

As she prepares for the Paris Games, the seven-time Olympic gold medalist talks about the doping accusations against her competitors and how she stays focused while swimming 1,900 miles a year.



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By Andrew Trunsky

Andrew Trunsky interviewed Ms. Ledecky in Bethesda, Md.

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Long before Katie Ledecky was collecting gold medals and setting world records, she seemed nonchalant about making it across the pool.

In her first race, a 25-meter freestyle, she stopped along the lane line about 10 times, sometimes to clear her goggles, sometimes to clear her nose and sometimes just to look around. But when she saw her competitors cruising past, something sparked within her. She let go. With windmill-like arms, she plowed ahead, ultimately finishing second.

When her father, camcorder in hand, asked his daughter, just 6 at the time, how the race had gone, she said, “Great!” He asked her if she was “just trying to finish,” and she responded, “Just trying hard.” The conversation left Ms. Ledecky with a kind of motto she has kept in mind as she makes final preparations for this summer’s Paris Olympics: *Great. Hard. Just trying to finish.*

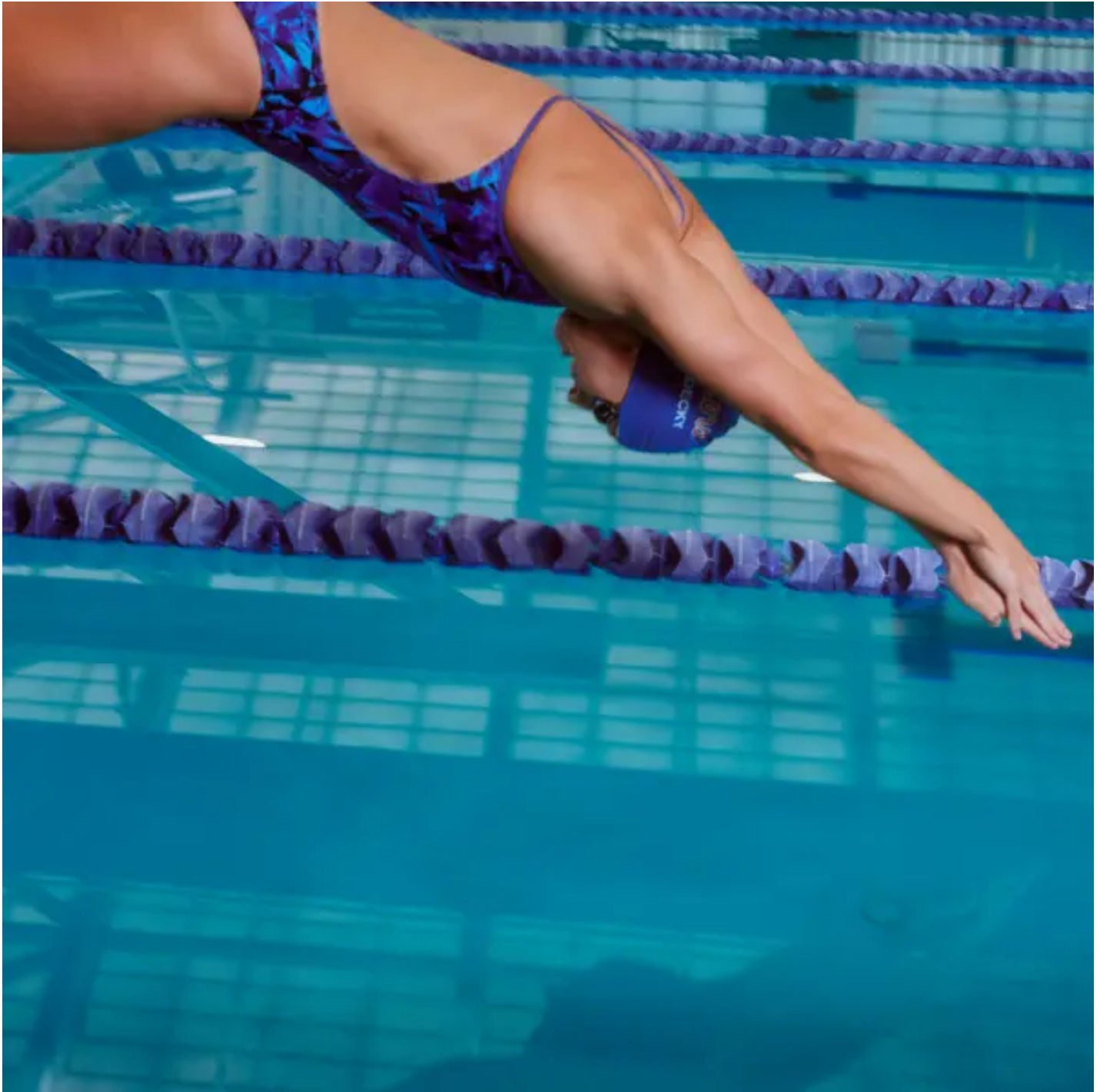
Many of her early swims took place at Palisades Swim & Tennis Club, a wooded, family friendly setting in Cabin John, Md., near Washington. Her final meet at the club was in 2014, two years after she had won her first Olympic gold medal.

