

Handling Disappointments

Question: How would you feel if you lost an Olympic gold medal by two-thousandths of a second?

You probably are wondering, “How could they measure that closely?”

Mathematically speaking, the distance you can swim in two-thousandths of a second is about the thickness of a coat of paint.

To have worked years and years and to have been so close to the ultimate prize and yet miss it by that length of time in a 400-meter individual medley must have been a difficult pill to swallow.

But that’s what happened to American swimmer Tim McKee. The event took place in the 1972 Olympics in Munich when Olympic swimming timing had just converted from stopwatches to the use of electronic touch pads. At that time, stopwatches were still sliced no finer than a hundredth of a second, but the just-installed electronic touch pads could measure the distance to thousandths of a second.



McKee had tied for first place with Gunnar Larsson of Sweden to the hundredth of a second, according to the stopwatch, but lost by two-thousandths of a second, according to the electronic touch pad.

To make the matter even worse, at the meet in Los Angeles in 1984, gold medals were awarded to both swimmers who had tied to the hundredth of a second. The difference? As a result of the controversy at the 1972 Games, the international swimming federation, FINA, subsequently clarified the timing rules for competition swimming. International races are now required to be timed to the hundredth of a second, and timing to the thousandth of a second is prohibited for tiebreakers.

Certainly, the disappointment must have been intense for McKee, but in life we have many disappointments. Those who go on to greater things dwell on the disappointments briefly, and then move on. Apparently, McKee did just that.

After competition swimming, he was inducted into the University of Florida Hall of Fame and the International Swimming Hall of Fame. He is a veteran celebrity swimmer for Swim Across America (SAA), a charitable organization that raises funds for cancer research, and has participated in 16 SAA events. He has worked in Miami Beach as a lifeguard and public safety officer for more than 20 years. He has also worked in real estate and has helped train other Olympic swimmers, including Nancy Hogshead.

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Disappointments of one kind or another come our way; such is the journey called life. When they do, learn to put them behind you and move on to greater things.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter

