

# No Matter What Happens in Athens, Phelps Is Best Ever

## American Swimmer Dominates Even More Than Legendary Spitz

By JOHN FEINSTEIN, AOL Exclusive

Our topics for today are two of the most remarkable athletes of our time, one who is currently at the zenith of his powers, the other who is reminding us of his greatness by reaching a nadir.

Michael Phelps is so good that few people outside the cult world of swimming can actually understand just how good he is. They are going to judge him on medal count because that's easy to understand and, if he falls short of Mark Spitz's seven gold medal performance at the Munich Olympics in 1972, they will claim that he's not as good as Spitz. In fact, a couple of TV talking heads who know as much about swimming as I do about the Standard and Poor 500, already were claiming he's not as good as Spitz a couple days ago before the Athens Olympics had even begun.

Let's get this straight right now: Phelps is *already* better than Spitz, regardless of how many gold medals he takes home from Athens. That's no knock on Spitz, who was fabulous, but was dominant in two disciplines: butterfly and sprint freestyle. His individual golds in Munich were in the 100 and 200-meter freestyle and in the 100 and 200-meter butterfly. He then swam on three U.S. relays at a time when no one in the world could compete with the U.S. in relays because swimming was a different sport then than it is now.

Phelps is one of the two or three best swimmers in the world in *three* strokes and could probably make the Olympic finals in his "weak," stroke -- the breaststroke -- if he chose to do so. That's why no one can touch him in the individual medley races: he builds a lead in butterfly; widens it in backstroke; doesn't lose ground in breaststroke and then blows everyone away in freestyle. If you have ever been a competitive swimmer on any level you watch him swim the IM's with your mouth open in awe. You see, there has *never* -- repeat never -- been a swimmer who was that good in three strokes. What Spitz did, while extraordinary, was understandable. Frequently, great butterflyers are also great freestylers. Ian Crocker is a perfect example: he holds the world record in the 100-meter butterfly and is a threat to win the gold medal in the 100-meter freestyle. He's a superb swimmer. But he would be the first one to tell you he's no Phelps.

In 1972, very few Olympic swimming events had semifinals. To win his seven gold medals, Spitz had to swim a total of 12 times and, as mentioned, there was virtually no pressure on him in the relays. To win seven gold medals, Phelps will have to swim 17 races, including the two toughest events in swimming -- the 400 IM, which he won in blow-away fashion Saturday night, and the 200-meter butterfly. That's because most Olympic events now have three rounds -- heats, semis and finals -- as opposed to 1972 when most only had two rounds. What's more, the relays are no longer a lock for the U.S. except for the medley relay. That was evident Sunday when the U.S. finished *third* in the 400 freestyle relay. In 1972, the U.S. could easily have finished 1-2-3 in all the relays if allowed to enter more than one team. Not anymore. What's more, Phelps will have to beat Crocker, who has beaten him twice in the last year, setting a world record on both occasions, to swim the medley relay final for the U.S. He could earn that gold medal if he swims in the heats as an alternate, but some will claim a taint on his gold count if he has to go that route. The U.S. will have to really *go* to win the two freestyle relays.

It is entirely possible then that Phelps will come home from Athens with "only," four gold medals and four silver or bronze medals. That's the way it will probably be couched: that he failed to live up to the hype -- and there has certainly been plenty of it -- by winning four gold medals.

Which is ridiculous. Phelps is the greatest swimmer of all time right *now*, regardless of how many gold medals he wins in Athens. In one sense, Phelps is a victim of the hype. He and his agents made a smart business decision a year ago when they decided to go for a heavy corporate marketing campaign before the Olympics. They knew Phelps would be the subject of

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a media feeding frenzy prior to the Olympics because of the American obsession with medal counts and because of the Spitz chase. That's why Phelps's face has been plastered all over TV and newspaper advertising the last couple of months. Which is understandable. Because if Phelps comes home with "only," four gold medals, corporate America isn't going to be beating a path to his front step. Cash in now, swim later. Because swimming is such a niche sport, that's about the only way to become wealthy.

Spitz didn't get even a fraction of the corporate hype that Phelps has gotten. The Olympics hadn't discovered corporate money in 1972. Spitz had just graduated from Indiana and was planning to go to dental school after the Olympics. He had gone into the 1968 Olympics pegged as a budding star and hadn't done all that well. But in '72, he was crushing world records in his events almost every time he dove into a pool, so his performance didn't surprise the swimming world. It *did* surprise everyone else. Spitz became an instant icon, cashed in his chips and never did make it to dental school.

