

And Then They Won Gold: Competitive Greatness



Theme I - Successful Parenting Of An Olympic Champion.

This is the first in a series of themes that author Chuck Warner discovered in the research and writing of the book, *...And Then They Won Gold: Stepping Stones To Swimming Excellence*. Highly acclaimed by swimming leaders around the world, the book is written for swimmers, coaches and parents to learn the steps to swimming excellence.

The book chronicles the development of eight great swimmers who collectively won 28 Olympic gold medals in all four of the swimming strokes and in most distances. Their careers are chronicled from their start in swimming in summer leagues, to working their way to the top of the Olympic podium.

The swimmers are: Matt Biondi, Dave Berkoff, Mike Barrowman, Josh Davis, Lenny Krayzelburg, Ian Crocker, Grant Hackett and Aaron Peirsol.

- Each of these champions had parents that were very interested and supportive of their child's sporting experience.
- For seven of the eight champions their parents coached life, not swimming.
- Their parents had high standards for the character displayed and developed by their child.
- The mothers of each of these male champions were emphasized as very important to their success.

This is a short excerpt from the chapter on eight-time Olympic gold medalist Matt Biondi with a subtitle, "A Process for Excellence." Matt was twelve years old during this scene:

In the sport of tennis it was a common sight during televised professional matches to see the players display temper tantrums and slam their rackets. Matt gave tennis a try, and during a match he became frustrated and slammed his racket on the court. His mother didn't say a word to him, but his match was over. Lucille [Biondi] walked out onto the court, grabbed Matt by the ear, pulled him to the car and drove him home. Matt's exploration into choosing a sport might be his own, but the way he conducted himself as a sportsman was fully under the guidance of his parents.

Theme II: Coach-Athlete Relationship of Olympic Champions.

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Coach-Athlete Relationship:

- Number of Coaches: The average number of coaches per athlete over the course of their career was five. Nearly all of them were interviewed, and nearly all significantly affected the success of the athlete.
- Age Group Significance: Nearly all athletes equally praised and expressed the importance of their age-group coaches as they did their senior coaches.
- Coaching Style: The most effective coaches allowed swimmers to express their personality while providing program structure and training direction.
- Coach Personalities: Different athlete personalities matched better with different coaches' personalities. Some really enjoyed a stern task master while others did not want it or seem to need it.
- Put the Athletes First: In the overwhelming majority of cases coaches put the athlete ahead of their own ego.

Shoulberg and Berkoff chapter opening:

The younger swimmers' practice at the cavernous Germantown Academy pool started precisely at 6:30 pm, and Head Coach Dick Shoulberg patrolled the pool deck. It was his domain, his classroom—every inch of it. His beard shielded his face from his swimmers' eyes. He could stare you down when he looked out of his glasses, but it was difficult for a swimmer to catch a clear look into his eyes. His voice could sound like a growl when he wanted it to. He let you know who was in charge, and when it was time to start practice, you were in the water or you heard his growl.

Hmmm ... let's see ... yes, the large red fiberglass starting block behind lane six was a perfect spot. David had used such a hiding place before at times just like now when he wasn't yet ready to take the plunge into the cool water. Even Coach Shoulberg couldn't outsmart him. David tucked himself into a small ball and cuddled up behind the side of the starting block near the corner of the pool.

"I want a 300 individual medley in reverse order," the coach barked. "First length is drill,

second is swim and the third is kick. Go on the 57.” Shoulberg liked innovation too. Why start on a round number? Anybody could do that.

The swimmers entered the water precisely on the 57 and every five seconds thereafter—that is all except for 11-year-old David Berkoff. David pressed his cheek and shoulder flat against the fiberglass block. His heart raced. He heard all the other swimmers turning and stroking but didn’t move a muscle for fear it might expose him to the sight of his new coach. Beyond the normal sounds that accompanied a collective of swimmers moving through the water, David sensed a stillness, a silence-like sensation that roared in his ears.

Where was Coach Shoulberg?

Shoulberg saw a foot sticking out from the side of the red block number six? Quietly, he bent over and picked up two hard Styrofoam kickboards and then tiptoed over near the block. He slapped the two boards together with all his might. “WHAACK!” The crack sounded like lightning had struck the very spot David was hiding. David scrambled to his feet and raced down the pool deck in the opposite direction as fast he could.

