

Saving Swimmer Ryan



Olympian Ryan Lochte, who fell into the water when he was 2 years old—and loved it—has been making splashes ever since, highlighted by a gold and silver medal last summer in Athens.

By Tito Morales

If ever there was a case for someone who seemed destined to make a mark in competitive swimming...

Not only were Ryan Lochte's parents, Steve and Ike, both former swimmers, but they've parlayed their love of the sport into long-time coaching careers.

Ryan and his four siblings grew up in and around pools. In the interests of safety, they were taught to swim before they could even say the word, "swim."

"The water was a part of them," says Ike. "For all my children, water was a natural part of their life."

"He fell into the water with a snowsuit on when he was about 2 years old, and as we went after him, he started screaming," says Steve of Ryan. "We thought he was scared, but when we pulled him out, he jumped back in. He was screaming because he didn't want to get out of the water."

Nearly 18 years later, it was Steve and Ike who were doing the screaming—along with some crying—as they watched their son capture a gold medal in the 800 meter freestyle relay and a silver medal in the 200 meter IM at the biggest swim meet in the world.

"I just cried the entire time," Ike says quietly, as she recounts watching the television coverage of the Olympics from Athens. "I couldn't believe he was there."

Nurturing a Natural

Ike and Steve (who today heads Daytona Beach Speed Swimming), recognized Ryan's talents early on—even before their son could differentiate a dolphin kick from a flutter kick.

"He knew the feel of the water when he was just 5 or 6 years old," says Ike, who coached Ryan from ages 6 to 11.

Nurturing such a gift is never easy. There is a fine line between a parent's support and devotion to a child's special abilities and over-exuberance. In the case of the Lochtes, the problem was compounded by the fact that not only were they Ryan's parents, they were also his coaches.

"It was really hard to contain ourselves," admits Steve. "We felt that our best bet was basically to treat it as if it were nothing. If it was going to come, it would have to come totally from him."

There was no special attention paid to their third child. He was given full reign either to pursue the sport or to choose to go down some other path.

"As far back as I can remember, swimming was something that I was doing for myself," Ryan concurs.

In keeping with their philosophy of treating their son just like every other swimmer, the playful Ryan was often ordered out of the pool because he was disrupting practices.

"I kicked him out a million times," laughs Ike.

"He enjoyed the racing, but he hated workouts," says Steve. "He probably only made one-fifth of the workouts. The rest of the time he was sent to the showers, where he would fill them with water and then slide on the tile floor."

It shouldn't be inferred from such mischievousness, though, that Ryan was not competitive by nature. His parents, in fact, go to great lengths to describe how their son would race at everything—even trying to gulp down milk in record time. It was just that when the interesting stuff at practice was over—the exciting fast racing part—Ryan's attention would tend to wander.

From Top to Bottom

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"I don't think there's an event that he can't swim," says Gregg Troy, Ryan's coach at the University of Florida.

At the 2003 SEC Championships, for example, Ryan, then a freshman, gave a preview of the greatness that was to come at both the collegiate and international level. In a remarkable four-day stretch, he led off the 800 yard freestyle relay with a split of 1:35.36, touched the wall second in the 200 IM in a blistering 1:45.05, split a 19.87 in the 200 free relay, and won both the 400 IM in a 3:43.31 and the 1650 freestyle in 14:55.03.

A little more than a month later, Ryan placed fourth at the NCAA Championships in the 200 yard IM (1:44.58), third in the 400 IM (3:41.45) and eighth in the 1650 (14:59.18).

The next collegiate year, while swimming short course meters, Ryan moved up to third place in the 200 IM and won the 400 IM in an NCAA and American record time of 4:04.52. His effort missed setting the world record by less than 2 seconds.

Ryan was the only swimmer at the 2004 U.S. Olympic Trials who competed in both the 100 meter freestyle (50.79) and the 1500 meter freestyle (15:28.37). He advanced to the semifinals in the former and to the finals in the latter, then scratched from both events in order to focus on other upcoming swims.

Ryan hedges when asked what his favorite stroke or distance might be.

"I love doing all different races," he says. "I don't like being limited by saying I'm a 200 freestyler. When people ask me what my best event is, I really don't know. I really don't have one."

The Turning Point

As a young age grouper, Ryan's natural ability carried him far—and for a good many years. He was nationally-ranked as a 10-year-old in his primary stroke, the backstroke, and he would routinely bring home high-point awards with little or no effort.

