

Coach reflects on Phelps' golden summer

BY MARK WHICKER

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ANN ARBOR, Mich. - (KRT) - Michael Phelps went back into the water Aug. 30. You would, too. The phone never rings there.

He won six gold medals in Athens but now is thrust into a race with no wall and no clock.

He is on a Disney-sponsored tour right now, in fact, with Lenny Krayzelburg and Ian Crocker, a 12-day whirl that ends in Anaheim, Calif., on Oct. 5. At the Olympics he talked eagerly of getting back to Baltimore and "being with my buddies," but when he got back two weeks ago he found 10,000 friends. It was called the "Phelps-tival," and Phelps found himself a prop for TV cameras and politicians.

"You know it's an election year when a Republican governor and a Democratic mayor show up in the same place," mused Bob Bowman the other morning. "Michael will go back there and relax, when all this is over."

Bowman is Phelps' coach. Eight years ago he was working at the North Baltimore Aquatic Club, training an Olympian or two.

"Michael was 11, already very special, and he just sort of got shuffled into my teaching group," Bowman said.

Suddenly Bowman was a celebrity, willing to entertain and inform the Olympic media while Phelps was squeezing 17 races into seven days. During all this, he became the head coach at the University of Michigan, and his office is right there on deck level at the Natatorium. He expects the Wolverines to be somewhere in the top five at the NCAA meet next year. Higher, in the future.

"I don't have to tell any of our recruits that I coached Michael," Bowman said, beaming. "They ask me."

That morning, Phelps worked out hard at 6 a.m. before rejoining the tour. Absurdly, there is the 2004 World Championships, in Indianapolis, for which to prepare. Bowman says Phelps will swim five events there, but don't expect any world records. That's in early October. Then, finally, Phelps can come up for air.

"I think I'm still going," Bowman said, moving his hand diagonally upward. "I don't know what would happen if I stopped. I know it's difficult for Michael, but he just has a way of taking care of what he has to take care of."

Most Olympic swim champs go back underwater in the three years between Games. Many of them retire. Phelps, of course, is different. Bowman says Phelps is readily recognized on campus these days, where he will work as a volunteer assistant while he trains. And Phelps does have something for which to train.

"I'm not sure which events he'll be doing in 2008," Bowman said. "Maybe some different ones. Maybe some longer ones. I do know he'll be swimming the 200 freestyle. And, if all goes well, I expect he'll be ready to win it."

The 200 freestyle gold medal is the only thing Phelps left in Athens. It was also the event that fascinated him the most, because it wasn't his specialty. It instead belonged to Ian Thorpe of Australia, who will only be 25 when he gets to Beijing.

Thorpe won the 200, but Phelps was a strong third.

"I think it was his best race in Athens," Bowman said flatly. "There was no way he was going to win, although I wasn't going to tell him that."

The 200 also was the only time Bowman and Phelps disagreed, even faintly, on what events he would swim.

Aaron Peirsol had just beaten Phelps in the 200 backstroke at the Olympic Trials. Coach and swimmer agreed there wasn't room on the Olympic program to try to beat Peirsol in Athens.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't do the 200 free," Bowman said.

"No way," Phelps replied.

"OK."

Bowman was in the midst of a year of coaching tartly. Phelps was being shuttled around the nation - and world - by his various sponsors. On every trip, Bowman insisted that each sponsor find a place for Phelps to train and fly his training partners in with him. Phelps never missed a workout.

"All that traveling did us good," Bowman said. "When we arrived in Athens, Michael was swimming as if he hadn't traveled at all. He was far ahead of everyone else."

And then he won the 400 individual medley on the very first night. He did it routinely but he also exulted, far out of proportion, it seemed. But he knew his next two events - the 4x100 freestyle relay, over which he did not have full control, and the 200 free - were loseable. Imagine the world's mockery if Phelps had begun the Olympics 0 for 3.

But he didn't, of course, and in fact he relaxed noticeably after the 200 and was untouchable thereafter.

"It was grueling for Michael, but he never snapped," Bowman said. "He's got great ability and a great work ethic and he's seen how he can combine those with the right technique to swim fast."

"You have to remember what he's done all his career. He beat everybody at 11, at 12, at 13, all his life. In his mind there was no reason to think he wouldn't beat everybody again. I could tell he was particularly excited before his first race there. But, no, he doesn't have doubts."

Then comes 2005, challenging for Bowman, recharging for Phelps. "We'll be doing well if we can get Michael matching this year's times next year," the coach said. "Because there might be another Michael out there, swimming right now, that we don't even know."

Bowman just hopes to find that young man and have him swimming for Michigan.

Phelps just hopes to reflect on his excellent Olympic adventure.

Assuming it ever ends.