“Palisades” is the first chapter of her new memoir, “Just Add Water,” which comes out on Tuesday, and the club’s pool remains her most meaningful place to swim.

Ms. Ledecky, now 27, and I recently met for lunch in Bethesda, Md., where she grew up. The day before, at the White House, she had been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, making her the first swimmer to receive one. During the ceremony, after noting that some consider 27 old for an Olympic swimmer, President Biden said: "Katie, age is just a number, kid."

"It took me a minute to process that joke," Ms. Ledecky said of the 81-year-old president's remark.

She ordered a grilled chicken salad. She had already swum 5,600 meters (or 224 lengths) that morning and had another practice in a few hours. She estimated that she swims more than 65,000 yards — or about 37 miles — a week. That adds up to 1,900 miles a year, and it means eons of staring at the black line that runs along the bottom of a pool.



Ms. Ledecky at a recent practice in Bethesda, Md. She swims roughly 37 miles a week as part of her regimen. Jared Soares for The New York Times

The work has not been for nothing. Ms. Ledecky has won 10 Olympic medals, seven of them gold, and 26 World Championship medals, 21 of them gold. She has 24 of the top 25 times in the 800-meter freestyle and 23 of the top 25 times in the

1,500.

For Ms. Ledecky, the hours spent staring at the black line below are far from boring. The repetition allows for creativity within bounds. She focuses on every detail of her stroke — how her hand enters the water, how she rotates, how she breathes — while tuning out the stressors of everyday life. And the practices are hardly robotic or solitary.

“I think some people don’t realize that we do stop on the wall, and we do get to chat with our teammates and listen to music,” she said. “I don’t feel like it’s too monotonous, just going back and forth, flipping at every wall and staring at a black line.”

At the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, Ms. Ledecky won the 800 freestyle and took silver in the 400-meter freestyle. She won the 1,500 freestyle, a new Olympic event for women that year, beating the runner-up by over four seconds.

Barely an hour before that race, she had finished fifth in the 200 freestyle; that was the only Olympic event in Ms. Ledecky’s career in which she did not win a medal.

“I don’t think I fully recognized how challenging that was in the moment,” she said of adding the 1,500 freestyle to her Olympic schedule. “I think I was just naïve to that and thought that I could just do it all.”

Ms. Ledecky also anchored the United States’ 4x200 freestyle relay in Tokyo. The Americans came in second, losing by 0.4 seconds to China, which set a new world record.

China’s relay win is less impressive than it originally seemed. In April, The New York Times reported that 23 top Chinese swimmers, including two on the winning relay squad, had tested positive for trimetazidine, a potent banned substance, seven months before the Tokyo Games.

After Chinese officials clandestinely cleared the athletes, the World Anti-Doping Agency, charged with policing illegal substances in sports, and World Aquatics, the international governing body for swimming, chose to not intervene. (An

investigation by Chinada, the Chinese antidoping agency, suggested that the swimmers had unknowingly eaten contaminated food.)

Ms. Ledecky at 15, after her surprise victory at the 2012 London Games. Doug Mills/The New York Times

“None of it makes sense,” Ms. Ledecky said. “I think athletes deserve answers, true answers. I think there needs to be a true independent investigation. I know there are some independent investigations and reviews that WADA and World Aquatics are doing now, but from the looks of it, it doesn’t seem like it’s very independent, in my opinion.”

Does Ms. Ledecky think China’s world record is tainted?

“Well, I mean, we need answers,” she said. “Yeah. I think we all feel really discouraged with the leadership here and just the way the global system has addressed this issue.”

She added: “It’s not because I need a medal or I want the gold medal. We are very proud of our silver medal relay that outperformed our expectations. We had great splits and we came together as a team.”

