

NO HOLDS BARRED



BY SARAH DOYLE LACAMOIRE

WHEN 14-YEAR-OLD MARK BARR woke up one morning with an orange-sized lump on his right shin, he knew something was terribly wrong. Osteosarcoma – otherwise known as bone cancer – had invaded the young athlete’s tibia. Weeks later, the leg was gone.

Barr’s first foray into sports came at the age of four, when his excitement for swimming convinced a local coach to let him take lessons a year before the age minimum would allow. His first swim meet took place at age five, and by the time he was 10, Barr had set a National Reportable Times record for the 200-meter individual medley, ranking eighth in the nation in his age class.

While an interest in baseball and soccer diverted his attention from swimming during his preteen years, Barr would eventually return to his aquatic roots.

“I’ve always been very athletic and competitive,” he says. “So when I lost my leg, swimming seemed like a great way to become active again.”

Cancer had severely reduced his muscle mass and left him incredibly weak, but two months after his chemotherapy ended, Barr was back in the pool. While his training as a young swimmer had taught him excellent stroke technique, he didn’t have the strength to finish one lap without running out of breath.

“I had to use a buoy to stay afloat,” remembers Barr. “It was very difficult.” But his new disability wasn’t the only thing on his mind. Like a typical teenager, he was very self-conscious. “At first, I didn’t know if I should wear my [prosthetic] leg from the locker room to the pool. I felt very awkward. Eventually, I just said ‘screw it’ and hopped my way around.”

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Barr went on to join the varsity swim team at Davis High School, and in 2003 he participated in his first Paralympic meet at the University of Minnesota. Confident in his abilities, Barr was surprised and relieved to see how competitive his fellow swimmers were. “That made me really happy,” he says. “It was great to see people just like me, and I learned a great deal from watching more experienced swimmers move in and out of the pool.”

At the Athens Paralympic Games in 2004, Barr scored an American record in the 100-meter butterfly and was one place away from receiving a medal. Participation in the 2006 World



(Above) Mark Barr at the Cal Poly Rec. Center

Championships in South Africa earned him a silver medal in the 100-meter butterfly. Now it’s on to the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games.

“I am incredibly excited,” he says. “The opening ceremony is my favorite part of the games. It’s a huge honor to represent your country – especially in front of 50,000 people.”

In the meantime, Barr trains 22 hours a week as part of Cal Poly’s swim team, while balancing his studies as a nutrition science major. He hopes to become a nurse practitioner or physician’s assistant.

“Swimming has really helped me lead a more normal life and made me mature much faster,” says Barr. “It’s the best thing that has ever happened to me.” □