

My Journey to the Olympics...and Back

By Carly Piper

Since birth, swimming has always been a huge part of my life. As early as 2, I was diving off of the edge of my aunt's pool and swimming to the side ladder. I began swimming competitively at the age of seven and I found that even at a young age, I loved getting to the wall first, getting my blue ribbon, and trying to do it better each time. I tried other sports, but swimming was something that I knew I did well. When I was eight years old, I won my first high point trophy and during the car ride home, I told my dad I was "going to the Olympics". Little did I know that I was looking twelve years into my future.

I saw the swimming success of my older sister Courtney and I wanted to succeed just like she did. Since my club was mainly a distance club, it was only natural that my first Junior cut was in the 1650 yard freestyle. It was not until right before my sophomore year in high school that I made my Senior National cut. I had the swim of my life (at that time!) in the 1650 and won the event with a Senior National time standard. Some people thought I had a late start—not making my Senior cut until I was 14—but I think it was perfect timing.

In high school I hit a plateau, like many swimmers do. In 2000, my coach decided that since he had never taken anyone to Olympic Trials, he would hold time trials in our high school pool prior to the meet entry deadline in hopes of qualifying an athlete. Unfortunately, I had just missed the cut for the 200 yard freestyle at our high school state meet, so he decided I would swim the 1,000 free. I made the short course qualifying standard for the 2000 Olympic Trials—I was so excited!

I went to US Trials, swam the long course equivalent of the 1000, the 800 meter freestyle, and got second to last. Not exactly the greatest meet of my life. BUT, I was at Olympic Trials!! I had done something that no one else on my team had done and I was so happy. I was not happy about my poor performance, but I was truly happy about what I had done to get there. I missed many school parties and staying out late with friends, but I went at Olympic Trials and that was something that few people get to say. The next stage in my life was approaching...college.

I decided to go to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which was probably one of the best decisions I have ever made. *Swimming was different in college.* I was used to the yardage, but I was not used to the variety within the sets and the dryland and weight training that we did. *As hard as it was to get used to new training, I knew it would make me so much better.* It is the greatest feeling to finish a 10,000 yard set with your teammates and know that there aren't many people out there preparing like that. As a distance athlete, there were many times when I was one of the last swimmers in the water. I could have gotten angry, and that was my first reaction, but then I realized that it would only make me better. That realization helped me achieve Big Ten Championships and NCAA All-American Honors throughout my collegiate career.

There were meets where I added a few seconds and didn't have great swims, but everything helped me prepare for the BIG taper meets. *I was fairly inconsistent with my times throughout my seasons, but what I focused on was getting to the wall first.* Then, when it was time to taper, I felt prepared and ready to swim fast. I had confidence in myself and in my coaches. I could always get back in the water and work harder if things didn't work out. *I had a plan...if you have a bad race, it is not the end of the world—just get back in and try again.*

In the summer of 2002 I qualified for my first US National Team—the 2003 World University Games. While preparing at a training camp in Colorado Springs, I was told that I was bumped up to the Pan American "A" team, which was to be held in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. It was at that same training camp that I tried to open a window and instead, broke it and put my hand through it. I nicked a tendon in my left hand and had to have surgery two months before my big meet. I was worried, but my coaches assured me that I would be alright. I realized I could do other things to supplement my training. I vertical kicked, did hours of cardio, and Pilates, just to name a few. I went Pan Ams and won a Gold Medal in the 4X200 meter freestyle relay—my first International Medal! I didn't dwell on my injury because *I knew I could overcome adversity.*

Making my first National Team prepared me for the year to come. After coming off a great collegiate year (we placed 10th at NCAA's, a first in school history) it was time to focus on an even bigger meet: 2004 Olympic Trials. My coaches told me the top six people in the 200 meter freestyle make the US Olympic Team, and I knew that was my best shot. I just concentrated on practice day by day, and tried not to think ahead. *When our team finally got to Trials it felt just like a regular meet.* I was around the people who were like family and knew that whatever happened, I was there to try my best and give it my all and that is all that mattered. I placed top 8 in the 400 meter freestyle, just out of top 16 in the 800 meter freestyle, and 5th in the 200 freestyle. I made the 2004 Olympic team and my childhood dream had come true! I traveled to Spain and Athens, Greece where I swam in the prelims and earned a spot to swim in the finals of the 4X 200 Freestyle relay. My relay team ended up winning an Olympic Gold Medal and breaking a World and Olympic Record. Talk about dream come true!

I ended my collegiate career with best times in the 500 freestyle (breaking 4:40!) and 1650 freestyle (just missing breaking 16 minutes with a 16:01). And I was very proud of what I'd achieved. I was done with college swimming but still had another year of school, but I was still enjoying myself and felt like I had some fast swimming in me.

It was different training after college. I was not going to nearly as many meets, and when I did compete, I usually did not have a coach present. If I swam poorly, I focused on the good practices that I had prior to the meet. The Summer of 2006 had its ups and downs with training. I would have a good week and then a bad week. National Teams were being picked and I was feeling decent in the water. I definitely did not have the meet I thought I would have. I was off of my best times by quite a bit and I didn't know what to think.

After the summer, I came back and started training again. I had two very frustrating national meets in 2007 where I got very sick at BOTH meets. I went into that year feeling very good about training and thought I would have a good chance to prove to myself that I could still swim fast. I knew I could have had really good meets, and I was very frustrated. I wanted to show everyone that I was still the Carly Piper of 2004. I was slightly discouraged with my performances but knew deep down that I could still go fast. A very good friend told me, "Carly, maybe the world is not ready to see how fast you can swim again." I knew I needed a change. I was scared and nervous, but *sometimes a change is good.*

I moved to Charlotte, NC and swam with Mecklenburg Aquatic Club with fifteen other college graduates. The workouts were so different. I was getting stronger in the weight room and was excited about how that was going to help me in the water. I was training the best I had in years and I was even more excited about swimming. The first long course meet we went to, I came close to personal bests in all my events. I knew I was on the right track! I was getting closer and closer to the two minutes that I had swam four years ago and I was not even rested. I was looking so forward to 2008 Olympic Trials. 2008 Trials was way faster than four years ago. I had some good swims and was right on where I was four years ago, I even swam a best time in the 100 freestyle. Even though I did not make the Olympic Team, I was genuinely happy that I swam well and that I continued training for another four years.

There were ups and downs and injuries and sicknesses throughout my career. I learned that with each problem I encountered, there was a way to overcome it and start over. As difficult as it was to achieve my ultimate goal and then try to climb back up and do it again to no avail, I would not trade my career for anything. I have traveled and experienced things that I would never have done without swimming. As hard as some things were to deal with, I always felt that I could get back in and try harder the next time, and that made it all worth it.