

Travelling past stereotypes

Triathlete finds his niche in the community

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

In Alabama, in the late 1940s and '50s, if you were a boy in a Southern Baptist family of athletes and sports fans, a boy who just happened to like boys, you had better like a few other things, too—running, swimming, cheering at college football games.

Fortunately, Jim Gambrell did. For years, a passion for athletics helped seal shut Gambrell's closet door. But when he finally came out in Portland in 1979, he discovered that gay liberation hadn't quite set free some of the stereotypes about gay men and sports.

Profile

Gambrell, recently returned from Gay Games III in Vancouver, British Columbia, is happy to report that the news has changed. "Gay" and "athlete" can now co-exist in the same sentence, the same human being, without provoking brows wrinkled in disbelief. Seventy-two hundred athletes proved that in August, Gambrell was among them.

With his compact frame, rusty-gray beard and impish expressions, Gambrell looks more like a thoughtful leprechaun than a man who recently participated in both a marathon and a triathlon during the same week.

This morning, his voice is raspy from working all weekend on a catering job in a refrigerated truck, but a soft Alabama drawl weaves through the gravelly sound. At 49, athletics still beat a vigorous pulse through Gambrell's life; he runs, bicycles across town to work as catering supervisor at Jake's, and swims at PCC, where he pursues courses in Hispanic art and literature.

This, after all, is Portland in the 1990s, not Alabama half a century ago. Walking softly, with his gentle grin, Jim Gambrell has traveled past stereotypes to a more spacious arena.

"Eight years ago, for Gay Games I, I went as a participant. I've always been a runner, a swimmer. But I was really afraid. I was intimidated by the idea that it was going to be very competitive.

"The most exciting thing was to get there and find out that the point was participation. I've noticed that there's larger applause for the last person than for the first person—or at least, equal. Which makes you feel good.

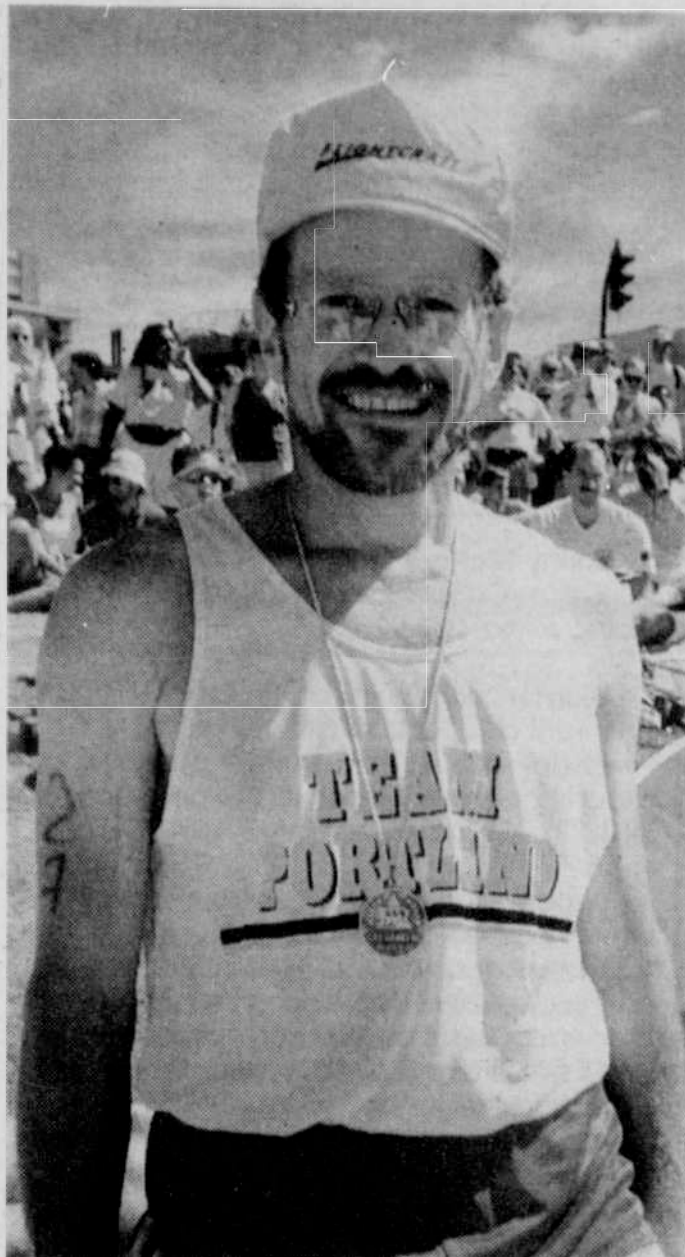
"So four years later I went back and I entered every event I could possibly get in. This time my goal was to get as many friends involved as I could.

"This was the most exciting one. There were a lot of people from Portland there. About 140 officially, and 10 or 20 more who didn't know about [Team Portland]. I did swimming, triathlon and marathon.