According to Steve, the turning point came when Ryan competed at the Junior Olympics as a young teenager. A friend from another team had outperformed Ryan to take home top honors, and

Steve, who was Ryan's coach at the time, noticed that his son was uncharacteristically sullen on the ride back home.

"I could see an immediate change within a week or two," says Steve. "He actually started to apply himself in training."

And by the time Ryan was a senior in high school, he was not only doing double workouts, but he was doing them with a discipline his relieved parents thought they might never see.

"I think a lot of people labeled him as being soft," says the Gators' Troy, who has watched Ryan's development from close range over the past few years.

"There's nothing further from the truth."

When Troy describes what it's been like to work with Ryan, he goes to great lengths to highlight not only the swimmer's incredible technique, but also his "coachability."

"When you ask for corrections, you get corrections," he explains. "And that's a reflection of the job that his mom and dad did with him."

Putting the Pieces Together

Ryan's IM prowess is proof positive that after some 30 years of coaching, Steve and Ike understand the nuances of competitive swimming, and understand it well.

Rather than have their son focus on each stroke in some type of pre-ordained, systematic methodology, the Lochtes allowed their son to develop into different areas of his swimming naturally.

"My wife and I always look at the growth of a swimmer in four components—the physical, the emotional, the social and the psychological," explains Steve. "It's very important that when you start switching strokes and putting pressure on and trying to develop the career of a swimmer that the psychological and physical components go hand in hand. If the swimmer's not a happy swimmer, the swimmer's not going to be good."

They watched their son's maturation very carefully—as they do with all their swimmers—and learned to spot subtle cues as to when Ryan was ready to grow into new areas.

"As they grow, we find out what they're turned onto," says Steve. "He

How They Train Ryan Lochte

Steve Lochte, Ryan's dad and head coach at Daytona Beach Speed Swimming in Florida, has long advocated overall fitness training of his swimmers.

"I'm big on medicine balls and generic fitness, such as rope climbing, sit-ups, crunches and basic pull-ups," he explains. "I use dumbbells strictly for stabilizing muscles, and they are always light weight with high repetitions."

Ryan, actually, didn't begin a heavy weight lifting regime until he arrived at the University of Florida, and his improvements in strength are readily apparent—especially in his flat-out sprinting abilities.

One mid-season short course set that Ryan used to hone each of his strokes consisted of 3 x 200 IMs, descending, on the 3:00, immediately followed by 6 x 50 each of fly, back, breast and freestyle with a :50 or :60 base.

An end-of-the-season set that honed his middle distance freestyle skills was 10 x 200 off the blocks with as much rest as needed in between each effort to reach full recovery. The first 50 was to be blasted, the middle 100 was easy, and the last 50 was again blasted.

It's often difficult for an athlete's parents and coach to be on the same page when it comes to training—particularly when one of the parents also happens to be the athlete's primary coach. And Florida's Gregg Troy concedes that initially there were a few minor disagreements between his way of training and Steve's.

Essentially, Ryan had to take a crash course in how to compete under less than ideal conditions—when the rigors of NCAA Division I training and meet scheduling collided head-on with the burden of academics.

"He'd never ever raced tired before he came here," explains Troy. "We had to walk a fine line between training him hard, but not training the racer out of him."

Judging from Ryan's racing form at the early stages of the 2004-05 collegiate season, Troy has succeeded.

Despite having only competed in a handful of meets with the Gators this season, and even though he has been in the midst of heavy training, Ryan is ranked at or near the top of the charts in the 100, 200 and 500 yard free, the 100 and 200 yard backstroke as well as the 200 and 400 yard IM.



STEVE LOCHTE



started out as a backstroker, but then he became very interested in the 100 IM—for whatever reason.”

As Ryan grew in different directions, so did his parents’ coaching of him.

Today, whenever Steve watches Ryan perform in competitions, he notices a fusion of both his and his wife’s swimming backgrounds.

“I see a combination of the motivation and competitiveness from me,” he explains, “and the gracefulness and technique from my wife.”

Cycling to the Games

In the build-up to the summer of 2004, Ryan’s training was organized according to three-part cycles. Every three weeks, for instance, was devoted to one week with an emphasis on aerobic-based swimming, followed by a week of threshold-based swimming and capped off with a week of anaerobic-based swimming.

“Depending on the time of the season, he might go two weeks of aerobic, one week of threshold and one week of anaerobic,” explains Steve.

As the season progressed, the emphasis gradually evolved to the point where Ryan would swim one week of aerobic, one week of threshold and two weeks of anaerobic. Every high-pressure segment was followed up by an aerobic segment to allow sufficient recovery before the next high-pressure segment.

