

U.S. Olympic Team Trials - Swimming

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Lucas Oil Stadium

Thomas Heilman

Media Conference

Q. What was your first reaction? What did you think?

THOMAS HEILMAN: Looking up at the board and seeing my name at the top was -- it was really special. It's a goal I've had for years now, and kind of to see it up there, it was a little bit of some disbelief. Yeah, it was just a really special moment.

Q. I wonder what it feels like to -- you've been in a lot of conversations of the first person since Michael Phelps and now being the youngest Olympian since him, I wonder what that feels like. And what it's like to do this with Luca, who's someone who's worn a lot of those labels and known that pressure for a long time?

THOMAS HEILMAN: First of all, to do it with Luca, I got to know him after we were up at the Olympic training center together for a few weeks. Throughout this week, we've been talking about it here and there, and to do it with him is really awesome. I think it was his first one too. I think both of us were kind of in the same boat and just really excited to do it together.

In terms of the Michael Phelps comparisons, it's always great to be in the same conversation as him, but I'm trying not to worry about that too much and trying to take things day by day and leading up to the rest of the meet and then through Paris.

Q. As you're kind of talking about the Michael Phelps comparisons and things, what does it feel like when people are kind of like, okay, here's the next great swimmer? As you're a young teenager growing up, still growing into your body, how did you manage that type of pressure?

THOMAS HEILMAN: I think -- well, I try not to think about it. I think I get to not worry about those comparisons too much. But it's honestly like the people around me who keep me grounded. Obviously it starts with my family, and then my teammates and coaches do a great job of not trying to make me up to be anything special like that for the



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most part.

Then all my friends just make me feel normal around them. They don't treat me like I'm any different from them. I think everyone combined just helps me stay a 17-year-old kid and just doing day-to-day stuff like a normal teenager.

Q. Given that you made the Worlds team last year for Fukuoka, I'm curious what sort of lessons you learned from being on that international stage? International meets are so much bigger, better lights, et cetera. What have you learned from that, and what are you going to take into Paris?

THOMAS HEILMAN: Firstly, I think that trip was one of the most beneficial things that could have happened leading into this year and this meet. The format of both meets are very similar with the semifinals, and I think having that experience under my belt really helped me over the past couple days in just trying to swim my races smart to make it to the next round, not put too much effort into the prelim or the semifinal, or as much as I needed to.

My Coach Gary Taylor told me day by day I have as much experience at this level as anyone else despite being only 17 years old. So I was trying to use that to my advantage and kind of make it pop tonight. I think I did a pretty good job of that.

Q. Talk to me about that week before U.S. Nationals last year and how you were able to maintain your composure once you realized you'd made the World Championship team and then qualified in a second event?

THOMAS HEILMAN: I think last year, I don't think many people had me making the team. So I was able to kind of coast through a little bit, a little bit under the radar. Then making that first race was really exciting and a great experience doing it with Carson. He kind of took me under his wing a little bit and made it a little bit easier for me.

Then after the 200 fly last year, I think it took a little bit of pressure off me going into the 100 and allowed me to kind of just swim freely. And I was just lucky enough to get my hand on the wall.

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Q. I was just wondering, you're among one of the younger swimmers here. In terms of the pressure that we've been talking about, do you feel like the pressure is off a little bit because you are young, you still have much more of your swimming career left ahead of you? How does your age play a factor in that idea of pressure?

THOMAS HEILMAN: I think it probably helps a little bit. I don't really feel too much pressure going into the races.

The night before my prelim swim a couple nights ago was honestly the most nervous I'd been the past two days. But once I started racing and got the first one under my belt and made it through the semis, honestly I haven't really felt much pressure since then.

I kind of gained some confidence after each swim leading up until tonight. So I think my age probably helps me a little bit compared to the other guys who have, despite me being in a World Championship final, it's still the biggest crowd any of us have ever swam in front of.

But I think a lot of those guys having Olympic Trials experience maybe played a role a little bit.

