News

SHARE

- News Home
- Latest News
- Featured Topics
  - South Korean ferry disaster
  - Search for flight MH370
  - Ukraine flashpoint
  - Australia and New Zealand Royal Tour
  - Oscar Pistorius trial
  - Advance Global Australian Awards
  - NITV News
  - Budget 2014
  - World Cup 2014
- Comment & Analysis
- Video
- Galleries
- Audio
- National
- World
  - Asia-Pacific
  - Middle-East
  - Europe
  - Africa
  - North America
  - South America
- Sci–Tech
- Business
- Sport
- Odd

18 Jul 2014 - 6:58am

Sexuality and swimmers: Why Thorpe's story made a splash

Tweet 9 Recommend 0

Previous Next
Image 1/
Video
Audio

Ian Thorpe (File: AAP)

Ian Thorpe is unpopular with some critics, despite a largely positive reaction when he came out last weekend. The issue is money.

Source
The Conversation

Tweet 9
Recommend 0
0

18 Jul 2014 - 6:58 AM
UPDATED 5 HOURS AGO

By Toby Miller, *Murdoch University*

Stories are circulating that he was warned prior to the 2000 Olympic Games about the financial impact on the Canadian swimmer Mark Tewksbury, who came out in 1998 (six years after he won gold at 1992 Olympics) and lost a "six-figure speaking contract". So Thorpe stayed where he was.

When Thorpe resumed training in the hope of selection for the 2012 Olympics, his fellow swimmers allegedly demanded their governing body reveal the payment involved in this comeback amid rumours of "six-figure handshakes".

Previous Next Hide Grid

Swimming Australia was in a tight spot, with ratings drooping and prime-time TV coverage imperilled. So if payments were made, they were presumably an investment in star power to regain media attention and boost revenues.

Ian Thorpe. (AAP)

Much of the frenzy surrounding last Sunday's television interview with Michael Parkinson has also been to do with dollars as Ten Network, who screened it, apparently agreed to hire Thorpe as a commentator on the Commonwealth Games as a *quid pro quo*.

So how badly has Thorpe jeopardised sponsorship opportunities with his coming-out announcement?

The stakes are considerable. By 2005, US celebrity endorsements amounted to over a billion dollars. Such investments are predicated on the assumption that audiences imagine they can magically transfer star qualities onto themselves by purchasing commodities associated with their idols, from shoes to supplements.

Inevitably, though, things go wrong with a system based on tests of desire, denial and physicality. There is an almost taken-for-granted oscillation between athletes' good and bad conduct: high-performance dietary supplements versus illegal drugs, sexual display in advertisements as opposed to extra-marital affairs in private, club loyalty and disloyalty.

