

# Taking off the Gloves

## INTERVIEW WITH A BAREBACKER

BY PAUL HARRIS

The recent publicity surrounding 'barebacking,' the act of having unprotected anal sex, has demonized those who take part. Some suggest they are filled with self-hatred, morons, extremely stupid, or even suicidal.

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Yet, whether one agrees with the practice or not, it is plainly going on, even though as a community we aren't terribly keen on discussing it.

I interviewed Richard, a 40-year-old man who works as an accountant, on this subject. We met at his home. He is 5 feet 9 inches in height, has brown hair, is fairly toned without being a gym bunny, attractive, intelligent, and has a great sense of humor. He was diagnosed HIV+ a little over 11 years ago, and since then he has had no illnesses whatsoever.

**How did you contract the virus?**

The honest answer is that I have no idea. All I know is that I

tested in 1987 for the first and only time and I came up positive. I had been practicing safe sex before then, so I must presume I contracted it sometime in the early 1980s.

**Richard, as someone who is HIV+, why have you recently decided to start barebacking?**

I followed the safe sex guidelines religiously for over a decade. I never had penetrative sex with another person without either him or myself wearing a condom. In addition, I always disclosed my HIV status to potential sexual partners.

What happened was this: more often than not, even if I was going to be the 'bottom' or we were using condoms, the other guy would make his excuses and basically run away. I ended up feeling like a leper. I hated it. I was being penalized for being honest.

Sometimes I had sex, always safe sex, with another person without telling him my status, but that made me feel guilty. As a result, I rarely ever saw anyone twice; I couldn't face the moment when I would have to tell them my status.

I started to become more and more isolated in every sense of the word — physically, spiritually, emotionally. Occasionally I would go off to bathhouses, normally in other cities when I was traveling. Again, while I 'got off,'

I found the experience unfulfilling.

Then, recently, an HIV+ friend invited me to a sex party specifically for people who were HIV+. I umm-ed and ahh-ed about going, but finally I went. You had the choice of using condoms, or not using condoms. There was no sense of judgment one way or the other.

I decided for the first time in well over ten years to have unsafe sex. It was a considered decision. I was not 'high' on drugs or drunk. I simply wanted to have good, old-fashioned sex again.

I was both the active and the passive partner in sex that night. I have to tell you that it felt wonderful. I felt more like a human being than I had in over a decade. Suddenly, I felt desirable and attractive again. I felt sexy. I felt wanted.

The following morning, when I woke up in my own bed at home, I felt like a new man. I went to work that morning feeling like a 20-year-old again. I felt human. I had almost forgotten what it was like.

**Would you do it again?**

Yes, and I have.

**Would you ever consider having unsafe sex with someone negative?**

Certainly not. The last eleven or twelve years have been very difficult for me — I wouldn't

want to inflict that upon anyone. I do not understand the psychology of people who can do that to another person. They must be real sickos.

**Do you not stand the risk of re-infection, and also of possibly making yourself very ill by having unsafe sex?**

Sure. I've thought about that. But what is the point of being a human being if you don't feel like one? What is the point of living on this planet, whether it is for 45 or 90 years, if you cannot feel a sense of really deep intimate connection with another human being?

**Have you discussed it with your doctor?**

No — I think he would go ballistic!

**What about your friends, the ones who know that you are HIV+?**

They wouldn't understand it either. I think they would be horrified. They have no idea what it has been like to live the life I have for the past twelve years. My boyfriend died a few years ago. Another close friend died last year.

I have been made to feel like a leper by most of the gay community. Look at any of the personal ads — 'Healthy,' 'You Be Too,' 'Disease Free.' It is unmistakable what it means. It means that they are not interested in dating someone HIV+ no matter

how fit and well he is, no matter how nice and decent a guy he is, no matter what his sense of values are. I am instantly summed up and judged for having this virus by people who haven't even met me. Have you any idea what that is like? It is continuous. You wind up being made to feel like the lowest of the low. I have been made to feel like a non-person.

**How do you feel about HIV+ people who have unprotected sex with others without telling them their status?**

In a word, criminal. I think they are behaving criminally. There is no other word for it. It is like firing off a gun in a supermarket. You might hit someone, you might not. But either way, you have no right to play with other people's lives like that.

**What do you say to the argument that it is everyone's responsibility to protect their own bodies?**

That is all right in principle, but no one can make an informed decision about consensual sex without access to ALL the relevant information. Someone's HIV status is relevant information. I have no sympathy or compassion for gay men who can treat other people's lives so cavalierly. I also cannot understand fellow gays and lesbians who can even begin to defend these people. ▼

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