

THE EVIDENCE DOESN'T LIE

JAMES CAMPBELL Page 80

THIS MACHO THING IS GETTING A BIT HAIRY

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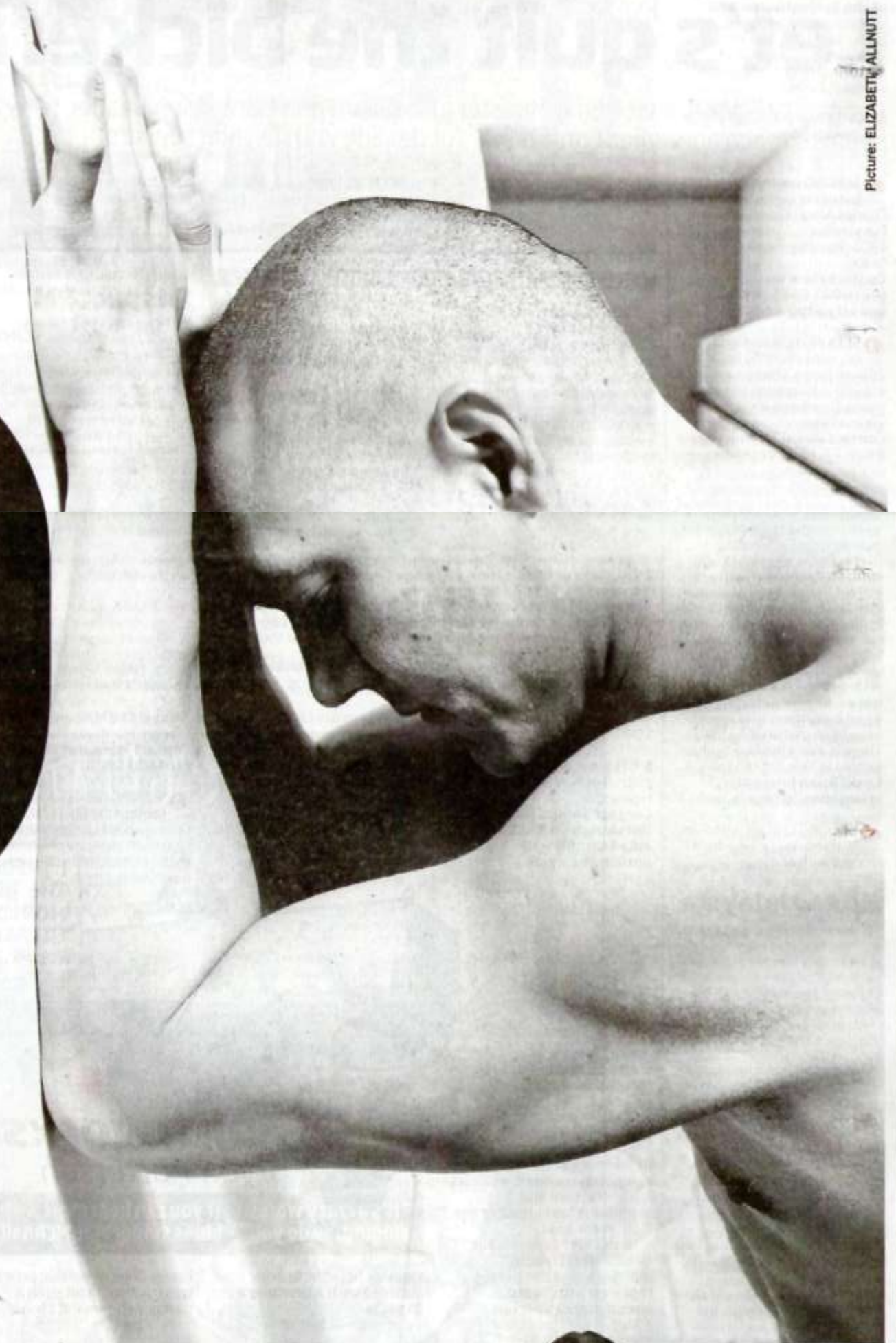
Agenda

FROM HERO TO

0 ZER

World records, Olympic medals, hero status ... swimmer Geoff Huegill was the toast of Australia. But in 2005 the glory had faded and he hit rock bottom - drinking, taking drugs, even contemplating suicide. Fast forward six years and Skippy is happily married and awaiting the birth of his first child. As he prepares for an Olympic comeback, he writes about those dark days.

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Picture: ELIZABETH ALLNUTT

NO LENIENCY FOR DRUG DRIVERS



MIRANDA DEVINE
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I was in a downward spiral and powerless to do anything about it

I MADE the final in Athens on talent alone and people were justifiably upset with me. I just didn't know where to go at the time. I carried a fear of failure that prevented me from giving my all. It had been too hard to refocus after Sydney, and I was only going through the motions in the lead-up to Athens.

