

first person first person

EXTRA SPECIAL ATHLETE

From competitive swimming, to scuba-diving, to mountain hiking, Gregory Burns is one super-achiever who would not let his physical disability get in the way of life's sporting achievements.

There are sports men, and then there are men who do it all – sports, the arts, living life to the fullest in general. Forty-four-year-old Paralympics World Record holder, Gregory Burns is the man we have in mind.

The American citizen who has travelled much of the world, for both work and leisure, is a sportsman with a difference. Apart from the physical aspect (Gregory contracted polio as a child which left his

leg muscles wasted away), Gregory's mental drive also makes the rest of us seem utterly apathetic and shamefully slothful.

Through The Barricades

Despite the need for leg braces and forearm crutches to help him move anywhere, Gregory doesn't let his handicap get in the way of accomplishing the physical and psychological heights he sets for himself.

Having started swimming at age three in the White House pool under the recommendation of President Eisenhower's personal physician ("I started swimming because doctors told my parents it would be good for my rehabilitation, though I was more excited to see how long I could hold my breath under water"), Gregory has not looked back since – not especially with three World Records at the 2000 Atlanta Paralympics under his belt, another World Record at the 1996 Barcelona Paralympics, in addition to dozens of other American Record times in his trophy booty, including one at last year's Sydney Paralympics.

Art Of Life

But it's not just the physical limits that Gregory has been pushing in his life. The former regional marketing manager of American conglomerate Pepsi Co. is also a recognised artist in his own right, who has exhibited and sold his works in countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore and the USA. In fact, Gregory's "Swimming Series" of paintings have been presented to President Clinton recently.

"My involvement in swimming and painting started when I was a child and has never stopped," Gregory says of the bi-polar interests that have formed his identity, "the water and visual imagery have shaped my life and interests. I can't think of anything else that I could devote so much of my life to, besides travelling and sex!" he says tongue-not-in-cheek.

"All I know is I have to do what I have to do. If that means getting into the pool for three hours every day or going to the gym on a rainy day, so be it... otherwise I would not feel I've given my best and the feeling of having let myself down is much worse than what I'd feel when I force myself to be disciplined about training," says Gregory of the factors that motivate him into action and the results in his life.

The World Over

And that so-disciplined motivation has come to good use in his training for last year's Paralympics under national champion swimmer, Ang Peng Siong. Swimming five kilometres a day, up to six days a week, plus three days of weight lifting a week was the normal call for Gregory when training for last year's millennial event. And even if the 2000 experience has not been his best so far, Gregory's come away from it with some good lessons. "Sydney was the best-run Paralympics, the Australians were fantastic. We had over a million spectators and thousands of school children who came to cheer. They also served the best

food I've ever had at a swim meet ever... and Peng Siong was the best coach I ever had... he got me in better shape than when I was much younger," he enthuses even in recollection.

And Gregory's a good judge when it comes to such mega-events, having participated and won in tons of them. Of another unforgettable memory, Gregory says, "Barcelona was an amazing experience. As you know, the Spaniards are a very hot-blooded lot and when we competed, the crowds went wild and I felt a little like... a movie star".

But of course, the "home" game in the US brought back especially fond memories, what with receiving medals from Attorney-General Janet Reno.

