

1 EARLY DAYS

Lightning does strike and it struck for me when I was in grammar school and I must have been 14 and a half. The headmaster stood up in school in the morning and gave his normal announcements and said you will all be delighted to know that Neil Tasker has been selected to swim for Great Britain. I looked to the boys at my side and said 'Which one is Neil Tasker?', they said "That one there" and I thought he doesn't look any different to anyone else. If he can swim for Great Britain, I am absolutely sure I can and that was the spark that set me on my swimming career. I spent almost all my time on the beach and then when I joined Brighton swimming club I was extremely lucky because I had a fairly meteoric rise within the club in my first year and I quickly got a free pass to the pool and so my swimming was on the up from that moment onwards.

2 TRAINING

I swam an incredible 21 or 22 times a week, at least 3 times a day. I used to cycle to the pool in the morning. Then cycle up to school which was at the top of a huge hill. At lunchtime I would use my bus tickets and come down to the pool and have a session at lunchtime. Then get the bus back for afternoon and then straight after school I would either cycle straight back to the pool or if I went home then I would go to club in the evenings. I suffered a lot from sinusitis and asthma and that was a problem and I regularly went to the doctors and the hospital. And finally, when I was about 17 I had an operation on my sinuses. And it didn't do any good. And when I went back to the hospital the doctor said "Well" he said, "Either give up swimming or don't bother to come back." And I decided not to come back and I have never looked back from that moment onwards. Neil Tasker was a wonderful mentor, he taught me some techniques but as I quickly realised that he was a sprinter and that I was destined to be sort of middle long distance and his technique didn't agree with mine. And although I often tried to put what he told me into practice, old habits and what comes naturally always wins the day. But he was a wonderful encouragement especially when it got to the time of the Olympic games. I can't remember who it was but someone gave me a set on Indian clubs, and I have used these to this day. Basically swinging my arms, doing exercises, arm exercises with these clubs and that is the only thing I have ever done. When I think today of what the young people do with all of their swimming, they are doing their weight training and their gym, doing cycling and they've got their nutrition. It was just very, very ordinary and fairly poor. Times were hard in those days.

3 SELECTION

I finished 1959 as number two in Great Britain to Ian Black. I had an extremely good National Championships and sort of went into the new year full of hope and the International Trials were in the April. I can remember going to the trials and the ASA secretary slapped me on the back and said "Well we are all depending on you Mike, get out there and stay out there", meaning go with Ian Black who was so far ahead of the rest of us it was unbelievable. And I set off in the 440 as it was in those days with Ian at my side and I stuck with him for the first 4 lengths and then I died, I was absolutely exhausted, I came last. And I basically had blown my international career in one foul swoop. So that was a bitter disappointment. And I came back after the international trials pretty forlorn, dejected and miserable and deflated. And it was at that time that Neil did all the things I needed and he

proved to be a really great mentor. And he said to me "Mike don't worry there is only one date on the calendar that matters and that is July 9th". And was the date of the International Olympic trials in 1960. And he was just right and I focused on just getting fit for that and sure enough when it came to the Olympic trials I managed to get in the 220 team with number three spot - I came 3rd.

4 THE GAMES

I don't have a huge number of memories of Rome I suppose because at the end of the day - disappointment. All I wanted to do was make the team, I never had any aspirations about winning gold medals really and sadly five days before the games before we went I managed to have a Lambretta accident. How it happened, what happened I honestly don't know but apparently I drove the Lambretta into the side of a lorry and sliced my kneecap. What I do remember is the headlines of course said 'Mike Read or swimmer hobbles to or limps to plane' That was one of the main memories, I had a nasty laceration on my kneecap when I got to Rome, and as a result of that I never reached the sort of pinnacle of fitness that was needed, and I ended up as the person who ended up as the reserve in the 4 x 220 team. I had my first coaching when I was at the Olympics which was good and interesting but when you get to that level of things it's not the time to start changing your stroke. Your stroke is actually pretty fixed by then. There was lots of hints but it was much more having someone that cared for you, I think that is the important thing and this is what worries me with young people today they go to the clubs they get flogged to death and then they lose interest. I was very lucky because I'd started swimming late, I achieved an ambition - I made the Olympic games and I was actually still enjoying it and it was fun. I suppose I was lazy as well, I wish I'd done better but it was nice to have people that actually took an interest and wanted you to do better. For me, up until then it had just been competition and I still thrive on competition I still love it.

