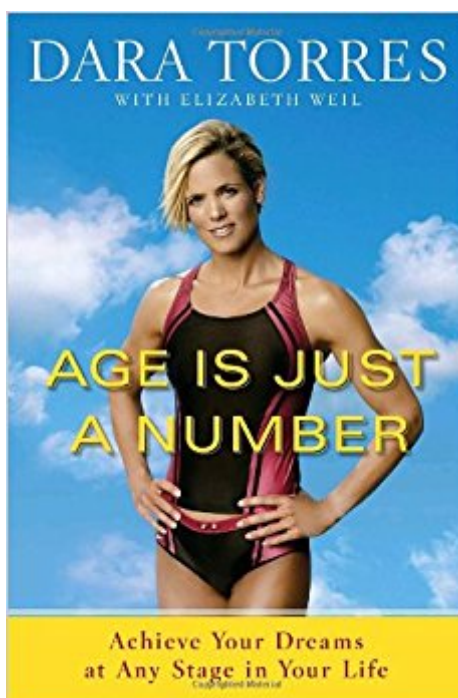


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# Age Is Just A Number: Achieve Your Dreams At Any Stage In Your Life



## Synopsis

From legendary Olympic gold medalist Dara Torres comes a motivational, inspirational memoir about staying fit, aging gracefully, and pursuing your dreams. Dara Torres captured the hearts and minds of Americans of all ages when she launched her Olympic comeback as a new mother at the age of forty-one—years after she had retired from competitive swimming and eight years since her last Olympics. When she took three silver medals in Beijing—including a heartbreaking .01-second finish behind the gold medalist in the women's 50-meter freestyle—America loved her all the more for her astonishing achievement and her good-natured acceptance of the results. Now, in *Age Is Just a Number*, Dara reveals how the dream of an Olympic comeback first came to her—when she was months into her first, hard-won pregnancy. With humor and candor, Dara recounts how she returned to serious training—while nursing her infant daughter and contending with her beloved father's long battle with cancer. Dara talks frankly about diving back in for this comeback; about being an older athlete in a younger athletes' game; about competition, doubt, and belief; about working through pain and uncertainty; and finally—about seizing the moment and, most important, never giving up. A truly self-made legend, her story will resonate with women of all ages—and with anyone daring to entertain a seemingly impossible dream.

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## Customer Reviews

DARA TORRES has set three world records and has brought home twelve Olympic medals, including four golds. She is the first American swimmer to have competed in five Olympics. She

lives in Florida.

Prologue I've been old before. I was old when I was 27 and I got divorced. I was old when I was 35 and I couldn't get pregnant. I was really old when I was 39 and my father died. But when I was 41 and I woke up in a dorm in the Olympic Village in Beijing, I didn't feel old. I felt merely and, yes, happily middle-aged. "The water doesn't know how old you are," I'd been telling anyone who would listen for the prior two years. Though sometimes, I have to admit, I would think to myself, Good thing it can't see my wrinkles. On the morning of the 50-meter freestyle Olympic finals, I set my alarm for six o'clock. I'm a type A person, or as some of my friends call me, type A++.

Basically, I'm one of those people who has to do everything I do to the fullest extent of my ability, as fast as I can. When I recently moved houses I didn't sleep until all the boxes were unpacked and all the pictures hung on the walls. I don't like to do anything halfway, and I'd set this crazy goal for myself: to make my fifth Olympic team as a 41-year-old mother. And the truth was I didn't just want to make the team, either. I wanted a medal. I wanted to win. Along the way, I also wanted to prove to the world that you don't have to put an age limit on your dreams, that the real reason most of us fear middle age is that middle age is when we give up on ourselves. It was a pretty crazy thing to be doing, especially under the circumstances. If you've ever had a toddler or watched a parent you adore die, you'll know what I'm talking about. Young children and dying parents are truly exhausting, and I had one of each as I made my comeback. But I knew in my heart I could succeed as long as I left no stone unturned. The race started at 10 a.m., so I'd worked out my schedule leading up to the race. I needed to drink my Living Fuel breakfast shake at 6:15 a.m. so I'd have time to pack my roller bag with two practice suits, two racing suits, two pairs of goggles, two racing caps, two towels, and my dress sweats, in case I got a medal before I caught the 6:45 a.m. bus over to the Water Cube. I'd then do my whole routine wake-up swim, shower, get mashed (a massage technique done with the feet), do my warm-up swim, get stretched, and put on my racing suit all before I headed to the ready room, where all the swimmers wait before a race. My teammates, I have to tell you, thought that roller bag was the funniest thing in the world. They were all 15 to 25 years younger than me, the ages I was at my first, second, and third Olympics. (I was already beyond their ages by my fourth.) Their bodies were like noodles, and they all carried their gear in backpacks. But I'd noticed that backpack straps made my trapezoid muscles tense up. Swimming fast, for me, is all about staying loose. So I had a

