

From Splash Magazine

Swimming Heroes/ From the past

Anthony Ervin

By **Bob Schaller**/*Special Splash Correspondent*

The man who isn't exactly crazy about giving interviews is asking a lot of questions.

About himself, that is.

The young, rising – and often mercurial – star that is Anthony Ervin has this swimming thing nearly down pat, especially in the 50 and 100 free, which he won at the 2001 World Championships in Fukuoka, Japan.

Yet he's still finding out who he is. Still finding the path that only he can follow. Still learning what makes himself tick.

"I ask myself all the time, 'Who am I? What am I doing?'" Ervin says. "What I've found is that if I think too much, it won't make me too happy. I'm better off to be there – in that moment – and just be who I am."

So he's found himself discovering what it is that makes him who he is in an unusual place: A Zen Center.

"I'm a practicing Zen Buddhist," Ervin says matter-of-factly.

The young man who was labeled relentlessly since Olympic Trials has volunteered one of his own. Go figure. Yet Ervin has that right; after all, just about everyone has tried to label him. So he's earned the right to label himself.

In fact, no younger male swimming sensation has been through more out of the blocks than Ervin, in a lot of ways.

The big labels started flying at Olympic Trials in Indianapolis. He became the first African-American to make the team. His father is black, and his mother Jewish. So all of a sudden, some of the biggest ethnic groups in America were staking claims to Ervin.

"The thing that I wasn't the most comfortable with is that all of the sudden, I come on the scene, all of these people are putting these labels on me," Ervin said. "They wanted to make me a part of whatever pertained to them. Don't misunderstand me; I have always

known that I am of mixed blood, part African American and many other things. But I was naive, because I didn't know that meant anything – or would have the ramifications it did at Trials. I'm just me."

So one of the fastest American swimmers, along with Gary Hall, found himself clogged by the media horde.

"When you strive for something and do well, it's always going to be a double-edged sword," Ervin said. "You reach your goals, but you will get cut in the process."

That rise to the top of the swimming world has been faster than even Ervin could have anticipated, which brought an entire different set of growing pains.

"My rise to where I am now came fast and furious," he says thoughtfully. "I didn't know how to handle it before. It was confusing. I've settled into it, and I'm getting used to it."

Ervin's mother is Jewish, which brought in an entire ethnic following when he made the U.S. team – and tied with Hall for Olympic gold in the 50m free. His parents are another issue he's not altogether comfortable talking about, simply because it is his life – his personal life – and there are parts of himself he'd rather not share with the world. That's in part for privacy reasons, but in no small part because he's seen how the media can twist and turn a story into the shape it wants.

"I'm indebted to my parents, but there are certain things I wish were different," Ervin said. "But I'm sure most of us would say that about their parents. Without them, I wouldn't have gotten here, I do know that."

His parents made him who he is – literally and figuratively – with the bevy of ethnic traits.

"There's something coming up all the time, a racial or ethnic hall of fame," Ervin says, shaking his head. "But I feel the labels, in a way, belittle who I am. I'm proud to be black. I'm proud of my Jewish heritage. I'm proud of everything that makes me who I am. All of that makes me a unique person, just like anyone else."

At the 2001 World Championships, Ervin's two worlds collided in the best possible way. His abilities reached a new level just as he became comfortable with his rising status as one of the sport's true superstars.

"I trained the whole summer as I did the summer before, and the whole focus was, of course, on the World Championships," Ervin said. "Though I won (the 50), I didn't do my best time. Of course, that's always an 'iffy' thing. But I did put in the training, so I wanted to see that improvement. Still, I won. A lot of times, it can be just about the winning, and whoever is the better man that day wins. To me, though, there is always room for improvement. So the 50 win at Worlds was not an emotional high."

That came later, when Ervin, not a favorite but one to watch in the 100m, claimed gold.

“In terms of emotion, the 100 was a different story,” Ervin said. “That was definitely more emotional than the 50 because I was not expected to win. I had made a game plan, and run it by my coach. Just by guts I made it work. That’s the irony of a game plan. It’s always good until you have to use it. Then, anything can go wrong. So there has to be a will to make that game plan work no matter what comes up, or what goes wrong.”

Finally, the spectrum of emotions reached full circle when the 400 medley relay came up. The U.S. team was disqualified when Ervin left the blocks early on the anchor leg. Ervin took it hard.

“The relay went bad for a lot of reasons,” he said. “I was coming off a (butter)flyer, which I had hadn’t done since NCAAs. So that was kind of strange, since I’m used to anticipating a freestyler. I was waiting so long that I had a lousy push off and went ‘plop,’ face down in the water. Then, I completely missed the turn. If not for that, we would have won. Don’t get me wrong, because I have no doubt in my abilities. But that’s just what happened, and it was an unfortunate thing.”