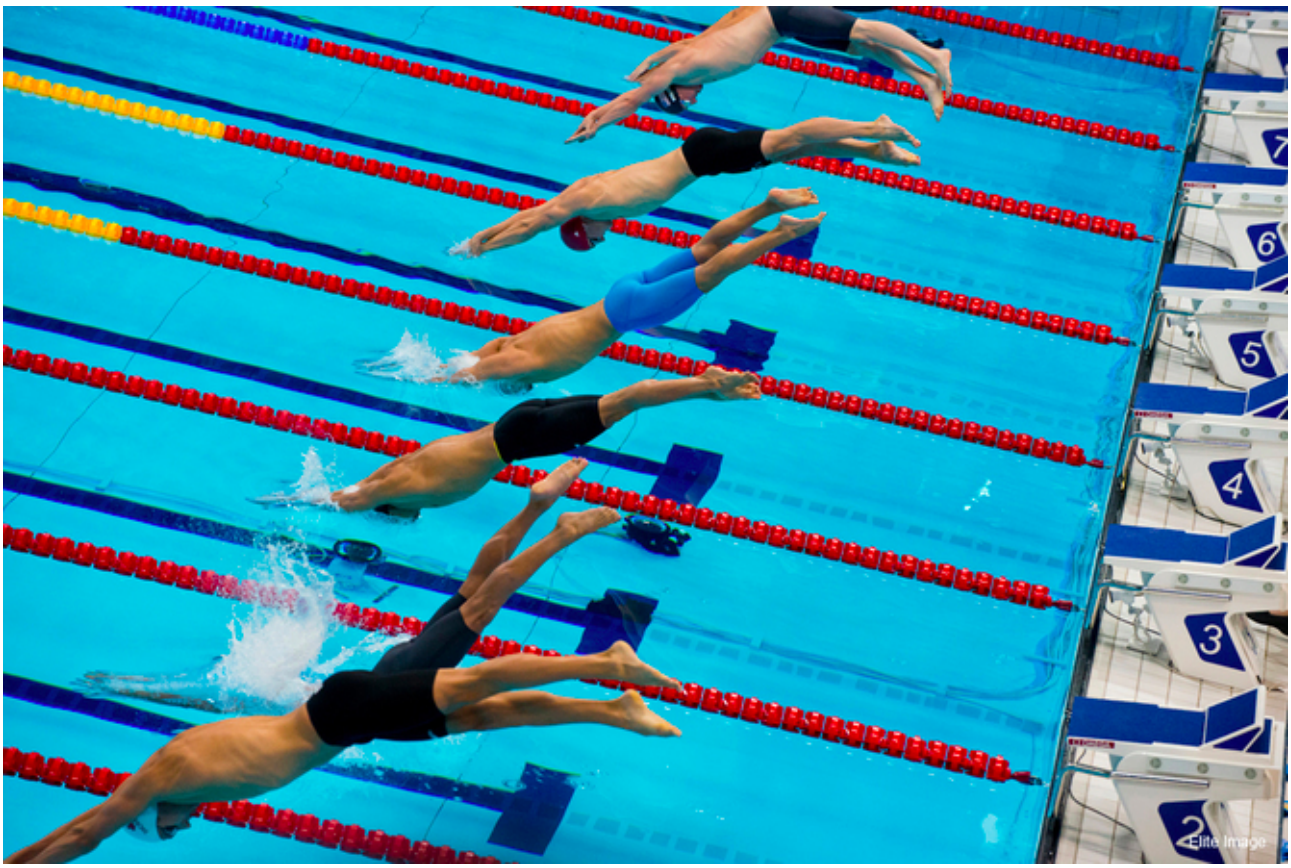
Because the body is the currency of sport, its passions and unreliability mark it out for disappointment and excess as much as fulfilment and success. And bodies become old, creaky and uncompetitive.

We know almost too much about sporting celebrities, most notably what their bodies look like *in extremis*: dirty, sweaty, teary, demoralised, undressed, furious, joyous, unguarded, unconscious and otherwise injured. Athletes' vulnerabilities grow all too apparent, magnified with each replay and diagnosis.

Sexuality in the pool

Thorpe's situation intersects with the historic identification of swimming with homoeroticism, as per English artist Duncan Grant's famous 1911 painting Bathing, which shows young men frolicking naked in the waters.

Swimming is regarded as masculine because of its self-sufficiency and demands for fitness, strength, and skill. But the sport's lack of violence marks it out from body-contact games.



Olympic swimmers diving into the pool in London, 2012. (Atos)

Elite male swimmers are outlined in form-hugging briefs or bodysuits, hair trimmed for minimal drag, lean, leggy, ducking, diving, turning, and speeding, seemingly oblivious to the gaze of others and the actions of fellow-competitors. Bug-eyed in goggles, their muscles strain with each eruption from the water.

The uncomfortable sense of the male body straining while almost naked can lead to some interesting practices of compensation in the media.

In the past, the BBC has seen the perils to conventional masculinity incipient here: instructions to its camera operators for the 1976 Games emphasised the need to capture swimmers' "straight lines" in order to suggest "strength, security, vitality and manliness" rather than the "grace and sweetness" of "curved lines".

And gay men in the pool?

American Bruce Hayes, an "out" swimmer who won relay gold at the 1984 Olympics, was a key figure in Levi Strauss' 1998-99 dockers campaign. The champion diver Greg Louganis did not lose support from Speedo or other sponsors when he came out.

Just this week, prompted by Thorpe's interview, the ASB Bank in New Zealand announced that its sponsorship contracts will all now guarantee diversity.

But the issue of sexuality and sponsors is multi-sided. This year's Sochi Winter Games faced controversy because of host country Russia's ban on public discussion of gay rights. Human Rights Watch and many other non-government organisations, such as Amnesty

International and the Russian LGBT Network, wrote a letter of complaint to the ten key Olympic sponsors, most of whom met with them.

But with over 80% of Russians supposedly in favour of the law, this presented difficulties to corporations that saw a large emergent consumer market and felt overwhelming greed.

So Thorpe, the closet, and money have quite a history. Their future may be much shorter. Part of that — an end to secrecy — he will no doubt welcome. The other part — financial uncertainty — he may not. But ultimately, sponsorship issues could arise from Thorpe being yesterday's hero rather than being gay.

