

UFA 4

Interviewee: Allison Wagner

Interviewer: Julian Pleasants

Date: February 10, 1997

P: This is Julian Pleasants. I am in the Oral History office at 104 Anderson Hall. It is February 10, 1997, and I am interviewing Allison Wagner. Allison, give me your full name, birth date and your birthplace.

W: I am Allison Marie Wagner. I was born here in Gainesville, Florida, on July 21, 1977.

P: When did you start having an interest in swimming?

W: I was about six or seven when I started swimming competitively. Before then, ever since I can remember, I always swam at the neighborhood pools during the summer. My mom always brought the kids down to the neighborhood pool to cool off and spend time there.

P: When did you start swimming with a trainer?

W: [When I was] about six or seven. I started swimming with the summer league. Actually, I started swimming on the team because my parents always encouraged my brothers and I to [participate in] a sport. I tried everything--soccer, softball, ballet, everything. I was not good at anything. I was awful, and I hated it. I finally tried swimming, and right off the bat I was good. They put me with all the boys, and I swam very well. I loved it.

P: From the very beginning, you were good at it and you liked it?

W: Yes.

P: What about high school? Did you swim for Eastside [Eastside High School, Gainesville, Florida]?

W: Yes, but I only swam for Eastside one semester. That was because there was a little conflict between the high school coach and my coach. The high school coach wanted me to practice with him, at least part-time during the week. I was not willing to give that up. I wanted to practice full time with my own coach Kevin Thornton [Kevin Thornton, head coach, women's swimming team, University of Florida, 1996-present; assistant coach 1995-1996], [who was here], especially with the Olympics coming up. I had trained for that for so long that I was not willing to sacrifice it. Finally, my senior year, the high school coach compromised, and I swam a couple of meets with them.

- P: Your coach, Kevin Thornton, is the present coach of the women's swim team at The University of Florida, correct?
- W: Yes, and he has been my coach for about six years.
- P: Why did you choose Florida to do your collegiate swimming?
- W: Basically because Kevin was here. It was a year to the Olympic trials and a year and one-half to the Olympics. I was entering college, so I really did not want to switch coaches. Plus, I liked Florida. I [had] lived here for a couple of years already, and I liked the school and I knew everybody on the team.
- P: What other scholarship offers did you have?
- W: I took recruiting visits to Texas [University of Texas, Austin, Texas] and Arizona [University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona].
- P: Did you consider them?
- W: Basically, I just wanted to see what other schools were like. I was trying to enter those trips with an open mind, but I think all along, in the back of my mind, I knew that I wanted to stay with Kevin.
- P: Let me discuss your high school activities a little bit. I noticed that you were in the International Baccalaureate program. Can you tell me a little bit about that program and how it has helped you in college?
- W: [It was] very, very demanding. I entered that in ninth grade. It is a really accelerated academic program. I remember my senior year, I was taking eight college-level courses. That was really difficult with swimming. Over the four years, it really taught me time-management, that is for sure.
- P: That is a question that is important to understand. You are taking tough academic courses, swimming, and, hopefully having some social life. How do you balance all of that?
- W: That last part--hopefully have some social life--hopefully is the key word there. I gave up a lot of that in high school and over the years. I did not have much time outside of school and swimming to do much, so my social life was with my friends at the pool. That time [at the pool] was not only practice, but social time. It blended together. Plus, I had to make sure I used every minute efficiently.
- P: Do you regret that?

W: I do not think I would have done it differently, but it is a little hard now. I am at college, and I am really ready to start developing myself in other ways. [I would like to] have more friends and be able to do stuff, [like] go to a movie if I wanted to.

P: What is your major here?

W: It was, last semester, visual arts. Now I am changing. I am thinking about rehabilitative counseling or something in the College of Health and Human Performance.

P: What would you plan to do with that degree?

W: I am not sure. I am just starting to look into it. I am just on the verge of changing it.

P: What can you tell me about your first years in college and your swimming experience? Can you give me an overview of your first two years? How have you changed, for example, since you have been here?

W: I think my first two years in college were a lot like my years in high school. I would go to school, swim, and study. That did not change much. The Olympics [were] all I had been focusing on for the last four years, and everything revolved around that.

P: Are you currently on the swim team?

W: I am red-shirting this semester.

P: Why are you doing that?

W: I have trained really hard for a long time, and I need a break and a little time off from swimming. I think that will make me a healthier and stronger person in the end.

P: Do you plan to come back in the fall?

W: Yes.

P: So there is, I do not know if this is the correct word, a burn out?

W: Yes, I never really believed in that term, but I think I have hit that.

P: So, a year off will rejuvenate you, and you can return to swimming next fall?

W: Yes. Hopefully, I will return back to swimming before then and maybe even compete this summer. I am not really sure. I [plan] to start training really soon.

P: Do you plan to compete in the 2000 Olympics?

W: Hopefully.

P: What do you think of Nicole [Nicole Lee Haislett, assistant women's swimming coach, University of Florida, 1996-present] as a coach?