roller bag. If I looked like a nutty old lady, fine. The Beijing morning was humid and dark when I left the Olympic Village. All the other swimmers were probably still asleep. I think that the only other person awake in the Village was Mark Schubert, the National team coach of the USA Olympic swimming team. Mark had also been my coach at my first Olympics, 24 years ago. And he had been my coach at Mission Viejo, where I had gone to high school to train at age 16. I love Mark. He is like my fairy godfather, constantly dropping into my life at just the right time, giving me what I need, and then disappearing again. That morning he had woken up in the Beijing predawn to help me prepare for my race. We had come a long way together. Though he wasn't my coach in the months leading up to the Olympics, he had taught me the discipline and the commitment to detail I now prized. We were now going to literally do one more lap. I rolled my bag out to the sidewalk as quietly as possible. I didn't want to wake anybody, partly because, as a mother, I knew the value of sleep. But selfishly, I also wanted my competitors to stay in their beds. The longer they slept, I told myself, the greater my advantage and the more time I had, relative to them, to prepare. Since my daughter had been born I had been saying that waking up with a kid in the middle of the night was going to give me an edge at some point. I hoped this was it. Over at the Water Cube the competition pool was empty, so I yelled "Good morning!" to Bob Costas, who was broadcasting up in the rafters, found my lane, and dove in. I don't usually do awake-up swim in the competition pool, but the 50-meter freestyle is a really strategic race. Time can contract or stretch out. It's only one length of the pool, just 24 or 25 seconds, but it's also easy to get lost. If I've learned one thing from all my races and all my years, it's that the Olympics can be disorienting, and the middle of things is where we tend to lose the plot. Part of my plan for the morning was to learn exactly where I was going to be in the water at every stroke of the race. So as I swam I memorized all the landmarks, the intake jets, where all the cameras were on the bottom of the pool. That way I had markers in addition to the lines 15 meters from the start and 15 meters from the end. I knew when to keep a little energy in reserve, and when to take my last breath and gun for the wall. More was riding on this race than on any other race I had swum. Back in Florida I had a child, Tessa, who one day studied this race to find out who her mother was. I had a coach, Michael Lohberg, who believed in me before anyone else, who now lay in a hospital bed with a rare blood disorder, fighting for his life. I had a father, Edward, whom I had lost to cancer just as I started this comeback, and who had wanted so much for me to realize my dreams, and who I felt was with me every day. And most unexpectedly, at

least for me, I had a lot of fans. I wasn't being coy when I say the fans were unexpected. I was saying they were unexpected because I didn't yet understand how overcoming perceived odds works or how even just attempting that can inspire people, and how the energy from those people can boomerang back to you, giving you the strength and energy you need to reach your goals. So I was surprised, deeply surprised, and also grateful that my dream was contagious. I've always been good in a relay, but I've never been quite as strong in my individual events. I've just never been at my best when I'm swimming in front of the whole world just for myself. But now I had the support of everyone nearing or over 40, everyone who'd ever felt they were too old or too out of shape to do something but still wanted to give it a try. I had everyone who didn't want to give up. I just couldn't let all those people down. I felt they were depending on me almost in the same way my relay teammates did. We were in this together. I couldn't entice so many women and men into dreaming a little longer and aiming a little higher, and then not win. Of course, as anyone who knows me will tell you, I wanted to win anyway. I'm pathologically competitive. I hate to lose. That's just what I'm like. If you and I were in a sack race at a field day, trying to jump across the grass with our legs stuck in bags, making total fools of ourselves, I'd still want to cross that finish line first. I'd give it everything I had. But now I wanted to win this race not just for myself. I wanted to win it for everyone who believed everyone who needed to believe that a 40-plus mom could still compete. At 7:25 a.m. I got out of the pool and walked to the locker room to take a hot shower. The wake-up swim and the shower were both part of an effort to get my core temperature up. Everybody's core temperature drops during sleep, and that temperature needs to rise if you want to swim really fast. My plan for the remaining two hours before my race was to have my stretchers, Anne and Steve, massage me with their feet, then swim again, then have Anne and Steve stretch me, and then put on the bottom half of my racing suit, with plenty of time remaining to lie on a massage table in the team area and listen to a bunch of rockers half my age sing a song called "Kick Some Ass." The mashing and the stretching were critical to my performance. All the other kids in the Olympics might have thought they could do their best by just swimming a little warm-up, pinwheeling their arms a few times and diving in. But not me. I was the same age as a lot of those athletes' mothers. Michael Phelps had started calling me "Mom" eight years earlier. I needed every advantage. Physically, I have to say I didn't feel great, still not fully recovered from the prior day's semifinals. (Okay, let me pause right here and say it: I'm totally fine with aging except for the recovery time. Is it really

