

HILEVEL PROFILE: JOHN FLANAGAN

By Brad Yates

John Flanagan is a legend as a distance swimmer. He sets the standard for confidence and discipline. He trains and races with a concrete focus that has helped him succeed at every level — from age-group to Punahou School to Auburn University to local, national and international competition. That success has not changed him, though. He competes to satisfy an innate love of racing — a drive to compete that has not diminished over time. He simply loves to race.

Recently, he received a huge gift: the opportunity to make a comeback, to be up for a serious challenge, and to complete his career.

THE COMEBACK

Having retired from international competition in 2001, Flanagan was pulled back in when the International Olympic Committee approved the open-water 10K event for the 2008 Games in Beijing. He currently is training 5 to 6 hours a day, pushing all of his limits.

JF “I’m completely immersed in preparing for the Olympic Trials on October 21st. This commitment involves my wife, Rae, and our young daughter, Kai. We decided as a family that I would come back.”

THE CHALLENGE

At 32, Flanagan could be considered past his prime. But he doesn’t consider his age a major factor. In a recent meet, he finished third, only seconds behind the leader, to qualify for the Olympic Trials. In the Trials, he will need to finish in the top two to move on to the World Championships. Once there, he must finish in the top 10 to become an Olympian.

JF “I feel very fit and ready to compete. I’m right where I want to be. I have a legitimate shot at reaching the highest level of competitive swimming.”

THE COMPLETION

The stage is set. Flanagan has a chance to become an Olympic athlete.

JF “I’m very grateful for this opportunity. This is a dream come true! Win or lose, make the team and continue on or come up short and be done. I will accept the results and move on.”

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Swimming a 10K demands a special focus. The open-water course is made up of a series of legs that connect point A to point B. To compete at this elite level, a heightened sense of awareness is needed, one that merges the physical with the mental. This state of mind or “natural knowing” underlies athletic success. To make it happen, Flanagan will race with calm resolve to place first or second. That’s all!

JF “I agree, as a coach, teacher and athlete, I work at living the process described here and making it fun. I’m proud to represent Hawaii, myself and my family at this prestigious event. A special thanks to all of the people that have given me so much support throughout my career.”



THAT WAS THEN & THIS IS NOW

Flanagan swam in the Olympic Trials October 21st and finished eighth. Not the results he wanted, but he is grateful.

JF “I’m stoked that my training paid off. I was able to give my best effort. My age was not a factor. It feels good to know that I have the strength and endurance to win that race.”

THE RACE IN REVIEW

The top finisher followed a strategy that worked. He hung behind the pack and took over the race in the last five minutes. Flanagan’s strategy was to stay with the pack and break loose at the end. Unfortunately, being in the pack meant the contest was too often about contact rather than swimming. Contact that was at times intentional. Contact that proved to be as intense as water-polo or rugby!

JF “The contact was by far the biggest drain on my energy. The pounding combined with the need to be hyper-alert, proved to be more exhausting than the actual pace of the race. Each open-water race is unique and this race might have just been the most challenging I have done. I did my best to keep my focus, follow my race plan, and stay positive.”

THE VICTORY

Flanagan embraced his comeback.

JF “At times in my career I have been disappointed in my ability to produce the results I wanted. Not this time. I feel good knowing that I was up for the challenge of competing at this level. The win for me is that I was able to race from start to finish. I was present and focused throughout. I never backed down or

gave less than my best. I feel complete ... not done ... just ready for the next challenge. More than anything, I want to move forward in my life, to learn from my efforts and build an active life that includes and nurtures my family.”

THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Flanagan’s performance throughout his Olympic quest was excellent; a credit to his integrity, skills, fitness and focus.

Integrity In his workouts, races and life, the truth of his commitment is demonstrated through his actions. In a word, he is solid. He works hard and enjoys the process.

SKILLS: As they say in the South, the boy can flat out motor. The power of his stroke seems to come from his soul. He swims for the right reasons, he loves to compete and he loves the sport.

FITNESS: He beat back father time by training 6 to 7 hours a day ... without getting injured or burning out.

FOCUS: Mental toughness only partially speaks to the issue of getting kicked in the head and not losing sight of his goal. Make no mistake, he has mastered the inner-skills of breathing, self-soothing, visualization and letting go.

The legend is confirmed! John Flanagan is a world-class athlete and person.

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