W: I thought it would be really awkward when I heard she accepted the position. Just two years ago, we were standing right next to each other on the blocks at World Championship trials, and it was me against her. Who would win? I have always looked at her as a competitor, somebody I had to beat. I thought it was kind of awkward at first, that she would be a coach, but it has really turned out well. She has so much experience, and she is not far-removed from the sport and experiences. Plus, she is a woman. I think it helps to [have her to] relate to.

P: Does the fact that she has three gold medals and a sterling career help her as a coach?

W: Yes. I think that certainly gains her respect as far as the other swimmers and me. I want to win a gold medal, and I admire her for what she has done.

P: Why are there so few women swim coaches?

W: I am not sure. I wish there were more. I have never had a woman coach on a national team trip. When you look at the swimming communities, there are not many woman coaches at all.

P: Would you prefer a woman coach?

W: I am not really sure. I have worked with men coaches all of my life, so I am not sure what kind of difference it would make.

P: Do you feel like you have a good relationship with Nicole, and that she helps your swimming?

W: Yes. Once a week we go out to dinner, and we talk and relate experiences. She tells me how she has been through and dealt with some of the things I am going through. It is really helpful.

P: Good. What is your specialty in swimming?

W: The individual medley, 200 and 400 [meters].

P: Which do you prefer?

W: Probably the 200.

P: Why?

W: I have been more successful at that event, and I guess that is why I like it more. I train more for the 400, or I have trained more for the 400, but I tend to lean more towards the 200. The 400 is a very demanding event. I say, and a lot of people say, it is the hardest event in swimming. I certainly agree. It is very demanding.

P: What is your favorite stroke?

W: Breast stroke. I started out as a breast stroker.

P: That is, according to most experts, the most difficult of the strokes. Would you agree with that?

W: I am not sure. I think, on my level, it really depends on the person. The breast stroke has always come naturally to me, ever since I was young. I was a breaststroker right off the bat. I think it depends. It [takes] a lot of coordination, and I can see how it could be difficult.

P: You do swim, in addition to the IMs, breaststroke races as well?

W: In national competitions, yes.

P: At the University, how do you relate individual goals to team goals? When you are in a swim meet, how do you approach that meet?

W: In a college meet?

P: Yes.

W: Basically, I just go out there and try to do my best. Hopefully, that will help out the team. Relays were a new thing for me when I first came to college. I had never been on relays. On my team here, whenever I went to nationals or anything, I was one of only a couple of people. There were never enough people for a relay. Since I swim IM, I am not on relays on national trips. That was a new thing, and I liked it. It is a lot of fun because you are all there rooting

for each other and cheering. Another thing I like about college swimming is that you are part of a team, you are all close and you are all striving towards the same goal.

P: How do you feel if you swim terrific times but your team loses?

W: That is kind of hard. Some people might not like this, but the past couple of years, I would probably feel fine. I concentrated on the Olympics, and that is an individual event. If I swam well, but the team lost, [my reaction would] depend on the level. If it was a dual meet, I would be OK. I swam well, and that contributed to my development and training towards the Olympics. [If] the team lost, it was too bad, but maybe next time.

P: What special characteristics does it take to be a top-level medley swimmer? What would be different from doing individual strokes?

W: I think it takes more training, because you have to develop in each stroke and focus on the techniques. Working on each stroke takes a lot more than just focusing on one stroke, but I like that. It adds some diversity. In practice, if I do not want to sit there doing one stroke all day, then I can switch around. It is more exciting.

P: For the record, tell me the strokes that you do in an IM.

W: [The strokes are] fly, back, breast and free.

P: Do you always start with fly?

W: Yes, that is the order.

P: What else is there about your swimming for a team? Do you feel really charged up about the SEC Championships?

W: Yes, the SECs are usually fun meets for me. I have not tapered [reducing the amount of laps you do in preparation for a meet in order to be well-rested] for those in the last two years.

P: You have not? Even so, in 1995, you won individual titles in the 200 IM, 400 IM, 200 Breast and the 800 Free Relay. You had a tremendous meet, even though you had not shaved or tapered. How do you explain such a great performance without that?

W: It is strange, because I was so geared towards the Olympics that I did not taper for a couple of years. I did not shave for a year and one-half to two years.

Even when I went to [the] Pan-Pacific Championships in Atlanta, in 1995, I did not shave, and I did not taper. I was doing workouts for warmup. I was sitting there doing workouts for the qualifying nationals. That is how focused I was for the Olympics. I was not even going to waste any time tapering. [I was] just going to train through. I did taper down a little for the SECs last year. That was getting close to trials, so I was on that road.

P: Well, you did win a silver medal in the Pan-Pacific Championships. So you were swimming highly competitive times on a world-class level, right?

W: Yes.

P: What about the NAAs? In the 1995 NAAs, you swam the same time as your silver medal in the Olympics, or close to it.

W: 1995 NAAs?

P: Yes, 157.71?

W: As my silver medal in the Olympics?

P: Is that not it?

W: No, that is on short course.

P: Oh, that is the short course.

W: Yes, that is the short course, and that is the 200. I won my silver medal in the 400.

