

Break Silver

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Amanda Beard has swam in the Olympics four times, dissed Michael Phelps, and been tattooed on *LA Ink*. Now back from Beijing, she's ready to dive in to life outside of the pool. By Jennifer Goldstein

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ichael Phelps is boring. Sure, he's one of the greatest swimmers ever, but where's his personality? His ego? His edge? In the interviews after the Olympics, all he could do was stick to the script: He thanked his team. He thanked his mom. He was humble. He was gracious. He was mind-numbingly dull.

Luckily, USA Swimming has Amanda Beard, a more interesting (and better-looking) athlete. The 27-year-old swimmer's Beijing Olympics didn't go as well as Phelps' (more on that later), but she seemed to be having more fun. In fact, the rumor in Beijing was that she had hooked up with Phelps after his win. It didn't happen, and to set the record straight, she joked to a Tucson, AZ radio show: "Eww, that's so nasty! ... Come on, I have really good taste."

USA Swimming would probably have preferred if she politely denied the relationship but anyone who knows Beard, knows she'll do anything for a laugh—and she doesn't like to follow the rules.

Beard grew up in Irvine, CA, and got her start in the pool when she was just 4. She was a strong swimmer, but she was horrendous at the breaststroke. So her coaches forced her to work on the stroke, until one day, she says, "It just blossomed." At 12, she became a breaststroker. When she was 13, she won a U.S. national title in the 100-meter breaststroke and medaled at the Pan-Pacific Championships. At 14, she joined the U.S. National team and began training for the 1996 Olympics.

Fourteen isn't young to excel in sports like gymnastics and diving, where a tiny frame and extreme flexibility help you. But swimming is different. You need height, a muscular chest, long arms, and a lot of power. In 1996, at 5 foot 3 inch and 92 pounds, Beard didn't look anything like an Olympic swimmer. But she made the team and went on to win silver medals in the 100- and 200-meter breaststroke. On the medal stand, with her gangly frame and a smile that was almost too big for her face, she held a teddy bear as she accepted her medals. Most people thought she brought the bear along because she was sweet and shy, but Beard says the incident was "kind of a joke." "My sisters were messing around with me, and they said, 'We dare you to take that out to the blocks with you.' And I was like, 'I totally will.'"

She should be glad she accepted their dare; that teddy bear cemented Beard in American's minds as the adorable face of the Olympics. But as cute as she was, Beard wasn't exactly an all-American sweetheart. Less than three years after her Olympic debut, at 17, she was in the tattoo shop to get her first tattoo—not something you could picture an Olympic darling like Mary Lou Retton doing. "I got the zodiac sign for Scorpio on the back of my neck," she says. "I was underage, so I had to use my sister's ID, and she's a Pisces. Luckily, they didn't check it very carefully."

With her tattoo, her silver medals, and an Olympic gold she had won in a relay, Beard continued swimming throughout high school and struggled to adjust her stroke as she shot up five inches in height. She was ranked only sixth in the country in the breaststroke when she made the Olympic team in 2000,

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so no one really expected her to win a medal. But Beard earned a bronze in the 200-meter breaststroke in Sydney. “That Olympics was a little bit different for me,” she says. “I was still a teenager, but I was starting to think, You know, I could maybe make a career of this.”

She went off to the University of Arizona, where she won an individual NCAA Division I championship in 2001. Then, at the 2003 World Championships in Barcelona, she broke the world record for the 200-meter breaststroke and was thrust back into the spotlight.

The swimmer America was reintroduced to in 2003 was very different from the gawky 14-year-old with the teddy bear they'd awwed over seven years before. She'd grown into her huge smile, and some curves had appeared on her 5 foot 8 inch' frame. With her full lips, blue eyes, and high forehead, more than a few people commented on her resemblance to another bad girl, Angelina Jolie.

Beard made the most of her newfound sex-symbol status, posing for a revealing spread in *FHM* magazine that rankled USA Swimming. “After that, I had a lot of people hating,” Beard remembers. “They were saying, ‘Oh, you’re a woman and you’re an athlete and you should be holding yourself to higher standards.’ But I didn’t see a problem with it at all. It’s not like I was forcing people to buy the magazine.”

