



TOTAL IMMERSION

In the closing days of his LA exile, Ian Thorpe stepped into the GQ frame for some freestyle reflection. For a man embroiled in a hardcore training regime and a trial-by-media, he is one talkative, straight-shooting guy. Photographs Nick Leary. Fashion editor Grant Pearce. Words Nick Scott.

White brushed cotton Henley by Polo Ralph Lauren; black wool pinstripe pant and braces by Ralph Lauren Purple Label from a selection at Polo Ralph Lauren.



White cotton shirt, black wool tuxedo pant, braces, all by Ralph Lauren. Purple Label from a selection at Polo Ralph Lauren. Speedmaster 18K Rose-Gold Chronograph, \$1600, by Omega.

IT was the month that Bill Clinton denied offering a puff of his cigar to “that woman”. Savage Garden’s “Truly, Madly, Deeply” was showing off Australia’s soapier side from the lofty summits of music charts around the world.

While John Howard jogged the home straight of his first term, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party beat an ultimately doomed path of hatred to universal recognition as the Fourth Reich. Lara Bingle, the Olsens and The Arctic Monkeys were all yet to reach their teens.

It’s bordering on gobsmacking that nearly nine years have passed since that January evening in 1998 when Ian Thorpe, now still only 24, dived into the collective national consciousness by out-touching then-and-forever-after rival Grant Hackett in the 400m freestyle at the World Championships in Perth. That night, Thorpe — at 15 years and three months — became the youngest ever male world champion in any swimming event. As he tore through the pool, it was as though some rogue strand of DNA from the time before man crawled out of the sea had lurked dormant in this amphibious adolescent’s family for millions of generations. Many assumed that Thorpe’s 190cm frame would become less conducive to the sport the older he got; then came nine Olympic medals, five of them gold, along with world records in 200m and 400m freestyle, and they had to admit otherwise.

Such illustrious sporting careers don’t come without a few blips, bloopers and skirmishes. For Thorpe, there was the air-guitaring incident, when he strummed the chimerical Strat after pipping the US in the 4x100m freestyle relay at the Sydney Olympics (an allusion to American Gary Hall Jr’s pre-race vow to smash the Australians “like guitars”). There was the full-body swimsuit affair, an unengaging barney that had more to do with the humdrum politics of sponsorship than the spicier business of performance enhancement. There have been the coach-splits, form-dips and disqualifications that are all just part of the package for any contemporary top-level athlete.

But largely, the media and the public have sung Thorpe’s praises in unison: sometimes a little too sycophantically for his liking. “The legend created around me is not realistic,” he tells *GQ* when we catch up with him at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, Los Angeles. “It’s like this kind of superhero story that just isn’t accurate. I know I’m good at swimming, but I’m not as good as I’m portrayed. I’m also not that pleasant — yeah, I’m a nice enough guy, but there are athletes who are a lot closer to perfect than I am.”

What about the lavish praise for his performances in the pool? “If people can make comparisons and assessments with numbers, fine; but when people say [affects a dramatic movie-voiceover tone] ‘He’s the greatest swimmer ever’, I think, ‘well, let’s try and analyse that and ask, Is he really?’. I don’t think I am; there’s a lot of people I’d put on the list before me. Even when they talk specifics — how much I train, my height, my reach in the pool — I think, ‘Hang on, I can’t do that.’” >

The last 10 months have not been easy for Ian Thorpe. First there was the physical mishaps — bronchitis combined with glandular fever and a broken hand, caused by slipping over in his Sydney home, that required five screws and a titanium plate — that prevented his participating in the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne earlier this year. Then, in August, having left Australia in search of relative anonymity (“Aside from the climate, the facilities and having a lot of friends there, people in America generally don’t know what I look like”), Thorpe found himself under intense scrutiny for his weight, eating habits and lifestyle over in California. “A lot of it was fabricated,” he says. “It came out of nothing and exploded, but the press still carried on trying to outdo themselves and each other. It’s all about who can make the best story possible.”