P: You were the two-time SEC Swimmer of The Year. How do you react to those kinds of personal honors?

W: It made me feel good. I had not really gotten any awards like that before. When I first went to SECs, I did not even know that existed. I remember at the end of the meet at my first SECs, I did not even know that award was there. I remember I was warming down. I had just gotten out and we were going to do a team cheer. I was still in my suit and everything, and they were doing awards. I did not even know what they were doing up there. They called my name and I was like, what? Chris Martin [Christopher Martin, University of Florida Head Men's and Women's Swimming Coach, 1992-1997] goes, Allison, you have got to get up there. I was like, what is this? So I went up there. It was pretty funny.

- P: That is great. What about this statistic? In 1995-1996, in team events, you won fifteen individual titles in eleven different events. How do you train for all of these different events?
- W: I train IM, so I ended up training for a lot of things. I will do any event in the college season. I will end up in any event. Usually how the college meets have gone in the past couple of years is they put me in the line-up last. They put everybody else in their strongest events, and they put me in what they have left and need to win, or what they need a strong person in. Or, if the meet is not going well, they can always switch me to something else. It was kind of hard sometimes, but I got used to it.
- P: Where do you get the energy to swim in all of these different events over a short period of time?
- W: It is kind of difficult, but at the same time, I swim the 400 IM. I do not think anything can be as difficult as the 400 IM. I am used to it.
- P: How much travelling have you done? You were at the World Championships in Rome while you were still in high school. Who travelled with you?
- W: The national team and all of the staff. My family came to watch.
- P: How has foreign travel affected you?
- W: It has been fun. Most of the time, on the national trips, I do not do much sightseeing. I used to live overseas. My dad was in the military, so I moved around a lot when I was a kid. I was born here, but I only stayed here for a couple of months. Then it was off on the road to different bases. Finally, my dad retired here about five or six years ago.
- P: Where did you live in Europe?
- W: In Europe, I lived in Heidelberg, Germany, and Berlin, Germany. On each military base they have a swim team. I was on the Berlin Barracudas and the Heidelberg Sea Lions. So whenever you wanted to go to a meet, you had to travel to a different base in Europe. I did a lot of travelling [for swimming and also for] vacations and just going around.
- P: Did you have good coaches in these base swim teams?
- W: Yes. My Berlin coach actually came here about two years ago to coach the FAST [Florida Aquatic Swim Team] after Kevin Thornton left. He was great. I think he was my first really influential coach.

P: Why?

W: He was at the Olympic trials in 1980. He taught me what it meant to be a great swimmer and what it took to be that, as far as training, dedication and discipline.

P: What is his name?

W: **Kevin McHenna**

P: Kevin McHenna. So as a younger swimmer, you swam with FAST, as well?

W: Yes, under Kevin Thornton.

P: What was that experience like?

W: I loved it. I always loved coming to practice. That is where my friends were. We would always have fun and talk in between sets and on the walls, if we had a little time.

P: Let us now talk about your Olympics training, because your career has been focused there. How do you train for the Olympics? Take me through a typical day.

W: [I] wake up at 5:30 a.m. and practice at 6:00 a.m. until about 8:00 a.m. Then I would go to class. It would depend on the semester, but [my classes were] usually during the middle of the day. Then, if I had time, I would take a little nap in the early afternoon. I had shoulder problems over the past couple of years, so I would always be at the training room a lot. I would go to the training room an hour before practice, and do some rehab. Then, [I would] go to practice again from 3:00 p.m. until about 5:30 p.m., at least. I would go to the training room again for at least another hour, if not more. Then I would get dinner, go home and study.

P: How many miles a day would you swim?

W: It depends on the time of year. Christmas time was our heaviest period of training, and I would always do a lot then.

P: Do you swim for times or for stamina?

W: The 400 IM takes a lot of endurance, so I actually did a lot of distance training. They have a distance camp every year, and they include 400 IM in that with the 1500 freestylers and the 800 freestylers. That tells you a little bit about what it takes, too.

P: You actually train at longer distances than the 400, so that is really for stamina?

W: Yes.

P: How do you swim against a time? What motivates you to beat somebody else's time or beat a previous time?

W: I always love doing that or attempting that. A lot of the times during practice, if there was no one I could race, I would have to race the clock. A lot of times before a last repetition in a set or something in practice, Kevin would tell me, Allison, try and go this [specific] time. I would, and I would just try my hardest and do what I do best.

P: Can you tell, when you swim, if you have made that time? Do you have sort of an internal clock?

W: Yes. Usually I can tell pretty well if I am going that time or not.

P: So if you are half-way through a race, you might know that you are behind that time, and you might need to exert yourself a little more?

W: Yes. Like at the Olympics--I did not think about it at the time, consciously. I was just concentrating on racing--I knew my time was not going to be that fast when I got to the half-way point. It was not as fast as I wanted it to be.

P: How important is the initial entry into the water?

W: In the 400, it is not as important as in other races. In other events it is, especially college swimming. The start is important. I actually had a pretty good start. I love doing them, especially breaststroke pull-outs after the start. That is important, especially in breaststroke.

