

Medal of Mediocrity

Being from NYC, my father didn't learn to drive or swim until work forced him to emigrate to California. To this day, nearly thirty years later, I would still say he doesn't really know how to, it would be more accurate to say that he knows *about* swimming. His version of swimming is floating on his back and thrashing his arms in the approximate direction he wants to go in. Being a good dad, he wanted to make sure that I wasn't going to end up like him. So, every summer from age six to nine, I was sent off to swim camp at Loyola Marymount University.

After a couple summers, I got fairly good at the breaststroke, and enjoyed pushing myself from wall to white tiled wall in their olympic-sized pool like a scrawny, pale torpedo. I was never great, always just slightly above average. The counselors didn't want you to think that, didn't want to stop receiving that cash injection from parents who believed their kids were destined for athletic greatness, or just wanted them out of the house for the day. They gave everyone medals made from the same dull metal at the end of camp each year. It wasn't gold, silver or bronze, looking more like an amalgamation of all those metals, creating a sort of shiny shit color. It didn't matter if you were the next Michael Phelps or needed floaties and a lifeguard on standby just to swim a lap, we were all "winners" in their eyes!

As we walked to the cafeteria each day, my chlorine drenched friends-of-convenience and I would pass by the tennis courts. Wanting to shake things up, I had tried my hand at tennis camp the previous year, but I lacked any and all hand-eye

coordination. The ball would fly toward me and I would either flinch or swing far too early, anticipating a blow that never came. The coach and I quickly gave up on me, and I spent the remainder of my time there kicking tennis balls and playing sharks and minnows with the other failures of physicality. I still got a medal at the end of it all though, despite giving up days into camp. It still hangs on a coat hook in my room to this day amongst the others, years of dust completely hiding what little shine it once had.

But on that day, as I passed those sun blistered courts, I saw a girl. She played with skill, deftly saving the ball and angling it viciously down towards the edge of the net on her opponent's side with her prosthetic arm. I could see her hard fought battle in the arc of her swing, the *thock* of the ball against the racket screwed into her hand socket. I stood there in awe of her strength of will to continue trying and trying again despite her disadvantage. Trying until she stopped failing and started thriving. I wished I had that drive. One of my friends yanked me by the arm and chided me for staring at "the disabled," despite her being anything but. I tried to explain this, but he just shook his head of damp, matted hair at me and walked off, either unwilling or unable to see what I had. I hope she got the gold.