

Paul Fortoul:

Interviewed by Greg Campora

Somebody said that these interviews were a kind of reward for being involved with the team for a long time - distinguished service medal, gold watch. Paul Fortoul's voice was the first officially gay swimmer's voice I ever heard; his was the contact phone number I got from the "New York in '94" office (the organizers of Gay Games IV). He coached the first workout I ever attended with Team New York Aquatics. Symbolically, Paul introduced me to one of the most profound experiences of my life - TNYA, Gay Games, this gay/swim thing - and getting there wasn't the easiest thing I ever did. As we spoke for the following article, it became clear that, at least a little bit, Paul thought this interview actually was a kind of reward. It gave him a warm feeling; he was proud of his connection to our team and felt that this was just a swell perk.

It has occurred to me that linear, chronological, topical storylines don't work with human lives. Paul's swimming, his childhood, his coaching, his talents, his parents, his sister, his shortcomings all conspired to create his life and to make it incomprehensible. However, the resulting collage is in some way archival; a picture of gayness, Gay Games IV, swimming in New York City, among other things. This interview, in its fuller context of the team, is another way for us to teach each other.

Where are we?

Oh - my office at City College.

And what is it you do here?

I'm a computer programmer.

Did you swim this morning?

No, actually I haven't swum since the hour swim.

How did [it] go for you?

I was disappointed. It was my best yardage, but I was hoping to be able to do 4500, and, I guess five weeks' training isn't enough. I needed six.

What's your favorite event?

That's a good question. I used to think of myself as a distance swimmer who swam butterfly fairly well, but I've had better success in the butterfly. I've made Masters Top Ten in short course meters in the 200 fly. I think it's the only

[event] I scored in in Gay Games (IV).

So when did you start swimming?

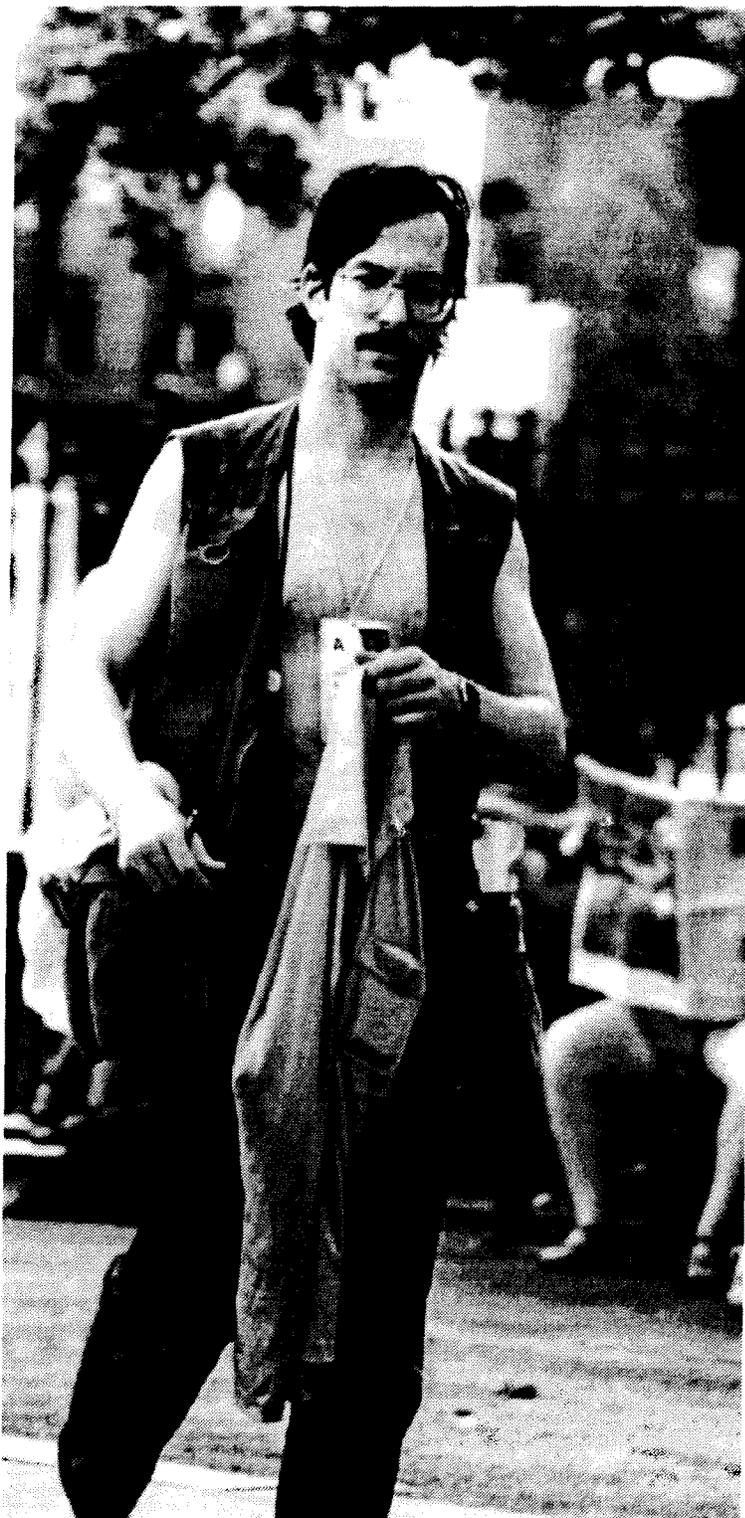
I started swimming competitively, actually, when I entered City College in 1975.