P: How long do you stay under water?

W: It depends. Usually for breaststroke [I stay under for] about half of a pool length for short course. During taper time (to practice my streamline and pull-outs), I would always try to see how far I could get under water from my start. [I wanted to] see if I could only do one stroke before I hit the wall. That was always fun.

P: That is better? That is faster?

W: Not just doing one stroke, because I was just concentrating, and I would come to a dead halt before doing another movement. If you have a strong start and it

could pull you through the water longer, yes, that is better.

P: So you are faster under the water than you are on the surface?

W: On starts, yes. You do not want to come up right away.

P: I noticed in the Olympics this year that a lot of male swimmers, particularly, were staying under longer, even for the fly and freestyle.

W: Yes. I am not really sure about that technique. I think it has some development to go. It seemed to me like it would work great for the first fifty [meters] of the race, but then it would fall back on them because it creates such oxygen debt. It would be great because people would be cheering. It was awesome. They were under water and they were moving really fast. Then they would hit the wall and come off that second wall, if it was 100, and everyone else would pass them because they had used their oxygen a little more wisely.

P: How important are turns in a race?

W: I think they are very important. In the individual medleys you have transition turns, which are very important. You can get ahead. Races can be won or lost in the turns.

P: Do you practice turns a lot?

W: Yes I do.

P: Do you have different techniques from other swimmers, or do most swimmers use the same techniques?

W: Most swimmers use the same techniques. Just like anything, your turns might be different from other people's. I remember, I think it was 1993, I started a new back-to-breast turn. Only a few people do [it], but it is a lot faster. It is kind of difficult to do without getting disqualified. You have to be really careful. I started doing that turn on my IMs. Usually, I gained a lot of ground on that turn, maybe a body length, so it is really helpful.

P: For races that are decided by tenths of seconds, that is critical.

W: Yes.

P: What about equipment? Do you use equipment in training?

W: Yes. I used paddles, pull-bouys, zoomers and fins.

P: What is a zoomer?

W: It is a fin, but it is cut off really short. It is kind of a strange concept. It is not a full fin, so it does not give you all of that propulsion, and it does not get in your way on turns.

P: How does it help you?

W: It just gives you a little extra, and you are able to move faster with that little extra end there.

P: Do you lift weights?

W: Yes.

P: How does that help?

W: Strength.

P: Just getting through the water?

W: Yes, being able to grab the water.

P: Do you do leg and upper-body workouts?

W: Yes.

P: Do you do any running?

W: Yes, I run, and a lot of times I will do road biking on the weekends. Also at the weight room, it depends on my training time, but I do the stairmaster and stationary bike. Also, we did stadiums.

P: So you just run up and down the stadium steps?

W: Yes. When I was on FAST, we did pull-ups a lot, rope-climbing, dips and push-ups. We still do sit-ups. Also, we do medicine ball throws and wheels--you prop your legs up on these two wheels and you prop your ankles up in between the beam that connects the little wheels. You have to pull yourself up a hill with your hands. That is really hard.

P: All of that, collectively, helps you?

W: Yes.

P: What do you do in terms of preparing for a big meet? How do you physically prepare yourself?

W: [I] usually rest a lot. [I] try to stay off my legs, and make sure I am eating right. Usually, at big meets I have a problem with losing [too much] weight, so I try to keep my food intake up and make sure it is the right kind of foods. I take a lot of ice baths, those are the things I do. I will fill up a big tub with a lot of ice--it's really cold--and either I will put just my lower body in, or I will get my whole body in. That is really tough.

P: How does that help?

W: It flushes all the lactic acid in your body. Since it is so cold, all the blood is trying to go through your veins and muscles to warm it up. All that blood flow is getting rid of the lactic acid.

P: What food would you eat before a meet?

W: Simple things like carbohydrates--nothing too spicy or complicated. [I eat things like] bagels and pasta.

P: No pepperoni pizza?

W: No.

P: What else do you do in terms of your diet over a longer period?

W: I have always tried to keep a healthy diet. I always try to get protein. That was always a little thing of mine. I have a hard time eating enough protein, but I always eat a low-fat, high-carbohydrate diet.

P: How do you prepare yourself psychologically?

W: I always try not to get too nervous. I get so nervous that it throws everything out of whack.

P: How do you prevent being nervous at the Olympics?

W: You cannot prevent that, but I would try to relax more. If I could do something different, at the Olympics, I would try to relax. I would read a nice book or watch a movie, rather than running around trying to do everything I could. I did not give myself enough time to relax and settle down each day. I think that would have helped.

P: What do you do in the ready room?

W: That room is pretty funny. Usually, my thing is to go there the last second I can. I do not really like sitting in there. I like swimming right before my race, so I try to stay wet. I like to be wet before I go up to my block. Usually, I try to swim until the last second I can--until they have called my name about ten times to get in there. I go in there right before they march out. I try not to spend a lot of time there. That does not work at the Olympics, because you have to be there fifteen minutes before your race.

P: What did you do this time in those fifteen minutes?

