



Photo courtesy of Bill Frakes

## NANCY HOGSHEAD

At the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, Nancy Hogshead concluded eight years as a world-class swimmer with three gold medals and one silver medal—the most decorated swimmer at the Games.

In recognition, Nancy has been inducted into eight Halls of Fame, including the International Swimming Hall of Fame. She graced the cover of *Newsweek* and was featured on a ninety-foot billboard in New York City's Times Square in an ad for Jockey International.

Nancy began working at the Women's Sports Foundation (the national advocacy organization for girls and women in sports) as an intern while in college at Duke University, eventually becoming the Foundation's fourth president in 1992. During her presidency, the WSF tripled its budget and secured the resources to build a Hall of Fame. She continues to write and lecture extensively on women in athletics. The Olympics also brought a diagnosis of exercise-induced asthma. Nancy authored *Asthma and Exercise*, a book that combines stories of how world-class athletes control their asthmatic condition. As the national spokesperson for the American Lung Association, she addressed the subject of asthma management skills on "Good Morning America," "The Today Show," "CBS This Morning" and "Nightline."

Nancy is currently an attorney at Holland & Knight LLP, one of the world's largest law firms, after having attended Georgetown University Law School. Her practice includes commercial, employment, and Title IX litigation. This super-achiever speaks regularly to corporate and civic groups, with an emphasis on her fundamentals of success.

## Success Is a Learned Skill



### Nancy Hogshead

Everyone knows that Olympic athletes train very hard. But I've found that very few people grasp the enormity of the physical and emotional commitment. To get this point across when I speak around the country I mark off the room to demonstrate the size of an average high-school pool, which is twenty-five yards in length. Then I ask the audience, "How many laps do you suppose you'd have to swim every day to become the best in the world?" Most groups start guessing at around fifty laps. Fifty laps? That's just warm-up!

In the hard part of the season my teammates and I would swim 800 laps a day. That's 20,000 yards or about twelve miles.

Not everyone wants to be an Olympian, but everyone has *some* goal that they want enough to perform the *equivalent* of swimming 800 laps to achieve: to be good at a profession; to be part of a winning team; to have a solid family life; to be able to help others in a meaningful way.

There is no shortcut, no "luck" and no way to manipulate the system to your advantage *without* hard work. Improving your attitude will not relieve you of having to work hard, although it does make the effort easier. If you're not willing to give consistently, half-hearted trying will just create another disappointment. Try the lottery instead!

Why should you push yourself? The answer: Because the rewards of *reaching* for excellence truly are profound. I'm not talking about a pay raise, a plaque or even a gold medal. It's *living into a purpose or a calling*

that enlivens even the most mundane tasks. It's a deep pride in the life we are living.

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Today, I'm an attorney working on commercial litigation and gender equity in university athletic departments. Every day I depend on the same skills that took me to the victory platform at the Olympic Games. I haven't stopped learning because I haven't stopped setting new goals. While I don't pretend to have all the answers, I do know something about what it takes to achieve a big goal over the long haul. It starts with a daily commitment to the goal and continues with hard work, which is the underpinning of any achievement.

My goal for this chapter is that you, the reader, will give yourself over to a purpose and then see yourself grow in unexpected ways as you pursue that dream.

### DAILY COMMITMENT

There is a lot of emphasis on *making* the commitment or the big decision: "I'm going to be in the Olympics!" "I'm going to be a doctor!" "I'm going to sell twenty percent more than last year!" "I'm going to be the best parent ever!" "I'm going to start a business that makes a difference in the world!" But getting there requires making the same choice every day—for *years*, like getting up at 4:45 a.m. to go to morning practices or working on a weekend when you already had plans or tackling labor strikes, volatile markets, obsolete products or legal entanglements. At home, it's when we take the time to answer our four-year-old's questions (even when it's been a tough day) or eating healthy when we crave ice cream.

For example, the Itchnatucknee is a spring water river that flows through some of the most beautiful Florida landscape, winding around cypress trees and through chalky banks. Every kind of wildlife calls this place home.

One day, my coach got the bright idea to have us swim against the current, *up* the Itchnatucknee River. Sounds like fun, right? Yeah, we thought so, too, but the reality was a little different.

For starters, spring water is *cold*, even in Florida. I saw teammates' faces turn every shade from white to blue. Although the water is lovely when viewed from a raft drifting downstream, a thundering herd of swimmers thrashing up the river brings silt up from the bottom, blinding all except the lead swimmers. Nobody wants to lead, either, because the lead swimmer (like a lead cyclist on the Tour de France) "pulls" everyone else. If I was lucky enough to get right behind one of the big guys, (like 6'6" John Naber), I got a nice ride, but the lead swimmers knew what was happening and didn't appreciate it. They'd often stop abruptly, causing a multi-swimmer pile up.

