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## A Swimmer of a Certain Age

By ELIZABETH WEIL

**NEAR THE WARM-UP POOL AT THE** Missouri Grand Prix swim meet, in Columbia, a crop of Olympic hopefuls lolled around in practice suits and towels on a Saturday morning in February. Fully clothed among them stood some relics of Olympics past: Scott Goldblatt, who won a gold medal in the 2004 Games, wore an aqua sport coat and a striped tie and was doing on-air commentary for [Swimnetwork.com](http://Swimnetwork.com); Mel Stewart, who won two golds and a bronze in 1992, wore the same goofy get-up, working as Goldblatt's sidekick. Meanwhile, [Dara Torres](#), who won the first of her nine Olympic medals in 1984, a year before [Michael Phelps](#) was born, stripped off her baggy T-shirt and sweat pants, revealing a breathtaking body in a magenta Speedo. She pulled on a cap marked with her initials and prepared to swim. Torres is now 41 and the mother of a 2-year-old daughter, Tessa Grace. She broke her first of three world records in 1982, at 14, and she has retired from swimming and come back three times, her latest effort built on an obsessive attention to her aging body.

Torres's retinue includes a head coach, a sprint coach, a strength coach, two stretchers, two masseuses, a chiropractor and a nanny, at the cost of at least \$100,000 per year. At the Olympic trials, this week, in Omaha, Neb., she's expected to swim fast enough to make her fifth Olympic team. If she does, she'll be the first American swimmer to compete in five Olympics (despite sitting out 1996 and 2004). She'll also be oldest female swimmer in the history of the Olympic games.

Stewart walked over to give Torres a hug, but he stopped himself short. "I don't want to mess anything up," he said, laughing, patting the air around her torso.

Last November in Germany, Torres clocked 23.82 seconds in the 50-meter freestyle short course, breaking the American record and making her one of only five women to swim the event in less than 24 seconds. The day after she got home to South Florida, she had a bone spur shaved out of her shoulder. In early January, she had another operation, to deal with a torn meniscus in her knee. Now just five weeks after the latest procedure, Torres looked great. She flashed her wide-open smile at Stewart and dove in the pool. Stewart retreated to Goldblatt and shrugged. "Hey, we'd all be in there if we could be winning," he said.

As Torres swam, her nearly six-foot frame stretching out across the water, her head coach, Michael Lohberg, checked her hip rotation and distance per stroke, while Torres's two stretchers, who moved from Connecticut to Florida to aid in her training, looked for small asymmetries and tensions in her body. Torres treats her body the way a motorhead treats his car: obsessively tuning it up, sparing no expense. If you study Torres's face and neck, you can see some faint signs of her 40-plus years. But barring the 13 small surgical incisions on her knees, elbows, shoulders, hands and fingers, her physique looks nearly flawless. Rowdy Gaines, who in 1996 was the oldest swimmer (at 35) to qualify for the American Olympic swimming trials, recently described Torres to me as having "the perfect swimmer's body; really, it's the picture they'd draw in the dictionary." Her posture is gangly, loose and cocky, like a teenage boy's. Her proportions more closely resemble the long inverted triangle of Phelps — broad shoulders, long torso, slim hips, long arms — than the more tightly muscled curves of two of the biggest names in

American women's swimming, [Natalie Coughlin](#) and Katie Hoff.

Torres is known for being both competitive and compulsive. Each year, on her mother's birthday, she tries to beat her siblings to be the first to call. In February, when a group of swimmers appeared on "The Today Show" to promote the new Speedo LZR suit, a Speedo rep offered \$100 to the first athlete to say [www.speedo.com](http://www.speedo.com); guess who won the money? Torres's partner, David Hoffman, a reproductive endocrinologist, who is Tessa's father, describes Torres's personality as "not type A. She's type A + +." As if to explain, one evening, over dinner with Torres, her mother and me, Hoffman mentioned how challenging it can be to do any kind of physical exercise with Torres. "When we go on bike rides, she's gone," Hoffman said.

"That's not true!" Torres objected. "I wait for you!"

Hoffman raised his eyebrows, resting his case.

After her swim, Torres returned to her hotel to eat lunch, nap and tear two LZR swimsuits worth \$1,000 — Speedo failed to send Torres's size, 27 long, and suggested she squeeze into 26 regular. Then she headed back to the aquatic center in the late afternoon. Gone was the morning's big smile. Torres was now 149 pounds of focus. Her body kept warm in a knit cap and Ugg boots, she lay on a yoga mat in the gymnasium, readying herself for the preliminaries of the 50-meter freestyle. Most swimmers prep for races by pinwheeling their arms and trying to relax. For Torres, the chore is far more elaborate, as her two stretchers work in tandem to contort and flex her body, in a 20-minute preswim version of the two-hour sequence they do three times a week at her home.