necessary to take 48 hours to recover from a 24-second sprint?) I also felt sick to my stomach with anxiety. I'm like that, even after all these years: On the day of a big race, I feel like I'm going to throw up. I know it's part of the adrenaline surge I need in order to psych up and win. But my relationship to that surge is like an addiction. I run toward it, crave it, can't live too long without it, and then it makes me feel terrible. That pre-race nausea gets me every time. I suppose when I stop feeling it I'll know it's time to call it quits and hang up my Speedo for good. That day at the Water Cube, as my mother came over to wish me luck, and then came back to wish me luck again, I took a few swigs of Accelerade to try to calm my nerves. Breathe, Dara, breathe, I told myself. It'll be over in 24 seconds. Of course, Mark Spitz once said the really great thing about being a competitive swimmer is that your career ends quickly. He said the reward for all the long hours in the pool is that you get to retire at 23 years old. Oh, well. I was not following Spitz's schedule (though he, too, attempted a comeback at age 41). So I tried to focus instead on what I'd learned at the Olympic Trials, where I'd felt so bad just before my first heat that I was crying in the hall but swam really well anyway: You don't have to feel good to swim fast. I must have said it to myself a hundred times: Don't freak out, Dara. Remember Trials. You don't have to feel good to swim fast. Finally, I went down to the team area and lay on a massage table for a while, listening to my iPod and watching the muscles in my quads tighten up. Then one of the coaches told me it was time to go to the ready room, which was a good thing. Because despite all my supposed maturity, for the last 20 minutes I'd been acting like an annoying kid. Every 30 seconds I'd ask: How much longer? Is it time yet? I couldn't stand the wait. I'd been working toward this moment for two years, or 24 years, or 41 years . . . Let's just say it had been a long time. I'd done everything I possibly could. I'd assembled the best team. I'd worked hard and smart. Now the only thing that was happening was that my muscles were tightening up. The ready room is where they put all the athletes just before a race. I hate the place. In the ready room it's just you and the seven other girls you're swimming against, and it's either hear-a-pindrop tense or filled with forced conviviality. When I was younger I'd sit in the ready room with my Walkman (remember those?), and then my Discman (remember those, too?), staring at my fingernails, always keeping an eye on the trash can so I'd know where to run to vomit. That day, on purpose, I left my iPod in my rollerbag. But as I ducked my head in to give the official my credentials, I could see everybody else sitting already, messing with their fingernails, or with their caps and goggles, looking sick and miserable. And the room was hot and stuffy. For my entire career I'd been just like them—enjoying

my Olympics by putting massive amounts of pressure on myself. Which is to say not enjoying the Olympics at all. But this time I felt totally blessed. I was at the Olympics. How cool is that? I sat with LeBron James and watched Michael Phelps swim. And guess what that's like? FUN. In just five minutes the eight of us girls were all about to do something incredible: swim in an Olympic final. By pretty much any sane person's standards, we'd already accomplished something. We were the eight fastest female swimmers in the world. We'd already won. I wanted to enjoy the experience. I wanted them to enjoy the experience. I knew we were all going out there to try to beat each other, and believe me, I wanted to win. But I felt the occasion called for a joke. "Anybody else hot? Or is it just me?" I called out to the girls. "I feel like I'm in menopause." I saw a smile creep across the lips of Cate Campbell, the freckly Australian redhead who up until that moment looked like she was about to meet a firing squad. I knew how she felt: like her whole future depended on the next five minutes. I now was old enough to know that there's a lot of life that happens outside of the pool. That she was going to lose loved ones and yearn for things that were outside her control. Swimming is not like real life. You can determine for yourself how hard and how well you train. You can control how you dive, how you turn, how you position your shoulders for your touch. But I knew what Cate was going through. Swimming fast can feel like the most important thing in the whole world. I've been there, I've felt that. She was 16. Maybe it was this perspective that caused me to ham it up just before 24 of the most important seconds in my life. Maybe it was nerves. Whatever the reason, I did. With just a few minutes to go before the race, all of us zipped up like sardines in our tight new racing suits, officials walked us down the hall to the rows of chairs under the bleachers. My mantra for the past two years had been to do everything all the other swimmers weren't doing that extra vertical kick in practice, those long hours of active recovery so I'd have something over them. But now the mom in me came out. I wanted to take care of everybody. I wanted all these girls to enjoy the event. I wanted them to relax. I knew that Libby Trickett, Cate's teammate, a really spunky Australian who'd gone into the Games ranked first in the 50 free, had just gotten married. So I asked her if she was going to have kids, and before I knew it, as 17,000 fans sat waiting for us to come out and compete, I was telling them what it's like to give birth to a child. And not just telling them. I had my feet up, as if they were in stirrups, yelling like I was in labor, just as I might have if I was sitting around my house yukking it up with my closest friends. Then it came time to walk out to the blocks for that long, fast lap. When I got to my lane, I dried off my block with a towel, lest I slip. Then I took off my

