

Matt Biondi – a swimmer, a teacher, a leader

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“Summer had her five events, and she was getting beat by the Chinese, who had numerous swimmers testing positive for doping within two years, but the press was hammering her because she kept losing. After she got the silver medal in the 200 IM, she was sitting there, crying with her head down, in her Olympic sweats with an Olympic silver medal around her neck. I walked over and I just said ‘I’m proud of you. There are millions of young girls in America that have been inspired by you and you’ve got one more race, and just go out and do your best,’ though she never looked up and didn’t stop crying. Summer ended up winning that race, leading from start to finish.”

“Our Olympic team was gathering for the last time and Summer was like in a daze and when she saw me, she hurried

over and gave me a big hug and she whispered in my ear, ‘I never could have done it without you.’ I had been kind of on the outside so that was a real turning point for me and encapsulated my career. I had started by watching and learning from people and then ending by being able to help somebody do a little bit better.”

So upset at his mistreatment, Biondi left swimming and began to utilize his degree in Political Economy of Industrialized Societies to teach both history and math.

Though he stopped swimming competitively, Biondi still found a way to stay connected with the water. “I had more than a dozen experiences with dolphins, right whales, orcas and even fin whales in the Sea of Cortez. I was on a research boat for about five years out of Hawaii swimming with humpback whales underwater which I like to show when I speak to

young groups.”

Being in the zone is described as the pinnacle of achievement for an athlete and characterizes a state in which an athlete performs to the best of his or her ability. It’s a rare situation when it absolutely comes together for a competitor.

Despite being so successful, when Biondi looks back, he can only find one time when everything came together in every aspect of his performance. “It’s called optimal experience and it’s about a time I had where I felt in complete mastery,” Biondi said. “It only happened once. It was so strong and powerful; it just consumed my whole body and I had nothing but endless energy. It was at the Olympic trials in 1988 in Austin, Texas and it was the fastest 100-meters I ever swam. When I look back on my accomplishments, it’s things like that which I find to be more special than my medal count.”

Biondi recently announced the formation of the International Swimmers Alliance (ISA) whose goal is to improve personal and economic opportunities for all swimmers and increase their negotiating power. So far, the alliance is made up of 120 world-class swimmers from 31 countries.

The main issue as Biondi sees it is “power, control and the flow of money.”

“The Olympics in Tokyo were scheduled to make over \$7 billion in revenue, which is up from \$5 billion from the Olympics in Rio, and it’s not unreasonable for the athletes to share in part of that,” Biondi said. “We want to know how the money is being generated and where it’s going and then ultimately, how can we share this revenue with the athletes who are performing and who are the show and who are the ones that people are paying to see.”

Like his parents, Biondi has allowed his kids to make their own choices as well: “My oldest son, Nate, didn’t start swimming until his sophomore year in the high school he just graduated from in Berkeley. He was a walk-on and made the sprint relay team that won the NCAAs this year. Lucas is 18 and plays volleyball for the Spike and Serve Club in Honolulu. My daughter Makena is with me and will be a freshman at Calabasas High this year.”

With all that is going on, Biondi still finds a release in the pool: “I don’t like to compete anymore, but I still try and keep in shape and will swim three days a week with Conejo Valley Multi Sport Masters.”

So, as he has done since he put his first foot in the water, Biondi continues to take the long-term perspective in all his pursuits.

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