



Wobbles

an Olympic Story

Nadine Neumann



Photo by Reece Scannell

Foreword

A continual reward for Olympic champions is the fantastic sense of gratification that comes from inspiring young athletes. Sports history testifies to this phenomenon, particularly when you look at the medals Australians have won at the Olympic Games in the men's 1500m Freestyle - Andrew 'Boy' Charlton in 1924 and 1928 gave rise to John Marshall in 1948 who handed over to Murray Rose in 1956, inspiring me in 1960, then Bobby Windle in 1964, Greg Brough in 1968, Stephen Holland in 1976, Max Metzker in 1980, who later inspired the next generation with Glen Housman in 1992 and Kieran Perkins in 1992 and 1996 and finally Grant Hackett in 2000, 2004 and 2008. Who is being inspired by Grant Hackett as they're doing the miles now? Watch this space for 2012!

In 1972, 15-year-old Shane Gould swam faster over 1500m than my world record of 1960, transcending any gender gap that may have been perceived (although nobody dared to speak about this in the old days of amateurism!). Shane was coached by the great Forbes Carlile and while my coach, Don Talbot, may have produced more world record holders and Olympic medallists, Don took us to Forbes for testing of blood, cardiograms, etc., during the dawning era of worldwide sports science. Swimming, like all sports, is a team sport, and this sharing of knowledge and encouragement has been part of the swimming culture since the beginning. Coach, club, physio, team mates and family all play a role, but in the end Nadine has to touch first, just as David Beckham has to net the ball passed to him.

Artist Margaret Olley once said, 'Giving is like a permanent receiving', and this is true of all kinds of giving, whether you are aware of it or not. I didn't know that a very determined young girl was inspired by my picture on the wall of her swimming pool. At the time, I was engrossed in my corporate career with a young family in Melbourne and hardly ever went to a swim meet. I only vaguely knew of Nadine through the press.

What a thrill, then, to read Nadine's manuscript, to realise that she had been speaking with me all along:

"I wondered if John Konrads ever did the open 800m Freestyle at the Castlerea District Championships, at the Auburn Swimming Centre. I wondered if he would laugh knowingly at how cold and windy the nights could be, and how it always threatened to rain while you waited without shelter behind the starting blocks... I imagined how impressed with my dedication he would be and how he would wish me good luck."

As an old champion, that's about as good as it gets!

Nadine's story is unique in that it says what she thought as a young girl, warts and all. In my opinion, too many sports biographies glorify the athlete's success and pain with the glossy view of hindsight, but they leave out the real, deep down thoughts which Nadine unflinchingly reveals. I think it's an absolute must for any parent of an ambitious youngster to have a glimpse of what may lie ahead. It's not as pretty as the TV makes it out to be.

There certainly is a generation gap and I've got three children to prove it. What I thought and how I articulated those feelings may have been different from the kids of today, but despite this, there are some aspects of the human experience that are the same for every generation. The road to elite sporting success is one of those common experiences and a parent may not be able to imagine that their 12-year-old might want to scream "Fuck!" when the road gets hard, but I think it is crucial for our children's sense of acceptance, support and love that we don't hide under a blanket of our own inhibitions. They must feel able to talk to us in any way that works best for them, otherwise, like Nadine did, they may get lost along the way.

For all its brutal honesty, in the end this is an uplifting story; one of the satisfaction, the triumph and the sheer fun of going after a dream, of overcoming phenomenal odds and learning about yourself along the way. I'm sure you'll be as touched and inspired as I was.

Thank you, Nadine, for telling it as it really is!

- John Konrads

Take Your Marks

There will be storms, child
There will be storms
And with each tempest
You will seem to stand alone
Against cruel winds
But with time, the rage and fury
Shall subside
And when the sky clears
You will find yourself
Clinging to someone
You would have never known
But for storms.

– *Storms*, Margie De Merrell

1.

“Will you make it in the end, through all the twists and bends?”

– *“Weir”*, Killing Heidi

MAY 2000.

Homebush, Sydney.

Australian Championships and Selection Trials.

The dream – the Olympic Games in my home town, in my home pool this September.

It’s the 200m Breaststroke for me, and to be selected I have to touch the wall first or second ahead of the toughest world-class field in any country on the planet. My mind is tight with voices, full of ideas too fluid to grasp and too heavy to probe. I’m nervous again and, as always, I’m categorising the mental static: good – bad; useful – destructive; true – false; keep – discard.

