On Campus

Back on the Starting Block

Jenny Thompson has more Olympic medals than any other American athlete, but her newest piece of neckwear is a stethoscope.

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Some Olympic champions' second careers consist of the occasional spot in a Nike ad, but few take on a completely new challenge, especially one that requires at least seven years of rigorous training. Then again, not all athletes have the endurance of Jenny Thompson, who retired from swimming in October and immediately began her pediatric rotation at the College of Physicians & Surgeons at Columbia University Medical Center. Thompson started med school in 2000, took a break to train for the Athens Olympics in 2004, and now she's back full time as a third-year student. Thompson, 31, swam her last relay at the FINA World Swimming Championships in October, wrapping up one of the most impressive careers in swimming history. Since her international debut at the Pan Am Games in 1987, where she took home two golds and a bronze, Thompson has won 85 international medals and 26 U.S. national titles. In 1999 she swam the 100-meter butterfly in 57.88 seconds, toppling a world record that had stood for 18 years. But she's best known for her Olympic record. In the four Olympiads from 1992 through 2004, Thompson captured eight gold medals, the most for any U.S. woman athlete, and 12 medals in all, the most for any American.

At a café across the street from the emer-gency room of the New York-Presbyterian Hos-pital/CUMC, Thompson, wearing a doctor's coat and stethoscope, sips coffee and eats a Clif Bar while talking about how she found her way to medical school. "My mother was a medical technologist, and as an athlete I grew up hearing about health," she says. "If someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I'd say a doctor." Still, she didn't seriously consider medical school until she was a senior at

Stanford University, where she majored in human biology. “I was held back by my fears,” she says, crediting her adviser with encouraging her. “So I did my premed requirements after college and I haven’t looked back since.”

Thompson uses the sound bites of a media-savvy athlete, but her humility seems genuine. Looking back on her career, she is magnanimous about both her successes and her setbacks. In the 2000 Sydney games, Thompson had the world’s fastest butterfly relay split, leading the women’s 400-meter medley relay to victory in a world record-breaking 3:58.30. But in the 2004 Athens games the U.S. team settled for silver, finishing in 3:59.12, nearly two full seconds behind the Australians. While Thompson broke numerous records and finished first in individual U.S. and international competitions, she never won a solo Olympic race; her eight gold medals were all in relays. “I really enjoy the relays,” Thompson says with a smile, “and it’s kind of lonely when you’re on the awards stand by yourself.”

She made the relays fun for her teammates as well. “Jenny’s really great at getting her game face on when she needs it, and she’s able to switch it off and be silly,” says Cristina Teuscher, ’00CC, who swam the 800-meter gold-medal freestyle relay with Thompson in the 2000 Sydney games. Before the race, Teuscher says, “she got us together in a little huddle and had us do this cheer: ‘Big dog, little dog, bouncing pup. C’mon team, chew them up!’ It was so silly and made us laugh. It re-laxed us for the race.”

Thompson retired for the first time after the Sydney games, but decided to come back for Athens. Now, she says, she’s ready to move on. “It is weird to be 31 and talking about my second career,” she says. “But I swam for 23 years. Through swimming I met people and learned about the world, but through medicine there’s so much more I can learn.” The first thing she had to learn was how to live out of the spotlight. “It was a difficult transition,” she admits. “I went from being at the top in swimming to being at the bottom of the barrel and realizing I didn’t know anything.”

Thompson doesn’t know what type of medicine she’d like to practice. “I’ve fallen in love with pediatrics, and I love kids,” she says of her first rotation, adding a hurried disclaimer. “But I haven’t tried surgery or ER or anesthesiology yet.”

When Thompson started medical school in 2000 she alternated study sessions with workouts. Now she doesn’t miss the daily practices. “I’m enjoying not being an athlete,” she says. “I’m glad I’m able to focus on my career now.” Not all Olympians have that luxury. “A lot of other athletes don’t know what they’re going to do after

they retire. I feel really lucky that I have a path.”

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