Ryan was usually in the pool nine sessions per week, with Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays being double session days. Saturdays were reserved for an extended practice, and Sundays were rest days.

“I’m big on quality,” says Steve, who explains that each of Ryan’s sessions usually totaled about 7-8,000 yards. “I like to see fast swimming in practice. If that happens, then you’re going to see fast swimming in a meet.”

Main sets total roughly 4,000 yards, with a premium placed on descending and negative-split swimming.

One bread-and-butter set for Ryan on his buildup to Athens was a set of 200s, varying in numbers of sometimes 20 and sometimes less. Instead of having Ryan grind through the set at breakneck pace,

Steve had his son focus on controlled hard swimming that was designed to simulate the end of a race.

The first 100 yards would always be swum at a hypoxic-emphasized moderate pace, with the first 25 swum using three breaths, the second 25 using five breaths and so on. For the third 50 yards, Ryan was instructed to wait at the wall until the 1:10 mark on the pace clock, then push off for two laps at sub-200 yard race pace. Then he was instructed to wait again at the wall until the 1:50 mark, and crank out the last 50 at exactly race pace. Each new 200 interval would be started from a base of 2:45 or 3:00.

A Gift Still Intact

On the first day of the Olympic Trials, Ryan underperformed in the finals of the 400 IM. Whereas he and his inner circle were hopeful that Ryan would crack the 4:10 barrier, he missed his backstroke turn, and after that, the wheels came off as he finished fourth in 4:18.46. As a sign

of Ryan's experience, however, he quickly rebounded the next morning in the 200 freestyle.

"I don't think a lot bothers him," says Steve. "He's kind of a laid-back person."

"I knew inside that if I didn't make the team in that event that I'd have other chances," says Ryan. "When I touched the wall, I felt that I'd just had a bad swim, and that can happen to anyone. I left that behind and went after my next race."

As has been a pattern for his career, Ryan seems to perform better as the stakes grow higher. In the 200 freestyle at Trials, he entered the competition seeded 11th. In the prelims, Ryan moved up to ninth place, then one round later, he moved up to eighth by lowering his time, then vaulted all the way up to fourth by slicing almost another 8-tenths of a second off his time.

In the 200 IM at Athens, he went from an opening round swim of a 2:01.41 to a semifinal of 1:59.58 and to a final swim of a 1:58.78 during which he sprint-

ed past two swimmers during the last 50 meters to earn the silver medal.

It's not that Ryan is holding back in the early heats. It's just that Ryan, as was the case when he was a free-spirited young age grouper, seems to grow more committed as the challenge intensifies.

"When I swim in the prelims, my mind's not really that focused," Ryan admits. "But after each swim, I get more hyped up. By the finals, I guess I'm just in the zone."

Ryan Lochte has been in the "zone" a lot of late, and even though he has been swimming for almost two decades, it's clear that his enthusiasm, commitment and passion for his sport are still intact—and, in many ways, virtually untapped.

"I'm just glad we didn't push him," says Ike reflectively. "I'm just glad we didn't push him...."

Tito Morales, a novelist and free-lance writer, is a Masters swimmer who competed collegiately for the University of California at Berkeley.

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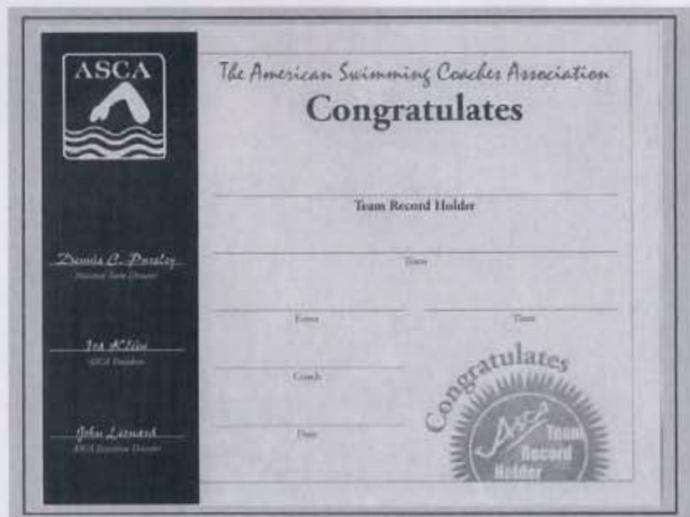
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