

Ian Thorpe

“It was harder coming out to my family”

He found success as an Olympian while a teenager, but away from the pool, Ian Thorpe struggled with rumours about his sexuality. Now, he’s campaigning for marriage equality and striving for balance in his active life, as he tells **Sheree Mutton**.



Ian, aged 15, with parents Margaret and Ken after winning gold at the World Championships in Perth.

his spectacular speed in the pool. Yet, outside the pool, Ian was facing intense speculation about his sexuality, continually being asked to either confirm or deny that he was gay, speculation that no teenager should have to endure, he says.

“I think it’s an inappropriate question for anyone, at any time and at any age, especially a child,” says Ian, now 34. “Had I had a little bit more time to work it out for myself, I may have been an ‘out’ competing athlete. I don’t know if I would have been or not, but I felt because of the tone, I was accused of being gay, so I only ever thought of this as really a negative thing; that there must be something wrong with me. So that’s the part that probably prevented me.”

The mounting pressure on Ian to confirm his sexuality continued for more than a decade and began to overshadow his swimming feats. Today, he acknowledges that his reticence and denials may not have been the best option. “Once you’ve started down this path and denied it, you continue and you don’t want to give someone who’s prying into your life the opportunity to tell them,” he says. “So, it was [about] working »

At just 17, Ian Thorpe became the most successful athlete at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and, in that same moment, a household name right across the country – an incredible feat for any teenager. With three gold medals and two silver proudly displayed around his neck, the boy from Milperra in Sydney’s south-west, was dubbed Thorpedo for

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GROOMING BY SAMANTHA POWELL. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHEE. NEWSPIX

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out what would work for me and how I wanted to come out.”

In 2014, Ian confirmed he was gay during a TV interview with Michael Parkinson. He says life has become much easier since then. “I’m a lot happier and content in myself. I didn’t realise how weighted down I felt with my sexuality. I thought it wasn’t a big deal and I didn’t feel like it was until I came out and went, ‘Wow, I actually feel like I’m a teenager again’. I just moved home, I was re-exploring Sydney and that’s how I felt – everything felt new.”

The five-time Olympic gold medallist says he made the decision to come out not only for himself, but to help others. “I was told by someone that the reason why it’s important to come out is because you become an example that makes it easier for someone else who may be in a more difficult situation than you,” says Ian. “I wish I’d heard that earlier. I don’t know if it would have changed anything, but it’s good to have the opportunity to live your own authentic life – exactly how you want to.”

Yet, behind closed doors, Ian says he felt anxious about having “that” conversation with his family. “It was harder to come out to my family than what it was for me to come out to the rest of the wider world,” he recalls. “I wasn’t sure what their reaction would be, but it was fantastic. It was that ‘we love you’ and ‘we don’t mind’.

“I come from a conservative family, so I didn’t know that was going to be the response. I’ve had friends that had seen how I’ve almost come in a circle, being so deeply in the closet to then being out front and centre.”

Ian says he never expected to become a poster boy for marriage equality in



FROM FAR LEFT: The promising swimmer in 1996; with one of the two gold medals he won at the Athens Olympics in 2004; and looking dapper with boyfriend Ryan Channing last year.



Australia, but coming out publicly served as a platform. “The reason why I’m so actively involved in the marriage equality campaign is that I don’t want young people to feel how I did – that the way they feel about someone else isn’t equal to other people. It should

feel the same and it is the same,” he says. “Australians actually, traditionally, have led on issues about LGBTIQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer] and we really have fallen behind in this area. We’ve watched as the rest

of the Western world and other places have legislated for changes in this.”

In his autobiography, *This Is Me*, Ian detailed his struggle with alcohol abuse and depression, which at times left him contemplating suicide. Yet he says he did the best he could. “Hindsight is a great thing. There’s plenty I’d consider changing, but you have to go with the circumstances that you find yourself in. You can only be as prepared for them as what your experience has been up

until that point, so you learn along the way. And you’re learning a lot about yourself, the world and the sport on the run, and there is no time, really, to look back. I worked damn hard at my career to get the results I did, so I guess I would not want to change too much of it.”

Since retiring, Ian has thrown his support behind the next generation, helping to mentor young swimmers, such as the 2016 Olympic 100m freestyle champion Kyle Chalmers. Ian says it has aided his transition into retirement, which is testing for any elite athlete. “It’s getting a balance in your life and, you know, that can be a difficult thing when you’ve gone from a life where you’re really dedicated in one area and neglecting the other parts of your life that would give you that balance,” he says. “It’s working out the right amounts of how much work I do and how much I do in passion projects, to the amount of time I spend with my friends, family and in relationships as well. It takes some adjusting.”

From the outside, it seems Ian has got the balance right. He and his boyfriend of more than a year, Ryan Channing, often share snaps on social media of their trips overseas.

Ian is also the new Specsavers eye health ambassador. After experiencing headaches and difficulty reading, he opted for an eye test and was fitted for glasses. “Both of my grandmothers have eye problems; one has glaucoma, the other is almost blind and has only a tiny amount of sight left,” he says.

“Even if you’ve never had eye problems before, you still need to have an eye test when you turn 35. It is an essential health check-up and picks up diseases like macular degeneration, glaucoma and even things like diabetes that you wouldn’t think of.” **AWW**

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