But many people did. And with millions of Americans watching (including more than a few men who had probably never seen a swim race before), Beard swam her way onto the 2004 Olympic team and headed off to Athens to compete. With four Olympic medals to her name, she didn’t have to prove anything. But she says she really wanted to win gold. “I was just like, Gosh, I know I can do this. I am at the best physical shape that I could possibly be, and I’m sitting here thinking, Why can I not bring home a gold medal in this event?” She put a lot of pressure on herself in the weeks leading up to the 2004 Olympics, and it paid off. She won gold in her signature event, the 200-meter breaststroke, and she picked up two more silver medals in the relays. “It was this huge relief,” she says. And she and the other swimmers celebrated accordingly.

“Everyone had been cooped up, stressed out of their minds for the last year, and people went crazy. I think they gave us a curfew of, like, 6 a.m. because they basically just wanted to make sure we were still alive in the mornings,” she says, laughing. “We have a really dull sport, where we stare at the bottom of the pool So when we get to go out and, uh, socialize, we’re pretty crazy. Swimmers party hard, probably harder than any other sport.”

The fun continued after the Olympics, too. “After I got the gold, it was like, okay, now I can continue with my life,” she says. She picked up a few new hobbies, including snowboarding, surfing, and riding street bikes. She also picked up more tattoos. “Oh man, I don’t remember most of them. There’s a star on the back of my calf that means nothing—it’s just swirly colors. I have three stars on my lower back, they have the letters A, T, and L in them, which stands for Amanda and Taryn and Leah, my sisters. I also have the name Ray tattooed on my leg. It’s my middle

name, my dad’s middle name, and my grandpa’s name.”

Most of that ink was on display in 2007 when Beard did a photo shoot for *Playboy*—something that annoyed USA Swimming once again. Executive Director Chuck Wielgus said that he thought the spread wasn’t an “appropriate portrayal of our sport.” But Beard disagrees. “Swimming only gets recognition once every four years, when the Olympics come around. For me to get swimming out there in any way that I can, even if it happens to be *Playboy*... I don’t think it’s such a bad thing.” Even if she was surprised by the negative response, she wasn’t bothered. “I get a crackup out of pissing other people off,” she says, laughing. “I kind of got a kick out of it.”

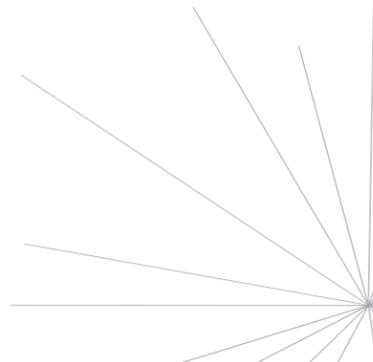
It’s obvious Beard likes being in the spotlight almost as much as she likes swimming. After the *Playboy* spread, she continued doing television reporting gigs for shows like *The Best Damn Sports Show Ever*. She also became a spokeswoman for GoDaddy.com, did some promotional work for the charity WildAid, and picked up another tattoo. “It takes up the whole back of my calf. It’s three big ol’ snowflakes kind of falling down my leg. I got that done by Hannah on *LA Ink*.”

Although she continued to train regularly, Beard was far from anyone’s mind early this year when swimmers began gearing up for the 2008 Olympics. So it was a surprise to everyone when she switched coaches two months before the trials and declared that she was training to make the Olympic team. “I didn’t feel like I had much to prove to anybody, but I wanted to swim purely for the fun and enjoyment,” she says of the decision.

In early July, Beard swam in the Olympic trials and surprised everyone once again by making the team with a second-place finish in the 200-meter breaststroke. Later that month, her fellow swimmers elected her to be a team captain. “I was really proud they gave me the honor,” she says. “But it wasn’t easy. When you are captain, you kind of have to be the bitch. You have to make sure everyone’s keeping in line. So it’s kind of tough.”

Beard tried to stay focused on her own swimming, but despite all her preparation, she didn’t race well in Beijing. Her 200-meter breaststroke was more than 2 seconds slower than the time she posted in trials, and she didn’t make it to the semifinals. “I was surprised to even be there. I felt like I prepared myself as best as possible, but I didn’t have it in me at that time and that moment,” she says of her race. “After my swim, I cried and was bummed out. But I had to put on a brave face because I had to be there to support the team and just enjoy watching the swimming.”

So she sat in the stands, cheered on her teammates, and watched, just like the rest of us back home, as Phelps won his races. But, always the rebel, she managed to create a little controversy before she left Beijing. “In China, they really trip out on a girl walking around with a tattoo. So I would go outside with shorts on and people would stop and stare at me,” she says, laughing. “I just want to be who I am, and I’m not just your typical all-American swimmer-type of girl.” ■



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