

Port Orange swimmer goes for Olympic gold, and Team Lochte has supported him every step of the way.

# Ryan's Hope



News-Journal/JI-EUN LEE

Ryan Lochte, at the YMCA in Port Orange in May, turns 24 today and later this week will begin competing in the 2008 Summer Olympics in China, where he will try to swim his way to five medals.

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**O**n an ordinary day in June, Kristin Lochte's cell phone buzzed with a text message from her brother, Ryan.

*Something bad happened. Don't tell Dad. I really, really hurt my ankle. I may have broken it. Promise you won't tell Dad. Please don't tell him.*

Ryan Lochte, Olympic swimming gold medalist and Port Orange's most accomplished athlete, had been fooling around on his skateboard after practice in Gainesville.

He fell while trying a trick he'd done plenty of times, and in an instant it looked like it would all be over. No Olympic Trials, where he'd attempt to make the U.S. team for the second straight time. No trip to Beijing, where the 24-year-old would attempt to win three, four, maybe even five gold medals.

All the dreams that were years



STEVE LOCHTE

in the making were going to die on a small piece of pavement at Lochte's Gainesville house.

But none of that mattered at this moment. Shoot, none of that ever really mattered to this kid.

He was more worried that he'd disappointed his old man.

He could bear the loss of millions of dollars and a few medals, but facing Steve Lochte's disappointment and anger? That would be more painful than any damage to his ankle.

"Of course, my dad found out soon enough," said Kristin, the oldest of the four Lochte kids. "And, of course, he started freaking out about it, talking about how Ryan was ruining his career."

"But then he calmed down," Kristin continued. "We found out Ryan's ankle was going to be fine,

and we moved on."

There are so many people who have helped Ryan Lochte reach this point, a few days away from competing at the 2008 Summer Olympics in China. A few days from perhaps knocking Michael Phelps off every magazine cover and inserting himself on his sport's center stage.

There is his mom, Ike, who was his first coach. There are his friends, the rest of his family and all the other swimmers past and present who have pushed Ryan to become, perhaps, the second-best male swimmer in the world.

But the most important person in his life was the father he met 24 years ago today. The temperamental, aggressive, demanding guy with the whistle was his best friend, his coach, his confidant.

And the one constant source of love and screaming.

SEE RYAN'S, PAGE 6A

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## FINALLY, A BOY

The man was yelling, over and over again.

"We got a boy! We got a boy!"

The date was Aug. 3, 1984, and Steve Lochte, standing by his wife at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, N.Y., couldn't help himself. After two daughters, Kristin, now 30, and Megan, 28, Steve had a male heir.

But a day later, the Monroe (N.Y.) Community College swimming coach was off to a swim meet.

Steve would have time to get to know the kid later.

Steve, now 55, was there for all the births, Ike recalled.

"I told him I'd divorce him if he wasn't. But right after each one, he always seemed to have a meet."

Ryan recovered from the "abandonment" pretty quickly. From as soon as he could wobble around, he wanted to be near his father.

They liked the same films ("kill-em movies, basically," Ike said). They loved fast cars. They loved eating pizza and wings on Friday nights, a tradition they continue to this day.

And they weren't afraid to show emotion to each other.

"You know how kids as they're growing up are always like, 'Don't kiss me in front of my friends?'" Ryan said. "We're not like that in my family. We're always hugging and kissing and all that. I didn't care."

The two seemed to have totally different internal makeups: Steve was the fiery one, always exhorting, quick to show emotion. Ryan was the one you had to constantly check for a pulse, a kid so relaxed he makes Jeff Spicoli from "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" seem like an uptight overachiever.

Ike, currently the child care director for the Port Orange YMCA, was Ryan's first swimming coach; unlike Kristin and Megan, Ryan was hardly in love with the water.

As Ryan got into his teenage years and into high school, Steve, the head coach at Spruce Creek and the Daytona Beach Speed club team, took over.

Ryan and Steve had their battles in and out of the pool, mostly because Steve saw his third-born wasting his talent by being lazy. The fights never lasted for more than a few hours, Ryan recalled. They would end, usually, with one of them apologizing, and then it was over.

No grudges. No teenage rebellion. Nothing.

If they fought so much, why did they stay so close? The family thinks it's because Steve wised up about separating home life from pool life.

Megan Lochte remembered Kristin and Steve duking it out verbally at home after swim practices, as the coach couldn't quite let go of the whistle when he walked into the house.

