



## **The Feat of the Meet**

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IT doesn't seem possible that this guy is for real.

I mean, yes, he came, he swam and he conquered... But he also—*relinquished?*

What the world witnessed on Friday night when Michael Phelps pulled out of the finals of the men's 4 x 100 medley relay was one of the most inspiring moments in the history of competitive swimming—check that, in the history of Olympic sport.

It didn't happen with the punch of a touchpad. Nor with numbers on a digital scoreboard. And it had nothing whatsoever to do with a tear or two rolling down a cheek during a playing of a national anthem.

Without question, though, the world's most talented swimmer saved his absolutely best performance for last.

### **An Unprecedented Build-Up**

For months now, the world's media have focused on Phelps and his quest to either duplicate or surpass legend Mark Spitz's heroics in Munich. Seven gold medals? Why not eight? Eight, how about nine?

Phelps, himself, never mounted a soapbox to declare his intentions of filling the back of a dump truck with gold medals. All he ever said was that he wanted to win "one gold." But that wasn't sexy enough for mainstream America. "One" doesn't play in Peoria. So the journalists took their angle and ran with it anyway.

And Phelps let them go.

As the Trials and the Games approached, the frenzy became a veritable maelstrom. Phelps became engulfed in a tunnel of bright lights, cameras and microphones. And each and every question seemed to hinge on his supposed mythical chase.

"Do you really think you can do it?" "Have you had a chance to speak to Mark yet?" "Will you look at yourself as a loser if you only win six golds?"

And the ever-patient Phelps continued to let them go with it.

Writers from some of the most famous newspapers in the world were hired to follow his every move. Not just in the swimming pool. But in that biggest cliché of the millennium—“24/7.”

First Phelps was on the pages of this particular daily. Then he was on the cover of that magazine. Next he was seen on various television programs. And then commercials...

Never before has a competitive swimmer been so *everywhere*.

And then, as soon as the Games got underway, the hysteria, incredibly enough, continued to build even stronger. NBC, in particular—desperate for heroes, especially in the wake of the fallout from track and field’s drug cheating debacle—was determined to make the 19 year old the centerpiece of its \$793 million dollar investment.

And, through it all, Phelps let them go with it—not that he really had any say in the matter by that point anyway. He resolutely went about his business between the lanes, no matter what they were throwing at him.

How Phelps could perform as well as he did under such scrutiny is a testament to his remarkable abilities. How he could perform with such flawless grace under pressure is a direct reflection of the sensibilities of those closest to him, particularly his mother and mentor, coach Bob Bowman.

One gold medal here, a bronze there, another gold here, and so on and so forth...

### **In The Eye of the Storm**

Day after day, through the most pressure-packed week of his life, Phelps forged ahead. He was humble. He was respectful. He was determined. He said all the right things in the post-race interviews, did all the right things on the awards podium, and never referred to his accomplishments in the first person singular—“I”—but always in the first person plural—“we.”

This journey, he made clear, wasn’t just about him. It also included his coach, his family, and his teammates. He was as thrilled with the swims of Erik Vendt and Ryan Lochte as he was with his own. And the one triumph which elicited his biggest celebration was a team event—the 4 x 200m free relay.

Such humility and respect by a superstar of modern day sport is difficult to come by.

Phelps, quite simply, was proving himself to be a prime time player from another era.

In an age of smack talk, derision-saturated journalism where in-your-face gloating is not only encouraged, but rewarded, the youngster from Baltimore is as far removed from the Terrell Owens and Alan Iversons as the earth is to Pluto and Neptune. He doesn’t need attitude or self-aggrandizement to get attention; he simply dives into the water and performs to the best of his abilities.

The media continued to crunch the numbers. They pursued their stories of their Olympic poster boy’s heroic quest—even though it became painfully clear that Phelps had moved on to other things. Not only was Phelps reluctant to engage in their trite calculations, but he himself, it seems, had pretty much lost track of what he’d swum, what he’d done, and what he’d won.

He didn't have time to look back. Only forward.

Phelps' showdown with Ian Crocker in the 100 butterfly, after all, loomed on the horizon. Everyone wanted to know about the picture of Crocker which he'd affixed to his bedroom wall. They wanted to keep squeezing and squeezing until there was a visible chink in the armor.

And Phelps, in more ways than one, made no secret of the fact that he wanted that one race more than all the others. When it came time to dropping an event after Trials it wasn't the 100 fly that got the axe, it was the 200 backstroke. The sprint fly had bigger implications. A victory in that event also meant guaranteed glory, and most likely yet another world record, in the medley relay. He'd had to sit that dance out in Barcelona; he wasn't up for a repeat of the letdown in Athens. Besides, it became evident after the 4 x 200m freestyle relay, that he was unbelievably passionate about the team events.

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That Phelps managed to pull out a win over Crocker in the finals of the 100 fly wasn't the highlight of these Olympic Games. That he pulled out of the finals to give his teammate an opportunity to win a gold medal was.

With one brilliant stroke of sportsmanship, Phelps quietly pulled the plug on the media's Parthenon-sized abacus. Just as the swimming competition was hurtling toward a crescendo of seismic proportions with the medley relay being the very last event of a truly dynamic swimming program, Phelps simply said, "Enough."

His message rang loud and clear: let's lose Generation Me and instead usher in Generation We.

Phelps, again wise well beyond his years, showed once and for all who was really in control all along. It's not that the medley relay couldn't go on—it's just that it would have to go on without *him*. The decision effectively turned the spotlight onto a trio of world record holders and an American record holder whose last names had nothing to do with "Phelps."

Let others share the glory, the superstar seemed to say. I've had my fill for now. The attention's been nice. See you in Beijing...

Talk about upsetting the apple cart. Or throwing away one of the bookends. Or bowing out before the final curtain.

It's not to say, of course, that Phelps still didn't walk away at the end of the day with another gold medal. But he did it under the radar. On his terms. And without all the accompanying fanfare.

And that, in the end, is what the Olympic ideal used to be about before all the perverse overemphasis on medal counts and superlatives.

In the 1924 Games, an unsung British runner gave up his spot in the 400 meters so that teammate Eric Liddell, who'd refused to compete on the Sabbath, could have the opportunity to race in Paris.

In the 1936 Games, when the great Jesse Owens was struggling with his takeoff point in the long jump, a generous German rival came to Owens' aid, offered technical advice, and essentially assisted his competitor in earning one of the American's record four gold medals.

And in 2004, Michael Phelps quietly excused himself from a relay so that a teammate—and chief rival, no less—could have the chance to earn a gold medal and break a world record.

Forget whatever else Phelps accomplished over the course of his extensive program. This one goes beyond records. Winning, in fact, pales in comparison. This simple act cuts to the very heart of goodwill and sportsmanship.

And for those who had the opportunity to witness it, the subtle gesture was a welcome reminder of everything that's right about the Olympic Games—and everything we should strive to make right in life.