Swimmers refer to the 50-meter freestyle as "the splash and dash." You dive, hit the water, go all out for about 20 seconds and then reach for the wall. In the preliminaries, Torres streaked down the pool in 24.89 seconds, placing second behind the 22-year-old Kara Lynn Joyce. She was pleased with her performance.

The next morning, back at the aquatic center for the finals, Torres appeared more interior. As her stretchers made last-minute adjustments — during competitions they stretch her five times a day — she stared at the ceiling, listening to her iPod. Up on the blocks, Torres looked taller and fitter than the seven other women, who were between 12 and 20 years her junior. Torres dried her block with a towel, bent down to start and this time touched the wall in 24.85 seconds, just ahead of Natalie Coughlin and again behind Joyce.

Within minutes, the three women stood on a podium. A college kid hung a silver medal around Torres's neck.

"Can I see it?" a high-school swimmer asked Torres after she stepped down.

Torres does not relish coming in second. "Sure," she said. "You can have it."

**TORRES LOVES TO WIN**, but not as much as she hates to lose. Growing up in Beverly Hills, the fifth of six children and the older of two girls, Torres started following her brothers to swim practice at the local [Y.M.C.A.](#) at age 7 and later joined the Culver City swim team. As a kid, Torres didn't have much of a work ethic, but she did do whatever it took to come in first. Torres's mother, Marylu Kauder, a former model, told me that one of her earliest memories of her daughter swimming was watching Torres during practice swim halfway across the pool and then stop and turn around so she could beat her teammates back to the wall. Torres lived a privileged life — her childhood home had 10 bathrooms. Still, when she broke the world record in the 50-meter freestyle, at 14, the achievement didn't seem to impress or surprise anyone much in the Torres household. As Torres recalls, her

brothers said, “Congratulations, whatever.” Torres’s own response wasn’t far more pronounced: “Someone told me I was the fastest in the world, and I thought, O.K., that’s neat. But those things really don’t stay with me.”

During her junior year in high school, Torres moved down to Mission Viejo, Calif., to train for the 1984 Olympics with Mark Schubert, who was coaching one of the best teams in the country and who is now the head coach of the U.S.A. Swimming National Team. “There are some athletes who love to train but are afraid to race,” Schubert explained to me. “In high school Dara was the opposite. I wouldn’t say she loved to train. But when it was swim-meet time, that’s when she’d really shine.” Despite this, the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles did not go as planned for Torres. At one point, she recalls, she peeked out to the pool from the athletes’ tent because she wanted to see her friend Rowdy Gaines swim. “I remember lifting up the bottom and seeing 17,000 people and I just freaked out. I got hot, I had to go to the nurse’s station, they were putting ice packs on me.” Torres swam so poorly in the preliminaries of the 4X100-meter freestyle relay (the 50-meter freestyle did not become an Olympic event until 1988) that the coaches even considered whether they could substitute a veteran for Torres in the finals that evening. But that afternoon a team captain took Torres back to the dorm to watch soap operas and managed to calm her down. In the finals, Torres swam her leg in 55.92 seconds, a personal best, and the team won a gold medal. Still, Torres describes those Olympics as “just scary.”

At the [University of Florida](#), which Torres started attending in 1985, practice became a much more prominent and difficult part of her life. The coaches routinely weighed all the swimmers, and if a swimmer didn’t make weight, he or she had to swim extra morning workouts. At Florida, Torres earned 28 [N.C.A.A.](#) all-American swimming awards, the maximum number possible during a college career, but she also became bulimic, forcing herself to throw up to make weight. In the summer of 1988, between her junior and senior years of college, Torres was ranked No. 1 in the world in the 100-meter freestyle. But as she puts it, she “just couldn’t get it together” in Seoul at the 1988 Olympics, Torres placed seventh in the 100-meter freestyle; again she won medals only in relays, a silver and a bronze. Near the end of the games, Torres overheard the East German swimmer Kristin Otto, who won gold medals in the 50- and 100-meter freestyle, tell a reporter, “I thought I’d have more competition out of Dara Torres.” “That was a knife in my back and my heart,” Torres told me.

