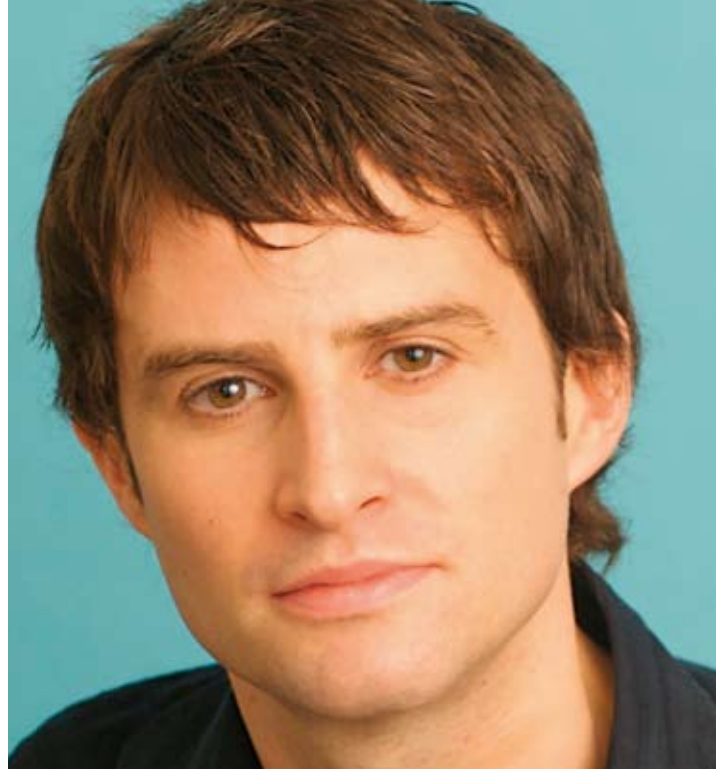


Giles Long

By Eve Menezes Cunningham



When Giles Long MBE was seven years old, he sat his parents down on the sofa and told them “I’m going to go to the Olympic Games and I’m going to win a Gold medal.”

They responded, he says, “Probably in the best way imaginable. They didn’t laugh at me. Instead, they said, ‘If that’s what you want to do, that’s absolutely brilliant. There’s only one person who’s going to do the work. We’ll back you up in whatever way we can but all the work’s going to be done by you.’ So that was brilliant. They really threw the challenge out to me. And that was the dream.”

Then, at 13, his arm was broken when he was tripped up by a bully. Worse, he found out that he had bone cancer. Giles says he’d felt something wrong with his shoulder but the break meant that the tumour shattered and the cancer spread through his system.

An insensitive doctor, on seeing his severely limited arm movement, said, “Once we’ve done the operation, you won’t get any more movement from that” Giles says, “Just like that, my Olympic dreams went out the window.”

After his treatment, Giles started swimming again because his friends were in the swimming club. His coach kept entering him in competitions and he was getting “comprehensively thrashed” repeatedly by two armed swimmers.

After a while, he says, “I told my coach, ‘I don’t want to do the competitions any more. I just want to come here and hang out with my friends.’ He said, ‘So you want to use the swimming club as a social club?’ and I said, ‘Mmm, yes.’ But he said, ‘If you want to carry on swimming here, you have to enter competitions. Everyone else has that goal of being the best they can be. We’re all a team with a common goal. As soon as you’ve got one person not sharing the goal it starts falling apart.’”

At one of the competitions, Giles was spotted by someone from the Paralympics. He was asked if he’d like to attend a training session in Darlington where he could meet members of the GB Paralympic Team. Giles realised he could change his dream and still win that Gold.

He achieved this at the Sydney Olympics in 2000. Giles says, “Being

an athlete is all about the journey. You’re always thinking, ‘what’s next? What changes can I make? How can I be better? Where are we going? What are we doing? How are we getting there?’ For years and years, you want to reach the destination. But when you finally do get there, it feels very strange. There’s a small part of you – no matter how much self belief someone’s got – that has that recognition that you might never get there.

“When I was standing there getting my Gold medal, it felt very pure. We’ve all seen people on TV receiving medals. Some people laugh, some people cry and you don’t want to do any of that. For me, the best way I can describe it is that it felt like someone had taken my heart out, given it a really good polish and then put it back in. I felt like I was gleaming from the inside out. My metaphorical heart not my literal heart.”

Giles says that, as well as his parents, he had “loads and loads of support. That support grows as you get better and better. Everyone thinks that sports like swimming are an individual sport. And for that one minute, from when you’re standing on the starting block to finishing the race, it is an individual sport.

“But to put you there, you need swimming coaches, teachers who first taught you to swim... In my case, I couldn’t afford to get my car fixed for my first Games but I had a mechanic who fixed my car for free. Then you’ve got, nutritionists, physios, even, when it comes down to it, people like hairdressers. It sounds stupid because what’s a hairdresser got to do with swimming faster? But a lot of sponsorship is based on what you look like. So if you can get your hair cut for free, that makes a big difference.

“At my absolute peak, in terms of training, it would be up to 60,000 meters in the pool every week. Then there’d be sessions in the gym and various weight and flexibility sessions. It’s important not only to be strong but to be quick with it. You wouldn’t catch a swimmer doing the same kind of things in the gym as a weightlifter because weightlifters don’t need to be strong and fast. They just have to be strong.

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Consequently, they can end up lifting a lot more weight. It's very much a case of horses for courses.

