

SPORTING LEGENDS: MATT BIONDI

SPORT: SWIMMING

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1984 - 1992

As a child, Matt Biondi did not excite great expectations of a glittering sports career. Born in 1965 in California, he was above average at school, but neither of his parents pushed him towards athletics.



Matt enjoyed basketball and swimming, but it was only in his late teens that the Californian began to show international class. Then a period of rapid growth gave him a body that would be the envy of all top athletes.

He stands 6ft 7½ in tall, weighs 15st. and ripples with muscles around the chest and shoulders. His hands and size 14 feet are so big that his friends call them flippers!

Biondi was quickly noticed when he went to the University of California Berkeley at the age of 17 to study political economics. There he was first tested in top class swimming and in only his second year of competing seriously he proved good enough to make the finals of the US Olympic Trials.

Although he failed to make the team for the Los Angeles games in an individual event, his fourth place in the 100m freestyle at the trials got him into the 4x100m freestyle relay team that won the gold medal.

It spurred him to greater efforts. He won his first US National Outdoor Championship titles in 1985, in the 100m and 200m freestyle events. He dominated the Pan-Pacific Games in Tokyo, grabbing the 50m and 100m freestyle and leading the US relay teams to first place in both the 4x100m freestyle and medley. His swims on the anchor legs of 47.66s and 47.84s were the fastest of all time during the 1980s.

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Biondi's 50m Freestyle Gold at Seoul '88 was his all-time favourite performance.

He was named US Swimmer of the Year for the first time in 1985, when he returned to Japan to take gold medals in the 100m and 200m freestyle and silver in the 100m butterfly at the World Student Games in Kobe.

There he improved on his two titles of 1985 by winning an unprecedented triple crown of 50yds, 100yds and 200yds freestyle races. By the time he arrived in Madrid in August 1986 for the fifth World Championships, he held world records for all the top sprint events: the 50m, 100m, 50yds, 100yds and 200yds.

Biondi underlined his sprinting supremacy by turning in the greatest ever performance at a World Championships, despite it being the most competitive meet for many years. He won seven medals, the most by one swimmer. Three bronze medals and one silver were topped off by three golds - in the 100m freestyle, 4x100m freestyle relay, and 4x100 medley relay.

He took a rest in 1987, finishing his degree at UC-Berkeley. But he still found time to repeat his NCAA Triple Crown triumphs and add two further US titles and one at the Pan-Pacific Games in individual sprint races. More importantly he discovered the perfect preparation for the Seoul Olympics: swimming with dolphins in the Bahamas.

It worked. In Seoul in 1988 Biondi totally dominated the Olympic swimming. He took five golds, silver and a bronze, for a total of seven medals, and set four world records and seven Olympic records. It was the greatest swimming performance since Mark Spitz in 1972 in Munich, and by far the best individual display of the 1988 Olympics.

He also swam in the 1992 Olympics. In total he has won 11 Olympic medals (8 gold, 2 silver and a bronze medal) in three Olympics.

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

In many ways, Matt Biondi enjoyed the perfect swimming career. He won Gold Medals at every major championship and set countless World Records.

He possessed a great deal of humility, and never considered himself to a rival to Mark Spitz's legacy. But in reality, Biondi was, of course, far faster than Spitz was. Biondi was taller, stronger and more powerful.

Everyone will remember Biondi for his epic 7-medal haul at the 1988 Olympics, but he was also a great team member of the USA team.

He inspired less gifted swimmers to greater heights and all his compatriots benefitted from being around him. After giving his all at the 1992 Olympics, he knew that the sport of swimming had moved on, and made the wise decision to retire.

At 26 years of age, he could easily have gone on for another four years, but the great man knew that his time was up. To realise and accept this reality takes guts and the heart of a champion. Matt Biondi can be considered as one of the greatest swimmers ever to hit the water, in my opinion.



Matt Biondi was an absolute powerhouse in the water!