

Olympic Swimmer Turns Away From Idol

Life as an **Olympic** hopeful can end as tragically as a Shakespearean play.

The difference between being on top of the world and feeling like absolute rubbish?

For Davis Tarwater, it was six-tenths of a second.

The heavy favorite to represent Team USA in Beijing for the 200 Butterfly, Tarwater saw his dream crushed when his time at the 2008 Olympic Trials fell less than a second short.

Six-tenths.

For Tarwater, it was more than just dealing with disappointment. It altered his life.

"When that happened my world came crashing down," said Tarwater via Skype from France, where Team USA practiced before heading to London. "I had nothing. I was a broken man."

But just like every good three-act performance, Tarwater was not finished.

Or should we say, God was not finished with the deflated swimmer.

Tarwater took one of the windiest roads to the Olympic Aquatic Centre this week in London, although looking back, he wouldn't have changed his path for anything.

'Olympics Had Become An Idol'

With his life at rock-bottom in June 2008, Tarwater returned to his hometown of Knoxville, Tenn., searching for new meaning in his life.

Shortly after, he crossed paths with pastor Doug Banister of All Souls Church in Knoxville and the two started sharing with one another.

“Peeling the layers of the onion,” is how Tarwater best describes the year after his near-Olympic miss.

“I had some really tough conversions,” he said. “I began reforming my identity into one that was **Christ-centered** more than athletic-centered or fame-centered.”

Raised in a Christian home, Tarwater realized that growing up, he “sort of went through the motions” with his **faith**, and by the time he reached college he “didn’t seek any spiritual community whatsoever.”

“In 2008, I basically came to terms that the **Olympics** had become an **idol** in my life,” said Tarwater, a standout swimmer at the University of Michigan.

Banister challenged Tarwater to come to his own conclusion of the person of Jesus Christ and whether he really exists. He even suggested he keep trying that Christ-less, intellectual path and to report back where that takes him.

“The ‘A-ha’ moments were many,” he said. “There was so much stuff packed in, by the time I had the ability to prayerfully repent and rebuke the stuff in my life, I was finally at a good time in life.”

For Tarwater, it was time to make up for all the lost years of living for himself.

“I would say I recommitted my life because I grew up in a Christian home,” he said, before clarifying, “but really it was the first time where I knew what I was doing and committed my life to Christ.”

Still, there was the lingering question: What next?

Tarwater wasn't completely sure what God had in store, but he was sure it wasn't in the pool.

'Never Heard A Clearer Call'

After a bit of soul-searching, Tarwater enrolled in a master's program at the University of Oxford in England.

He felt led to pursue a degree in Latin American studies and did just that, beginning in the fall of 2009. "I can get my master's and change the world," said Tarwater, who continued to grow his **faith** at St. Aldates Church in Oxford.

But after graduating in late summer of 2010 and taking a family vacation, he felt the Lord pushing him back into the water.

And this time, it was the deep end.

"I've never heard a clearer call in my life," Tarwater said. "I made the call to David Marsh at Mecklenburg Aquatic Club in (Charlotte) North Carolina."

It was October of 2010 and Tarwater and Marsh sat down and talked things over, wrestling with two main questions: *Is it worth doing?* and *Is there enough time?*

Tarwater was more sure of the former than the latter, but Marsh assured him, with enough hard work, there was just enough time—18 months until the 2012 Olympic Trials in Omaha, Neb.

"We came to the conclusion it was going to be tough," he said, "but we could pull it off physically."

'Your Will Be Done'

The phone rang 23 minutes after he returned to his home in Knoxville from Omaha.

Tarwater was tired. He had endured 18 months of grueling workouts, leading up to last month's Olympic Trials in Omaha.

And for the second time in his life he felt there was a legitimate shot at fulfilling his dream.

But when his three events were finished (100, 200 butterfly and 800 relay), he had barely missed qualifying again.

His closest finish was 7th place in the 800 freestyle relay—only the top six qualify for London—but it left him standing just outside the Olympic rings, looking in.

Only this time it was different.

Bummed? Certainly. Frustrated? Yeah.

But the 28-year old, who spent his time in Charlotte worshipping at Hope Community Church, was now grounded in Christ.

His identity as an Olympic swimmer? It now paled in comparison with being a **follower of Jesus**.

“This time, when I walked out of Omaha, it was a whole different experience,” Tarwater said. “I went through it all again. I had missed the team again, but it was almost like it was the last step in submitting everything to God. I said ‘Your will be done.’”

But when the phone rang, and his coach was on the other end, Tarwater found out that will was now something completely different.

Hours after giving it all over to the Lord, he got the call of his life. It was Coach Marsh with some amazing news.

He was headed to London as an Olympic swimmer.

“Michael Phelps had dropped the event,” said Tarwater, who moved up to the sixth qualifying spot. “And we both burst into tears.

“He knew my path, knew my faith. And he knew I walked out of

Omaha in a way that was frustrated, but in a way that I was doing everything I could to glorify God.”

As soon as Tarwater hung up the phone with his coach, he dialed his parents, Dwight and Mary, who were driving back to Knoxville from Omaha.

“I have some news,” Tarwater said.

Before he could even get all the particulars worked out—that his sister Katherine, 24, and brother Dwight, 20, would be able to come to London to cheer him on for Tuesday morning’s 800 relay qualifier—his mom had broken into tears.

And now he was getting emotional again.

“It was really a special moment,” Tarwater said. “It was a long road and there was a lot of pain. But this time I felt so much comfort in the pain.

“It was a real gift from God. I felt His presence so much the past few weeks. It was an unbelievable feeling.”

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