

# **Dave Denniston**

## **USA Swimming**

### **USA Para Swimming**



Like a lot of young swimmers, Dave Denniston grew up dreaming of wearing the USA swim cap with his name below the American flag at the Olympics.

Unfortunately, he never celebrated that opportunity.

He came close twice – finishing in the top 5 of the 100 and 200 breaststroke events at 2004 Olympic Trials – but no cigar.

So when a freak sledding accident in 2005 altered his body – paralyzing him from the waist down and leaving him



wheelchair-bound – rather than use his injury as an excuse to stop, he decided to use it as inspiration to move forward.

Three years later, he was in Beijing competing in the same pool where Michael Phelps won eight gold medals – but as a Paralympian – fulfilling an updated dream and mission.

“I really didn’t think about trying for the Paralympics until (U.S. Paralympic coach and former Auburn assistant coach) Jimi Flowers emailed me in 2007,” Denniston said. “He told me that if I had been thinking about it, I needed to get on the horse and take care of classification and compete a few times.

“My roommate at the time, Justin Caron, and I were swimming recreationally twice a week at the Carlsbad High School pool. I mostly went to throw myself in the pool from my wheelchair and watch the lifeguards have a mini panic attack. But I discovered how much I loved the freedom of being in the water and moving my body without the help of a chair.”

Denniston trained two hours every day after recovering from the accident to try and walk again. At the same time, he started swimming about as much, so he was in very good physical shape.

Although he admits he “barely made” the Paralympic team in 2008, when Flowers pushed him into the Birds Nest – the Olympic pool in Beijing – for opening ceremonies, Denniston realized the dream was coming true out of

a nightmare he couldn't have conceived four years earlier.

“I take a lot of pride in this country and having the chance to represent the USA (cap and all) was a bit of an overwhelming life experience I will never forget,” he said.

A year later, when Flowers died tragically and unexpectedly from a fall while mountain climbing, Denniston, who had been considering transitioning into coaching, stepped into the lead Paralympic role.

Although he was still competing, Denniston said he knew he wasn't getting any younger and had developed a genuine passion for the Paralympic movement.

And it seemed like a logical step to honor his longtime friend – the one who recruited him to swim at Auburn in 1997.

Having swum for some of the best coaches in the game – David Marsh, Dave Salo and Dave Durden – he knew how to use the various aspects of a sport like swimming to grow as a person and leader.

“After Jimi's passing, Julie Dussliere from U.S. Paralympics fast-tracked me into a coaching role,” Denniston said. “I was fortunate enough to take over coaching the U.S. Paralympic Resident Program in 2010. Thanks to the buy-in and trust from my former teammates, they were very successful at the London Games.”

After five years in the role, Denniston, who grew up in Wyoming and had his accident there, said he grew stagnant in his coaching role at the Olympic Training Center and some of the choices he was making. He felt that he wasn't helping the athletes like he could, and it was time for a change.

He started reflecting on his values and coaching philosophy and determined that what he was doing there wasn't true to who he is as a person.

“My passion for the athletes and for Jimi clouded my vision, and I needed to hit the reset button and find a new way to grow,” he said. “So now I'm in Wyoming (since 2015) and have really found out more about myself in a little over a year than I did for five years in Colorado Springs.

“I've really benefitted from working with (Wyoming Head Coach) Tom

Johnson because he gives me the autonomy to coach in a way that is true to my philosophy while guiding me in the areas that I need to develop. I had a fabulous mentor in high school named Jim Jones, who always told me 'If you ain't growin, yer dyin'!' I'm back in a place where I am growing!"

Denniston said life in Laramie has been a lot of fun and busy. He has a lot of family and friends in town and nearby that he gets to see regularly.

With the university being the only one in the state, he sees many friends he grew up with at football and basketball games, and he's enjoyed reconnecting with people and making new friends.

He grew up in Wright, a small town 40 miles from Gillette, Wyo., and he got his start in the pool when his neighbors started a club team at the local 4-lane, 25-yard pool.

He was one of four original members – along with the three Nolte boys and their sister. When the club disbanded, his mom drove him daily to Gillette to continuing his training.



And although he said he didn't always see himself being a coach, he knew he liked helping people find their own path and their own personal values.

"I believe swimming happens to be a great way to submerge yourself in a culture and lifestyle that fosters personal growth. When I coach an athlete that is my top priority: helping them grow and discover themselves."

"It was a grind that could only be fueled by a mother's love," he said. "However, I think she was starting to question whether it was worth it. I remember coming out of the locker room after one of my practices and

overhearing my mom talking to my coach, Craig McCrary.

"I'm not sure how the conversation started, but I remember hearing Coach McCrary say '...keep this kid in the water because he's going to be a stallion.' It was the first time I ever heard a coach believe in me as an athlete, and that's when I also knew I'm a swimmer."

And what did Denniston learn from swimming that he continues to use in his life today as well as pass on to his swimmers?

Toughness, perseverance and sacrifice.

"One thing I'm reminded of constantly is that there's forced pain and there's chosen pain," he said. "In a sport like swimming, you choose every day how much pain you are willing to put your body through to get better. The coach writes the practice, but only you know how much you are really going to push yourself. I took pride in embracing the pain of practice nearly every day for over 20 years.

"In my current situation, I have forced neurological pain from my spinal cord injury. That forced pain is nothing compared to the pain I chose to put myself through as an athlete. Aside from the time management skills, the friendships, and some of the other life lessons in this sport, that is one thing I'm grateful the sport of swimming gave me. I was presented with an opportunity at every practice to see how tough I really am. I wouldn't know that without swimming."

Dave Denniston enters his second season in 2016-17 as an assistant coach at the University of Wyoming. Denniston came to UW after coaching the U.S. Paralympics swim team at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs since 2010. "We are all excited to have Dave become a part of our staff," UW head coach Tom Johnson said at the time of his hiring. "I believe he will not only bring a lot of knowledge but he has a tremendous amount of experience, as well as great energy and enthusiasm."

Denniston was a member of the Auburn University swim program from 1997-2002. A two-time team captain at Auburn, he was a three-time individual NCAA champion, including the 1999 national title in the 200-meter breaststroke. Denniston was a 15-time All-American and also helped lead the Tigers to the 1999 NCAA Team Championship. Denniston competed in the 2000 Olympic Trials in the 100 and 200-meters, where he finished 6th and 9th, respectively. In 2003, he qualified for the World Championship Team in the 200-meter breaststroke before he primarily focused on qualifying for the 2004 U.S. Olympic Team. He finished fourth in the 100-meter breaststroke and fifth in the 200-meter breaststroke at the Olympic Trails.

In 2005, Denniston was injured in a sledding accident and then went on to qualify for the 2008 Paralympic games. Denniston started a motivational speaking company called Mind Over Body. It was created to help people reach their goals despite barriers in life. He has also spent time as an Assistant Editor for Swimming World Magazine. He was awarded the Christopher and Dana Reeve Inspiration award in 2009 and James R. Flowers Coach of the Year award in 2012 while coach of the U.S. Paralympic team. Denniston is a 2002 graduate of Auburn where he earned a bachelor's degree in communications and a minor in english.