The slimy green grass wrapped itself around my arms and shoulders and (my favorite part) *where do you think the bugs live?* My swimsuit was cut with a scooped "V" below the neck, so where do you suppose those bugs went? You got it! Right down the front! Where did they go out? Well, they didn't. Swimming the river was like an entomology lesson—afterward my suit was filled with beetles, granddaddy long legs, grasshoppers, all going crunch, crunch. Once, training partner and Olympic medal winner Billy Forrester turned to me and said, "What's that on your hip?" It was a dead frog.

Remember, this was a training exercise to increase our lung capacity, endurance and strength—not a peaceful field trip. Swimming up the river was hard work. It took five hours to go up and back. We did this every Wednesday for two years.

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*'What's that on your hip?' It was a dead frog*  
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If I had depended on that moment when I made the big decision, I wouldn't have made it. It was the daily decisions, such as the choice to swim up a river when you're slightly "bug-phobic" that go unrecognized and frequently unrewarded, but which make the big goals possible. If you can keep that goal in front of you in spite of all that life throws at you, you've mastered the *daily* commitment, not just the commitment of the moment.

Now that you've made the decision and you're making the same decision every day, let's talk about staying true to your decision.

## EXPECT OBSTACLES

Ever wonder why it seems as if every Olympian has to overcome something? The media love to give us these heart-tugging stories of injury, disease, violence, family tragedy and financial limitations. Other obstacles that aren't as media-friendly can interfere with a commitment just as easily, including: lack of support from family and friends; being told we are "foolish" or "not realistic"; personal disputes with coaches or teammates or even the doubts about whether attaining the goal is worth the effort.

I hate to be the one to burst the myth, but most Olympians do *not* have perfect bodies. They are not in perfect health, are not rich, do not live right next to the world's greatest facilities or coaches, are not exempt from the effects of racism, sexism and poverty, do not have conflict-free relationships with their coaches, teammates and support systems.

It shouldn't be surprising. The world doesn't give people exactly what they need to achieve their dream on a silver platter. Going up, down and around obstacles is *normal*, something to be expected when pursuing a big goal. *The Road Less Traveled* by Scott Peck has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than two decades. It begins with the sentence, "Life is difficult." What I find perplexing is not that Olympians have to deal with these hurdles, but that people are perpetually surprised that Olympians have to overcome *anything at all*.

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A 90-year-old man came up to me after one of my talks and said, "I could have been in the Olympics. It's just that I got in a fight with my coach." I was raised to respect my elders, but I wanted to tell him, "If you let a fight with your coach get between you and the Olympics—you *weren't even close*. You've been kidding yourself for the last seventy years."

The fact that life isn't going to hand us our big reward is precisely why achieving it requires us to grow in unimaginable ways, to move far outside our comfort zone, to stretch our ideas of what we think of as possible. Expect the obstacles and embrace the struggle of growing.

## WINNING WITH *YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES*

Right after the Olympics, many people wanted to know, "How did you do it?" I would recount how my parents did thus and my coach motivated me in a particular way. But soon I realized that I was doing a disservice to my listeners because no one else on the planet was ever going to have circumstances exactly like mine.

Also, if my achievement was contingent on the occurrence of precisely those circumstances, then my achievement amounted to plain luck—and I knew that I didn't get to the Olympics through luck.

To begin with, my parents are truly wonderful people. My father is an orthopedic surgeon and my mother was a teacher until the kids came along, at which time she moved into very meaningful volunteer work. But swimming was not their gig.

I was just 14-years-old when I broke my first American record at our National Championship meet in Canton, Ohio. I broke the record in the prelims and I still had to swim the race again in the finals later that night. I was so excited that I was crying when I called my parents in Jacksonville to tell them my big news:

"I broke the American record," I said between big sobs.

"Good. Good. Did you make it into the finals?"

"Yes, Mom...I was first." *You know? I just swam faster than any American ever had before!*

"Good. Good. What stroke did you swim?" *Oh, please.*

"I swam the butterfly, Mother."

"Oh. I like it when you swim the backstroke so I can see your face." Get the picture?

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*Both Tracy and I could have justified quitting*

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Contrast my parents with Tracy Caulkins' parents. Tracy is the "winningest" swimmer ever, having won forty-eight National Titles and at different points in her career held American records in every stroke, both in sprint and distance events. She had an amazing athletic career.

Tracy's parents drove her and her teammates to practice, sat through many practices, clocked her split times during workout and were involved in the United States Swimming National Governing Body. Her father was a starter for many of her races.

Both Tracy and I could have justified quitting. Tracy could have said she was pressured too much and I could have said I wasn't supported enough. Even though we came from completely different circumstances, we each won three Olympic gold medals. We both won *with* our circumstances.