Phelps is planning to swim in at least one more Olympics. That's the way it is these days in the era of the professional Olympic athlete. He is only 19, already a millionaire, so he can afford to keep swimming for as long as his body allows him to do so. In Spitz's era, two time Olympians were rare. Now, they are commonplace. Phelps will probably swim in at least three Olympics, perhaps four.

Which means he may not even be at his peak right now. As great as he is, it is possible that, regardless of how he performs in Athens, he may be four years away from his best swimming. He's so good and, in Bob Bowman, has such a good coach, he might be dominant in FOUR strokes by the time 2008 rolls around. Whether he wins four medals or six or eight in the next week, it is worth remembering that we are watching an athlete who is doing things in his sport that have never been done before.

The same is true when we watch Tiger Woods, but it is harder these days to remember that. The majors drought is now up to 10 and he has gone through two full years without winning a major title. In fact, he hasn't been *second* in a major in the past two years and was never in serious contention on the back nine on Sunday once this year.

Just as a means of comparison, let's for a moment examine the majors record of the three men who are currently better golfers than Tiger, regardless of what the World Rankings may say: Ernie Els went five years between his second major victory and his third and hasn't won in his last nine majors -- one less than Tiger. Phil Mickelson didn't win his first major until he was almost 34 -- he and Els are both five-and-a-half years older than Tiger -- and Vijay Singh hadn't been close to contention in a major for four years until last weekend's PGA. Els, who will be in the Hall of Fame in the near future, says his career goal is to win all four major titles at least once, a feat accomplished by only a handful of players throughout history. That would be a great achievement. Woods, who won't turn 29 until the end of this year, is one British Open victory away from doing it *twice*. Only Jack Nicklaus (three times) can top that.

All of which is to say that the Tiger Woods we watch win eight majors from the 1997 Masters through the 2002 U.S. Open was playing at a level that no one, including Nicklaus, has ever accomplished. The Woods we have watched since then -- whether because he fired Butch Harmon or because he changed equipment or because he changed his body or because he's in love (I don't buy the one for a second) -- simply isn't the same player. Right before our eyes, Tiger Woods has become Tom Kite, a gutsy grinder who showed his toughness on Friday at The PGA by birdieing three of the last six holes to extend his amazing streak of made cuts to 129 -- 16 better than the once untouchable record of 113 set by Byron Nelson.

But Tiger Woods is not supposed to make his headlines on Friday. He isn't supposed to be off the golf course and on his way home on Sunday afternoon at majors before the leaders hit the back nine. But that's the way it has been most of the last two years. In dealing with any affliction, the first step towards a cure is acknowledging the problem. Maybe, now that he's

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gone another full year without sniffing a major, Tiger will come out of denial. All year long he has insisted that he's "close," that he's "really happy," with the things he's working on in his swing.

No, he's not close. As one player said at the U.S. Open after listening to Tiger almost comically insist he was, "just a yard off," as he missed greens from the middle of the fairway with wedges in his hands, "If he was close, he would only be beating the rest of us by a shot or two. Because when he's ON he kills us."

Exactly. Fairly or unfairly, Woods set a standard so high for five years that there was bound to come a point where he couldn't maintain it. Even so, the fall has been -- relatively speaking -- precipitous. Consider this: If you were voting objectively for Player of the Year right now, Woods wouldn't just be behind Singh, Mickelson and Els, he would be behind Todd Hamilton.

Will he come back and start winning majors again? Of course. Nicklaus went three years at almost the same age without a major victory so these slumps happen even to the greatest players of all time. But here's what we don't need to hear when Tiger wins again, whether it is at The Masters next April or at Pinehurst, St. Andrews or Baltusrol later in the year: "I guess this proves all those people who said I was in a slump wrong."

You can bet he'll say something like that. What he should say is, "boy am I glad the slump is over." Because for Tiger Woods, this is a big-time slump. This is Barry Bonds going from 73 home runs to 16 home runs or Michael Jordan dropping from 30 points a game to 12. This is a valley, a nadir -- you pick the word. In the end, it will probably make him a better player because all truly great athletes learn from struggle.

The first step to ending that struggle for Woods is a simple one: admit -- at least to himself -- that he's struggling. Physician heal thyself. Athletes too.