The Mother of All Comebacks

Youth, as expected, was served at the swim trials, but the epic splash was made by **41-year-old Dara Torres,** who became the oldest American swimmer ever to qualify for the Games

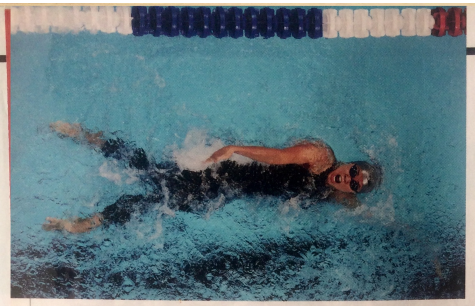
BY KELLI ANDERSON | *Photographs by* Heinz Kluetmeier

IT WASN'T until after she had touched the wall in the 100-meter freestyle final before a stunned crowd at the Olympic swimming trials in Omaha last Friday night that Dara Torres really showed her age. Pushing back the vintage goggles that are older than some of her competitors, the 41-year-old mom looked up at the scoreboard and . . . squinted. ¶ "I couldn't see if I had won," said Torres, whose time of 53.78 put her .05 of a second ahead of 25-year-old runner-up Natalie Coughlin. "They need to make the numbers bigger for people my age." ¶ That had rarely been an issue for the sport before Torres, who won nine medals over four Summer Games (1984, '88, '92 and 2000), decided to come out of retirement for a third time two years ago. In winning the 100 free, she became the oldest American swimmer to make an Olympic team and the first to make five teams. Although she says she felt "like I had been run over by a train" the next morning, Torres recovered to win Sunday evening's 50 free over Jessica Hardy by half a body length and set a U.S. record of 24.25—her second American record of the meet. "I don't know what you even compare it to," says men's assistant coach Frank Busch of Torres's performance. "I don't know that people really grasp what that means. She's obviously talented, but determined? The sacrifices she's made? At 41 years of age?"

JUST WIN, BABY Before a huge crowd that included two-year-old Tessa, Torres took the 50 free in a U.S.-record time of 24.25.

Torres's mind-boggling performances stole some of the spotlight from what was otherwise a showcase for a younger generation of established swimming stars. As expected, Michael Phelps, 23, won all five of his finals, breaking world records in both medleys and setting himself up for a shot at winning a record eight gold medals in Beijing. His former North Baltimore Aquatic Club teammate Katie Hoff, 19, won all five of her events too—setting a world record in the 400 IM and U.S. records in the 200 IM and 200 freestyle—to equal the mark set by Shirley Babashoff at the 1976 trials. Coughlin gave herself a chance to match or better her Athens haul of five medals by winning the 100 back in a world-record time of 58.97 and finishing second in the 100 free and the 200 IM, an event she decided to swim just two weeks ago.

The record crowds at the trials included more than just U.S. swim fans. Italian national team coach Alberto Castagnetti showed up, as did French technical director Claude Fauquet and a slew of international journalists, including about 20 from Japan. The Japanese were there in large part to track the progress of breaststroker Brendan Hansen, the rival of Japanese swimming star Kosuke Kitajima. Hansen, who because of the rivalry is far more famous in Japan than he is in the U.S., won the 100 breaststroke in Omaha, but shockingly, he faltered in his signature event, the 200 breast, finishing fourth as two of his Texas training partners, Scott Spann and Eric Shanteau, secured spots on the team. "I train with these guys every day," said Hansen, who lost an opportunity to win the individual gold medal that eluded him in Athens and reclaim his world record, which Kitajima broke last month. "Ultimately I might have trained them a little too well."



WORLD OF HER OWN Coughlin swam the fastest 100 back ever and may have a shot at medals in five other events in Beijing.

Although the men's squad has a surprising number of first-timers such as Weber-Gale, Schubert believes it is "one of the greatest men's teams we've ever fielded." But he says the comparisons being made to the 1976 team, which won 12 of 13 gold medals in Montreal, are premature. "They will have a tremendous challenge equaling what the '76 team did," says U.S. national team director Mark Schubert, pointing to this team's relative weaknesses in breaststroke and middle-distance freestyle. "The world has gotten a lot more competitive."

The Australian women's team is the best in the world, but the challenges to the U.S. women, who will be favored in just a handful of events, including both backstrokes, the 400 IM and the 4×200 free relay, will come from all over. Consider all the people Hoff—who monitors the progress of her global competitors on the Internet—has to keep track of: Stephanie Rice of Australia in the medleys; Federica Pellegrini of Italy in the 200 and 400 free; and Rebecca Adlington of Great Britain in the 800, to name just a few. "I like to know where I stand," says Hoff. "I was well aware of Stephanie breaking my record [in the 400 IM in March]; of Pellegrini doing the 400 [world] record."

Torres plans to be on top of her game too. While she had little doubt she would make a relay team, she didn't expect to win the 100 free, an event in which she has decided she will not compete in Beijing. (She will, however, presumably enter the other three events she qualified for—the 50 and both 4×100 relays.)

Torres's most recent comeback is a credit to an innovative training program that includes weight work that emphasizes core stability as well as several hours a day of massage and stretching. She is leaner, more balanced and more efficient in the water than she was in 2000 when "she swam on strength," says Phelps's coach, Bob Bowman. "Now it's more finesse-like."

Torres has been proactive about addressing suspicions of drug use, asking the United States Anti-Doping Agency to give her any drug test it could devise.

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While Japan was abuzz about Hansen, the French contingent took note of the men's 100 freestyle. Since Alain Bernard swam a world-record 47.50 in March, the French have been favorites in the men's 4×100 free relay. But in the 100 free prelims and semis in Omaha, three men—Phelps, Jason Lezak and eventual winner Garrett Weber-Gale—all broke 48 seconds for the first time.

Leading the American sprinting resurgence is Weber-Gale, a 22-year-old from Wisconsin who also won the 50 free, beating, among others, two-time defending Olympic gold medalist Gary Hall Jr. His coach at Texas, Eddie Reese, who is also the U.S. men's head coach, had always told him kicking was his gift, but Weber-Gale didn't figure out how to fully integrate it into his stroke until this March. Since then he has lowered his PRs by a second in the 50 and a second and a half in the 100.

FAST WORK Weber-Gale is leading a much-needed U.S. sprinting resurgence.

Since March she has had her blood tested at least a dozen times as part of a USADA pilot program. "I want to be an open book," she says. "I want people to know that I'm 41, and I'm doing this right. I'm clean."

Why is she doing it at all? Torres says she was inspired by a number of fellow masters' swimmers who told her they wanted to see a 40-year-old in the Olympics. Her coach, Michael Lohberg of the Coral Springs (Fla.) Swim Club, said that it's because "she's nuts. She enjoys jumping in that pool and swimming fast because of the feeling she gets. Tonight, to touch that wall, this is [that feeling]. She wants to look at the scoreboard and say, You know what, people? I'm Number 1." □

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