Competitive swimming was still in my blood, but I was clearly losing motivation and was completely unable to make the transition to a productive life outside the pool. I had few skills beyond

swimming, certainly nothing anyone would want to pay a salary for. Pretty soon after Athens everything seemed to fall apart and that next year, 2005, would be a total waste of time.

Training programs for Olympic athletes usually work in four-year cycles. The year after an Olympics is when a lot of athletes take their break and have a rest. Then, with three years to go, they start building into it. Two years out, they're completely focused. If I was going to stay in swimming and move from Queensland, the only two coaches I wanted to work with were Grant Stoelwinder and Jim Fowlie, but neither of them was available. Grant was in Western Australia and Jim had gone to Canada to coach. This added to my uncertainty, but I decided to come down to Sydney anyway.

In Sydney, there was a lot of partying going on and swimming wasn't my main priority. I'd train for two or three weeks, often with the guys at Sydney University, then I'd have a month off. I couldn't go on like that. The writing was on the wall and I finally called it quits, walking away from a sport in which I had been a dual Olympic silver and bronze medallist, five-time world champion, eight-time world record-holder and five-time Commonwealth Games gold medallist. I was 26.

I was still doing some sponsorship activities, but I almost started to see myself becoming a glorified promotional model.

There wasn't much substance to some of the publicity gigs I was asked

to do — just a logo, a photographer and a smile. As long as my name was still being mentioned there was the possibility of an income, but with every new Games there's a new crop of star athletes. It's not rocket science to work out that the major sponsorship money goes to these bright new achievers. These are often four-year deals, when the next group is due to come through.

I had stepped away from the pool and wasn't going to Beijing, so by 2005 my sponsorships were dropping away with few prospects for the future.

I was living pretty fast and needed the income, but at the same time I couldn't help thinking there's got to be a better way than just turning up and smiling for the camera. I always tried to be professional, but I felt some of this work completely lacked soul.

It didn't take long for me to hit rock bottom. By 2005 my party life had given me a drinking problem, financial worries and I was experiencing depression. I also started having suicidal thoughts.

If I wasn't catching up on a lifetime of sleep in 2005, I was either drunk or off my face, partying away what little money I had left. I had no direction or goal in life. I was ruining the reputation I had worked for in the pool and was letting down my friends and the few remaining sponsors I had.

I STARTED to resent swimming: it had taken over my life, demanded all these sacrifices and left me with nothing. I hated myself and there were times when I thought I should just take the easy way out.

I thought I might be able to improve things by travelling overseas, so I formed a plan: I would compete in the Commonwealth Games trials in March 2006, and if I didn't qualify I'd go overseas in April. I probably shouldn't have even swum in the trials — you didn't need to be a genius to know how that would turn out.

I left Australia and travelled up through Asia, spending some time with Mum's family in Thailand.

I eventually made my way over to Europe and spent the summer of 2006 travelling France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Italy

BEFORE



and Switzerland and so on.

I visited some of the cities I'd been to as a swimmer. Travelling as a member of a swimming team had been highly regimented. Unlike touring as a representative footballer or cricketer, there's a total ban on alcohol and you rarely tasted the local food or saw the sights. The only sight I got to see was the corridor from the hotel to the pool and back again, and maybe whatever was within walking distance around the hotel.

I could go to Barcelona as I've been to Barcelona, but I couldn't describe it or tell anyone what I liked about it. I wanted to go back to some of these places and enjoy what they really had to offer, including the food, which is one of the joys of travel.

I certainly reconnected with food. I learnt to appreciate it early in life through Mum's cooking. I love how food brings people together and I sure had a knack for over-indulging. I was already becoming overweight and starting to get comments from punters in the street as well as from the media when they spotted me.

At 188cm and approaching 130kg, I wasn't hard to spot. I was eating and drinking to mask my depression, but it was just a joke to some people. I had hoped that going away would be a release valve, where I could

do whatever I wanted and not worry about the consequences or public exposure. But even overseas I'd go to the remotest place in the remotest country and still find Aussie backpackers. You think you're anonymous, and then some Aussie comes up and asks, "Aren't you Grant Huegill, the swimmer?"

I travelled widely and had a good time, at least for as long as the money lasted.

I enjoyed being away, but I can't say it made me feel more at home in the world. When I came home after less

still wasn't in a good place. I remained trapped because I was so ineffective in my life outside the pool.

those depressive thoughts, then I'd have to deal with the consequences of writing myself off — spending money I didn't have, behaving badly, letting people down and burning bridges with friends. I was in a downward spiral and powerless to do anything about it.

When it comes to putting on the swimmers and goggles and racing someone from one end of the pool to the other, I'm your man — I've been one of the best in the world. How could I be so good in one area of my life and yet be in shambles in relationships, self-image, and trying to produce an income. I struggled to put a

improvement, like with Ken's training logbooks. This was the sort of certainty that surrounded everything I did in my life as I counted down swimming one event after another. Everything was calibrated and catered for, like living in a bubble. But that's not true of life in the real world, which is full of uncertainty and promises nothing. I was struggling with the transition. I was lost.

