

Before the Big Time

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Most Olympians didn't start out with gold stars on their foreheads. In fact, many of them were just like you when they were younger, working hard at practices and having fun in the pool.

So just because you might not be at the top of the heap right now doesn't mean you should give up your hopes and dreams. That next big swim could be just around the corner.

All you have to do is hang in there and stick with it, and you'll accomplish great things.

"I was really a late bloomer," said Kaitlin Sandeno, a gold medalist at last summer's Olympics in Athens. "I wasn't winning anything when I first joined a club."

Kaitlin's Olympic teammate, Maritza Correia, says her swimming experience was similar, and that her career has been a series of ups and downs – great years followed by so-so years, and bad years followed by great swims and trips to the medals podium.

"When I first started with club swimming, I wasn't very good – maybe a win here and there," she said. "My whole career has been in waves – big waves where I win five or six medals, and then lows where I don't win anything or I drop off. But after those drop-offs, it seems like I'll come back and break records and win a whole bunch of events."

And you never know what direction your talents will take you. Larsen Jensen, the Olympic silver medalist and world record holder in the 1,500m free, actually started as a sprinter.

"I first started swimming, and it was just a summer league, not USA Swimming or anything like that," Larsen said. "I'm from a small community of maybe 10,000 people. So I went 30 seconds in the 50 free, which was pretty good at the time in my small town for a 12 year old – or at least I thought it was. I was beating people in practice and winning."

Another late-bloomer, Olympic gold medalist and American record holder Ryan Lochte, remembers finishing dead last in a big race when he was 12, and it wasn't until he was 14 or 15 that he started training harder and winning most of the races he entered.

When he was younger, Ryan was inspired by a friend who constantly finished ahead of him at meets.

"This (guy) was one of my best friends, and he just always beat me, and one day I said to myself, 'I hate losing – this won't happen again,'" Ryan said. "I remember that, because it was 1992, and I watched the Olympics on TV, which was also inspiring."

While he wasn't always at the top of his game, Ryan does remember his first win.

"I was 8 years old," he said. "It was a 25 freestyle, and I have a picture of me holding the first-place ribbon I won."

When times improve, a special opportunity might arise for swimmers, whether it's to make a national cut, earn a college scholarship or just feed off the encouragement that comes with improvement.

Larsen said simply putting in the work itself often leads to an unexpected breakthrough.

"In a way, that mindset of just working my behind off in practice really helped me, because all I wanted to do was improve, and I gave myself no reason to think otherwise," he said. "So the harder training led to major time drops."

Kaitlin says sometimes, those breakthrough years can just sneak up on you.

"I don't even know what caused my breakthrough," Kaitlin said. "I think it was just getting comfortable in the environment, putting in a lot of hard work and picking the right events."

Maritza said she still isn't used to being known as a "record holder."

"One of my Florida records (in the 50 freestyle) just got broken at Junior Olympics," she said. "It's so cool, because my brother coaches down there, and people talk about 'breaking Maritza Correia's record.' That's such a great feeling, to know that something I've done is pushing kids now. I never imagined that would happen."

As Kaitlin points out, that big change often comes with discovering what events suit a swimmer best. The Olympians interviewed for this article recommend not specializing until at least physical maturity has taken place.

And even when that's occurred, most elite swimmers say doing other strokes is still important, if not just to break up the training, then to build muscles with different strokes and maybe discover untapped potential in another event.

Ironically, many of the Olympians didn't, when they were younger, even swim the strokes or distances that earned them Olympic medals.

Larsen still believed entering high school that he'd be a sprinter.

"My freshman year in high school is when I really got serious about swimming," Larsen said. "I thought I'd make Junior National cuts in the 50 and 100 freestyle. Then I got a coach who said, 'You will be a distance swimmer.' I liked that idea, especially the tradition and heritage of the event. I had gone 17:30 in the mile, and in this book I was reading about swimmers, (an Olympian) had gone a time similar to that. So I started comparing myself to him and got into the mindset of a distance swimmer."

Maritza's list of events was diverse as an age grouper. She swam everything.

"I did the 400, the mile – all the freestyles and butterflies and even breaststroke," Correia said. "Every meet we went to, I swam something like 12 events. And though I compete mostly in the freestyle (sprints) now, I still don't train just for freestyle. I mix in a lot of IM work."

Kaitlin doesn't like the "specialization" tag because she feels some swimmers might be limited by it.

"I still think, even at my age (22), that I might want to try some new events," Kaitlin said. "I think especially as an age grouper you don't want to focus on just one event or even one stroke. You could be a 100 fly standout and end up being a great 100 freestyler. Or maybe you have a 400 in you that you've never thought of until you try it."