

# grey matter

by Mike Evans

I had just turned fifteen when the 1978 Commonwealth Games were held in Edmonton. In the week preceding the Games, as a local competitive swimmer, I participated in a kind of full rehearsal for the swim meet officials which followed directly on the Canadian team's morning practice. As we, the Games' understudies, all in our mid-teens, passed through the locker room on our way to the pool, Graham Smith and several others were showering after a workout. I remember being dumbfounded by his sheer size, not having been within fifty feet of him in four years. He stood perhaps only two inches taller than I, but I thought I could not have encircled his chest with both arms and his shoulders seemed fully three feet across. He looked like some sort of Herculean demi-god, spitting water between his teeth. Graham later went on to capture six gold medals at those Commonwealth Games and reclaim the world record in the 200 meter individual medley. It was the most dominant performance by a Canadian athlete in years, in my own backyard, and yet it seemed somehow remote to me.

I was later a younger teammate of Peter Schmidt, who set a new world record in the 400 meter freestyle at the Canadian Olympic trials in 1980, just prior to our government's boycott of the Moscow Olympics. Politics prevented Peter from having the opportunity to join other Canadian sports heroes in the rarefied atmosphere of Olympic success. His achievement, no less remarkable for having been performed in Canada in a race he swam virtually alone, never acquired the acclaim it deserved and certainly never snared the attention of the national media, the Canadian public, or, I must admit in retrospect, me. That honour, if honour it be, was reserved for two different young men, men of my generation, men who proudly carried maple leaf tattoos on their chests as testament to the patriotic pride they carried in their hearts.

At sixteen, after a false start to my own season and a resuscitated interest in theatre, I "retired," but the swimmer within me was carried by these men. Alex Baumann was already in the spotlight as the winningest age group swimmer in Canadian history. Victor Davis was still toiling away in relative obscurity in Waterloo, laying the groundwork for his explosive entry on to the international stage two years later, in 1982.

Victor leap-frogged over the national scene, bursting forth as a new star at the trials for Canada's World Championships team to Guayaquil, Ecuador. At the World Championships he broke the then longest standing world record in swimming, David Wilkie's 200 meter breaststroke record from the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. And Victor didn't just break the record — he shattered it. In a sport where hundredths of a second can mean the difference between first and eighth, where tenths of a second can mean the difference between Broadway and Fort MacMurray, Victor lowered the record from 2:15.11 to 2:14.77, almost three seconds ahead of his nearest rival. No less memorable than his results was his unique preparation for an event. While other swimmers politely splashed themselves prior to a race, Victor lay prone on the pool deck and plunged head first to his waist in the water, thrashing wildly as if invoking a benediction from the aquatic deities beneath the surface; from Poseidon, the maker of earthquakes. He emerged containing a focused, elementary fury, the sole object of which was to propel him through the water faster than any other person in the world. For six years the gods complied.

Victor carried another mark of distinction though, less a badge of honour than a hubristic curse laid by the media. In 1982, at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, Australia, Victor overturned a small chair in the presence of Queen Elizabeth. To my knowledge, admittedly limited (not being privileged to royal confidences), she never mentioned the incident and her beneficent silence would have been a good example for the media. Instead, journalists seized the

event with the kind of stupid tenacity normally exclusive to pitbulls, and sensationally cast Victor as the bad boy swimmer, the barely restrained rebel, Brando in bikini trunks. Certainly there are romantic associations inherent in such a role, and Victor would have appreciated them, but it is indicative of a critical failure in journalism that we need to pasteurize our heroes or vilify them. What the media too often failed to acknowledge was that Victor's demonstration of temper followed the disqualification of a gold medal relay team by a faulty automatic sensor system. It was later admitted by swim officials that the electronic sensing device, which had victimized more than one Canadian relay team, was not reliable. In other words, Victor was pilloried in the press for wanting to win, expecting to have won — and he may have been right! Victor's hatred of losing was legendary and ought to have been admired, not satirized. Make no mistake: Victor was never a lamb. He once said of himself that if he had not found swimming he would probably have found prison, but the essence of that swaggering statement was simply the sincere conviction of a tough kid who had raised himself on "the wrong side of the tracks." His conduct as a member of Canada's national team was never deemed inappropriate by anyone involved.

"...thrashing wildly as if invoking a benediction from the aquatic deities beneath the surface..."