With Ryan and Steve, though, whatever anger came through at the pool was left behind when the splashing died.

At home, he was just a dad.

In fact, the dirty little secret of the Lochte family is that when it comes to discipline, Steve is the one willing to spoil the kids a little more.



## THE LIGHT GOES ON

There wasn't one moment when Ryan started listening.

Every kid's maturity clock is different. But somewhere around his junior year of high school, Ryan began to improve drastically in the water.

There was that national meet in Minnesota, when Steve was muttering in amazement as his boy came from the back of the pack to win an 800-freestyle race.

Then the state championships started coming, and the college scholarship offers.

It would be easy to say their relationship improved once Ryan started to become as serious about swimming as his dad always was. But it's not true. Their bond stayed strong as always. Only now, Ryan didn't have to be nagged as much to train. He knew his potential was great, and it made him happy to see his dad pleased with him.

Finally, in the fall of 2002, it was time for Ryan to leave. He had the talent to swim at the strong University of Florida program under Gregg Troy, an old friend of Steve's.

## Career Highlights

- Qualified for 2008 U.S. Olympic Team in five events at U.S. Olympic trials: 200 IM (individual medley), 400 IM, 200 backstroke, 4x100 free relay, 4x200 free relay.
- Set three world short-course records at the 2008 FINA Short Course World Championships; won four golds and two silvers at the meet.
- Owns one long-course world record in 200

backstroke (1:54.32), set at 2007 World Championships in Melbourne, Australia, where he won two golds and two silvers.

- Won six medals, three of them gold, at 2006 Short Course World Championships.
- Won gold medal in 4x200 free relay and silver in 200 IM at 2004 Olympics.
- Named NCAA swimmer of the year in 2005 and 2006.

SOURCE: News-Journal research

But how do you let go? After trying to get through to him for so long, Steve finally had, and now someone else was going to finish the job and take his son the rest of the way to the finish line.

For the next four years, Steve walked a tightrope between overbearing father and helpful swim coach.

Troy swears Steve was nothing but helpful, giving him tips on how to motivate Ryan.

Ike's not so sure her husband was that restrained.

"I'd say, 'Leave him alone; he's got another coach now,'" Ike said. "It took a little while, but I think he learned."

### FULFILLING 2 OLYMPIC DREAMS

As Ryan continued to improve at Florida, Steve was often there. Sure, he was in the bleachers now, but the physical distance means nothing. They are swimming these

racers together.

Every time Ryan competes, you can see the emotions churning inside Steve. Sometimes there is anger, mixed with excitement, spun with joy and even a little sadness, all in the course of a couple hundred meters.

The U.S. Olympic Trials in 2004 produced the most poignant race of both of their lives.

Steve had come so close to coaching an Olympian in the past, twice missing out by less than a tenth of a second.

Now, in the 200-meter freestyle final, Steve watched Ryan finish fourth, qualifying him for a spot on the Olympic Team.

Not only did he have an Olympian, but it was his own kid fulfilling Steve's greatest dream.

"He turned and looked at me in the stands," Kristin said, "and we both had tears in our eyes. I just kept telling him, 'You finally got

one. You finally got one.'

"It was the most emotional I've ever seen him."

Ryan brought home a gold and a silver from the Athens Games, and he should do even better this time.

His improvement since 2004 has been staggering. World records have been shattered, a million-dollar contract signed, and expectations raised to a level where a five-medal haul in China is almost expected. As Ryan's stature in the sport has exploded, he's never forgotten who his rock is.

"He's the No. 1 dad anyone could ever have," Ryan said. "I know how much my success means to him, and it makes me really, really happy to see him so happy."

Steve is quietly confident; he's never one to brag, but he knows his kid can beat Michael Phelps twice, Aaron Peirsol once, and win a couple of relay golds as well.

"He has the potential to do it," Steve said. "I'm not predicting he will, but he certainly has the potential."

If pressed, Steve will tell you it's not one race or one medal that makes him so happy.

It's moments like the ones he experienced in Omaha, Neb., last month, at the U.S. Olympic Trials.

"So many people, two, three times a day, would stop us and tell us that we had the greatest son with the greatest personality, and how nice he'd been to them when they met him," Steve said, his face beaming. "They said, 'Your son is such a great swimmer,' but beyond that he's such a great person."

"Hearing that means more to me than anything he could ever do in the pool."