

swimmers

COURAGE & TRIUMPH



LARRY THOMPSON

“Quick, where’s my goggles?! Halfway through these wonderful athlete profiles, I could stand it no more—I simply had to find the nearest pool and go for a swim! Each story is a motivator. Each voice reminds us why we love this tough, honest sport of ours. If you take swimming seriously, you’re going to connect with these pages.”

—P.H. Mullen, author of *Gold in the Water*

“If you’ve ever wondered ‘What is it about swimming that makes champions go through all that work and pain?’ this book will provide the answer. I’ve been privileged to know many of the swimmers profiled herein, and I can honestly say, their stories are worth reading. Larry Thompson has assembled a fine collection of swimmers to profile in his book, *Swimmers: Courage and Triumph* and every swimming fan and reader will benefit from knowing their stories.”

—John Naber, Olympic swimming champion, television announcer, author and motivational speaker

“*Swimmers: Courage and Triumph* captures the essence of what happens when the human spirit uses the element of water to overcome challenges, both mentally and physically, in order to break through boundaries set by the mind or body.

This is a must read for anyone who is passionate about swimming. More importantly, this is a must read for anyone who needs inspiration to reach a life goal. The book inspires all readers to realize that all triumph originates with courage.

The book does a fantastic job of detailing how each triumph has its place in history, beginning with Mark Spitz’s seven world records in the 1972 Olympic Games all the way to Lynne Cox’s historical swim to Antarctica. Readers will enjoy learning about such people as Rich Abrahams who broke age barriers with his world record swims. Other stories such as the lives of David Yudovin who survived cardiac arrest and George Brunstad at age 70 who both went on to swim the English Channel are equally inspirational. Every reader will enjoy the stories shared in *Swimmers: Courage and Triumph*. I know I did!”

—Brent Rutenmiller, Publisher of *Swimming World Magazine*

“Larry gives us a brief glimpse into the lives and accomplishments of truly extraordinary individuals who through their passion and commitment have achieved greatness in the aquatic community. And while these people come from all walks of life, having unique goals and experiences, Larry’s depiction of their enthusiasm for swimming and their courage is an inspiration to all members of our aquatic family and to the public at large.”

—Rob Copeland, President - United States Masters Swimming

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Melanie Benn

When 18 year old Melanie Benn headed home to San Diego for Christmas break during her freshman year at Humboldt State University in 1995, she thought she was getting the flu.

She never could have imagined that days later, she would be facing the loss of her forearms and legs above the knees because of bacterial meningitis, a relatively rare but critical infectious disease that causes inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal chord.

She also couldn't have imagined that a decade later, she would have completed a career as a world class swimmer, competed around the globe and also earned a Masters degree and embarked on a busy career as a social worker in a prestigious medical research institution.

Benn had been feeling sick and run down for about a week before her trip home that Christmas. By the time she reached her family on Christmas Eve, she was vomiting and then fell unconscious. She would be in the hospital for five months, battling the infection and a related blood clotting disorder that caused gangrene in her extremities and necessitated the quadruple amputation.

Benn's obvious poise, warmth and self confidence make it easier to understand how she rebounded from such a devastating and sudden illness. She exudes relaxed humor and modesty over her accomplishments; and in a wheelchair and prostheses she balances a work, training and personal schedule that would overwhelm many able-bodied people.

She claims to be a "big wimp" when it comes to sports. "I'm not an athlete at heart," she says. But her success in the pool, and the way she rebuilt her life with a disability, reveal what could only be described as remarkable toughness and determination.

Before she contracted meningitis, Benn had never heard of it. Close to 3,000 Americans a year contract viral meningitis or the more serious bacterial form of the disease, and it is more likely to spread in crowded living conditions such as college campuses. The symptoms of its onset are similar to those of the flu but include rashes and a stiff neck. Though it is not widely known, there is a vaccine for meningitis that costs about \$65. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now recommend that all adolescents get the vaccine, as young as age 11 or at least before they enter college. Benn's mother Candie has become an active proponent of the vaccine and is a co-

founder of the National Meningitis Association. Melanie has also done public awareness-raising and advocacy for the vaccine, and the company which manufactures it funded her family to cheer her on in Sydney and Athens at the 2000 and 2004 Paralympic Games.

“Because meningitis is kind of rare, it’s taken a long time for awareness to come about,” she says of the disease. “But there are a lot of risk factors for people living in close proximity, like kids at boarding schools or sports camps.”

Along with the amputations, Benn also needed a kidney transplant, from her father Ed, and spent a year on dialysis. Her recovery was rough, needless to say, but she says the support and positive attitude of her family and friends helped her through it.

“People are able to survive experiences like that because you regress emotionally,” she says. “I remember being itchy, tired, hungry. You don’t analyze what your life is going to be like from here on. You turn to the people around you for emotions. During the really acute days when I was getting amputations and dialysis and skin grafts, my friends were always there, ordering pizzas and laughing, really upbeat. I’m sure it was hard for them to be like that, but they did it. When they talked it was always like ‘when you go back to school, when you do this or that’ – it was never a question.”

