



Exclusive Interview with Michael Phelps

Thoughts from the greatest swimmer of a generation

By Josh Gartner

It is difficult to overstate the remarkable achievements of US Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps. At the age of 15 he competed in the 2000 Sydney Games as the youngest American male Olympic athlete since 1952. During the Athens Games he proved that he was no longer a kid, winning an astounding eight medals, including six golds, at the still tender age of 19.

His unbelievable career to this point has raised expectations to nearly impos-

sible levels. Phelps needs four gold medals to pass Mark Spitz and Carl Lewis for the most ever won by a single Olympian. The Baltimore native is already the most decorated swimmer in World Championships history with 20 medals, including 17 golds, so the Olympic feat would just be another feather in the cap of this extraordinary athlete.

With such unbelievable accomplishments at a young age, one might expect Phelps to have an inflated sense of self.

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Yet he comes across as humble, earnest and personable. On the eve of his potentially ground-breaking appearance in the Beijing Olympics, Michael Phelps talked with *China Brief* about the difficulties of high expectations, the excitement of the Olympics and some of the positive work that he has done in the community.

CB Thank you for taking the time to talk with *China Brief*. First, how has your impression of the Olympic Games changed since you first competed eight years ago in Sydney?

MP Each of the Olympic Games that I have participated in holds a special place in my heart. The Olympics have always been special to me ever since I was a kid and dreamed of competing in the Olympics. For 17 days, the whole world comes together in the spirit of competition and it has been a truly amazing experience to actually be a part of the

Olympic movement.

CB You stand four gold medals away from becoming the most decorated Olympic athlete ever. How do you deal with the attention and pressure on you to reach this incredible mark?

MP I am aware of the attention and am thankful for it because I want to increase the popularity of the sport, but I am really focused on my training right now. I want to be the best swimmer I can be. My biggest motivation comes from the goals that I have set for myself.

CB In 2007, you came to Beijing for the Visa Friendship Lanes goodwill tour. How did your experience change the way you view China, and having been in the country before, how do you expect the Beijing Games to differ from others in the past?

MP I have visited China three times now and each time I have been there the excitement and support of the people continues to grow. The Visa Friendship Lanes tour gave us (Katie Hoff, Ryan Lochte, Megan Jendrick and myself) a chance to meet and interact directly with hundreds of kids through swim clinics and appearances. I think the energy level of the Beijing Games is going to be at an all-time high and I can't wait to be a part of it. I am really looking forward to swimming in the Water Cube.

CB During your visit to China you met with Liu Xiang, China's Olympic hurdling gold medalist. What kind of conversations take place between two world-renowned athletes? What kind of sense of him were you able to get?

MP It was certainly a pleasure and honor to meet Liu Xiang. We both have a relationship with VISA, who arranged for the opportunity for the two of us to meet. Our conversation was a bit limited given the language barrier, but he was very friendly.

I think we can both relate to hard work and determination and share the pride in representing our respective countries. I wish him all the best; I know he'll definitely have the crowd behind him in Beijing.

CB What made the biggest impression on you during your 2007 visit to China?

MP I was really impressed with the excitement and enthusiasm of the people of China. They have a great sense of pride in hosting the Olympic Games and you can see and feel it. I was there for the one-year-out celebration and I remember driving back to the hotel and the streets were filled with people, block after block, all celebrating the countdown. Really exciting stuff.

CB The Beijing Games have received a huge amount of press coverage beyond the sports, both positive and negative. How does that affect the athletes who have to compete? How has it changed your outlook for the Games?

MP The Olympic Games have always been very special to me. It's been a childhood dream come true to be able to compete in the Olympics and it's a feeling that is indescribable. The Games are the one time when people from all around the world come together to compete and there is no other sporting event like it. The Athlete Village is literally full of athletes from all around the world, eating and sleeping in the same area. We are all there to compete but also there to experience different cultures and really get to know each other.

CB In a recent *New York Times* article, you mentioned you're not a morning person. What impact does competing in the morning have on your performance, and what steps are you taking to ensure that the time difference will not affect you in Beijing?

MP Yeah, I am not much of a morning person. But that will change, it's the Olympic Games. I'll def-

initely be ready to go, no matter what time finals start. Over the past year or so, we have had several meets that followed the same format, prelims at night followed by finals in the morning. So I have a pretty good idea of what it will be like.

CB Do you have any pre-event rituals or superstitions?

MP Well I always walk out onto the pool deck listening to my mp3 player and I have been known to flap my arms around my back a few times while standing on the block. That's pretty much it.

CB You are involved with a number of groups that try to make a positive impact on society (Pathfinders for Autism, Boys and Girls Club of America and Octagon's Swim with the Stars Camp, to name a few). How do you choose with which groups to get involved, and can you talk a little about your work with them?

MP My mom is in education and she's always talked about the importance of giving back and helping others. There are so many great causes and charities that people can work with and I have been fortunate to help several organizations over the years. I really value my relationships with the Boys & Girls Clubs, Pathfinders for Autism, Make-A-Wish and many others. A family from my childhood swim club, North Baltimore Aquatic Club, has a son who is autistic, so that's how I got involved with Pathfinders for Autism. My involvement ranges from volunteering for a fundraising function, signing autographs, talking to media to help raise awareness or it can be me just hanging out with the children playing games with them. The kids are very competitive so it's always a fun time and brings smiles to their faces and to mine.

CB Thank you for your time and good luck this summer in Beijing! 🍀