

Howard looks to Olympics

BY JASON LINCOLN
The Battalion

In 1996, Devin Howard made his debut on the national scene at the Olympic Trials. He finished 10th, eight places away from a trip to the Atlanta Games.

Four years later, Howard is returning to the Olympic Trials. This time he is in position to swim his way to Sydney for the 2000 Summer Games.

Howard was fresh out of high school at the time of his first trial. He would soon join the Texas A&M swim team, where he slowly worked his way up the national rankings as he waited for the next chance to reach the Olympics — the pinnacle of a swimmers career.

That chance will come on Aug. 9-16 as Howard will join America's best swimmers at Indiana University. Only the top two in each event will earn a trip to Australia. The rest will have to wait another four years.

Competing against the best became a necessity as he quickly excelled under A&M coach Mel Nash and the Aggie program.

In his first two seasons as an Aggie, Howard began making his mark on the collegiate scene, twice qualifying for the NCAA Championships.

Then in 1998-99, as a junior, Howard stepped up to the next level and began competing on the international scene. It started at the FINA World Cup hosted by Texas A&M.

Howard swam 2:00.58 in the 200-meter butterfly, his signature event. It was good enough for fifth place and a top-20 world ranking. Howard had found his new niche.

His international competition peaked in the summer of 1999 with a bronze medal

performance in the 200-fly at the Pan American Games.

"He's a dogged competitor, and he's feisty in races," Nash said. "There's an obnoxious streak in him when he's racing. But that is a good thing."

Howard has been storming the world scene lately, as he prepares for his Olympic goal.

Over 20 American records and a dozen world records were set in Athens as the United States team went on to win the meet.

"The Short-Course Worlds were great because it was the fastest competition I have ever faced," Howard said. "It was great getting to see some other competition, besides the same people you always face in the States. It was a great experience."

In 1999, after the national meet, Howard was ranked fifth in the nation in the 200-fly. After this year's national meet, he was passed by two swimmers because he did not compete.

Howard is qualified in five events for the Olympic Trials — the 100- and 200-fly, the 200- and 400-individual medley and the 200-free.

"Now I have a little bit of an advantage," Howard said. "I can look back to four years ago to prepare. Now I am a lot more experienced physically and mentally. Things that bothered me then won't effect me this year."

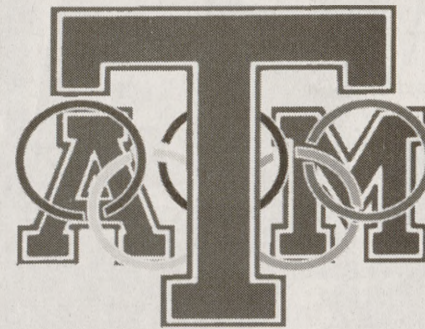
Howard plans to focus on only the 200-fly and 200-free for the actual trials.

Howard's current time of two minutes in the fly is about three seconds shy of the second-ranked Ugur Taner. Meanwhile, Tom Malchow dominates the event at 1:55.

"Devin is really coming into his own for his age," Nash said. "He's in range of making the games. He's not an odds-on favorite, but he definitely has a shot to get there."

Howard has four more months of preparation to drop his time at least two seconds, a difficult feat for swimmers at his level.

The rest will come from his stubborn, never-give-in nature to qualify him a spot in Sydney.



After representing the United States in a pair of World Cups, he joined 12 other men to be part of the American delegation to the Short Course World Championships in Athens, Greece, the site of the 2004 summer games.

Howard came back with a gold medal as part of the 800-meter freestyle relay. Howard swam in the morning portion of the relay that set an American record, while top ranked U.S. swimmer Neil Walker rested for the finals.

That evening, with Walker in Howard's place, the team set a world record and a new American record, and Howard returned home with a gold medal. Howard swam the 200-fly in two minutes flat, finishing 14th in the field of over 40 countries.



JASON LINCOLN/The Battalion

As A&M senior Devin Howard has spent four years getting ready for his next shot at the Olympics. Now he has a mere four months before his shot at earning a trip to Sydney.

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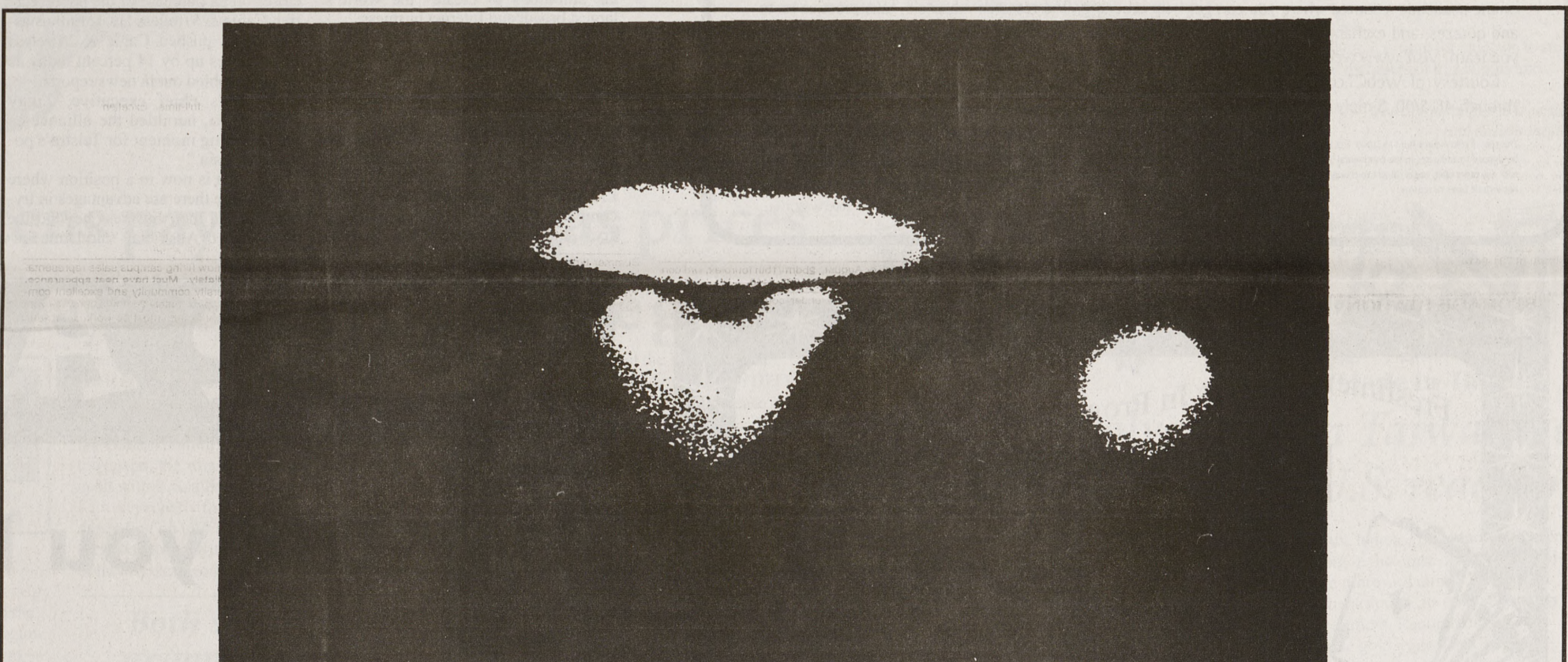
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