

U.S. Olympic Team Trials - Swimming

Wednesday, June 16, 2021

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

CHI Health Center

Alex Walsh

200 Meter Individual Medley

Zach Harting

200 Meter Butterfly

Media Conference



U.S. OLYMPIC TEAM TRIALS



year has been like for you guys?

ALEX WALSH: This year, coming in as a freshman, it was a lot different than when I had committed, what I envisioned. Obviously the social limitations were super high on the athletes at Virginia, and that was not what I expected or wanted for my first year, but I think the good thing is our team became so close, especially my first year class.

Those girls and boys are my right or die's. I literally could not even imagine being here without them. You know, this is kind of cheesy but before semis last night, I was super nervous, like freaking out in my room, and I saw all the UVA girls posting about the finals lineup and how me and Kate were swimming the 200 IM, and I thought of Alexis Wenger and Lexi Cuomo and like all these girls who worked so hard throughout the season and performed so well at NCAAs, and I was like, if I'm not going to do it for myself, I'm going to do it for them and I'm going to do it for my whole UVA team, and that shows the bond that we were able to cultivate this year, and obviously I'm excited for the next NCAA season as well.

Q. Zach, they talk about clutch performances, people being able to perform how they normally would under pressure, and it seems like you were able to execute your race plan just as you always do even though it was the finals. You have been in World Champ finals and the Trials finals before. Can you take me through that race and how you managed that stress and pressure and emotion?

ZACH HARTING: I did absolutely terrible managing the stress. I wasn't eating as much as I normally would. I wasn't hungry, the appetite wasn't there, and I was just trying to force myself to eat, that way my body would be prepared when the time came. I knew what I was here to do, and that I was here to win, and I wanted to win and sit on the lane line. That was my plan.

My coach told me, you've done this a thousand times, you've trained for this, you're ready, you're physically ready. You're not anxious or nervous. You're excited to race, and it's really easy to get those two mixed up. But physiologically they do the same thing to your body, so it's a mind set thing. And once I made the switch that I'm not

THE MODERATOR: At the end of the table this evening we have our newest Olympian in the Men's 200 Meter Fly, Zach Harting, and sitting to my left is Alex Walsh, the newest Olympian in the 200 Meter IM.

Q. Alex, can you talk about your UVA teammates and with Kate next to you and Paige qualifying yesterday or the day before, whenever?

ALEX WALSH: I'm really grateful to have Kate Douglass swimming next to me tonight, and she swam next to me in the semifinals last night. We didn't train that much together throughout the NCAA season, but leading up to Trials I told Todd, our head coach, that I wanted to start doing more 200 IM practices with Kate, so definitely leading up the past six or seven weeks we have been racing next to each other, so having her there to pace was an accepts of comfort for me in the ready room, which obviously like the stress in that room can be can be really high.

I'm really happy to have her there and really happy we went one-two. And for Paige, I trained with her most of the NCAA season, and I have never seen someone who has her kind of work ethic. She showed me what it would take to be Olympic contender, and I would show up every day and try as hard as possible to stay with her on sets, but she would mostly beat me a lot.

Yeah, she is someone who I look up to a lot, especially since I'm a freshman and she is a senior, and I couldn't be happier that she is on the Olympic Team as well.

Q. Alex, has it started to sink in how amazing this year has been for Virginia? The NCAA Championships couldn't have gone much better for you guys. And here you guys are, one after the other making the team. Can you touch on emotionally what this whole

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

nervous, I'm excited to race, and especially when I knew what I was there to do, and then having been here in this situation before, obviously being in lane 4 versus lane 7 it's a little bit different but being able to pull from World's finals, and going through semifinals a couple of other times was huge to pull from. Yeah, tried to do that and then just get the job done.

Q. Alex, what are the next two days going to be like for you, as you have that relief off your shoulders but Gretchen is going into the 100 Free, and that's going to be a real tough event, especially tomorrow night just to get into the final. So what's that going to be like for you to experience that with her, just like she was at the pool there with you tonight?

ALEX WALSH: Thank you for that question. I'm so excited for Gretchen. She is swimming tomorrow, and she should not have been up so late watching me. She should have been home resting, and she was here, and she was like, what do you need? Do you need water? Let me like -- let me distract you, let me talk to you. So over the next two days my goal is to be her personal assistant, and I'm going to do everything I can to help ease her nerves.

I will literally give her a back massage, I don't care, I will literally do anything she wants because I know how hard I've worked, but I know how hard she's worked, too. Even though we haven't been together this year, we obviously are still super close. I just want to help her make her dreams a reality, just like she helped me make mine.

