

Virtual Mentor

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VIEWPOINT

Ron Karnaugh's Tragedy and Triumph in the 1992 Olympics

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The intersection between medicine and sports can be chilling and cruel. During the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Ron Karnaugh was the world's highest ranked swimmer in the 200 individual medley, an event that challenges the swimmer's skills in all 4 swimming strokes - freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, and butterfly. It should have been the most exciting time in his life, but unfortunately, Ron's 61-year old father, Peter, suffered a fatal heart attack after climbing the steps of the stadium to take a photograph of his son. Despite this personal tragedy, Ron decided to compete in the Barcelona Games, and ultimately finished sixth in the 200 individual medley final.

"It's something I'll never forget," said Karnaugh. "Not a day goes by that I don't think about it. For a year or 2, it was really hard to cope with, thinking why me and why did this happen at the Olympics, which was supposed to be the best week of my life. But having gone through medical school, I see how people live and die every day, and I feel really grateful for the time that I had with him."

The experience of his fathers' death, and his mother's battle with throat cancer motivated him to pursue a career in medicine. With financial support from George Steinbrenner, New York Yankees' owner, Ron attended and graduated from New Jersey Medical School in 1997. However, Dr. Karnaugh never lost his drive for athletic competition and decided to defer his postgraduate training in orthopedic surgery to train for the 2000 Olympic swim team. At the time of his decision, many observers felt that it was foolish for a man his age to consider returning to this sport. After rededicating himself to swimming, Dr. Karnaugh became the oldest male swimmer, at age 31, to represent the United States on a national team. He placed third in the 200 individual medley in the 1998 World Championships, but his drive to make the 2000 US Olympic team was ultimately "unsuccessful."

For his courage and perseverance during personal tragedy, we are proud to present the Virtual Mentor Award to Dr. Ron Karnaugh, a physician-athlete who dared to push the conventional wisdom regarding physical achievement in his individual and professional pursuit of excellence.

Audiey Kao, MD, PhD is editor in chief of *Virtual Mentor*.

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