



Kowalski, Daniel (b. 1975)

by Linda Rapp

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Daniel Kowalski in 2009. Image is a film still from a video by youtube contributor MasterGames2009. The video can be found here.

Australia is a country mad for water sports and esteems the athletes who excel at them. Olympic medalist Daniel Kowalski was among that elite group. Only too aware of the value placed on heteronormativity in male sports culture, he remained closeted during his competitive career but found the courage to come out publicly as a gay man in 2010 and began speaking out against homophobia in sports.

The only son and younger child of Tony Kowalski, a drilling engineer, and Penny Kowalski, an occupational therapist, Daniel Kowalski was born in Singapore on July 2, 1975. His father's job brought the family back to Australia when the boy was six.

In his new home in Adelaide, the youngster was soon caught up in the national passion for swimming and was competing in the sport before the age of ten. At fifteen he made his first trip abroad representing his country, swimming to a bronze medal in the 800-meter freestyle at a meet in Monte Carlo in 1989.

Although he did and would continue to do well at shorter distances, Kowalski made a specialty of the 1500-meter event—30 laps of the pool—and hoped to swim it for Australia in the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona. Unfortunately for him, Australia could only send two athletes to the event even though they had three of the best swimmers in the world at that distance. The sixteen-year-old Kowalski was edged out by superstar Kieren Perkins and Glen Housman, the eventual Olympic gold and silver medalists, respectively.

Kowalski's coach, David James, suggested that he could get to the Games by trying out for the team from Canada, where he held dual citizenship because his father was a former resident of British Columbia. "But I would never have done that," Kowalski declared to Jacquelin Magnay of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "Australia is my home."

Later in 1992 Tony Kowalski's employer transferred him to work on a different oil rig, and so the family moved to Queensland, much to the chagrin of South Australia swimming fans, who saw their young star going to an opposing state team.

The following year Kowalski was plagued by poor health, suffering from glandular fever and respiratory-tract infections. As he rebounded from those to prepare for the 1994 Commonwealth Games, he experienced shoulder problems but, with the dogged determination that would come to be recognized as characteristic of him, he persevered to win a silver medal in the 1500 meters and to share the victory podium with his teammates Perkins, the champion, and Housman, who took bronze.

Two weeks later Kowalski was in Rome to represent his country at the World Championships when, on the eve of the competition, he came down with food poisoning. He nevertheless gave his all for Australia and gutted out the grueling long-distance swim, after which he collapsed on the pool deck. His efforts had just won him the silver medal.

In October 1994 Kowalski went to Melbourne to train with Bill Nelson, the coach of the Australian national swimming team, in hopes of improving his performance and his chances of making the Olympic team in 1996 and medaling in Atlanta. In a rather unorthodox and occasionally awkward gambit, Kowalski moved in with Nelson, his wife, and their three children.

The program got off to a bad start. Kowalski's shoulder problems recurred; he came down with chronic hay fever and conjunctivitis; and he was the victim of two accidents, one on a treadmill and the other on the road when a hit-and-run driver knocked him off his bicycle.

It was, Kowalski told W. Smith of the *Courier Mail*, "the worst six months of my life. The thought of quitting, of going back to Mum and Dad on the Gold Coast, came into my mind several times a day."

He persevered, however, maintaining a rigorous training routine in hopes of making the Olympic team. Coach Nelson declared himself impressed by Kowalski's work ethic, telling Rachel Buchanan of the Australian newspaper *The Age*, "Daniel is an athlete dedicated beyond belief—way above average. . . . A lot of times I have seen people with similar levels of talent but they won't do the things it takes."

A stellar performance at the Olympic trials sent Kowalski on his way to the Atlanta Games, where he swam in four events. The Australian squad came in fourth in the 4 x 200-meter freestyle relay, and Kowalski medaled in all of his individual events, taking bronze in the 200- and 400-meter freestyle and silver in the 1500.

Kowalski continued to turn in strong performances in the pool, winning a bronze medal in the 1500 at the 1998 World Championships.

In the same year he became a sports ambassador for the United Nations, in which role he addressed the General Assembly and made visits to refugee camps on the Thai border with Cambodia.