## BEING COACHABLE

Everyone talks about finding a mentor or mentoring others, but few talk about the skills needed to be *mentorable*, to be coachable. I define being coachable as giving another person permission to demand the very best of you. I don't mean following someone blindly, ignoring your ideas or principles. I'm talking about having a goal big enough that you're willing to step outside your comfort zone—in your relationships with others—and to allow someone else to contribute.

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*I whispered, 'I don't care.' Big mistake!*  
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Being coachable/mentorable is a learned skill that will serve you in your quest for high goals. I would not have made it to the victory stand without my coaches. Not even close. As a lawyer, I now actively seek out those within our law firm with high standards, who might push me and help me develop my legal skills.

I have been fortunate to work with several world-class coaches, and each one has contributed to my success. One afternoon, my coach made me race a fifty-yard backstroke (two laps) against a swimmer who had missed morning practice and (as far as I was concerned) had just loafed the afternoon workout (as much as one can coast 400 laps). I felt that after swimming my 800 laps, I was "done for the day." I was bone tired and didn't want any part of this unfair race at the end of practice.

We raced, she won and under my breath, I whispered, "I don't care." Big mistake!

My coach hauled me up out of the water by the strap on my suit and chewed me out good. Meanwhile, my suit was giving me a wedgie and my coach's face was just two inches from mine—and he had the worst breath.

The mind can do many things with this experience:

*How dare he! How could he humiliate me in front of my teammates! I'm his best swimmer and hardest worker! It was just two laps out of 800! I do NOT deserve to be treated this way! I'm outta' here!*

Or:

*What's wrong with me? How come I gave up? Maybe I really don't want it. Maybe I don't have what it takes. Maybe I'm just wasting my time. What's the use? I'm outta' here!*

But that's the great thing about high goals. My goal of gold medals gave my coach the permission to "get in there" and interrupt that conversation inside my head. He shook my perfectly rational, reasoned belief that I had done enough. But *that* thinking was only going to get me to a certain level, and not to the victory stand at the Olympic Games.

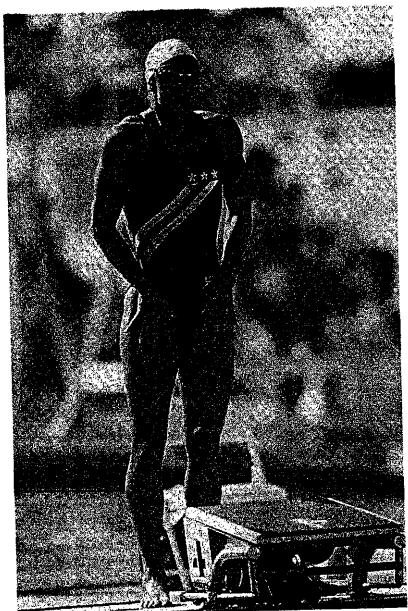
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*If the people around you have to do it perfectly according to you, you will probably have a hard time finding effective mentors*  
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After telling this story, I've had people say, "I don't respond to that kind of motivation." Let me be clear: I am *not* recommending that particular coaching technique. But when I tell this story, it makes the point that if the people around you (your mentors) have to do it perfectly *according to you*, you will probably have a hard time finding effective mentors and what you can achieve will be limited.

## IT'S THE JOURNEY

Note that my chapter does not contain a paragraph describing "the thrill of victory." That's because, for me, the honor and glory of the Olympics come from the journey, not from any one event. Throughout my career I probably swam with a thousand other swimmers from some of the country's best teams, and only a handful of us made it to the Olympics. But all 1,000 of us went through a process that taught us the fundamentals of success and prepared us for the big challenges in life. I am altered by the Olympic experience, not because I stood on a victory platform, but because I went for it without holding anything in reserve. There was no "What if?" because I knew I had gone through the struggle and had done everything I could do.

Throughout this journey of years of workouts and competitions, there were moments of true mastery, of bliss, of a oneness with myself and the world. All the splashing and chaos of workout life were muted and my soul was very still. Truly effortless. During these times, it felt like my soul hovered about two feet above my body and it condensed into a sliver, a needle. These were my shared moments with God.



*Photo courtesy of Heinz Kleutmeier*

In the yin and yang of life, I don't know whether I could have had such spiritual moments without also experiencing the downside of going for a big goal: the slumps and discouragements; the feeling that I could not make myself get in the water another day; the agonizing questions about whether this was the right path; the feeling that my goal was dominating my life, rather than vice versa. I endured a two-and-one-half-year period in which I did not improve a single time. And still, I got back in the water, every day.

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Ultimately, I felt that developing the talents God gave me was a noble purpose. I was proud of what I was doing. I've heard people share their visions of leadership, excellence, pregnancy, parenthood and community in much the same way. That sense of purpose gives us the ability to move beyond what we otherwise might have thought possible.

To awaken the Olympian within, we must have faith in the noble purpose of our life's goals. We must learn the skills of success to achieve our noble purpose. We'll be amazed at what we are capable of achieving.

