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Michael Phelps: In Praise of Swimming

How has the Olympic swimming champion spent the last couple of years, post-Beijing? Between training for London 2012, he's been raising money for nonprofits, working with his foundation, and helping to develop innovative products—all in the name of swimming.

By Debra Maurer



It's been almost three years since we jumped on the Michael Phelps support train, eyes glued to the TV during every one of his eight events during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Phelps was not only a top U.S. swimming champion, but a front-runner who had the chance to win eight gold medals in a single Olympic Games, breaking Mark Spitz's record for most decorated Olympian ever—and he did.

Since his wins in 2008, however, he's been doing more than just swimming. Phelps is using his career to benefit his long-time and continuing goal: to promote the sport of swimming.

The Michael Phelps Foundation

After earning a \$1 million bonus from Speedo for breaking Spitz's

record, Phelps began the Michael Phelps Foundation and launched the national im program (its name inspired by Phelps' participation in the Individual Medley, as well as the empowering idea of "I am"). Phelps explains how the program came to fruition: "We developed the im program in partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, KidsHealth.org, and the Michael Phelps Swim Schools that encourage increased participation in health and fitness activities—including swimming, of course—and personal empowerment through planning and goal-setting. The reports we are getting back from the pilot sites are extremely positive, and we are looking forward to expanding the program in 2011."

Phelps has had a longstanding relationship with the nonprofit since 2003. "It's a very important relationship to me. I enjoy visiting the Clubs and spending time with the kids. Whether it's sitting around and talking or taking part in some of their activities, just to spend time with them and offer any guidance and support that I can means a lot to me," he says. The Boys & Girls Club has supported Phelps throughout his career so it was a great fit to partner with them to launch the im program. The foundation currently works within six clubs, and Phelps hopes to reach additional clubs going forward.

The Michael Phelps Foundation assists swimmers through other initiatives as well. "[In August 2010, our foundation] committed \$100,000 to help establish Level Field Fund-Swimming in an effort to help provide financial assistance to qualified swimmers so they can pursue their dreams, just like I did," says Phelps. "I'm very competitive, and I want to help make sure that our sport doesn't lose talented swimmers because of a lack of funding."

Phelps has attended many fundraisers and had the opportunity to meet kids who are not only fans, but also promising young swimmers—something he's found to be a great honor: "I love working with kids as I'm a kid at heart myself. I always enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to meet and interact with kids." A key message Phelps tries to get across to them is his motto: Dream, Plan, Reach. "It's a very basic and straightforward approach that I have taken with my swimming career and life, but it can apply to any passion these kids may have," he says. "I hope I am able to inspire children to follow their passion and chase their own dreams."

Since his wins in Beijing, Phelps has even co-authored a children's book entitled, *How to Train with a T. Rex and Win 8 Gold*

Medals. Along with plenty of fun illustrations, the book compares some of his astonishing statistics—such as his 10,000 calories/day diet—to other quantities and measurements. (How many pizzas would that be? 512!)

His Drive

If you've seen Phelps in one place other than the pool, it's probably out on the turf. In 2009, he took up golfing and used his newfound interest as more than just a fun distraction. He hosted the first Michael Phelps Foundation Golf Classic as a fundraiser in September 2010. Any interested player had the opportunity to bid and bring three friends along to compete and meet Phelps at the tournament.

The following month, he attended the Nemours Swim4Kids event, which benefited the Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Del., and KidsHealth in their mission to promote healthy lifestyles among kids and teens.

Now a household name, Phelps brings awareness to these great causes and a growing buzz about swimming. In 2008, the possibility that an athlete could win so many gold medals in one Olympics was awe-inspiring; it made the entire nation root for him, whether you were a fan of swimming or not. Phelps remembers how it was only a few years ago when you couldn't find the sport being covered on TV or anyone giving it much thought outside of the Summer Games. "Now, people will approach me and tell me about their experience of watching swimming at the Olympics and how exciting it was," he says. "They'll tell me exactly where they were and who they were with. I think that alone speaks to people having greater interest."

For Phelps, having a passion for the sport—and a competitive drive—began as a young tween. "I hated to lose (and still do). I think that is one of the things that my coach, Bob Bowman, noticed about me as an age group swimmer. When he first [talked to me] about my potential in swimming as an 11-year-old [and] introduced the idea that I could be an Olympian, he outlined very specific goals as a way to show me how it was possible," says Phelps. "So from then on, goals have been a very big part of my career and life. They are what drive me both in and out of the pool, and are constantly evolving. When all is said and done, I want to be able to look back and say that I accomplished everything I set out to do."

