



Tewksbury, Mark (b. 1968)

by Linda Rapp

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A publicity photograph of Mark Tewksbury provided by marktewksbury.com. Courtesy www.marktewksbury.com.

Olympic medalist Mark Tewksbury was closeted throughout his competitive swimming career, but since coming out has become an advocate for glbtq rights.

Mark Tewksbury is the adopted son of Roger and Donna Tewksbury. Born February 7, 1968 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, he spent his first five years in that city, but then his father, who worked for an oil company, was transferred to Dallas. During the hot Texas summers, a dip in the pool was a favorite family activity.

Young Mark showed promise as a swimmer. He took lessons and began competing in races for children. When the Tewksburys moved back to Calgary a couple of years later, he continued training and perfecting his skills. By the time he was seventeen, he was among the elite of Canadian swimmers and represented his country at the Pan Pacific Games in 1985.

Swimming was a joy for the young Tewksbury, but his experience at school brought him misery. As early as grade school, he had realized his sexual orientation but found himself confused, conflicted, lonely, and not knowing where to turn for help. In his memoir, *Inside Out* (2006), he recalls those years, "I felt vulnerable and freakish, like I was the only person in the world with this affliction."

As a result of his feelings of alienation, Tewksbury became something of a loner in junior high school. One day he arrived to find that his locker had been vandalized and that homophobic slurs had been written on his notebooks. Devastated, he ran home and waited all day for his parents to return from work.

He told them what had happened but was not yet ready to acknowledge that he was indeed gay. His parents took the matter to the school principal, who side-stepped the issue of homophobia and recommended that Tewksbury transfer to a different school. He did so, but the students there learned of the reason for his transfer, and bullies tormented him. He calls this phase "the beginning of my double life," which meant success and happiness in swimming and trying to avoid cruel taunts at school.

In his solitude and despair, Tewksbury says he "really considered ending it all." On several occasions he took a knife from the kitchen and locked himself in the bathroom. "I would never actually hurt myself," he stated, "but the depths of my self-loathing and desperation in wanting to be something different than what I was pushed me dangerously close."

He found solace in his swimming and his family but was still afraid to reveal his "awful secret" to those closest to him.

The teenager endeavored to mimic straight behavior, dating a few girls, but soon gave up the pretense. He occasionally risked making a pass at another male but did not establish any romantic relationships.

Tewksbury poured his energy into his swimming, becoming increasingly successful. At seventeen, he swam

for Canada in the 1985 Pan Pacific Championships, placing eighth in his specialty, the 100-meter backstroke. He won gold in the event at the next two Pan Pacific games in 1987 and 1989, and took the silver in 1991. In addition, he was part of three silver medal-winning medley relay teams (1987-1991) and earned another silver in the 200-meter backstroke in 1987.

He also found success at the Commonwealth Games, winning double gold in the backstroke and medley relay events in both 1986 and 1990.

Tewksbury went into the 1988 Olympic Games with high hopes. His Canadian relay team won the silver medal, but in the backstroke event he could manage only a fifth-place finish, trailing other swimmers who had adopted a new style of underwater kick that gave them the slim but essential margin for victory.

Since the Olympic Games had stretched into October, Tewksbury could not enroll for the fall term at college. Pentathlete Diane Jones Konihowski approached him about joining a project that she was organizing to have athletes speak at Alberta schools. After taking a "crash course" in public speaking, Tewksbury began making presentations.

He was a hit with the children, and soon he was invited to address a corporate group. His successful appearance led to a lucrative contract that gave him the financial resources he needed to meet the expenses of training for the 1992 Olympics.

Tewksbury was concerned about the so-called "morality" clause in his speaking contracts. He was still not publicly out but was beginning to explore his gay identity.

For about a year he lived with a gay couple from whom he received an "introduction to gay culture." Through them he met gay men and lesbians in his hometown. He was grateful for their encouragement and support. "I would never be entirely alone again as a gay man in Calgary," he wrote.

Tewksbury went to the 1992 Olympics shouldering Canada's hopes once again. In an exciting final race in the 100-meter backstroke, he improved his personal best time by over 1.2 seconds and edged out his rival Jeff Rouse of the United States by six one-hundredths of a second to win the gold medal, setting a world record in the process.

He also swam the first leg of the medley relay for Canada's bronze medal-winning team.

Tewksbury's gold medal was a life-transforming event. It was Canada's first gold medal at the Barcelona games and the first Canadian gold in swimming since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, which the Communist bloc boycotted. Tewksbury's world record-setting win propelled him to the cover of *Time* magazine. He was also named Canada's Male Athlete of the year and was inducted into the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame, the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, and the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

In the lead-up to the Olympics, Tewksbury had appeared on television as a spokesperson for the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, and photos of him, handsome and bare-chested, were on Bugle Boy jeans ads in bus shelters all over the country. His endorsement deals were jeopardized, however, when rumors of his homosexuality began to surface.