When did you graduate?

Actually, I don't have a degree yet . . . I stopped going to school in 1980. I'm close to a degree, but I'm not there yet. I started working at the college full-time in September of 1981. I guess I stopped swimming about a year before that - I was spending more time on the deck than in the pool by that time. It amazes me to this day that I would wind up coaching. If you'd had told [me] twenty years ago - I've been coaching close to fifteen years - that I'd end up coaching, I'd have said, "No."

Why?

. . . Because I'm a shy person. I really don't see myself as a leader and getting involved, being on deck, knowing how to coordi-



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nate people . . . When I first started swimming I was just awestruck at how my coach could get people to work, knew the right thing to say to everybody to get the most out of each individual. I'm a much more by-the-numbers sort of person and, in fact, my coaching style is very different from his, but it is the thing that I'm proudest of. I don't think I'm naturally good at it. The working with people has been a real challenge.

How did you start coaching?

Even when I was swimming in college, because I was so good at numbers, I was the person who helped take splits. My coach was very good with people, but he was not good with numbers. He always relied on people around him to help him in that area and I got very good at it . . . That's how I started getting involved . . . as I kept swimming here, even after my four years of college eligibility were up . . . My coach was

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a principal in [an] elementary school and what with meetings or whatever in the afternoon, and having somebody who had some knowledge, I ended up covering more and more workouts.

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Gradually, I began swimming less and less until, in the fall of 1980 I wound up, basically, not swimming and just coaching. Then when I got a full-time job here, working in the computer center, I was officially put on as an assistant coach of the college team - unpaid at that time.

How would you describe your coaching style?

It turns out, I think one of my strengths lies in the motivational area. I'm probably a little weaker in the specific technique areas of swimming. That's a weakness in my own personal swimming. I don't have a good feel for the water . . . Although, I think, years of coaching have helped develop a better sense of that. One of the other strengths I have, and it also relates to numbers, is the taper - to be able to get really good drops in times from people I've worked with all year. That's a very numbers-oriented, technical part of the training.

I thought we had a great taper for the Games.

I wish I would have been more involved with the taper for the Games. I mean, I was involved at least in discussions with the other coaches, but I think part of the taper is being there and working with the swimmers. Maybe even when I was there, I wasn't really. There was always so much happening.

How long have you been with Team New York Aquatics?

