

# Phelps' maturation includes faith

Having been blessed to cover his Olympic debut in Sydney, Australia, in 2000, and report on his unprecedented eight medals at the 2004 Games in Athens, Greece, I am more than a casual observer of the athletic marvel that is Michael Phelps.

It was gratifying to see Phelps swim as well as ever the night of Aug. 7, as he led the U.S. to a gold medal - his 19th - in the 400-meter freestyle relay. It was his first dip into the pool at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, but the performance was not surprising, considering the evident serenity the 31-year-old discovered in the aftermath of a series of aimless choices that culminated in a drunk-driving arrest in fall 2014.

Phelps bared his soul to Sports Illustrated's Tim Layden in November 2015, and in June Karen Crouse of the New York Times added additional pertinent details about his personal growth.

It was at an addiction recovery center in Arizona where Phelps, who turned pro at 16 and never had time for college, began reading real books, not just magazines, which took him from Rick Warren's best-selling "The Purpose Driven Life" to "Man's Search for Meaning," by Holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl.

This is a side of Michael not previously exhibited.

✖ Over a 14-month span, from July 2003 to August 2004, The Baltimore Sun sent me wherever Phelps competed. Those travels became a book, "The Story of Olympic Champion Michael Phelps, From Sydney to Athens to Beijing" (Rodale Press, 2006).

The only references to faith or religion in the book are mine.

On page 1, I wrote that "Michael Phelps manipulated water like no man since Moses." Later, it was noted that swimming's 24/7/365 ethos does not observe the Sabbath, that before swim finals are held on a Sunday night, preliminaries are held on Sunday morning, church services be damned. While the men who founded the North Baltimore Aquatic Club swam their first strokes in a Knights of Columbus pool and studied at Loyola High and Loyola College, the NBAC stressed a self-reliance and self-determination more in line with Ayn Rand.

Phelps was a boy and young man of few words when I followed him on a full-time basis. He never mentioned church or faith, and I cannot recall him saying "Thank God" or anything similar, as an aside or at a press conference, on the road to Athens.

That's why it is gratifying to hear him acknowledge a higher power, that he is not in this on his own.

