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## Local swim teams reaping the benefits of the "Phelps Factor"

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Benjamin Gordimer ran through the list of sports he has played: basketball, baseball, soccer, taekwondo, karate, football.

Not until he watched Michael Phelps win eight gold medals at the Olympics had the 14-year-old from Fort Worth wanted to be a part of a swim team.

"I thought about doing it, and it never really caught on," Gordimer said. "But after I watched Michael Phelps, it pushed me to do it."

That's the "Phelps Factor."

Swimming typically sees a significant increase in participation numbers after an Olympics, but the success of Phelps, Dara Torres and the rest of the U.S. team in Beijing has national swimming officials hoping for an even bigger boost than usual.

Pat Hogan, director of club development for USA Swimming, said a 1-2 percent annual increase in membership is typical. After an Olympics, there is typically a 5-10 percent jump.

"With the great success that our team had at the Olympic Games, the media coverage around our Trials here, and the Michael phenomenon, if you will," Hogan said, "I'm hopeful for as much as a 10 percent bump in 2009."

If Tarrant County-area swim clubs are an indicator, the Phelps Factor won't disappoint.

About 40 swimmers attended a tryout for the Fort Worth Area Swim Team (FAST) on Thursday night at Wilkerson-Greines Activity Center. FAST program director and head coach Ron Forrest said a typical Olympics year results in about 15 new swimmers.

Thursday night's session lapped that number, and that was only the first of four weekly tryouts scheduled for those interested in joining the 170-member team.

Mid-Cities Arlington Swim (MARS) is preparing for a similar surge next week when it returns from its two-week summer break.

"Our phones have been ringing almost nonstop, and our e-mail boxes have been filling as a result of the successes of the U.S. team in Beijing," said Brian Dangelmaier, MARS program director and head coach.

Dangelmaier, who also is coach at Arlington Lamar High School, said he fielded nine phone calls in less than a week from Lamar students interested in joining the swim team when school resumes.

That's the "Phelps Factor."

Dee Dee Stack of Fort Worth said watching Phelps influenced her decision to bring her 13-year-old son, Bobby, who had expressed an interest in swimming, to Thursday's FAST tryouts.

"The Olympics kind of gave us that little push to go forth and do this, because watching Michael Phelps was amazing," Stack said. "I remember Mark Spitz swimming, so seeing Michael Phelps was really truly amazing in all that he achieved."

Stack also cited the influence of Torres, the 41-year-old mother who won three silver medals in Beijing.

Forrest said that although it lacks a catchy name at this point, there is a Torres effect at work. Of the 40 or so swimmers who visited Wilkerson-Greines on Thursday, at least five signed up for the Masters level for ages 19 and up.

"Judging by things you read on the Web sites," Forrest said, "it's really motivated people in their middle age to come back to swimming, if they've been swimmers, or who see her doing that and say, 'Hey, I can give that a try.'"

Forrest thinks that in a few years, Phelps and Torres will have served as a big "1-2 punch" for swimming. Both he and Dangelmaier say the benefits will go far beyond competitive swimming.

MARS and the city of Arlington are a part of USA Swimming's "Make a Splash" initiative, which provides swimming and water safety lessons for families that cannot afford them. Dangelmaier said in the past week alone, he had fielded phone calls from families totaling about 20 children interested in that aspect of his program.

While Forrest talked Thursday evening about how every swim coach goes into tryouts hoping for that slim chance that the next Phelps or Dana Vollmer — the 2004 gold-medal winner from Granbury whom he coached at FAST — will walk through the door, he smiled as he watched a 6-year-old boy slowly cover the width of the pool. The boy — a real go-getter in the water — would swim about three or four strokes, latch onto the side of the pool, catch his breath, then resume attacking the water until taking his next break a few feet later.

"This little guy, if we put him through the swim school," Forrest said, "in two or three months, he's going to know how

to swim. So when he goes to a lake, he's going to be fine."

And perhaps the most important part of the Phelps Factor could be getting kids into pools and teaching them how to swim.

"So maybe they're not going to be world-record holders, maybe they're not going to win eight gold medals at an Olympics," Forrest said. "But if it saves their life when they fall out of a boat in the lake, and Michael gets that kid into the swimming pool and teaches them how to swim, then we have to be able to thank him for that."

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Want to swim? For contact information on area swim clubs that are members of North Texas Swimming Inc. and USA Swimming, go to [www.ntswim.org](http://www.ntswim.org) and click on "Teams."