I joined the team when what became the team really started. In early 1986, I had already decided to go to Gay Games II . . . None of the swimmers here knew I was going to Gay Games. I didn't know anybody who was going [there], but . . . I got a call from somebody wanting to know about using the pool here . . . it turned out to be Eric Miji. He was trying to get the group of swimmers he knew from New York who were going to the Games together to do some training. It was early '86 and we eventually held a few practices up here. Eric had gotten the ball rolling in terms of having a swim team from New York, but I had more coaching experience, so when we got out to San Francisco I helped out the splits and so on. There were only twenty of us in attendance . . .

What did swimming in Gay Games II have to do with your coming out?

I used Gay Games as a vehicle. In 1986, I'd made my plans to go to San Francisco, and I decided I was going to tell [my parents]. They knew I was taking a two week vacation in San Francisco, and I decided to tell them why I was going there.

After San Francisco did Team New York become Team New York Aquatics?

We weren't really together enough to organize workouts. Most of us swam with Red Tide. When we'd meet new people we'd say, "Join Red Tide, that's where most of us are." So, Red Tide had a lot of gay people . . . but we'd get together, the twenty of us who'd gone to San Francisco - you know, Christmas cards, a get-together over

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the summer on Fire Island, maybe one in the winter. We'd see each other at swim meets or at practices with Red Tide. In the fall [of] '89, we knew we wanted to take a large group to Vancouver. That we actually planned. We started to organize our own workouts. People pitched in and we took 48 people to Vancouver. We had achieved a critical mass. Enough people to form our own separate [Empire] chapter. And the team just grew. We adopted the by-laws about six months after Gay Games III.

Who was the first head coach?

Me. I ran as many workouts as I could and I was doing some coaching for Red Tide. Other people were involved, like Chris Packard and Gregg Santo when he still lived here.

Well, let's start with Gay Games IV. When did those duties [as Meet Co-Director, with Charlie Carson] really start?

More than a year out [after Gay Games III]. But all along, from 1990-on I was doing a lot of things. Checking out the meets I went to - "How are they running this meet? What are they doing right? How can we improve it?" Then it was going to the U.S. Masters Swimming conventions. Meeting and talking with people who are running big meets . . . Me getting involved with running meets. Trying out different software. Getting to know local officials, working with timing systems, computerizing meets. Charlie's a much better organizer and marshall-er of human resources. He was extremely valuable as a co-director. The people who were recruited, Like Karen Sauvigne to organize the volunteers - so many people - did a tremendous job.

Is it done yet?

99.9% . . . A few people need to get sent meet results. We're waiting to find out if somebody in Switzerland broke a national record over there. We actually found out last month that one of the relay teams [that] took fourth place had an outside swimmer, a swimmer not from the same team . . . There are two other projects

to get finished, one of which I'm not involved with: the video, Charlie's still working on that. And the surveys. We need to look at that and put together some kind of report for Amsterdam so that they can do better than we did.

Separating the meet from its aftermath, were you pleased with the meet, itself?

Basically, yeah.

What would you change?

Getting the results out on time, and part of that [problem] is from the meet itself. We needed more people involved with running the Games who had my kind of experiences - going to big meets - so that they could have done the things that I did. So that it wouldn't have been just me. That was definitely a weakness. Some

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of the knowledge and awareness had to keep coming from me. That placed a bigger burden on me.

Did you enjoy the meet?

(Laugh. Pause. Laugh.)

I guess, you don't have to answer that.

