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AT Special Feature: 50 Freestyle - Swimming at it's Finest!

by Matt Martinez



Anthony Ervin (AT File Photo), equaled Tom Jager's twelve year-old 50 meter Freestyle record in 2002.

The 50-yard freestyle demands perfection like no other swimming event. The race is so short, that even the smallest mistake can result in a blown race. Have a slow reaction off the blocks in a 200 breaststroke? There is still time to regain that ground. Miss a turn in the 400 I.M.? There are 15 more laps to make up for it. This is why the 50 freestyle is swimming at it's finest: pure racing, almost no strategy involved, just get up and go!

The 50-yard freestyle is equal to the 100-meter dash in track. ...The glamour event, and whoever holds its world record also holds the title as the fastest swimmer of all time. Olympic gold medalist and NCAA champion Tom Jager held the crown for 12 years. Jager's record of 19.05 stood for 12 years until UC Berkley sprinter, Anthony Ervin, equaled that mark in 2002. This was the first time since 1999, when University of Arizona grad, Roland Schoeman swam a 19.07, that someone got close to breaking Jager's record, and possibly the 19-second barrier. Unfortunately for swim fans, Ervin was not the one to provide the community with that elusive sub-19 swim. Then came 2005...

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The 2005 college swim season began with two premier superstars in sprint events, Frenchman Fred Bousquet of Auburn, and Croatian Duje Draganja of Cal. Both of these men swam for elite college programs known for developing sprinters, David Marsh of Auburn and Mike Bottom of Cal are thought to be two of the best sprint coaches in the world. Bottom was actually Ervin's coach in 2002 when Ervin tied Jager's record and also set the world record in the 100-yard freestyle, going 41.62. Draganja was also coming off of an exciting Olympic year in 2004, where he won the silver medal in the 50-meter freestyle, only .01 of a second behind champion Gary Hall Jr.

Although Draganja seemed to be the favorite because of this international success, Bousquet carried an equally impressive resume, being the defending NCAA champion in the 50-freestyle. Bousquet actually set the world record in the event, though the meet was swum in short course meters because of the Olympics. So, he set the record in a different course.

It seemed that it was a sure bet that both swimmers had an equal shot at breaking 19 at the NCAA Championships, everyone was just waiting for it to happen! In the end, Bousquet would come out victorious, winning the 50 free and setting the records. He became the first person to break 19, smashing the record in pre-lims with an 18.74. That night, he added to his success, going under 19 again and winning the 50 free title. Draganja barely missed in that final heat, clocking a 19.01. Although Draganja seemed disappointed about his 50 free, he wasn't fazed and dominated the field in the 100 free en route to a NCAA record of 41.42.

It seemed that there would be an immediate rush of people who would soon start breaking the 19 second barrier, NC State sprinter Cullen Jones got close (19.07), but besides him there wasn't anyone else during the 2006 college swim season. It wasn't until 2007 that there would again be a sub-19 second swim...

The 2007 NCAA Men's Division I Championship Meet ended up being (at least for sprinters) the fastest meet in the history of the sport! In the sprint events, which included the 50 and 100 freestyle, 100 back, breast and fly, and the 200 and 400 free and medley relays, there were eight NCAA records set. In the only event that a record wasn't set, the 100 backstroke, winner Albert Subirats missed the record by a mere .23 of a second. The stars of the meet, however, were Auburn sophomore Cesar Cielo and Stanford senior (and NCS record holder in the 50 free), Ben Wildman-Tobriner. The

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two sprinters launched an assault of the 50 free unlike any before!

The first event of the meet, the 200 free relay, was looking to be a two-team race between the Stanford Cardinals featuring Ben Wildman-Tobriner, and the Auburn Tigers with Cesar Cielo. Stanford swam first, and Wildman-Tobriner led off, posting a 19.03, the 5th fastest time in history. Cielo led off his own Auburn relay with an 18.89, the second fastest time ever, and gave him the honor of the second person to break 19.

A short while later that day, in the third event of the meet, came the 50 free pre-lims. Wildman-Tobriner again swam first, blazing to an 18.98 and an American record, making him the third fastest person in history. Then Cielo, swimming in the final heat (the usual spot for the top qualifier going into the meet), bettered his time from the relay and came in at an 18.84. In the past, only one man had ever gone under 19 seconds in the 50 freestyle. But, on this day, March 15, 2007, there had been two.

That night, Stanford and Auburn squared off in the finals of the 200 free relay, and again, Auburn proved to be the most dominant sprint school in the country. Cielo led off with an NCAA record 18.69, while his teammates Matt Targett (18.71), Scott Goodrich (18.69), and Bryan Lundquist (18.62) did their part to secure a victory and an NCAA record of 1:14.71. Although it was an Auburn-dominated relay, Wildman-Tobriner led off his relay in an 18.87, resetting his American record and helping to set up a very exciting match up later in the individual 50 free.

In the 50 free, Cielo equaled his time from the relay, matching his NCAA record of 18.69. Wildman-Tobriner, unfortunately, failed to break 19 for the third time, tying for second with Matt Targett of Auburn and Albert Subirats of Arizona in a 19.08.

By the conclusion of the 2007 NAAs, it was apparent that the meet was one of, if not the fastest, championship meet ever. Nine NCAA records were broken, including all five relay records. There were big names at the meet, such as Larsen Jensen (USC, Olympic silver medalist), Albert Subirats (Arizona, multiple NCAA champion), and Darian Townsend (Arizona, Olympic gold medalist, former world record holder), but none of them were as big as the two stars of the meet, Cesar Cielo and Ben Wildman-Tobriner.

For some time, swim enthusiasts claimed that no one could ever break 19. Tom Jager got the closest and no one was able to do

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better. Then came Anthony Ervin, who equaled Jager's time. Everyone still thought that it was impossible to go sub-19. Finally, along came Fred Bousquet and his magical 18.74. This opened it up for everyone, and finally there were two swimmers going under 19 at the same meet, Cielo and Wildman-Tobriner.

Now that it seems possible to go as fast as an 18-second 50 freestyle, who knows what will be next? It is said that it is impossible to surpass perfection, but don't tell Fred Bousquet, Cesar Cielo, or Ben Wildman-Tobriner.



Anthony Ervin with the author, Matt Martinez when Matt was 12 years old.

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