

U.S. Olympic Team Trials - Swimming

Sunday, June 20, 2021

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

CHI Health Center

Lindsay Mintenko

National Team Director

Women's Olympic Head

Coach Greg Meehan

Men's Olympic Head Coach

Dave Durden

Media Conference



U.S. OLYMPIC TEAM TRIALS



Q. To all of you, with so much conversation about the pandemic and how it was going to affect people, there were teenagers who would have not made it last year, and there were older swimmers who made it this year, whether it had to do with age or just an opportunity to come back to the sport as some of them did. I'm curious, now that you have had a full eight days to go through this, your assessments, maybe Lindsey starting with you, how the pandemic affected this team. And maybe there is no trend, maybe it's individual stories, but because this is such a big story, the missing year, how did it impact this team that you have going to Tokyo?

LINDSAY MINTENKO: I think these guys can -- they were in the daily grind of dealing with the athletes more than I was this past year. I think it definitely affected the team. It was interesting. We were trying to figure out stats and everybody was like, it's such a young team, a rookie team and there are a lot of rookies on the team, but only four more than in 2016.

We had 31 on our team in 2016, and we have 35 with the Open Water team this year. So it's young, yes, but it's the team we got the opportunity to pick this week. We're lucky that we are here, we are lucky that we get to do this. I'm so proud of this team, and so humbled to be sitting up here with these guys. We have been through a lot these past 18 months.

These guys have been by my side since like, I don't know, November of 18 or something. We're going to have a great -- we have a great plan going into Tokyo. We're really looking forward to it and really excited to work with a lot of the new people that we have not had the opportunity to work with before.

GREG MEEHAN: That was a great answer. I did want to wish all the Dad's out there Happy Father's Day. I think our focus as coaches and as Team USA is on what's in front of us. Of course you could look back and try and project how the team would have looked differently a year ago, but the reality is this is the group. These are the athletes that came here and got through this meet grinder of a competition.

THE MODERATOR: Joining us are Managing Director of the National Team, Lindsey Mintenko. Next to her, Greg Meehan, the Women's Olympic head coach, and then Dave Durden, the Men's Olympic head coach. During the awards ceremony, the team announced eight assistant coaches. We will also have the Open Water head coach, Catherine Kase, joining the team. That makes 11 coaches total, and a total of 53 athletes going to Tokyo for Team USA, three open water athletes and the 50 pool athletes who competed here this week.

Q. Greg, Simone said you are a serial planner because I asked her how her training would be different than it would have been with her dealing with the Overtraining Syndrome. What do you see for her over the next few weeks?

GREG MEEHAN: We're going to take it day by day. Much like everything in the last 18 months, you have a plan and then you adjust the plan, then that plan gets adjusted. So we will have -- I have a plan already in place, but we will take it day by day and make some adjustments. I think tonight was so representative of Simone's competitive spirit. She could have not had a coach for the last year and still done what she did tonight because in that moment she is just so tough. Her mental toughness and her competitive spirit is what makes her truly great.

That was amazing to see. She just willed herself to that. We're just going to take it day by day and make sure we are focusing on her health and at the same time trying to maximize performance.

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

It's what separates Team USA from the rest of the world is the difficulty of making this team. We couldn't be more excited about the athletes that are on Team USA. They proved themselves this week and looking forward to getting to training camp so we can be even better in Tokyo.

DAVE DURDEN: For me it's exciting to have a high-level meet where we have the best in our country racing each other. We get that a little bit at NCAA competitions in March, but as coaches we look at times to make effective changes with regard to what we are doing race plan wise, race strategy wise, changing up how we are coaching our athletes.

So the beauty about that now is we have eight days of information on that. We have waited a long time to get that information, but we have eight days of information and it helps us do our job better. I would probably guess every coach would tell you that. It's like, thank goodness we actually have information now so we can go forward and make our athletes better.

