

Debbie Meyer
Part I: Early Years: The Road to Sacramento

Debbie Meyer leaves New Jersey for Sacramento, California and begins training with coach Sherm Chavoor at Arden Hills Swim Club. At the 1967 Pan American Games she breaks the world record in the 400 and 800 meter events and TASS, the Soviet news agency, names her the top female athlete of the year.

Interview conducted by Bill George in Sacramento, California, on July 28, 2024.

Bill George: Hi, I'm Bill George here for Capitol Weekly, the Oral History Project. And today we have a very distinguished Californian and one of the most famous athletes in the history of the state, Debbie Meyer, a three-time Olympic gold medal champion and a presence on the swimming scene for the last, oh, many, many years. Debbie, thanks so much for being here today.

Debbie Meyer: Oh, it's my honor.

BG: And it's funny because we're recording this by circumstance, by coincidence, really, at the time that the Paris Olympic Games are going on. In fact, the swimming was last night. So it's interesting timing.

DM: Yes, it was great timing. Absolutely great timing. And we're in a break right now between trials and finals.

BG: There you go. So tell me, let's talk about your life story, which actually you were not born here in California.

DM: No.

BG: Where were you born and how did you end up here in Sacramento?

DM: I am a native Marylander. I was born at the Naval Academy. My dad was in Korea at the time, and it was the closest installation to Severna Park, where my folks grew up. I lived there until I was probably about 3 or 4. And then when after the war and my dad finished college and

was in graduate school, he was recruited by Campbell Soup, and we moved to New Jersey. I started swimming at a summer club there in 1960. It was probably close to June or July of 1960 and almost eight years old, and I joined the swim team just knowing how to do freestyle, if even that. I learned to swim in the Chesapeake Bay and Severn River. No swimming lessons. I watched my older brother swim and, you know, that's how that started. And then we moved out here and I started swimming for Sherm Chavoor at Arden Hills. And that was a traumatic experience to begin with. The very first day.

BG: Let's talk about. But your dad was working for Campbell Soup and actually got transferred.

DM: Transferred here to Sacramento from New Jersey. And he had been offered two other transfers, one to South America. And my mom said no, because there were three kids she didn't want to go and at that time, you know, not a lot of expats everywhere except if you were in the service and he was in, you know, private business. And then he was offered a job in Midland at one of their plants in Midland, Texas. And my mom goes, you have to put dry ice in a pool? No, we're not going there. So this was his last chance and he took it. And he was in Sacramento for 11 months before getting transferred to, from Campbell Soup to Swanson Frozen Foods in Modesto. And we elected to live in Sacramento, and he commuted to Modesto everyday.

BG: From, from there to Sacramento.

DM: Yeah, from, yeah.

BG: And that was because of your swimming, right?

DM: Well, because of my swimming, and it was 1966. There's two years before the Olympic Games. So, you know, you don't know you're on the Olympic team until you make the Olympic team. And I had just gone to my first nationals, and I'd only been swimming for Sherm for just a little over a year, and I didn't know what my potential was. Nobody, you know, there's always potential, but you don't know if you're going to live up to it. And so he made the decision to do that. And it would have been the third high school for my brother and really a year and another brother an eye operation coming up. So he decided to commute.

BG: So I want to talk about your parents a little more, because they just had such a huge impact on your life, and really serve as kind of role models on how you should parent a young athlete, I think in your case. So your father was actually a war hero?

DM: Yeah. Well, I think he was a war hero. Yes. Anybody that that fought in the war is a hero. Right.

BG: But he was a pilot I believe.

DM: He was the navigator bombardier on PBJs. So they were B-51, stripped down to crates to sit on and carry the bombs and, and the fuel and they were subchasers so they would fly anywhere between 25 and 50 to 75ft to 100 above the water. Looking for submarines because there weren't radar at that time.

BG: And then your mom, talk about her a little bit.