Q. (No microphone.)

ALEX WALSH: I don't know yet. I scratched the 200 Backstroke tomorrow. I don't know about anything else.

Q. This is a question for both of you. Can you describe what it's like to sit up here knowing you are going to Tokyo when there was still chatter one month ago, two months ago, that the Olympics might not happen?

ZACH HARTING: Not really, I guess. It's still kind of surreal. Yeah, it says Olympian underneath my name and the whole first question you had for her, I was like, whoa! Obviously this has been a difficult year I think for everybody. A lot of people had a lot of outside the pool -- no pool access, struggles they had to overcome. So I think everybody at the meet, just baseline is just grateful to be here and putting up with the mask stuff and just doing whatever it takes to make this meet happen.

I commend everybody for that. It's just an overwhelming sense of gratitude, which I think goes a long way in our

sport, especially as unforgiving as it can be. And then just to know that we made it is -- we worked our whole lives for this. I started swimming at 7, and I'm 23. Two-thirds of my life has been dedicated and gearing towards getting the Olympic ring tattoo, and going to the Olympics, and now it's happening. It's hard to describe that. It's a dream come true, dream to a goal to come true.

ALEX WALSH: I agree. I think obviously when COVID was at it's peak and people were like, we don't even know if the Olympics are going to happen and everything got postponed, that was a really stressful time for myself and I can only imagine like for everyone else. Obviously rumors swirling, I tried to honestly block that out of my head because if the Olympics were going to happen, a different meet was going to happen, the same goal was just to, like, go a best time or, you know, improve on your national ranking or your world ranking.

So all the rumors, yeah, I kind of just tried to block 'em out. With the support of my coaches definitely they were like, you know, trying to keep that out -- even if the Olympics wasn't going to happen this year, which I'm so grateful that it is, there are still Olympics three years from now, and obviously the goal is still the same, which is to make that again so, yeah.

ZACH HARTING: Bueller, Bueller.

Q. Zach, congratulations. You talked about sitting on the lane line and soaking in the whole atmosphere after you qualified, and sometimes you do crazy things before you race. What does it mean to you to be an entertainer in this sport and to put on a show?

ZACH HARTING: Yeah, I think back to when I was growing up and you go to a local hockey game or a local football game or any football game really, and you are there as a fan and you are there to be entertained. It's a night out, and it's a fun thing. I think swimming doesn't -- not everybody takes it as -- that role as seriously. I always have been a goof ball, and I kind of try to be true to that. I like to have fun. I hate when I don't have fun.

As soon as I graduated, I told my coach, look, if it's not fun at practice, I'm leaving and there has only been one or two times when it wasn't fun, because I was sick, and it's not productive, then like, let's get out of here. But I like to have fun. I like to make other people have fun, and I like to make other people laugh, which they laughed in my interview on deck, which I thought was kinda good, because they were laughing.

I think everyone needs to laugh, especially now with all this serious stuff people are dealing with. You guys are here

for a show, so we might as well give it to you.

Q. Alex, you and Gretchen swam together for a long time. How was it different this year with you guys being apart? How did you support each other and push each other even though you weren't in the same place, and how did your relationship evolve?

ALEX WALSH: Yeah, so, we obviously weren't training partners anymore, but that doesn't mean that we still weren't -- I was obviously SnapChating every single day, FaceTimes every single week. I remember like my transition to UVA was not the easiest because I was like, wow, college training is really hard, and I wasn't expecting that. I was expecting it but nothing can really prepare you for that. So I would call her and I was like, you won't believe this 4 IM set I did, and she was like, wow!

And I knew whatever she was doing because I had already done six years of that, but, yeah, whenever she was feeling upset she would call me and, like, I would work it out with her. Even though we weren't there next to each other, whatever we were going through the ups and downs of trying to perform here at Olympic Trials, we would share that with each other. It's still obviously like -- when she got here, like her and my old Coach Doug, they showed up to the pool and I immediately ran into Doug's arms and started sobbing, because I missed them so much, and of that just goes to show that even though I am not with them all the time, they are still the most important part that this journey has been.

Q. Zach, you said you didn't do a good job of handling your emotions in the day, but you're still here as an Olympian, so you obviously had to fall back on something. What mental and physical training helped you get on the Olympic Team?

ZACH HARTING: I tried to distract myself and -- I'm really honest when people are like, you doing good, and I'm like, no, I'm struggling, my gut is in a ball, and my coaches were there, they talked me through it, like look, dude, you're ready. We had a guy show up today, and he doesn't swim until later this week so he just got here today and he was like, said, look, dude, you have done this a thousand times, a million times, what's one more?

