



Mitcham, Matthew (b. 1988)

by Linda Rapp

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Matthew Mitcham stunned the world with his final dive in the ten-meter platform event at the 2008 Olympic Games. His nearly flawless execution of the extremely complicated dive earned him the highest score in the history of the sport and secured the gold medal.

A native of Brisbane, Australia, born March 2, 1988, Matthew Mitcham says that as a child he felt like the ugly duckling from the Hans Christian Andersen tale: "You know how the ugly duckling wasn't like the other ducklings? I wasn't like the other kids. I was smaller, I was scrawnier. I wasn't good at soccer or cricket or football."

He did, however, achieve success in trampolining, a sport he began practicing in 1997. He went to his first World Junior Championships two years later and returned in 2001, when he won the title in double mini apparatus. He also competed in the Australian Youth Olympic Festival (AYOF) in 2003, finishing sixth.

Meanwhile, Mitcham had also taken up diving. When he was eleven years old, Australian Institute of Sport coach Wang Tong Xiang saw him do a double somersault while playing on a diving board, and he brought him into the national training program. The skills that Mitcham had mastered as a trampolinist were naturally applicable to diving performance, and he soon excelled at the second sport as well. He won the Australian National Junior Diving Championships from 2002 through 2004. At the 2005 AYOF competition he took three gold medals and one silver.

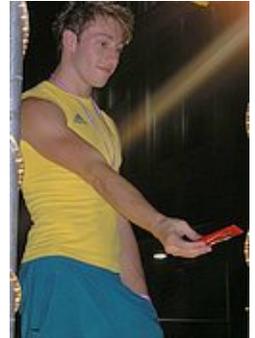
Mitcham advanced to the world stage in 2004, winning silver in the one-meter springboard, three-meter synchro, and ten-meter platform events at the World Junior Championships.

In 2006, however, wrote Nicole Jeffery, "Diving Australia could only watch as its future walked out the door." Mitcham had decided to quit the sport. For seven years he had adhered to a rigorous training regimen. That and his schoolwork took up all of his time. "There was no fun and no friends," he said of that time, "but from all the intensive training, I'd developed a fighting mentality, and I kept going even though I wasn't liking the sport."

Mitcham had a lot to fight. He was taunted at school, but he feels that his candor about his homosexuality made him a less vulnerable target for bullies: "I was just so open with it that everyone knew."

At the age of fourteen Mitcham came out to his mother, whose response, as he recalled it, was "Well, du-u-uh!" Despite his mother's lack of surprise at the revelation, there was, stated Mitcham, "a lot of conflict" at home, and so he moved in with his grandmother at around the same time.

Mitcham, who had battled through a back injury and needed prescription medication to mitigate depression and anxiety, finally found the pressure too great, and so he gave up diving. "It took me a good six months to stop hating the sport and not have negative thoughts about it. Every time I thought about diving, the



Matthew Mitcham leading the 2009 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Photograph by David Urquhart. Photograph by David Urquhart appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.

overwhelming feelings of fear and angst flooded me," he stated.

Mitcham moved to Sydney in early 2007 with his partner, Lachlan Fletcher, whom he described as the "one constant" in his life during the troubled years.

The move to Sydney proved beneficial. "It was a break for me to explore myself and get familiar with who I really was," Mitcham commented. "Just being a happier person really radiates in other areas of your life." He was able to get off the medications that he had been taking for depression.

In his newfound contentment, Mitcham yearned to go back to diving and sought out coach Chava Sobrino of the New South Wales Institute of Sport (NSWIS) to see about joining his program. It proved a perfect fit.

At NSWIS, Mitcham not only found a coach who believed in him and whose approach was ideally suited to developing his talents but also other nurturing friends including fellow diver Alexandra Croak and mentor Sarina Bratton. "That little support network has made my dream possible," stated Mitcham.

The dream was almost derailed by battles among diving clubs. "There were rules in place that said I wouldn't be allowed to compete for Australia if I didn't train in the national centre [in Brisbane], . . . [but] those rules were changed before the Olympics, so I was allowed to compete," explained Mitcham.

Mitcham wanted Fletcher supporting him in the stands at Beijing, but money was a problem. In a charmingly ironic development, Mitcham received a travel grant from the Johnson & Johnson Athletic Support Program for Fletcher—the first time that such an award had been granted to a same-sex partner—and the gay and lesbian community of Sydney pitched in to pay for Mitcham's mother to be there too.

Mitcham's first Olympic performance was not a success. He was off in the three-meter springboard and finished well out of the medals.

In the ten-meter platform event--the final diving competition of the games--Mitcham was much stronger. Going into his final dive, he had a chance to stand on the medal platform. The Chinese team had swept the golds to that point and was expected to take the last one as well, but Mitcham had hopes of at least a bronze.

His final dive was an extremely risky back two-and-a-half somersault with two-and-a-half twists, which he executed with a degree of proficiency that drew gasps of amazement and admiration from viewers. NBC commentator Cynthia Potter exulted, "Matthew Mitcham has done something that nobody in the world thought anybody in the world could do!"

Mitcham said that his memory of "the dive itself is a bit vague. It felt good, although I wasn't exactly sure."

As he emerged from the water, however, he heard wild cheering and saw his score, 112.1 points, the highest in diving history. Poolside, he fell to his knees and dissolved in tears.

Gathering himself, he moved to the backstage area and was immediately mobbed and embraced by teammates, competitors, and other members of the diving community.

Controversy erupted when NBC, which had not even broadcast Mitcham's fifth-round dive (even though it showed all of those of two Americans who finished lower), completely failed to report the fact that Mitcham was the only openly gay man among the over 11,000 athletes at the Beijing games, showed no reaction shots of Fletcher in the stands (or, for that matter, of Mitcham's mother, who was standing next to

him), and relegated coverage of the subsequent medal ceremony to its web site.

An NBC spokesperson initially claimed that "in virtually every case, we don't discuss an athlete's sexual orientation," despite the fact that they regularly show spouses and heterosexual partners in the stands and that they also considered a heterosexual love triangle involving two swimmers and a coach to be newsworthy. The network eventually apologized for its "unintentional omission" in its reporting on Mitcham.

Viewers of other networks saw Mitcham's elation at the medal ceremony and his touching sharing of the moment with those he loved most. As he exited the pool deck, he climbed into the stands and kissed both his proud and overjoyed partner and mother.

Following the Olympics, Australians voted Mitcham the Sports Performer of the Year in 2008, and he shared the nation's Don Award (named for Australian cricketing legend Sir Donald Bradman) with pole-vaulter Steve Hooker in recognition of sporting achievements that had inspired the nation. He was also awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia.

Despite his stellar performance, Mitcham found no corporate sponsors until he signed a deal with Telstra, an Australian communications company, in February 2009. He called it a relief to receive sponsorship as he pursues his goal of earning more medals in the London Olympic Games in 2012. Since most divers hit their peak in their mid-twenties, there is every reason to believe that Mitcham may realize his aspirations.

Most people do not appear as public figures at the age of twenty, but Mitcham has done so with grace, stating, "I never made the choice to be a role model, but as soon as somebody looks up to you or finds something in you that they like, you become one. And that's something that you either honor and respect or reject. I honor it."

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