Once her college career ended, Torres decided to retire. But before long she felt the urge to compete again and was elected an Olympic team captain for the 1992 games in Barcelona. With her bulimia in check, she won a gold in a freestyle relay, yet it was her only event. “I would say 1992 was less than stellar by her standards,” Schubert told me, adding sympathetically, “I don’t ever remember her being good enough for her.” Torres had no individual medals to her name, and her growing collection of relay medals presented a complicated prize. She kept them under her bed in her apartment in New York, where, she told me, they turned black with tarnish.

After 1992, Torres lived what appeared to be a glamorous life. She became the first athlete model in the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, married and divorced Jeff Gowen, a sports producer, kept fit running and cycling in Central Park and playing basketball at the Reebok gym. But in the spring of 1999, despite not having been in a pool, except to cool down, in seven years, Torres decided she wanted to compete in the 2000 games and moved to California to train. After only five months, Torres’s time in the 50-meter freestyle was 0.3 seconds faster than the world record she set in that event more than 15 years earlier. In Sydney in 2000, Torres, then 33, won three individual Olympic medals — bronzes in the 50-meter freestyle, 100-meter freestyle and 100-meter butterfly. She won two gold medals in relays as well. Though she instantly missed the intensity of training for the Olympics — she told me she cried on the way to the required urine test after her last race, sad that it was over and unsure what to do with her life — she came home and again retired. “I felt like I really didn’t have anything else to prove to myself,”

she told me. “Plus, I thought 33 was really old. And I was tired.”

Over the next five years, Torres married and divorced again, this time an Israeli surgeon named Itzhak Shasha, and was inducted in the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. (Torres’s father, Edward Torres, a real-estate developer, was Jewish, and she converted before marrying Shasha.) She also became the first woman to win the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach car race; when asked to explain why she entered the event, she replied, “I’m so freaking competitive it’s unbelievable.” Then, in the fall of 2005, after struggling for years to have a baby, Torres finally became pregnant with Tessa. At the time, she began swimming again for exercise, because, she says, she had terrible morning sickness and she’d “rather throw up in the pool gutter than next to the StairMaster.” But predictably, Torres soon found herself racing “whoever the middle-aged guy happened to be in the next lane,” even when she was noticeably pregnant. Three and a half months postpartum, she raced at the Masters World Championships. Fifteen minutes after nursing Tessa in the bathroom, she swam the first leg of the 50-meter freestyle relay in 25.98 seconds — fast enough to qualify for this week’s Olympic trials.

**A WEEK AFTER THE MISSOURI GRAND PRIX**, in the muggy South Florida haze, Torres rolled up to the Coral Springs Swim Club at 7:45 a.m. for an 8:00 practice, because, as she explained in a text message: “. . . hate getting there last! You’d think I would have grown out of that, but I still hate anything to do with being last!!”

As a swimmer of a certain age, Torres takes much longer to recover between workouts. In college she swam 10 practices a week, for a total of about 65,000 meters. Now she swims five, totaling around 25,000 meters. In the water, she does the same workouts as the other sprinters on her team — timed sets, kicking and drills — and she dispatches each with her signature flawless technique and the happy-to-be-there enthusiasm of a woman who was supposed to have hung up her Speedo many years ago. “Isn’t he nice to look at?” Torres whispered to me, cocking her head toward her training partner, the 6-foot-4, well-muscled, 28-year-old Bulgarian Ray Antonov. At the end of practice they kissed each other four times on the cheek. “It’s a Bulgarian thing,” Torres said, laughing.

Torres’s innovations for keeping her body in top shape as she advances deeper into middle age are almost entirely out of the pool. In Florida, after her two-hour water workout, Torres changed into a black workout top and shorts and met her strength coach, Andy O’Brien, in the gym. Over the past year and a half, O’Brien, who is also the strength coach of the [Florida Panthers](#) hockey team, has switched Torres’s focus away from heavy, static weightlifting and geared her training toward balanced, dynamic exercises that stimulate her central nervous system. “The idea is not to isolate muscle groups but to get muscles contracting together in the right sequences,” O’Brien explains. Weight training, he notes, grew out of bodybuilding, and that low-rep high-weight tradition is ill suited for a sprinter since a body comprised of big muscles that have been trained to produce force only individually wastes considerable energy trying to move. O’Brien says speed derives from highly coordinated movements and fluid timing. Under his tutelage Torres is 12 pounds lighter, stronger and more cut than she was in 2000. Torres told me that it took her head coach, Lohberg, a little while to embrace O’Brien’s program, but she says, “I’m swimming really fast now, so he can’t complain.”