“BERKOOOFF!!!” the coach screamed in his loudest growl. Underneath the beard he couldn’t help but smile as he watched the chubby little boy scoot down the deck.

“Berkoff, in the water noooow!!” David made a leaping dive into the pool and slithered into the group of swimmers.

Later that night Shoulberg met Judge Elaine Berkoff in the hall after her son’s first session at Germantown. The coach relayed the events of the evening.

“He’s a pistol,” Elaine said.

“We’ll look after him.” And Dick Shoulberg did.

Dave Berkoff swam for 14 more years with a variety of coaches, most notably Joe Bernal at the Gator Swim Club under whose guidance he broke world records several times. But in his run at a second Olympics, he finished his career with Coach Shoulberg.

Theme III - High Goals of Olympic Champions.

This is the third in a series of themes that we discovered in the research and writing of the book *...And Then They Won Gold: Stepping Stones To Swimming Excellence*, a highly acclaimed book by swimming leaders around the world. It is written for swimmers, coaches and parents to learn the steps to swimming excellence.

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Athletes who have high goals tend to be synonymous with great achievements. We found several interesting aspects about the way these eight great swimmers created and sustained their lock on their goals.

- **Timing:** Seven of eight swimmers began to see themselves achieving very high goals several years before achieving them. However, one individual never thought about the Olympics until a year before setting a world record and winning an Olympic gold medal.
- **Limits:** No athlete ever exceeded their goals.
- **Visible:** A few athletes posted goals in their bedroom.
- **Source:** Only a few coaches initiated a high goal such as competing at the Olympics, but in most cases the coach planted the “Olympic seed” and nurtured it.

Aaron Peirsol moved into the senior group at the Irvine Novas as a 13-year-old. There were four years to the Sydney Olympics. That fall, Coach Dave Salo presented Aaron with the goal of earning a spot on the 2000 USA Olympic Team. A few weeks later this was the scene at practice:

On a dark, cold night at practice that season, the senior group had trained for two hours, and Aaron was exhausted. They had just completed a test set of 3 x 300s on 5:00. Everyone was dismissed except for Aaron. Coach Salo asked him to stay in the water. Dave was clearly unhappy with Aaron's performance.

“Aaron, I want you to do another,” Dave told him.

“I'll do my best,” Aaron responded respectfully. Aaron swam again. Dave wasn't satisfied.

“Let's do another,” Dave ordered. Aaron swam another 300, but it wasn't faster.

“Let’s do another,” Dave said again.

Aaron thought to himself, “What do you want from me?” But he swam another, and it was no faster. Aaron touched the wall and Dave knelt down at the side of the pool in front of him.

“Listen,” Dave said to him. “You have the ability over the next four years to do something really special. Our goal is for you to make an Olympic Team. In order to do that you have to train like Jeff Rouse and Brad Bridgewater [former world record holders] did when they were here.” Aaron knew those names and respected them greatly. He fed off his coach’s belief in him and the excitement over the prospect of being able to reach his special goal. He intensified his training to get there.

Aaron Peirsol went on to win five Olympic gold medals and become the greatest backstroker in the world.

Theme IV - Family Size and Competitiveness

This is the fourth in a series of themes that we discovered in the research and writing of the book *...And Then They Won Gold: Stepping Stones To Swimming Excellence*, a highly acclaimed book by swimming leaders around the world. It is written for swimmers, coaches and parents to learn the steps to swimming excellence.

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The highly competitive character of an athlete was found to be one of the most important qualities in their successes. In the process of researching and writing the book *Four Champions, One Gold Medal* (the story of the race for the gold medal in the 1500 meter freestyle at the Montreal Olympics), it seemed obvious that the fiercely competitive nature of the four swimmers came in part from competing with their older siblings in their homes that averaged 3.5 children.

Over many decades the average family size has become smaller. Among the reasons for smaller families today are the rise in cost of keeping a home and both spouses working. Logic suggests that smaller families could decrease the competitive nature of children. Here are a few facts on family size and the competitive nature of the eight athletes chronicled in the book *...And Then They Won Gold: Stepping Stones To Swimming Excellence Volume I*:

Single Children: None.

Children Per Family: An average of 2.4 per family. Four of the athletes were the oldest, one in the middle and three the youngest.

