

World Biography (/in... / Ow-Sh (index.html) / Michael Phelps Bi...

Michael Phelps Biography

June 30, 1985 • Baltimore, Maryland

Swimmer



Phelps, Michael.

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Young American swimmer Michael Phelps has broken several world records in his sport. Even his record breaking has broken new records: he was the first swimmer ever to shatter two world records in individual events during a single day, and was the first to swim five new fastest times at a world championship meet. Phelps, whose best stroke is the butterfly, is said to possess the perfect build for competitive swimming. He stands more than six-foot four inches in height, and his wingspan, as it is called, is even longer: from finger to finger he measures six-foot seven inches across. These attributes have given him an edge in the highly competitive sport, but those who know him say that it is his inner drive, focus on achieving goals, and likeable personality that make him a winner.

(Discovered Olympic potential

Phelps was born on June 30, 1985, and grew up in the Baltimore suburb of Towson. His mother, Debbie, is an administrator with the Baltimore County school system. He has two older sisters, and began swimming when they joined a local swim team. "At first, I was a little scared to put my head underwater, so I started with the backstroke," Phelps told Frank Litsky, a sportswriter for the *New York Times*, adding, "I was still scared because I don't think I had goggles."

Phelps's parents quickly recognized their son's talent. When he was eleven years old, they brought him to a top swim coach, Bob Bowman (c. 1964–). After watching him swim, Bowman agreed to take over his training at a Baltimore-area swim club. Bowman predicted that Phelps would be Olympic-caliber material by the time he was fifteen, and might look forward to going to the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney, Australia. Phelps was thrilled by the idea, especially since one of his sisters had qualified for the U.S. women's swim team at the 1996 Summer Games but was sidelined by an injury.

When Bowman told Phelps that he had Olympic potential, the twelve-year-old gave up his other sports, which were soccer, lacrosse, and baseball, in order to bring all his energy to daily pool practice. He began winning every competitive event he entered. The first time he lost, however, he was so upset that he threw down his goggles. Bowman warned him about his unsportsmanlike conduct, and since then Phelps has taken his handful of setbacks in stride.

"It's when your body is not in the best situation, your mind is not in the best situation and things are against you those are the times that really count and really matter you overcome and rise to the occasion."

Those setbacks included his first-ever U.S. national championships, in the summer of 1999. He finished in last place in the 200-meter butterfly. He bounced back at the 2000 U.S. spring nationals to take a third place finish, and then became a surprise qualifier for the Sydney Olympics later that year. When he arrived with the rest of the U.S. swim team, he was the youngest American male swimmer to enter an Olympic contest since 1932. He had qualified for just one event, the 200-meter butterfly, and finished in fifth place.

(Swim Legend Mark Spitz

At the 1972 Summer Olympic Games in Munich, Germany, a young California athlete by the name of Mark Spitz became an international celebrity and Olympic legend. Brash, confident, and phenomenally fast, Spitz beat out the other world-caliber swimmers to win seven gold medals in the sport. No other athlete has ever attained such a feat during a single Olympics.

Born in 1950, Spitz was a talented swimmer in his teens, much like Michael Phelps. Before he competed in the 1968 Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City, Spitz predicted he would win six gold medals, but went home with just two. His confidence was viewed by some as arrogant and unsportsmanlike, and he said little after returning to an intense training schedule for the 1972 Olympics.