5 FUNDING

You forget these were 1960's and before, was the time of the true amateurs, I've always been an amateur. I received 10 shillings a day for 21 days while I was out in Rome and that was a king's ransom. When I came back from the Olympics, I still did a lot of competition and I would flog myself to death for 95% of it. Then I started to ease up on the last 20 yards and I'd get beaten. And this went on for about a year so I must have been pretty down about it and then slowly things started to change and I started to do longer distances and I started winning again. And I started to moving up into the half miles and the one miles and the pier to piers, and I started enjoying swimming again and it was really from that moment onwards that my career actually took off. In 1968 I did a very good Lake Windermere swim, I think I was 2nd that year to Van Schneidel who won it for Holland. And I can remember the secretary coming up to me afterwards and saying good swim Mike you really ought to think about doing the Channel and I got back to Scotland in 68 gone home and it's funny how things niggled at you. You think can I, can't I, should I, shouldn't I, where would I find the money and things. And as a result of that I went to my employer - who was ICI, Scottish Agricultural Industries which was a subsidiary of ICI and I asked them if they would sponsor a swim and bless their hearts they said yes they would and so the money side of my first Channel swim was sorted out. And then the question was ok that's all very well but the Channel's down in Dover and I'm up in Edinburgh and I went to British Airways and I said can you help me and they very kindly gave me an open ticket, which meant that at a

moments notice they would stick me on a plane and get me down to London. So those 2 problems were overcome and I duly did my first Channel swim.

6 CHANNEL SWIMMING

When you think about it a Channel swim is going to last about 15 hours, I stroke about 60 strokes a minute. So 60 arm strokes like this is 3600 an hour, which is about 50,000 over 15 hours. And then when you say to yourself your legs are moving 2, 3 or 4 kicks to an arm stroke then you begin to understand that's a hundred thousand, 200 thousand slappings around the leg, so at that point grease is important. For me I covered myself from head to foot in Vaseline and lanoline and I wasn't proud at all to do it. And also it's so mucky and so difficult to get off afterwards. When you come out the sea and you are frozen cold it's very rare that there are nice hot showers and if there are hot showers there is no soap, or something like that, life never runs simply. So most of the events you keep grease down to a minimum but for the Channel – who cares! The tide is terribly important this is why when you set out on a channel swim, when you first book your channel swim you need to be booking them 2 or 3 years ahead now you are given a window, let's say it might be the 17th to the 23rd, or 24th August. Now that window serves two purposes, one it's at the bottom of the neap tides, and two hopefully you are going to get some good weather in that time because you want it as calm as possible. And if the calmness can combine with the bottom of the neap tides then that's good. Neap tides are weak tides a week later the tides are spring tides and they are strong tides and why does it matter? It matters because if you look at a map the tides are going 6 hours up to London flooding up and 6 hours ebbing back. So you actually going from a to b, you are really going 12 miles that way, 12 miles that way, 12 miles that way on a neap tide. If you go on the spring tides you are going 24 miles down, 24 miles back and then of course the tricky bit comes when you get to the cape in France and the current is hitting it and pushing you back out again, and at 4 knots it's pushing you out further and faster than you can swim and you know as I will show you on the map later you can easily go back to Calais. It's not easy. The king of the channel is the person who has swum the channel more times than anybody else, as verified and authenticated by the channel swimming association and that's me. And I got that record in 1979. There are many things I would do differently but it's been a wonderful time, it's had its ups, it's had its downs there are many disappointments and failures are all part of character building all I would say is yes I would do it all again but given the chance I would do it better. Most definitely.