In an interview just prior to the Olympics, Tewksbury had attributed his lack of a girlfriend to the time and travel involved in training and claimed to have had a serious relationship as recently as 1989, some five years after his last opposite-sex date.

The following autumn, however, the Ottawa-based magazine *Frank*, a purveyor of celebrity news--or at

least rumor--published an article claiming that Tewksbury had been at a gay bar with Svend Robinson, the first openly gay member of the Canadian parliament. The story was false. When Tewksbury's agents had learned of the magazine's plans, they threatened legal action and were quoted in the article denying that he was gay. The agents had not discussed the question of Tewksbury's sexual orientation with him before making the statement.

Tewksbury was becoming increasingly uncomfortable remaining closeted. In November 1992 he came out to his sister, who had suspected and was very supportive, and his parents, who were shocked and initially distraught. They eventually became more accepting, his mother to a greater degree than his father.

After a brief relationship with another man ended badly, Tewksbury went on a get-away vacation to Australia. Seeing it as a place where he could make a new start, he decided to emigrate and become a citizen.

While there, he attended the University of New South Wales in Sydney, where, in 1995, he completed the political science degree that he had begun at the University of Calgary in 1986. He found a class on sex, power, and politics particularly relevant for him. "It gave me a vocabulary to finally start speaking out with," he said.

An opportunity to return to the Olympic movement as a Canadian representative on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) brought Tewksbury back to his homeland. In 1996 he began work as a member of the Site Selection Committee for the 2004 games. Experiencing the politics of the higher echelons of the Olympic governing body was disillusioning for Tewksbury and would eventually lead him to resign.

Meanwhile, he began a happy relationship with Benjamin Kiss, a Swiss figure skater who had gone on to a career in acting. The couple met in 1997 in Berlin, where Kiss then made his home. For over three years, the two spent as much time together as they could, sometimes in Germany and sometimes in Canada, but in the end they both realized that they were not going to be able to build a life together.

In 1998 Tewksbury lost a lucrative speaking contract with a financial institution because the company's consultant declared him "too gay." Tewksbury, who had gradually been becoming more open, decided that it was time for him to abandon the closet completely. He planned to come out publicly in a one-man show, *Out & About*, that would also be a fundraiser for a Toronto AIDS hospice.

Before the show took place on December 15, 1998, two reporter friends of his, Patty Young of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* and Pamela Wallin of the CBC television network, approached him about doing coming-out stories. Eventually he agreed to their requests, with the proviso that they withhold the information until after he had done his show. Both agreed, but the editorial board of the *Globe and Mail* decided to put Tewksbury's story on the front page of the December 15 morning edition.

A brief media furor ensued, and in its wake a spate of letters, mostly supportive. Tewksbury felt relief that he had finally identified himself publicly as a gay man, but, he wrote, "the journey of coming out, declaring who you are and what you stand for, never really stops."

Part of what Tewksbury stood for was integrity in sports, and by 1999 he "had a complete crisis of faith in the leadership of amateur sport," including the IOC, from which he resigned that February. With a number of others, he then founded Olympic Athletes Together Honorably (OATH), a group dedicated to reforming the IOC to eliminate cronyism and a "lack of real accountability." A 2000 IOC Commission took note of the OATH report and agreed with some of its conclusions, but, wrote Tewksbury, "many recommendations were implemented, with just enough adoptions to have the appearance of change without ultimately changing anything."

In 2001 Tewksbury became a member of the Montreal tourism committee bidding for the 2006 Gay Games. Although Montreal apparently had the nod, sports politics once again intervened, and after disagreements between the Federation of Gay Games and the Montreal host committee, the Games were awarded to Chicago instead.

After an acrimonious parting of the ways with the Gay Games Federation, Tewksbury co-founded the Gay and Lesbian International Sports Association (GLISA), which became the sponsor of the first World Outgames, beginning July 25, 2006 in Montreal. In addition to sports competitions in 35 disciplines, the Outgames feature musical and dance activities, and are also the forum for the International Conference on LGBT Human Rights.

The timing of the inaugural Outgames was controversial, with its opening only four days after the completion of the 2006 Gay Games in Chicago. Most amateur athletes cannot afford the time and expense required to participate in two competitions so close together. Outgames organizers decided to avoid further conflict by scheduling their next event for 2009 in Copenhagen instead of maintaining a quadrennial schedule.

In late 2004 Tewksbury was shocked to receive an e-mail in which the long-ago trasher of his school locker confessed but claimed--honestly, Tewksbury believed--that he and the other boys who took part did not realize at the time that he was actually gay. It was "just some guys being jerks," wrote the correspondent. Tewksbury accepted that the act was "just a stupid prank," but, he wrote, "that stupid prank almost killed me."

In retrospect, Tewksbury considered the painful experience pivotal, the first step down a long path that took him from feelings of shame to self-acceptance and then on to pride and the determination to work for glbtq rights.

In 2006, as part of the Toronto Pride Festival, Tewksbury was one of a handful of Canadians honored for having demonstrated extraordinary commitment to queer life.

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