

*The following are two excerpts from “Odd Man Out: An Autobiography,” written by Jeff Commings.*

The Olympic Trials is already a harrowing experience without the onslaught of the media added on. The meet is the culmination of years of sacrifice and training for every swimmer there. Most people have spent their lives thinking of nothing but this meet. I was preparing to compete in my first Trials, and I walked into the natatorium at Indianapolis a little unprepared for what was to come.

I was ranked fifth in the 100 breast going into the meet, and had a very good chance of making the team. Only two people get to represent the United States in the 100 breaststroke. My coach and I believed I only needed to swim five-tenths faster than my best time to grab one of those spots. Dropping five-tenths is like kicking a little bit harder on each stroke or having a fantastic start. But nothing is guaranteed at the Olympic Trials.

About one-tenth of one percent of the competitive swimming community ever makes it to Olympic Trials, so best of the best was gathered in one place for a week. I was warming up in the same water as Janet Evans, Matt Biondi and Pablo Morales. Yes, I had rubbed shoulders with the swimming elite at previous meets, but this had a different aura from the instant I walked on the deck.

I didn't have any time to adjust to the atmosphere. The 100 breast was the first men's event, and I was swimming in the fourth heat of the preliminaries. Fifteen minutes before my race, I stood on the deck trying to focus on what needed to be done while simultaneously watching the heats of the women's 100 free.

Then Jenny Thompson broke a world record in the final preliminary heat. I was as stunned as Thompson was when the time flashed on the scoreboard and was knocked out of my present state of being. They're breaking world records in prelims! As I heard the crowd cheer for Thompson, my body started to feel heavy. The weight of the Olympic Trials had officially hit me.

I shut my eyes and tried to block out the meet for a minute. I tried to think of something soothing, but nothing was coming to mind. The crowd was so noisy it was hard to block out the cheers.

It was time to swim, but I wasn't ready. My body felt like stone as I stood behind my lane. Kirk Stackle, a Texas postgrad who I trained with for the past nine months, was in the lane next to me. I checked out other swimmers in my heat, and they looked so relaxed and calm. I was shaking so badly I thought my organs would come loose.

The referee blew the whistle, commanding us to get on the starting blocks. I was shaking so hard I thought I was going to fall off.

The starter began the race and it was over before I realized it was even happening. To say the race was a blur is an understatement. In one moment I'm standing on the starting block trying to calm my nerves. In the next instant, I'm looking at the scoreboard, wondering how it is possible that I got fourth in the heat with a time that would surely not get me the chance to swim in the final.

As I climbed out of the pool, I scanned the spectator area for my mom. She also knew I hadn't swum fast enough to make the finals, but she still gave me a smile that, for just a few moments, made me realize that the bad swim didn't signal the end of the world.

The warm-down pool at the Olympic Trials is a well of sorrows. The defeated sit on the edge of the pool, trying to find an explanation for it all. Teammates often console each other with hugs and comforting words. Some find themselves sitting alone staring blankly into space. I'd had poor swims before in my life, but this one had come so far out of left field that I couldn't fully process it. I listened as the announcer named the finalists in my event. I had placed 12th overall in the preliminaries, four places shy of a lane in the finals. In 1992, there was no semifinal race. If you didn't make the top eight after prelims in 1992, you stood on the deck watching finals with everyone else.

I sat on the edge of the warm-down pool trying to find a reason why I swam more than a second slower than my best time. Was it wrong to shave and taper for the conference meet a month earlier? I knew there was nothing I had done wrong physically or mentally. To this day, I blame Jenny Thompson. It's better than blaming myself.

---

While I was preparing for a trip home during Christmas break in 1991, I resolved to come out to my mother. I was almost 18 years old, though four months on my own wasn't long enough to make me feel like an adult. I wanted to be able to explore my sexuality in Austin once the swim season was over in March, and coming out to my family was just the step forward I needed. Once my mother knew, telling the rest of my family would be easy, and maybe telling my teammates wouldn't be so hard, either. The result of all of that would likely lead to a much happier life. But I talked myself out of it that year. Those five days at home were so wonderful. It was the first time my mother and I had seen each other since I left for college. The thought of ruining that Hallmark moment turned me into a coward.

I would talk myself out of it for eight more years. Each time, I would summon the courage to make the announcement on the last day of my trip home and make a clean getaway in case all hell broke loose. It was the thought of all hell breaking loose that scared me. I figured keeping a secret from my mother was better than never being able to talk to her again.

It wasn't a good way to live. I was hiding something from one of the closest people – if not the closest person – in my life, and it also happened to be my mother.

I could have told my brother first. I was certain Darryl wouldn't respond negatively. He could have been the test for me. But I felt strongly that my mother needed to be the first to know. The betrayal had to stop. My mother wanted me to give her grandchildren and I didn't want to keep giving her empty reasons why I wasn't continuing the bloodline. Whether or not she had a suspicion I was gay, she needed to know about this part of my life. I didn't need her approval, but I really wanted her blessing.

In 1999, I gave myself a mental slap. I was 25 years old. What was I scared of this time? I was going to St. Louis for Christmas with the family, and after the presents were opened, I was going to spill the news.

I have to thank my best friends, Patt and David, for their encouragement. David told me his coming-out to his mother was worse than he imagined, but it was a necessary thing. He now felt more comfortable in his skin, even though it meant a strained family relationship.

I had nothing to lose. I had quit my job as store manager for Blockbuster Video in Denver because I wanted to start my journalism career. I was siphoning money from my savings while I looked for work and was about a month away from moving into Patt and David's basement.

Hell breaking loose couldn't be much worse.

I waited until the night before I was to go back to Denver. My brother usually comes to the house to say goodbye before I leave, but I called him to make sure he'd be there when I made the announcement. I figured he'd make a good buffer. Or a good shield if things were thrown.

But he called to say he was tied up with work and couldn't make it. My natural instincts told me to wait until next year. But I gave myself another mental slap and walked into my mother's study, where she was playing computer games.

I sat down on her old leather rocking recliner, which was almost as old as I was. My breathing was labored. My heart raced.

"So," I said in an effort to get her attention. "Can we talk for a bit?"

The look she gave me when she turned around made me realize she had been waiting for this conversation for almost 10 years. Maybe she knew that I had been putting this off for almost 10 years and was steeling herself for the fact that I was finally going to make the announcement. If she had been expecting this talk, she didn't look too happy that it was happening.

I swallowed hard. There was no saliva in my mouth.

"Well, I'm not going to prolong this with small talk. Mom, I'm gay."