

From Splash Magazine

Meet the Athletes/Splash

Erik Vendt

By Bob Schaller

Has success changed Erik Vendt? Hold that thought. Someone else is talking to him

“Can I call you back in two minutes?” Vendt asks.

Two minutes later.

“Hi again, sorry about that,” Vendt says. “I’m helping a friend move.”

Same Erik Vendt. He turns the swimming world on its ear by racing Michael Phelps down to the wire in the 400 IM last summer, and then he helps a friend move.

Finishing second to Phelps, Vendt and his U.S. teammate brought the crowd to its feet at the ConocoPhillips Summer Nationals, both going under the former world record in the 400 IM. Then they faced off again a few weeks later for gold and silver at the Pan Pacific Championships in Yokohama, Japan. Vendt wasn’t even in the camera’s frame for most of the race.

“That’s something I hope shows who I am,” Vendt said. “I was behind by something like four seconds. I always take a lot of pride in never giving up. I pushed off for the breaststroke and realized what I was there to do, and I wasn’t getting it done. So I pushed and made up a lot of ground. It wasn’t about the gold medal, or the silver medal that I did get. When I retire – no matter if I get first, last or disqualified – as long as I know in my heart that I gave it all I could, then there will be satisfaction.”

And then he comes back to earth – and America – and stays the same person. He’s long given autographs to kids at meets, but now it’s more frequent. He even gets recognized and stopped occasionally.

“Whenever that happens, I’m so shocked and flattered that I’m more than willing to give them whatever they want,” Vendt says.

So, surely, that’s changed him? Wrong.

“It’s like an alternate life,” he explains. “I don’t think of it as anything more than it is. I’m just doing what I love to do. In that way, everything happening is a lot of fun. But no, I never thought I’d get to the point where someone wants my autograph.”

Vendt, who is from North Easton, Mass., went all the way across the country to swim for legendary coach Mark Schubert at the University Southern California, where he is a senior. Not only did he swim under the old world record in the 400m IM at Nationals and then get silver in that event at Pan Pacs, he also took silver in the 1500m free in Japan. He took another second place, in the 400m free, and fifth in the 200m breaststroke at the Nationals last year. He was also the 2002 NCAA Swimmer of the Year, winning the 1650y free and 400y IM, and taking second in the 500y free.

“I think I really put myself in a good position to make a statement last year, and this year,” Vendt says. “I would have liked to have won gold and gotten the world record, but I’m in the position I want to be in. I had been kind of quiet since the Olympic Trials, so it was important to burst back onto the scene.”

Vendt went from a small fishbowl in Massachusetts to one of the nation’s – and the world’s – swimming hot spots at Southern Cal.

“Coming to SC was a little different than swimming for a small team in New England,” Vendt said. “But I was excited for the challenge, and to swim with the people here who are so great.”

Stepping up to the big time was a logical, necessary climb if Vendt wanted to reach a higher level.

“There were a lot of steps, big and small, that I had to take,” he said. “They were all very welcoming out here. I think that’s what set me up for really breaking through (in 2002). It had a lot to do with my mindset and confidence.”

Though he now swims for Schubert, he’s learned a lot from all his coaches along the way.

“I remember something important from every coach who has taught me, from their philosophies on swimming and work ethic to lessons in life,” Vendt says. “(My club coach) told me one day, ‘Don’t let anyone ever put out that flame inside your belly.’ That was important advice for where I was then at age 14.”

So going out to train with USC, it was an important thing to remember.

“I know coach Schubert trains his swimmers hard, sometimes to the brink of collapsing,” Vendt says. “That’s a challenge I wanted. I’ve always remembered – and told myself – that no matter what the set is, no matter how hard it is, I’m not going to quit. I’m going to give it all I’ve got – no matter if I make the time or not – until I’m done.”

Vendt picked up a silver medal at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney.

“That was absolutely unbelievable,” Vendt said. “Tom (Dolan) was actually a huge help. They announced my name, and I waved to the crowd, and Tom came over and said,

'Let's do it.' Those three little words really inspired me. Plus Tom Dolan is a guy who represents what I want to represent – perseverance and toughness rather than just being remembered for talent. Because I don't think I really have any talent. My strength is that I never give up. Maybe I have some – a very little – God-given talent. But what has gotten me here is working hard. A lot of people have talent. But how many are willing to work that hard? That's where you can set yourself apart, and make up for what you might lack in actual talent."

Before 2002, Vendt, an Olympian, still knew he was only on the verge of joining the elite swimmers of the U.S., and the world.

"I was always kind of right there, but never considered one of the best," Vendt says. "After the Olympics, I was like all the other swimmers in that there's a kind of post-Olympic letdown. No matter what the meet was, it was nothing like what we had just been through at the Olympics, and that was kind of depressing. I realized last summer there was two-and-a-half years until the next Olympics, and I knew this would probably be the last chance I have to do anything special in this sport at the Olympics. So I decided to give everything I have. Last April was a turning point, because it was time to get serious. When you realize that, you have to get back to doing what you love to do. And that's what I did."

Swimming for the Trojans has been just what the doctor ordered. He's part of a team, something he loves.

"After the Olympics, you go to NCAAs, and there's not 18,000 people – it's tough to get excited unless you have the right mindset," Vendt says. "Then I realized what my goals were and that I had to get excited myself. Swimming for a college, for a team, makes it mean a lot. It's like on the relay, you'll see a guy go 48.2 on his 100 leg when he had just gone 49.5 in an individual event, the 100 free. When you're swimming with those other guys, for your team, you find that extra energy to go faster. Those three other guys on the relay are counting on you. You think, 'I have to do this for my team, not just myself.' That makes it more special."

Vendt is a native of Massachusetts, so he understands that winning doesn't come easy. In fact, his favorite team, the Boston Red Sox, is the poster child for futility.

"Some day, they will win it," he says. "That's what I keep on hoping for. I honestly think they will win it some day. It's like life, no matter what happens, you keep going, keep trying your best, and keep working hard to get better."

Vendt actually had a decent career in baseball as a youngster.

"I had to make the decision at about 13 as to what I was going to pursue, baseball or swimming," Vendt said. "At the time it was a very hard decision."

But just as he remembers a lesson from each swim coach he's had, he sees parallels between baseball and swimming.

"When you come up to the plate, you have to have total concentration and confidence," he says. "It's the same thing in swimming when you get up on the blocks."

The experience in baseball, and other school experiences, helped Vendt keep a world outside of swimming, something he thinks is important to all swimmers.

"My parents always told me that I had to stay well-rounded," Vendt says. "Friends are very important to me, especially since I don't have any brothers. I'm very happy to have swimming, but I'm also happy to have a life outside of that."