

# Nothing for granted

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Ruling the pool: Grant Hackett has put in the laps in preparation for the world swimming championships, which begin in Montreal on Sunday.  
Photo: *Andy Zakeli*

**No Kieren Perkins, no Ian Thorpe. Grant Hackett will swim in no one's shadow at next week's world championships in Montreal. Michael Cowley reports.**

We don't know his name yet, but perhaps in a few years we will hear his tale of inspiration. He'll reveal how, as a young swimmer, he sat glued to his television as Grant Hackett smashed the 1500m world record. How that night he typed all of Hackett's times into his computer with the ambition of crossing them off, one by one. How he was allowed to sit up in the early hours of an August morning in 2004, and watch Hackett overcome adversity to defend his Olympic 1500m crown. And it will be that inspirational performance that was one of the driving forces behind this young man becoming a champion athlete.

That's how it works. Inspiration passed down through each generation.

Ask Hackett about when the "fire was ignited" and he swiftly nominates another August day, this one 10 years before his. It was the Commonwealth

Games in Canada, and 14-year-old Hackett sat there and watched Kieren Perkins break the world record in the 1500m. Later that day Hackett wrote down all of Perkins's times. The plan - one which was eventually achieved - was to gradually tick off each time.

Two years later, Hackett watched in awe as Perkins overcame the odds to win gold in the 1500m in Atlanta. He knew Perkins would win. He told all his classmates at school. This was his inspiration. The memory of it would be there when he needed it, twice in particular. The first time, at the 2000 Olympics, it helped bring down Perkins.

"There's no doubt I drew inspiration from Kieren's swim in 1996 for my own performances in 2000 and 2004," Hackett said. "In 2000 it was a story of adversity, me getting through that week of the Olympics. The pressure of having the Olympics in my home country, having glandular fever in the lead-up, being written off because I was swimming so poorly early, having Kieren swim close to his best in the 1500m heat. In the end it came down to relying 99.9 per cent on my head. I just had to get up and do it.

"Then in 2004, to be a red-hot favourite, then to get sick during that week, be pushed all the way in the fastest 1500m [field] ever, and come out victorious. Your mental approach is so important in those times, and you do call on any inspiration you can.

"And hopefully now, from that swim, I've been able to inspire others. The amount of people that I feel like I've inspired, who have come up to me - just general public or people I've known - and said how amazing it was, given my condition, to watch that race in Athens and see me win.

"The amount of accolades I've received from it is unbelievable. You probably wouldn't change the scenario at all. It was exciting, and Kieren's swim was so exciting back in 1996. To go through that situation and come out victorious at the other end, it's encouraging to know that I can do it under that adversity.

"You wouldn't like to do it like that every time, but it was the most pressured meet, and the most difficult situation, I could have been in, and I still came out victorious, so you probably wouldn't change it for the world, given that scenario.

"My problem is that when I get to an Olympic year, I've got too keen and when my body said, 'Back off a little bit, Grant', I said 'No you're not allowed to, it's not happening'. But that will change now. I've finally begun listening to my body and, if I need a session or two off, I take them."

Health is not a concern as Hackett prepares for a torrid program at the world titles, which begin on Sunday. He's fit, healthy, ready, confident and, importantly, motivated.

Talk about how he may perform at the world titles in a year when many swimmers take it easy following the Olympics, and Hackett suddenly starts talking about fractions of time.

"1.89 seconds ... that's how far there was between myself and Larsen [Jensen, the American who finished second in Athens], and I know that result kicked me in my training and motivated me to do well and to improve on my performances," Hackett said. "I know that if I stagnate or don't improve I'm going to end up finishing in the minor places or not even on the medal dais.

"But I know now what sort of ammunition Larsen and David [Davies, third in Athens] have got. They are not a big secret any more. Last year was the first time they had ever broken 15 minutes, and I knew they were going to swim fast but I didn't know they could swim those times and take such a huge, huge chunk out of their PBs. So this time around I expect them to swim probably faster and that's the way I'm perceiving it.

"Expecting that is almost comforting this time. It was a shock to have them so close in that race last time. I didn't expect that but I thought I dealt with it really well through the event and stuck to my race plan.

"This time if they are ahead of me or right next to me or it came down to a sprint finish, mentally I've already absorbed that challenge and know how to deal with it in an instant."

Hackett, who will captain the Australian team at the titles, will contest the 200m, 400m, 800m and 1500m, and said his preparation, especially for the longer races, had been "particularly good". He felt as though he was capable of swimming personal bests, and at least in the 1500m that means lowering

the world record of 14 minutes 34.56 seconds he set in Fukuoka, Japan, four years ago.

"I don't plan to finish my career at 14:34. I'd like to think I could swim under 14:30. 14:34 is a good time but it's not that good. I haven't reached my limitations. Probably a few years ago, when I was around that magic 15-minute barrier, I thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice to swim a 14 minutes 30, something freakish like that, one day?'. It would be almost disappointing to finish my career where it is now."

Montreal will be the first time since 1997 that Hackett will be competing at a major international meeting without his friend and rival Ian Thorpe.

Think about what Hackett would have collected had Thorpe never been there: he would have won three world titles in the 400m and additional three Commonwealth Games golds from the 200m and 400m, several Pan Pac titles, a 400m gold instead of silver at Athens and five extra world records.

"I'll miss him, I love racing Ian," Hackett said. "Racing the best is the best thing you can do, and I can't be too disgusted with myself when I finish half-a-body length behind someone who is as good as Ian.

"Look, I've been lucky. I've got to the race the best of the best. People sometimes get to race against one great swimmer - look who I've had to race ... first Perkins, then Thorpe, and now Michael Phelps. I love that. It's certainly no curse."