

# SEMINOLE AQUATICS

March 24, 2020

Well, we are now in our second week out of the water. As I said in my last note to you guys, I'm going to try and write something to send out to you all every few days, whether you read these things or not. If nothing else, it's good for my own sanity, and it makes me feel a little better connected to a team that I can't see in person for awhile.

The last time I wrote, I told you a story about Andy Rivera-Maldonado, a great kid that anchored a State-winning relay for us, despite having missed nearly half a year leading up to the summer of his senior year. The point I was trying to make was that even though this is a challenging time for us as coaches and athletes, we can still come out of it better than ever.

In that same vein, I've got another story for you.

Lori Thomas has been kind of a mythical figure for many of the swimmers in our program for a long time. She won the State championship in the 50 free in her senior year, and as the first Seminole High Swimming state champ for several years, the sweet smell of her 1998 win has perfumed the air around Seminole Aquatics and SHS Swimming for over two decades. If you ask any of our really good swimmers from the past 20 years who Lori Thomas is, they'll all know. Such is the "Lori Legend" that I even had one of our best female sprinters nearly moved to tears when she met Lori on a visit back to Sanford a few years ago.

In 1992, I was in my fifth year of coaching swimming at SHS, and Lori's older sister, Kara, was on the team. Kara was a very good swimmer in her own right, and eventually became a multiple school record holder, a state finalist in sprint freestyle, and a collegiate swimmer at LSU. I met Lori when she was in 5th or 6th grade, and she was tearing it up as an age grouper for my friend Clay Parnell at Patriot Aquatics. I was teaching American Government at Seminole, and coaching high school swimming for the Noles. There was no pool in Sanford, no Seminole Aquatics, and we trained at the Lake Forest community pool, with no starting blocks, and just five lanes to practice in.

Kara Thomas graduated in 1995, I believe, so I had it in my mind that I'd be going back-to-back with the Thomas sisters, in four year blocks. Not a bad situation for a young coach. After Kara's senior year State Meet, I stepped away from coaching for a year—Lori's freshman year—but I was back the next season and I got to coach Lori for her last three years. And it was wonderful working with her.

Lori Thomas wasn't an overly-gifted physical specimen; while she wasn't very tall, she had tremendous feel for the water, which all good swimmers do. Her single best

quality, the one that made her an eventual champion, was her desire. She always loved racing, and she was incredibly coachable. Back when giant VHS home video cameras were first coming out, I would record starts, turns, and finishes, and then I'd break down the film to try to find ways to get her off the blocks faster. She devoured information like that, and just as importantly, she was one of the hardest workers I ever coached. Here's an example:

During her senior year, she was selected to the SHS Homecoming Court, a pretty big deal for a young lady. At that time, we were no longer practicing at Lake Forest; we were actually at the old Longwood pool on E.E. Williamson Road. It's still there now, but it's long-since closed, and full of black water, ducks, frogs and snakes these days.

Our practice time that year was 7 to 9 pm on weeknights. On the Friday night of Homecoming, Lori came up to me before she got in the water and said, "Would you mind if I got out a little early so that I can get to the game by halftime? My parents are supposed to walk me out on the football field for the ceremony."

I looked at her, completely incredulous. "Are you kidding me? I can't believe you're even here in the first place. Of course you can get out early!"

So, at around 8 pm, Lori jumped out of the pool, ran into the bathroom, and came out about five minutes later, in a fancy dress, wet hair, and no shoes, sprinting to her car. THAT'S Lori Thomas, guys.

Lori didn't lose a 50 free race that entire year, going into the District meet. She was totally focused on wanting to win the State 50 free, having finished second the year before. She cruised through a 23-high 50 free at the District Meet, unshaved and unsuited, and just off her shaved best time from the year before. Things looked really good for the State Meet that year (there was no Regional meet back then), and I thought all along that she could win the whole thing.

Now, one other thing about Lori—-I had never seen her look nervous, or keyed up before a race the entire time I'd coached her. She had been in plenty of pressure-filled situations before, and had won some big races, but she always looked and acted relaxed.

The State Meet that year was at the International Drive YMCA Aquatic Center. Her first swim that meet would be the 50 free preliminary heat, and as I watched her behind the blocks before the race, I didn't feel good about it. Normally, Lori exuded confidence before races, but as I looked at her, the body language she was giving off was that of a person that felt like she just *had* to do well. She hadn't yet signed a college deal; she hadn't lost a race all year; and now, there were college coaches in the stands that had told her they'd be there just to watch her race. So, as I watched her behind the blocks, head down, dark-grey goggles covering her eyes, I thought to myself, "*Ohhh, crud . . .*"

As the State top seed, Lori was in the third and final heat. Carrie Ellis won the second heat right before Lori swam and went a fast time, around a 23.5, fast enough that it definitely got my attention. So, now Lori's heat comes up, she hits the water, and from her third stroke, I know she's in big trouble. Whereas everything all year had seemed effortless and fluid, she now looked panicked and raw, almost fighting her own stroke the entire 50 yards. When she finished, barely winning her heat, but nowhere near the time she (and I) had hoped for, she was despondent. She climbed out of the water, and immediately broke down in tears, something else I'd never seen her do before. "I don't know what's wrong," she sobbed over and over.

I quickly got her away from the blocks and started talking to her, alone. You looked tight, I told her. It's probably just nerves, I reasoned; as a coach, it's one of the hardest things to deal with, because an athlete that is bewildered and heartbroken has a hard time hearing anything in these moments. So, I told her to try not to cry in front of anyone for now, and to go get in a long warm down and get ready for her next race, the 100 free.

In the 100 free prelim an hour later, she looked much better. She swam our two free relays to close out the morning, and then got ready to go back to rest for finals.