First Borns: It has been well documented that the oldest child in a family tends to be more cerebral. One explanation is that they tend to spend more time getting feedback from, and interacting with, one's parents when they are a young child. Supporting this argument is the fact that 21 of the first 23 astronauts, over half the U.S. Presidents and 55% of all Supreme Court Justices were firstborn children. Although this trend toward cerebral strength held up in our study of these athletes, they were still very, very competitive.

Those Led to Swimming by an Older Sibling: All four of those that weren't the oldest became involved in competitive swimming because of an older sibling. Although Aaron Peirsol was the oldest of two biological children (and in the middle of a family with two other step-children), he was motivated in part to become involved in competitive swimming because of his mother's enjoyment of swimming.

Each of our athletes in the book has a subtitle or nickname for their story. Mike Barrowman's is "The Competitor." Here is an excerpt from *...And Then They Won Gold* that helps illustrate how he displayed this quality as a young boy:

Almost any game was of interest to Mike, and his parents saw value in exposing him to lots of them. He played softball, football and soccer. He was a Boy Scout too. He loved the competition in each sport and was competent in everything he tried. He wasn't sure which sport to focus on yet, but continued to invite his sister into matches of skill at home. Sometimes breakfast at the Barrowmans included more than food. It could also be a contest.

"You want to race?" Mike asked Sophia.

Sophia matched Mike's snake-eyed stare. She wrapped her little fingers and hand around her orange juice glass just like her older brother.

At 10 years of age, Mike was a man of the world to Sophia. He held his glass up and touched hers.

"Go!" Mike yelled.

The two threw back their heads and guzzled their orange juice as fast as they could. "I won, I won!" Sophia leapt with excitement. "That's the first time I've won!"

"Come on, you two." Mom was referee again.

Mike sneered. "Soph, look."

"What? Look at what?" Sophia asked.

Her older brother matter-of-factly pointed out the truth while he shook his head, "You've still got drops of juice in your glass."

Sophia looked at the bottom of her glass in horror.

"Sorry, you lose, Sis."

Mike Barrowman competed and climbed his way through age-group swimming. He became a junior national champion, then a national champion and eventually an Olympic champion. He owned the world record in the 200-meter breaststroke from 1989 through 2002 until Kosuke Kitajima finally broke it. An assessment of Mike's physical characteristics finds a young man that never grew to six feet in height and didn't have any exceptional physical gifts such as superior strength, large hands or feet. It was his competitive zeal that burned inside him so strongly he became the very best in the world for a long period of time.

Theme V - Hard Work

This is the fifth in a series of themes that we discovered in the research and writing of the book ...*And Then They Won Gold: Stepping Stones To Swimming Excellence*, a highly acclaimed book by swimming leaders around the world. It is written for swimmers, coaches and parents to learn the steps to swimming excellence.

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There are many factors that Olympic champions grow from: talent, opportunity, competitiveness, self-image and self-reliance are some of the most critical. But none is more critical than plain old hard work. In the eight short biographies of the athletes in ...*And Then They Won Gold*, there are many different time tables for when that hard work began and how it was conducted. Here is a summary of some of the factors.

When: Each of our eight Olympic champions was on their own time table of hard work. From as young as thirteen to as old as a sophomore in college they made a decision to train very hard.

How Often: During the years immediately prior to achieving Olympic success each athlete trained 9 practices or more per week.

How Far: The range per week during the hardest weeks of the year was from about 45,000 meters to about 75,000 meters. Grant Hackett, the greatest distance swimmer in history didn't necessarily train the longest. For several years, backstroke king Lenny Krayzelburg had that distinction.

Training Partners: Most of the athletes had good training environments in their years leading up to their first Olympics. This included good training partners most of the time, but not always. Occasionally the coach and clock became the only standard to measure hard work.

One of America's true sprint successes was 100-meter butterfly world record-holder and three-time Olympic gold medal winner Ian Crocker. Despite his talent for speed, there were times in high school when he did massive amounts of work, especially during the winter breaks. This included 20x200s butterfly. Here is an excerpt from ...*And Then They Won Gold* during his sophomore year of high school:

During the holidays in December of 1997, a Canadian team came down for a short training camp with the Porpoise team's older swimmers. The combined group was able to use the Riverton pool, which meant 25-meter training as well as the use of starting blocks and six lanes with lane-lines! It was a glorious upgrade from the Reiche pool. For an extra challenge, the group tackled 100 x 100s. After the long and difficult set there

remained 40 minutes in the extended three-hour practice.