"I grew up in Alabama. My family, my uncles and my mother, were always participants in athletics. The family has always been sports fans. You had to be. It was just automatic. When you're really young, and you know you're gay, being a sports fan is something you have to do to satisfy family and friends. It kept me in the closet for a long, long time.

"Then I discovered the gay community and became a part of it, and I put all that [athletics] aside. I thought, 'I don't have to do that anymore. Now I can be whatever everybody else is.'

"Later I fell back on—what did I do best and know best? Sports. I started discovering people in the community like myself. I found a



Jim Gambrell

PHOTO BY RENEE LACHANCE

"When you go to the games . . . you're running that marathon with another 200 people, it's like running with a family. It's like everybody in that race is related to you."

— Jim Gambrell

niche within a niche.

"When you go to the Games, all the time you're running that marathon with another 200 people, it's like running with a family. It's like everybody in that race is related to you. You're so proud of the person who broke the record and finished. And you're so proud of that grandmother who came in last.

"I run with two friends of mine. We have this kind of secret competitiveness that we don't want each other to know about—it's sort of who can beat whom. But it's all in fun.

"A few years ago, these friends decided I hadn't really run until I'd run a marathon. I used to say, 'Marathons are dangerous. They're bad for the body.' Then one day I decided—they gave me such a hard time—that I was going to do it. I had a better time than they had ever had.

"Then it was—who can make it to the Boston Marathon first? Then—who can participate in the most marathons? Then one day I said, 'Wait a minute. Where does this end?' So you stop. We talk about that a lot, the competition. It's always in there. Our whole capitalist system builds that in us. You can fight it all you want to, but you still compete. You just do.

"I try to run about three days a week. I bicycle to work as much as possible. I try to swim two or three times a week. I take classes at PCC when I can, just for fun. My interests go in a thousand different directions. I'm always finding something new.

"I take Spanish, Hispanic literature, Hispanic art. That's just my interest for now; it'll change. But the athletics are something I'll always do. Some of it is for health. Just knowing that I feel better and I can eat more. It

keeps me in with this group of friends that do that.

"I've been here 11 years. I go home at least every other year at Christmas. I don't miss it. I sometimes miss some of the people. I moved back there once, but I know I could never live there again.

"There's a certain stratification of society [in Alabama]. It's not just black and white. It's—are you a member of the right country club? Do you go to the right church? It's really stratified. You have to fit in.

"I go back there, and all they talk about is who got into which club, and who knows whom. Several friends of mine back there, I used to think were the most open-minded people in the world. One of them joined the Peace Corps. He marched with Martin Luther King. I go back now, and see that he's not as open-minded as I thought he was. I'm the one who's grown.

"I came out in 1979, when I moved back here. It was almost immediate, like okay, now I'm home. I can do what I want to do. I'm not as much a part of the community as I used to be. I was active in the Portland Town Council, on the Gay Pride committee one year. But my interests went other places.

"My goal is to [continue athletics] until I pass away. If I get too old to run or swim, I'll officiate. The triathlon's my favorite. It's three different sports; it seems to draw a really diverse group.

"When we marched into the closing event, the triathletes got together and all dressed alike. We all wore our swimsuits, our running shoes and bicycle helmets. When the music started, the group of about 100 of us all danced to the music. By the time I got ready to go, I really felt like a part of this group.

"I was one of the oldest people in the group. I'm 49. I tend to feel like an outsider because of age sometimes. But we had a 65-year-old swimmer on our team who won every event he was in. He was the one people rallied around.

"Another thing I notice with the Gay Games—men and women are closer together. Outside our community, the stereotype is that we don't get along at all. It's not true. One of the first things I noticed when they started the PAL program was the number of women who came. They didn't have to. It wasn't their problem. I wonder how many of our organizations would have survived without women? They wouldn't have.

"Our Frontrunners Club had to struggle at one time to have 10 or 15 members. Now there are 30 or 40. Maybe some of them are into their bodies for cosmetic reasons. But some of them are not. People are concerned about what they eat; there seems to be a much more healthy consciousness.

"A lot of people I know who go to bars say things aren't as much fun as they used to be. I keep hearing that. Well, it depends on what you call fun. I guess I have a moralistic background that goes back to the old Southern Baptist thing, but I found a certain amount of disgust in certain things I saw when I came out. At the same time, I was glad to see all this energy in the community, if they could band together in some way.

"At the Games, with 7200 athletes, that energy was there. They all were focussed. They all were proud. I think we changed the attitude of the average person in Vancouver.

"One day we were on our way to the stadium and found this man walking down the middle of a busy six-lane highway. He was disoriented. We got him to the hospital. All the people at the hospital were stunned that six gay people from Portland were helping this man when nobody from Vancouver would give him the time of day.

"I kept hearing things like that. A few more minds were opened; a few more people thought, 'Oh, they're not so bad.' If we can have the Games in other cities like that, we can change the stereotypes."



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