

Swimming Into Tokyo 2020 With Caeleb Dressel

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Team Toyota athlete Caeleb Dressel may be a world-class swimmer, but he didn't learn to compete by racing in the pool. Dressel developed his appetite for victory by racing for the shower.

"I'm one of four siblings," he says. "And we're pretty friendly now, but growing up, it was a mess. That's where I got my first taste of competition: If you got to the shower last, you weren't getting hot water."

Dressel, who grew up in Green Cove Springs, Florida, started swimming in a summer league before the age of 6. Though he played football and soccer and ran track growing up, Dressel began to focus exclusively on swimming by the time he was 13.

"I think it's important for young swimmers to try other sports," says Dressel. "I never wanted to pigeonhole myself. But whatever you choose to do, whatever you're good at, make sure you enjoy it. And from there, just try to be the best that you can."

For Dressel, getting better means setting small goals. For example, he adopted the habit of putting reminders on his phone to give him items to check off, offering him a sense of moving forward.

And so, to succeed at a sport based on strokes, Dressel relies on a series of steps. "Even though I'm looking

ahead, I'm taking it a day at a time," he says. "Showing up for practice focused, ready to go and ready to improve."



Leaning on Family

But there are other support systems getting him to the starting block, and of all of them, Dressel's family is his biggest. Dressel's family is packed with competitive swimmers, and he turns to different members for different strengths, whether it's swimming strategy or just to talk.

"I would say that I learned something from each family member," he says. "My sister Sherridon is a ball of fire. She taught me not to take anything from anyone. My other sister, Kaitlyn, is an artist and taught me about passion. Talking with her really helped me through the times when I wanted to quit."

Those times tested his commitment. Though he loved the sport, the Olympian admits that long practices often felt mundane, especially when he was an active teenager.

"There were points where I really hated swimming," he says. "It's a tough sport and it teaches you a lot about yourself when you have one of those hard practices and you kind of reach rock bottom."

Despite the challenges, Dressel stayed the course.

“It’s those moments that shape you and you learn,” says Dressel. “You learn things about yourself, about how you handle things and what you’re going to do about them moving forward.”

Putting in the Work

Even though he trains six hours a day — four hours in the pool and two hours of weight training — it’s the mental part Dressel spends the most time strengthening. “The physical stuff I can handle. It can be hard, and I’ve definitely been pushed,” he says. “But when you’re that tired, your body really starts listening to what the mind has to say. You have to spend as much time training your mind as you do your body.”



Making it to the Show

That mental training impacts attitude and assures grit under pressure. One of Dressel’s earliest Olympic memories dates back to when he was 12 years old, watching Team USA in the men’s relay at the Olympic Games Beijing 2008. Recalling watching team anchor Jason Lezak pass the French swimmer to win gold, Dressel remembers the excitement of watching the American team.

“Eight years later, I went to Rio and some of those athletes were my teammates,” he says. “It almost feels like you don’t belong. But I knew I had put in the work, I made the team and I wanted to do my part. So, I did belong, but you also really want to prove yourself and prove you earned that spot.” And prove it he did. Dressel won two gold medals at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games — in the 100-meter freestyle relay and the 100-meter medley relay.

Now, looking ahead to Tokyo 2020, he's trying to stay focused on the big picture while still appreciating those who have helped him along the way.

"I don't ever want to take for granted the people I've met," he says. "I feel like everyone I've come in contact with along my journey has been a part of it. I don't know where I'd be if one of them hadn't been there. Every coach I've had along the way, every teacher, they've all played a part to some extent in getting me to where I am today."