W: I just sat there stretching. This is kind of gross, but I cannot stand spit or anything like that to be in my throat. I feel like it stops my breathing or something. I just sat in there spitting, stretching a lot and drinking water.

P: What were some of the other competitors doing?

W: [Some were] jumping around, swinging their arms or just sitting there listening to music.

P: Is there any playing of mind games, trying to intimidate the opponent?

W: Yes, there definitely is. I remember the 1993 short-course World Championships. It was not really in the ready room, but that day I showed up early because the pool is always so crowded. I was swimming against the Chinese to win the race that night. She was my main competitor. I was there early--there was nobody at the pool. The Chinese girls had slept at the pool--yes. I got in the pool. The pool was empty; the whole place was empty. I went to go warm-up by myself, and two Chinese girls jumped in in my lane to warm-up as soon as I got in. That is just a little mind game right there. I guess they were trying to psych me out or something.

P: Were they trying to block you?

W: Yes. I think they were just trying to get in my way and play with my mind a little. It did not really work. I just moved to the other lane, and I did not let it bother me.

P: How does shaving affect you? Is it psychological or does it really help?

W: I think it is more psychological than physical. As far as the physical part goes, it only helps you maybe a tenth or something, very little. In the 400, that is not as big of a deal. I could understand in the 50, because [a tenth of a second] is a

lot. I think psychologically it helps. It gives you a whole new feel in the water. That is nice, because when you get to a big meet, you want to feel different--like you are faster. It makes you feel faster. You have got less drag.

P: So you sort of feel the water better, is that it?

W: I think [you just feel it] differently. I spent a year with hair on me, and so it does not really feel better because it feels strange. It feels faster because the water just rolls right off of you.

P: What about tapering? How does that help you?

W: Mainly, just rest. I have not done a lot of tapering in my swimming career, as I said before, but it is just a lot of rest. Usually, when I get ready for a meet, I concentrate more on speed work. [I work more on] starts, turns and a lot of technique.

P: Some swimmers visualize the race and winning the meet. Do you do things like that to help you prepare psychologically?

W: Yes, I visualize my race. I visualize my turns sometimes if I know I will have a hard time with it. My fly-to-back turn is my slowest turn, so a lot of times I will try and visualize hitting the right stroke into the wall and doing the turn well.

P: When you hit the wall during the race, do you try to hit the wall on the stroke?

W: Yes, at the end of a stroke.

P: Have you timed your strokes so you know basically how you will hit that wall?

W: Yes. From the flags I will know, based on where my stroke is at that point, where I am going to hit the wall. If I need to shorten up my stroke or lengthen it to hit the wall at the end of the stroke, then I will be able to do that.

P: How did you overcome your nervousness at the Olympics?

W: I am not really sure I overcame it. It was still there, but I just tried to think that I was going out there to have fun. I swam everyday. I was just swimming; just doing something I love and having fun at it.

P: You have trained four years for that moment.

W: Yes, and there were a lot of expectations and pressures.

P: How did you present that in your mind? Did you say that you were determined to win the gold or just to do the best you could? How did you approach the actual race?

W: I wanted to win the gold. I had sacrificed a lot. I had trained for four years. I knew I had the ability to swim a time that could win, and I wanted to win the gold.

P: Were you really disappointed when you did not?

W: After the 400, I was somewhat [disappointed]. I had always done better in the 200, so I was kind of looking to that race. I was disappointed after my 400, but I still had hope for the 200.

P: Let us go back and talk about the Olympic trials. How did you perform in the trials as compared to the Olympics?

W: I think my times were faster at the trials. I am not really sure why. I certainly was not as tapered for the trials, so that is kind of confusing. I was having a lot of shoulder problems at the trials. It was hurting me a lot during my races. I was pretty nervous. You cannot go to the Olympics if you do not get first or second.

P: What were your shoulder problems?

W: I have tendinitis in my shoulder. I also had a thing called costochondritis, which is inflamed ribs. That affects my shoulder as well.

P: Did you have a special trainer for the Olympics?

W: They have trainers that are on the team with you. Since I had been on the national team for a couple of years, I had worked with them before. They knew what I liked, and I could always explain what I wanted.

P: Did you take a personal trainer with you to the Olympics?

W: No. Kevin went, but he was not allowed on deck. He was only allowed on the stands. Unless you are affiliated with the Olympic team, or any Olympic team, you are not allowed on deck.

P: Was that a disadvantage for you?

W: Yes. I thought so in the beginning, because Kevin was my coach. I had worked with him for so long that I wanted him on deck with me. It was kind of hard. I called him on the phone a lot since we were given the pagers. That was helpful. He could always page me, or I could give him a call to page me.

P: When did you decide what events to train for in the Olympics?

W: I knew it was always IMs, and I was giving other events a chance at trials. Since I had a bunch of shoulder difficulties, it kind of inhibited those other events. I needed to concentrate on those two races when the meet started, because the other events were just wearing down my shoulder more.

P: Is that why you did not continue with the 200 breaststroke?

W: Right.

