

THAT'S NOT IT!

by John Leonard

Last week, we had a Mom come to us and "inform us" that her 13-year-old daughter would be gone for two weeks vacation in late June, maybe another week after that. Her daughter was not much of an age group swimmer, but she has some endurance capacity and comes regularly to workout at 5:30 am and again at 5:30 pm daily. She works hard, demonstrates little talent, but lots of determination. Her mother is not athletic and clearly does not value athletics. We expressed our dismay that she'd be missing for 2-3 weeks in the middle of the most important training of the summer. Her mother's response?

"Who cares, she'll never be an Olympic swimmer, so what does it matter really?"

This is a dagger in the heart to any swimming coach, and it is to me.

If we only cared about and worked hard with, those 52 people who will eventually, once every four years, go off to the Olympic Games, it would be a small, empty and meaningless sport.

My response was "That's really not it."

What is it?

It is the fact that young people need to learn to dedicate themselves to something that is difficult, something that requires perseverance, guts and the daily determination to get your butt out of bed and go out and push your body till it can't go anymore.

Why do they need to learn this?

Because their lives are too easy, too soft, too catered-for. Too many people carry them; make excuses for them, never allowing them to try to be "heroic." Is it "heroic" to get your butt out of bed and go swim at 5 am? It is if you haven't done it before. Is it heroic to "make" 10x200 fly on 4:00? It is if you haven't ever done it before. Is it heroic to finish your swim and turn around and cheer for the teammate who is even further behind than you are, and is struggling to make the set? Need I say it? It is if you've never done it before.

And that is what "**It**" is about. About doing what you haven't done before. And learning that sometimes you succeed. Sometimes you fail. If you fail, you go again until you learn to succeed.

It's not about being an Olympian. It's about **being Olympian**. Learning to be a hero. And what it takes to learn that.

Or, you can Be Comfortable and teach your child that it's more important to be Comfortable.

So, if that's your choice, I only have one question? What will happen to your child on the day when they are made "uncomfortable" by life?

Reply from George Block, Alamo Area Aquatics Assoc., Level 5 Senior Coach

Your article really struck home as it reminded me of Robert Reyes – arguably the worst swimmer to ever go through our program – rescuing four of his buddies from choppy, night seas... a hero. Robert Reyes swam on our high school team and he was always the slowest guy in the race, but he would swim ANY race and go all out, all the way.

He was the same way in water polo. We have seven high schools sharing the same pool, so we don't have any weekday games. Every Saturday they play 3 or 4 games, 3 or 4 hours of wrestling up and down the pool. Robert Reyes was always the slowest guy, but he would never quit. Even then, the real reason he was swimming was to help him when he went in to the Navy. He had his goal way back then and was preparing back "in Taft High School" for when his moment came. I told our kids that the famous Olympians actually have it easy. They know exactly when their moment is going to come. They can prepare precisely for that moment and they have a lot of help getting them there. For the rest of us it's a lot different.

Your phrase to the mother, "being Olympian" hit it perfectly. All of us will have our "Olympics," when the very best we can bring is called from us. We don't get to know when that moment is going to be. We have to constantly prepare. We may have no one to help us. No one may ever know. It may come like it did for Robert, as a physical test on a dark night, in choppy seas, with the flaming wreckage of a helicopter still floating in the water. It more often than not won't be a physical test, but a moral one -- that integrity thing. I tried to explain to my team that the reason they have to prepare every day is because they have to be prepared every day. "Being Olympian." That is it.

(Finally, read the next page for the true story of a Swimming Hero)

Man Rescues Navy Pals

By Amy Dorsett - Express-News Staff Writer

A San Antonio sailor saves four crewmembers after a helicopter crashes into the Mediterranean Sea.

A San Antonio Navy man came to the aid of four comrades in the choppy waters of the Mediterranean Sea last month, rescuing them after their helicopter crashed into the sea. Petty Officer 2nd class Robert Reyes, assigned to a helicopter combat support squadron aboard the USS Kearsarge, made the rescue June 22 when a helicopter flying a routine search-and-rescue mission crashed into the water. Reyes, 21, whose boyhood love of helicopters propelled him to enlist in the Navy three years ago, quickly suited up for what was to be his first rescue mission. Already feeling the rush of adrenaline, Reyes' emotions were running even higher because the crewmembers were like family. "Just the day before we flew together," Reyes said. "While I was dressing out, I was trying to calm myself down."

Within minutes, Reyes' helicopter was hovering in the nighttime sky above the downed chopper. Reyes, a trained rescue swimmer, jumped from his helicopter. "I started swimming up to them, seeing if they were alert," Reyes said. One by one, Reyes helped each crewmember swim to the pickup point, where they were hoisted into the waiting helicopter. Navy officials say the four who were rescued are quick to call Reyes a hero, a title he brushes off. "When they say that, I just think I'm happy they're there," Reyes said, adding some of his water skills were acquired while on Taft High School swimming team.