

Reflections on the Olympic Trials

By Coach Michael

Everyone here is at the elite level. Everyone here has worked hard and done very well for a long time (local superstars). Everyone here has put a lot of time and effort into his swimming. Everyone here is a high achiever and expects a lot from himself. Everyone here cares immensely about how he performs. And the Trials comes around only once every four years. That is a recipe for pressure and everything that attends on it, positive and negative. The pressure inherent in the situation spurred many athletes on to greatness, and pushed just as many to melt.

In many events, there were two clear favorites coming in to the Trials – swimmers who over the past year or two had separated themselves from the chase group. But in many cases “newcomers”, or at least swimmers who had previously been far back from these favorites, over the past few months had made major charges forward, and by the Trials prelims they had closed the gap entirely and had even gone to the front. This put serious mental (and physical) pressure on the preemptive favorites. Sometimes they could respond, but often they could not: they had done their fastest swimming a year or two out, and the swimmers who chose this summer to peak made the team.

Rachel Komisarz and **Natalie Coughlin** have been the fastest 100 flyers in the country the past few years, and were the prohibitive favorites to make the team. Then Natalie decided not to swim the 100 fly, and suddenly the game was wide open. A **Tennessee girl**, Christine Magnuson, was very fast in the prelims, narrowly missing the American record, while Komisarz looked flat – is Komisarz keeping her powder dry, or is she folding under the pressure??? Several previously “second tier” girls stepped up and put even more pressure on Komisarz, and in the final **Elaine Breden**, a strong flyer from Kentucky/Stanford blasted past everyone, and along with Magnuson punched her ticket to Beijing. A year ago, or even six months ago, this result would have seemed impossible.

Coughlin and **Katie Hoff** have been the best 200 freestylers over the past couple of years. Then Coughlin decided not to swim it at Trials, and suddenly, once again, the game was wide open. **Allison Schmitt** from Wolverine, who has been improving like crazy recently, stepped into the gap in the prelims and unsettled the veterans. Schmitt kept up her fast swimming, and Coughlin only very narrowly touched her out in the final. Newcomer Allison Schmitt makes the Olympic team.

Coughlin bypassed the 200 free to swim the 200 IM on the same days. She had never been known as an IM'er, and until last month, when she broke the American record in the event, had not even competed in the IM in several years. Obviously she has a very strong fly, and back, and free, but a very suspect breaststroke. But she chose to swim the IM. The usual suspects made the final, and Ariana Kukors looked very strong, along with Hoff and Coughlin. In the final, Coughlin crushed everyone on the fly, looked alright but not great on the back (it is a very different thing to swim back right after fly, as compared

with back by itself), then got hauled in by Hoff and Kukors on the breast. It was a three way sprint the entire last 50, and with five meters left, Hoff and Kukors had a clear lead. Then Kukors made three major mistakes, gave away an Olympic berth, and made her coaches sick: she breathed twice inside the flags, interrupting her stroke rhythm, and short-stroked the finish with her head up. Her coach is a friend of mine, and I felt sick in empathy. Kukors will be replaying that finish in her head for the next sixty years.

Davis Tarwater has been the second best American 200 flyer for the past four years, after **Michael Phelps**, of course. Tarwater has been Phelps' teammate at Wolverine/Michigan, has trained with him every day, and was obviously a favorite to make the team. He swam well in prelims and semis, but so, too, did **Gil Stovall** from Georgia. Both Tarwater and Stovall swam best times and looked very good going in to the final. At the 150 mark, Tarwater looked like he had it. But Stovall closed very fast, Tarwater tightened up, and a few seconds later Stovall had realized his dream and Tarwater's was shattered.

In the prelims of the women's 100 back, **Haley McGregory** from Texas, who has been improving rapidly ever since Kirsty Coventry came to Texas to train with coach Kim Brackin, broke the world record and looked wonderful doing it. A minute and a half later, **Natalie Coughlin** took the record back by swimming a tenth faster than McGregory had. These two obviously established their bona fides for an Olympic spot. **Margaret Hoelzer**, formerly of Auburn but now training with King Aquatics in Seattle, looked strong, but she's never shown that much speed in the 100, so she was considered a long shot. But in the final Coughlin went out crazy fast, McGregory went with her, and Hoelzer waited for McGregory to fade, which she did in the last ten meters. Hoelzer snuck in and made the team in her "off" event. And McGregory, who had broken the world record the day before, will probably be staying home: she's not nearly as strong in the 200.

