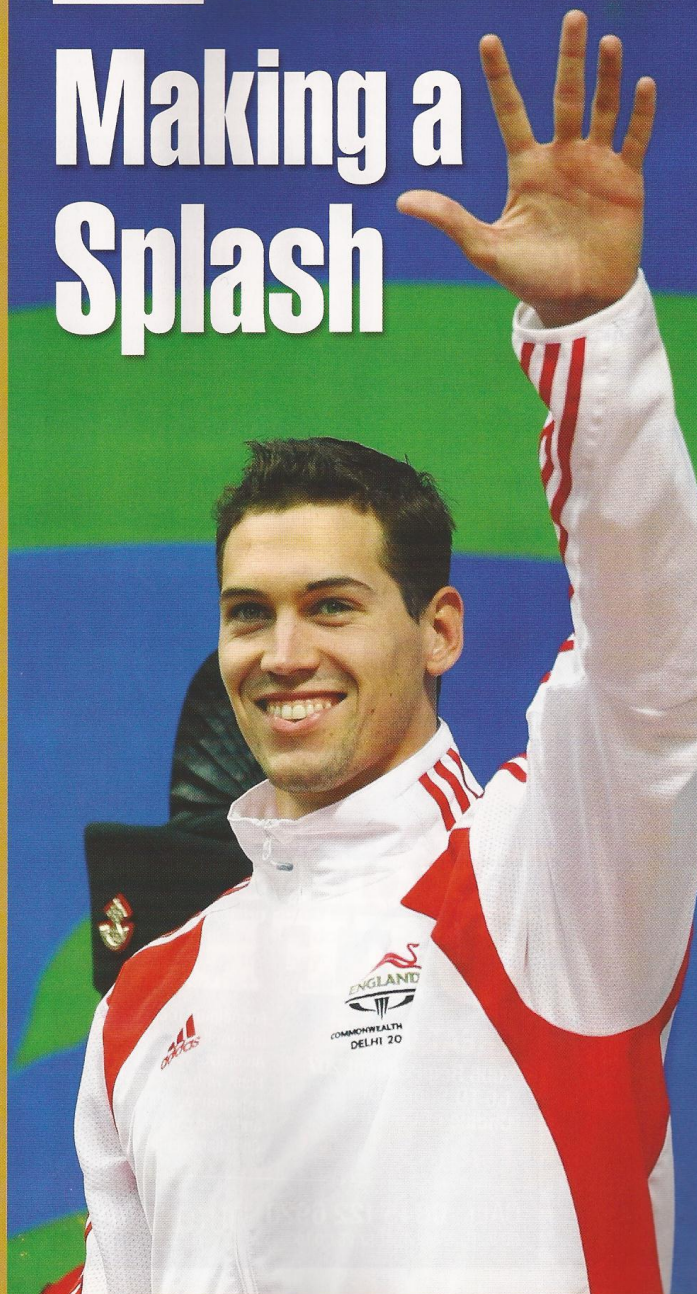




Making a Splash



By Stuart Weir

Simon Burnett swam for GB in the 2004 and 2008 Olympics. In three Commonwealth Games (2002, 2006 and 2010) he won two Gold, three Silver and two Bronze medals, as well as European Silver and Bronze. He is a serious medal prospect for 2012. He grew up in Oxford but lives and trains in Arizona. He is 28.

At what point did you realize you had a special talent as a swimmer?

"Right from a young age I knew I was good because I could win races, but speaking on a national scale, or of Olympic aspirations, it wasn't until I was about 16 that I started to take it seriously. I might add, much to the frustration of my coach who noticed at a young age that I had the talent but I was never the best behaved athlete, nor did I work as hard as he would have liked."

What was your first achievement?

"Qualifying for the Commonwealth Games in 2002 was a really big achievement on a grand scale – that the event was in Manchester made it more special. In 2001 I had qualified as a junior for the Three Nations Championships in the 100 Freestyle – that was a step in the right direction and started me moving towards my international career."

What has been the highlight of your career so far?

"Making the 2004 Olympic final in the 200 Freestyle was a great achievement as was winning two Gold medals in the 2006 Commonwealth Games. The 100 Freestyle remains my only individual Gold medal at a major event."

Why are you based in Arizona?

"I went on a four year scholarship to college, as you can only compete four times in the NCAA (College) championships. I didn't really think ahead, I stayed because things progressed really well. I was swimming well so I stuck with it. I also love the area and I love the sunshine. We train outdoor all year round. It has worked well for me."

What does your training involve?

"My training has changed dramatically in the last two years. As I have got older, my ability to recover from training has diminished so we have altered my training to compensate for that. When I was younger, say 18-23, I was training 24 hours a week – mainly in the pool but also some gym work and weights.

Now I train once a day but it is a lot more specific, with more concentration on power and strength – less on endurance. I don't have the ability to recover from those long, gruelling, endurance workouts any more. Another reason

for doing less endurance work is that I now concentrate more on the 100 than the 200.

So now I train for just 12-15 hours a week – most of that in the pool. But I also do about the same amount of time in exercises to help me recover – whether that is a 30-40 minutes stretching session after a work-out or rolling out my muscles. I have started doing cold-tubs – something I used not to do because I despise the cold water. But as I find that it helps me, I have made the effort to do it.

