

THE MAGIC OF AN OPPORTUNITY

By Mike Gustafson

Imagine Doc Brown from *Back to the Future* came up to you and said, "Today you're going to set a world record. The only thing you have to do is race."

You'd swim that day, right? You'd be the first person in the pool, warming-up, excited and ready to swim? World records aren't broken every day. The opportunity is rare. You'd take advantage of it. Unfortunately, time travel and Doc Brown do not (yet) exist. Swimmers don't know what the future holds. Sometimes, we don't feel like swimming.

Instead of swimming that looming, ominous 1500m this afternoon, we'd rather go to the beach. Or go shopping. Or take a nap. There will be another day, another race, right?

But you never know. Sometimes the difference between breaking a world record or not is simply showing up to swim.

Take Kate Ziegler. At the Indianapolis Grand Prix, Ziegler told me that on the day she broke Janet Evans' hallowed 1500m world record, she didn't want to swim that evening. She wanted to go to the beach. She wasn't really feeling it. Fortunately, her coach convinced her to swim that afternoon. The rest, as they say, is history.

But what if she had gone to the beach? What if she never swam that day? For whatever reason, the nuts and bolts were zooming in perfect harmony that day. Would they realign? Could she repeat that same performance the next day? Next week? What if she didn't swim that day?

I was once told from the creator of "Friends" that the hardest thing to do in the entertainment industry isn't getting your foot in the door; it's being prepared when you're already in.

People always get their foot in the door, but they rarely take advantage of it.

It's that old "elevator pitch" theory. You should always be prepared when you live in Hollywood, because you never know who could be stuck in an elevator with. Some of my friends went from assistants to executive producers in 24 hours because they were stuck in an elevator with someone like Rosie O'Donnell, pitched her an idea they had rehearsed, and made the most of their opportunity. No joke.

Swimming is similar. Any given lane at any given time is an opportunity. "Give me a lane, anywhere, anytime," one famous swimmer used to say, "and I'll aim for perfection." Sometimes, swimming is viewed in a linear path. You'd think, "Times will get faster. Races will get easier. I'll eventually get here, do this, swim that, and by this year I'll be where I want to be." Swimmers sometimes circle on the calendar, "This is when I'll swim my fastest. This is the plan."

But swimming is rarely predictable. It's not this linear, easily-planned calendar of time progression. It's more a chaotic fun house. It's opposite than what you'd expect. You swim fast when you expect to swim slow. You swim slow when you expect to swim fast. One day, you could be planning a trip to the beach, while your body secretly knows, "I could be breaking a world record right now, this very second."

You never know when the swim of your life will happen.

You can't plot out the future. And unless Doc Brown swings by your house and points out the highs and lows of your future swimming career, it's best to say to yourself, "Give me a lane, anywhere, anytime – and it could be magic."