

Golden Girl, a Book Review

By Laura Goodwin

Golden Girl by Michael Silver (with Natalie Coughlin) - How Natalie Coughlin fought back, challenged conventional wisdom, and became America's Olympic champion

Published in 2006, this book may not seem to make for a very timely book review. However, I just discovered it last year and was amazed by how much of the Natalie Coughlin story I did not know. Since then, I've been talking about the book a lot and I've hardly encountered anyone who has read it, so I thought it would be well worth giving it some press.



Golden Girl takes you through the backgrounds of Natalie Coughlin and those who influenced her swimming career. It is an in-depth look at her stunning college career at UC Berkeley, leading up to her fantastic performance in the 2004 Athens Olympics.

This book is as much about coach Teri McKeever as it is about Natalie Coughlin. Silver gives a detailed account of her history (swimming, coaching, and life) and explains her rise to a spot as the first woman on the coaching staff of a US Olympic swim team. Silver describes how McKeever was absolutely essential to Coughlin's success, coming into her life at a time when Natalie was a broken product of a high pressure, high intensity, and high yardage club team.

Teri McKeever's approach was the antithesis of this kind of training philosophy. Her program is one of 5 in the country that gives swimmers an afternoon off. She mixes in Pilates, yoga, spin classes – she is constantly looking for ways to train swimmers that will alleviate the monotony that can come with staring at a black line for 5 hours every day.

In addition, she writes highly unique workouts, *and* makes a point of giving her swimmers the rationale behind the drills and sets she chooses. Drills that start from the middle of the pool (or a running dive), reverse swimming, underwater bobs in lieu of rest between intervals – swimmers and coaches at Cal are experimentalists on a daily basis. Not only that, but as McKeever explains the purpose of each set and drill, she also asks her swimmers for feedback. In a sport dominated by autocratic coaches, her approach leads to athletes who are much more self-determining and able to find the training tools that work best for them as individuals.

Relatedly, the story also makes it clear that McKeever is tuned into her athletes in a way that eludes many coaches. Before coming to Cal, she coached for Fresno State where "they revered her for her compassion, her belief that athletes should be well-rounded, and her willingness to seek meaning in the process of training and competing, rather than obsessing solely on the outcome." She was so well-known for this trait that athletes from other sports would seek her out for advice and counsel on problems they were having. And for swimmers like Natalie Coughlin who had extreme personal drive and commitment combined with less need for high training volume, she would notice when they were overtrained or overworked and

send them away from the pool for a few days. Since so much of her highly unconventional approach relies on swimmers having a great feel for the water and technical excellence, getting in and swimming poorly is not worth the effort, physically or mentally.

So that's Teri McKeever – what about Natalie Coughlin? I think we can take it for granted that not every coaching strategy will work for every athlete – why did McKeever's work so well for Natalie, especially since she was injured and ready to walk away from the sport at the time?

First, Coughlin has an incredible feel for the water, and her ability "to process and implement specific information regarding her physical movements borders on the freakish," says assistant UC Berkeley coach Whitney Hite. She is also an intelligent athlete who strongly desires to be involved in the process of directing her training and competition. Her ability to take stroke instruction and turn it into correct motion in the pool is outstanding.

Perhaps her swimming technique is best summed up by consultant Milt Nelms, who worked with Natalie throughout her time at Cal. "US swimming has administered all the strength tests, and she's off the charts – the bottom of the charts. According to them, she can't swim very fast. She can't impose herself on the water; she has to relate to the water. What happens to most people in the water is that a big part of them is still relating to being on land, so a part of their movement includes land-based reactions. But Natalie uses her body in the water the same way that people walk on land."

All of this, in combination with her incomparable maturity, focus and drive made the McKeever/Coughlin pairing an indomitable one. As Natalie finished her senior season and prepared for the lead-up to the games, it was clear to the swimming world that something special might happen. For Natalie, it was not only about the medals she could win, but also "striking a chord for change – making a statement about the pathology of the predominant swimming culture and sending a message that an alternative approach such as McKeever's could be successful on the grandest of stages. That meant a great deal to Coughlin, who resented the unquestioned tenets of the culture and the way in which dissenters were marginalized."

And after her record-matching 5 medals at the Athens Olympics, she feels even more conviction in these techniques. Says Coughlin, "A lot of what Teri has tried to teach us is to always be willing to switch it up, that there is no right way to train and no wrong way to train. The key is never to be closed-minded. Swimming is such a young sport, and there is so much out there that hasn't been looked at or proven. So we're going to continue to be open-minded."

For anyone who is interested in swimming and training techniques, coaching styles, or an inside look at elite swimming circles (especially collegiate swimming), this is a great read – the innovative training of an amazing athlete by a groundbreaking coach.