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Louganis Is Back on Board

By KAREN CROUSE

FULLERTON, Calif. — The Olympic-size outdoor pool at Fullerton College on a recent afternoon was an aquatics diorama, with a beginners swim class sharing space with a group of seasoned competitors churning out laps. At the far end, in the deep water, three divers practiced their springboard takeoffs.



Christine Cotter for The New York Times

It might have been an ordinary winter scene in Southern California except for one detail. The coach leaning forward in his chair and speaking so softly that his voice was barely audible over the medley of old pop hits blaring from the loudspeakers was Greg Louganis, considered diving's Michael Jordan — or Michelangelo.

Louganis, a five-time Olympic medalist, was hired last November by SoCal Divers to coach athletes with wide-ranging ages and abilities. To watch him dissecting a beginner's front dive tuck during a practice last month was like observing Meryl Streep teaching an introductory acting class.

Louganis became the first man to win consecutive Olympic gold medals (1984 and 1988) in the platform and springboard events, a feat never equaled. He achieved his springboard victory at the Seoul Games in 1988 despite striking the board with his head on his ninth qualifying dive.

In 1982, Louganis became the first diver to be awarded a perfect 10 from all seven judges while performing a reverse two-and-a-half pike at the world championships.

After retiring in 1988, he became a phantom presence in USA Diving, ubiquitous in the record books but otherwise invisible. In the past 23 years, Louganis acknowledged his homosexuality and revealed that he had AIDS, accepted acting jobs and trained dogs for agility competitions.



It never occurred to him to train people until he showed up to watch a competition last year in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and his spot-on assessments of the divers led someone to ask, “Why haven’t you been coaching?”

The seed, once planted, sprouted when Chris Mitchell, who started SoCal Divers, approached Louganis with a coaching offer. Louganis accepted after gaining assurances from Mitchell that he would be free to follow his building-blocks philosophy, which is at odds with some American coaches who stress acrobatics over mechanics.

Louganis insists his divers show proficiency in one fundamental before moving on to the next.

“I’m not surprised,” his former coach Ron O’Brien said in a telephone interview, “because he’s a perfectionist, and that was the way he was taught in dance and acrobatics.”

As a competitor, Louganis’s mechanics were so sound that China’s national coaches in the 1980s pored over film of his dives and tailored their programs to match his technical precision. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Chinese have dominated diving much as Louganis did. They have excelled at the expense of the United States, which did not win a diving medal at the past two Summer Olympics.

Louganis emphasizes practice over competition and the whole person over the athlete. He encourages his divers to keep daily journals in which they write their intentions for each practice, then critique their performances.

“A lot of the parents say they’re on board with it,” Louganis said. “We’ll see how well they can hang in there.”

Louganis never expected to still be around. In 1993, he gave himself a spectacular party for his 33rd birthday because he did not think he would live to see another year. With little fanfare, Louganis turned 51 last month. Except for a scare two years ago, when his T-cell count dropped dangerously low, he said his health had been so good “you kind of forget about it.”

He practices yoga, part of a fitness program that is coupled with an aggressive drug regimen. He has sought medical help for depression and is in a stable relationship with Daniel McSwiney. Louganis said the abusive relationships and the substance abuse that pockmarked his youth were behind him.

Over lunch at a Thai restaurant near Fullerton, a two-year college, Louganis appeared the picture of health. His face was tanned and unlined, and his salt-and-pepper hair, mustache and goatee were neatly groomed.

He ordered panang curry, and the waitress asked how spicy he wanted it on a scale of 1 to 10. "Ten," he replied. Taken aback, she said, "You tried 10 here before?" When his meal came, Louganis finished it without breaking a sweat.

His move into coaching has been smooth, but not entirely stress free. In response to a mass e-mail Louganis sent about a winter camp, another coach replied using an off-color remark about his sexual orientation. Louganis has been accused of stealing divers from other teams.

"There's certain coaches who feel insecure about their own abilities," said Louganis, whose only previous coaching experience was working with his high school team, at Valhalla in San Diego, after returning from the 1976 Summer Olympics.

What he lacks in experience, Louganis says, he makes up for in empathy.

"I kind of speak their language," he said. "I know what it is to be afraid of a dive. I know what it's like to put a new dive in a competition. I know what it's like to feel a little insecure about a dive."

This emotional connection is important. The best athletes do not always make the best coaches because their genius is so ingrained or intuitive that they find it hard to express it in words. Even if Louganis has the answers, his style is to ask questions, to make his athletes feel as if they are co-pilots on a journey.

"I want them to understand I don't know everything," Louganis said. "I don't have a magic wand. We're in this together. A lot of times I'll say: 'How can we get you to make this adjustment? How's this going to make sense to you?'"

Megan Neyer was close to Louganis when they were divers; both qualified for the 1980 Summer Olympic team that did not compete because of the United States boycott of the Moscow Games. She was initially surprised to hear he had decided to coach. The more she considered it, the more sense it made.

"I've watched him with his dogs," she said in a telephone interview. "I think a really critical component of being a good coach is being clear in your commands, which he is

extraordinarily good at with his dogs. He's also very warm, and it's a very good balance, being clear in his expectations and using warmth to reinforce the behavior."

The youngsters in Louganis's evening group encircled him like seagulls around an abandoned picnic. Between giggles, they say he is a very nice man.

Raquel Corniuk, 14, who commutes 30 miles each way twice a week to be coached by Louganis, is quieter than her splash-free entries. She wordlessly performed one dive after another, nodding at whatever Louganis said. He recalled being the same way, to the point that his coaches told him he was difficult to coach because he was so uncommunicative.

As the practice was winding down, Corniuk smiled at a comment made by Louganis, who in turn beamed at her.

"You get her to say anything, it's a big deal," he said. "I really relate to her."

Corniuk is a national-caliber diver whose primary coach is Hongping Li, who runs a club at the University of Southern California. Hopscotching between coaches, with the blessing of each, is an arrangement that her mother, Diane, described as unprecedented in diving. Corniuk said that since she started working with Louganis, her mechanics and mental approach had improved, especially on the more difficult dives on her list.

"When I was working on my optionals and I was frustrated, he was giving me tips on what he used to do," she said. "It's stuff that's more in your head, and he says it in a way I can understand."

With the sun high in the sky on this unseasonably warm day, Louganis stepped on the one-meter springboard and performed one forward pike, followed by another. In the crowded pool, his dives barely caused a splash.