

HE'S BACK

(SORT OF)

Olympic Gold Medalist Brian Goodell Returns to the Sport

by Christine Ennulat >>> Photos by David Balch

Olympian Brian Goodell is nothing if not candid about his return to swimming.

"So, how's your Masters experience so far?"

"Hit and miss."

"How have you stayed fit over the years?"

"I haven't," he says, and owns that while he's healthy, he's also maybe 30 to 40 pounds heavier than when he last competed, in college.

"Well, what kind of times are you getting?"

"Slow ones."

OK, so everyone should now know not to expect big,

splashy performances like his world-record-setting, Olympic gold swims in the

400 and 1500 in 1976 at Montreal. Still, it's a fine thing to see the last American man to hold those world records return to the sport, on whatever terms. In August, he swam in the USMS Long Course Nationals, held at his home pool in Mission Viejo, Calif., that hotbed of world-caliber swimming so prominent in the 1970s and becoming so again.

Goodell's swimming story begins, or almost didn't begin, in 1961 when a certain toddler fell into a pool. His cousin pulled him out of the water as soon as it happened, but not soon enough to erase the

terror that took hold in young Brian Goodell and kept him walking around with a Styrofoam bubble strapped to his back until he was 5. His parents, Wayne and Reba,

spare and an extraordinary work ethic, Goodell was winning races against swimmers bigger and older than he. When he was 9, the family moved to Mission Viejo,



quietly waited him out until he was able to release his fears, and it paid off—10 days after his first swimming lesson at age 5, he competed in his first meet. After that, there was no stopping him.

Before long, with talent to

where in 1968 they were integral in starting the Mission Viejo Nadadores, the storied swimming program that has produced many national—and even world-caliber—swimmers, notably Shirley Babashoff, Tiffany Cohen and

Larsen Jensen among others. By age 14, Goodell's fellow swimmers invited him into Mission Viejo's fabled "animal" lane, in which swimmers pushed themselves to extraordinary lengths, literally, covering as much as 80,000 to 100,000 meters a week.

In the book *Four Champions, One Gold Medal*, writer (and esteemed swim coach) Chuck Warner details Goodell's development into a champion, as well as the parallel journeys of contemporaries Bobby Hackett, Tim Shaw and Australia's Stephen Holland. All roads here lead to "the spectacular men's distance freestyle performances in the 1976 Olympics, including the 1500 meter freestyle, perhaps the greatest performance in swimming history," Warner writes. Each young man had his own tool kit—qualities, opportunities, circumstances and lots and lots and lots of hard work—that he used toward his achievements. Foremost among Goodell's many tools, Warner explains, was visualization, which he learned from Jeff Goforth, whom the Nadadores' coach Mark Schubert brought in to lead a seminar for the team in autumn 1975.

Goodell began applying it in his practices right away. "I was in a fantasy world the whole time," he remembers, explaining how he could

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possibly slog through 20,000 meters a day. “Otherwise,” he says, “you’d be saying, ‘Oh, my arm hurts, my shoulder hurts, I’m hungry, I’ve got to go to the bathroom, I’m bored....’” He began to use his imagination to find, and even create, the reserves that got him through all those miles and ultimately to that final touch on the wall at Montreal.

In his book, Warner recounts one particular day at practice, when Goodell was feeling draggy and resistant during a 3,000-meter swim. The Golden Earring song “Radar Love” had been stuck in his head since the ride to the pool. Worried that he’d have to repeat the

swim the next day if his splits weren’t acceptable, Goodell changed his mindset—the second 1500 became the 1500 final at Montreal. The beat from “Radar Love” swelled in his mind and lined up with the beat of his arms. As the music built, so did his swim.

“What are you doing?” asks Goodell’s coach in Warner’s telling of that story. “I just won the Olympics! I set a new world record! The puzzled coach said, ‘Well, your last 100 was 59.2. Not bad.’”

Goodell’s last 100 at the actual Olympics just a few months later was 57.7. (He was landing a 747 at the time...to the accompanying strains of “Radar Love,” of course.) The new world record he set that day, breaking the one he’d set at the Olympic Trials in Long Beach (15:06.66), was 15:02.40. Three days later, he broke his own world record in the 400-meter freestyle, at 3:51.93.

Goodell’s record in the 1500 stood for four years, until the Moscow Olympics when Vladimir Salnikov swam 14:58.27, becoming the first man to break the 15-minute barrier. Who knows how things might have gone had the U.S. not boycotted the Olympics that year.