P: You had qualified in that race, correct?

W: Yes. It had gotten really bad right up here in my pecks. That is an important muscle for breaststroke, and it was really bothering me.

P: How did you swim during the preliminary races? Do you swim differently than you did in the finals?

W: Yes, definitely. I think it depends on the meet, though. At the Olympics, you have to give all out in the preliminaries--more so than at nationals. [The Olympics] are a lot more competitive. Usually at nationals, I do not have to push it that hard to make the finals. I can relax a little, and maybe play around with other people in other lanes.

P: You cannot in the Olympics?

W: No.

P: Did you swim better in the preliminaries than in the final?

W: I do not think so. Usually I drop a good amount of time in my races between preliminaries and finals.

P: You swim faster in the finals?

W: Yes. I think the biggest drop I ever had was at the World Short-Course Championships in Mayorca in 1993 when I broke that world record. In the morning I had gone 2:17, and this is short-course meters. That is really slow, so I was really disappointed. At night, I went a 2:07. I do not know how I dropped that much time [ten seconds], but usually I drop a bunch of time. [It is usually] at least couple seconds.

P: Ten seconds is a tremendous difference.

W: Yes, I do not know how I did that one.

P: How did you feel about breaking a world record?

W: It was pretty neat. I always dreamed about standing on the podium while they are playing the anthem and raising your flag. That is the best moment.

P: Describe your 400 IM race at the Olympics. Who were your major competitors?

W: I thought, going into the Olympics, my major competitor would be Krisztina Eggerszegi [Krisztina Eggerszegi, Member of Hungarian Olympic Swim Team, Gold and Bronze Medalist, 1996 Olympics] and maybe an Australian Elli Overton [Elli Overton, Member of Australian Olympic Swim Team, 1996 Olympics]. It ended up being--I try not to think about her--I cannot even think of her name, the Irish girl [Michelle Smith, Member of Irish Olympic Swim Team, Gold and Bronze Medalist, 1996 Olympics].

P: She won that race?

W: Yes, and I had never raced against her. I had been at the world class level for a while, but I had never raced with her. I was kind of surprised going into it, and I really did not think she would be there, but she was.

P: What about this controversy? At one point she had been accused of taking steroids.

W: It was kind of difficult most of the time, at least for the Chinese. I would not really consider myself _____. At the Olympics, too, I still thought I could have won, even if she was on steroids. My best time would have beat her in both races. I did not really see how I could not have won if I had done my best times. At the same time, her story is kind of fishy. Her boyfriend had gotten banned for steroid use. I had never raced against her or heard of her before. All of a sudden she is at the top, dropping twenty seconds off her time. That is a little interesting. I wish I could learn how to do that.

P: All of this really peaked at the Olympics. She had not been swimming these world-class times prior to that?

W: No.

P: So you had no sense of what kind of swimmer she was?

W: Right.

P: Describe the actual process of this race. [Tell me] how well you started, how you were doing at the middle, and then how you felt at the end of the 400.

W: It is kind of good that you are interviewing me at this time of year, because I could not have talked to you about it before without breaking down right there--especially the 200. I started out pretty well in the 400. The fly was not always my strongest stroke, so I expected that. I started out fly. I was not really at the lead, but my goal was just to be right there with everybody else--not too far behind, but just right there. That was going well at that point. I pulled ahead in the backstroke, and I was up there with Krisztina Eggerszegi. That got me kind of excited when I saw that on the turn because she is an awesome backstroker. I was ahead in backstroke, and I pulled ahead of her in breast stroke. By freestyle, the Irish girl had pulled up, and by the last length, she pulled ahead of me in the last 25 [meters].

P: How close was the race?

W: I think she was a second and a half ahead of me. I am not sure, but I think that is how it ended.

P: When you hit the wall, did you know where you had placed?

W: No, I was at the same point as Krisztina Eggerszegi. It was a race to the finish with her and me. I just finished two-tenths or something ahead of her.

P: Did you know you had beaten her?

W: No. I had a feeling, but I could not really tell because there is a lane in between us. I turned around and was happy to see that I finished ahead of her.

P: Why do you think you did not swim your best time in this particular race?

W: That is a hard question. I have been trying to figure it out for myself since the Olympics. I think there are many factors, but I can name a couple I have been thinking of. I did have shoulder and rib inflammation and tendinitis. Also, I had lost a lot of weight before the Olympics. It was not on purpose but from all the nervousness and energy I was using. I had never really tapered like that before, so that was a new experience for me. I think now, when I start training again, I would like to practice tapering a little more often. It is a hard thing to grasp; you have to learn it just like everything else.

P: It was a different experience for you?

W: Along with everything else, the whole Olympics, plus the taper, which most people have experienced before.

P: Describe your race in the 200 IM.

W: I do not know what happened in that race. It is very difficult for me to talk about, but I finished sixth. It was like somebody sucked out all the energy out of me. I got ahead after the backstroke, but after that it was over. I was trying as hard as I could, but it was like I was swimming through pudding or something. I was not going anywhere.

P: Did the failure to win a gold in the 400 IM affect your 200 IM race?