15-year old Elizabeth Beisel was usually known as a 200 backstroker: she has lead the "second tier" of backstrokers, in the 2:11 range, over the past couple of years. But she comes from an IM-oriented program and has been working on all four strokes, improving her weaknesses, and expanding her event program. In the prelims of the 400 IM she qualified second, behind favorite Katie Hoff, and thoroughly confused the issue of who would make the team. In events of 400 and longer there are no semis, and the prelims and finals are swum on the same day, so a few hours later Beisel swam the race of her life, dropped another four seconds, and pushed Hoff, hard, to a world record. Beisel "came out of nowhere", ran past several "favorites", and made the Olympic team in an "off" event.

In the men's 200 breast, **Brendan Hansen** was an absolute lock; the real question was who would be in the second position: **Eric Shanteau**, Hansen's teammate, has pushed Hansen hard recently; **Scott Spann**, another of Hansen's teammates, just finished his freshman year at Michigan and has been improving continually; **Giordan Poglioli** has been in the front ranks for years, as has 2004 Olympian **Scott Usher**. The battle for second was joined, with no clear favorite. In the final, Hansen was narrowly in first at

the 150 mark, with Shanteau right at his shoulder. Then, instead of Hansen surging ahead, Shanteau picked up his pace, and Spann shot by both of them. At about the 175 mark it was clear that Hansen was fading, and badly, and that multiple swimmers would be going by him. I felt sick to my stomach. Spann held on for the win, his first in major competition, Shanteau was second, and Hansen finished back in fourth. The entire coaches and swimmers section of the stands went dead silent. This could NOT be happening!?!? Later that evening and the next day, a Japanese camera crew was dogging Hansen, wanting to grill him about miserably failing in his attempt to unseat Kitajima for the Olympic crown.

In the women's 100 breast, there were six or seven girls who had realistic shots at making the team, with no clear favorite, and no one near the Aussie Leisel Jones' recent times or world records. The prelims and semis did no more to clarify the situation, as everyone was close and no one was very fast. In the final, former world record holder **Jessica Hardy** went out crazy fast, well ahead of world record pace, and it looked like the lifeguards would have to pry her off the pool bottom with a putty knife at the 75 meter mark. Not surprisingly, she started fading – but how much, and who would take advantage? The rest of the field was pretty even, Hardy held on for the win, and **Megan Jendrick** (nee Quann, the Olympic champion in 2000) from King touched out Stanford's **Tara Kirk** by .01 second. Hardy was ecstatic, Jendrick was ecstatic, and Kirk was demolished mentally: she swam the 200 breast a couple of days later, an event where she was on the short list to make the team, and did not even make the semis – mentally she gave up after her disappointment in the 100.

In the summer of 2006, **Cullen Jones** appeared “out of nowhere” on the sprint scene and won both Nationals and Pan-Pacifcics. Then, just as quickly as he appeared, he vanished. Recently, he switched clubs, to Mecklenburg in Charlotte, NC, and started swimming fast again. In the prelims of the 50 free, he looked tremendous and broke the American record, with five or six very strong sprinters right behind him, including one double Olympic champion and one world champion. In the final, the entire field looked even all the way to the last yard or two, when Texas' **Garrett Weber-Gale** out touched **Ben Wildman-Tobriner** from Stanford. American record holder Jones finished third; Olympic champion Gary Hall Jr. finished fourth. When Garrett got out of the pool, he ran over to the coaches' section, jumped over the railing, and hugged his coaches Eddie Reese and Chris Kubik. I expect the same four years from now.

The men's 100 free saw three American records set: first **Jason Lezak** in the prelims, then **Garrett Weber-Gale** one minute later in the prelims, then Lezak again in the semis, with a time only narrowly missing the world record. Now we come to the finals, and Lezak has a reputation for fading under pressure: can he hang on and make the team? It wasn't clear until you looked at the scoreboard, because six swimmers all swam the last twenty-five meters together and seemingly touched together. Weber-Gale first, in a much slower time than the day before; Lezak second, in a much slower time than the day before.