And yet all of this was mere preamble to Victor's finest performance, in 1984, as one of the two recognized juggernauts of Canadian swimming. Victor Davis, the Dionysian figure, tempestuous and exuberant, fierce and fun-loving, and Alex Baumann, the Apollonian figure, quiet and contained, no less fierce and fun-loving, led the Canadian swim team into the Los Angeles Olympics. Following a silver medal performance in the 100 metre breaststroke, in a time that until that race would have been a new world record, Victor vowed not to let himself, his teammates, or his country down in his specialty, the 200. Though he later said that he had swum as fast as he had expected he had needed to, the fact that he had not been first rankled and it was Victor the warrior-athlete who mounted the starting blocks for the 200 metre event two days later. He was merciless. Victor destroyed his opposition, establishing himself without question, against the world's best, at the pinnacle of his sport. His time, a new world record, was 2:13.34. His jubilant eruption from the water, his celebratory glory, his proud representation of Canada atop the medal podium, will remain etched in my memory forever.

Victor remained at or near the top for the next four years. His upset in the 200 in 1988, by two eighteen year old Albertans, stunned Canada's swimming community at the Seoul Olympic trials. In contrast to expectations, Victor accepted defeat gracefully and, now the old man of Canadian swimming, the grizzled veteran at 24, he worked hard with his successors, Jon Cleveland and Cam Grant, to help them prepare for the enormously taxing emotional pressure of Olympic competition. They fared less well than he had in

the pool. Victor represented Canada only in the 100 breaststroke and had to watch what had previously been his specialty, the 200, from the wings. Ironically, his time from the '84 Olympics, his world record, withstood the onslaught of a whole new cast of Olympians. Still, he led the Canadian men's 4 x 100 medley relay team to a silver medal finish, equalling the best finish ever for a Canadian relay team, including the glory days of the Olympics in Los Angeles.

In the summer of 1989, after years of twice a day workouts, chalking up as many as 100 kilometres a week in the pool, Victor Davis

"He's Victor. Big Victor. Strong Victor... He was invincible."

retired. Having become a respected ambassador of his sport and his country, Victor decided to pursue the rest of his life — with no less vigour than he once pursued swimming. His pool supply business looked to become a success; he began modelling; and the endorsements which had once eluded him due to the media characterization of him were now offered sincerely.

His tragic death Monday under questionable circumstances, the result of injuries sustained 60 hours earlier after being run down in the street following a barroom confrontation, has left most of his fellow teammates, friends and coaches speechless in disbelief, anger and grief. Even after doctors suggested his outlook was "very, very, very grave" due to the severity of his head and spinal injuries, no one believed that Victor could actually die. Perhaps Mario Cavazzoni, one of the new breaststrokers, said it best: "He's Victor. Big Victor. Strong Victor. As a competitor, he was almost a mythic character. I looked up to him. There's no way this could happen to him. Really no way. He was invincible." The memories of Victor which have appeared in the press in the past week have all commended his generosity, his indomitable spirit, his toughness, his zest for living. That someone like Victor could be cut down like this, at 25, frightens all of us.

It sickens me that it could take the death of a genuine Canadian hero to force our parliamentarians to redress the absurdity of our drinking and driving legislation. Yet Victor would rightly object that his life was not more valuable than the lives of the countless others who have suffered death where alcohol is involved. And the incident is still under investigation; this is neither the time nor the place to pursue further this line of questioning. Instead, I can offer only my condolences to those who actually knew him, his friends and family. Victor was the first person in my chosen sport to capture my imagination, he will always be the biggest, and I mourn his passing. For many years to come, whenever I hear our national anthem I will remember, and if not for the memory of Victor's pride in Canada, the anthem might have been diminished. He was one who was truly strong and free.

We who thrilled to your success will miss you Victor. Your premature exit from the stage of life saddens us all. If I might paraphrase the leading figure of my other favourite pursuit:

Good night, fierce prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Mike Evans is a regular contributor to *The Gateway*.

Over the course of the year the editors of *The Gateway* receive many comments, both good and bad. One which I felt was both valid and correctable was that there was a shortage of intellectually challenging content.

As a result, "grey matter" will be available to the University community on an ongoing basis. If you have an opinion, analysis, essay, short story, or other "serious" work, please contact Randal Smathers at Room 282 SUB, 492-5168. "grey matter" submissions will be subject to minimal editing.

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