W: Not that much, because I truly believed I had a better chance in the 200 to win a gold medal. Sure, I was disappointed a little at winning the silver, but I was thinking that a silver and a gold would not be that bad. I was OK with that. [laughter]

P: How did you feel winning the silver? That was your first Olympic medal.

W: At first when I finished, I was a little disappointed because I wanted to be first. I felt really proud standing on the podium and the whole crowd cheering.

P: Where is your medal?

W: At my parents' house.

P: Do you take it out and look at it periodically?

W: Moreso with my parents. They like to show it to all their friends. I think they think it is theirs instead of mine. They were telling me what their plans are to do with it, and I had no influence on that.

P: You did not win a gold medal in the 200 IM, but you are a world record holder in that race, which means you are the best in the world. There must be a certain amount of satisfaction in that kind of achievement.

W: Yes, in a way, but I hold a world record in short-course meters, which is different. That time translated would be a long-course world record, so I feel good when I think about that race. I think that was probably my best race ever. It even gives me more to think about, because I feel like I should have been able to do better at the Olympics.

P: Will that give you strong incentive for 2000?

W: Yes. I [would] really like to swim up to the ability that I think I have and have shown in training and practice everyday.

P: How have you been swimming since the Olympics?

W: I have not really. I have not swam for a couple of months now. The two months after the Olympics, I was having a hard time getting motivated. I was burned out, as that term goes, so I [decided to] take a break.

P: When do you think you will start back your full-time practice?

W: I am not sure. Right now I am doing dry-land training to try and get a little more aerobic base before I head back to the pool full-time.

P: Talk about living at the Olympics. Where did you live in Atlanta?

W: In the dorm facilities within the college.

P: What was your reaction to that experience of being in a living facility with all these other people from all over the world?

W: The first week, I really did not pay much attention to anything. I was really focused on swimming my race. The second week, it was a blast. It was so fun. There was everybody around, and everybody was friendly. The closing ceremony is my fondest memory. Everybody [was there] from all [the] countries--we did not even speak the same languages--but here you are holding hands or dancing with other people. Everybody is happy and joyful, and you did not even know them.

P: Did you exchange pins and souvenirs?

W: Yes. I traded mostly clothes, like T-shirts.

P: Some people have argued that the Atlanta Games were too commercial. What do you think?

W: Yes, I guess. I think that was more on the outside to say. I did not really pay much attention to that. All I knew was that we were getting a lot of free stuff, and that was great. So maybe that was part of the commercial part of it, but I liked it.

P: How should Olympic athletes be paid?

W: I do not know. It is kind of hard being in college, because you cannot accept any prize money, training money or anything when you are in school. I have

won about \$50,000 over the past couple years, and I wish I could have put that in trust funds or something not available to me until after school. It is kind of disappointing when you swim hard and that money is there. You could use it for your future, but you are not able to. Winning is not necessarily for the money, but it is nice. I could use that in the future some way.

P: So should there be some system where at least they could take a percentage of this money to help defray college expenses?

W: Not so much college expenses. At least not for me, because I have a scholarship here. I think it would be nice if we could put that money in trust funds where you would not be able to touch it until you are out of college. I am not sure if that would work. I know in Canada they do something like that. I think that would be nice, because it is kind of hard when you have to make that choice. Money or school? I always wanted to swim with a team like this, and everybody is really friendly. I was not willing to give that up.

P: Do you plan to complete your college education?

W: Yes.

P: Good. What about training of Olympic swimmers? Should there be a special location where they all train together? How should that work?

W: I do not know. I think there are pros and cons of that situation. On one hand, you would be around people who are going through the same things, doing the same type of things you are doing and have the same goal that you have. On the other hand, it would be too close for comfort sometimes. It is kind of nice to be around people who do not have the same goals or train here at the University, away from those other prospectives and pressures.

P: So what you could do, perhaps, is take a semester off and go and train for the Olympics specifically?

W: Yes.

P: Do you think that would be better in terms of your times and your capabilities?

W: You mean with other people?

P: Yes.

W: Yes. I think that would be helpful. I know that before the Olympics, we had a training camp. We were together, as a team, like two weeks before the Games started. That was nice. I know other countries spend a lot more time together

as a national team, but I think it was good because you always had support. Everybody was nervous, everybody was looking forward to their races and going through some of the same things.

P: What impact has the NCAA reduction of official practice times had?

W: Not much. Sorry to the NCAA. There are mandatory practice times of only twenty-one hours a week, but then we have voluntary extra practice times. If you do not go, then you are kind of yelled at, so you do not really have that much of a choice. In theory they are volunteer practices.

P: Sort of like in the army when they point at you and ask you to volunteer.

W: Yes.

P: What does your scholarship pay?

W: I have a full scholarship that pays for the dorm, food, books, classes and everything.

P: Do you think this University does a good job of taking care of the female athletes?

W: Yes, I think they do a great job. I have not seen a lot of other schools, but I know people that go to other schools. I think Florida does one of the best jobs in the country as far as supporting their female athletes.