Benn didn’t waste any time going back to school, she started classes at a local community college while her bandages were still on. Then she transferred to San Diego State University and graduated with a degree in psychology. Later she earned a Masters in social work at UCLA, and started working at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) medical school as a counselor for hospital patients, including those with HIV and AIDS and postpartum mothers.

“It’s a broad range, mostly crisis situations,” she said. “I love being in the medical center, the environment is really conducive to learning. I was a patient at UCSD so having that experience gives me more insight as a provider of care.”

In high school Benn played softball and basketball and was on the diving team. “The swimmers hated us because we were bad and brought the team score down,” she laughs. “We even had to ride in a separate bus from the swimmers.”

During the year of dialysis following her illness, she had a port in her chest for the procedure that prevented her from getting in the water. But once that was over, she took the advice of several friends and hopped back in the pool.

“I absolutely loved it,” she said. “At the time I was still learning to use these arms and legs (prostheses) and in a big wheelchair. I felt so cumbersome, so to be able to take every-

thing off, to be able to move so freely just felt great. Sports had been a big part of my upbringing. After my illness, I wasn't sure what sport it would be. I had always done team sports, but swimming as an individual sport has really nurtured my sense of individuality. As a person with a disability that's important because you have to have a lot of strength."

Benn got psyched to start swimming while watching a fundraiser for the Challenged Athletes Foundation called the San Diego Triathlon Challenge at La Jolla Cove, a famous picturesque swimming spot. She started training for the following year's triathlon, and joined a local Masters swim team coached by Alan Voisard. She credits Voisard with convincing her to start competing, but he says she needed little encouragement.

"She asked me if I thought she could do this, and I said sure," said Voisard. "She was ready to go. We started with fins to help her feel the acceleration in the water. With shortened limbs it's harder to get that momentum going, but once she got the feel of it we weaned her off them."

He isn't surprised how quickly Benn progressed.

"She was very determined," he says. "Once she got in the water and had an idea of what the possibilities in swimming were for her, she stayed really committed, found her balance, the moments in swimming that would help her grow. She'd be doing flips in the water, messing around between sets, I think she enjoyed that sense of playfulness and freedom of movement that she didn't have (out of the water) at that point in her life."

Benn found out about the Paralympics, an international competition held immediately after the Olympic Games in the same venue. Athletes are grouped into categories based on their disability. Physical disabilities are rated on a scale of 1 to 10 based on mobility, Benn is in category 4. Categories 11-13 are for visually impaired athletes. Each event is held separately for each category.

At the Paralympic Games trials in Indianapolis in June 2000, Benn surprised herself by setting a national record in the 50 meter backstroke and a time in the 50 meter freestyle that ranked third in the world.

So she was off to Sydney, spending three weeks in the Olympic Village with athletes from around the world. She describes the Sydney experience, where she won a bronze medal on the 4x50 freestyle relay, as "amazing."

"It was really impressive just to be around that caliber of athletes from all different countries," she says. "You get on the bus in 'USA-land' and then go through 'Germany' and the 'Czech Republic' and other countries, more and more people would get on. It

was something to see eight wheelchairs trying to fit into a small space, communicating with hand signals and different languages. My favorite thing was seeing how the blind athletes would all get around with their hands on each other's shoulders."

"And with my social work background, it was interesting to see what kind of equipment people from different countries had and how they interacted. The swimmers from South America had nothing (in terms of modern prostheses or movement aids). One guy would go around on an old BMX bike, instead of a wheelchair. He'd ride right up to the blocks on it."

Four years later she qualified for the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens, another experience she can best describe as "amazing." She thinks she performed better there, even though she had been training on her own rather than with a team because of her busy schedule. She won a silver in the 50 meter freestyle, bronze in the 100 meter freestyle and bronze in the 20 point 4x50 meter freestyle relay.

"I did better for having been there before and having more training and experience," she notes.

By the fall of 2005, Benn had turned in her "retirement papers" and removed herself from the mandatory random drug testing pool, which all potential Paralympic athletes must agree to.

"The drug testing process alone is enough to make you want to retire," she laughs. "They showed up at my house six hours after I'd gotten home from Athens and all I wanted to do was sleep."

She and her partner recently bought a condo in the Tierrasanta neighborhood of San Diego, not far from the medical center. She still swims, but just for fun, which has made her appreciate the sport in new ways, and she enjoys doing yoga and camping and has experimented with sailing. "I like to keep a balance of my career, my family life, my spirituality," she said. "But I am looking for a new sport. I'm not sure what it will be yet."

Voisard is confident she'll succeed in whatever she does, athletically or otherwise.

"She is very humble, she's not a limelight person, but she's a star," he says. "She's like a magnet when she enters a room. She's so charming, because people see the authentic person there."

Melanie was photographed July 31, 2005 in San Diego, California.

Profile contributed by Kari Lydersen.