Torres does her weight training for 60 to 90 minutes, four times a week. On this day, O’Brien coached Torres through a series of exercises that she did while lying on a large exercise ball — lifting weights, doing crunches with weights behind her head. She also performed cross-body pulls with another large ball in her arms. Throughout, O’Brien kept his eyes on Torres’s shoulders and upper back (and several of the young men on the team kept their eyes on O’Brien, unable to afford his services themselves but eager to see what they could learn). Nearly everyone in Torres’s orbit is in awe of her body — its beauty, its strength, its form. “Look at the way her scapula is traveling!”

O'Brien enthused, noting the place where she just had an operation. "Dara repairs 10 times faster than most athletes. Considering her age and the length of time she's been training, it's pretty amazing."

After grabbing a steak salad for lunch, Torres drove home (fast) to be stretched. Torres puts as much energy — and money — into her workout recovery as she does into her training. Nearly everybody I spoke to for this article struggled to find a way to say gracefully that Torres's considerable financial resources — sponsorships from Toyota and Speedo; money she has earned from modeling, TV work and motivational speaking; plus a private sponsor for training expenses — are helping her gain speed. Torres books a massage three times a week and visits, as she needs to, a chiropractor, who works his bald head to a frothy sweat as he tries to stick his hand under her shoulder blade. This afternoon, however, she was getting her two-hour stretch. BlackBerry in hand, pink flower bolster from Tessa's bed under her legs, Torres lay on her kitchen floor gossiping with her stretchers, as they used their bodies to guide her limbs into precise angles and knead knots and sometimes small pieces of scar tissue out of her muscles.

"Dara and I haven't seen each other in like 10 hours, so we have to catch up," Anne Tierney, one of the stretchers, explained as she sat on a chair near Torres's head. Her partner, Steve Sierra, sat on a chair near Torres's side, and the two proceeded to "mash," or massage Torres's shoulders and legs with their feet — sometimes standing on her body — so their hands wouldn't tire and they could apply more force. After 45 minutes, they began Torres's resistance-stretching sequence, a series of maneuvers that looks like a cross between a yoga class, a massage and a Cirque du Soleil performance. The concept behind resistance stretching is that muscles can gain more flexibility if they're contracted and stretched at the same time. At one point Torres rolled onto her stomach, tucking one leg underneath her chest (in what yogis call pigeon pose). Then Tierney leaned her torso against Torres's slightly bent back leg, pushing it toward Torres's glutes, as Torres worked to overcome Tierney's force and straighten out that leg. Later, Torres moved up onto a massage table and Tierney and Sierra worked on her tensor fascia latae, a muscle that starts on the outside of hip and extends down the leg. Sierra used his hands and shoulders to rotate Torres's thigh externally; Tierney stood at the foot of the table, pulling outward on Torres's calf near the ankle.

Torres calls resistance stretching her "secret weapon." Bob Cooley, who invented the discipline, describes it in less-modest terms. According to Cooley, over a two-week period in 1999, his flexibility system turned Torres "from being an alternate on the relay team to the fastest swimmer in America." The secret to Torres's speed, Cooley says, is that his technique not only makes her muscles more flexible but also increases their ability to shorten more completely, and when muscles shorten more completely, they produce greater power and speed. "What do race-car drivers do when they want to go faster?" Cooley asks. "They don't spend more hours driving around the track. They increase the biomechanics of the car. And that's what resistance flexibility is doing for Dara — increasing her biomechanics."

Moments from the end of Torres's workday — her swim workout, her gym workout and her two-hour stretching session nearly complete — Tessa ran into the kitchen, shouting, "Mama!" The toddler clearly takes after her mom: even at age 2, she's working on driving her plastic car between the Mini Cooper and the Lexus S.U.V. in the garage, while standing up. Tessa distracted herself in the living room full of toys while Sierra finished with Torres, first working his fingers under her rib cage, a painful technique that, unexpectedly, helps with shoulder rotation, and then pressing very firmly with the heels of his hands on Torres's solar plexus, as if doing CPR. None of this is comfortable — I had the distinct pleasure of being stretched by Tierney and Sierra myself — but Torres has a very high threshold for pain and the willingness to endure it.

"O.K., Tessie!" Torres finally yelled, standing up from the table and sliding on her flip-flops. "Outside? Race ya!"



