

Louganis, me, and HIV

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In case you haven't seen it yet, it would be worth your while to make an extra effort to catch the HBO documentary *Greg Louganis: Back on Board*, which the channel is broadcasting this month. It provides a brief sketch of the financial problems that have plagued the Olympic diver since the publication of his autobiography 19 years ago, the death of his former boyfriend and his current marriage, and his return to diving as a mentor with the U.S. national team. Most of all, it is well worth watching as a reminder of the narrow escape so many of those infected with HIV in the 1980s were fortunate to survive and how they have managed to carry on with their lives.

For me, the show offers a chance to reminisce on a few of the most heartfelt and funniest moments of my journalism career.

I did my first extensive interviews with Louganis at the 1987 U.S. Olympic Festival and the Pan American Games, where he was his usual brilliant self in sweeping the golds in platform and springboard. After those one-on-one interviews, he held court in a group press conference in Indianapolis, where a number of the reporters coyly hinted around about his sexual orientation but never explicitly asked him about it. It was a silly charade and Louganis never took the bait, just wryly answered the questions that were asked.

I scarcely remember anything about those Pan Am Games. My mind was focused elsewhere. Back in Los Angeles, my newspaper, the *Herald Examiner*, had started to publish a lengthy series I had written on death and disability in football, a project that had consumed virtually every spare moment I had had for the previous 10 months. And just a week or so earlier, at the Olympic Festival in North Carolina, I had struck up a professional friendship with Toni Ginnetti, a sportswriter for the *Chicago Sun-Times* who was a pleasant diversion from some of the more troglodyte attitudes that plagued most of the press boxes we frequented.

Flash forward a year to Orange County in southern California. The diving nationals are being held, a preview of the Olympic Trials to be held a few months later back in Indianapolis. Ginnetti isn't there to cover them, but Wilt Chamberlain is in the crowd. I am scheduled to do a lengthy interview with Louganis in one of the few available time slots he will have before the Olympics themselves.

Now, I have never gotten chummy with my sources. I am not gregarious by nature with most people. When I am interviewing someone, I don't open up. My stories are supposed to be about them, not me. But I kept thinking about that silly song-and-dance I'd seen at the news conference a year earlier and I decided to send Louganis a subtle signal that I was a sympathetic gay voice if he ever needed one.

I did something I am sure no one ever did before for an Olympic interview. I donned a skimpy pair of shorts and a tight white Bundeswehr tank top - the gayest emblem in my entire

wardrobe. We had a pleasant, professional interview in which the biggest unknown might have been which of us was showing more cleavage.

I have two standout memories of that competition. The first was when a diver jumping right before Louganis struck his head on the springboard. Bloody mess. Louganis was performing the same dive next and he had his worst score of the meet on it. Fortunately for him, he rebounded the next day to take first place.

The platform was another matter. Louganis always had the cleanest entries into the water I had ever seen, things of beauty in which his body cuts cleanly through the surface and the water implodes inward with a distinct, hollow "thunk." But in the prelims and the finals in California, he entries were consistently messy. Not enough to cost him the gold, but definitely a problem.

Flash forward a few months to the trials in Indianapolis. The trials are being picketed because Bruce Kimball is being allowed to compete despite having fatally run over two teenagers with his car shortly before. In the pool Louganis is his usual dominating self in both the springboard and the platform, but his platform entries remain messy.

I call my office in Los Angeles.

"I know we don't have the day-by-day assignments for our Seoul Olympics coverage set yet, but put me down to cover Louganis in the platform finals," I told my editor. "He's had a few months to clean up his entries and he hasn't done it. It could cost him the gold and a shot at history. I think something is going wrong in his training."

Louganis had not paid any special attention to me since our Bundeswehr interview in California, but the night after the meet was finished, I got a call in my room. It was his manager/boyfriend, Jim Babbitt.

"We're going out for drinks," Babbitt said. "Why don't you come by the room and we'll head out."