DM: My mom actually taught swimming growing up. She never taught me how to swim. She said, "watch your brother." And then she was a physical education health teacher. And then when she had us, she stopped teaching because my dad said, when they're kids, there's no working for you. So she was a stay at home mom that volunteered a lot.

She was my mother the car, which a lot of moms were at that time. And I had three brothers, one older, two younger, and we were all involved in something. So at the time she was putting on, she said, "man, I put on at least 100 miles a day driving everywhere," and right around Sacramento that was pretty tough at that time. You know, within the Fair or the Arden area and Fair Oaks Boulevard and Eastern and all around there and Watt avenue. But she, they, were both very influential on, on my career. Whereas they would always say, anytime you want to quit, you quit. It's your decision. You're the one that gets up every morning and and goes to practice and works hard and I wouldn't say sacrifice, but gives up your normal life as a teenager and and young person. But to me swimming was normal, so it, there was no other life.

BG: I'm going to jump ahead a little bit here because we're talking about your mom. But after you became a swimmer of note, you actually went to the former Soviet Union to swim. I think Mark Spitz was with you.

DM: I was supposed to go to the Soviet Union to receive the TASS Agency Award, and it was in April of '68. But, you know, of course, the Cold War was on at that time, and I didn't. We had our passports and everything. Well, my dad went to get his passport and he couldn't get it because his birth certificate said "Baby Boy" Meyer on it because my grandmother never put a name down. And so that was really funny. So we'd always call him Baby Boy.

BG: But wasn't there a time you guys were in Russia?

DM: My mom did.

BG: She went with Spitz.

DM: I missed, she met with Spitz, and a lot of the different swimmers, you know, that made it through to the '72 games. This was in August of '71. I didn't make the trip.

BG: Oh, okay.

DM: And she was saying, they were flying on Aeroflot and she goes, she would look down and there was a hole in the bottom of the plane and she could see the ground. Obviously they didn't fly that high. But they would, they were in Minsk and Kiev and Moscow, so its...

BG: And they were trying to kind of shove the American team around and your mother would have none of it.

DM: Oh, yeah. So, but when I was supposed to go, they didn't let me because they said we don't have, everything was set up, and then they cancelled because they said, we don't have someone to show you around because you can't take pictures of bridges or buildings or things like that.

BG: Right.

DM: And, you know, to a 15 year old, who cares? You know, I'm not taking pictures of bridges anyway. I'm just there to swim.

BG: So you come to Sacramento? What year was that?

DM: 1965

BG: 1965

DM: Yes, so.

BG: And you're living in motels as you wait for your dad to come out and...

DM: Well, we were waiting for our furniture to come out. He was here early, and he came in... he left New Jersey in January and we moved here April 1st, or March 20th rather. And I asked my mom probably about ten years ago, I said, how come we came in in March? We only had two more months of school. Why did I have to change schools in the end of the year? She goes, because your dad missed you so much, he couldn't wait, you know, any longer.

So we arrived. But I'm going to go back further than that. In 1964, December, we went to Massachusetts, to New Bedford. My uncle was stationed up there, and my mom and her two sisters, we had Christmas at my Aunt Claire's. And I got two things for Christmas. One I loved, one I hated, and the one I hated they told us Christmas Eve was we were moving to Sacramento and I was so upset I started crying. I go, I" don't want to move. I'm gonna miss my friends. I don't want to change schools." You know anything, you know, a 12 year old would say. And I said they don't have swim teams in Sacramento. And my dad goes, yes, they do.

And, you know, he goes, I've already looked into it and this, that and the other, he had contacted Mary Kelly from the Vesper Boat Club. She was the coach there. And she said, if you're going to Sacramento, you need to go to Arden Hills with Sherm Chavoor, because I was going to try out for Vesper Boat Club that January to to swim. And another one of my friends had tried out and made the team, and I was better than Shirley was, so I figured I would. I would make the team. And had I made the team, there were two girls from Vesper that made the Olympic team in '68, so we would have been teammates there, and, but we were teammates anyway.

BG: So you come here and there is a swim club and it's called Arden Hills. And a famous coach, Sherm Chavoor, who had established a pretty vibrant program by that point. So when you show up, tell us about the day that you showed up.

DM: I got out of school. I was at Jonas Salk in junior high school or middle school, they call it out here. And I got in the car and went to practice. My mom introduced me to Sherm and he said, okay, go get dressed. He introduced me to two other gals, Paula Crowther and and Susie Peterson. And I went in and got dressed, got in the pool. He goes, okay, 500 warm up. And I must have had this look like deer in the headlights. And he goes, do you know what that is? I go, yeah, it's 20 laps. He goes, well, get moving.

So I started swimming and everybody started passing me. And then they were catching me and I didn't do very many laps. And I got out of the pool and I went into the bathroom and I got dressed, and he goes, where are you going? I go, I don't think I can do this. I said, they're faster than I am and I'm not sure I'm in the right place. And he goes, well, if you decide to come back same time, same place tomorrow and don't be late. And that was Sherm. And of course, you know, you knew, knew of Sherm and he was kind of gruff in that way. People kind of thought of him as a Simon Legree. You get on the phone and you say, hi, Sherm, he'd go. Hi May, you have 15 seconds. But Sherm, he goes now you have 13 seconds. So he's that type of a person.

And so I went out to the car and my mom was there with my two younger brothers. And she goes, what are you doing out? And I go, mom, I can't do it. She goes, what do you mean you can't do it? I said, they're faster than I am. I don't know anybody. I just... it's I can't do it. I can't do it. She goes, well, you haven't given it a chance. You were only in there for like five minutes. And what are you going to do otherwise? I said, I don't know, watch TV. She goes, nope.

So I went back the next day, and the next day, and the next day. And about two, oh a month later, I was going about 5000 yards a day. So it was a lot of desire, determination and dedication. And I actually wanted to be on the same relay team with Susie Peterson, who was the fastest ten and under in the country. She was 11 at that time, and I was 12. But I wanted to be on a relay team with her. So that was my goal, and I learned a little bit of goal setting there.

BG: And of course, later, Sue Peterson would win two Olympic gold medals in Mexico City. So you weren't just in a pool. I mean, these kids were good.

DM: We had Susie Peterson was on the team, Johnny Ferris, Mike Burton, myself, Susie, Micki King, and then we had a swimmer from another team that came out and trained with us that year, John Nelson. So we had quite a few people on the team.

BG: Almost like a prelude of the '68 Olympics.

DM: '68 Olympics, almost

BG: Just amazing.

DM: Yeah.

BG: And all kind of by chance in a way.

DM: Very much so. And you know, I'm going to go back to that Christmas in '64, that second present that I got was a stopwatch, because I had always borrowed my parents stopwatch to time kids in a race. I was swimming at the Camden Y in the Wedgewood Swim Club during the summer, in Camden Y in the winter. And I got a stopwatch for Christmas. And on the back of it, my dad wrote Debbie Meyer December 25th, 1964. And underneath in quotations it said "Mexico City, 1968."

And I opened up the stopwatch and I read the back, and I go, what does that mean? And he goes, well, maybe you can get there someday. And I'm going, well, what are the Olympics? I had no clue. And he goes, well, remember we woke you up in October and you watched these swim races on TV. And I go, yeah. He goes, well, those were the Olympics. I go, oh, you know, I, I didn't get it. I was very naive, very naive. And, you know, I didn't know enough about the swimming world. I swam summer league and that was big stuff. And then I swam a Y league, and I just like getting in the pool swimming.

BG: Well, Sherm Chavoor said Mark Spitz would have had as much a chance as a tomato in a ketchup factory without his family. So he was very family oriented. Arden Hills was a whole bunch of family, brothers and sisters really.

DM: Right, yes. We we most of the kids on the team had a sibling on the team. You know, Suzie had her sister Debbie. My older brother Cliff was on the team. My younger brother Jeff was on the team for a while. My youngest brother Carl said, I'll decide later. So. And he he had a natural stroke like I did, pretty much. And, but he goes, I don't want to work that hard.

BG: But Chavoor was different too, because not only was he a coach, but he owned the club. So he's totally invested in it and in the swimmers.

DM: Yes, and Arden Hills Swimming and Tennis Club was, you know, a beautiful place back then. He, he worked hard at keeping it family oriented. He didn't pick and choose his members. You know, if you applied, you normally got in, and it was a different lifetime and a different lifestyle back then. We had a tennis team and a swim team, you know, and only time they mixed together is when he would have his adult parties, when the swimming parents would get together with the tennis players. But I was never far from, from Arden Hills, even when we didn't have practice or we were on break for two weeks, I'd go up and swim all the time.

BG: And what were the workouts like.

DM: If swimmers today are watching this, I would say boring. They, my granddaughter was swimming for a while, and she just. She quit, and I said, Lexi, why did you quit? She goes, well, we did the same thing every Monday, every Tuesday, every Wednesday. And, you know, there just wasn't a lot of variety. But when I swam, we would do a thousand kick warm up, in the morning and in the afternoon, and then we'd do 2000 to 2500 to maybe sometime even 3000 in pulling, where nowadays they use a pull buoy between their legs and they put it between her thighs, we used an inner tube and we made like a figure eight and had it on our, our ankles and we would drag for anywhere from 2000 to, to 3000 yards. And then we'd turn around and do the same thing in swimming, where we would have to get times that Sherm wanted us to swim.

So we'd either do ten 200s or back to back 1650s or straight 3000, 20, 25 or 30 100s and things like that. And we do the same thing in swimming. So that's where, you know, a lot of people said it would get boring, but we did a lot of distance training and training has changed. There's a lot more today where they will work on specific parts of a race like the middle of a 1500, they'd work on the middle repeats of the 100s, on the 500 to 1000 and things of that nature. But, and they're also doing a lot of weight training now where we never did any weight training at all. It was all swimming.

BG: Would you call, you said some people call them a Simon Legree or a taskmaster.

DM: Yes.

BG: So, I mean, he was very much. You guys swam harder and faster than almost anybody.

DM: Yeah. We do anything for him, you know, he treated his swimmers. I think he treated everybody the same. Others will say no. He put you on a pedestal. I go, how? Because you asked me to get out and get a drink of water so you could have a rest. You know, it was okay. You know, we didn't have water bottles at that time. We'd have to get out and go to the drinking fountain. But, you know, if Sherm said jump, we'd say how high? If the stopwatch would bounce off the ground, we'd go running, you know, things like that. But he cared about the swimmers. He had a love for every one of his swimmers.

BG: So you start competing. You got this pool full of all star swimmers. And then there's something called the Junior Olympics. So just tell me what that was like in the big meets that you had as a kid.

DM: Sherm hosted the Junior Olympics every June. The short course Junior Olympics. Our long course was normally up and Redding. The short course one involved, we were part of Pacific Swimming, so it involved all the swim teams down through the Central Valley and into the Bay Area, and a little below the Bay Area, down into Salinas and all, and kids from all over the age group would come. You could swim until you were 18 at that time. So we had those every year and it was a great meet.

It was hosted the... KFBK and KOVR, I think, were the hosts of of it. So that was kind of cool. And I wanted to be on the same relay team with Susie, and I got to be on the same relay team. And then one year in the Junior Olympics, I beat her, which was surprising. So then I'd have to start, you know, reevaluating what I wanted to do and And then that first year was the first year I broke 30 seconds in the 50 freestyle, and I thought I was going to be a sprinter. That's all I wanted to do was sprint, you know. And then one day in the 1650, I did all flip turns because flip turns had just started really in 1964. And so that was the first time I did, you know, 63 or 60, 63 flip turns and Sherman goes, you're a distance swimmer.