Innovative Developments

Now as the face of competitive swimming, Phelps worked on a product development deal that benefits both kids and adults by making an active lifestyle more attainable. In early 2010, Phelps signed a deal with Master Spas, a leading hot tub and swim spa manufacturer, to develop a line of signature swim spas. Along with coach Bowman, Phelps worked with a team of engineers at Master Spas who produced six various-sized swim spa models, which feature a sophisticated swim current at one end and hydrotherapy jets at the other end. While the concept isn't new, the design and technology are.

"Master Spas has been a great partner; they were very open to the input that both my coach and I had for them. The wave propulsion technology provides a great water environment to swim in [because] you are not swimming in and through air bubbles," says Phelps.

Master Spas installed a commercial model at Phelps' training center in Baltimore. It provides Phelps and his teammates with the opportunity to work on stroke technique in a much more effective way. Typically, Bowman has to walk around the pool deck and yell across the lanes to provide instruction or stop drills to have the swimmers gather at one end of the pool. With the swim spa—complete with underwater camera—Bowman can stand right next to the swimmer and provide immediate feedback.

While Phelps will be able to use the swim spa for his own training, it was just as important to him that these swim spas provide a means to get people interested in swimming and to stay active. "Not everyone has access to a community pool, or their local pool [might] only [be] open for a few months a year," says Phelps. "A swim spa by Master Spas provides another way for people to access water, whether it's just for fun or for exercise. The adjustable water speed levels can accommodate those who are just starting out in the sport, [as well as] those who are more advanced. And as you progress in your swimming abilities, you can adjust the speed to push yourself further." The sound system and the ability to control the water temperature are great features, he adds.

Preparing for 2012

With the Swimming World Championships coming up this July, and the London 2012 Games a little over a year away—which Phelps' has declared as his last Olympics—it's time for the celebrated champion to focus on his training. Like all prior championships and Olympic Games, Phelps has some very specific goals. To prepare, he is focusing on his overall fitness level both in and out of the water; he hits the pool once or twice a day and lifts intense weights out of the pool.

Phelps' eight astonishing wins in 2008 (seven in which he also broke a world record) brought his total number of gold medals to 14; add in the two bronze he collected in Athens, and that's 16 Olympic medals total! Is there really much else to prove? Well, he's only the second most winningest medalist of the modern Olympics—three medals shy of surpassing the current title-holder, gymnast Larissa Latynina of the Soviet Union. While winning this title is something we'll certainly be cheering for in 2012, Phelps' focus is not so limited.

As a true competitor, sports icon, and philanthropist, Phelps is excited about the next phase of his career. "As I look towards 2012, I'm looking forward to the new [swimming] program [my coach and I will] be working on, as well as my continued efforts to promote the sport as it receives more attention in World Championship and Olympic years," says Phelps. "I am still very much motivated by my goals, and there are a couple more I'd like to achieve. When all is said and done, I want to be able to look back and say that I did all that I set out to do, both in and out of the pool."

Photo courtesy of © The Nemours Foundation/KidsHealth

Swim Spas for Every Level



You might easily assume that the swim spa Michael Phelps uses as part of his training must be custom-made and unavailable to the public, but that's not the case; in fact, anyone can buy it! One of Phelps' goals in creating his signature line of swim spas by Master Spas was to make sure there was a model to suit every fitness level and swimming ability.

As a competitive swimmer, Phelps needs a large swim area in order to perform all strokes, including the butterfly. Master Spas worked with Phelps and his coach Bob Bowman to develop the MP Signature model. Its swim area is over two feet longer and almost 10 inches deeper than any of the manufacturer's previous models. "We'll certainly be using this for training as it comes with an underwater

camera [...] to use for stroke and body position analysis—something we have never been able to do before," says Phelps.

With over 60 different speeds, its Wave XP Propulsion™ Technology (the propeller system that operates the current) has a setting that can challenge even the most competitive swimmers. But since most of us will only be watching the Olympics on TV—not competing in them—the current can easily be adjusted to beginner levels and then be increased as your abilities improve.

Another model in the MP line is the MP Momentum, which is suitable for less competitive swimmers who are also looking for hydrotherapy and maximum versatility. While the Signature has the largest swim area, the Momentum features a lighted clear acrylic wall that separates the hot tub area from the swim area. The hot tub section has its own temperature control so you can ease your muscles against the warm, bubbly jets after swimming or working out.

The swim spa series includes four other smaller models to suit consumers who have limited space and/or smaller budgets. Each one, however, features seats with hydrotherapy jets at one end of the swim spa. So how much will these run you? Depending on the model, these compact "swim-in-place pools" range from \$29,995 to \$44,500—a good investment when you consider the individual costs of a hot tub and an average-sized pool.

Photo courtesy of Master Spas, Inc.

To learn more, visit the Michael Phelps Swim Spas by Master Spas website:
www.michaelphelpsswimspace.com

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