Two months ago a few of my training partners came down with an ugly flu. I was stronger. I kept it at bay and continued training. Two weeks ago more of the girls succumbed, but I held it off. Two days before the 200m Breaststroke and my body betrayed me. Again. It has happened before, at other crucial times, but this race means much, much more...

It is the night before my final and I am so sick I can’t stop shaking. It’s devouring all my energy just to stay positive; just positive enough to produce the winning swim – a perfect symphony of mind, technique, stamina and spirit – against the odds. Again. I’ve done it before, at other crucial times, but this race means much, much more.

Tonight I dream of floating in slow motion music. I am safe, embraced by a hum of distant voices that echo like thoughts through water. My heart dances to the rhythm. I am the water and I am the song until morning brings birth and I suddenly burn in competition’s fluorescent lights.

The heat swim passed without a murmur yesterday. Each competitor plays their cards close. I am in the final and that is all that matters. Today I will find my place in folklore. Nobody needs to know the rest.

But I am sick. Denial won't fix it. It is not a psychosomatic self-sabotage, like it seems to have been every other time. It's a simple, scorching flu that everyone else has had, so I strut with a confident smile and say, "I've swum with a sniff and a cough before at other crucial times and I can do it again, because this race means much, much more."

Pool deck in the buzz of warm-up time. The hundreds of hopefuls jostling for their patch of limited lane space to hone, perfect and make final contact with the water before their moment in the spotlight. My coach, Glenn, looks at his stopwatch. "Thirty-five point six. Do you want to do another one?"

I was swimming 34.5 easily for my 50m Breaststroke pace checks only days ago. On a regular day I would do another couple to make sure my synapses realise they are about to race, go fast, wake up! But I'm heavy, my bones ache, my limbs are petulant.

"Think I need to save what I have left for the real thing."

He understands as a coach does, and attempts a mask of cheer. I am buoyant in return. I will not falter. I've worked too damned hard for too long to just let go and it's my turn to sing the song of the triumphant!

As the evening deepens and my 200m Breaststroke final approaches, I ponder the words for just a moment - evening, final - and categorise them as bad, destructive, false, discard. Today will be the day of miracles, again, like it has been before, at other crucial times.

My turn. The announcer calls my name and lists my achievements like a catalogue. I am a hero in his words. My body responds with a tremor. Good. Each cell sparks as I stand to face the watching world and the crowd bellows support.

"Go, Nads!"

Crude, but warming. It doesn't seem so long ago that they

called me 'Wobbles' - 'Wobbs', 'Wob-dan', 'Wobber'. They tried 'Earth Shaker' for a short time, but nicknames need to be discernable over the clamour of swimming crowds and concentration's barrier. Wobbles made everyone take note, so that was the one that stuck. It was aptly chosen at the time and now I think I hear them chanting 'Wo-bbles - Wo-bbles...' from somewhere far away.

Colette, my sister, whistles; I know it's her. I feel more like Wobbles than Nads today and she's trying to turn the tide for me. I think I see the water ripple as she pierces through the roar and I hold onto that sound. It bounces and fills the stadium like the music from my dream and I feel it shimmer through my core - clarity, strength, precision - I am almost ready to race.

A TV camera is thrust in my face to show Australia what lies beneath the brief CV of a local - so much, too much to share it in a single gesture, but I need to be free of it all to race. My body has been trained to move to an ancient rhythm, but I have to give the conductor space. I know what happens when my mind muddles the flow, when I try too hard, and today of all days I cannot allow it to come between me and that song I know is mine.

I blow a kiss into the lens and watch as all my neatly categorised thoughts, my light and my dark float from my palm into the eye of the nation. I am free and ready.

I kneel reverently at the water's edge, blocking out the rest of the introductions, swirling with my hands, acquainting my skin to the liquid silkiness. I thank the Universe for this moment and surrender to Fate. I cup the water in my hands and focus:

Three quick, violent splashes to the face - mind be still.

Two slower bursts of water to the chest - heart be strong.

Two, more deliberate, over the head - body be powerful.

One final explosion of water to the face - spirit shine.

I cannot remember when this routine started; it has been part of me for eons. My cool, blue element trickles over skin. Body and water become one. The starter's whistle is shrill and sets eight in motion. We climb the blocks - three steps. It seems

higher than normal, or perhaps today I am further away.

“Take your marks.”

Four laps as fast, as fierce, as flawless as I can.

I draw three deep lung-fulls from the silent atmosphere. Always the number three. Conductor taps. I am poised. The world holds its breath.

And in the pause, as I teeter towards the blue, I see it all played out before me like a film – every laughing, screaming, singing moment that has brought me here, to the Olympic Swimming Trials, Sydney, 2000.

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