

CHAPTER ONE

JUST THE TWO OF US

The foreign journalist took the microphone, stood up in a crowded press conference, and, in perfect English, asked Natalie Coughlin a pointed question.

How does it feel to dishonor your country?

This was a strange time to have a bad flashback, but given her state of delirium, Coughlin wasn't entirely surprised. Here she was, at the 2003 FINA World Championships in Barcelona—the last major international competition before the Athens Olympics—slogging through some warm-down laps after one of the more astonishing outcomes of her career. Coughlin, the world record holder in the 100-meter backstroke since the previous summer, had just done the unthinkable: She'd failed to advance past the preliminary rounds. As she completed her last, painful turn in the warm-down pool, her Speedo goggles were filled with tears.

Coughlin's head, meanwhile, was full of dreadful possibilities. Her mind jumped back to her most recent international disappointment, at

the 2002 Pan-Pacific Championships in Yokohoma, Japan, the previous August. In the wake of the favored US team's defeat to Australia in the 400-meter medley relay, Coughlin, after a slew of reasonable questions, had been asked how it felt to dishonor her country by the Asian sports media's answer to Mike Wallace on speed. At the time, she'd nearly started laughing. Coughlin hated to lose in anything, but coming up short in a relay against the formidable Aussies certainly didn't qualify as a domestic disgrace.

Now, however, as she exited the warm-down pool and gathered her belongings, she was in no mood to field outlandish queries. Physically, she doubted she could make it up the steps to the podium. Her face pallid, her body shivering under a nylon sweat suit, Coughlin felt disoriented. She was reeling emotionally as well. This was supposed to be *her* meet, and it had gone so terribly wrong. Poised to showcase her amazing versatility and stamp herself as the swimmer to watch at the Athens Games, Coughlin had taken ill at an inopportune time. Just as the weeklong competition was about to begin, she'd been felled by a virus that caused a headache, sore throat, and 103° fever.

*La polivalencia*, the locals called it.

The worst feeling in the world, Coughlin called it.

The previous evening she had sucked it up and, in her third race of the meet's opening day, propelled the United States to victory in the 4 × 100-meter freestyle relay with a blazing leadoff leg. Now, however, the woman who had hoped to win as many as seven gold medals at the Worlds had hit the wall. On this warm August morning, Coughlin, the only woman in history to have broken the 1-minute barrier in the 100 back, had finished her heat in 1:03.18, more than 3.5 seconds shy of her world record. By morning's end she was in 22nd place, not good enough to advance, an outcome that did not bode well for the rest of the meet.

It was the biggest story of the day, if not the entire meet, and Coughlin wasn't eager to be grilled by the press, even though she had a legitimate explanation. Following her warm-down swim, she shared her feelings with coach Teri McKeever, who urged her to meet with the media. "You're going to be competing in this sport for a long time,"

McKeever told her. “The classy thing to do is to go to the press conference, acknowledge that you don’t feel well, and answer their questions.”

So off Coughlin went, and McKeever braced herself for several days of poolside skepticism. Make that 12 *months*. Instead of validating 3 years of cutting-edge achievement, Coughlin was providing fuel for the cynics who’d doubted that she would ever come through on the big stage. That had begun before the 2000 Olympic Trials, when a torn cartilage in Coughlin’s left shoulder derailed her designs on making the US team as a teenager. Skeptics wondered whether she was a china doll doomed to crack under pressure. With her body having failed her yet again at a critical juncture, the resolutely confident Coughlin was bound to be confronted with self-doubts, as well. It was, McKeever would later conclude, “the first time I’ve seen a chink in her armor.”

Protective by nature, McKeever, 42, was like a surrogate mother to Coughlin, who’d come to her as an emotionally and physically scarred teenager on the verge of quitting the sport. The oldest of 10 children, McKeever had been a caretaker her entire life. In her march toward improbable success in her field, she had given so much focus to her career that she felt it had impacted her personal life—an issue, given that she harbored dreams of becoming a wife and mother. Instead, it was as if she had 25 *de facto* children, and Coughlin was the one with whom she was the closest.

McKeever had known something was wrong the day before the meet, when she realized Coughlin was literally hotter than the Spanish summer sun. As was her custom before a big meet, McKeever bought a small gift and a card for both of her swimmers in Barcelona—Coughlin and former Cal star Haley Cope, a backstroker/sprint freestyler—and scrawled personal messages that she presented separately to each woman. When Coughlin read McKeever’s card, which spoke of their journey and the exciting opportunities ahead, she hugged her coach as a thank-you gesture. McKeever instinctively recoiled: “You’re burning up.” Coughlin conceded that she felt a little flushed but assured McKeever she could swim through it.

That night, a worried McKeever tossed and turned in her hotel bed.

*Natalie* never *gets sick*, she thought to herself. In 3 years together, the coach couldn't remember a single practice in which Coughlin had been too ill to participate. The girl was tough, mentally and physically, as if her intensely competitive nature wouldn't allow an infection to mess with her body.

Empathetic to the core, McKeever also had some selfish reasons for considering the impact of Coughlin's physical breakdown. A coach's prominence is often tied to the success of his or her elite swimmers, and with breastroker Staciana Stitts, a recent Cal grad and a 2000 Olympian, having relocated to Southern California to swim for Dave Salo of the prominent Novaquatics club, Coughlin and Cope represented McKeever's best chance for career enhancement. Cope, perhaps the most unlikely world-class swimmer in recent American history, was regarded as somewhat of a miracle, having emerged from a broken home to become a world champion—and one who had continued to improve even after her collegiate career. But Cope at her best still wasn't as formidable as Coughlin on a bad day. McKeever knew that Coughlin, when it came down to it, was her ticket to Athens.

No woman had ever served on the coaching staff of a US Olympic swim team, and McKeever, one of the few prominent females in her profession, aimed to be the first. The process of naming assistant coaches was political and inextricably tied to the makeup of the team itself. Were Coughlin, as expected, to emerge as the centerpiece of the US women's squad, selecting McKeever as one of the assistants would be a natural means of keeping the swimmer in her comfort zone. McKeever had a good relationship with the University of Southern California's Mark Schubert, already appointed as the coach of the women's team, though their philosophies were strikingly different. The bottom line was this: With Coughlin at the peak of her powers, McKeever was a slam dunk to be selected.

Though this was hardly her primary goal, McKeever desired the distinction as a means of uplifting her program, which was struggling to break into the national top five, and because it might pave the way for other women in her field to achieve similar success. Most of all, though,

she wanted to prove something to herself: that the sacrifices she had made over the past 2 decades—really, since she was 4 years old—had paid off in a blatant and tangible way.

Teri McKeever, by all rights, was ordained for athletic excellence. Her father, Mike, a USC football star, had an identical-twin brother, Marlin, who had also been a gridiron hero for the Trojans. The McKeever twins were famous across the land and seemed destined to be professional football players. A series of injuries derailed Mike's NFL hopes, but in 1961, the Los Angeles Rams would make Marlin the fourth overall pick in the draft, and he would enjoy a productive, 13-year career for four teams as a linebacker and tight end, making the Pro Bowl after the 1966 season. The popular twins also acted in several movies, including *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* and *The Absent-Minded Professor*, and appeared on the covers of numerous national magazines.

Teri's mother, whose maiden name was Judy Primrose, had been a youth swimming champion who had once finished second in the mile at US Nationals. Had the Olympics featured an event longer than 400 meters for women back then—"long enough so that I could wear everyone else down," in Judy's words—she likely would have qualified to represent her country.

Like classic characters from an old movie, football hero Mike and homecoming queen Judy hooked up as college kids, got married, and started making babies. Teri was the first, and she was not an especially easy child. "From what I was told," Teri says, "I was sort of an awful little kid."

After Teri came Mac, and then Judy got pregnant again. The McKeever family had an idyllic life that seemed emblematic of the American dream. And then, in an instant, their picture-perfect existence was shattered. On December 4, 1965, Mike McKeever was broadsided by a drunk driver while driving in Long Beach. He fell into a coma. Ten days later, his second son, Barry, was born.

Teri barely remembers her father, but she distinctly recalls her mom telling her in the aftermath of the accident, "All right, I need your help now."

It was a heavy burden for a 4-year-old. From that point on, little Teri became a caretaker. She was especially protective of Mac: When he would rile his mother by, say, dropping his jacket on the ground, Teri would jump in and plead, “Mommy, don’t yell at him. I’ll pick it up for him.”

On August 25, 1967, some 20 months after the accident, Mike McKeever died in a Los Angeles hospital. Teri remembers “sitting at the funeral and seeing people walking by and looking at us, and every one of them was crying.” From then on, whenever she saw her uncle Marlin, Teri would chillingly be confronted with a vision of what her father would have looked like at that age.