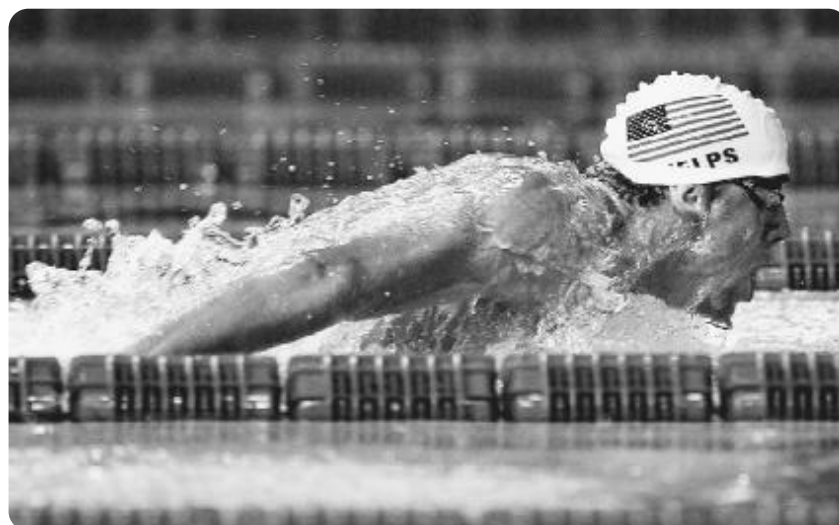
But Spitz became the star of the Munich Summer Games. He won his first gold medal in the 200-meter butterfly, setting a world record. He went on to enter six other events, and set world records in each of them. In just eight days he set seven world records and won seven gold medals, including one for the 100-meter freestyle, which was considered his weakest stroke. No other Olympic athlete has ever accomplished such a feat, in either Winter or Summer events.

During the second week of the Games, a group of hooded men associated with an Arab political organization took several Israeli athletes hostage in the Olympic Village. They demanded that Israel release Palestinian prisoners in return. The standoff ended tragically with a botched rescue attempt. The nine Israeli men died, as did several of the hostage takers. Spitz was forced to leave Munich earlier than planned because of the crisis—he was Jewish, and Olympic officials were worried about his safety.

Spitz enjoyed lucrative endorsement contracts after his Munich performance. His dark good looks and mustache made him an early 1970s heartthrob, and he was one of the first Olympic athletes to earn a small fortune from such contracts.

(Began setting new records

A few months later, in early 2001, Phelps surprised everyone once again. At the U.S. spring nationals, he became the youngest male swimmer to set a world record. The event that marked this accomplishment was the 200-meter butterfly. He was just fifteen years and nine months old at the time. At the age of sixteen, he decided to give up his chances for a college athletic scholarship by signing an endorsement deal with swimsuit maker Speedo.



Michael Phelps competes in the 200-meter mens' butterfly event of the 2003 FINA World Swimming Championship in Spain.

AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.

Phelps soon began breaking world records in every event he entered. In August of 2002, at the U.S. National Swimming Championships in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, he set a world record in the 400-meter individual medley. The following April, at the 2003 U.S. spring nationals hosted by Indiana University, he beat his own world record in the 400-meter individual medley. *Rocky Mountain News* journalist Jody Berger wrote that Phelps "flies across a pool like water is someone else's problem. He doesn't punch his way through the wet stuff but hydroplanes across its surface at a speed few humans can match."

The official Indiana meet was followed by a special contest between American and Australian swimmers billed as the "Duel in the Pool." The United States and Australia have each produced several top swimmers in the modern era of the sport, and there is an intense national rivalry between the two countries. But Phelps's biggest rival, Australian champion Ian Thorpe (1982–), was ill with meningitis-like symptoms and did not compete, creating much interest in what would happen in a contest between the two swimmers at the World Championships in Barcelona, Spain, in July of 2003.

Thorpe, three years older than Phelps, is a huge star in Australia. Sportswriters there call him "Thorpedo." He won three gold medals at the 2000 Sydney Games, and was also a world record holder. Their rivalry heated up in June of 2003, when Thorpe's coach told the press that Phelps was not yet a serious threat. "The promise with Phelps is there, but for people saying he's going to outdo Thorpe, I live to see that day," *Sports Illustrated* writer Brian Cazeneuve quoted coach Don Talbot as saying.

(Called the next Mark Spitz

Phelps bested Thorpe in nearly every contest in Barcelona in late July of 2003, and it made the American the new star in competitive swimming. He won five medals and set an astonishing five world records. The first came in the 100-meter butterfly semifinal, and the next came when he broke his own

record in the 200-meter individual medley, besting Thorpe by a large margin in that contest. His own American teammate, Ian Crocker (1982–), broke Phelps's 100-meter butterfly record in the finals, but Phelps went on to take part in two relay races that each won a gold medal. His last two world records were set in the 400-meter individual medley and the 200-meter butterfly.