Giles seems very appreciative of all the support he's had. He says, "There's a whole raft of people that helped me get there. And as my career went on, I became better at identifying who they were and at assembling that team around me so that all of the team decisions didn't necessarily have to go through me. So maybe, in the same room, you've got your physiotherapist, your nutritionist and your psychologist. If you can get these people starting to exchange ideas with one another, then that's when they start coming up with ideas ultimately to get me to swim faster but they're getting lots out of it as well, lots of new ideas and it becomes a real place of synergy."

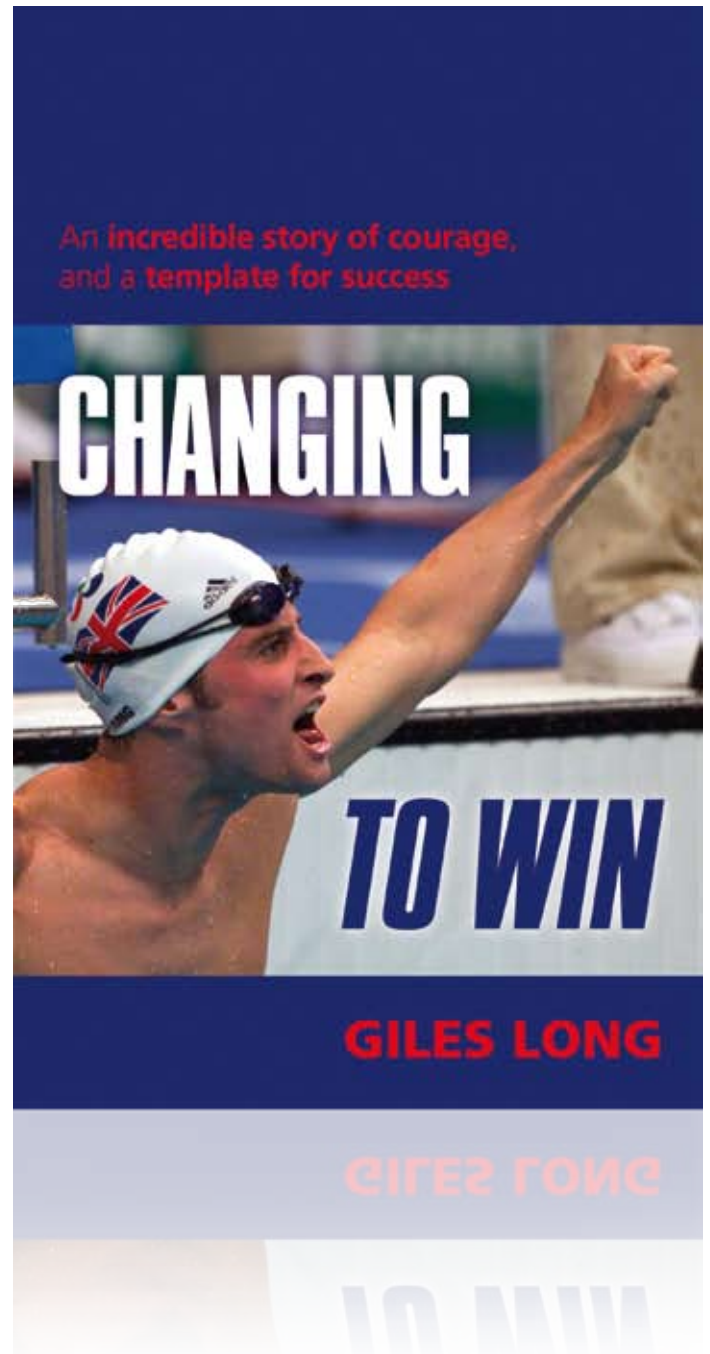
That ability to surround himself with the right people is useful in his current work, giving inspirational speeches to corporations and other groups. Giles says, "That support comes in many, many forms. There are support services that I tend to buy. Things that every business does like IT support, design, marketing, PR – those kinds of things. Then there's mentoring work. I've worked a lot with David Pearson of Sony. He's really helped me think about how I approach my business in a slightly different way."

"I was looking for something to do because I could feel my swimming career coming to an end. I started to get beaten by younger guys. I was still improving but I would have, maybe, three improvements a year and they might be by a couple of hundredths of a second whereas the younger guys coming into the sport would be getting maybe five or six improvements a year and it would be 1/3 of a second or 1/2 a second. As you get older, it doesn't get any easier and personal best times become harder to fight for. I started enjoying training more than I enjoyed competitions.

"I started working for the Youth Cancer Trust and speaking in schools because I thought, "That's something I can do and it's a way of earning some money and getting out there. I absolutely loved doing it. I loved inspiring people and leaving them motivated and coming back and hearing about the positive changes that they'd made towards being the best that they could be." The speeches at schools led to events and corporate work.

Although his swimming career is over, Giles still swims for fun, "often at London Fields because it's outdoors, heated and is in a lovely setting"

Now he's training for the Marathon. He says, "I'm not very good at



doing sport unless there's a goal. I'm not a gym bunny. I can't just go to the gym and jump around. The initial stages are to get a high level of aerobic fitness. I need to be getting up to about 20 miles a week. It can be broken up so, maybe, four sessions of five miles. That's going OK. I'm about halfway there. There's a fair amount of fitness that carries over from the swimming days."

He only decided to run the marathon the week before our interview as someone suggested he do it to raise money for the Youth Cancer Trust. Health wise, Giles says, "Touch wood, I'm OK. I think I'm now in the zone where I've got about as much risk of contracting cancer as the next person." ●

www.gileslong.com

Youth Cancer Trust: www.yct.org.uk

You can order "Changing to Win" by Giles Long, from Amazon.

Pictures for this spread and front cover by Hayley Madden.