Before she left the pool, though, we talked some more. Calmly now, and with time to digest everything that had happened, I explained that I felt she was just overwhelmed with everything before the 50 free in prelims—-not having lost all year, college coaches watching, worrying about not winning, etc, etc, etc. It's a lot to handle, and a lot to process. I tell our SR Elite swimmers all the time that they might think they understand pressure, but the pressure of a senior year State Meet is different; being on the blocks in Lane 4, at night, under the bright lights, with a title on the line, can buckle your knees a little bit.

So, we talked it out, and I told her to go back to the hotel, eat a good lunch, get a good nap in, and come back later that night, ready to race. I told her it was really pretty simple, when you think about it—-it's a race, that's all, and you're just swimming two laps, just down and back, as fast as you can go. I told her not to worry about anything, because I told her I certainly wasn't.

That, of course, was a lie. I then proceeded to go back to my hotel room and worry myself sick for the next five hours.

*Why did she look so bad in the water?*

*What if I screwed up her taper? Did we rest too long? Not enough?*

*What if she comes back tonight and goes even slower?*

*What in the world will I say to her after she's given me everything for the last three years?*

I arrived back at the I-Drive pool for finals warmup, and I saw her walking toward me from the opposite direction, carrying her big red Speedo bag, as always. I tried to get a clue about where she was, mentally, by the way she walked toward me. Nothing.

Finally, we came face to face, and I asked her, “How’re you feeling?” Her eyes narrowed, and she said, half smiling, half scowling, with her jaw set firmly, “I’m going to kick her (butt)!”

That’s when I knew it was over. Really. I knew right then that Lori would win the 50 free.

When we worry about the outcome of something, we can’t perform at our best. So, in prelims, Lori’s mind was full of “what-ifs” —

*What if I don’t win tonight?*

*What if the college coaches see me do poorly?*

*What if I can’t swim in college after all?*

*What if we can’t afford the school I want to go to?*

*What if I put all this work and time in for nothing?*

In the parking lot at I-Drive that November afternoon before Finals, the “what-ifs” were all gone. Replacing them was a single-minded focus on simply racing the person next to her. Just like practice. And for Lori, and for all my great swimmers over the years, that’s the place where they’re the most comfortable. Just racing. Let’s race. Simple.

Right before the final of the 50 free, I spoke to her one last time. I don’t remember everything I said, of course, but I ended it with the same thing I said to her before just about every 50 free she ever did: “Good start, good turn, good finish.” And I stepped aside to watch it all unfold, still just absolutely sick to my stomach (guys, I still get that way).

Then, as if on cue, an already-dramatic day threw us another wild curve. Standing behind the blocks, just two minutes from the start of the biggest race of her life, her goggles broke as she put them on.

I was standing right behind her when they snapped, and she turned to me, holding them in her hands. I grabbed them, sprinted over to where our swimmers were, and said, “I need goggles, guys, quick!” Right away, I got pelted with five or six sets of goggles, and I ran back over to Lori. The announcer was just beginning to announce the finalists for the 50 free.

As cool as the other side of a pillow, Lori quickly went through each pair, tossing aside the ones she didn’t want, and settling on a pair that she’d use. It took maybe 10 seconds.

A few seconds after that, she stepped up on the blocks in Lane 5, and won Seminole's first swimming State championship title, in a lifetime best and All-America time of 23.33 seconds, a school record that lasted 21 years.

When she got out of the pool, I remember hugging her, and then her teammates swallowed her up with a lot of hugs and tears, before she was interviewed by a newspaper reporter.

The next day, in the Orlando Sentinel, the Sports headline read, "Seminole's Thomas Captures Title." In the article, they described her post-race feelings, and it read:

*"I feel great, I feel so great," said a teary-eyed Thomas after finishing the 50 free. "I wanted it so bad. I felt good the entire race. Good start, good turn, and good finish."*

She went on from that year to accept a full-ride swimming scholarship and train with the legendary sprint coach Sam Freas at the University of Hawaii. After competing in the 2000 US Olympic Trials, she transferred to the University of North Carolina where she finished her swimming career. Lori and I still stay in touch from time to time. She's a wife and a mother, living in North Carolina, and coaching high school swimming. She's really good at it, too.

There are a couple of important things that we can learn from that 1998 State Meet:

- 1) The pressure that we put on ourselves to perform is never good; it usually will have the opposite effect, making us tight, and unable to perform at our best.
- 2) When our happiness is dependent on an outcome—-feeling like we have to win, or that we have to get a certain time, it adds more pressure to the situation. And, that ain't ever good, people.

In Lori's 1998 State Meet situation, all of her pressure and "what-if's" happened in prelims. Then, after getting her heart broken in the morning, she was able to regroup, refocus, and come back to a point where competitive swimming is very basic, almost primal. Just one person against another person, racing two laps, and trying to get your hand on the wall first. Not worrying about anything, or thinking about anything else. Just racing. It's always just racing at major meets. You show me a championship final in any sport, and the guy I'll always bet against is the *thinker*. My money is always on the *racer*. If I'm trying to solve a Rubik's Cube, give me the thinker. At the State Finals, I want *racers*.

My swimmers know by now that I'll never put a time in their heads before a race. And they know better than to ask me what time I think they'll do. When they do ask, though, I always tell them that I'll write it down, and they can see after the race how close I was (and I am really, really close most of the time). But, for me to tell them before they swim? No way.

What I do tell them is the most simple, and it's the best pre-race advice you can get: Just race, and have fun! And it works just as well for an AG2 swimmer at his first meets it does for the biggest of our big-shots in the State Meet.

Keep staying safe, and I'll be in touch again soon.

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