I'll tell you, the time that I was most elated

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and excited during the meet was the last heat of the men's 800 freestyle on the first day. That was totally thrilling. I mean, we had some glitches in the morning . . . they started one of the women's heats without the (timing) pads in the water . . . But the last heat of the men's 800 was the heat with Bruce Hayes and Matt Clark. I had taken Bruce to the Empire State Games' Trials a few weeks before and I was comfortable with the way he looked in that meet. Set up. But you never really know how good the taper's going to be . . . I mean, I was pretty confident that he was going to get a world record. No matter what difficulties we had before that, here we were at the last heat of the day and Bruce was having a phenomenal swim. About 300 meters into the 800, I knew Bruce had the world record locked up . . . Matt was not as sure a thing and I really wanted it - why settle for just Bruce? Matt had been with us a long time and he'd actually held world records before. Bruce had not. I got out on the deck and I cheered them in the last half and yes, Matt made it. It had happened. In a sense, nothing could go wrong from there. Swimming had started and we had TWO world records, lots of swimmers had participated and there was so much energy. And it was two swimmers from New York, besides. How could it have been better?

You know, I'd already swum my first event - the 800 - and I absolutely understood what a meet director had told me in May. He said, "Swim the long events, it's the only peace you'll have." And it was the only peace I got. Sure, there were a lot of other moments. Yankee Stadium, walking in, that was exciting. Seeing people at the parade on Sunday, but a lot of it is really all a blur. There were always too many questions, there were always - get this done, get that done. Too much happened for me to enjoy it, in that sense. Am I sorry that I did it? No.

How do you think the team survived it? How did you survive it? - I mean, did you learn anything?

I think I learned some things to recommend to who's doing it next. I think it was an awesome experience for the team to have gotten

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so involved in putting this thing together. "Games Can Change The World," there's a lot of truth in that. It's amazing, I didn't discover until the week of the Games that that [statement] had originated with Gail Motyka. Well, Roz Quarto, whom Charlie and I reported to as co-chairs of a sport, gave us a pep talk the night before the Games. She talked about that slogan, and everybody heavily involved in organizing the Games really had to believe it. That's what we were doing there. Changing the world. And I have to think that in some way that we did. I hope it's part of a larger change.

Also, the kind of competition that (Gay Games' Founder, Tom) Waddell envisioned . . . is like the participation medal says. Something like "to do one's best is the ultimate." And that's what we did, and people were educated, on a personal level, people in New York. There was lots of publicity. There was an awareness. It's one of those things that would have made a huge difference to me 25 years ago. I didn't realize I was gay until I was 25. Of course, I was gay be-

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fore that and I should have known it, but there wasn't the publicity, there wasn't the awareness. No one growing up today can fail to know that there are gay people and to be, in the very least, aware that there are differing opinions in the world as to the validity of that as an option. That would have made some kind of difference in my life!

This is a many-part question. What do you hope for, for the team? for yourself? your coaching? swimming?

The team and I are going to the (IGLA) championships in Montreal; we'll go to Amsterdam in 1998. I'd like us to continue to be successful in spite of the difficulties of swimming in New York City. Boston probably has more available pools than New York.

Of course, they only have one workout a week.

I clearly noticed this during the Games; our swim team was the best-organized of any team in any sport. We have some of the best-coached workouts among the gay swim teams in the country. We have a tremendous amount

well. I think it would be good for the team to do a little more outreach into the other boroughs. I mean, we have people from the outer boroughs and beyond, but I have to believe that there are more gay swimmers on Long Island than have evidenced so far. For myself, I need a little distance. I may never be involved with such a big project again in my life. I'm only 36 and that could be very well have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The thing I miss the most right now is breakfast. From half-a-dozen to a dozen people would get breakfast together at 8:30 after workout. Sometimes we'd talk about the Games and sometimes we'd talk about events of the world. Karen Sauvigne knew Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and we talked about her nomination. That kind of thing is the fun of being involved with the team. I want to see the tape of me on network television. The Friday before the Games started, NBC News ran a clip of the team at pool with me coaching and apparently I was on network tv. That; and the participation medal and I'll be able to put this experience behind me.

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of coaching talent on the team. We've always had it. I'd love for us to win Montreal, but people will have to train in August to swim well in October and we've always had trouble organizing over the summer. It would be nice to take a good team to Amsterdam. Partly, I'd like for New York City to accomplish things in swimming - apart from the gay world. I'd like for New York City to do



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