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In Swimming, Knowing Your Stage Matters More Than Your Age - by Aaron Piersol (07/31/2012) - by Aaron Piersol

*Aaron Peirsol competed in three Olympics and won seven medals. He won three gold medals at the Athens Games in 2004, sweeping the backstroke events. In Beijing in 2008, he won the gold medal in the 100-meter backstroke. As he says, "I'm a former swimmer who enjoyed what he did and got to do it for a long time." He will be writing for the 2012 London blog throughout the Olympics. This is his second post.*

So much of sport is mental, and it's fascinating how one must approach sport as a career progresses. A few years ago in swimming, a daunting element of technology entered the sport and altered its course. In many ways, actually, it accelerated the natural progression of performance. When those suits — which were so much fun, by the way — took a leave, a step was skipped. Swimmers really did not want to believe it was all the suits and therefore, unconsciously even, they helped evolve the sport with perspective.

Swimmers have been trying to convince themselves they were as fast as before. And you know what? They have. The mind has overtaken what technology brought. Another way to think about it is we would not be going quite so fast had we not had that jolt to our perspective of what fast is; for it is merely that, perspective. It only took three years for records to be broken at a more acceptable rate.

Youth is a powerful tool, one that an older generation can be wary of. When you are young, that is your most powerful tool, that you are unpredictable and have nothing to lose for your slate is blank. This is what the young tell themselves. Every sport eventually recycles itself with a new generation of athletes, those with a fresh and advantageously naive perspective, looking at who is the best in the world and what the records are and that being the only standard they know, and so taking it as merely what they have to do.

Two wonderful athletes who know how to use their advantages have shined here, Ruta Meilutyte, a 15-year-old breaststroker representing Lithuania, and another, Ye Shiwen, a 16-year-old Chinese 400 I.M.'er, know only that those are their normal standards, not that five years ago those times wouldn't be done for another 15 without the influx of technology; that is simply what must be done.

Yet youth lacks something, at least that is what the experienced tell themselves. Every athlete eventually matures within his or her sport, and youth hopefully turns into something else — youth's counterpart, experience. Those who stick around long enough must convince themselves that the young will not be able to handle the pressure and the breadth of such a competition, say, as the Olympic Games. The proficiently experienced athlete knows the ropes, knows the rhythm of big competitions, and how to put them in perspective.

You ignore that your performances are more predictable than a precocious youth's, and that you don't recover as well; that your scope of what is possible is likely narrower because your perspective of what is fast goes back so far to much older standards.

But there are those who change with the tide. They meet the new generations with flexible adaptation and take the changes in technology as an experience to learn and grow. This, besides persuading themselves they belong at that level, is perhaps the biggest step an athlete can take in their career; to understand it is a process; that youth is fleeting and merely sets one up to be humbled and learn once again. South Africa's Cameron van der Burgh and the United States' Dana Vollmer have both broken records, which much of the swimming world is still coming to grips with.

It is one incredible thing to break a record or win a medal. It is something wholly unique for an athlete to consistently do that over an extended career. There are elements of adaptation and intelligence that transcend any one single performance. Edwin Moses, Roger Federer, Steve Redgrave, Kelly Slater, Grant Hackett — all of these uniquely high-performing athletes adapted to the changing tide time and again. That is what those veteran swimmers breaking records are now doing — showing a malleable mind and pushing forward.

Ultimately, neither youth nor experience is more advantageous, and that is the point. It is merely accepting what stage in your career you are and harnessing those strengths. It takes a unique athlete to embrace all of sport's challenges. The body can do much, but if the mind is not there, then it doesn't matter where the body is.