No Limits

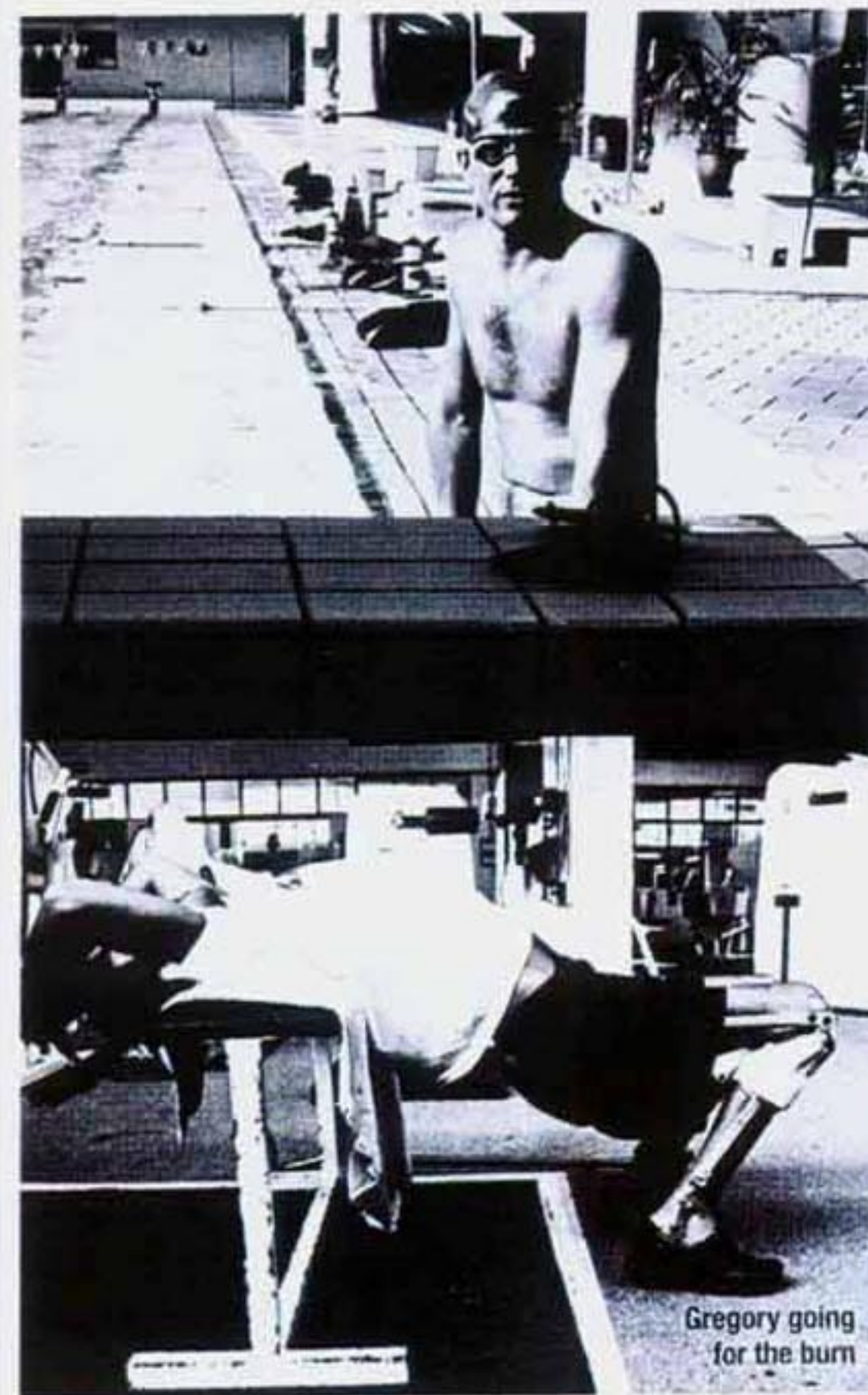
But despite the medals and distinction that have come with having successfully navigated round the imagined limits of disability, there is still much ignorance, if not discrimination, out there, that Gregory has to battle. "Many people confuse the Paralympics with the Special Olympics. The former is for people with physical disabilities while the latter is for those with mental disabilities. As such, the level of competition between the two is very different. I've given talks to many groups, in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and USA, over the past 20 years to counter misconceptions like these.

"I think both the able-bodied and the disabled need to shred the misconception: that people with disabilities do not and should not do sports. Sports make people strong both physically and mentally and we can all benefit from that. It's also important to know that whatever your level of fitness or competition, there are folks out there whom you can compete with or just exercise with... starting out and taking the first step are the hardest. After that, it gets easier because you get more and more committed as you see results." Surely that alone should get us off our lazy butts to push ourselves a little harder? ■

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Gregory Burns knows no limits



Gregory going for the burn