Dive In!

When Olympians Dara Torres and Caitlin Leverenz dived into the pool as kids, they were swimming to have fun—nothing has changed.

June 18, 2014 By Kate Ferguson

At the Summer Olympic Games in 2012, Caitlin Leverenz won a bronze medal in the 200-meter individual medley. Leverenz, now 23, was living a dream that began at age 7 when she begged her mother to allow her to swim year-round. But mom declined. At age 8, she asked again. This time her mother agreed, thinking her daughter would probably get cold and tired and then be done for the winter. Leverenz never did. Now she's training for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro and really looking forward to competing.

"There's been so many times when swimming just didn't go the way I wanted it to—a race, a practice—when I just wanted it to be better than it was," Leverenz says. "But those are the times when I've had the most growth in my life. I wouldn't have learned the things that I learned and I wouldn't be the person today that I am without having done that, and swimming is a very safe place to do that."

Dara Torres agrees. Torres, age 47, didn't make the 2012 Olympic swimming team, but not for lack of trying. She missed making the team by 9/100ths of a second. For Torres, getting shut out was tough. "I always like to win, and there hasn't been an Olympic team that I've gone to the trials and haven't made," she says. "But I was okay with it because I gave it everything that I had." In previous years, though, Torres not only made the team, but even brought home 12 Olympic medals.

Like Leverenz, Torres picked up many life lessons from swimming: sacrifice, dedication, hard work, time management and the pursuit of excellence. "There's a lot that I learned personally from the sport of swimming that just trickled down into other aspects of my life," she says.

That's one reason why Dara signed up as spokespersons for SwimToday, a summerlong campaign sponsored by USA Swimming and nine industry partners. SwimToday's goal is to persuade parents that swimming is, according to the campaign's slogan, "the funnest sport there is," and a beneficial youth sport option that yields a variety of useful life skills.

In addition to all these benefits, Torres says she wanted her daughter to join a swim team so she could enjoy the camaraderie and actively engage in a sport. "The thing I would hate to see is my daughter standing on the sideline because she's not as good as the other kids," Torres says. "In

swimming, you're always participating."

Another opportunity afforded to children when they sign up for swimming as a sport is that "it is such a great way for kids to learn how to fail and have it not be a bad thing," Leverenz says.

"I think our culture in general teaches kids that they shouldn't fail," she adds. "Failure is an inevitable part of life, but as long as you can learn from those failures, that makes life even better."

Because swimming is competitive, many parents believe that the sport is too intense to be fun. But Torres begs to differ. "If parents were to watch these kids in practice, they'd see that they're always having fun," she stresses. "Swimming is also great fitness-wise for your kids because it's so easy on the body, and you don't have to worry about injuries."

For Leverenz, her worries right now concern practicing for the upcoming Games. She won a medal in the previous summer Olympics, so now there's pressure—some of it self-inflicted—to better her performance. "Winning a bronze in 2012 was a huge dream come true for me, and I'm really proud of that," she says. "But moving forward I definitely want to get a better medal."

Still, one of the life lessons Leverenz learned as a youngster diving into the pool stays with her. "I just have to work the hardest I can and race to the best of my abilities," she says. "That's all I can ask of myself."

Meanwhile, the reason she got into the sport in the first place remains the same: Swimming is just so much fun.

To learn more about SwimToday, click here.

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