



BEIJING BOUND



Two varsity swimmers go for gold in China

By Steve Raczynski
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IMAGINE YOU ARE ATTENDING a swim meet at Springfield College, sitting high atop the bleachers in Art Linkletter Natatorium. To the novice, it is easy for the eye to become trained upon two individuals: Roy Burch '08 and Justin Zook '08.

They are talented athletes, doing what they do and love best. Swim.

It is obvious these two are good. They win. They set records, and have been doing so for Head Coach John Taffe for the past four years. They are two of many reasons why the Pride has maintained a high level of success in the world of collegiate aquatics.

Roy Burch and Justin Zook are two of Springfield's Olympians for 2008. They are anything but typical student-athletes. They are both worldly individuals in more ways than one. Circumstances have allowed each to travel the globe. And they have both made decisions in their young lifetimes that have greatly accelerated their levels of maturity and responsibility, as well as their ability to cope.

Justin David Zook

JUSTIN DAVID ZOOK was born in Chicago, but moved to Plymouth, Minnesota, with his parents by the age of five. Plymouth is where Justin really calls home.

Zook was born prematurely—about a month early (just 4 lbs, 3 oz.)—with some abnormalities, including only half of his right foot. Doctors told his parents Justin would never walk, that he would probably have a mental disability, and that he would have poor eyesight. Then, it was discovered very early in his life that his right leg had severe muscle, ligament, and nerve damage, meaning his leg was destined never to grow properly.

The choices were sobering. Surgery: not just one, but more than thirty. Every two years or so, his right leg would be purposely broken, then reset with a new plate inserted, making it easier to walk. The other choice? Amputation, "...which," Zook says, "would have been the easy way out. That would have saved maybe twenty surgeries, and lots of pain.

"I remember the day that doctors asked me when I was eight or nine, 'What do you want to do? Keep your leg or not?'" says Zook. "I tell you, *that* will make you grow up in a hurry. Amputation would have really changed my life in so many ways."

Not only would amputation have prevented Zook from walking, but it would have prevented him from becoming a world record holder in the 100-backstroke as a Paralympian. It would have prevented him from competing internationally at the Paralympic Swimming World Championships in such places as New Zealand, Argentina, and South Africa, or in the Paralympic Games in Athens in 2004 where he won a gold medal (100 back), a bronze (50 free), and finished from fourth to eighth in five other events.

"I've always had an affinity for water," says Zook, a three-time All-American at Maple Grove High School in Minnesota. "My mom used to tell me I loved to take baths as a baby. How many little boys do you know who liked to take baths? Later on, rehabilitation after surgery proved to be far less stressful in water. Swimming pools literally became my friend. So, at a young age, I joined a swim team. I recall my mom and aunt sitting in the stands at my first meet. They didn't think I was going to make it to the other side of the pool. Two years later, at the age of eight, I won five state titles. The same thing happened again when I was ten."

Last April, Zook finished first in four events and set multiple American records in the U.S. Paralympic Trials at the University of Minnesota, earning him the right to compete in Beijing for the United States once again in the Paralympic Games September 6-17.

Justin hopes to repeat as a Paralympic Champion.

"Beijing will be my last meet," says Zook, a sport management major at Springfield College, who graduated last May in just three and a half years. "Then I'm off to graduate school, maybe at Central Florida. I think I'd like to become an athletic director some day on the collegiate level. Springfield College has prepared me well for that prospect."

Zook, who essentially swims with only minimal help from his left leg, says his parents "made all the right decisions and held it all together, especially in the early part of my childhood. I can never thank them enough."

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Roy-Allan Saul Burch

ROY-ALLAN SAUL BURCH was born and grew up in Bermuda, an island located 650 miles off the coast of North Carolina known for its tourism, breathtaking beauty, laid-back attitude and, of course, its shorts. An English colony founded in 1609,

Bermuda is only twenty-one square-kilometers in length and breadth, meaning one is never very far from water.

"My mother wanted me to learn how to swim simply because she didn't want me to drown," says Burch very matter-of-factly. "Only fifty percent of [Bermuda's] black community can swim. So, I learned to swim by the age of four. It certainly made her feel better."

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to make it that far. The four-year-old amazed everyone by swimming not one, but ten lengths of the pool. "I didn't choose swimming," says Burch, recalling that moment. "Swimming chose me, and the rest is history."

Burch specializes in the shorter events and recently became a six-time All-American at the NCAA Division III Championships in Miami, Ohio. He now holds many school records at Springfield College, including the 50 free (20.2 seconds), and the 100 free (45.08).

"I started racing when I was five or six," says Burch. "Swimming has led to many international trips. Those experiences have definitely made me a stronger swimmer and a much stronger person."

Indeed, by the time Burch was sixteen, he had traveled to the United States on several occasions, including New Jersey and New York, as well as to Barbados, Canada, Aruba, Curacao, the Dominican Republic, and Manchester, England, for the Commonwealth Games.

Burch then attended Peddie School, a well-known prep school, in Hightstown, N.J., where he competed for two years. "That school had plenty of spirit and energy," says Burch. "It was highly diverse and provided great motivation to further my education."

But then a life-changing event took place. In October 2003, when he was eighteen and away at school, his mother, Karen,

a school teacher, succumbed to cancer. She was only forty-five. "I was very close to my mother," says Burch. "She was basically the backbone of the family. My aunts, my uncles, and grandparents all looked to her when it came to organizing events. I took it hard. It took quite awhile before I started to turn things around."

That's when Springfield College came into the picture. "I did not know exactly what to expect when I first arrived," recalls Burch. "I was hoping to make friends quickly. I soon realized that Springfield attracts the type of student who easily allows that to happen. And, of course, I had the team."

Then came yet another life-changing event. Burch was destined to meet his fiancée, Lauren Van Laethem '05, who was also a swimmer. "Yeah, we met in the pool," he says, looking a little sheepish, but with an impish grin. "Let's just say she really caught my eye." And then came the birth of Serena Marie on June 16, 2006.

Since the birth of his daughter, life has not always been simple for Burch. "It's helped me to mature in so many ways," he says. "Serena has been a gift. I'm not sure where I would be without her and Lauren."

Both people and places have great meaning for Burch. His tattoos reflect this—one, a map of Bermuda on his right shoulder and partially down his right arm; the other, on his left arm, is a tribute to his mother, including her date of birth and her date of death.

A business management major, the next course of action for Burch is to graduate (he has one more semester to go). He will represent Bermuda at the Beijing Olympics in the 50-free and perhaps the 100-free. "Actually, Beijing might just represent a steppingstone," he says. "The four-year plan following Beijing is to do well in the Commonwealth Games, and then be ready for the Olympic Games in London in 2012. Ultimately, my goal is to do something that will be remembered by my country."

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John Taffe, head coach of the men's and women's swimming team at Springfield College, says of these gifted student-athletes: "No matter what happens in Beijing, they have both left a lasting impression on the Springfield College swim program. We will miss each of them a great deal." ▽