**UPON HEARING THAT TORRES** is likely to make the Olympic team at age 41, many people have the same question: How is this possible? Kinesiologists counter with a different query: Why are you so surprised? “Dara is extremely impressive, but she’s not as unique as people think,” says Michael Joyner, a competitive athlete and anesthesiologist at the [Mayo Clinic](#) who writes scholarly papers about aging and sports. “[Ted Williams](#) hit .388 when he was 39. Jack Foster did very well in the Olympic marathon when he was 40. [Karl Malone](#) earned a triple-double in an [N.B.A.](#) game at 40. Jeannie Longo won a French time-trial championship in cycling at age 47.” Torres’s events — short swims — are also well suited to competitors of advanced age. Compared to, say, running, swimming is more technique-intensive and produces fewer injuries. Sprints are also kinder to older athletes, in that strength falls off more gradually than aerobic power. In April, at 37, Mark Foster, a freestyle sprinter in England, came out of retirement and earned a spot, for the fifth time, on the British Olympic swim team. “For those of us who pay attention to this stuff,” Joyner said, “Dara’s performance is unusual but not totally unexpected.”

So why do we assume a middle-aged swimmer must be all washed up? Because for nonelite athletes, sporting achievements fall off precipitously with age. Body composition changes toward more fat and less muscle. Strength and aerobic capacity decrease as well. But a primary reason that athletic performance degrades in adulthood is changes in priorities. People tend to devote more time and energy to jobs and families than to sports. Even committed athletes downgrade their workout goals from achieving personal bests to staying in shape. Academics refer to this reduction in physical activity as hypokinesia. The phenomenon is not limited to humans. A 1985 study showed that rats with unlimited access to running wheels exercised less as they aged. “But look at people who maintain activity levels,” says Joel Stager, a professor of kinesiology at [Indiana University](#). “It’s a different story! A lot of what we assume is aging is just progressive hypokinesia. How many people at Dara’s age have maintained their training consistently? I’m going to say there are very, very few.”

Even childbirth needn’t be a sports-career killer. In 1972, in *The Journal of the [American Medical Association](#)*, E. Zaharieva published a study of 13 women who were pregnant and then competed in the 1964 Olympic Games. Most resumed serious training between three and six months after giving birth. All said, Zaharieva wrote, “they became stronger, had greater stamina and were more balanced in every way after having a child.” Last September, [Lindsay Davenport](#) was back on the pro tennis tour and winning just three months after giving birth, while in November, [Paula Radcliffe](#) won the [New York City Marathon](#) less than 10 months after having a baby.

So how long can peak athletic performance last? Hirofumi Tanaka, the director of the Cardiovascular Aging Research Laboratory at the University of Texas at Austin, found that both elite and nonelite runners and swimmers could maintain personal bests until age 35, after which performance declined in a gradual, linear fashion until about age 50 to 60 for runners and 70 for swimmers. Deterioration was rapid from there. Tanaka also found that swimmers experienced more modest declines than runners and that swim sprinters, like Torres, experienced the smallest declines of all. At [Yale University](#), Ray Fair, a runner and an economist, crunched statistics on aging and peak athletic performance and created what he calls the Fair Model. The model provides a table of coefficients that enable an athlete to take a personal-best time and compute how long he or she should expect to take to complete that same event at a specific point later in life (assuming he or she has continued to train at the same level). According to the Fair Model, a woman who swam a personal best 24.63 seconds in the 50-meter freestyle at or before age 35 should expect to clock 25.37 seconds at age 41. “I am struck by how small the deterioration rates are,” Fair wrote in a paper titled “How Fast Do Old Men Slow Down?” “It may be that societies have been too pessimistic about losses from aging for individuals who stay healthy and fit.”

Historically, the economics of swimming have also contributed to the preponderance of young champions. Little

sponsorship money existed for swimmers until about 10 years ago, which tended to mean that once a swimmer graduated from college, the gig was up — it was time to get a job. But now Speedo and TYR, among other companies in the swimming business, make it possible for elite American swimmers to train full time and continue to be competitive well into their 20s and 30s. This can't fully counteract "black-line fatigue" — burnout from spending too many hours staring at the bottom of a pool; Phelps insists he's retiring at age 30 — but the money is pulling elite swimmers' ages up. Economists who study sports, like Raymond Sauer at [Clemson University](#), note that if athletes are economically motivated enough — if, says Sauer, they have "low wealth and poor income-earning alternatives" — they can stay in sports until a quite advanced age. Stager, at Indiana University, notes that the average age of competitors at national swimming championships increased from 16 in the 1960s to 20 in 2004.

