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# CHICAGOANS GEAR UP FOR GAY GAMES VIII



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# Local

## Chicagoans gear up for Gay Games VIII

By Matt Alderton  
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Michael Thiry began swimming competitively when he was 7 years old. A native of Arlington Heights, Ill., he swam his little legs through elementary school, his adolescent legs through middle school and his adult-sized legs through high school. When he was in the 12th grade, however, Thiry quit. Tired of swim caps and Speedos, he never wanted to swim the length of an Olympic-sized swimming pool again. And for 15 years, he didn't.

"I just got really burnt out," said Thiry, 34, who lives in University Village and works in the Chicago Transit Authority's treasury department. "Then, in November 2008, I decided to get back into it. I've been swimming ever since."

You might say that swimming saved Thiry's life. Or at least changed it. That's because three of the 15 years he was absent from swimming were spent as a caretaker for his partner of 10 years, who suffered from kidney disease. When his partner eventually died, Thiry decided to live.

"A couple years after my partner died, I decided I was ready to make friends, get back in shape and just be healthy," he said.

So, Thiry joined the Chicago Smelts, Chicago's mostly gay and lesbian masters swim team. Then, just to kick things up a notch, he registered to compete in the 2010 Gay Games in Cologne, Germany.

"It's a completely new experience for me," said Thiry, who'll be competing in

seven different events, including the 400-, 800- and 1,500-meter freestyle; the 50-, 100- and 200-meter breaststroke; and the 200-meter individual medley. "I'm really looking forward to competing, but I'm also looking forward to meeting so many people from all over the world."

Thiry is just one of more than 6,000 GLBT athletes that already have registered for Gay Games VIII, taking place July 31 through Aug. 7, according to Gay Games Sports Manager Rob Smitherman, who expects a total of 12,000 participants and 34,000 spectators this summer in Cologne. "The U.S. is well represented, with the second most registrants behind Germany," Smitherman said. "And many of the registrants are from the Chicago area; my rough count is that it has the third most registrants after San Francisco and New York."

Among the Chicagoland athletes heading to Germany in July is 38-year-old tennis player Javier López-Quinones of Rogers Park, who competed in his first Gay Games when Chicago hosted them in 2006. "I heard about the Gay Games in 2005 and decided to participate," he said. "I came out late in my life—I was 28—so it was a good experience for me, to feel that sense of belonging. I took the train to Soldier Field for the opening ceremonies, and during my journey from Loyola all the way down to the South Loop the train was packed with people wearing the Gay Games logo. It just made me feel proud. It gave me goose bumps."

It's a feeling fellow Chicago athlete Timothy Hunsinger—a runner—can relate to. "Struggling for acceptance and self-worth is very human; I think it can be even more of a struggle when you are GLBT," said Hunsinger, who lives in Streeterville and runs regularly with the Chicago Razors, Chicago's gay triathlon training group. "For me, participation in the Gay Games, as well as regional events that the Razors compete in, is about 'personal best' with support from my friends, family and the LGBT community."

The sense of community that was so prevalent in Chicago promises to persist in Cologne, according to Smitherman. "The people of Cologne are similar to the people of Chicago—nice, friendly and very accepting of everyone, regardless of sexual orientation," he said. "What will be different is that

the beer is cheaper and really good."

The beer—called Kölsch—is brewed only within the city limits, where it's served in distinctive 0.2-liter glasses. Tall and skinny, they're like a lot of the athletes who'll be competing this summer in 35 different sports.

Because the competition in Cologne will be as tough as the beer is tall, Chicago athletes have been training especially hard in the final months leading up to Gay Games VIII. Thiry, for instance, has been swimming three to four days a week and plans to compete in several masters-level swim meets this spring as practice for Cologne. López, meanwhile—who fell just short of earning a bronze medal in 2006—has been training with a physical trainer twice a week to work on strengthening the joints in his legs and shoulders. He's also been lifting weights once a week, doing cardio three times a week and playing tennis twice a week.

Hunsinger, who competed in the triathlon in 2006—when he placed 51 out of 154—will be running in the marathon this year, instead, as part of a recent goal that he set for himself: to eventually run seven marathons on each of the seven continents. He's already run three U.S. marathons—two in Chicago and one in Utah—and has signed up to run the Antarctica Marathon in March 2012. When he competes in Cologne, he'll be able to cross Europe off his list, too.

"I have made exercise a priority in my life ever since the summer of 2003, when I had put 250 pounds on my 5-foot-10-inch frame; additionally, my work—running a life-support machine—can be very stressful at times," said Hunsinger, a clinical perfusionist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. "Exercise helps me stay fit and manage the stress of my world."

To train for Cologne, Hunsinger spent his winter competing in snowshoeing races. Having kicked off his 2010 running season in March with the Shamrock Shuffle, he's now running at least three times a week—a 12-mile run on his own or with the Razors, a speed workout with the Razors and a five- to seven-mile run on his own—and either



biking or swimming three times more.

"I only take one day off per week," he said. High school science teacher Jessica Andrasko, 37, of Bolingbrook, Ill., also has been training hard for Cologne. She and her women's volleyball team, Chicago Momentum, play competitively twice a week and plan to secure private gym time this summer to work on their game. For them, however, preparation is as much financial as it is physical: To cover the cost of traveling to Germany, Chicago Momentum is actively fundraising online at its Web site, MomentumVB.com, and in person via weekly raffles at T's Bar & Restaurant in Andersonville.

"Realistically, our target is \$20,000," said Andrasko, a former pro volleyball player who's competed twice before in the Gay Games—in Chicago and in Amsterdam, where she won a bronze medal in 1998. "So right now, our focus is on fundraising. Once we're there, though, our goal is gold."

For Chicago Momentum, Gay Games VIII is a family event. Win or lose, many of the women are bringing their partners along as spectators. Although she's undecided, Andrasko's partner may tag along and compete in golf. One player, who's about to become a foster parent, might even bring her new foster child.

López's partner plans to go, too, and Thiry's will most certainly be there in spirit. "He's the inspiration behind why I decided to get back into swimming to begin with," Thiry said. "He'd be really proud of me. Being a caretaker for three years was a big thing; I think he'd be really happy that I'm now doing things I care about—that I'm spending time on me."

