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Feature



RAFE:

Out, Gay and Mormon. Can He Survive? Taking on Survivor: Guatemala

by Sharon Hadrian, AfterElton.com

The premise is simple: outwit, outplay and outlast, but America's most famous reality show delivers much more than a simple strategy and adventure game. Entering its 11th season this fall, *Survivor* is well known for placing strange casts of conflicting characters into remote settings, then providing twists and turns worthy of a Laurie R. King novel.

But this season, set in the Guatemalan rainforest, may provide the most intriguing juxtaposition yet: a gay Mormon cast member.

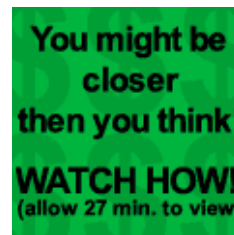
Rafe Judkins, a native of Salt Lake City, grew up in a large, eclectic Mormon family. He spent his early years traveling around the United States in a seventeen-passenger van, and it was this experience that he credits with getting him interested in travel and nature. His family eventually settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he attended an esteemed prep school, and upon graduation was selected as the senior class member "Most Likely To Be On *Survivor*." Four years later, that prediction has come true.

Judkins is being promoted by CBS as "the gay Mormon Ivy Leaguer," but the network seems content to leave the burning questions surrounding this label a secret—for now. However, his family is (at least superficially) very supportive of him, as evidenced by their jubilations on their family homepage, LandonJudkins.net.

Judkins is the fifth out gay male to appear on *Survivor* in the show's history. Richard Hatch won the premier season in Pulau Tiga by making alliances—a concept that is now universal to nearly every contestant in every *Survivor* season—and flaunting himself as a "fat, naked gay man." Subsequent seasons saw Brandon Quinton and John Carroll saddled with every gay stereotype in the book, and the latter was considered one of the most deceiving contestants on the show.

Carroll later defended his actions, saying, "When you are gay, you learn to have façades. So, I think manipulation is inherently a defense mechanism for many gay people." However, neither contestant was particularly memorable once their season ended.

Last season saw a small break in the mold for gay contestants, as Coby Archa, a



conniving Texan hairdresser, surprised those around him with his physical presence in the challenges. However, he ultimately couldn't handle the social, schoolyard-like aspects of the game, and he was eliminated halfway through the season.

Combining successful aspects from previous *Survivor* winners, Judkins is portraying himself as having both powerful physical skills as well as great interpersonal skills, not to mention—you guessed it—that famed Ivy League education.

In an interview with CBS.com, Judkins, who graduated from prestigious Brown University earlier this year, confidently said, "They won't expect that I will probably be the smartest person out there." But in spite of his cockiness, that statement might turn out to be wrong, as he will be marooned on the island with tribe mate Brian Corridan, a graduate of the equally well-known Columbia University. (Corridan is also rumored to be gay, though CBS has not confirmed that.)

Both competitors have studied the game and believe their knowledge, along with their Ivy League book smarts, will help them become the sole Survivor. Unfortunately, history is not on their side: some of the best students of the game (including *Survivor: Amazon's* Rob Cesternino) have never won.

One thing Judkins will have on his side is extensive travel and outdoor experience. While at Brown, he became a wilderness guide in a program called BOLT, designed to place students in "intense wilderness situations." Judkins has also traveled around the world, visiting all 50 states and 14 countries, including a 7-month school backpacking trip in Australia. He is also an accomplished swimmer, which should help him during *Survivor's* many water-themed challenges.

Physicality and brains are two characteristics that can both help and hinder a *Survivor* contestant. Depending on the other 15 contestants with whom he is competing, Judkins' skills may be seen as helpful or as a threat. *Survivor: Palau's* Tom Westman, who was arguably the hardest worker in camp, won last season; however, six months earlier in *Survivor: Vanuatu*, all of the strong, younger males were voted out first because they were perceived to be a threat to some of the weaker, older players.

In *Survivor*, who you know and how you interact is often more important than what you can do.

To further this social challenge, Judkins will likely find himself stuck on the island with a disparate tribemate. In the past, each gay male contestant was placed in the game alongside a stereotypical redneck or seemingly bigoted person, a casting ploy designed to make both personalities seem more over-the-top to viewers. Hatch's foil in *Pulau Tiga* was Rudy Bosch (whom he surprisingly befriended, despite their differing opinions on homosexuality) and in *Palau*, Archa went up against James Miller, a southerner whose most memorable line last season was his comment that "It feels terrible to have my butt whipped by a homosexual." (Pause for chuckles.) The early favorite for the Redneck Award this season is Brandon Bellinger, a 22-year-old farmer from Kansas resident whose hobbies include fishing and mudding.

Although being gay is rarely described as an asset in society, Judkins believes that he can use his sexuality to his advantage, even amongst his diverse *Survivor* tribe mates. "I can interact really well with people and be emotional and understanding and not have this macho thing, not that all straight guys do, but you know. People underestimate me. They're going to look at me and see that I'm friendly and that I'm this gay guy. What damage can he do to anyone?"

Judkins believes he can play a subtle game, using his wilderness skills to succeed while not being perceived by other contestants as the eventual winner. But if he can make timely interpersonal connections, Judkins may very well prove that his social skills (and not his wilderness background) will make him the sole survivor on *Survivor: Guatemala*.

Survivor: Guatemala is shown locally on KUTV, Channel 2 at 7pm Thursdays.