Despite evidence that older athletes can remain competitive longer than many imagine, Torres's achievements have provoked consistent rumors that she must be doping. These began at the Sydney Olympics in 2000 and have been so persistent in Torres's latest comeback that last September Torres flew to Colorado Springs, Colo., to meet with Travis T. Tygart, C.E.O. of the [United States Anti-Doping Agency](#). Tygart acknowledges that since the high-profile steroid scandals involving [Barry Bonds](#) and [Marion Jones](#), the onus has fallen on athletes to prove that they're clean, and that that's nearly impossible to do. "Can U.S.A.D.A. give Dara or some other athlete the stamp of cleanliness?" Tygart asks. "No, the science isn't there yet." Every athlete who is training for the Olympics is subject to testing at any time, in or out of competition. But Tygart was able to offer Torres the chance to volunteer for a pilot program that tests more broadly blood and urine for signs of doping and presumably will catch a much higher percentage of dirty athletes. Torres said yes. (Jones, among others, passed less-sophisticated U.S.A.D.A. tests while using performance-enhancing drugs.) Tygart has not yet released any data on Torres's testing. But he says the fact she volunteered is significant. "I think a dirty athlete would be crazy to volunteer for this program," he told me. He was also heartened that Torres did not ask how the pilot's protocols worked or what drugs they would be looking for.

EVEN TORRES KNOWS that if she manages to earn one of the two spots available on the Olympic team for the 50-meter freestyle, or one of the six available on the 100-meter freestyle (which includes a relay team), this will be her last trip to the Games. Mark Schubert, the national team's coach in 1984, told me he's sure Torres will hold master's swimming records in freestyle sprints at age 50 and 60 and 70. But — let's face it — compared with the Olympics, even the Masters World Championship is a glorified losers' round, and holding a master's world record is hardly an exciting achievement for an athlete who hit the world stage just as she entered high school and who has nine Olympic medals to her name. Driving home one night from a sushi dinner, Torres's partner, David Hoffman, admitted that he'll be relieved when Torres emerges from her Olympic training tunnel. "We don't spend as much time together," he told me as he idled his car outside their home. "We can't go on a vacation." Torres had driven home separately with Tessa. Hoffman watched the swimmer standing in their driveway at dusk, her mind clearly turned toward getting Tessa to bed, so that she could get nine hours of sleep herself. "I can't wait until this is over," Hoffman sighed. "It'll have been two years."

Still, the next morning Torres rolled back up to the pool, chipper and early as usual. "Hey, Dara," one of her teammates called, "I heard you were going up for 'Dancing With the Stars'?"

"I can't dance," Torres laughed, dipping her goggles in the pool. "No way if I'm going to be the first one off!"

And with that, Torres grabbed her workout sheet, stuck it to the side of the pool and got down to business. The mood at practice was calm, and as Torres warmed up, her lean frame stretched out among the 16 other spectacular

bodies, it was easy to forget that before last year nobody believed that a 41-year-old mother of a toddler, coming off a six-year hiatus, could swim this fast.

According to her coach, Michael Lohberg, Torres should feel less pressure than his other, younger swimmers. “What’s the worst thing that can happen to her?” he asks. “She goes home to her daughter and her partner. Her whole sense of self-worth doesn’t come down to tenths and hundredths of seconds in a pool.” But Torres doesn’t necessarily agree with that opinion. She takes seriously her new role: hero of the middle-aged. About an hour into the morning’s workout, all the swimmers gathered in the center of the pool for a much-loathed drill, vertical kicking. The task at hand was to hoist one’s torso out of the water, using only a flutter or dolphin kick, for 40 seconds, 12 times, with 35-second breaks between each rep. For the last 10 seconds of each vertical kick, the coach yelled, “Streamline,” meaning the swimmers, while still kicking, had to extend their arms straight overhead, one hand on top of the other.

At first Torres led good-natured griping among the swimmers. But after five kicks, the sets were done in silence, all of the athletes too exhausted and miserable to complain. The coach even stopped yelling, as his swimmers’ eyes were on the clock; everyone knew when to pop up and when to come back down. Yet each time, Torres rose to her vertical kick a second before everybody else, and there she was, rising out of the water, for a few moments longer at the end.

*Elizabeth Weil is a contributing writer for the magazine. Her last article was about single-sex public-school education.*

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