

# With AIDS, Louganis loses support

Keith Cunningham

The gem-studded, red ribbons were in full view for the world to see. The glitzy smiles seemed to indicate concern for the victims of the deadly disease. In fact, many touted the Oscars of last March as a turning point in AIDS awareness.

Never before had a mainstream motion picture been recognized for dealing with the subject of AIDS and homosexuality. Yet, there was Tom Hanks accepting the best actor award for his performance as a gay man dying from AIDS in *Philadelphia*.

The way Hanks was embraced that night sparked a gleaming hope in many minds that perhaps the victims of AIDS would no longer have to fight two battles — the deadly disease and the stigma placed upon those suffering from it.

Sadly, one year later, that spark of hope has quickly been dimmed by the storm of condemnation that has fallen upon Olympic swimmer Greg Louganis following his admission that he contracted HIV through homosexual contact. Quite simply, once the idealized Hanks was replaced by the real-life pain of the "fallen" gay champion, the gem-studded ribbons lost their luster.

The criticism Louganis has incurred must be understood in the light of the fact that Louganis is homosexual. The criticism and the lifestyle are powerfully interdependent elements that are indicative of a society that is hopelessly obsessed with separating the innocent victims of AIDS from the "guilty."

The attack on Louganis is centered around a cut he acquired while diving in the 1988 Olympics. In Seoul, Louganis sought to do what no other diver before him had done — win back-to-back Olympic gold

medals in both diving competitions. However, during the springboard preliminaries it appeared Louganis' attempt at Olympic immortality was over when his head slammed into the board, spilling what we now know was tainted blood. Louganis' critics claim he should have informed the Olympic Committee that he was HIV-positive. Louganis defends his silence by stating that diving is a non-contact sport and making such an announcement would have thrown the competition into a frenzy.

Five minutes and several stitches later, Louganis returned to the competition and completed a nearly perfect 2 1/2 flip that advanced him to the finals. Less than 24 hours later, he captured the coveted gold by brilliantly executing what was called the "Dive of Death" because it had previously killed two other divers. The event went down as one of the most dramatic comebacks in Olympic history and the champion Louganis was soon known as the greatest diver ever.

It was not known then the incredible weight Louganis was carrying with him as he climbed the Olympic tower. He had been informed just six months earlier that he was HIV-positive. He was taking AZT every four hours around the clock and practicing fervently with the knowledge that this Olympics would be his last competition.

In a recent interview, Louganis reflected on his triumph saying, "A lot of people saw me at the Olympics and they were cheering for me." Now, with Louganis facing the greatest competition of his life, the cheers have turned to silence. The gleaming fans are now scornful critics.

The most overt level of this attack is evident in the type of story the press has chosen to portray. The fact that Louganis' image is denigrated by the cur-

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rent media focus on his nondisclosure at Seoul is directly connected to Louganis' homosexuality. We embraced the eternally heterosexual Magic Johnson when he disclosed he had acquired HIV from irresponsible sexual escapades. We cried for Arthur Ashe when he was forced to tell the world he had become HIV positive from a blood transfusion. For the gay diver we shed no tears but devalue his life in a rush for judgment.

The critics argue that Louganis was irresponsible both in his lifestyle choice and in his silence at the Olympics. Yet the inconsistent treatment of Louganis compared with Johnson's indicates the true root of this criticism. There is one key difference between Johnson and Louganis. Johnson was heterosexual.

Dear Greg,

You know better than to expect the same adulation. Try not to think about the cheers of Seoul or the acclaim of Los Angeles. As your body begins to fail and your hair turns a lifeless tone, don't look back on the day when you were symmetrically perfect and at the peak of physical being. Once you fall into that physical state where every day becomes a chore, please don't expect to receive their get-well cards. Expect the anger and judgment that kept you silent for so many years. You are right, this should be the time when they cheer for you the loudest. They aren't. To them, you are no longer the champion they loved. You are now somehow different.

Keith Cunningham is an English major at the University.

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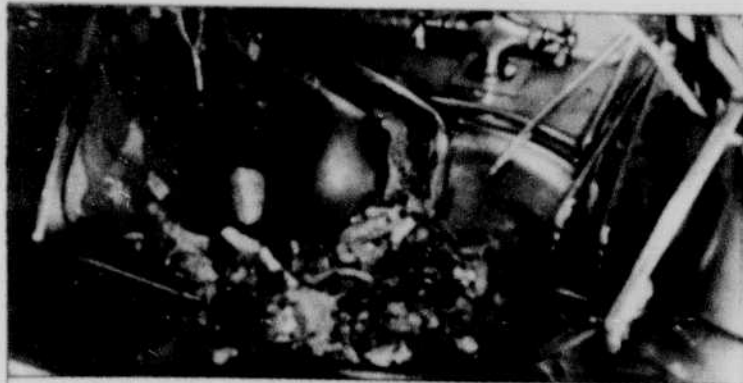
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