Meanwhile, Goodell went on to have an illustrious swimming career at UCLA, where he majored in geography. Though he never came within 12 seconds of his Olympic time in the 1500, he did bring his record time in the 400 down to 3:51.56 in 1977. He pretty much dominated his events throughout college.

And the world finally got bigger. The grown-up Goodell acknowledges the enormous luxury he had in his teenage years to focus so intensely on



Goodell utilized visualization techniques in his 1976 quest for Olympic gold, setting world records in the 400 and 1500 while **GOLDEN EARRING** played “Radar Love” inside his head.

his swimming. “Life was *very* simple then. You got up and you ate, and you swam and then you ate, and then you swam and you ate and you went to bed, and then you got up and you did it all again. And you did whatever someone told you to do, constantly, and that’s all I had to think about, worry about.”

In college, more thorny questions arose: “How am I going to graduate?” Goodell recalls the worry list. “What am I going to be? Who am I going to marry? What am I going to do? How am I going to pay for these *kids*?” He chuckles. “When I finished my swimming career and graduated from UCLA, I was so happy to say, ‘Oh, good, now I can be normal. Then you go to being normal, and it *sucks*, you know? You’re schlepping around with the masses, and everyone is competing for new houses, and all that stuff. Yuck!”

Ultimately, all of Goodell’s questions worked themselves out. But the transition, he says, was “pretty hectic,” as it is for any young person starting out. For nearly his whole life, Goodell’s identity had been swimming—and then, it wasn’t. “Suddenly, I was thrust into a business world I knew nothing about and was low man on the totem pole,” he says. Just after graduation (amid several promotional appearances for The Finals and around the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles), he apprenticed at Grubb & Ellis, a multinational commercial real estate advisory firm. Goodell found the business “very competitive,” he remembers. “All those guys were all like, ‘Eh, it’s not like *swimming*, is it?’”

It wasn’t, but armed with his work ethic and well-founded faith in himself, Goodell made his way. His first job was with the Santa Margarita Co., a master plan community developer owned by the same

family who had created the Mission Viejo community in the 1960s. For about 10 years, Goodell served as director of business properties with SMC in building the town of Rancho Santa Margarita, adjacent to Mission Viejo. But an economic downturn in the mid-’90s and faltering land sales set him on a somewhat circuitous path toward his next career—building private prisons and jails.

With that switch to the marketing team for Corrections Corporation of America, Goodell says, “I got very involved in politics, with the legislature, with the governor’s office, U.S. marshals and INS and all these people, trying to get all of them to embrace the idea of privatizing their facilities.” Often, it was an uphill battle, but Goodell’s growing skillset was all about putting together deals, making things happen—“putting people together and building relationships,” he says, and he helped get two prisons built in California. Those contacts led to a new job developing business on the West Coast for the Corporation for Standards in Outcomes, which was “a good run,” he says, for about five years until the company changed ownership. Goodell did consulting work for a few months before landing his current position, as vice president for business development at buy.com (whose owner and founder Scott Blum, by the way, is a former Nadadore).

Now Goodell is back in Mission Viejo with his wife of 21 years, Vicki—a schoolteacher, piano teacher and marathon walker/activist for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society—and their three boys. The oldest, 18-year-old Brian Lee, will head this fall to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, on a track scholarship. Greg, 17, a senior at Mission Viejo High School, and Scott, a

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13-year-old eighth grader, are both Nadadores, training under eminent coaches Bill Rose (think Larsen Jensen, Mike Bruner and other Olympians) and Jim Montrella (some more Olympians, Ohio State women), respectively. Greg excels in the distance events...like You-Know-Who.

Family and work kept Goodell away from swimming regularly over the years, and now his children have brought him back (though work remains an impediment). Two summers ago, when middle son Greg started early-morning workouts with the Nadadores, Goodell figured he might as well make use of the time and joined the Masters group. Then Greg began getting sick a lot, so his early-morning workouts stopped. “Well, there went my workout,” Goodell says with a laugh. “I wasn’t going to get up for *myself*!” Since then, he’s managed to at least keep a toe in, and that’s enough. “Some weeks I’ll go three or four times, but that’s very rare,” he

says, “and then I won’t go for three or four weeks, and then I’ll go once, and then I won’t go for two weeks, then twice in a week...it’s been like that.

“I don’t really have any goals to set records,” he continues. He toyed with trying for the high point award for his age group at USMS Long Course Nationals, but when he mentioned the idea to Vicki, she informed him that was the weekend they’d be departing on a cruise to Alaska to celebrate her parents’ 50th wedding anniversary. (He still planned to swim the first two days of the meet.) “So there’s no goal here,” he says. “The goal is just to swim, not to win anything.”

