# Coming Up for Air

Olympic HIVer Greg Louganis beats the blues

January 1, 2005 By Sean Strub

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Few athletes have publicly shared not only the height of their victories but the depth of their defeats like five-medal Olympic diver, dog trainer, author, actor and HIVer Greg Louganis. The boy with the perfect body and angel's grace has grown up and found gold-medal strength in honesty and disclosure. In October, Louganis, 44, began touring both coasts, this time coming out about his depression. I checked in with him at his Malibu, California home—where he chatted about his newfound but hard-earned happiness and the healing power of dogs.

***POZ:* How did your speaking tour start?**
Louganis: [Pharma folks at] GlaxoSmithKline contacted me about my depression experience and about reaching out to the GLBT community. It feels like coming out—again. Talk about how many times I've come out: my sexuality, HIV, depression and abusive relationship.

**When I'm in a depression, I find it hard to discuss.**
It takes discipline to take action. And courage. I think it's a good idea for friends to talk about depression. You can bring it up, but it's their choice whether to share.

**What's your campaign's message?**
You don't have to go through depression alone. It can be isolating, but through therapy, whether with a psychologist or psychiatrist, with or without medication, I've learned to recognize when an episode of depression is coming on.

**What do you look for?**
Clues—like when I find it difficult to get to the gym regularly or when I'm not adhering to my HIV meds, not staying active and interested in things I enjoy. It may have nothing to do with HIV, or maybe it is intertwined with it.

**What do you do?**
I keep a journal. I also work out daily, do yoga and meditate. Taking my HIV meds every day is a barometer—if I have an extremely difficult time taking them, I know I have an issue I need to address so it doesn't pile up and become debilitating.

**Whom do you turn to?**
Usually, my partner, but it's a drag when you're both down. I used to go to my mom, but I lost her

in July, and I haven't fully processed that yet. There have been times when I've come home, turned to my partner and said, "I miss my mom." That's the biggest thing—not being afraid to admit a weakness.

**Last year, I figured out that an HIV medication was causing my depression. Have you had med-related episodes?**
I try to rule out medication as a cause, especially if I've recently changed my regimen. My doctor and I determine if a depression could be a medication reaction. But if it's something emotional that threw me in a tailspin, I need to identify it and address it or let it go.

**Is dealing with depression's stigma easier because of other stigmas you've faced—being gay, adopted, HIV positive and battling a learning disability?**
The more you practice, the better you get. And I've had lots of practice—letting go of secrets, being honest about what's going on and how I'm feeling. So I'm getting better at it.

**Are you on antidepressants?**
I haven't been on psych meds for three years, because I needed to learn other coping skills. But to learn those skills, I did need medication to be able to work on myself.

**How did the queer community respond to the depression-awareness event you and actor Chad Allen hosted in New York City?**
Really positively. We shared our personal experiences, which opened the door for others to share theirs.

**You've told *POZ* that your dogs saved your life (see "Dog Days in Malibu," March 1999). Update us on your canine family.**
Two of my dogs, Freeway and Ryan, have passed on, and I gave Mikey, a border Terrier, to a friend who needed a companion-therapy dog. Nipper, my Jack Russell terrier, still competes. She's now qualified for nationals— the American Kennel Club in agility and the U.S. Dog Agility Association for steeplechase and the dog agility masters' team. She's won so many gold medals, it's disgusting. She's rivaling her dad.

**Do your dogs get depressed? You once told me that my dog, Billy, was biting people because he was sad.**
When something physical is going on with them, they get lethargic. When I was taking care of my dad, and he was in a wheelchair, Freeway would stay by my dad's side, not mine, rest his head on my dad's arm and just be there for him.

**So, overall, how are things going for you in your life right now?**
Aside from losing my mom, things are going well: continuing with my acting class, teaching [dog] agility, competing with the dogs and this educational tour. If somebody were to follow me around, they would think I am nuts, just because my life is pretty full of dog stuff and acting stuff. The acting is more theater, but I did a film last summer. Actually, I didn't act in it—I worked with the dogs.

**How has your acting career changed?**
When I played a kid in Larry Kramer's *Just Say No* in Chicago 1999, I thought "I can't wait to grow up." Now, I can play the young father! After that, I did *Nunsense, Amen!* in Hollywood, Florida, which was great—I was such a butch Sister Robert Ann. I recently did a scene from *Jeffrey* in LA and played Sterling, the older man's part, instead of Darius, the young man's part that I had originally played off-Broadway in New York City.

**I can't wait for what's next.**
Neither can I. Actually, the next chapter of what I want to do is the ultimate coaching guide for dog trainers. A lot of the principles that you teach, whether coaching a two-legged or four-legged athlete, are very similar.

**Right after your 1995 autobiography, *Breaking the Surface*, came out, you were reluctant to talk much about how you make your HIV-treatment decisions. Has that changed?**
God, yes. I was so frustrated with some of my protease inhibitors' side effects that I stopped seeing my doc and stopped taking my meds for a year and a half. I was still getting my blood checked for a UCLA study, and my viral load shot through the roof, so I thought, "I have to do something." One of the nurses introduced me to my current HIV positive doctor. I was able to talk to him and express my frustrations with the medications. He was very realistic: "I can't force you, but these are my recommendations, these are potential side effects, etc." We also tested for resistance, which narrowed our options but helped us get onto a plan to lower my viral load.

**How's your viral load now?**
I don't remember numbers, but I know it was high and now it's OK. For me, it's healthier not to obsess over numbers. I look at the big picture.

**HIV or depression—which has been a bigger burden?**
Depression. Unless you have gone through it, you really don't know how debilitating it can be.

**I agree.**

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