Toby Miller does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

Article by The Conversation

- More Videos
- More Content

13 Jul 2014 - 06:53pm

Ian Thorpe comes out in candid interview

Australia's greatest ever Olympian, swimmer Ian Thorpe, has spoken of his depression and ended speculation about his sexuality in a candid TV interview.

17 Jul 2014 - 04:50am

Swimming

A 12-year-old girl decides to make an autobiographical video, but she cannot write her own life. (An Australian Production) (Short Film) PG

-

16 Jul 2014 - 03:25pm

Penny Wong lashes out at homophobia in wake of Thorpe revelation

-

23 Jun 2014 - 10:44am

Argentina commentator goes crazy for Messi's goal

Argentina commentator, Alejandro Fantino goes crazy when Lionel Messi scored a goal on the 91st minute, in the match against Iran.

-

14 Jul 2014 - 08:56pm

John Berry interview: The pressure of 'coming out'

US Ambassador to Australia, John Berry spoke to SBS about Ian Thorpe's revelations and the pressure young gay people face when they 'come out'.

-

14 Jul 2014 - 04:28pm

John Berry interview: The pressure of 'coming out'

US Ambassador to Australia, John Berry spoke to SBS about Ian Thorpe's revelations and the pressure young gay people face when they 'come out'.

-

15 Jul 2014 - 5:06am

Aussie team rallies behind Thorpe

The Australian team has rallied behind Ian Thorpe after he came out in a TV interview, with some hoping he takes up a mentor role at the Glasgow Games. ...

- 2 Jul 2014 - 10:24am

Ian Thorpe opens up to Michael Parkinson

Australian swimming legend Ian Thorpe has sat down with Michael Parkinson for a no-holds-barred interview on his career and personal life. ...

- 16 Jul 2014 - 5:08am

Ian Thorpe's coach guides Olympic hopefuls

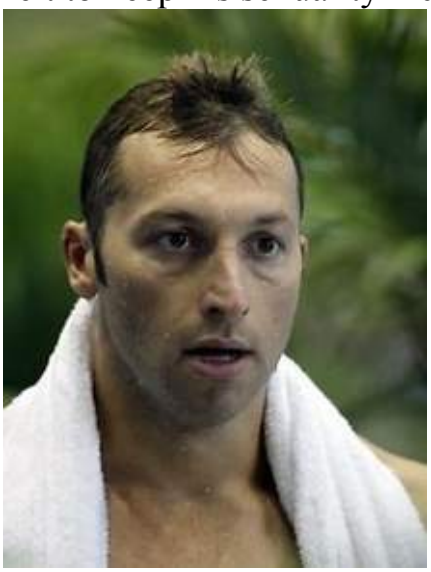
The Youth Olympics look to be the perfect opportunity for up and coming Aussie swimmers to make their presence and return the country to its former glory. ...

-

13 Jul 2014 - 9:01am

Thorpe thanks supporters after revealing sexuality...

Olympic champion Ian Thorpe has confirmed he is gay and revealed the pressure he felt to keep his sexuality hidden. ...

- 

13 Jul 2014 - 9:15pm

Emotional Thorpe comes out in TV interview

MELBOURNE (Reuters) - Ian Thorpe, Australia's most decorated Olympian, revealed he was gay in an emotional television interview on Sunday, ending years of speculatio...

-

14 Jul 2014 - 11:18am

Comment: Thorpe emerges too late for some

Many people have praised Ian Thorpe's coming out as 'brave'. But for some, that bravery from a sporting hero was needed long ago. ...

Browse by

- Toby Miller
- Person Career
- SWIMMING
- sports
- Ian Thorpe

0

livefyre

Sign in

3 people viewing

+ Follow

Share

Post comment as...

Newest | Oldest | Top Comments

Powered by Livefyre

- On Demand
- Guide
- Programs
- Radio
- Shop
- News
- Cycling
- Football
- Movies
- Food
- NITV
- Comedy

Back to top

- Copyright
- Terms & Conditions
- Privacy
- Disclaimer

- Feedback
- Audience Technical Support
- Complaints

- Contact
- Media Releases
- The SBS Charter
- Codes of Practice
- Policies & Publications
- Freedom of Information
- Freeview
- Using this Website
- FAQs

- Our Story
- Commissioned Content
- Translations & Subtitling
- Sales & Advertising
- SBS International
- Publicity Media Centre
- Careers
- How to receive SBS TV & Radio
- How to get my Program on SBS
- What SBS tells me about Australia
- Why SBS introduced commercials
- The SBS Board of Directors

- SBS Shop
- World Cup 2014
- Cycling Shop
- Podcasts
- Harmony Day
- CQ Cultural Intelligence
- NITV
- Newsletters

SHARE