Swimming for its own sake? Brian Goodell? Absolutely. “I never feel better than when I swim in the morning—physically and mentally,” he says—repeatedly. “I hate running, I hate going to the gym. What’s the point of all that? I don’t like hurting, and just starting running just kills me all the time, and it’s

BRIAN GOODELL’S SWIMMING ACHIEVEMENTS

- 1975 World Championships: silver in 1500m freestyle
- 1976 Olympic Games: gold in 400m and 1500m freestyle
- 1977 World Swimmer of the Year
- 1979 Pan American Games: gold in 400m and 1500m freestyle, as well as relay
- 5 World Records in 400m and 1500m freestyle
- 8 American Records in 400m, 1500m, 500yd and 1650yd freestyle, as well as 400yd individual medley
- 9 NCAA Championships in 500yd and 1650yd freestyle and 400yd individual medley
- 10 AAU National Championship individual titles in 500yd, 1000yd, 1500yd, 400m, 800m and 1500m freestyle
- 1986 International Swimming Hall of Fame Inductee

BRIAN GOODELL with his wife, Vicki, and their sons (l to r) Scott, 13, Brian Lee, 18, and Greg, 17.

something I've never liked and I just don't want to do it. Swimming feels good—I can get a good workout, get a good burn.” Typical workouts comprise 3,000, maybe 3,500 meters, with a lot of drill and a good bit of variety. “I don't know—just *moving* is good,” he laughs.

Being close to all that high-caliber swimming is good, too. At the 2004 Olympic Trials last summer in Long Beach, as eight athletes—two, Larsen Jensen and Justin Mortimer, from Mission Viejo—strolled toward the blocks for the 1500 meter freestyle finals, a familiar guitar lick blared over the pool's loudspeakers, then resolved into a quietly driving, then building, beat. Brian Goodell and a few others grinned as Golden Earring began to sing, “I've been driving all night, my hands wet on the wheel...”

Goodell, who'd arranged that musical moment, sat at the foot of Larsen Jensen's lane looking on as young Jensen smashed the American record, dropping it down to 14:56.71. (In Greece, Jensen dropped his time more than another 10 seconds, taking the silver with 14:45.29.)

The two had met a few times to talk about Goodell's experiences. “People just can't imagine what it's like,” he says. “Take every awful final exam, your first speech, your wedding day, anything else that's caused you a great deal of stress and anxiety in your life, and combine it and then



Photo: mikegillmorephotography.com

multiply it by about 10, or 20, and that's what it's like when you're going into your first Olympic finals. That's how you feel.” Goodell counseled Jensen to expect the pressure, accept it, respect it, use it. “The best thing is to know that you're going to be all right no matter what the outcome is—you can move on, you're strong, you can handle it.”

Sounds like old wisdom, perhaps tracing all the way back to the relinquishing of one Styrofoam bubble. “Some people just go crazy because they want to control everything,” he says, “and I've learned that I'm not in control of anything. All I can control is how I react to what happens.” He could be talking about swimming, or business or family, or just about anything.

For now, business and

family are the focus, especially family—“We celebrate life events until we're sick of them,” he chuckles, having just come through an anniversary, a birthday and a graduation, with another family party coming up the next weekend.

Just as important, if not more so, are the smaller moments in between. That morning, he remembers, he'd

finished Masters practice and was ready to go home. “A diving meet was going on in the other pool and I thought, ‘Hmm, the snack bar smells pretty good, I think I'll go and have breakfast.’ I sat down and watched the divers dive for a while—how nice is *that*? To cruise around and get to swim and enjoy some of the best parts of life, right there.” <<<

DISTANCE SWIMMING COMES FULL CIRCLE?

Brian Goodell's return to swimming coincides nicely with the return of the top distance swimming prizes to within American reach, after a hiatus nearly as long as Goodell's from the sport. And Mission Viejo, Goodell's own proving ground, is once again a hub.

After Vladimir Salnikov broke 15 minutes in the 1500 in 1980, it would be 20 years before a U.S. swimmer did so. Writer Chuck Warner notes that no one broke Goodell's American record until George DeCarlo, eight years later, and that no American swam as fast up to the 1999 publication of his book.

After 1980, Salnikov broke his own record two more times, and his time of 14:54.76 remained the fastest from 1983 to 1991. Then, in the early '90s, the record dropped a few more times, down to Kieren Perkins' 14:44.66 in 1994, where it stayed until Grant Hackett took it down to 14:34.56 in 2001, where it remains. For how long?

USA Swimming has upped the ante: \$1 million to any swimmer winning Olympic gold in the 1500, or the women's 800, in world-record time.

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