Phelps was seemingly unstoppable. Just a short time later, at the U.S. summer nationals in College Park, Maryland, he won five of the fourteen gold medals awarded, becoming the first male swimmer ever to do that at a U.S. nationals event. With such a promising start, the eighteen-year-old was called the next Mark Spitz (1950–). Phelps had heard the name before, as he recalled in an interview with Elliott Almond that appeared in the Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service. He told Almond that he asked his coach, "Why are they asking me about Mark Spitz? What did he do?" he told Almond. Bowman explained to him that Spitz was an American swimmer who was the star athlete of the 1972 Summer Olympic Games in Munich, Germany. Spitz set seven world records in Munich, and returned home with seven gold medals.

Phelps's interest in matching Spitz's legendary performance intensified when Thorpe asserted that no one could ever repeat Spitz's feat. Late in 2003 Phelps signed a new contract with Speedo that showed the company's faith in him: it ran until 2009, and included a \$1 million bonus if he matched Spitz's seven gold medals at the coming 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece. In the buildup before the Athens Games, Phelps was predicted to become the star American athlete. But he tried not to make any predictions. "If you get caught up in it, your mind will take over and control you," told Litsky in a *New York Times* article. "I have to make sure I'm in control."

Phelps did not worry about the other problems he might face at the Athens Games. In one interview Phelps was asked if he was concerned that the roof over the new Olympic pool had not been completed with only three months to go before the Games' opening ceremonies. It would not matter to him or to his performance, he told Duncan Goodhew in the *Financial Times*. "A pool's a pool. Water, lane lines, starting blocks," he remarked. "We are all in the same boat. We all swim under the same sun." Phelps did not match Spitz's record, but he did take home six gold medals and two bronze medals.

(Uses rap songs to focus

Phelps is known for his perseverance and concentration in the pool. He swims twenty thousand meters on some days. Kevin Clements, a friend at the Baltimore area club where Phelps practices, told the *New York Times*'s Litsky that Phelps "likes to train. He's never satisfied. Outside the pool, he's a normal guy to hang out with. He likes to tease and fool around with other people on the team, which is natural in this atmosphere. But he's mature in ways, too. He kind of makes training fun."

Rap music helps Phelps focus on his goals. Before every meet, he swims his warmup laps, then changes into a new swimsuit and puts his headphones on for the entire thirty-minute period before the race is set to start. He likes Snoop Dogg, 50 Cent, and Eminem. He also listens to music every day while he drives to practice. "When I get out of the car, the last song stays in my head," he explained to *Dallas Morning News* journalist Cathy Harasta, in an article that appeared in the Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service. "It's there all during practice, in my head."

His car is a Cadillac Escalade sport utility vehicle, which he bought used with the \$25,000 bonus he earned from the U.S. Swimming Federation when he began breaking world records in 2003. His mother allows him to buy something with his winnings every time he sets a new world record. One treat was a

47-inch television for his bedroom. Another time, he installed new subwoofer speakers in the Escalade, to create a better bass sound for his favorite rap songs.

(Headed to University of Michigan

Phelps graduated from Towson High School in 2003, but delayed college plans to concentrate on training for the 2004 Olympics. In April of 2004, Bowman was hired as the new men's swim coach at the University of Michigan, which had produced several top athletes in the sport over the years. Phelps was not allowed to swim for the school because he had turned professional by accepting the Speedo endorsement in 2001. He went out and bought two U-M caps for himself and for Bowman, however, and planned to enroll there as a student so they could continue to train. In 2004 he said that he plans to swim for another ten years.

In his spare time Phelps likes to play video games. He makes appearances for Speedo and also serves as the national spokesperson for the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Later in life, he has said, he would like to have a career in either sports marketing or in some technical field. He told Goodhew he hoped his own success as a champion swimmer would boost the sport's profile. "One of my big goals is to improve the knowledge of the sport. Not many people know about swimming and (I want) to be able to take it to a new level and hopefully, in the US, get in with sports like basketball (or) football, where people see (swimmers) on the street and know who they are."

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(User Contributions:

Aug 10, 2012 @ 6:18 pm 

Sally
(/news/Ow-

Good info on Michael - I see what a wonderful and supportive human being his mom is and was just wondering if Michael has any contact with his dad and if his dad is also rejoicing in Michael's success.

thank you

Sally

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