Those misfortunes will likely be fewer and far between as Ervin gets ready for the coming year, and the next World Championships – not to mention the 2004 Olympics. He is still fawned over at every venue, yet he is still unknown as a person to most of those paying him so much attention.

“When someone goes on like that, I don’t know how to answer,” Ervin says quietly in an introspective tone. “Everybody tells me I have extraordinary talent with swimming. But that gives the impression that I am lazy and don’t do any work, which is ridiculous.”

There is old school in Ervin in his determination, but his training is very much new school. University of California sprint coach Mike Bottom doesn’t believe in putting in the thousands of yards each day. Instead of adhering by the age-old motto “Practice makes perfect,” Bottom scales it back, believing “Perfect practice makes perfect,” even if that means a fraction of the yardage.

“A lot in the swimming (community) are biased by the old school of thought, of putting in the quote ‘Work,’” Ervin said. “And for a distance swimmer, that works. But my work, as a sprinter, is done through technique, with the proper catch and hold in the water. That’s the toughest part, getting the most out of every stroke. It’s not easy. Of course, we put in the work, do the aerobic training and everything else. And I think that’s obvious by what happened (at Worlds) in the 100. I couldn’t have won that had I not put in the ‘work.’”

Bottom is also unique in that he not only discourages his swimmers from making swimming their life – he actually prohibits it. He demands balances in their lives. He won’t let his swimmers put all of their eggs in one basket simply because he doesn’t want his student-athletes to enter the world with an empty basket. Athletes should – and have

to – have something else in their lives, whether swimming goes good, or bad, Bottom reasons.

“That has been extremely important,” Ervin said. “We’re told that if we want to be the best, we have to dedicate our all. Now, if I were to dedicate my all (to just swimming), I would be burned out. If you tie yourself down with one thing, you will not get on with your life.”

Ervin’s interests are as varied as his own personal makeup of ethnicities. He can be found at museums or in forests and other natural wonders, and he’s into classical music. He likes computers. He’s glad Bottom welcomes that kind of diverse thinking and balance.

“The coolest thing about Mike is he’s not afraid to be nontraditional as a coach,” Ervin said. “In some ways, I look at him more on a friendship level than the authoritarian coach. He does tell us what to do, but he gets on a personal level with each of us. If I don’t feel like doing something, he’ll say, ‘Let’s do something else – what do you want to work on?’ So you still get the work done, but your input matters and Mike works with you.”

Ervin’s also had to do a lot of work outside the pool at Cal in the classroom. That presents its own challenge. The average student could not imagine training for hours in the morning before school. And then wearing the body down all afternoon and early evening, leaving scant few hours to study before the body demands rest.

“School is a challenge,” Ervin says. “It makes it that much harder because of the swimming. It’s really hard to have both of those at the same high level; actually, it’s impossible. If I want to dedicate my all to my classes, I will have to sacrifice something from swimming. So there’s give and take from both ends.”

As there is in Ervin’s dealing with the media. Through his gold-medal training partner Gary Hall Jr., Ervin was able to see how a news story can take on a life of its own. So Ervin is very careful in choosing his words. He is well-spoken as much as he speaks very clearly. He corrects this interview when it is pointed out that Ervin must be “driven.”

“You said I’m driven,” Ervin says. “But that’s not entirely accurate. If you put that in the story, it will be wrong. If I don’t like something, I’m not going to be driven and pursue it.”

Though Ervin’s interpretation of the context was his own, it is a story about him, so he certainly has the right to clarify. And that he takes the time to do it and provide additional information and perspective is more endearing than abrasive. Again, Ervin had the best teacher of media relations in Hall, who was taken down and rebuilt with equal fury at different parts of his career.

“Gary is very misunderstood,” said Ervin, who in December was heading out from California to attend Hall’s wedding. “Until I roomed with him at the Olympics, I had

never really gotten a true glimpse of what Gary is like. He's very deep, and well spoken. We're similar in a lot of ways, especially about how dealing with the media has been kind of rough. There was a whole kind of plot to get Gary, and that was unfair. I don't think that's right. In that sense (of dealing with the press), he was very helpful to me, because I've been in awkward situations, too."

What's not awkward – and what is most enjoyable – are the kids who swarm to Ervin, unaware in most cases of his race or ethnic background.

"I love that – the kids are great because I can deal with them and make a difference, and yet I don't have to deal with the labels," Ervin says. "The kids are innocent; not biased and not into the politics of who I am. Actually, it's refreshing."

The questions come as fast as one of Ervin's 50 free strokes. Usually it's "How do you go so fast?" (Answer: "Train hard, train smart and enjoy it") and, oddly, "Do you eat oatmeal?" (Answer: "Yes, apple and cinnamon, usually").

"The questions aren't really that deep," Ervin says. "But neither is life a lot of time. They're having fun. And so am I. That makes everything pay off."

Note: Anthony Ervin retired from competition in 2004.