

THE TRUE GLAMOUR OF EVERYDAY EXCELLENCE

When we think of Michael Phelps or Natalie Coughlin, we think of the world records and the gold medals. We remember the spectacle of the Olympics, with a huge swimming complex, television cameras everywhere, hundreds of reporters from every country, thousands of long-lensed photographers trying to catch “the shot,” twenty thousand spectators from all over the world, the parades of finalists in their nations’ uniforms, announcements of every swimmer’s accomplishments, incredible tension and excitement as each race marked the culmination of years of work for each athlete. We watched race after race pitting the eight fastest athletes in the world against each other, that opportunity spurring them to greatness – and the result was world record after world record, swimmers celebrating, spectators going crazy in the stands, and commentators competing for the largest hyperboles.

It is all very glamorous and exciting, the life of Michael Phelps or Natalie Coughlin. Great athletes seem to inhabit another world, almost or completely removed from our humdrum. They are glamorous; we’re ordinary. They do extraordinarily things; we do the routine. They just seem different from us. The problem is, the very public two minutes when they are racing for world championships hides the very private four years of work that brought it about. The last step to the summit of Everest is remembered, the long preparation and strenuous climb forgotten. We need to remember that, because when great athletes are getting better, they are just like us.

Michael Phelps, and Natalie Coughlin, and Ryan Lochte, and all the rest that we read about or watch on television, train every day, usually twice a day. And when Michael Phelps trains, there are no television cameras following his every move, watching every repeat of a grueling set. There are no reporters wanting to ask what he ate for breakfast or how he compares with Mark Spitz. No mother in the stands crying with every medal. No spectators crowding the stands and wanting his autograph. No parades of smart-looking athletes to the blocks. The glamour and excitement is gone, and we are left with the day to day ordinariness of practicing. In fact, when Michael Phelps trains, it looks exactly like it does when we train: a few coaches on deck praising good repeats and yelling about poor ones, training groups of swimmers in the water, a few pace clocks measuring time and achievement, empty bleachers, a few people watching from behind the glass...

It all seems very ordinary – surely there is more to it? But this is where excellence happens. This is where Michael Phelps creates the physical and mental capacities that allow him to swim a 4:03 in the IM in Beijing. This is where Natalie Coughlin perfects her underwater dolphins that allow her to hold off Kirsty Coventry in the Olympic final. This is where Ryan Lochte works on his stroke in hopes of taking down Aaron Peirsol. – This is where swimmers get better.

And while it may not have all the artificial excitement and glamour of an Olympics televised all over the world, the daily training has its own excitement, as swimmers push themselves to swim faster than ever before – every day – as they work to improve their

weaknesses – every day – as they build strength – every day – as they strive for perfection and hold themselves to the highest standards – every day. Improving every day, getting a little bit faster, a little bit more beautiful and efficient in the water, a little bit tougher mentally and physically: all this brings satisfaction, pleasure, and excitement. And without the hard daily work of getting a tiny bit better with every practice, there is no Michael Phelps or Natalie Coughlin to cheer for, and we're watching another boring Law & Order re-run on television, instead of breathlessly watching a swimming meet from Beijing.

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29 April 2009