Preparing for Paris

In the fall of 2021, Ms. Ledecky, a graduate of Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., moved from that city to Gainesville, Fla., home of the University of Florida. Since then, she has been training alongside the Gators’ collegiate teams and other Olympians under Anthony Nesty, the Florida swim and dive coach and one of the head coaches for the U.S. Olympic team.

Mr. Nesty tweaked Ms. Ledecky’s stroke “to try to lengthen things out a little bit,” as she put it, and slightly increased her daily yardage. She trains with Bobby Finke, who won gold medals in the 800 and 1500 freestyles in Tokyo, and Kieran Smith, who took bronze in the 400 freestyle there.

“Just trying to keep up with them changed my stroke naturally,” Ms. Ledecky said.

Mr. Nesty said that Ms. Ledecky, even at her elite level, is coachable and teachable, adding, “The day-to-day grind, she enjoys it more than competing.”

Ms. Ledecky also said that she is trying to improve her kick. “A lot of people watch my races and think that I don’t kick, but under the surface I am kicking,” she said. “At least I feel like I’m kicking!”

Swimming freestyle during a training session in Tokyo in 2021. Doug Mills/The New York Times

She added that she is not focusing on the 200 freestyle ahead of Paris. Mr. Nesty has endorsed the shift away from it. “Athletes aren’t machines,” he said.

Ms. Ledecky is not the most talkative in practice, and Mr. Finke said she is one of the humblest people he has ever met. “I’ve never heard her mention that she has a world record, a gold medal or a world title,” he said.

Mr. Finke and Mr. Smith were excited when they heard that Ms. Ledecky would be training with them in Gainesville, but Mr. Finke confessed that he was slightly nervous too.

“I’ll be honest, I was very scared at first just because I’ve seen how she trains in practice and how fast she goes,” Mr. Finke said. “I won’t lie, she’s beaten me a pretty good amount of times.”

It is a fact that Ms. Ledecky is the greatest freestyler of all time, he stated. “People ask, ‘Who’s the most famous person you have in your phone?’ I’m like, it’s probably Katie, for me,” Mr. Finke said.

Katie Ledecky is among the world's most accomplished athletes, but people seem to know little about Katie Ledecky, the human. Part of it is that most Americans follow swimming for only a couple weeks every four years. Part of it is that Ms. Ledecky is reserved and polite; she is not very active on social media and she does not make outlandish comments.

Ms. Ledecky and Katie Grimes, her American teammate, during the 800 freestyle race at the Tokyo Games in 2021. Doug Mills/The New York Times

“I can name on one hand the number of swimmers that nobody dislikes,” said Rowdy Gaines, the three-time Olympic gold medalist who is now a swimming analyst for NBC Sports. “There is nobody that dislikes Katie Ledecky.”

Unlike some other famous American swimmers in years past, Ms. Ledecky has not gotten into the kind of trouble that generates headlines. She said she has never smoked or had an alcoholic drink, noting that it's tough to go out drinking if you have to get up for practice at 4 a.m.

“I didn't really go to many parties, just because that's not my scene,” she said of her time at Stanford. Her social life centered on dinner with friends or hanging out in the dorms with students who were not on the swim team.

“I remember there were some nights, we would do watercolors,” she said. “It sounds so lame, but it wasn’t. It was a lot of fun.”

Ms. Ledecky also does not have the kind of romantic life that would attract TMZ.

“I think none of that has been a deliberate choice of like, ‘Oh, I can’t date right now because I’m training,’ or, ‘I don’t want to,’ or ‘I have no interest in you,’” she said. “None of that. It’s just a natural thing, and whether it’s coming from me or from other people being intimidated, I don’t know. I’m a friendly person at heart!”

In Tokyo, Ms. Ledecky won the 1500 freestyle by four seconds. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Outside Olympic years and world championship cycles, she has stayed out of the news by not weighing in on hot-button issues. When I asked her if she keeps up with political news, she said yes, before quickly following up: “I don’t want to get into politics.”

“I think everyone has the ability to choose what they feel comfortable with and what they want to speak up for,” she said. “As a current athlete and somebody still competing, I have always tried to just keep my focus on the competition and not get too involved in anything that could become controversial.”

Her thoughts seemed to go back to the revelations about the Chinese swim team: “If you feel like there’s something that doesn’t sit right, if people aren’t competing fairly — if you don’t feel like the leaders of these organizations are necessarily doing what they need to be doing — then I think you’ve got to speak up about it and try to speak with some of the people that can implement change and try to work on things.”

‘Swim Like a Girl’

In her memoir, she dips a toe into potential controversy in the last chapter, “Swim Like a Girl.” She describes the sexism that not even she has escaped and quotes some of the unintentionally sexist comparisons made by some of her Olympic teammates.

“Her stroke is like a man’s stroke,” said Connor Jaeger, who won silver in the 1500 freestyle in 2016. “I mean that in a positive way.”

“She swims like a guy,” said Ryan Lochte, the 12-time Olympic medalist. “Her stroke. Her mentality. She’s so strong in the water. I’ve never seen a female swimmer like that.”

In her book, Ms. Ledecky also recalls an Associated Press article from 2016 with the headline, “Michael Phelps ties for silver in 100 fly.” In tiny print underneath: “Ledecky sets world record in women’s 800 freestyle.”

Some men, however, have called out the double standard. During Ms. Ledecky’s dominating 400 freestyle at the Rio de Janeiro Games in 2016, Mr. Gaines, the NBC analyst, said it loud and clear to the millions glued to their TVs: “She doesn’t swim like a man. She swims like Katie Ledecky.”

In May, Ms. Ledecky became the first swimmer to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Kenny Holston/The New York Times

Ms. Ledecky's book is just as much an ode to her family, coaches and mentors as it is a memoir. It may be light on drama, but it goes deep on a sport that many admire but few truly understand.

It's clear that her mother, Mary Gen Ledecky, is an enormous role model. Not only was she a collegiate swimmer, but she was one of the first recipients of an athletic scholarship after Title IX. "Title IX, now a fundamental aspect of civil rights in the United States, changed my mother's life forever," Ms. Ledecky writes.

But these days Title IX is under scrutiny in the sport. In March, over a dozen female college athletes sued the N.C.A.A., alleging that their Title IX rights were violated in 2022 after Lia Thomas, a transgender woman, was allowed to compete at its championships; Ms. Thomas won the 500-yard freestyle and earned two other All-America honors. The issue has thrust swimming into a contentious cultural discourse.

Ms. Ledecky said she preferred not to weigh in. But she added: "I think we're lucky to live in a country where issues can be debated, whether it's that issue or any other issue. It's how I feel. I think it's important to learn perspectives of others and gain an understanding of things and learn more about where everyone comes from."

Outside the pool, Ms. Ledecky is part of a breakfast group and a "very casual" book club with some of her teammates and coaches. She listens to classic rock: the Beatles, Billy Joel and especially Bruce Springsteen. She is a fan the Washington

Nationals (she threw out the ceremonial first pitch at a game in 2016) and the New York Islanders (her uncle is a co-owner). She was raised Catholic and still goes to church, she dabbles with the piano and she does chores around her new house in Gainesville.

But most of her time, as has been the case for most of her life, is taken up by the sport of — no, the *joy* of — swimming.

And while swimming, even distance swimming, is hardly monotonous, the longer races have a masochistic side to them. You have to go out fast, but not too fast, and hold on as the pain sets in.

“I realized I was good at it from a young age, but I also recognized that I touched the wall and walked away from my first distance race a lot happier and more into it than all my teammates that just did it for the first time, too,” Ms. Ledecky said.

As she approaches her fourth Games, Ms. Ledecky remains devoted to practice. “I don’t feel like it’s too monotonous, just going back and forth, flipping at every wall and staring at a black line,” she said. Jared Soares for The New York Times

As she began to set age-group records and climb the ranks of American swimmers, she was not looking very far ahead. When she met with her coach in the fall of 2011 to talk about her goals, the Olympics had not crossed her mind.

Nine months later, she won the 800 freestyle final at the U.S. Olympic Trials and was off to the London Games. It was like being “transported to a different world,” she said. When she made the Olympic final, she still was viewed by most as an afterthought.

But she was undaunted, telling her mother before the race: “When I make the podium, even though your seats are really high, you’ll be able to move down for the medal ceremony.” Her mom turned to her dad and winced.

Hours later, Ms. Ledecky, then 15, had won her first gold medal.

“I dove in and got out front, and just stayed there,” she said.

It’s a description that applies to nearly all her races. And it is a result of the same mentality that has guided her from Palisades to Paris — and, she hopes, to the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028, and beyond.

Great. Hard. Just trying to finish.