We have a data point now, so that's what I'm excited about. I now know, okay, this is what I need to tweak a little bit for Murph. This is what I need to tweak for (Andrew Seliskar). I get excited about the next eight weeks and how it's going to help me be a better coach.

Q. For all three of you, we have had emotions amongst competitors, jumping lane lines to celebrate and giving condolences, Chase and Jay putting their arm around Foster and the 800 Free when they all went down to a stunned 15 year old, and today with Abbey leaping over the lane line for Simone.

As coaches of Team USA, what does that mean to you to see that bond amongst competitors grow and how much does that help the team develop?

GREG MEEHAN: I think if you ask National Team alumni their experiences over the years competing for Team USA, it's not about the times; it's the experiences. These people love and care about each other. When you get out to that camp setting, spending that quality time together, getting to know the new folks, reengaging with people they haven't seen in -- you know, some of them are really close and they haven't seen each other in such a long time.

They're ecstatic just to be able to do that, knowing that's coming. For Abbey and Simone in the 50, that was a cool moment. Their schools are what, 30 miles apart, but they never see each other because of some of the restrictions through this year. There is that bond. They had their Stanford and Cal rivalry over the years, but as soon as they finished on that 50 they're on Team USA. Now we're

ready to go compete against the rest of the world.

I think you see that throughout the course of the meet. It's a genuine love and care for their teammates and the consoling of those that aren't moving on because they really care about them.

It's a meet full of emotions, no doubt.

DAVE DURDEN: It's been an emotional 14 months, and I think that carries over to this competition over these eight days. No one has had it perfect. It's just kind of the relief of doing what you have now worked five years to do and over the last 14 months in some tough circumstances.

Just that alone is kind of an outpouring of -- I mean, I'm tired. I didn't swim! I can only imagine what these swimmers are experiencing as they touch the wall.

Q. For both coaches. In 2016 there was a lot of discussion of the amount of team building that you did between Trials and Rio and how well it worked. You're doing it now with a very different group. You're doing it, as Dave alluded to, off of a fresh set of data point that you've been waiting to get. Is it going to be a more compressed or active team bonding building process now in the next several weeks than it was five years ago?

DAVE DURDEN: I forgot the question, our team building peace of it. I wish I had a good answer for you, Pat, on that. Part of the just really thinking about the personalities, taking a couple days to do that. I fly out a little later tomorrow on purpose, just to sit with -- there is a white board in a conference room that has all the names of these athletes up on it, and it's just sitting with that for a second, and understanding where these guys are coming from, where they are around the country, where they are in school, out of school, professionally, et cetera, and just honestly using the experience of the coaching staff that we have to gel this thing together.

It's not one person's solution to this, it's a coaching staff solution to this. I think we have the -- we definitely have the right staff on our side to help with that, and that's probably our first piece, is to lean into our staff and come up with a blueprint that's going to help our team gel and, again rate some performance in Tokyo.

GREG MEEHAN: I think there will be definitely some planned activities again, right? I think there's little things to do on a daily basis. There are bigger things that I have in mind. That camaraderie, as you go through a two-week camp, and it's great we are going to be in one location for two weeks, so that time in Hawaii is valuable. The first part

of it is spending time to get to know people a little bit better that they don't know well yet.

But then in the water, it not 50 different individual plans. It's different groups getting people training together that they don't necessarily get to train with very much, create some competitive environments in practice, and that just continues to build and build as we get closer and closer to departure to Tokyo.

So some of it you can put your finger on and some of it just -- it's the magic that happens at camp that you can't explain. Lindsay knows that better than Dave and I, for sure. She has been on Olympic Teams as an athlete. It's an amazing experience.

Q. Dave, what have you seen from Tom Shields the last couple of years, particularly with his journey with mental health and what not?

DAVE DURDEN: I don't know why Greg was laughing at that.

GREG MEEHAN: I saw 17-year-old Tom that I coached.