And I was like, you're right, dude. And when I left the team area to walk back for my race, it just, like, clicked, like "Eye of the Tiger" game mode, I'm like, I'm ready for this. Then a lot of those nerves that were in my gut just, like, vanished. My coaches walked me through it. They screwed my head on for me. When that's screwed on, then my body can do what it's trained to do. I owe it to them.

Q. Zach, you've been at World's, Pan Pacs, Trials, what's the craziest thing you have ever seen happen in the warm-up pool?

ZACH HARTING: Good question. Craziest thing. Can I think on that and get back to you? I want to give you the best answer I can. Give me like two minutes. It's a good one.

Q. Alex, you said that you asked specifically to start focusing on the 200 IM training group. What led you to that decision to ask to focus on that group?

ALEX WALSH: Yeah, so when I first got to UVA my primary coach was Blaire Bachman and Paige, she is her primary coach, so I was mainly in distance group, I would call it, and that was different for me. But I think it was a very good thing. I'm happy with how I performed here. I think the base I was able to build in my first freshman season is unbelievably strong and, you know, I just -- but I just got to a point where I was like I feel like I would be more productive if I try to get my speed back.

Really I wanted that speed because that's what makes me confident. The biggest thing leading up to Trials, Todd was like, it doesn't matter what you swim day-to-day at practice, obviously you have to put the work in but when you get to Trials you know that work is going to pay off and that's what matters.

And I was like, this is what's going to help me and make me confident. Obviously, I was doing the yardage that I needed to be doing, but I wanted to focus on more speed-based training and I think that really paid off.

ZACH HARTING: The craziest thing I've seen in warm-up is at Short Course World's, 2018 and the lack of etiquette. Nobody talks about it, and somebody should, there are seven different points -- I could write them down, maybe that's another thing, but anyways, we were in China and they were alternating which way you swam, so the odd lanes you would circle swim and the other lanes you would swim reverse. I'm like, that's fine, no problem with that.

The problem I have is you would think at that level if you're going into the wall, people would move out of the way for you. So you can flip, not necessarily the case I'm like dude, come on you don't stand in the middle of the wall, people pushing off right in front of you as you are about to go and going slow. If you're going to push off of somebody who is already going fast you should be going faster than them so I be don't push into your feet, or vice versa. I'm not going to push off in front and get run over. That's just me.

But the lack of etiquette was like, we are at World Championships, we can't figure out how to warm-up together, come on guys. It wasn't just one country; it was a handful, I was livid. I had five or six different points of things you should or shouldn't do when you are warming up, especially when it's super crowded.

We were blessed with having Wave I and Wave II split up, makes the meet smaller, makes the meet a lot more manageable, especially with the two different pools, if you time it right you can basically get in with nobody, which is awesome.

But, yeah, you have to swim differently. You have to be considerate of others, how fast you're going to go. If you're going to kick, give the opportunity to somebody, say, hey, I'm kicking, would anybody like to go? If no one says anything, all you. The lack of etiquette was what got me.

Q. With the pandemic going on, is there any concern that there are going to be too many people in the warm-up pool in Tokyo and that could lead to too-close-for-comfort situations?

ZACH HARTING: I would say at this point -- I will speak for me, I'm not going to speak for Alex. I just met her. I think we have been in -- we've gotten comfortable being in a large crowd, I'm vaccinated, so that provides a little bit of mental comfort there.

I'm not too worried about it. I guess the health officials are saying it's all good, and I didn't study medicine in college so I'll just let them figure that out. It will be fun. It will be fun. If not, we'll leave. That's my motto, but it will be fun so we'll stay.

Q. Zach, you've been on the team at World's with Nathan Adrian and with what went on tonight, that was probably his best chance of making the team. What did he provide from a leadership standpoint on that team, and what do you think would be missed if he doesn't qualify for this team?

ZACH HARTING: Yeah, so Nathan -- Nathan and Matt, I will group them together just because they are such rock-solid leaders. Me and Zane actually got to room with the two of them. They were the captains at Worlds and me and Zane got to live with them for that week. They were like, yeah, this is basically exactly what the Olympic Village is like. They had a plethora of knowledge. It was liked anytime you talked to them, they were super calm.

It was like, hey, what do you need? You could talk to them about your race, and they would talk to you about theirs. It

was just the leadership. They were kind of like the fathers of the team, and I'm not going to say they're not going to make it, because they're the staples of the US.

I don't know what would be missed. It's just -- they're a staple for us, and they're going to make it. That's what they do.

THE MODERATOR: Perfect, thank you all.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports