened. Life does that. It just happens. Right now I feel like I am at a crossroads of some kind, and am really just doing my best to get through the transition. I imagine that the experience of being a part of the Games will have a huge impact on my future, but I am not exactly sure how - which is half the fun. Meanwhile this is a great experience for me because my role includes diplomacy, sport, politics, business and humanitarianism. These are all very interesting, and very vast areas.



So we'll see?



So we'll see.