So training still takes the same amount of time as before but because of my weakness in recovery from workouts, I have had to substitute these things to help my body."

Was your performance in the 2010 Commonwealth Games what you expected?

"The Commonwealth Games went better than I had expected. By Delhi I had had about 10 months of the new training regime, but going into a major event with a dramatically different training regime raised some questions. 2010 had been a mixed year with some good performances but some disappointing.

Beforehand, I had thought that the best I could do in the 100 Free was the Bronze because I didn't think I could beat Brent Hayden or Eamon Sullivan because of how their seasons had gone. So I was very shocked to come away with Silver. In fact at the end of the race I looked up at the scoreboard and saw three, after Eamon's name and thought "Man, I must be fourth". I assumed the South African on the other side got second and I must be fourth. It was only a few seconds later that I found my name on the board in second place. I was thrilled."

What will it be like to compete in London 2012?

"I think it is going to be amazing. I competed in the Commonwealth Games in Manchester – which is a big event for us, but you can't compare the Olympics to any other event. The difference would be like comparing a European Football Championship with a World Cup.

That the Olympics are in our own country is going to be incredible – particularly for a sport like swimming that doesn't get a lot of publicity or attention. But at the Olympics, the swimming is often a big deal – particularly as it is going on in the first week when there is not much else. And of course we have an amazing team at the moment – getting better and better every year so it will be a great opportunity for everyone to get some exposure and have a great time."

What can you achieve in London?

"I went through a tough time with my swimming, which is well documented, and it was only last year that I got back into the top 10 in the world in the 100 Free – after being ranked number one in 2006. I am trying to take each year as it comes. The rankings are so close at the moment that all there is between me at 10, and the guy number one is half a second. So if I can keep my preparation going the way I want it too, and if I can improve and take it lightly, not putting too

much pressure on myself to get back to where I was, I think anything is possible.

"I'm going into the Olympics with an open mind, because anything can happen and we have seen surprise after surprise in a hundred different events and 100 different sports and I don't see this as being any different. I am as fast as I have ever been in the 100 Free and I don't see why I can't continue to do that."

Talk about your Olympic experience.

"The Olympics are very, very different from a world championship. One of the biggest deals about the Olympics is not the sports event itself, but everything that goes with it. It is being in a village with other athletes. It is having access to food and drink (soft drink obviously) 24 hours a day. It's about you being in a house on your own and having to manage your own time – and having a lot of time on your hands with all these distractions available.

The Commonwealth Games is a good taster, a good preparation for the Olympics. The World Championships are different, because you are in a hotel but the Commonwealth Games has a village. So I really believe the Olympics just build on that, one step further. Having been to the Commonwealth Games before the Olympics really helps in terms of being able to deal with that."

What other interests do you have?

"With regard to sport, I have become very americanised and I love to watch American football – that's the sport I watch most and find most exciting.

Almost everything I do has some tie back to swimming. For example I do some coaching with kids. They are aged 7-12, and I am trying to help them get better, to change them from average swimmers to being competitive in the event. One of my coaches runs a swim school and I volunteer with that two hours a week. That's teaching kids, who have never been in the water, to swim and giving them confidence.

We train on campus and I try to stay connected with the university from an academic standpoint and attend some Science lectures.

It is easy to get too caught up in swimming and let it dominate your life. You really can over-analyse. You can be constantly thinking and worrying about the swimming – what happened

in training today...I've got this difficult session tomorrow...I have to make sure that this, this and this happens. My coach tells me I need to fill my time, to get out there and do other things. So I try to keep busy and distract myself from the sport."

Do you believe in a God or a higher being or anything beyond yourself?

"I consider myself agnostic. I don't subscribe to any religion but I do believe that there is some greater power out there than just our own experience and our own perception. I really want to believe that there is more to life than trying to take care of yourself, produce offspring and make some money. I cannot accept that that is all there is to this life. So I do believe in something beyond this human experience but I don't know what it is."

In Delhi you dedicated your Commonwealth Games medals to UCARE. What is UCARE?

"UCARE (Urology Cancer Research and Education) is a charity which supports urological cancer research projects linked to Oxford, where doctors and scientists are taking a leading role in the global fight against cancer. It is about rarer urological cancers which include kidney and bladder and testes as well as prostate cancer. It is also about research and education in Urology. The doctors are fantastic but they are dealing with lesser-known cancers – not the glamour ones if there are any. These cancers make up 20% of all cancers diagnosed in the UK each year. We are trying to raise awareness of UCARE."

How did you get involved?

"I got involved through my next door neighbour whose husband had cancer and got treated by a doctor in Oxford, David Cranston, who started the charity with a colleague Andy Protheroe. My neighbour asked if I would help out and I said I would love to.

I think it is so important for men to take these things seriously. It is not drilled into men the way it is to women. Just as women are told to check once a week or once a month for breast cancer, men need to do the same – to be checking themselves and also getting regular check-ups from the doctor. No man likes to go to the doctor and have a delicate and intimate procedure but it is so important to promote that in order to stay healthy." ■



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