

Home / In The Magazine / People & Places / Dara Torres: Life in the Fast Lane

## Dara Torres: Life in the Fast Lane

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It's been a "surprising ride" for the seasoned Olympian, who at 41 is living proof that there's no age limit on dreams.

It is a balmy fall day just a few weeks post-Beijing Olympics. Inside the historic Hilton Hotel on Chicago's Michigan Avenue, guests and fans are swirling in a frantic frenzy like worker bees preparing the hive for its queen.

Milling around the hallways are the biggest and best names of last summer's Olympic games: NBA's Kobe Bryant, Jason Kidd and WBNA's Lisa Leslie; pitcher Jennie Finch; decathlete Bryan Clay; volleyball queens Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh; swimmers like Jason Lezak and Aaron Peirsol; tae kwon do's Steven Lopez and Mark Lopez; and the women's water polo team. The excess of athletic star power is the result

of Oprah's season kickoff show at the nearby Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. Of the more than 150 athletes brought in for the show, most have ended up here.

Included in the mix is 41-year-old Dara Torres, the record-setting five-time Olympic athlete who made news for competing in the 2008 Olympics as the oldest swimmer in the history of the games. Torres stands nearly six-feet tall. Her striking pixie-cut hair, megawatt smile, and toned frame are the essence of athletic power. Her left wrist and hand are bandaged in a brace — the result of her smashing her hand into the pool wall during one of her three silver-medal races where she tried to out-touch her nearest competitor, Germany's Britta Steffen, in the 50-meter freestyle, only to lose by 1/100th of a second.

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"I was bummed I lost by a fingernail," she says. "But it was just an awesome feeling to be back there, having that adrenaline rush to be competing and racing the best in the world."

At this particular moment, Torres is concerned about getting a table at the now-packed Pavilion, a casual hotel-based restaurant that has a long line trailing into the hallway. With Torres is a posse of friends and trainers, including Anne Tierney, one of Dara's two personal stretchers. Our group is told there aren't any available tables. Taking control of the situation, Torres wanders through the restaurant. Seeing a few empty spots, she returns and implores the hostess to combine a few tables. Within a minute or two, we are seated.

Torres starts scanning the menu. Around her neck are two chains she wears for good luck when traveling. On one is a pair of her father's World War II dog tags. The other — a necklace with an angel — is a good luck charm.

"All I ate while I was in China was McDonald's," Torres says with a laugh while ordering a sandwich with fries.

## Beyond Beijing

These days, Torres is concerned with being a mother to her 2½-year-old, Tessa Grace, and trying to make a living through post-Olympic endorsements.

"You just have to find a balance, like any working mom," she says. "At first it was hard. My biggest fear was doing my training and being away from my daughter. You just have to realize you have to do your thing and also be a mother."

The fifth of six children and oldest of two girls, Torres spent her youth in California. As a Beverly Hills teenager, she attended Westlake, a private girls' school in Los Angeles. A self-proclaimed tomboy, Torres ran around in tube socks playing soccer with her older brothers. Years later, she earned 28 All-American swimming honors at the University of Florida.

She competed in her first Olympics in 1984 at the age of 17, followed by stints in 1988, 1992 and 2000. It was after her third Olympics that Torres became the first athlete model in the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue. She also spent time swimming with sharks and jumping out of planes while hosting "Extreme Step," a segment of the Discovery Channel's former science and technology show The Next Step.

After a seven year-drought from competitive swimming, Torres started training for the Olympics in the spring of 1999. In five months, she dropped her time to best the previous world record she'd set in the 50-meter freestyle more than 15 years earlier. At the 2000 Olympic games in Sydney, Torres, then a 33-year-old, competed as the then-oldest member of the U.S. Olympic Swim Team, winning five medals — three individual bronze and two golds on relays. Befitting her past, Torres took time off once again, opting to commentate for NBC at the 2004 games in Athens, instead of being in the pool.

"You have to do it when you are ready," she says. "At that time, I was glad I wasn't swimming."

Torres was taking time off from swimming when, after struggling to have a baby, she became pregnant. Torres and her partner, David Hoffman, gave birth to their daughter in April 2006. Torres didn't waste any time trying to get back into shape. Her well-documented comeback started just hours after giving birth.

"I was a little too embarrassed to ask before I gave birth," Torres says.

But Torres says she promised one of her coaches she would swim a week and a half later, to help him garner publicity for a meet. Lying in the hospital with her newborn daughter, Torres stopped the doctor after he congratulated her.

"He started to leave, and I grabbed his white lab coat," she says.

After telling him she wanted to work out again, Torres says he told her she could go to the weight room the next day but would have to wait six weeks to do anything aerobic. But when she ran into her doctor in the gym a week and a half later, he told her she could start swimming again.

Now, Torres spends much of her time at her home in Parkland, Florida. Her daughter enjoys watching Torres swim — even if it means Torres' friends rewind their TiVo many times over.

"She says, 'Oh I want to watch Mommy on TV. Play it again, play it again,'" Torres says.

As for the medals, at first Torres' daughter didn't want anything to do with them.

"Because she'd say, 'Those are Mommy's,' but then when I started showing them to other people, she started taking them and putting them on herself," Torres says with a laugh.

Torres says the 2012 Olympics in London are a possibility, but it also depends on how her body handles the next few years. At the time of this interview, Torres was one week post-shoulder surgery to correct a rotator cuff problem that has bothered her since 2000. She also had knee surgery last year and a bone spur removed from her shoulder. Still Torres plans on continuing to swim.

Torres' key to keeping fit is working her core, especially her abdominals. With her trainers, Tierney and Steve Sierra, Torres recently released a workout video — Resistance Stretching — the cover photo shot in Torres' daughter's playroom. The video gives useful tips on increasing flexibility and strength while removing muscle tension.

"She resists while we stretch her," says Tierney, who has trained other Olympians like gymnast Nastia Liukin. "It's not like she is just lying there. She is kicking down as we are taking her leg above her head, so she's working the entire time. It's about creating strength in your entire range of motion."

Torres, despite all of her success, is still amazed by all the attention she's received, calling it a "surprising ride."

"I'm so used to kids coming up and asking me for autographs, and now I have middle-aged people coming up to talk to me," she says. "I like hearing their stories. I hope what I've done has helped inspire other people to do things they thought they were too old to do."

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