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PEOPLE OF THE BOOKS

Jewish empathy for those overcoming obstacles characterizes sketches of five San Diego athletes

San Diego's Finest Athletes: Five Exceptional Lives by Joey Seymour, Sunbelt Publications, 2009, 195 pages including endnotes and bibliography, \$17.95.

By [Donald H. Harrison](#)



SAN DIEGO—As one might expect of a master's thesis, there are 264 endnotes and a bibliography with more than 110 sources in this book. But what may be surprising is that this piece of academic research is very readable, enjoyable in fact, and chock full of quotations from articles written by local sportswriters about the five famous athletes. There's even a forward by Nick Canepa, the San Diego Union-Tribune sports columnist.

Seymour, who I'm proud to say is now a contributing writer to *San Diego Jewish World*, draws portraits of five athletes from six sports (I'll explain that seeming discrepancy in a second) who brought their ethnic, sexual, or racial pieces of the great American mosaic to additional prominence through their competitive accomplishments.

Maureen Connolly, the "Little Mo" of tennis, was one of the first women to become a national sports hero. Charlie Powell, an African-American, played pro football and was a professional boxer who even fought the future Muhammad Ali, then known as Cassius Clay. Greg Louganis, a Pacific Islander adopted by a Greek father, became the best diver the world had seen, and also was among the first sports figures to come out as a gay man. Tiffany Chin, the ice-skater, was one of the first Asian-Americans to come to prominence on the ice. And Adrian Gonzales, a Mexican-American who grew up on both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana border, has brought to baseball a quiet, born-again Christian faith.

None of these athletes is Jewish, that's true, but author Seymour is—and he brings to the book the Jewish empathy for anyone who must overcome odds because of the group that he or she was born into.

Powell was one of those phenomenal athletes who won letters in several sports in high school; upon graduation, he tried to transfer that versatility to professional sports—and though he was a good defensive end, and a good boxer—he never rose to the heights of either sport. Had he stuck just to one sport it might have been a different story.

For Louganis the drama was that he was a gay man, whose muscled physical beauty was a turn-on both for fellow gays and for women. How truthful should he be with his fans, and how would the truth affect his career?

You've heard of stage mothers; Tiffany Chin had a rink mother, who hired and fired coaches who dared to disagree with her about Tiffany's training. The pressure on the skater to excel, to win, was at times so intense, one is not surprised that sometimes in the midst of a dazzling routine she would flub a routine maneuver.

Of all the athletes, Gonzales seemed to lead the most charmed life—having excelled in baseball leagues on both sides of the border and bringing with him to the San Diego Padres an international fan base. But he also had to live with an unnerving death threat, made by an anonymous individual who was angry at Gonzales' father, who owned a Tijuana sports franchise.

The master's thesis was written at USD under the guidance of history professor Iris Engstrand – herself a great sports fan and season ticket holder. Subsequently it was published in book form by Sunbelt Publications, the same organization that published the biography I wrote five years ago about Louis Rose, San Diego's First Jewish settler, so I have a sense of some of the wonderful experiences that are in store for the first-time author. He'll have a "kick-off" party for his book from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., Thursday, Nov. 5, at the San Diego Hall of Champions. The special event admission is \$15, in return for which visitors will receive a copy of the book, "sports-themed snacks" and a tour of the museum.

In telling about the athletes' lives, Seymour noted that each had some difficulties to overcome. Connolly's parents divorced when she was four, and thereafter her father disappeared from her life, leaving her angry and determined never to lose anything again, making her among the most fierce competitors ever seen in tennis.

[Go to the top of right column](#)

In the months to come, Seymour will be making the rounds of bookstores and special interest groups, telling stories about the athletes and signing books, so if there are any synagogue Men's Clubs or Sisterhoods looking for a different kind of program, you can contact Seymour via his email, joeyseymour1@aol.com.

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[< Back to the top](#) • [Return to Main Page](#)