World champion runner-up **Kim Vandenburg** and world short course champion **Mary Descenza** have ruled the American 200 fly scene for the past few years, swimming in the 2:06 to 7 range while the rest of the pack was back at 2:09 to 11. They seemed clear favorites. But **Elaine Breeden**, fresh off her Olympic spot in the 100 fly, was feeling her oats, **Kathleen Hersey** from Atlanta was looking good, a new kid on the block from San Diego, **Tanya Krisman**, dropped a ton to make the finals, and going in to the final there were five or six girls with good shots at making the top two. The favorites were no longer the favorites. Breeden took it out fast, as usual, and Descenza and Vandenburg went out slow, as usual, but the latter two didn't have their superstrong last 100's as usual, and Breeden hung on for the win and Hersey snuck in for second. If Descenza and Vandenburg had gone anywhere near their best times, they would have made the team; they didn't.

It doesn't matter how fast your seed time is, it doesn't matter how fast you swim in the prelims, and it doesn't matter how fast you swim in the semis: if you don't finish in the top two in the finals, you stay home.

Emily Silver from Cal qualified for the team in the 400 free relay, then broke her hand (probably) in the 50 free at the finish. Depending on the ruling from her doctor, she may have to stay home and watch the Olympics on television, and Kara Lynn Joyce of Georgia may take her place. Luck/fortune plays a part, and things are not "fair."

Miscalculation? **Ryan Lochte** swam in the early rounds of the 200 free and swam very fast, then chose to scratch the final and concentrate on the 100 back the same day. His thinking, apparently, was, "I'm going to be named to the 800 free relay on the strength of my prelim time [he is most certainly correct about that], I'm not sure I can beat Phelps in the 200 free [he may be correct about that], I'm pretty sure I can win the 100 back, and if I do I will be named to the 400 medley relay, so that I am trading a gold and silver for three golds." He turned out to be dead wrong about the 100 back, where he finished behind Peirsol, who broke the world record, and Matt Grevers, who came on very strong at the end. So he turned out to be wrong about his medal count; now he is probably looking at a gold in the relay and nothing else, at least from these events.

The top swimmers were, generally, much looser and more relaxed in the prelims: they were going to make the semis, so there isn't much pressure and they can swim relaxed, which in most cases means fast. In the semis the situation changes: there are a lot of fast swimmers vying for eight spots in the final. The very best swimmers are still in their comfort zone, but there is a greater sense of urgency, and the combination often produces the fastest times of the meet. But in the final there is tension everywhere: this one counts: if I want to go to Beijing, I have to be great right now!! The atmosphere in the warmdown pool (behind the competition pool) is tense; the atmosphere in the swimmers' and coaches' section is tense; the atmosphere in the ready room (where the finalists wait before parading out for the finals) is tense. Very few swimmers can keep themselves calm through this final step of the game – those are the ones who rise to another level of performance in the finals. Even veterans, even national champions, even world champions, vanish mentally and physically under the pressure of a Trials final.

The pressure and tension built over the course of the meet, as people's opportunities to make the team dwindled. By the last day or two, many of the competitors who had expected to make the team but who had not yet done so were wild-eyed and frantic. Back in the warm down area, there were a lot of coaches talking a lot of swimmers down off the ledge.

There were many many heartbreaks, with favorites failing in their best events to make the team. What happened afterwards was fascinating: some of these swimmers gave up, and either badly bombed in later events, or even scratched the rest of the meet; but some of them got back up and kept fighting, hard, even in weaker events.

As an example of a fighter, **Ariana Kukors**, a favorite to make the team in the 400 IM, bombed badly and finished well off the pace. Then she raised her game, swam beautifully in the 200 IM (not as strong an event for her), with five meters to go had a spot on the team, then breathed twice inside the flags, short-stroked her finish, and allowed Natalie Coughlin to sneak her hand on the wall before her: another disappointment, even more huge. Then later in the meet, in the 200 breast, a weaker event for her, she fought like crazy and made the finals in the 200 breast, where she acquitted herself very well.

Some swimmers swam great and made headlines and seemed to come "out of nowhere", such as Elizabeth Beisel, Allison Schmitt, Scott Spann, etc. But they only showed up suddenly because we don't see them everyday. If we had seen their daily training and their performances in minor meets, and had seen their continual and rapid improvement over the last year, their "breakouts" at the Olympic Trials would not seem so surprising.

There was a lot of good, fast racing, and a few very happy swimmers and coaches afterwards, but there was an undercurrent of disappointment – two swimmers make the team, all the rest do not. That is a shame, given the caliber of the athletes and of the performances. The dominant feeling should have been a celebration of accomplishment.

