

The Golden Boy of the Pool

At an age when most people still grapple with their careers, star swimmer Michael Phelps has secured a comfortable retirement. And that's after 22 Olympic medals, including 18 golds, numerous awards, and a non-profit foundation.

By Stuart Forster



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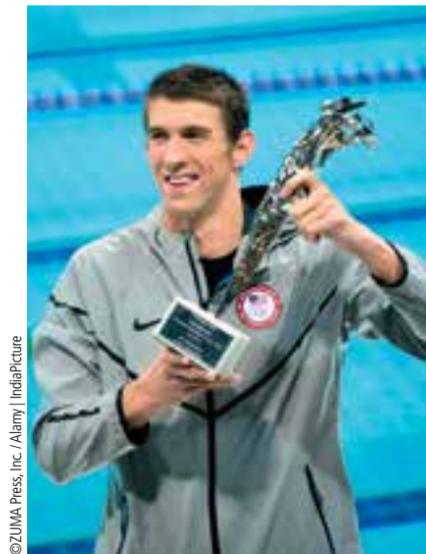
Many people merely dream about being 27 years old (again!) or comfortably retired, but Michael Phelps, the American swimming sensation is both. Following a successful London 2012 Olympics inning, during which he won four gold and two silver medals, Phelps ended his sporting career as arguably the greatest and surely the most decorated Olympic athlete of all time.

Most sports fans know that 18 of the 22 medals hung around his muscular neck during various Olympic Games were coloured gold, but many are unaware that Phelps's Olympic career began in 2000 at the Sydney Summer Games. The 15-year-old Phelps, who was showing great promise as a member of the North Baltimore Aquatic Club, qualified to become the youngest male swimmer of the United States to make it to the Olympics since the 13-year-old Ralph Flanagan in the Los Angeles Games of 1932. The precociously talented Phelps finished fifth in the final of the 200-metre butterfly, an event he would soon come to dominate.

Phelps is an inspiration to countless young people across the globe. According to him, in an interview with the *Daily Mail*, the best advice given to him was by his swimming coach at school, who told his student to not "put a limit on anything, the more you dream, the further you get." Within just months of his first Olympic final, he broke the first of his 39 career world records in the 200-metre butterfly and, in doing so, had his name written into history as the youngest male ever to hold a swimming world record. He cemented his reputation by winning the title at the 2001 World Championships.

Even Usain Bolt, the 26-year-old living legend who seemingly strolls to sprint victories at will, is unlikely to match Phelps's duration of sporting dominance. Lenny Krayzelburg, an American swimmer who himself won four Olympic golds, summarised in *Sports Illustrated* magazine the awe in which Phelps was held throughout his career, by saying, "I don't think we've seen anything like him. Nobody's this good in everything."

Phelps clinched six gold and two bronze medals at the 2004 Athens Olympics, resulting in the attention of the world's



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sporting press and bringing comparisons, perhaps inevitably, with Mark Spitz and Ian Thorpe, the other dominant swimmers of their eras. Of course, it was four years ago, in Beijing, that Phelps managed to surpass Spitz's achievement of seven gold medals in a single Games by taking home eight.

Despite his reputation for single-mindedness and dedication to training, Phelps is renowned for his warmth towards friends. His human side is also shown by his flaws and his ability to bounce back. Phelps did, unfortunately, experience a couple of controversial moments in his life, notably one relating to driving under the influence of alcohol while aged 19. Feeling as if he may have let his supporters down, the athlete moved on.

"He's the reason I travelled to London for the 2012 Olympics," says Steven Barry, a former amateur swimmer and sports fan from the United Kingdom. "We're unlikely to see a single athlete dominate the sport to the same degree again, and I'm pleased to say I saw him in action."

Phelps's future looks golden, whatever he opts to do in his retirement. One option may be more work with the Michael Phelps Foundation, which was established in 2008 and encourages youngsters and children to engage in a healthy lifestyle. ■

MORE ON MICHAEL

- Michael Fred Phelps II was born in the state of Maryland, U.S., on 30 June 1985.
- The street near his alma mater, Towson High School in Towson, Maryland, is called the 'Michael Phelps Way', named after him in 2004.
- Find out more about the Michael Phelps Foundation at www.michaelphelpsfoundation.org.