

ROWDY GAINES: A WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE

By Mark Muckenfuss

Check out the January issue of Swimming World Magazine and read all about Rowdy Gaines, past and present, in Emily Mason's "Still Kicking" column. In 1984, Rowdy won the 100 meter free at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Following is the story of Rowdy's Olympic triumph as it appeared in Swimming World back in September 1984:

Sentimental favorite Rowdy Gaines polished off the end of his individual career with gold, achieving what he has so many times failed to do in the past few years: coming back in a final heat with a time faster than in the morning prelims.

What looked like the end of a great American comeback story was tarnished, however, by a controversial start that left a bad taste in the mouths of many of the other competitors, particularly Australian Mark Stockwell, who won the silver, and American Mike Heath, who finished fourth.

After congratulating Gaines on his win, Heath, who was caught off balance on the start and was the last swimmer off the blocks, struck at the water with his fist and angrily left the pool. He reportedly said he could have gotten a better start at a novice meet.

The Australians filed a formal protest. Peter Evans, Stockwell's teammate, was furious. "You were robbed, mate," he told Stockwell as the medal winners walked to the awards presentation.

The complaint was that the start was too quick. The Australians said official Francisco Silvestri of Panama fired the starting gun before all the swimmers were set. Similar complaints had been made about Silvestri at both the 1982 World Championships and the 1983 Pan-American Games. FINA officials dismissed the protest.

U.S. coach Don Gambriel was also upset, filing a protest against Silvestri, but not the race itself. But no one was willing to question Gaines' victory, even indirectly.

"I don't want to take away anything from Rowdy," said Stockwell at an interview for the medal winners. "I mean, he's great. He's been around for a long time and he knows what to look out for. It just wasn't a fair start."

Gaines was first off the blocks. He used that lead to his advantage, holding it through the entire race to beat Stockwell, 49.80 to 50.24, and set an Olympic record. Gaines swam a 50.41 during prelims to qualify for the finals.

"My coach, Richard Quick, told me all day, 'Get down, (the official) is giving a quick start,' and so I did. I knew I got a good start. At first I had no idea where I was (in relation to the field). But I knew I was ahead at the 50,

and I could feel Mark starting to creep up on me. At the last 25 meters, I thought, 'I can't stop now, this is my last 25 ever.'

It was the case of four years of work coming down to less than a minute's worth of swimming. The 100 freestyle gold Gaines felt was a sure thing in 1980, before the U.S. boycott, was struggle and a frightening uncertainty this time. "I was scared," he said. "I was just like this (showing a trembling hand) on the blocks."

That emotional intensity unleashed itself with the final touch and a look at the scoreboard. Gaines exploded out of the water, his fist raised to the crowd sharing his victory. He cried. He pranced from one person to another in the post-event area, jumping into the air in excitement, hugging and kissing everyone in sight. "I'm 25 years old," he said, through sobs that him practically voiceless, "and I'm acting like a 10-year-old."

Some gold medal winners are stunned, speechless. "It hasn't sunk in," they say. Not Gaines. Not the 100 freestyler who spent the afternoon trying to relax by watching the "Newlywed Game" and Woody Woodpecker cartoons and talking with Tracy Caulkins ("She really relaxes me."). This gold medal was ready to sink in long before it was placed around his neck. And yet, as he said several months ago, "It's never a cakewalk being a 100 meter freestyler," particularly when you haven't swum your best time in four years and there are up-and-coming young sprinters hammering at the door.

"I'll tell you the truth. Today, I was preparing my loser's speech," he said. "I felt if I lost, I would come out and be gracious. I was going to say that I thought I had contributed to the sport and that I've got nothing to be ashamed of. It would hurt for the rest of my life. But I would have said it was worth it."

Only a year ago, he said, that attitude would have been impossible for him. He had swum poorly at the Pan-American Games in Caracas and was ready to hang up his goggles. His 200 freestyle time had sent him to his hotel room for three hours of crying and a desperate desire to get out of the sport. Then came a talk with Don Gambril.

"I told him if it wasn't there in the 200 anymore, he still had the 100," Gambril said. If Gaines did well in the 100, it would set him up for three medals in the '84 Games, and that's just what happened.

"He realized that I needed to stick around for my own sense of sanity," Gaines said. "I think if I had quit, 20 years down the line I would have jumped out of the 20th floor, just from wondering if I could have made it or not. I felt in my heart that I needed to do this."

Gambril congratulated Gaines as he left the pool deck after the awards ceremony.

"He asked me if it was worth it," Gaines said. "I told him, yeah, it was worth it. I'd go through another four years for this feeling. There's so many of us who have been around for so long (since the 1980 boycott). You might get tired of hearing it, but we went through hell in '80. But it was worth it."