



Louganis, Greg (b. 1960)

by Robert Kellerman

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Greg Louganis is widely regarded as the greatest diver in history. After having won a silver medal at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, he dominated diving competitions throughout the 1980s, winning two gold medals at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and two more at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Since his retirement from competition, he has acknowledged both his homosexuality and his status as a person living with AIDS.

Louganis was born on January 29, 1960 in San Diego to a Samoan father and a northern European mother. He was adopted at nine months and was raised in El Cajon, a suburb of San Diego. He began his athletic life as a gymnast and acrobat, but switched to diving when a local coach noticed his natural talent.

Diving became an important physical and emotional outlet for Louganis, an arena in which he could succeed at a time when he was ridiculed for his skin color, his interest in dance, his undiagnosed dyslexia, and his apparent homosexuality. Suffering from depression in his adolescence, Louganis attempted suicide several times, smoked and took drugs, and denied his sexual attraction toward men.

Louganis emerged as a diving phenomenon when he was a teenager. He demonstrated not simply strength and technical proficiency, but also an unusual grace, a combination of qualities that were to become his trademark.

At the 1971 AAU Junior Olympics competition, Louganis caught the attention of legendary diving coach Dr. Sammy Lee. Dr. Lee coached him to a surprise silver medal in platform diving and a sixth place finish in springboard diving at the 1976 Olympics.

Louganis began to explore his sexual orientation in 1978, when he started college at the University of Miami, where he majored in drama. He quickly became favored to win medals at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, but the American boycott of those games ended that dream.

In 1981, he began preparing for the 1984 Games. He transferred to the University of California at Irvine to train under coach Ron O'Brien.

In diving competitions, Louganis began to dominate the sport internationally. In the 1982 World Championships, where he swept both springboard and platform titles, he became the first diver in international competition to be awarded perfect scores by all seven judges.

At the 1984 Olympics, he became the first male diver since 1928 to win gold medals in both the platform and springboard events. In 1984, he was honored with the Sullivan Award as the country's outstanding amateur athlete; and in 1986, he was awarded the Jesse Owens International Trophy.

In his personal life, however, Louganis was less successful. He entered into several relationships, none of which lasted long, then initiated an abusive relationship with his manager, who controlled his finances and his life.

Following the 1984 Olympics, Louganis ended the relationship with his manager (who later died of AIDS), pursued an acting career with modest success, and began the process of coming out publicly as a gay man.

Early in 1988, Louganis tested positive for HIV, but decided nevertheless to compete in the Seoul Olympics. In a heroic performance, he again won gold medals in both the platform and springboard competitions. But his triumph would later be tarnished by controversy.

Had his HIV-status been widely known, Louganis' second to last springboard dive could have caused an international incident. He misjudged his distance from the diving board and hit it with his head. The doctor who stitched his bleeding wound was not told that the diver was HIV-positive and did not wear gloves or take appropriate precautions.

Although the risk of HIV-transmission was small, and the doctor was in fact not infected, the incident was nevertheless regrettable and underlined the danger of athletes not disclosing their HIV-status to appropriate officials.

Although Louganis' homosexuality had been an open secret in the diving and gay communities for years, he came out officially at the 1994 Gay Games in New York City. A year later, in a nationally televised interview with Barbara Walters, he also publicly revealed his HIV-status. The revelation that he was HIV-positive during the Seoul Olympics sparked discussion about the ethics of concealing one's HIV-status during sports competitions.

Since 1995, Louganis has been a visible figure in the gay and lesbian community. His autobiography, written with Eric Marcus, *Breaking the Surface*, became a best-seller and the basis of a television movie.

Louganis has also had successes as an actor. He appeared in productions of Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*, a play about a gay man dealing with AIDS, and Dan Butler's *The Only Worse Thing You Could Have Told Me*, a gay man's coming out story.

Louganis, who has also written several books about dog care, regularly appears at gay pride events and has an active speaking career.

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Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.