There has also, recently, been an unwelcome return of those persistent bouts of speculation — no, let’s make that antiquated, parochial squawking — over his sexuality; so much so that he found himself in front of the Foxtel cameras in August in a bid to dispel this and other rumours. (“People will tell you black and blue that I am gay,” Thorpe told the reporter, “but there is no basis for what they are saying. It’s no big deal because that doesn’t affect any part of my life.”) Does he find the public fascination astonishing? “When I did that interview, I sat there thinking, ‘Morally, this is rubbish’. I toyed with the idea of pulling the interview, because I shouldn’t have to answer those questions; it isn’t anything I need to address. I can say something and some will believe me, some won’t, so what’s the point of even answering the question?”

The scrutiny carried on in Los Angeles,

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to the extent that Thorpe chose to train in elite schools and colleges surrounded by intense security operations. Following a hairy incident reminiscent of Princess Di’s last waking moments, he even resorted to taking advanced driving lessons to help him elude the paparazzi. What makes him, in particular, such pap-fodder? “I think I’m just a really good target,” he says. “People pick on me and I don’t bite back. I’ve had a history of being nice to people.” Supporting that last notion, he even manages to imply that there’s a touch of altruism to the public fixation: “I know it stems out of an admiration for what I’ve done in the past, and it’s really good to know you have that kind of support — even if it is, ‘Is he doing the right thing, is this right, have we lost him, what’s he doing?’”

“Seriously, though, people need to get some perspective. Look at the significant things some people in Australia are doing without getting recognition they really deserve. It’s just really bad form.” The debate over commercial versus moral newsworthiness is nothing new — it will rage to the day that our Doomsday asteroid is nudged onto page two by Suri Cruise’s debut brush with Botox — but it’d take a hardened newsroom hack not to admit that Thorpe has a right to rant. Some within the domestic media must live with the fact that they bullied, conjectured and extrapolated Australia’s highest achieving Olympian into an emotional cul-de-sac from which lesser a man

might never have escaped. As the invasion crept further into his family’s lives this year, he considered quitting the sport on a daily basis.

The Ian Thorpe we encountered is either a master self-delusionist, or a man who has tussled with the relentless prying and prattling — along with his own innate sensitivity — and come out on top. Our money’s firmly on the latter. He banters happily about our photographer’s shock on seeing him and realising he wouldn’t, after all, have to spend hours Photoshopping away the physiological effects of pizza and cola; he merrily contrasts the thin-slice views the public have of his ostensibly glamorous life with the quotidian, chlorine-and-clock-watching reality of his existence during this, the crescendo of his most taxing physical programme to date (despite the odd indulgence such as the protein burgers that sparked one of the mini-furores in August).

And this is where you’ll find Thorpe at his most animated these days — his new approach to training, employed to reach peak fitness and weight (he estimates he is currently just over his 96-101kg ideal) for the World Championships in March and the Beijing Games, his third Olympics, in 2008. “Before, when I trained, I’d push myself too far,” he says. “Now, I assess what my body can take, build up this optimal level of health then see how much I can try and destroy that then bounce back at it.” His new path is also more analytical. “I used to think about everything but swimming when I trained — I could solve every problem imaginable during those endless hours in the pool. I’d sing songs. Occasionally I’d think, ‘Is my stroke OK? Yeah, fine.’ But now, I’m analysing what’s happening every second; where the water is in

relation to a part of my body, how my stroke feels, how my kick is interrelating with the front of my stroke, if I make a modification here how’s it going to change the exit of my arm there.”

The regime comes under the tutelage of self-described ‘aquatics specialist’ Milt Nelms, partner of Australian swimming legend Shane Gould. He originally trained with better-known coach Dave Salo, but changed mentors when Salo’s US squad, then training for the National Championships, started getting media-mobbed each time they left the pool.