DAVE DURDEN: Yeah. Just an openness to be able to communicate where he is in a day-to-day setting. We had a really awesome conversation for about an hour out there, outside of the warm-up pool the day before the 100 Fly prelims. Tom has spent this past year, over this past year working in therapy. You understand how much he cares about how others perceive him. He is awesome, and I think it took a long time to get to that, but he's also been fantastic with the guys on our team. Being open with the guys on our team, helping the guys on our team through their own mental health struggles.

He has turned into a great mentor in this area for the athletes in our environment. I think that even assuming that role has been one that has helped him navigate and work through some things in his own mental health journey.

Q. Lindsay, as we know here this week, if you were vaccinated you could not be contact traced. As I understand it, maybe things have changed, once you go to Tokyo the early indications are that that doesn't matter if you've been vaccinated, you can still be contact traced, which of course is fascinating and scary and all of the above.

I'm curious, when you think ahead to Tokyo -- maybe the coaches would like to talk about this, too, either way -- how much are you concerned about something like that? What is your worst fear? Because, of course, this is unlike

anything that you or any of us have been through before?

LINDSAY MINTENKO: I do think they have modified their rules a bit. They are now taking into consideration vaccination status. They aren't going to automatically disqualify you if you are contact traced at this point. That was good news for us. I have a lot of concerns going into the next few weeks. The health and safety of our athletes is always our number one priority. It takes on a whole new meaning this year.

We have a strict protocol in place during training camp. That's why everybody who has been on this pool deck has been asked to be safe when they are on this pool deck. This virus is still here. It's out there, and we're going into an environment where we have no idea what the other population has been doing to protect themselves. That makes me nervous. We are going to do a lot to protect ourselves. But I'm nervous about what we're going to walk into.

Q. There will be no family and friends over there in Tokyo, and you have young team members, rookies on the team and there is not going to be a personal look to anyone in the stands, an embrace. How do you create a sense of family for these kids and the older ones as well?

LINDSAY MINTENKO: I think what Dave and Greg mentioned about how the team comes together. To me it's an absolutely fascinating process to watch. How teams who are competitors this week will be -- will have life-long friends by the time August 5th rolls around. That bond is super fascinating. We're going to have to rely on each other a lot more than we would have to if our loved ones were able to come to Tokyo to watch.

It's going to be -- it might even be stronger, the bond might be stronger, because we don't have that outlet. We're lucky we have a wonderful coaching staff and a wonderful group of leaders on our team that we get to take with us to Tokyo. We will support each other and, you know, as parents ourselves, we will do everything we can to support these athletes both in and out of the water.

Q. Greg, with the added events, more dicey for some to make the team, especially in relay events. I am wondering how you approached that? Brooke Forde had to wait five long days to be up there. First of all what does it mean to you to have seen her up there and make it. How did you handle that as a coach with such a unique but long and drawn out situation?

GREG MEEHAN: Yeah, this -- the added events didn't change the roster tremendously. I think there is only one

additional athlete. We just had fewer doubles than we have had historically. So just mapping that out and doing it for the men's roster as well, knowing that we may butt up against that 26 number, patiently watching things unfold and hoping for the best, obviously to pick up everybody.

It is difficult for those athletes, even those second-place finishers, where there wasn't two or three days in the meet.

You kind of assume it's going to happen, but still things need to fall the right way. So to finish that off tonight, getting some help from others, and having someone like Brooke on the team I think makes Team USA better. So we're grateful for that and excited for her.

It's just -- Dave alluded to this -- This is emotional. It's a stressful meet in so many ways. At the end of the day, you take a breath, and no matter how everyone got here, we're here, and now we're ready to move forward as we move into next week.

Q. (No microphone.)

GREG MEEHAN: I had her keep training. If she gets picked up, I don't want her having five days off. She came in, she was super diligent. We had conversations. I would fill her in, I wouldn't get too much into the weeds, but okay these are things that need to happen, and each day she knew she was getting closer, but there was still a lot of uncertainty. The training piece was the most important so we are not going home having not done anything for the last five days.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, all of you, for coming this week. We appreciate it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports