

My Journey to the 2012 Olympic Trials

By Erika Braun

Wow! What a year. I never dreamed that at age 40 I would be competing at the 2012 Olympic Trials in Omaha. This incredible experience and the process of getting to Omaha reaffirms my belief that nothing is impossible if you are committed to a goal, are willing to make sacrifices and have the help of a great support network.

In this picture of course: Dara Torres and Erika Braun - two fabulous 40-something swimmers at the 2012 Olympic Trials.



I am honored that Greta asked me to write this article for the NC Masters Swimming Newsletter. It is a great opportunity to tell my story and to thank all of the people that helped and supported me along the way.

I suppose my "journey" really started in 1988 when I competed in the Olympic Trials in Austin, Texas, at age 16. It is amazing to think about all the things we have done in our past and how details fade with the passage of time. Although I certainly remember going to the Trials in 1988, I had not given much thought to the actual event and my performance back then until Omaha became a reality. Just after I qualified for Omaha on May 19, 2012, my parents located an old VHS tape of my first Olympic Trials 50 free qualifying swim in 1988. On a quiet Saturday I decided to watch it. The memories started rushing back. As I sat watching the swim, I was struck by two things: (1) how my stroke and mannerisms were still so familiar nearly 25 years later and (2) how uninterested I looked! By the end of that short 50-meter swim I realized just how much I took that opportunity for granted and how misplaced my motivation was at the time.

What a difference 24 years make

With the benefit of hindsight and maturity, I now realize that youth and talent are no substitute for dedication, hard work and internal motivation. This realization made my second trip to the Olympic Trials possible.

I had not been in the water since leaving The University of Georgia swim team after my sophomore year in 1992. Then, in 1998 I got married and we moved to Greensboro. Eventually my husband and I made our way to Raleigh. I heard that there was a very active Masters swim team called Raleigh Area Masters. In

November 2003, I decided to give swimming a try again after thinking I might want to attempt a triathlon.

My first meet after joining RAM was the Charlotte Sunbelt meet in January 2004, which I'm sure Jerry Clark will recall was yet another snowy weekend. I'll never forget it since I ended in the emergency room in downtown Charlotte after smacking my heels on the bulkhead. I left the emergency room after midnight with stitches in my busted heels. Needless to say, after that meet my passion for competition was reignited. A great source of inspiration was former Olympian Sue Walsh who competed in the sprint and backstroke events. To see Sue in such incredible shape and to still be competing at such a high level pushed me further in our meets together.

In 2004 we traveled to my first U.S. Masters Long Course National Championship in Savannah, GA, which provided my first chance to swim with other North Carolina swimmers as a team. We had a great showing and I loved the competition and camaraderie of the meet. My time in the 50m free at this meet was 27.73. After that experience, I started going to as many North Carolina meets I could fit into my schedule. With every meet, I started feeling a little stronger and faster and began to feel more confident in my races. However, I still shied away from longer distance races and kept to what I knew best as a drop-dead sprinter. My husband, Eric, became accustomed to seeing me going out fast in my 100's and then dying. I absolutely loved that Masters had 50's in every stroke!!

A few years later, I started looking for additional Masters meets for competition. Eric traveled with me up to George Mason University in 2006 and the University of Maryland in 2007 for Colony Zone meets. During these meets, I got to know Jon Klein and Bob Schmidt, who are inspirational competitors. I was so impressed with Jon's dedication to his healthy diet, weight-training regimen and focus on constantly improving his times. At this point, my times were starting to plateau a bit and I wasn't seeing significant time drops in my events. Eric was always so supportive and encouraged me to add weight training to my swimming to push me to the next level. I was hesitant at first, but started attending a 1-hour Body Pump weight class at Gold's Gym twice a week, which focused on lighter weights with higher repetition.

In 2008, just as the "tech suit" era began with the stunning performances of the Olympic swimmers in Beijing and Phelps's unbelievable 8 gold medals, I began focusing with my coaches on improving stroke technique and using underwater dolphin kicks to create more efficiencies. The coverage of the Olympics provided more access to see these elite swimmers' techniques and how we could emulate their strokes.

U.S. Masters Nationals Short Course Championships in Atlanta in May 2010 was the meet where everything came together for me. For the first time since getting back into the water I could say my times in the 50 free and 100 free were "personal bests" and not just "Masters personal bests" with times of 23.49 and 51.30, respectively. Although there was a lot of discussion about times being achieved in the tech suits not being "real times," it provided me with the motivation that with hard work I could continue to improve my events. I never dreamt that I would see times on the scoreboard that were faster than when I was a teenager. As my focus on competition was further fueled, I sought out a few local age-group USA-Swimming meets to participate in that summer as there weren't as many long course meters Masters meets offered. This was a unique experience because I was the only 38-year old competing with the kids. Needless to say, I received a few interesting looks from some of the kids and parents. Since that first age group meet, the parents and kids have gotten used to seeing me swim in their finals and have now embraced me as a fellow competitor instead of the old lady swimmer. Even most of the parents cheer for me, which makes me feel great.

While working full-time as the Director of Human Resources with Golden Corral, I did my best to balance my work, personal life, and swimming. Unfortunately, the one area I never seemed to focus on was healthy eating. With a busy work schedule and late swims in the evening, I often grabbed a microwave pizza and Cheese Nips after practice. It drove my husband crazy! At this time, I was still swimming four times per week and attending two Body Pump classes each week. I eventually felt that I had maxed out on the benefits of Body Pump, so I started doing a little heavier weight lifting at our local gym. I had never really done any serious weight training and did not have any special routine or knowledge of proper techniques.

In April 2011, I talked my husband into going to the USMS Spring Nationals in Mesa, Arizona This was the first meet following the banning of tech suits from competition and I began to doubt my performances from the prior year. There was a silver lining to the trip, however. Henry Stewart, my fellow RAM

teammate traveled to the meet and had a swimming buddy from Columbia meet us in Arizona. Although my performance was not good, we had a great time getting to know Felipe Gomez.

At one point I was sitting in the stands with Felipe and he introduced me to someone he just met from Columbia: Daniel Vargas. We started chatting and were talking about swimming and how we were getting older and still enjoyed swimming and competing. As we chatted about events and times, I mentioned that I had been to the Trials in 1988. He asked me if I was going to try again for the 2012 Trials. I laughed because I never had considered it. He brought up Dara Torres and said if she could do it, then so could I. On the way home from the meet, I told Eric about the conversation. He had been traveling to all of my meets and had watched me improve, but was never a fan of swimming and never knew a swimmer before me. What he did know was how much I loved competing and how much I had improved in the last couple of years. He also knows the power of determination and setting goals. His response was simply that if I wanted to try to qualify, do it right. He offered to locate a trainer for me and said that he would cook my dinners every night, but I had to agree to eat healthy every day and come up with a plan of attack.

The training begins

One of my first steps was to seek out additional long course meters competitions so I could get better acclimated to competing in long course events since the only way to make it to the Olympic Trials is to qualify during a long course meters event. That led me to another USA meet in Cary in June 2011. I won the 50m free with a time of 27.16. Although I was nowhere near the Trials cut of 26.39, the time was my best since college. Shortly after the Cary meet, I had a bit of a breakthrough at a small meet in Goldsboro, NC. I decided to compete at the last minute and drove down myself. At the time of my 50m free, the electronic timing system was not working, so they relied on two hand timers per lane.

Fortuitously, North Carolina's Top Ten recorder, Hans Van Meeteren, was my official timer for the 50M free. When I hit the wall, he told me I went 26.65. I was shocked and a bit skeptical that I went that fast. However, later in the day, I also swam a swift 100 free at 59.33 so I was evidently having a good meet. Jon Klein gave me a hard time saying that I should bring Hans to all of my meets as my personal timer. Seeing my 50 free time in the 26's really boosted my confidence.

Eric and I next traveled to Cleveland in July 2011 for a USA Speedo Sectionals meet at Cleveland State University. This was my first "big meet" swimming in a prelim/final format with elite competition from around the country. I made the finals in the 50 free, but went a little slower than the recent trip to Goldsboro swimming 26.78 in prelims. I was hoping to swim faster in my 50 free, but remained optimistic that I could keep improving because I went 59.05 in the 100 free, which was a personal best. I also swam fast times at that meet in my 100m fly and 100m back. The competition was amazing and really pushed me to go faster!

Soon it became clear that I needed to diversify my training regimen by doing more weight training and adding intensity to my swimming workouts. In an effort to refine my workouts, I met with Danny Maresca, a personal fitness and health consultant who works with my husband in his battle with Multiple Sclerosis. Eric really enjoyed working with Danny and respected his advice and guidance. As a result, Danny and I decided to start working on my strength training in a more methodical and focused way.

We started in September 2011. We planned to coordinate my new training regimen with my next USA Swimming long course meet at the Minnesota Grand Prix in November. With Danny's focus on the importance of proper nutrition and eating organic, Eric took the lead to ensure my eating matched my training efforts. We added more lean proteins, fresh vegetables and fresh fruit to every dinner. Eric cooked dinner for us each night to stay on track with proper eating. Over the course of several months, I began to feel more energetic and felt my body becoming leaner.

Over the next two months, Danny continued to push me and it paid off. I worked with him two times per week and once on my own. Adding a third day of weight training was crucial to my program. By November I was starting to feel stronger and more confident. When we left for Minnesota, I was really excited and so was Eric. Just before leaving, he looked up the swimmers registered for the event and really got excited when he saw that Michael Phelps, Ryan Lochte, Dara Torres, Missy Franklin, Jessica Hardy and Madison Kennedy would be swimming. He was starting to learn the names of the elite swimmers and I think for the first time started thinking about the level of competition involved. I remember him saying how swimming with these people was like him playing basketball with Michael Jordan. It was fun seeing him so enthusiastic!

My experience at the Minnesota meet demonstrated how I performed better when I did not have time to think too much about a race. After the preliminaries in the 50 free, the finals were announced and I had not made it. I headed to the shower and Eric went outside to wait for me because it was so hot in the pool. After a few minutes, his phone rang and it was my Mom. She was frantically asking him if he heard the announcement. Luckily, many of the meets are now live-streamed over the Internet, so she had been watching on her computer. She was about to turn off the computer when the announcer asked for all coaches to attend a meeting to discuss the 50 free results.

As it turns out, a coach filed a protest alleging a problem with the starting system. They gave all swimmers a chance to participate in a re-swim. I jumped at the chance and was joined by several swimmers, including Jessica Hardy. It was a good thing because I jumped back into the pool and swam my next personal best of 26.63 in the same heat with Jessica Hardy. That got me into the finals, but I failed to improve my time that evening in the finals. Swimming the 50 free for a third time in one day was tougher than I expected.

Following the MN Grand Prix, my 50 free time qualified me to participate in the USA AT&T Winter Nationals meet in Atlanta. Although I was feeling really strong and confident in my training, I went 26.90 in both prelims and again during a time trial. My stroke did not feel efficient and I felt like I was spinning in the water. During this meet, we ran into Coach Paul Silver, head coach of the Marlins of Raleigh age group team. Swim MAC Head Coach David Marsh was also there and talked to me about my stroke technique. Coach Marsh is so respected in the swimming community, especially for his work with sprinters. The fact that he took some time to offer advice to me was a critical moment along my journey to the Trials. I listened to every word. So when he suggested that I ask Paul if he would allow me to swim in a December long course meters meet that they were hosting in Cary, I jumped at the chance to give the Trials cut another shot. I figured I had about five meets between December 2011 and June 15 to make the cut before the deadline and I wanted to take every opportunity available. During the local meet in Cary, my RAM teammates came out to cheer me on, but I swam a disappointing 27.20 this time. I was heading in the wrong direction and realized I needed to change the way I thought about my race.

Adding long course training

After returning home and with some additional urging from Eric, I reached out to Paul Silver to inquire if they trained at any long course pools in the winter. We discussed where I was in my training, my recent times and whether he thought I could make the Trials cut. He was very encouraging and welcomed me to his team. He had several promising swimmers training for the Trials as well and we decided the added competition would help all of us. Although I was grateful to Coach Silver for allowing me to train with MOR, I was not sure I could take waking up at 4:00 am to get to the pool by 4:40 am and hit the water by 5:00 am. I never liked waking up early in college to train and I certainly did not ever think I would be doing it again at 40 while working full-time. Coach Silver has a saying that if you want to soar with the eagles, you have to get up with the owls. There were a few days in the beginning when I almost stayed in bed thinking someone else could go soar with the eagles!

Coach Silver helped tweak my stroke so I was digging deeper into the water and trying to improve the efficiency of my stroke, including adjusting my head position and timing for my breath. We really focused on the details and the little things like walls, fast kick sets, underwater kicks, no breathing in and out of walls. We always tried to perfect every detail in practice until it was second nature. He wanted all the details worked out in practice so I did not have to think about anything in competition. He wanted the race to come to me. There was not one practice when I trained with Coach Silver that he didn't have me sprinting all out whether in 50's or 100's. I am grateful that he would create a special sprint lane for a few of us to adjust from his typical long distance training. When I asked one of the girls, Hannah Lincoln, who I trained with in the sprint lane how often they do separate sprint workouts, her response was "never until you came."

One of the things Coach Silver reinforced with me was distance per stroke training to lengthen my stroke. Warm up always consisted of at least 400 meters of distance per stroke swimming with reducing number of strokes per length. He also had me swim build up 50's or 100's where I would sprint into the wall to really focus on my finish. "Bow" drills were also used to open up the freestyle stroke to get a more powerful pull. He also had us do "test sets" where we would swim fast off the blocks for time. It amazed me how his swimmers could continuously get up on the blocks with very little rest and swim 6 x 200's all out. I definitely needed a bit more recovery in between timed races, but it was great experience to swim fast in practice as preparation for meets. We consistently focused on head position and proper breathing

technique so that I wasn't wasting energy or reducing the efficiency of my stroke on breathing. Both Coach Silver and RAM Coach Sue Haugh constantly reminded me to keep my head down until it finally became second nature.

I knew Coach Silver believed in me when he agreed to fly to Austin, Texas with Eric and me in January 2012 for the next Grand Prix event. By that time, I was closing in on my first month of training with MOR and was really hoping to see some improvement after all the extra work. I was excited about this meet because it was the same pool where I swam in the 1988 Olympic Trials so I was familiar with the pool. Unfortunately, rather than improving, I took another step back with a 27.16 in my 50 free. After three consecutive mediocre meets, I was really worried that things might not improve any further for me. Coach Silver, Danny and my RAM teammates refused to let me get too pessimistic. They helped me realize that all of the tweaking of my technique and elevating my training was going to take some time to come together in better performance. I suppose I was still getting used to my adjusted stroke and I was still playing with how many breaths to take. In Austin, I thought I needed more breaths, so actually took three. I later decided that breathing during the 50 free slowed me. Ultimately, we determined that keeping my head down and not breathing worked best for me. Danny and Coach Silver convinced me that my body did not need additional oxygen during a 50 free.

Coach Silver and Danny kept pushing me to set small, incremental goals. As I started to really listen to them and take that advice, I started seeing subtle improvements. That led me to really believe that I could make the Trials cut if I just stayed with my training routine. The other important element that fed my optimism and kept me from setting mental limits on my performance was training with younger swimmers. The more I practiced with these 15-18 year old teammates; I tended to forget about my age and simply focused on physical results and incremental improvements.

Despite the fact that I felt stronger and faster in practice, all the hard work had not yet translated into a better performance in a meet. That finally happened at the Speedo Championship Series Sectional in Greensboro in February 2012. I made finals in the 50 free and finished with a 26.60. With only 3-4 more opportunities to make the trials cut, dropping from 26.63 to 26.60 was good progress, but I was hoping for more. I decided to use my 100 free the next day to get an official split for my 50 free time. For some reason, I was behind the blocks and realized I was in the wrong lane because I had looked at an old heat sheet. With the swimmers coming to the wall prior to my heat, I was still frantically trying to figure out which lane I was in. I looked up at Coach Silver and he held up a "6" as the whistle was blowing for our heat. I ran down to lane 6 and jumped on the blocks to swim my 50 split and swam my best time ever at 26.48. Getting closer, but the Trials cut still eluded me! This was enough improvement, however, to keep me in the proper frame of mind and maintain focus on training.

I had next planned to head to Indianapolis in March for the Indianapolis Grand Prix, but with the Trials cut deadline fast approaching, there was a huge demand to register for the last few long course meets. I learned this the hard way because Indianapolis filled up within a few hours of the opening of registration. Luckily, an alternate long course meet was quickly organized by Purdue University and informally called the "Detour from Indy" because it was held at Purdue University, just a few miles from Indianapolis, so swimmers could compete despite missing out on registering for the Indy Grand Prix. Although I really enjoy swimming at Indy, at this late date, I was just happy to be in a competitive meet.

The first day I swam the 100 free with a new personal best of 58.58. I qualified for finals, but decided to scratch to rest up for my 50 free the next day. I was feeling confident and strong in the water after my 100, so I was excited to see how my 50 free would go the next day. I ended up with almost exactly the same time as in February-26.49! Again, that 26.39 eluded me and I was starting to get anxious about the looming deadline to qualify.

It was now March and I started to feel the pressure of the June 15 Trials cut deadline overtaking me. We were able to locate a USA Swimming event in Nashville that was available the third week of April. With the meet scheduled, I kept up with training and looked forward to heading to Music City. When we arrived at the pool, it was dark, cold and pretty depressing looking. I had a bad feeling from the start. When I hit the water for warm ups, it just felt like an old slow pool.

I was seeded 2nd after prelims behind Olympian Amanda Weir. That night I went a personal best at 26.42, and placed first. Apparently Amanda had scratched and left the meet. Three one hundredths of second! I was mistaken - Nashville is a fast pool. Of course, now Eric teases me because that is now how I

determine if a pool is fast. If I swim fast, it's a fast pool. Swim slow, the pool is slow. Who cares about depth, gutter system, temperature, etc.?

We were making progress, but we were also running out of time. I decided to give it one more chance with a time trial on Sunday before heading home. Eric left Sunday morning at 4:30 am to head to Pittsburgh. It would also be the first time that he would not be at the pool for a swim in almost a year. He called me right when he landed in Pittsburgh to see if I made it. I jokingly told him I slowed up at the end with a 26.43 just so he would see me make the cut for the trials in person.

Since my focus all winter was on long course meets, I looked forward to swimming again with my fellow Masters swimmers as we hosted U.S. Masters Spring Short Course Nationals in Greensboro. There were no looming time standards for me to worry about and we had an awesome time hosting and winning nationals for NC Masters! Once again, the camaraderie of participating in relays with everyone was icing on the cake! All of my hard training paid off as well. I swam almost all personal best times in my six events winning each of them in my age group and breaking a national record in the 100 IM with 57.95; 57.03 in my 100 fly; 50.59 in my 100 free; and 22.99 in my 50 free in a relay split.

The week after Masters Nationals, I felt in great shape and wanted to try again to make the Trials cut since I knew my time was limited. Coach Silver helped me arrange a time trial during a small meet in Cary on May 4. This was a Friday and we were leaving the next day for Montego Bay, Jamaica for a long-planned vacation with my sister-in-law and brother-in-law. I had worried about not making the Trials cut before vacation and then backsliding from my training. Leading up to the swim, I tried to visualize myself making hitting 26.39 and then packing for Jamaica for a long week of resting and celebrating. Our friends Eric and Brandon came over after work to watch me swim, along with RAM teammate Jason Gasior. I felt ready.

When it was time to swim, the pool was virtually empty except some coaches and meet officials and the few friends that came to watch. I stepped to the blocks by myself and went for it. I felt great, but it is always a little odd swimming against the clock alone in the pool. Eric said he thought I made it when I hit the wall, as did Jason from RAM. The scoreboard seemed to jump from 25 seconds to 26.48 in a manner that defied what my supporters observed. Unfortunately, it was not meant to be and I hit the wall with a 26.48. It was still a great time, but I started feeling again like I had hit a plateau and was having a hard time getting past the 26.40's.

The Jamaica Taper

Now I was tired and frustrated and the pressure was building in the pool and at work. Golden Corral recently acquired a large number of restaurants and I was dealing with unexpected pressure at work. Adding to my work stress, I really started feeling the pressure of competition since there were only three meets left for making the trials cut. I was really hoping the early mornings with Paul weren't for nothing. I registered for the 2012 Josh Weaver Memorial Meet in Chapel Hill on May 18-20 and then for the Santa Clara Grand Prix the first week in June. MOR was also planning to compete back in my favorite pool in Nashville just two weeks before Trials.

Despite Eric's urging me to stay home and train, we packed up and headed to Jamaica. As luck would have it, the hotel we stayed in was located on a beautiful small bay that had a lane line stretched put to keep tourists close to shore and safe. When we arrived at the beach the first day, I saw a prime training opportunity and promptly hit the lane line swimming 1 hour a day for 4 days that week. There was a gym as well, so I was able to maintain my training schedule. It was a great week of relaxation. I put work aside and let the pressure of the Trials cut drift away as I lay on the beach with my family.

Vacation ended and we returned home on Saturday, May 12. The Chapel Hill meet was exactly one week away. I worked with Coach Silver to tweak my start and finish. Danny and I stretched and did light weight training to keep my muscles in top form. There was not much else to do at this late date, so I took Coach Silver's advice and relaxed for the week, slept as much as I could and let the race come to me.

Eric and I arrived at the UNC pool promptly at 5:30 am per Coach Silver's instructions. The entire MOR team was coming and he wanted us on deck and stretching early. I got in the water and warmed up with about 2,000 meters. Coach Silver and I did a few starts and then it was time for the 50 free prelims. My parents were in the stands with Eric. But for some reason, we did not tell many of our friends about this meet. I guess because it was local, we just did not make a big deal out of it.

When they put us on the blocks, I felt ready (but it was not the first time I felt good before a swim!). I had a great start and finally let the race come to me. I was not thinking about anything but finishing strong and doing what came naturally. Finally, everything came together and when I hit the wall, I heard the crowd cheering. Even before seeing the clock, I knew from the cheers that I had made it. When I looked up and saw 26.32 I felt a wave of relief wash over me. Then I looked at my Mom, Dad and Eric and let out a single fist pump and jumped out of the pool and into the arms of my MOR teammates! I will never forget that moment.

The day after qualifying, NBC 17 came to our home. Several other media interviews followed including the News and Observer's Caulton Tudor, local TV and radio talk shows, as well as swimming media outlets like Swimmer World and SwimSwam. I was so honored by the interest and support of not only my swimming family, but also our local community and my Golden Corral family. Just being mentioned in the same sentence with Dara Torres and Janet Evans was surreal. It was simply an honor and will always be grateful. I finally reached my goal 24 years after first qualifying for the Trials at age 16. The icing on the cake was the opportunity to compete in Omaha with the best swimmers in the world as they chased their dreams of going London to represent the United States.

The Olympic Trials

After the build up to finally qualifying, it was time to get back to training. Now it was all about the start and the finish. That can be the difference between first and last when the competition is so close! We drilled starts and finish every practice leading up to the Trials. Danny was with me all the way too. He customized my on land training to keep my muscles tuned up and ready for the competition. Given how my qualifying effort went, there was little time for a comprehensive training program with a designed taper. Unlike the elite swimmers, I did not have the luxury of a months-long lead into the Trials. But if I had a short "taper," it was nothing like my Marlins of Raleigh sprint-training buddy, Hannah Lincoln, who qualified on the last weekend before Trials in the 100 fly! Hannah was one of the other five swimmers from the Marlins of Raleigh that qualified for the Trials.

It was not all work and no play, however, as we headed into Trials. Coach Silver organized a send off party for the MOR qualifiers with ABC 11's Steve Daniels as the emcee and the great UNC back stroker Sue Walsh as the keynote speaker. As I sat with my MOR teammates listening to Sue Walsh, I felt as though I had come full circle from being inspired by Sue Walsh at my first Masters meet to having her speak at the MOR send-off to Omaha. Coach Silver invited my Mom and Dad, my RAM coaches and many of the friends that supported me all along the way.

The parties were not over though. Before leaving for Omaha that Sunday, my RAM team and coaches threw a surprise send off party. It was so much fun sharing my experience with RAM. They inspired my journey and finishing it with them was perfect.

Off to Omaha

One of most memorable experiences occurred very soon after we arrived in Omaha. I knew the competition was going to be awesome and the pressure continued to build as I walked into convention center upon arriving in Omaha. Although my race was not until Sunday morning, we flew up on Wednesday to get acclimated to the environment and be part of the weeklong excitement. The reality of what I was in for hit me when I was standing outside of the convention center chatting with Hill Carrow who was in town on a scouting trip as part of his effort to bring the 2016 Trials to Greensboro. As we were standing together, I asked a few passing swimmers where I needed to go for credentials. The response was priceless. With sheepish grins, they "helpfully" informed me that credentials were for swimmers.

Walking into the competition pool was like nothing I had ever experienced. It was an NBA-like arena with a Jumbotron and seating for 13,000 people, all looking down on a pool built just for the Trials. I jumped in the competition pool on my first day for a quick warm-up after our flight. I swam alongside Elizabeth Beisel.

The next day, time trials began after the prelim sessions. It was a much more structured process than I had experienced at other meets. We were paraded out behind the blocks just prior to our heat. My 100 free time trial felt stiff and I didn't have much energy at the end of the swim. I went 58.81, which was a bit off my personal best from earlier in the year. I shook it off and was glad that I was able to experience the pool and blocks prior to the 50 free. Over the next several days we attended all of the finals. At the

beginning of each finals session, the playing of the star spangled banner was incredibly moving along with spectacular red, white, and blue lighting and indoor fireworks. The busting pyrotechnics when the top two qualifiers touched the wall was over the top. You could actually feel the heat in the upper deck of the arena.

As if the electric atmosphere was not enough, we knew we were part of something special watching the Lochte/Phelps showdowns! The 200 IM was particularly exciting as they were neck and neck the entire way and Phelps touched Lochte out by just a hair. The most thrilling event for me, however, was seeing Cullen Jones touch second in the 100 free from an outside lane to earn his place on the US Olympic Team. He went out so incredibly fast in the first 50 that I wondered if he could keep it up. As he said in one of his many interviews, he is a racer and he got it done. I'll never forget the look of surprise on his face as he hugged David Marsh. e then later came back to win first in the 50 free by upsetting Nathan Adrian from an outside lane again. He proved to me that winning from an outside lane is always possible if you want it bad enough.

It was now time for me to swim! I had been watching from the stands all week and soaking up the excitement, but now it was my time. The heat sheets came out the night before my swim. Of course, I pulled lane 9 against the wall. Then my nerves kicked in and the butterflies started. I was suddenly worried that I might not be able to focus my nerves into energy for my swim. I shared this with Coach Silver as the pressure enveloped me. In his classic deadpan style he simply said: "You asked for this!" But then quickly went back to coaching, trying to settle me down. He looked me in the eyes and told me to enjoy myself, to enjoy the experience and to remember that I was one of only three 40 year-old women in Omaha. That brought me back to why I was at the Trials-because I loved swimming and competing with the best. Win, lose or draw, I was 40 years old and swimming against the best.

During most meets, I pop into the water to warm up a few minutes before my race. I found out quickly that you are required to remain in the ready room well before your swim. Since the 50 free starts at the opposite end of the pool from the ready room, we had a surprisingly long walk behind the scenes in the back of the arena to get to the blocks. I felt like I was flying blind because I could not line up behind the blocks before my race and get into the flow by watching other heats. Since I was in Lane 9, I was also the first person to walk up the steps to the pool area to parade our heat on deck. The lighting was unbelievable and the anxiety was high. None of my prior meets prepared me for this experience.

Everything after walking out to the blocks was a blur. The next thing I knew, I was in the water racing for the wall. When I hit the wall, I turned to the scoreboard and see I finished in the middle of the heat with a 26.64. Although I am disappointed that I did not finish with a personal best, I would not change a thing. The competitive fire still burns and my training continues After watching Dara Torres just miss making her sixth Olympics by just a tenth of a second and having the experience of a second Olympic Trial, I know that with hard work, motivation and the support of friends and family, nothing is beyond reach.

That is why I want to end this "journey" by simply saying thank you to everyone who trained me, supported me, or simply cheered for me. Without RAM coaches Sue Haugh, Steve Weatherman, and Dan Schad and my RAM teammates, my journey would have ended somewhere other than Omaha. I'm grateful to Coach Silver for taking me on as a "project" and to the MOR kids who welcomed me as one of their own. My employer, Golden Corral, always supported me and helped me balance the demands of my job with a rigorous training schedule. In fact, my boss, Judy Irwin and her husband Bill even detoured from a cross-country trip to see me swim in Omaha. Finally, there is no stronger motivation than knowing that I could look up into the stands after every swim see family and friends cheering for me. I will never forget the joy of seeing my Mom and Dad cheering for me in Chapel Hill twenty-four years after driving from Minneapolis to Austin for my first Olympic Trials in 1988. Then there is my husband Eric. Despite his daily struggles with Multiple Sclerosis, he was with me literally every step of the way.