Dog Days in Malibu

Greg Louganis never thought he'd live this long, and he's loving every minute.

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He's surrounded by water, just as you would expect: Greg Louganis' house sits perched on a hill overlooking the Pacific, a great expanse of ocean on view. Outside, terrace after meticulously clipped terrace leads down to a sumptuous swimming pool.

"I never swim," says Louganis, following my eyes down to the pool and shrugging those fabulous shoulders. "Sometimes I go into the Jacuzzi. But rarely."

Louganis has never been exactly who we thought he was -- or who we wanted him to be. In his youth, he was a four-time Olympic diving champ, but the private Louganis, we learned, was always much more complex. The adopted Samoan kid of a Greek father and Texas farm-girl mother, he had an unhappy childhood that led to teenage suicide attempts and a history of debilitating relationships with the wrong people. And as he admitted in his bestselling 1995 autobiography, *Breaking the Surface*, Louganis was a master of disguise, concealing from us for many years the fact that he was gay and HIV positive.

Breaking the Surface was a huge success for Louganis because writing the book enabled him to finally stop hiding. But it also caused a cruel onslaught of criticism, in particular because Louganis acknowledged that he had known he had HIV during the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, when he hit his head on the diving board and bled into the pool. Captured on camera, it was truly a shot seen around the world. He was attacked for not telling the doctor who treated him -- without gloves -- for the gash; he was accused -- however falsely -- of putting other divers at risk of HIV infection. Suddenly, during a much-hyped *20/20* interview with Barbara Walters, the all-American hero had become a diseased pariah.

Now, on a clear day in Malibu, looking fit, healthy and relaxed in jeans and a t-shirt, the famously reserved Louganis puts his angst and anger about the whole blood-in-the-pool ordeal into perspective. "When the book came out, there were all these debates on blood in the pool and all that," he says, settling down with me at the dining table. "A lot of good information was getting out there, and that made me feel OK. It's important to know how you get HIV -- and how you *can't* get it. And you cannot get HIV from a chlorinated pool." Louganis waves his hand, as if dismissing the entire flap. "A lot of people hang onto that image of me holding my head in the pool because there's just so much ignorance, and when there's ignorance, there's fear."

Which brings us to the second Louganis trouble spot. Once out about AIDS, he found himself in the unenviable position of being one of the world's most famous people with HIV. Expectations were extreme. "About the criticism from activists that I don't do enough about AIDS? Well, enough is a bottomless pit," he says. "You can never do enough for a lot of people." But Louganis acknowledges that his stature allows him a measure of influence that he tries to use wisely. "I think the public views astronauts and Olympic gold medalists differently from everyone else. There's a sense of pride in us that we represented our country. So I feel it has allowed people to open their ears and hearts to some of the things I have to say."

I first laid eyes on Louganis on a bright, sunny day in the late '70s at the University of Miami. The student union was splayed out around the diving pool, and having lunch while watching the beautiful divers was a favorite pastime. "Wait 'til you see the new guy," people had been saying for weeks about the teen Olympian phenom. I knew Louganis was it the moment he climbed the stairs to the board -- it was the shock of his chiseled physique, the grace and purpose with which he set the fulcrum on the board, the unsmiling way he seemed to be talking to himself. Louganis took off from the high board, and the crowd held its breath. He was like a bird in flight -- a rare, exotic one -- or something never seen before on this planet.

Louganis actually blushes when I tell him this. "Long time ago," he says, not too wistfully. These days, diving has very little to do with his life. Still a Speedo pitchman (and the sunny face of the new Viatical Benefits Foundation ad), Louganis also breeds and trains dogs. And his health?

"Why? Do you think I don't look good?" he asks.

"You look fabulous," I say. "As beautiful as ever."

After a moment, he speaks quietly. "For the most part I'm doing very well," he says. "The protease inhibitors can be tough to tolerate, and some of the other treatments have been very harsh. I still participate in the trial studies at UCLA because I think it is an important thing to do."

He has taken two (two!) spinning classes today, and it's barely noon. His body, which was a marvel, is still strong and hard; the tan, he says ruefully, is because of the Bactrim he takes to prevent PCP -- it makes him super-sensitive to the subtropical California sun. Louganis attributes his current health above all to a daily dose of optimism. "I don't live my disease," he says. "I'm not totally consumed by it -- I never was. It's just one part of me. And so I never lived my life as if I were going to die."

For more than a year now, he has been linked to *E! Entertainment Television*'s Steve Kmetko, a relationship Louganis does not deny but is reluctant to discuss. Hooking up with someone like Kmetko, who is HIV negative, is not something Louganis ever thought he'd do. "When I first became positive," he says, "I decided not to date anyone who wasn't also positive. But at the same time, most of the people I met seemed to have already given up, and that's not where my head was at." Such experiences, he explains, "opened me up to a serodiverse relationship. If you love someone, and love and protect your partner, there's no reason why that person should ever seroconvert."