Judy met a man named Gary Gannon and married him in 1969. The two ended up having seven kids together—for a total of 10 in the household. In reality, though, there were nine kids and a de facto third parent—Teri. She changed diapers and got her younger siblings dressed, fed, and bathed. When she turned 16 and got her driver’s license, Teri also received a credit card from her mother, so she could do the grocery shopping and run other errands.

The family lived in Escondido, a town north of San Diego, in a nice house that had 25-yard and 50-meter pools in the backyard. Many of the kids gravitated toward sports—Mac played football for Long Beach State and San Diego State, while Barry played for Stanford. Years later, younger sisters Kelli and Kristi Gannon would earn spots on the US national field hockey squad.

Shy by nature, a trait she shared with her late father, Teri felt most comfortable in the water, an environment in which she could escape the hectic pace of a life spent caring for her brothers and sisters. Swimming also offered the best chance for individual attention from her mother, who imparted the lessons she had learned while training for legendary coach Peter Daland at the Los Angeles Athletic Club.

While many youth swimming standouts built their endurance bases through rigorous, monotonous workouts, that wasn’t an option in Teri’s world. Time was always of the essence. She typically swam in the backyard while supervised loosely by her mother, who had one eye on her eldest daughter’s technique and the other on the younger kids. “Sometimes

Mac and Barry would swim relays against me,” McKeever recalls. “Sometimes the younger kids would be riding their bikes around the pool while my mom tried to coach me. I remember at least one time when one of them fell in, and my mom had to reach in and fish her out in the middle of my set. I never knew when my workouts were going to be, because it depended on everyone’s nap schedule.”

When mother and daughter did have uninterrupted time together, it was inevitably rushed, so it was essential that every minute count. The result was that Judy emphasized technique and form over mind-numbing repetition and often instructed her daughter to practice at race speed, rather than stressing the value of going long distances at slower speeds. Judy also felt that Teri’s tall, slender build was not particularly suited toward the overtraining that most coaches favored. Instead, she focused on the mental aspects of preparation, painstakingly explaining the rationale for each element of the workout and imploring her daughter to participate mentally in the process.

Judy might not have realized it then, but she was creating the basis for a philosophy that would guide her daughter to an impressive stint as a competitive swimmer and a revolutionary career as a coach. At the very least, growing up in an environment that necessitated quality over quantity would later compel Coach McKeever to ask the questions that most of her peers dared not broach: Why do we make them swim so much more than their race distances, over and over again, in practice? If you’re more efficient in the water, doesn’t that also enable you to retain more energy for when you need it most?

Before becoming an all-American at USC, McKeever, a butterfly and middle-distance freestyle specialist, excelled as a youth swimmer and competed in numerous meets across the country. Those trips had special meaning for her, not because she was going head up against the best in the United States but because of the quality time she got to spend with her coach and traveling companion. While many of the competitors behaved like social butterflies, McKeever kept to herself, sitting with her mother and beholding the spectacle. “The only time I remember being alone with my mother,” she remembers, “was at those national meets.”

As an adult, McKeever essentially had more than two dozen children—and the big meets represented an opportunity to bond with the highest achievers. Coughlin, who arrived at Cal as a confused, burned-out teenager, had trusted McKeever like a child trusts her mother. In many ways McKeever was the one person—besides herself—in whom Coughlin had complete faith. Though Coughlin’s parents were in Barcelona to watch her swim, it was McKeever to whom she turned for support when she fell ill.

Given Coughlin’s symptoms, it was no surprise that her teammates weren’t especially eager to be in her company during the competition. For 5 days, Coughlin spent the bulk of her mornings, afternoons, and nights lying in bed at the team hotel, alternately sweating and clutching her blankets, barely able to eat or sleep. “No one wanted to be around me, of course,” Coughlin says. “Other than the doctors, Teri was the only one who’d deal with me.”

McKeever would knock on the door of Coughlin’s hotel room every hour or so to check on her, and the two would go down to team meals and sit alone at a table in the far corner of the room. None of this was visible to the rest of the swimming world, which saw only stunning failure, confirming some people’s suspicions that Coughlin, as she had been before the 2000 Olympic Trials, was physically—or, as some erroneously speculated, mentally—vulnerable when the stakes were highest.