In April 2000 Kowalski had a hand in the victory of his favorite basketball team, the Victoria Titans, in a pivotal semi-final match. From the huge pile of well wishes that coach Brian Goorjian received, Kowalski's, praising "the team unity you have, the incredible work ethic and your commitment to the ultimate goal," was the one that he chose to motivate his team in the pre-game locker-room pep talk. "I just came in there and read his words," Coach Goorjian declared to Grantley Bernard of the Melbourne *Herald Sun*. "He said it perfectly."

Kowalski's commitment to hard work and his staunch support of his teammates made him one of the most popular members of the Australian squad swimming before home fans in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.

Kowalski swam in only one event in Sydney, the 4 x 200-meter freestyle relay. He swam in the preliminary heats that advanced Australia to the finals, but he was on the sidelines, cheering on his teammates, when the home squad claimed victory. Because of his participation on the winning team, Kowalski shared the gold medal, but he still yearned to win one with his own swim.

It was not to be. After the Sydney Games he had two shoulder-reconstruction surgeries, but they did not resolve chronic dislocation problems, and so Kowalski retired in May 2002.

"Obviously I didn't get the full symphony out of me. All elite athletes want to get the best out of themselves and I didn't quite get the best. But I'm past beating myself up. Instead of feeling that I've failed, I'm going to start feeling proud of what I've achieved," he told Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*.

Because of his leadership skills Kowalski was invited to be a mentor to the 2004 Olympic swimming team. He also worked as a television commentator at the Athens Games. He continued his association with the sport by serving for two years on the organizing committee for the 2007 World Championships, which were held in Melbourne.

Following the competition Kowalski was back on television, but not as a sportscaster. Teamed with singer Kate Ceberano, he appeared on the game show *It Takes Two*. Winnings went to charity, and Kowalski chose to benefit Beyond Blue, a foundation dedicated to educating people about depression and its treatment. He and Ceberano did well, staying on the program for seven weeks.

Kowalski next moved to the United States and spent a season as an assistant coach at the University of Wisconsin before returning to Australian television to work as an interviewer at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Ironically, the man who was known for his team spirit and generous support of others felt very much alone himself because of his sexual orientation. The homophobia prevalent in male sports culture only made his situation more difficult.

Kowalski came out publicly as a gay man in April 2010, writing a moving personal story published in *The Age*. In it, he stated, "I finally accepted my sexuality at the end of 2006 following a huge anxiety attack at work. After what were literally years of torment, denial and very, very dark times, I couldn't live a lie to myself any more." He acknowledged having felt depressed and even suicidal during his struggles.

He is appreciative of the support of his family and friends, but he was reluctant to reach out and avail himself of other services. "I am aware there are phone numbers you can call for advice and support," he wrote, "but it was so hard because there seemed to be a lack of accessible role models who were also elite athletes." He mentioned rugby star Ian Roberts and champion diver Matthew Mitcham as the rare Australian sportsmen who had come out as gay.

While acknowledging that "there is still a long way to go," Kowalski expressed cautious optimism for the future because "the world is a little more accepting of homosexuality," adding, "Despite the dark, fearful and lonely times, being able to write this fills me with a sense of freedom, pride and relief."

Of the emotional toll of being closeted, Kowalski stated, "As an elite athlete and career education adviser, day to day I work with athletes promoting balance in their lives and being true to themselves. I can't help but feel like a hypocrite when I haven't been doing it myself" because of the extreme social pressure.

Once he found his voice, however, Kowalski was quick to speak up when Jason Akermanis, a star on the Western Bulldogs team of the Australian Football League, stated his belief that the league was "not ready" for gay players to come out and that such an acknowledgement by an athlete "would be international news and could break the fabric of a club."

Kowalski decried Akermanis's comments, expressing both anger and sadness over them and the potential damage that they could do to an athlete contemplating coming out.

As for himself, he said, "I was scared but since I've come out publicly, my life isn't really any different, but the support has been overwhelming and I wish I could've done it sooner."

Through his example and his advocacy, Kowalski will surely provide the inspiration for other athletes to be able to come out with confidence.

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