

SWIMMING MEN



Grant HACKETT (AUS)
6.60%



Pieter van den HOOGENBAND (NED)
3.30%



Ian THORPE (AUS)
3.30%



Kosuke KITAJIMA (JPN)
3.30%

The best of the decade:
Michael PHELPS (USA)
75.40%

Also voted for:
Domenico Fioravanti (ITA)
Aaron Peirsol (USA)
Cesar Cielo Filho (BRA)
Paul Biedermann (GER)
Zhang Lin (CHN)

The greatest of all-time

No prizes for guessing who the male athlete of the decade is. He was born in Baltimore on June 30, 1985, and he grew into not only the greatest swimmer of all-time but the greatest Olympian, with 14 gold medals at the Games and 22 World Championship victories to his credit.

By the time Michael Fred Phelps arrived in Beijing for the 2008 Olympic Games, he had raced in his first Olympic final at 15, set his first world record at 15, claimed six gold medals at Athens in 2004, set 32 world records and claimed 17 gold medals at world championships.

Of the targets left to him, the one that caught the public imagination more than any other was the one he missed by a gold medal back in 2004: Mark Spitz's all-sport Olympic record of seven golds at one Games. At a Games hosted by a nation that holds the figure eight in high esteem as a bearer of good fortune, Phelps went one beyond Spitz but luck had nothing to do with it.

Here was the most versatile swimmer in history, ranked in the top three in

Photo: REUTERS - DAVID GRAY

the world at various stages of his career in the 200m freestyle, the 100m and 200m backstroke, the 100m and 200m butterfly and the 200m and 400m medley. Take out the backstroke events and you have five of the gold medals from Beijing, US teammates helping him to go one step beyond Seventh Heaven.

At 10, fresh from shedding a fear of putting his face in water and channelling his energy into an activity that had served as the best medicine for the attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder he was diagnosed with at 7, Phelps joined North Baltimore Swim Club. There to greet him was coach Bob Bowman, a Beethoven fan with a degree in developmental psychology, minoring in musical composition. If the instrument was willing and able, then the notes that Bowman mapped out in those early days would become a masterpiece. Their slogan was "The solution lies with us".

RESULTS, MEDALS

Just in few lines: **Olympic Games:** 14 gold and 2 bronze medals. **World Championships:** 22 gold, 4 silver, 37 world records (29 individual, 8 relay)

At the US Olympic trials, soon after his 15th birthday, Phelps qualified to race the 200m butterfly at Sydney 2000, where he was placed fifth. Six months later, Phelps, 15 years and 273 days old, became the youngest male world record holder ever, his 1:54.92 in the 200m butterfly at Austin eclipsing Malchow's best of 1:55.18. That was the first of a record 37 world records. At the 2001 FINA World Championships in Fukuoka, he proved himself a racer, winning the 200m butterfly in a world record of 1:54.58, but it was not until August 2002 that Phelps gave a hint of his extraordinary versatility: in 4:11.09 over 400m medley, he shaved 0.67sec off the world record that had stood to Tom Dolan (USA) since he became Olympic champion in Sydney.

Phelps' stature grew again at the 2003 FINA World Championships in Barcelona, where he became the first man to break world records in two separate races on the same day: 1:54.58 to win the 200m butterfly and 1:57.52 in the semi-final of the 200m medley. He then set a world record of 51.76 in the first semi of the 100m butterfly before losing the record and taking silver behind teammate Ian Crocker (50.98), set a world record of 1:56.04 to win the 200m medley ahead of Ian Thorpe (AUS) and ended his campaign with the first sub 4:10 effort over 400m medley (4:09.09).

The stage was set for Athens 2004, when Phelps got closer to Spitz than any other swimmer ever has, winning five gold in finals and one for racing in the medley relay heats, before relinquishing his place in the final to Crocker, and two bronze



Photo: REUTERS

Everybody watches him... Michael is in the spotlight, wherever he swims

medals, one claimed behind Thorpe and Pieter van den Hoogenband (NED) in the 200m freestyle. His medal tally matched the single-Games record of Aleksandr Dityatin (URS), a gymnast, in 1980.

After winning two solo gold medals at the FINA World Championships in 2005, he then rose to previous heights again in 2006 with world records in the 200m butterfly (1:53.80) and 200m medley (1:55.84). The best was yet to come: at the FINA World Championships in Melbourne in 2007, he won every race he entered, set five world records, four of them on his own. "There has been nobody that's been not just as dominant but as versatile. His performance was the greatest performance of all-time. He can do it from behind, he can do it from the front, he can do it when it's close, he can do it when it's not close. He can go

anywhere," said Mark Schubert, USA head coach, in Melbourne.

And he did, in Beijing earning a \$1m bonus from sponsor Speedo, which he used to create the Michael Phelps Foundation, a charity foundation to promote water safety and to advocate swimming for children.

He is made to swim: a long, thin torso offers low drag; he has albatross arms that span 201cm, wider than his height, of 198cm, large paddle-like hands and hyper-flexible ankles above his size 14 feet. He is also what Bowman calls his "motivation machine". Anything, good or bad that comes his way or is said about him, Phelps will use as motivation to get better. He pinned a quote from Ian Thorpe, to the effect that it was impossible for anyone to win eight gold medals, on his locker door so that he might see it every day.

But in Beijing, Thorpe was grace personified, saying: "I'm really proud of him not just because he won eight golds.

Rather, it's how much he has grown up and matured into a great human being. Never in my life have I been so happy to have been proved wrong. I enjoyed every moment of it."

Didn't we all – even those, like Laszlo Cseh and Ryan Lochte, who claimed three medals each in his wake. ■

by Craig LORD, English language editor, FINA Aquatics World Magazine (GBR)

He can do it from behind, he can do it from the front, he can do it when it's close, he can do it when it's not close. He can go anywhere