He has no regrets about the switch. “After the session, I’m so drained, mentally, but it’s a really dynamic way of training,” he says. “It’s going *swimmingly*. Sorry.” Beyond the forthcoming competitions, Thorpe doesn’t rule out continuing with swimming — at the ripe age of 25 — but will put more time into Fountain For Youth (www.iant.horpesfountainforyouth.com.au), his charity that tackles the pitiful state of health and education among indigenous children. “People don’t get what is happening in Australia,” he says. “That there are people who are more impoverished and unhealthy than anyone else on this planet, including Africa, South America, Latin America; these are some of the poorest people on the planet, and this is inexcusable in our country.”

Asking a sportsman what they’ll be doing by 50 — alluding to his career mortality, effectively — can be about as tactless (and unproductive) as asking a rock star the same thing. But Thorpe is happy to be drawn. “I’m getting comfortable with having absolutely no clue where I want to be in the future,” he says. “I reckon by 40 I’ll have a family and children, probably in Sydney. I’ll find the right thing. Other than that I’ll be doing the same as now.” He smiles wryly. “Partying and eating burgers.” **GQ**

The Hitlist

Lesser men than Ian Thorpe have been caught in battles with the media. GQ revisits the sporting nadirs that have made tabloid history.

Shane Warne

Phone sex, serial shagging, diet pills, too many pies, divorce — the Sheik of Tweak has been tabloid fodder virtually since the day he unleashed his first ‘zooter’.

The Headline: “New sex scandal hits Warne” announced *The Sydney Morning Herald* (May 8, 2006), after the newly single Shane was snapped romping with two models and a blow-up doll in a London hotel room. **The Response:** Warne didn’t directly comment on his well-publicised threesome (technically a foursome, really), yet when questioned about how he felt after his narrow win playing for Hampshire against Middlesex that May, Warne bared his true feelings to the *Herald*: “If I’m honest, I’m tired out.” And who could blame him?

Jason Akermanis

Bottle-blond Brisbane Lions goal-kicking machine ‘Aker’ was dumped after he wrote in a newspaper column that there was “a less than five per cent chance” he’d stay with the club. Coach Leigh Matthews suggests that he’s not a team player; the club sanctions Akermanis and the battle continues headlong into 2007.

The Headline: “Lions Refuse To Bite On Aker Outburst” — *The Age* (Sept 22, 2006)

The Response: “They don’t want me there and I don’t want to be there,” Akermanis sniffs. Enough said.

Mike Tyson

Ear chomping, leg biting, wife bashing, rape charges, spending way too much time with Don King, dropping several fortunes during 40 years on (and off) the planet — Iron Mike’s crimes and misdemeanours are as hard to beat as the man in his pugilistic prime.

The Headline: “Tyson Hates Fight Game, Keeps Playing” — *Chicago Tribune*

The Response: “I truly hate fighting,” Tyson admits in the same newspaper story. “I’ve got a bad taste in my mouth.” Well, it’s probably a chunk of Evander Holyfield’s ear, Mike.

Eric Cantona

While at his peak with Manchester United in 1995, Frenchman Cantona was red carded. The unhappy forward decided to practice some martial arts on a mouthy fan on the way to the sheds. He cops community service, a hefty fine and a ban for the kung fu kick seen all around the world.

The Headline: “Cantona Banned Over Attack On Fan” — www.bbc.co.uk

The Response: “When the seagulls follow the trawler, they think sardines will be tossed into the sea” was Cantona’s enigmatic take on the tabloid feeding frenzy.

John Hopoate

The one-time representative rugby league star, late of Manly-Warringah, was dumped in 2001 when he introduced a new tactic into the manly game, namely inserting a digit (or two) into an opponent’s backside during a tackle.

The Headline: “Hoppa Gives League the Finger” — *Workers Online*

The Response: “I saw the photo of the tackle in the paper and, yes, it looks bad. But there are always two sides to every story.” — Hopoate’s Mormon bishop, Will Wolfgramm, keeps the faith.

— **Jeff Apter**



Black cut velvet jacket, white cotton shirt, black wool pant, all by Giorgio Armani from a selection at Giorgio Armani.

Grooming Chantal Moore.

Ian Thorpe shot in the Presidential Suite at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, Los Angeles (www.beverlyhillsluxuryhotels.com). GQ flew from Sydney to LA with Qantas.