“Good job everyone!” Coach Powers affirmed. “We have 40 minutes remaining and we’re going to do some easy swimming as a recovery from that great set.”

“Sharon, how about if I do a ‘get out’ swim?” Ian proposed.

Sharon consulted with the visiting coach. Then she asked Ian, “What do you have in mind?”

“How ‘bout we cut that warm-down in half if I better a certain time?” Ian asked.

Sharon consulted again with the visiting coach. “Under 53 for 100 meters.”

“But that’s like 47 in a 100-yard free!” Ian argued.

The coaches stood their ground. The team moved out of the center lane and began slapping kick boards on the water and cheering in support of Ian. He got out of the pool and shook his hands to loosen up his forearms. He adjusted his goggles. The coaches cleared their watches. Ian stepped up on the block.

“Take your mark!” Sharon commanded. “Go!”

With the prospect of getting out of practice 20 minutes early, the two teams cheered madly. Ian raced against time. He loved this sort of challenge. When he touched the wall every swimmer was silent in anticipation. Did he make it?

The Canadian coach and Sharon compared watches. The Canadian coach yelled, “51.6!” The teams went crazy. It may have been a dark, cold December day in Maine, but in that moment Ian Crocker was a hero in the swimming pool.

Ian Crocker made his first Olympic team as a senior in high school. It was the first time a swimmer from the state of Maine ever made an Olympic team. At 17-years old, he was a part of the USA gold medal 400 medley relay at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Theme VI - BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL SWIMMER

This is the sixth in a series of themes that we discovered in the research and writing of the book *...And Then They Won Gold: Stepping Stones To Swimming Excellence*, a highly acclaimed book by swimming leaders around the world. It is written for swimmers, coaches and parents to learn the steps to swimming excellence.

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In 1988 Matt Biondi, along with his friend and rival Tom Jager, pioneered professional swimming in the United States. Each of our swimmers in *...And Then They Won Gold* embarks on the pursuit of a post graduate professional career in some form.

A few fast facts on how they began as a professional swimmer:

Accomplishments: They were an Olympic gold medal winner or a prospective one by virtue of a world record holder.

Least Income: USA Swimming stipend per month that in the early 1990s was a approximately \$1500 per month.

Most Income: This is hard to say exactly, but in our study this is likely Grant Hackett in Australia where swimming stars are handsomely rewarded. Most of our swimmers earned \$100,000 or more.

Income Sources: Federation, sponsors and clinics are most common. For someone like Grant Hackett he was a regular on television doing commercials. Aaron Peirsol endorsed a variety of products. Swim suit contracts were high and more widespread in the late 1990s and through 2008 or so, than they seem to be today.

Interesting Income: Perhaps Lenny Krayzelburg, who was on several TV game shows after the 2000 Olympics. Lenny was also on the cover of TV Guide leading into the Sydney Games.

Following the 1996 Olympics, triple gold medal winner Josh Davis sought a way to continue to swim while earning income to support his new bride and forthcoming family. This excerpt demonstrates the struggle and serendipity of finding his way.

In February he was offered a second appearance. There was a huge hot-tub show in the area and Josh was hired by a hot-tub company to sit in the tub and sign autographs for two days. He lingered in the tub and smiled and waved at the people passing by. If they stopped, he signed autographs and chatted. During his breaks he walked from booth to booth shamelessly asking for free handouts of power bars, towels or anything that the various hot-tub sponsors would give him. There was an engaging young man working at

a shoe booth and they struck up a conversation. His name was Evan Morgenstein. When Josh continued on his way, Evan followed him and they exchanged their contact information. A few days later Evan called Josh on the phone: "I've got three deals for you." He listed off the deals for Josh, which amounted to more work than from all the time he had spent with [his current agent] Billy Stapleton's firm.

Josh Davis was poor and hungry for a means to make a living and swim. But he was also very loyal. He wrestled with the idea of accepting work with Evan or waiting for it from Billy. Finally, he called his father for advice.

"Dad, I'm really torn. I made a commitment to Billy Stapleton and his firm to work with them. But I'm not getting any work," Josh told him. "I have the chance to work with another agent with some opportunities that seem promising."

Mike Davis told his son, "You're responsible for your family now, Josh. You need to provide for them and if there's work you should take it."

Josh called Billy Stapleton, apologized for leaving his company but explained that he could get work through Evan Morgenstein and needed to accept it.