Q. I also used to work in southwest and central Virginia, so I'm familiar with where you're from. But for those who are start to go get to know you on the world stage, can you give us a sense of what Crozet and Western Albemarle was like and what it means to you to represent that section of the country.

THOMAS HEILMAN: Yeah, Crozet is a pretty small town. There's not many people in the town that you don't really know, especially there's only about 1,000 kids in the high school. So you get to know everyone pretty well. It's an honor to, I guess like you say, kind of represent the town.

It's a really amazing place, and I'm lucky that I've been able to grow up there and build the relationships with my classmates and friends up until this point. I'm looking forward to getting back and seeing everyone.

Q. When you were talking earlier about staying grounded, you were talking about doing normal 17-year-old things. What are some normal 17-year-old things that you do?

THOMAS HEILMAN: Hanging out with my friends as much as possible, a lot with my teammates as well. I'm really into sports. If I have some free time, I'll go outside, and I have a little basketball hoop that I'll shoot some hoops on, or I'll take like a wiffle ball and swing a golf club recently.

Just playing sports with my friends. If I have a Saturday night during the fall, I'm watching college football. So I'm really into that.

Then a little bit ago I got into chess a little bit. So every once in a while, I'll spend some time playing chess online. But just little things here and there, just trying to kind of take my free time however I can.

Q. Talk us through maybe how the race execution went, a little slower than the world champ swim, but just ecstatic to get your hand on the wall first. Maybe also talk about that last 50.

THOMAS HEILMAN: I mean, the time wasn't anything spectacular, but under the circumstances, it doesn't really matter. In terms of race execution, I think my first 100 -- I don't know exactly the splits, but I think it's the fastest I've ever been out on the first half. So I'm excited about that for the 100.

Up until about the 185 meter mark, everything was going pretty much perfectly -- turns, underwaters, breakouts, everything -- all the small details went exactly how I wanted it to.

Coming off the last wall, I planned to try to make my move under water, and then I kind of felt it a little bit the last 15 meters, and I was actually getting a little bit scared because I could feel my stroke kind of falling apart a little bit. I feel like I held it together pretty well, and getting my hand on the wall first was a little bit of a relief.

Q. Thomas, one of the great things about these types of teams, World Championships and here, are the young swimmers getting to learn from the older ones. Who on this team or last year's experience were people that you were really excited, that you looked up to, that you were really excited to learn from. Who are some of those swimmers on this group, in the national group?

THOMAS HEILMAN: Last year it was definitely Carson, being one of the guys that I qualified with in the 200 fly. We kind of bonded over that, and I talked to him of course beforehand and became really good friends with him during the lead-up to World Championships and have kept that relationship up since then. Obviously he already made the team, so I'm looking forward to hang out with him again this summer.

Then I'd say Ryan Murphy and Nic Fink as the captains last year played a big role in making everyone feel comfortable, but especially me as the youngest guy on the team.

Then this summer, I know Caeleb Dressel just qualified in the 100 free. So he's been probably the swimmer I've looked up to the most and followed the most growing up. He wasn't on the team last year after his comeback, but now this summer I'm looking forward to hopefully hanging out with him a little bit more.

Q. Your coach Gary Taylor is a great coach. He's got great experience working with elite athletes. What would you say might be something that you learned from him in your association with him over the past couple years?

THOMAS HEILMAN: When he came into our program about three years ago, I was primarily just doing like freestyle and butterfly training, and that's what I was good at at that point. We're kind of just trying to focus on those two strokes.

I think the most important thing that Gary did for me on our entire team was kind of focusing on building everything as a swimmer. We worked a ton of IM, like all four strokes, spent a lot more time on underwaters. Got me out of my comfort zone doing more distance training, which I think has definitely helped, especially like in the 200.

I think just trying to challenge me in new ways, and then also, like I said earlier, just trying to keep me grounded. Obviously he's -- we celebrate when things go well, but throughout the season, he tells me what I need to hear and not exactly what I want to hear. He just tries to keep me on the right track as best as possible.

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