sneakers and my two T-shirts, and walked to the edge of the pool to splash my body and face. Back at the blocks, I roughed up the skin on my forearms and hands on the block's surface so I'd have a better feel for the water. Each time, just before a race, the officials blow a series of whistles - first a bunch of short bursts to warn you to get all your clothes off except your suit, cap, and goggles. Then a long whistle meaning it's time to get on your block in ready position. After that, the starting signal begins the race. When I heard the long whistle I took my mark, with my right leg back, my left toes curled over the cool metal edge, staring down my long blue lane. I had just one word in my head, tone, reminding me to keep my body tight, in a toned position to knife into the water on my start. I knew everybody who dreamed my dream with me was on that block, too. But I also knew, at the starting signal, that I'd be diving into the water alone. From the Hardcover edition.

As a competitive Masters swimmer who grew up swimming in the same era as Dara, I loved this book and could relate to it in every way. So many of the coaches and swimmers who make up her story are people I knew or know about so it took me back to "the good ole days" of age group swimming. I also appreciate how she candidly shared some of the most negative aspects of sport - such as undue pressure to be thin and to lose weight which is such a terrible problem because of too much focus on appearance vs. health. This pressure nearly killed a girl I swam with in high school who went to the University of Florida and was never overweight but they made her think she was so she ended up with anorexia! Male coaches and trainers criticizing female athletes and telling them what they should weigh and how they should look has got to stop!!! I felt such a connection to many elements of Dara's life, personality and emotions about her sport which I think any female athlete, not just a swimmer, would be able to relate to. Even though she has more trainers and domestic help than most of her readers, Dara comes across as a real person, who anyone could talk to, with problems ordinary people face, but yet she is extraordinary at the same time which makes you want to strive to be better yourself. She also creates the excitement true competitors feel when they are about to race which makes you want to go out and do it! When I finished the book, I couldn't wait to get back on the blocks again which I did the very next day! This book also sends out an inspirational message to readers that there is much to be gained from competing and being active as older adults which is wonderful - more and more older adults are feeling better than ever in their 40s, 50s and beyond because of healthy activity - thanks, Dara, for getting the message out that getting moving is where it's at because I believe that with all my heart!!

Not the best writing, but an athlete's bio never is. However, it is a fast read and pretty inspiring. Dara cuts to the core of her motivation and drive, which is why I bought the book. Talks about hard work, dedication, and focus in a way that only someone who has been through the reps could. I admire Dara and am glad I read this book.

Excellent read and reminder that come backs happen throughout one's life - always fascinating to get a look into the mind of a champion as they go for a dream and make it happen.

I was told I needed to read this book. I enjoyed the book so much. It renewed my dream I have wanted to pursue for so long I am finally back on track,

The Dara Torres story is amazing because here is a lady who made the most of her opportunities. It is true that she may have had some significant advantages, but not everyone understands the value of those advantages and wastes them. Dara was a great swimmer who did not take anything for granted and worked very hard for her success when others would have been happy for her to fail. Great story.

Overall, I loved the stories Dara had to tell following her entire swimming career. She is an amazing inspiration to any aging athlete. Age is truly just a number. My only dislike was how the book jumped around throughout time. Great read!

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and it has inspired me to get back in the water and swim!

I enjoyed reading it.

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