



Michael: An Appreciation

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OKAY. So the Olympic Games are over and we're now about a week and a half into Michael Phelps' retirement. Has he changed his mind yet?

The thing of it is, you just hate to see it all end.

If we have, in fact, witnessed Michael's last performance, you can't help but feel a mix of emotions. There's gratitude, for having had an opportunity to witness such unparalleled brilliance. Elation, for watching him go out near the top of his game, and on his terms. Pride, for understanding how much he's meant not just to our country, but also to competitive swimming. And, of course, sadness, for realizing that in sport, as in life, even the greatest of journeys must eventually reach a conclusion.

So Many Memories. So Many Numbers.

I remember it as if it were yesterday. On the eve of the 2004 Olympic Trials in Long Beach, California, Michael held court over a room full of journalists and calmly announced that one of his biggest goals was to change the face of competitive swimming by dramatically boosting its visibility.

"Doing things that no one has ever done before will bring more attention," he explained.

That was heady talk for someone whose entire Olympics resume to date consisted of a 5th place finish four years earlier in Sydney.

The questions directed at Michael soon turned to numbers. *How many events? How many medals? How many golds?* Digits, after all, have always been easy for the media to report and for the general public to digest. They look good in print or on a monitor. They're tidy in charts. And they're highly translatable—reading just as well in one language as in another.

Michael, as cagey then as he is now, sat there with that bemused smile of his and watched as the pixie dust he'd just sprinkled quickly turned into a plume. None of us realized at the time just how immense that cloud would become.

18 golds, 2 silvers and 2 bronzes.

In a country whose swimming success has long been an embarrassment of riches—from Daniels, Weissmuller and Madison to Spitz, Evans and Hall—Michael’s Olympics achievements have made the extraordinary appear almost ordinary.

What tends to get lost, in the media maelstrom of hype, excess and superlatives that has come to define the modern day Olympiad, is context.

But those able to maintain a level-headed perspective realize just how difficult it is to even earn a spot on a U.S. Olympic team. It is difficult still to win a medal of any kind at the Olympics. And it is beyond difficult to win a single gold medal.

Gold medals, though, seemed to bloom from Michael’s fingertips.

So Many Memories. So Much Acclaim.

Sullivan Award winner, six-time winner of Swimming World’s World Swimmer of the Year, two-time winner of USOC “Sportsman of the Year,” three-time winner of the Golden Goggles “Male Athlete of Year,” Sports Illustrated’s “Sportsman of the Year,” appearances on “The Tonight Show,” profiles on “60 Minutes,” covers on Time and GQ... Michael’s accomplishments, much like the national and international titles, are too plentiful to enumerate.

FINA recently awarded Michael a trophy proclaiming him the greatest Olympian of all time. That’s a start. The USOC should compose a hymn for the guy. NBC, undoubtedly the biggest beneficiary of his mastery, should erect a building in his honor. And the IOC should consider adding a sixth interlocking ring to its iconic logo on his behalf.

But his has never been a legacy built on numbers or accolades alone.

It’s more about the moments. His breaking his first world record as a 15 year old in the 200-meter fly at the 2001 Worlds. His epic mano-a-mano battle with Erik Vendt in the 400-meter IM at the 2002 Nationals. The manner in which he graciously conceded his spot in the finals of the 400-meter medley relay at the 2004 Olympics. That unforgettable touch against Milorad Cavic in the 100-meter fly at the 2008 Olympics. His announcement that he would use his \$1 million performance bonus to set up a nonprofit organization to promote healthy and active lifestyles for children...

Michael with a swimsuit, cap and goggles was like Shakespeare with a quill. Like Picasso with a blank canvas. Like Edison with an idea.

The debate began to take shape even before he finished toweling off for the final time. Is Michael, as FINA suggests, the best athlete to ever appear in the Olympics? It’s fruitless to engage in such discussion. But since doing so seems inevitable in an era awash with vacuous blogs, tweetarrhea and an endless, nauseating parade of Top Ten Lists, why not make a case that he’s simply one of the greatest athletes ever, Olympics or otherwise.

Didn’t Michael revolutionize his sport, like a Ruth or an Ali? Didn’t he rack up his sport’s version of a “major” at the same rate as a Woods or a Federer? Didn’t he bring out the best in his teammates, like a Pele or a Gretzky? And didn’t he, when the stakes were greatest and the pressure was highest, perform just as gracefully and triumphantly as a Jordan or a Montana?

But perhaps the biggest testament to Michael's lasting impact is in the notion of whether we will ever see his likes again. Answer: unequivocally, yes. Because if Michael taught us anything over the course of his wondrous career, it's that the impossible, no matter how preposterous, is very much possible.

So Many Memories. So Many Lessons.

Michael made swimming hip. He made it infectious. He made it relevant.

In the pool, he not only helped refine the fifth stroke of modern day swimming, the underwater dolphin kick, he also helped define a new blueprint for the multi-tool swimmer.

But, as is the case with all champion athletes, it's not the feats that occur on the playing field that matter most, but rather the wisdom which is dispensed as a result of them.