Having qualified for the 100-meter butterfly final on the first day of the meet, Coughlin, even after her illness worsened, and even after her plodding effort in the 100 back the next morning, decided to give it a go in the evening session of day 2. Her only chance, she and McKeever reasoned, would be to employ a “fly and die” strategy: Go out hard and see if her body could hang on for 58 seconds.

Coughlin flew at the start...and quickly died, finishing last in the field. She skipped the warm-down session, the series of slow laps all competitive swimmers rely upon to rid their body of lactic acid and thus spare themselves the aches and pains that result when the acid remains in the system. Coughlin didn’t care—her body already ached miserably from

the virus, and she didn't plan on reentering the pool anytime soon. Hunched over in pain, barely able to move her legs as she slowly hobbled to a car waiting to take her back to the hotel, Coughlin stopped and balanced herself on McKeever's arm. "Whoa," she said, cracking a tiny smile. "I haven't gotten *eighth* in a race in a long time."

But as the meet proceeded, Coughlin knew she was losing more than just a couple of races. On the men's side, 18-year-old Baltimore phenom Michael Phelps was doing what Coughlin had been projected to do—win race after race and position himself as the greatest American medal hope for Athens. Meanwhile, Coughlin's brilliance of the past 3 years was suddenly fading from memory, and the predictions of multiple individual golds were being downscaled.

Was she versatile and talented enough to approach the Olympics like Phelps and challenge Mark Spitz's record haul of seven golds (four individual) from the 1972 Olympics in Munich? Undoubtedly. Was her body capable of holding up? Even Coughlin began to wonder.

Cooped up in her hotel room, she had a lot of time to think. A major decision loomed—would Coughlin renounce her collegiate eligibility and cash in on endorsement offers that could exceed \$1 million? The smart money said yes.

Or would she thumb her nose at conventional wisdom and return for her senior season at Cal? Few college athletes, let alone athletes who compete in nonrevenue sports, would think twice about leaving for such a bounty. But Coughlin, especially in the wake of her sudden fallibility, wasn't so sure.

Going into Worlds, Coughlin had all but decided to bolt. She could still attend classes at Cal and train with McKeever and the rest of the team, but she wouldn't be able to compete in collegiate competitions. Considering that college meets are contested in short-course (25-yard or, during an Olympic year, 25-meter) venues, while the Olympics are held in long-course (50-meter) pools, that wasn't a huge loss. It would be like skipping half-court, three-on-three hoops competitions while preparing for full-court, five-on-five action. Coughlin, who excelled at turns, had already

proven to be the best short-course swimmer in the world; the key for her was pushing her long-course capabilities to the highest possible level.

Yet turning pro wasn't the no-brainer that everyone assumed it was. For one thing, Coughlin was true to her school like few other collegiate athletes, with a fervor that would have made the Beach Boys proud. As a high school senior, she had fought fiercely with her parents for the right to attend Cal, which she correctly sensed would be a better fit for her than Bay Area rival Stanford, her parents' preference. Not only was Coughlin excited by the idea of swimming for McKeever—and, though she respected him greatly, somewhat certain that Stanford's hyperintense coach, Richard Quick, would not be the best fit for her—but she also loved everything about Berkeley: the liberal legacy, the diversity, the probing encouragement of progressive and contrarian thought, the vibrant campus in a lush yet urban setting.

With Coughlin back for a fourth season, McKeever had a chance to push her program to the next level. Not insignificantly, Cal would also have an opportunity to defeat Stanford in a dual meet for the first time in 28 years, something both women craved the way Golden Bears seek honey. Coughlin would also have a chance to make history; already the only swimmer to sweep three individual events at three consecutive NCAA Championships, she'd be favored to make it four for four.

Besides, Coughlin thoroughly enjoyed being part of a team, getting lost in the fabric of collective goals, and, on occasion, getting to pretend she was one of the girls. As much as she stood out in the water and embraced her role as a star, she worried about being cast as an ordained Olympic hero before her time. Were she to turn pro and start showing up in commercials a full year before the games, she might suffer from the same type of overexposure that made some viewers regard Marion Jones's performance at the 2000 Sydney Games as a disappointment, rather than an exceptional accomplishment.

In one sense, her body's breakdown in Barcelona could have spooked her into taking the money while it was still on the table. But in another sense, Coughlin felt a greater need to cling to McKeever and remain in the protective cocoon that had revitalized her as an athlete.