BG: So you're getting better. Now you start to win these meets. And then is it 1966 that you kind of come to

DM: '66 I started doing really well. I swam at the Y, and shoot did I break? No, I didn't break 18 minutes till the next year, but I did really well. I made nationals in the 500 free and the 1650, and

they were in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. And I remember I packed my suitcase and, you know, I could eat anything. I was probably like five foot six and weighed 93 pounds or 90 pounds, something like that, and Sherm kept trying to put weight on me and put weight on me. And so when I packed my suitcase that I had, you know, five packages of, you know, package of six of double packages of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups in my suitcase. I ate 34 the first night I was there, 34 peanut butter cups, but

BG: Which led to a nickname for you?

DM: Yeah. Peanut.

BG: The Peanut Butter Kid.

DM: Yes. So we went to Bartlesville and I swam the 500 free, and I had a swim off in the 500 to make the finals. There were only six lanes at that time, and I listened to every coach that came up and gave me advice except for Sherm. So I swam this other gals race instead of my race. I, needless to say, I did not make the finals and that's the last time I did not listen to Sherm.

BG: Of course the, 1967 you really take off.

DM: I kind of broke through then. Well, actually, that next summer, the '66 outdoors I made the finals in the 400 free and the 1500 meter freestyle. And I think I got third in the 400 free. And I got, I was leading the 1500 until the last three laps, and then Patty Caretto came up and beat me the last three laps, and she won, and we both broke the existing world record. And that was kind of the meat that put me on, on the map at that time.

BG: And then 1967, Sherman's named the head coach of the Pan American team.

DM: Team, the Pan American team and the Olympic team. Yeah.

BG: But the first you have the Pan American games.

DM: The Pan Americans

BG: In 67, which you went to. And that's your first international.

DM: My first international meet. And we were in Winnipeg, Canada for that. And it was a great time. We had a training camp and the University of Minnesota, and I think I spent more time in the basement of the dorms because of tornado warnings that whole week that we were there two weeks, but that whole one whole week, we were in the basement most of the time, and there were no air conditioners in the building, and it was hotter than heck there. And, you know, and I was used to humidity and all, but it was just hot. We were in the upper floors of the dorm, so it was even worse.

BG: So you go to Calgary, it was

DM: Winnipeg.

BG: I'm sorry, Winnipeg.

DM: We were in Winnipeg.

BG: And how did you do in Winnipeg?

DM: I won the 400 and I won the 1500, no the 800 because they didn't have a 1500 for women. And I broke the world record in those those two events. And I had broken the, did I break the records before that? I can't remember if it was before or or after the Santa Clara meet, international meet.

BG: And so you won a whole bunch of races in '67 and athlete of the year in a number of publications. Most surprising, I guess of all would have been in TASS, the Soviet news agency said you were the top swimmer female athlete of the year, actually.

DM: Right

BG: Over people like Billie Jean King and some other big names. But it was the height of the Cold War. Were you aware of that and what was it surprise you?

DM: I was, and it did surprise me. It it really surprised me. There were a lot of awards that year, which surprised me even more because I was doing something I loved. I wasn't in it for that. And

I'm going, why did they do that? That's the type. As I said, I was very naive, and up until I started working for Speedo, you know, I was a real introvert. And, you know, when you're swimming 7 to 10 miles a day, staring at a black line all the time. You don't talk much. And we didn't have much rest in between all of our repeats with Sherm. So it it was surprising between that and eventually the Associated Press Athlete of the Year, I mean, Sullivan Award was in '68 and there was an LA Times award, all this stuff. And I'm going. I didn't think of myself as any different than anybody else, but the TASS one did surprise me.

BG: It was very unusual, and it got a lot of media attention because it seemed to signal some kind of a rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union. And a lot of articles are saying, oh my God, this is a big deal, because the Russians never say anything nice about the United States.

DM: Yeah.

BG: And vice versa.

DM: And, you know, I didn't think anything about that, really. You know, and put any real thought into it until after the fact.

Continued in Part II