P: In terms of swimmers, do the male and female [teams] have the same facilities and the same training?

W: Yes, absolutely. Here at Florida, football is obviously more focused on. I have seen the football athletes have different situations and probably have more advantages and different opportunities in a way, but I have never felt, as a swimmer, that swimming was nothing or had no importance. I think here they give importance to every sport. I like that, and as far as a male and female swim teams, we are two in the same. Up until this year, we trained together. I think it is exactly the same.

P: Of course, the football team makes a huge sum of money to help support other sports.

W: Yes, we would not be able to do a lot of the things we do without that money. They provide money for the whole school and the sports.

P: So you would say Florida is really ahead of the curve in terms of taking care of

women's sports? They have just started a softball team and the soccer team.

W: Yes, I really like how they do not cancel men's programs to equal out the program. At other schools they would cancel, say, men's swimming, so they would not have to add another program. Here, they will add other ones. It is nice.

P: How fast can swimmers swim? At the Olympics there were 267 [National records], twelve Olympic and four world records. No mark set after 1980 survived. Every year they get faster. How fast can they go?

W: I think there is no limit. I think we always will be getting better and faster, and there will always be new training techniques.

P: Why are they getting faster?

W: I think more technological advances help. I know some of the strokes have changed. Just a little thing like back-to-breast, like the turn I do, you would not be able to do before. On the back-to-back turn, you were not be able to do a flip turn, but now you can. That makes up time.

P: How about the pools? They are designing the pools differently. Does that help?

W: Yes, I think it helps. I am not sure how much it helps, but I can certainly notice a difference between the shallow end of the O'Connell Center and the Olympic pool. There is a big difference. The Olympic pool is deeper. They have certain better systems, [and] the lane ropes [are different].

P: So the lane ropes do help?

W: Yes. Sometimes a little pool or at dual-meets [there are] little lane lines that are not that strong. The waves just go right over them and provide a lot of turbulence. The better pools have stronger, bigger lane ropes that just the [stop] water from going in between.

P: The deeper the pool the better?

W: Yes.

P: What about the new swim suits?

W: Those are always fun. I think I have tried every swimsuit they have. They are always coming out with a new material. I think Speedo's new material is

aquafiber or something like that. It is fast. It feels great. I swam in a Nike suit at the Olympics, and it felt pretty good.

P: Why are the suits better? How do they cut your time?

W: They say that the newer suit materials, like the aquafiber, the material I used with Nike, is faster than your skin. It can repel the water faster, and it does not create as much drag. Plus, comfortability is a big factor with me. I used to swim in paper suits when I was younger. Those were really uncomfortable. They cut into your shoulders, and the seams are really tight. If I feel more comfortable, then I am going to be able to go faster.

P: Is this mainly psychological?

W: I do not know. I think it is a little bit, but the racing suits are much faster than training suits. I do not know. I have always been into the suits a lot. I like to experiment with the faster suits, or what they say are faster.

P: One suit had little ridges on it that were supposed to channel the water better.

W: Yes, they always come out with new things. It is kind of funny. The new little ridging on the suits is supposed to channel the water some way. I just try on the suits and see which one feels best and most comfortable.

P: Are athletes today stronger, better trained and smarter than they used to be?

W: That is a hard question. I think that we know more now. There is more out there as far as technology and development. That helps. People are learning more about swimming, what it involves and what the water does when you go through it.

P: If we look at diets, new training methods and new technology, do you feel all of that is going to lower the times?

W: Yes. I think a lot of advances in those areas have helped lower times.

P: What is the future of swimming in America?

W: I am not sure. I would hope that it would gain more popularity. At the Olympics it is certainly popular, but in between those four years, it is really does not gain that much attention.

P: My impression is that female athletes are getting into soccer and softball. They are getting into other sports. If you look at attendance, gymnastics and women's

basketball would far out-draw swimming. Why do you think that is?

W: As far as gymnastics goes, I think that is more entertainment. I think that is why it draws more people. I do not know why with swimming there are not more people coming in. I really do not know.

P: It might be partly because it is an individual, as opposed to a team, sort of thing. That might be one reason.

W: Yes.

P: Where do you see yourself in four years, in terms of your schooling?

W: Hopefully, I will be at Sidney 2000, swimming there. That is where I really hope to be. That is my real goal. As far as my in between time, I would like to get stronger, learn more about myself, learn more about my swimming and develop myself.

P: Has your 1996 experience helped your swimming?

W: Yes. I think so. I have learned a lot in these past couple of months. It has really been hard, but I have learned a lot about myself, my swimming and things I can improve on. I think that will help in the end.

P: Most important lessons are hard. Do you think that you just wanted a medal too much?

W: In a way. It came to a point where the medal was everything, and I do not think that is the healthiest way to approach it. For me, if I did not win the gold medal, I was nothing. I do not think that is the best way to approach it. It kind of sets you up. I think the gold medal should be the icing on top of the cake, and all that hard training in between should be where the success really lies.

P: Is there anything else you would like to add or talk about?

W: No.

P: This concludes the interview with Allison Wagner.