



Racing to Victory over Asthma and Allergies

As a competitive swimmer, Tom Dolan couldn't have designed a better body for himself. At 6 feet, 6 inches tall, with arms that seemed to stretch the width of a pool lane, he wasn't exactly a welcome sight to his opponents.

But what no one could see was that inside Dolan's imposing physique was an athletic flaw: lungs plagued by severe asthma and allergies. At times during his training workouts, Dolan would labor for breath and even black out in the water. His college coach always kept an inhaler right next to the pool. But instead of quitting, Dolan kept training harder and swimming faster—until he made it to the U.S. Olympic team.

When he came home from the Olympics in Atlanta in 1996, it was with a gold medal—and he landed on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* magazine and a Wheaties box. He went back in 2000 to Sydney, Australia, and this time he did even better, capturing a gold and a silver.

"I had no superhuman qualities that helped me to overcome asthma, except the fact that I had a big heart and wouldn't allow myself to be beaten down by asthma," says Dolan. He also possesses an iron will: When he broke his arm at age 11, he wore a special foam cast and dragged his arm through the water as he swam countless laps.

Dolan's competitive spirit is legendary in his family. To get him to drink milk as a child, his father would simply pour two glasses and say, "Race you!"

But at times, asthma seemed like the one opponent that could really give Dolan trouble in the pool. Although doctors often prescribe swimming as an ideal exercise for asthmatics (because the humidity and warmth of the water can make breathing easier), it's with the understanding that asthmatics will swim slow, steady laps. The level of training Dolan underwent to take on the top swimmers in the world was so intense that some doctors worried that he could risk his health.

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“When I was in high school, a lot of doctors told me not to swim,” says Dolan, who took up the sport at age five because his older sister was a swimmer and he wanted to beat her. “They were worried about all the chemicals in the pool affecting my allergies and asthma. I really had the worst of both worlds in terms of athletics. The harder and more intense my training was, the worse my asthma became. And in the fall, with tree mold, and the spring, with pollen, my symptoms got worse.”

When Dolan was in college, he found a doctor who specialized in asthma and who put him on a carefully monitored treatment regime. That helped Dolan’s symptoms immeasurably—as his row of gold and silver medals prove.

Dolan recently retired as a competitive swimmer and is now living in Arlington, Virginia, while he interviews with various corporations and prepares for a second career as a businessman. It’s a sure bet he’ll be successful in whatever he does—and, in a strange way, Dolan says he owes some of his confidence to asthma.

“One of the most frustrating things for young people with asthma is that there are only so many things that are in your control. You can’t control the heat and humidity and the air quality,” Dolan says. “For an athlete in an elite part of the game, we like to control everything. So asthma gave me a lot of perspective on the fact that swimming is just a sport and there are a lot of things out there that are more important. For all the troubles asthma gave me, it also gave me a lot on the other side to make me stronger.”