It was not a stretch to say that McKeever saved Coughlin's career, both technically and emotionally. When Coughlin arrived at Cal, McKeever changed her stroke, giving it a more cyclical efficiency that reduced the stress on her injured shoulder and helped her reach a new level of excellence. She also altered Coughlin's outlook, making life in the pool fun and exciting and unpredictable. Coughlin, who'd taken to the pool because she enjoyed the sensation of frolicking in the water, rediscovered her love for the sport at Cal. By the end of their first year together, Coughlin had been voted the NCAA Swimmer of the Year and was on her way to becoming the greatest collegiate swimmer of all time. She was getting good grades; making appearances on behalf of the university; and projecting an image of beauty, grace, and well-rounded achievement.

What Coughlin didn't realize was that in the process, she was helping to save McKeever. Before landing Coughlin, the coach had been, quite literally, a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Overworked and overstressed, McKeever suffered from depression, panic attacks, and a severely impaired self-image. She had reached a breaking point with her closest coaching confidant, Cal cocoach Mike Walker, and feared that severing ties with him would expose her shortcomings as a leader. Whenever McKeever felt like giving in and walking away, she would remember her commitment to Coughlin and the unique opportunity this special swimmer's presence afforded.

It was as if Coughlin's fragility superseded McKeever's, pushing the coach to challenge the limits of her own potential. "I was at the lowest point of my life," McKeever recalls. "And one of the things that pulled me through—though even Natalie may not know this—was her being here, that I'd made a commitment to someone that special. I'm a better coach than I was 4 years ago, and not just because of what I've learned from her in the pool. In many ways, she's the kind of person who makes everyone around her better, and I've probably been the biggest beneficiary."

One of the tenets of McKeever's philosophy is that the journey is as important as—or, in most cases, more important than—the outcome. Even as she felt Coughlin's disappointment in Barcelona, the coach

viewed it as another chapter in her swimmer's odyssey toward growth and fulfillment, a trying time whose value might not be understood until after the fact. For the previous 3 years, things had been going so well, so consistently, in Coughlin's career, it was almost eerie.

Perhaps there was value in Coughlin's being forced to confront her frailty a year before the Olympics; surely she could learn another lesson in perseverance and handling adversity by fighting through the discomfort.

If a hope for redemption, however minor, were to present itself, McKeever was all for it. Jack Bauerle, the vaunted University of Georgia coach in charge of the US women's staff in Barcelona, kept asking McKeever if there was a chance Coughlin might be available for the meet-ending 400-meter medley relay. Because Coughlin was the fastest US swimmer in three of the four strokes—all but the breaststroke—at 100 meters, leaving her off the medley relay was almost inconceivable. Yet the coaches knew that even if she began to feel better, Coughlin would be weak and out of sorts in such a competition. Swimming is a sport in which “feel for the water” is everything; skip a few days of training, and a swimmer is liable to behave like she hasn't been in a pool for months.

Bauerle asked McKeever about the possibility of Coughlin's swimming the backstroke leg in the prelims. That way, even if she performed poorly, the team's other swimmers would probably be strong enough to qualify for the final. It would also allow her to shed some of the rust, potentially clearing the way for a faster swim in the evening.

“Jack, the girl is spent,” McKeever said. “The way I see it, she's got one swim in her, period.”

Saving her for the finals would be a gamble, but McKeever and Bauerle agreed that it was a risk worth taking. Cope, the second-best US backstroker, could go only so fast; Coughlin at least offered the possibility of greatness. She led off the medley with a time of 1:02.26—nearly 3 seconds off her world record, but a respectable effort under the circumstances. The United States finished second to China, edging the powerful Australians, and Coughlin views the performance as a triumphant one. “I was really proud of myself for sucking it up and swimming

through my sickness,” she reasons. “Everyone thought the meet was a disaster for me and that I should be devastated, but it actually ended on a redeeming note.”

After the meet, Coughlin joined McKeever, Cope, and a small US delegation on a side trip to Athens. They got the lay of the land, visited the Olympic swimming venue, and had a fancy dinner that featured local delicacies. For a couple of days she forgot about the disappointment of Barcelona, stopped worrying about whether or not to turn pro, and looked forward to her next big international test.

*Next summer, she told herself, I'll be healthy. Then all these people doubting me now will be the ones who feel like crap.*