I'm not a big drinker - club sodas and lime, thank you very much - but I figured my Bundeswehr message had gotten through and I would be able to have a real heart-to-heart with Louganis at last. I got ready and showed up at the allotted time.

I knocked on the door and Babbitt answered - barefoot and dressed in only a T-shirt and a jockstrap.

I assumed I had arrived too early and they were still getting ready. As I stepped in the room, Babbitt informed me in short order that we weren't going out, Louganis wasn't coming, and hey - manufacturers send Louganis swimsuits all the time that don't fit him so if I try one on and it fits I can keep it.

Mama never prepared me for this.

What followed was about 20 awkward minutes in which Babbitt did his best to convince me it was in everyone's best interests if we did the nasty and who was it going to hurt? Lie after lie poured out of his mouth about his "platonic" relationship with Louganis and his ownership of the house Louganis lived in and come on - try on the suit!

I beat a hasty retreat, vowing never to wear Bundeswehr again.

Well, at least not for an interview.

A few months later we are in Seoul for the Olympic Games. The preliminaries in springboard don't figure to generate any news of interest, so I am off covering something else, volleyball or basketball probably. Suddenly a whisper spreads through the press box: Louganis hit his head on the board!

I quickly alert Ginnetti and head over to the natatorium to catch the last few dives. Louganis rebounds but looks shaken. I realize I am the only reporter there who was around when that other diver smacked his head on the very same dive at the nationals, so this gives me some nice exclusive material to provide my readers. Hey, that's what they paid me the big bucks for.

But it occurs to me that something remains wrong with Louganis' diving, that somehow his training has not run smoothly, and so I stay for all of the platform preliminary dives. Dive after dive, Louganis splashes badly on his entries. He looks so in control in the air, so out of control entering the water. Unthinkably, he enters the final dive of the competition still trailing in the standings.

And then, the final dive. I had some moments in Seoul that left me choked up and teary-eyed. Watching Matt Biondi churn the final lap of the pool to pull out a narrow relay win for the U.S. Janet Evans windmilling relentlessly lap after lap in a Zen quest for the gold. One-handed pitcher Jim Abbott celebrating his gold medal victory alone on the mound by slapping his glove against his thigh, the sound of one hand clapping, as his teammates raced through the outfield.

But that final dive – that topped them all. Louganis barely parted the molecules of the water as he entered and sliced toward the bottom of the pool. The only sound in the natatorium was the collective whoosh of the audience sucking in its astonished breath – then erupting with shouts and screams and applause as they realized they had just witnessed a dive for the ages. On his most difficult dive of the meet, Louganis was perfection incarnate and had racked up an insurmountable lead to complete his second Olympic sweep of the diving medals.

He climbed out of the water, stood in the embrace of his coach, and sobbed.

Never before had I seen him show so much as a fraction of that emotion. This wasn't the emotion of a historic performance, or the end of a dominating run, or the thrill of a clutch dive. This was something darker and deeper.

I turned to Ginnetti.

"Something's going on with Greg," I told her. "He's not this demonstrative. He hasn't looked right all season. Something is going really wrong in his life or his training that we haven't been told about."

I never saw Louganis again until he stopped in San Francisco in 1996 for a book signing after the release of his autobiography. I had thumbed through the book transfixed. I read about his manager, Mr. Jockstrap and T-shirt, turning tricks on Santa Monica Boulevard a few blocks from my apartment. I read about abuse and betrayal and depression. I read about the

HIV infection he had learned of in the months leading up to that bloody dive in Seoul and the triumphant final plunge thereafter. For the first time, I saw a connection between my life and the life of one of my news subjects.

We've spoken on a couple of occasions over the years when I've written about one of his projects, but a friendship never formed. We could have swapped horror stories about the KS we endured, the weight loss we suffered, the near death experiences that left us still standing and stronger than ever.

So there were a few tears in my eyes as I watched the HBO special. I was so happy to see that Louganis didn't disappear below the surface, never to be seen again. He's back, happier and healthier, and helping others.

As I say, worth watching.