All bets are off. Just because someone is a favorite does not mean he will swim well at the Trials and make the team. In many many instances, if the favorites had simply swum their times coming in to the meet, they would have made the team; but they swam slower, and lower seeded swimmers swam through them.

I am really impressed with the depth of American swimming. In only a few events have one or two swimmers truly separated themselves from the pack (most notably in the men's IM's, where Phelps and Lochte play with the rest like a cat with a mouse); in all the rest, we have a fairly large number of swimmers who are bunched at a high level of performance. There were a lot of young kids – 15 to 18 year old girls, 16 to 19 year old boys – who stepped up and announced by their performances that they will be players over the next four years. Most of the semifinalists and finalists were college swimmers and post-graduates, but in each heat there were a few of these up-and-comers who stood out.

Aaron Peirsol re-established his racing toughness, if anyone doubted him after last summer's loss to Lochte in the 200 back at worlds. In the 100, he floated through the prelims and semis, then charged to a world record in the final, followed very closely by Northwestern standout now training with Arizona Matt Grevers, then Randall Bal, who had scared the world record in the semis, but who has a history of falling just short when it matters, and of losing to Peirsol when it matters. Then in the 200, Peirsol floated through the prelims and semis, and looked 195 meters in to the final like he would lose to Lochte, who was strong on the swim and superhuman on his walls, then Peirsol somehow, passing human understanding, got his hand on the wall .02 before Lochte, and tied Lochte's world record from last summer.

The men's 200 IM saw Michael Phelps and **Ryan Lochte** dominate the prelims, semis, and finals, with Lochte, as usual, pushing Phelps hard all the way to the end, and Phelps, as usual, touching first at the finish, this time with a new world record. So Lochte, within thirty minutes, recorded two second-place finishes, and pushed first Peirsol and then Phelps to world records. It was a very difficult double, and all told, maybe more impressive than the two swims he followed to the wall.

The women's 200 back was wide open, with world champion Margaret Hoelzer the favorite coming in, but looking sluggish in the prelims. Elizabeth Beisel, fresh off her 400 IM swim, was obviously swimming huge, and Hayley McGregory, smarting from falling short in the 100 back, was on a mission. Mary Descenza rounded out the usual suspects. In the final, McGregory went out crazy fast – she was either going to have a spectacular swim or die a very painful death on the last fifty. Hoelzer, who showed in the 100 that she has been working on her speed, went out fast but more prudently; Beisel doesn't have much speed and was a clear third. Over the course of the last 100, Hoelzer turned on the jets and blazed past McGregory, who started fading fast the last length, and Beisel, who ALWAYS finishes well, ran past McGregory in the last ten meters. Hoelzer took down the world record, set by Coventry at the Missouri Grand Prix meet, and Beisel showed that she will vie for the Olympic championship a month from now. She is on fire. McGregory got her best time, again, and swam a thoroughly gutsy and courageous race, but fell just short, again. Everyone, and I mean everyone, wanted her to make the team.

Erik Vendt has been on fire all spring and summer, swimming best times by wide margins in the 400, 800, and 1500 freestyles, and scaring the American record in the mile a couple of times. He was the head and shoulders favorite to win the mile and go to Beijing. His teammate **Peter Vanderkaay** was much better at the 200 and 400 frees than the mile, and American record holder **Larsen Jensen** appeared to have been doing more sprint training than distance, as witnessed by his 400 free victory early in the meet. So Vendt had a spot on the team locked up. Then the final started. Jensen was out fast, with Vanderkaay and Vendt swimming together. At about the halfway point, Vanderkaay picked up his pace, Vendt slowed his down, and the former swam through Jensen with a wicked last 400 meters. So another sure thing wasn't, as Vendt faded to fourth.

At Trials, the uncertainty is almost overwhelming. Who is going to step up and swim fastest when it counts? You never know. A very few superduperstars seem to always get their hands on the wall first – Phelps, Peirsol, Coughlin, Hoff – and that tendency to come through in the clutch is what makes them superduperstars. The rest, including many truly great swimmers who at times produce stunning swims, are more inconsistent, and that gives the Trials its special gut-wrenching eight days of tension.

When swimmers made the team, their coaches were just as jubilant as the athletes; when swimmers fell just short, their coaches were just as dejected. And with coaches who had several potential Olympians on their squads, the eight days of Trials were an emotional roller-coaster, superhighs when a swimmer came through and made the team, superlows when a swimmer finished just out of the picture. The highs and the lows are both parts of it.