“I haven’t been on the boards for a couple of years now,” Louganis says, refusing to talk more about his relationship because he’s “a private kind of guy.” But “two years ago I granted a wish for a boy from the Make-A-Wish Foundation [for those 18 and under with a terminal disease]. He wanted to be coached by me for a day, so I met him at the USC pool. It was neat, because the little guy could dive pretty well. And that was exciting for me, so I got on the boards with him, and we dove together.”

Doesn’t he ever want to go back to diving in some way? After all, he was No. 1.

Louganis grins. “For the first time, yes, I think I have enough distance where I could go back and coach,” he says. “I don’t want to coach full time, but I’ll be involved with diving. Part of the reason why I didn’t coach before was because I’d just get so frustrated. I’d basically see someone diving and I’d think, ’Get off the board, let me show you how to do it.’ But now I know I’m not going to get up on the board and do a reverse three and a half -- that is never going to happen again.” He shrugs. “So I can say now that I could coach, but there are still so many other things I want to accomplish.”

The dogs are everywhere. They have always been Louganis’ best friends -- in most of the photos of him as a boy, he has his arms around this pooch or that one. As the years went on, his dependency on them deepened. When he found out he was positive, the dogs were the ones who nourished and nurtured him and made him smile. First there were the Great Danes; at one time Louganis had five. He still has one, the beautiful Freeway, but their short lifespan (some only live to be five years) convinced Louganis to look into other breeds. He’s now got a Bouvier, a Jack Russell terrier and two others. Plus, he’s babysitting a friend’s two dogs. All seven have shown up for the interview, well behaved and well groomed.

For years, Louganis was a dog groomer for Pets Are Wonderful Support (PAWS), a nonprofit organization that helps people with HIV care for their pets. He made house calls to see that both pets and their owners were getting what they needed.

Imagine the shock of opening your door and finding Greg Louganis there to clip your dog’s nails! “Yeah,” Louganis says with a rare smile, “some guys would go a little nuts. They’d get so excited, but then I’d start working with their dogs and they’d forget who I was. The dog became the star.”

With the same drive, determination and blind faith that propelled him high into the air above a pool, Louganis mastered the art of training his dogs. Yet his new book, *For the Life of Your Dog*, is less a how-to training manual than a guide to living with a dog from birth through aging, sickness and death.

“There are so many people like me out there -- HIV positive people who never thought we’d live this long,” he says. “To get a dog when you’re positive is a commitment to go on living -- that dog will be around for 15 years. But I want to make sure that people understand the incredible thing they are taking on. All puppies are adorable -- it’s sticking with a dog and training it so it can fit into your life and you can fit into its -- that’s so hard.” He’s stroking Nipper’s head. “The bond that you share with a dog is unique, in that the dog is as loyal as you are.”

As if to prove his point, the dogs put on a great display, demonstrating for this stranger all they do to keep Daddy happy. This goes way beyond sitting, staying and lying down; the Louganis dogs know how to carry groceries, hike up a mountain with a backpack and get in and out of a pool without making a mess. Louganis shows some of the dogs and takes others to training classes to socialize them. “Sometimes I know more than the trainer,” he aw-shucks. “But it’s great for the dogs to be around other dogs in a structured environment.” We all roll around on the floor together until they tire of us and pad off to different spots in the house, where they nap in the sun.

“I’m not sure where they are,” he says when I finally ask him where he keeps his medals. “But if you want to see them, I’ll go find them.” He bounds up the steps to his bedroom, then runs down to the basement. A little while later I hear him upstairs again. When he again heads toward the basement, he looks embarrassed. “Here they are!” he exclaims finally, rushing up the stairs and depositing them in my lap.

He won five during appearances in three Olympics, but there are only four (all gold) here today; a silver medal he won in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal was donated to the Ryan White Foundation. I take each one out of the box and drape them across my chest. They’re heavier than they look. Louganis can’t help but laugh. “They look good on you,” he says.

“They looked better on you,” I point out. “Can we watch some videos of you diving?”

Louganis hesitates -- only for a moment -- and then pops a tape into the VCR. It begins with Louganis on the boards in Montreal, barely 16, his body still not fully developed. We watch dive after dive in silence, and even when the fans in the Olympic stadiums go nuts, we don’t say a word. Only when we get to the ’88 Olympics does Louganis come to life: That was where he hit the board. Somewhat sadistically, the networks showed the dive over and over, and each time Louganis cringes. You can see how embarrassed he was, how worried, how he tried to keep his hand over his cut to hold in the blood. But today, Louganis the perfectionist looks at it another way. “See, I was too close,” he says softly. He leans in to watch it again, and for that moment, with the dogs asleep and the house drenched in sunlight, it’s easy to remember that when Greg Louganis used to hit the water, there was barely a splash.

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