Josh and Evan immediately began a clinic company and set up dates for Josh to visit local clubs. The concept wasn't new, but Josh's love of teaching, children and superb public speaking skills produced a budding product that would serve swimming and his family wonderfully for years to come. Josh found through the clinics that he was more than just a great teammate, but an inspirational leader of thousands of young swimmers throughout the country.

Josh Davis continues to operate a thriving clinic business today and Evan Morgenstein has become one of the leading agents for Olympic athletes in the world.

Theme VII - COMPETITIVE GREATNESS

By Chuck Warner//Special Contributor

This is the seventh and final article in a series of themes that we discovered in the research and writing of the book *...And Then They Won Gold: Stepping Stones To Swimming Excellence*, a highly acclaimed book by swimming leaders around the world.

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It probably isn't a surprise to anyone who follows sports or swimming that the best athletes tend to perform at their best under pressure.

The concept of "competitiveness greatness" might be described nicely in John Wooden's famed Pyramid of Success as, "Being at your best, when your best is needed."

However, the objective of our book is to see how this quality develops in champions from a young age to a mature athlete. The development of competitive greatness in any swimmer is seldom accomplished without failures. Each of our eight subjects in the book had challenges to overcome to perform at their best in the most critical situations. Some had many failures before having success.

Did these athletes get nervous? Yes! All of them! But they gradually became more comfortable at higher levels. Many were terribly nervous just before winning Olympic gold medals.

How did they deal with nervousness? Different athletes had different methods, but all developed their ability to establish a comfort zone in the most competitive situations.

What obstacles did they have in competitive situations? Injuries and health came up at inopportune times for some. Below is one of the most dramatic examples.

This excerpt is taken from the story of Australian Grant Hackett. A great argument can be made that he is the greatest male distance swimmer in the history of the sport of swimming to date.

2004 OLYMPIC GAMES – Athens, Greece

By February of the late Australian summer of 2004, as a result of pushing himself relentlessly in preparation for the Athens Games, [Grant] Hackett was suffering from breathing problems. He was hospitalized for a bronchial condition. The chronic problem did not abate, and between February and the August Olympics he had been through 15 rounds of antibiotics but was still unable to shake the problem. By the time he had landed in Athens, fluid had entered one of his lungs. The lung was partially collapsed and functioning at 25 percent of its full capacity. He and Coach Cotterell kept the extent and severity of his condition secret from the Australian medical team for fear that to protect his health or even his life they might not let him swim in the Games.

... (we pick up the story a little bit later)

Thus far in the Olympic Games there seemed to be little reason to doubt Grant Hackett's health status based on his performances. But the 1500 requires the greatest amount of aerobic capacity in any of the events in pool swimming and far more than a 400 or 200-meter freestyle. (The efficiency of one's lungs is critical to producing the energy necessary for success.) In the heats, he qualified third with a time of 15:01.89. There were two young guns, each six years Grant's junior, Larsen Jensen (15:03.75) from the USA, and David Davies (14:57.03) from Great Britain who swam well in the preliminaries. They saw the target on the champion's back, sighted on it, and were ready to attack. He would need to dig down deep to win the gold medal.

In an interview with Swimming World Magazine the previous year he had explained his mental toughness: "There is nothing better than practical experience to develop mental toughness—far better than reading about it in books ... I've had to deal with competitive pressures—in particular, having to perform at the Sydney Olympics with glandular fever along with the huge national expectations. I was considered the lowest odds to win the 1500, and I've dealt with that and come out successfully on the other side."

On August 14th, the 1500 was an intense race from start to finish. Afterward, reporters wrote of Grant Hackett: "It is the toughest race of his life, one that tears off the mystique enshrouding this event. Grant has to work for this one—hard. And the winner is in doubt until the final few strokes." The scoreboard read 1 – Grant Hackett 14:43.40 Olympic Record; 2 – Larsen Jensen 14:45.29; and 3 – David Davies 14:45.95.

Grant Hackett's emotional face at the finish was near tears. His body was wracked with pain. He was still the best in the world, even when he wasn't at his best. He never mentioned his illness until November.

Over the next four years Grant Hackett pursued his dream of becoming the first swimmer to ever win three 1500s at the Olympics.

The author is Chuck Warner, who has also written the highly regarded book *Four Champions, One Gold Medal*, the story of the preparation and race for the gold medal in the 1500-meter freestyle at the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