Michael showed tens of millions of us how to flap our arms and believe that we, too, can soar if we only put our minds to it. He taught us how to dream big—bigger than we ever could have imagined—and to believe in ourselves as much as our dreams.

He taught us about preparation and execution, and about how if we're going to strive for something, why not make it perfection.

He taught us how to be relentless in battle, humble in victory, gracious in defeat, and how, if things don't go our way, to quickly put the setback behind us and move on to the next challenge.

He taught us to keep experimenting, to keep exploring and, above all, to keep trying.

He reminded us that the only person worth trying to please is yourself, that actions speak louder than words and if it's attention you're after, do something to earn it.

He taught us that each new challenge represents a new opportunity, that nothing worthwhile ever comes easily and that it ain't over 'til the scoreboard says it's over.

And, most importantly, he taught us that we must stay true to ourselves, we must be accountable for our actions, and we must always shoulder responsibility for our missteps.

So Many Memories. So Many Theories.

Michael's was a journey that was played out in front of the eyes of the world. Who could have predicted that Athens, and six gold medals, was merely a prelude of things to come? If Beijing was the most compelling reality show in television history, London was certainly a worthy sequel.

His prodigious abilities have been scrutinized, dissected and analyzed.

It's the size of his hands and feet. The breadth of his wingspan. His body's ability to flush out lactic acid. His feel for the water. His mental toughness. His lung capacity. The fire in his belly...

It's far too simplistic to credit Michael's success to a fierce desire to win. He just wants it more than the next guy, was an all-too-common refrain. The truth is that anyone who earns a spot in an Olympics final hates to lose. If they didn't all desperately want to win, they never would have made it that far to begin with.

What separated Michael from the others, in my mind, was his willingness to embrace challenges.

Ian Crocker once had the upper hand on him in the 100-meter fly. He set about to change that. That memorable 200-meter freestyle final in Athens, in which he mounted the blocks as a prohibitive underdog against specialists such as Ian Thorpe and Pieter van den Hoogenband? No one made him join that race; he relished the opportunity to be in that field. He wanted to become a fixture on the 400-meter freestyle relay, so he turned himself into a sprint freestyler. He insisted on going up against Paul Biedermann wearing a reputedly inferior swimsuit. And he enthusiastically raced head-to-head with world record holder Aaron Peirsol in the backstroke.

And then, of course, there was London...

How easy it would have been for Michael to simply walk away after Beijing—mentally, physically and emotionally. He'd set the bar so high there and he'd created so many unforgettable moments that he knew full well he'd never be able to outdo himself. He could have eased onto the golf course with no regrets, no unfinished business.

But he couldn't resist the opportunity to test himself yet again—against Ryan Lochte, in particular, the new best swimmer on the planet.

Michael never met a challenge he didn't like. Throughout his career, the guy just loved to put his nose in it—whether he came out on top or not. And as the record shows, more often than not, he did come out on top.

So Many Memories. So Much Legacy.

It goes without saying that Michael is leaving the sport, and all of us, in a far better place than when he first swam onto the scene. As he matured, so did swimming.

Before Michael, there was no "Duel in the Pool." There was no prime time coverage of the U.S. Olympic Team Trials, and scarcely a mainstream media mention of a little biennial gathering called the FINA World Championships. And certainly before the Age of Michael, no one ever could have envisioned sell-out crowds in excess of 14,000 cramming into temporary venues such as those constructed for the Trials in Long Beach and Omaha.

Michael proved that a career in swimming could, in fact, be lucrative and, thanks to his trailblazing along Madison Avenue, future generations of our top athletes will surely benefit from increased sponsorship opportunities.

Some believe that the men's 400-meter IM in London—where Ryan earned gold and Michael missed the podium—represented a changing of the guard of sorts. Others believe that it was when Chad le Clos toppled Michael in that scintillating 200-meter fly. And still others believe that it was when Missy Franklin earned her fourth gold medal as a member of the 400-meter medley relay on the last day of competition.

But I'm convinced that the real passing of the torch occurred much, much earlier—when Ryan, Chad, Missy and countless others watched Michael perform in Athens and, with the help of a few specks of magic dust that floated down from the billowy cloud overhead, convinced themselves that they, too, could someday swim like Mike.

A few decades from now, some other young kid with designs on becoming an Olympic swimming champion will browse the Internet and stumble across the record books. He'll see the name Michael Phelps peppering the results. He won't be all that taken with the times. Maybe he'll visit YouTube, or some form of it, and he'll watch a couple of this Phelps guy's races. Chances are he won't be all that impressed with the quality of the images. He might even chuckle at the racing attire. And there's a real good possibility that he won't be all that taken with either the guy's swimming technique or his underwater abilities.

But the one thing he won't be able to overlook is the number of times this Phelps guy medaled at the Olympics: 18-2-2.

Because digits, after all, are easy to digest. They look good in print or on a monitor. They're tidy in charts. And they're highly translatable—reading just as well in one language as in another, and from generation to the next.

[Editor's Note: What a wonderful treat it will be to watch a rejuvenated (and unretired) Michael Phelps perform at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games.]