

How Not to Ruin a Swimming Prodigy

Todd Schmitz Has Guided Swimming Phenom Missy Franklin Since She Was 7; The Starfish



By MATTHEW FUTTERMAN

Nothing about the aquatic credentials of Todd Schmitz hinted at future glory: After swimming for Metropolitan State College in Denver, he started coaching the 8-and-under group at a Colorado youth club in 2002.

But his very first "Starfish" class featured a 7-year-old newcomer named Missy Franklin. Yes, *that* Missy Franklin. Now the 17-year-old world champion in the 200-meter backstroke, Missy the Missile is a likely medal contender in several events at this summer's London Games.



Chris Schneider for The Wall Street Journal

Missy Franklin trains at the Lowry Long Course Pool in Denver.

And beside her on the Olympic deck will be Schmitz, head coach of a youth club so makeshift that it has no pool. Its practices shift between rented lanes at five Denver-area facilities, with Schmitz lugging club equipment in the bed of his GMC Sierra pickup.

That a world champion swims among these migrants is something Schmitz shrugs off as good fortune. "The train was going by, I jumped on and I'm enjoying the ride," says Schmitz, a 33-year-old native North Dakotan.

But better-pedigreed coaches don't dare call Schmitz lucky. So often do children seemingly destined for aquatic greatness quit or fall short that Franklin's trajectory has earned her coach a large measure of respect. "It's hard to argue with his success," said Greg

Troy, University of Florida head coach and a head coach of the 2012 U.S. Olympic swim team.

Perhaps the biggest supporters of Schmitz are Franklin's parents. In an era when many parents turn their lives upside down in quixotic, high-dollar pursuit of their offspring's athletic glory, the Franklins have left the nation's premier teenage swimmer in the lanes of a club that costs about \$2 an hour, far less than a baby sitter, and that welcomes every kid regardless of ability.



Chris Schneider for The Wall Street Journal

Colorado Stars coach Todd Schmitz, who first met Franklin when she was 7 years old, watches his swimmers at practice.

It isn't as though Franklin's parents—her father an executive, her mother a physician—couldn't afford to place their daughter in costly elite program. "Why would we?" said Dick Franklin, Missy's father, a director with the renewable energy organization Cleantech Open. "We have a kid who is happy and who keeps swimming faster."

For a young and aspiring Olympian, arguably no choice is more important than picking a coach. For years, Franklin's parents have been urged to move their child to California, Texas or Florida to train with coaches whose swimmers have won enough Olympic hardware to fill a vault. The Franklins decline to identify the sources of such pressure, in part because they say it is well meaning.

The Franklins believe they already happened upon the ideal coach

for their daughter. Schmitz, who earns a salary of about \$70,000 a year, arrives at the pool around 5 each morning and during the school year leaves most evenings at 7.

His work ethic and passion for coaching were apparent when he swam at Metro State, where after practice he hung around to write down that day's routine and ask about the philosophy behind it. "That's rare," said Andy Lehner, ex-coach of Metro State's now-defunct swim team. "Most kids after practice are pretty focused on what their next meal is going to be."

As a coach, however, Schmitz stands out for a devotion to rest and play. No less important than his swimmers' splits is whether they are having fun inside and outside the natatorium. At practice, if the kids seem spent, he'll end the workout midway through and start a game of water polo. "He's a fun loving kid, he laughs with them, he plays loud music," said D.A. Franklin, Missy's mother.

Schmitz's swimmers also go through a structured dry land practice twice a week that focuses on building core strength and athleticism. "Looking at a black line all day, every day gets awfully dull," he said.

Even when it comes to improving form—something other coaches regard as a strict science—Schmitz believes in the art of play. Sometimes, in fact, he orders his charges into the deep end for a session of vertical kicking, with the aim of lifting their torsos out of the water.

"A lot of this is about simply playing around in the water," he said. "That's what kids do naturally, and the play engages the mind and gives the swimmer the tools to figure out the right way to move their body."

Before joining the Colorado Stars, Schmitz tended bar, waited tables and ran a lawn-mowing business. A business major, he became a junior executive with a national restaurant chain.

But corporate success was less appealing to him than a career beside the pool, and a year after college he accepted a full-time job as the under-8 coach of the Colorado Stars, a club with about 130 young swimmers.

Schmitz's dad, Orell, an attorney in Bismarck, said he wasn't surprised when Todd quit his corporate job to coach full-time. "It was obvious when he was dealing with kids how excited he was about it," says the elder Schmitz. "It became real apparent that this was where he was getting his joy."

When Missy first joined the Starfish, the Stars' youngest group, Schmitz says her strokes were hardly Olympian, and she didn't care much for practice. When the workout board called for 50-yard sprints, Missy sometimes sat out one for each one she swam.

But from the outset she took pleasure in reaching the wall first. At age 12 she broke three national age group records in one meet. As she moved from the Starfish group to the adolescent division of the Colorado Stars, Schmitz followed her, with the club's board promoting him to head coach in 2008.

Many coaches with a prodigy in their stable would choose to increase her workouts to test her potential. But in the view of Schmitz, the biggest danger for Franklin and for all his swimmers is burnout. So even as Franklin broke record after record, Schmitz treated her like everyone else her age in his elite group. That was the equivalent of owning a Ferrari and driving the speed limit.

This meant that Franklin would swim two hours a day, five or six days a week, with an average of roughly 4,000-5,000 yards per day—less than half the yardage logged by top college swimmers. In the summer, he doesn't hold Saturday morning practices, giving Franklin and all of his other swimmers a weekend-long break from the pool.

"The last thing I want to do is for them to get to the end of the summer and feel like all they've done is swim," he said.

Even in the run-up to the Olympic trials, Franklin usually takes off two days a week. One recent week, Schmitz told Franklin to skip practice to get ready for her boyfriend's prom. Working with Schmitz, Franklin says she has come

to believe that balance is as important to her success as stroke improvement.

This approach differs radically from the high-mileage, high-intensity philosophy of Michael Phelps's coach, Bob Bowman. "My way doesn't have to be the way for everybody," said Bowman, calling Schmitz's strategy "perfectly fine."

Unlike Phelps, who went professional as a teenager, Franklin has eschewed sponsorship offers in order to swim in college after she graduates from high school next year. Colleges eager to conscript Franklin could offer Schmitz a coaching job—a recruiting strategy that is not unprecedented in cases involving a huge star.

But Schmitz says the Stars club is big-time enough. His dream is to gain funding sufficient to build the club a pool. That way, he said, he wouldn't have to haul his digital clock with the extension cord out of his truck to every practice.

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