ALSO began experiencing grief I'd suppressed about my set grief aside, but now I had nothing to hold it at bay. I had no idea how to manage myself at 12 and I wasn't much better in my mid-20s. I discovered a lot of painful memories and now I was getting to experience them as vividly as if they had happened yesterday.

I was also blaming everyone else for the poor choices I had made and for all the painful circumstances that were beyond anyone's control. I thought the world owed me something, including a living, in return for all the sacrifices I'd made. I even blamed the world for my dad dying, leaving me to grow up in a family that wasn't my own. I carried a huge chip on my shoulder. It may not have been the model of a traditional family, but I had their support, my coach, the squad and the wider community. Self-pity blinded me to that.

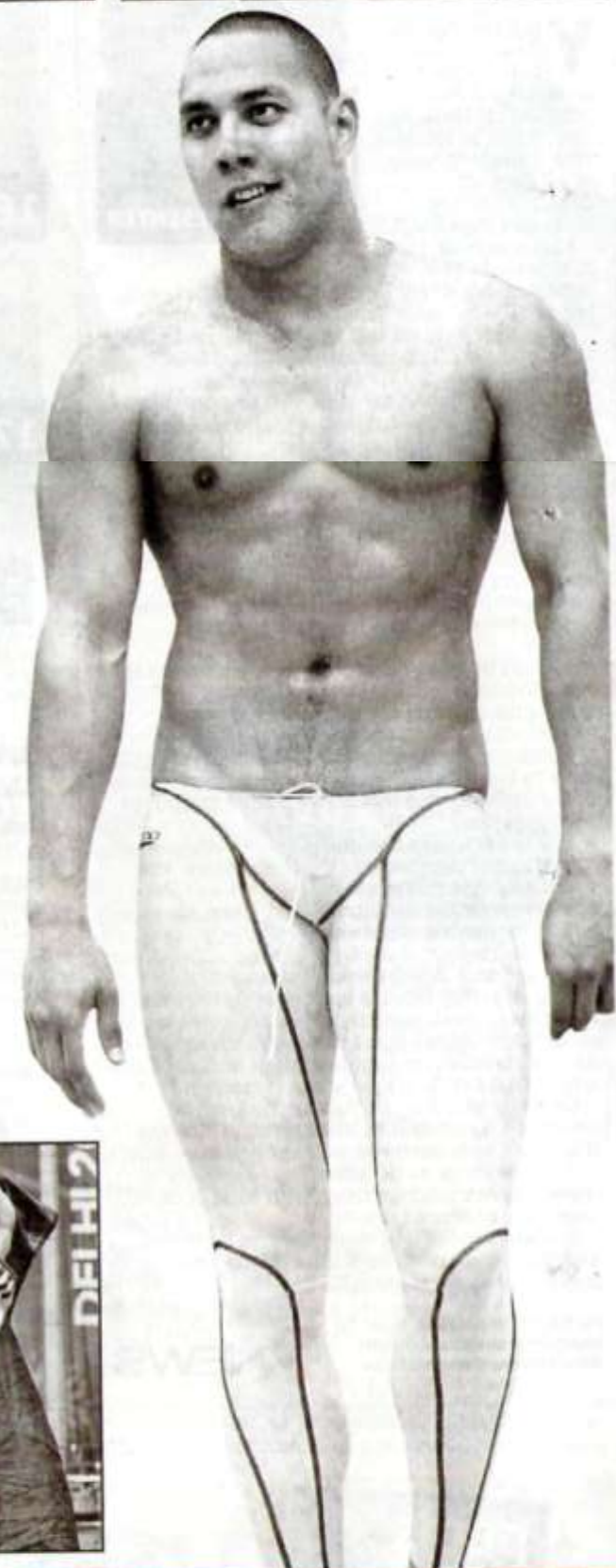
"I thought the world owed me something, including a living, in return for all the sacrifices I'd made"

The usual cycles kicked in again — plenty of alcohol and party drugs. I was arriving home from clubbing at 4am, the hour I used to be getting up and training. I now had debt collectors to deal with. I'd eat out for most lunches and dinners, and was grazing constantly throughout the day.

My weight was a burden. I'd returned home 45kg heavier than my 90kg swimming weight, with a waist measurement of 111cm. I'd beat myself up because I wasn't achieving anything, then I'd write myself off to try to block

simple structure together to let me function in the real world, and I spent a lot of time beating myself up, trying to comfort myself in unhealthy ways.

The years of serious swimming had hardwired me to a complete system, structured to provide immediate feedback to my every action and performance. Virtually everything I did was evaluated. My good performances were rewarded and praised. When I fell short, I was met with encouragement and suggestions for



AFTER



Rollercoaster ride: (top) Huegill took refuge in eating and stacked on the kilos when things started to go pear-shaped; (above far right) Huegill in better shape; (above) Huegill with pregnant wife Sara; and (right) winning the gold medal in the 100m butterfly final at the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi last year.

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