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McNAMARA: Olympic gold vein

COMMENTARY:

If you listen to the media, we occupy a new gilded age every four years. Thousands of competitors "mine for gold" or "go for the gold" in the Olympic Games. As usual, this year's medal counts are prominently totaled in our press and on TV screens to show national standings, especially the numbers of medals won by the United States.

In the case of Michael Phelps, there was tremendous interest generated in his quest for eight gold medals, perhaps spurred on by television's need to hype the Olympics, and abetted in part by Mr. Phelps' several sponsors. More power to him, though, as they say in the sports world: He worked hard to become a genuine Sports Phenomenon - maybe the Phenomenon of the century. And most Americans, if not most of those who follow the Olympics around the world, cheered on this extraordinary young man - I did, too.

But media hype in these Games in any form, and in the final analysis, is only a form of commercialized hope. Maybe this means we all direct our attention toward too small a population at the Games: the gifted, highly proficient few who will become Olympic champions, and those only slightly less capable, who will receive silver and bronze medals.

More than 10,000 men and women are said to be participating in more than 300 events during this Olympiad. The vast majority of these will never come close to the medal stand. At an even further distance from these awards are the thousands that participated in Olympic trials and prior competitions in their home countries or elsewhere to vie for berths on their national teams. Their talents, training, and results, when measured against those who become Olympic medalists, are often just a bit less, in fractions of minutes or seconds, distance or scores. Their losing efforts should instead be

measured by what they were capable of giving and doing: Their best is their reward, an intangible, but real medal. It should be proudly kept, a counterbalance to the overwhelming attention and awards of the very few. It's often easy to forget in the spectacle and commentaries of the Games those who failed to reach the three-level awards platform.

Fifty-two years ago, together with three other oarsmen of a four-man shell, I failed to make it to the Olympic Trials, much less the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne. It wasn't for lack of coaching. I would like to think that we had in Chuck Logg a perfect mentor - who in 1952 had coached two other Rutgers oarsmen who rowed to the gold in Helsinki in their two-man shell. They had returned to row with us in New Jersey in preparation for the Olympic Trials, hoping to defend their championship.

While the coach was sold on the champion pair, he also liked our fours' progress and our times. We had rowed together for a year in the Varsity eight-oared shell, and some New York newspapers had us as the top-rated four in the East. I liked to think we were reasonably proficient and confident and that we would do well at the Trials.

Our two shells trained twice daily for almost two months: the pair in their shell from '52, and our four in a borrowed boat without Olympic specifications. We were waiting for one ordered by the university to be constructed and shipped to us just before the Trials on the New York Athletic Club water course.

About two weeks before we were to leave for New York, the coach met us at the boat house with the bad news: Somehow, the university failed to process the order for our shell's construction. Never ordered, it was never built, would never arrive and efforts to beg or borrow a four-man boat with Olympic specs just didn't succeed. Our last practice on the river wasn't exactly upbeat, but Joe Schick, our stroke-oar, said it best: "We tried, and did what we could. Nobody can take that away from us."

Joe Schick was right. Past all the sports hype, media commentary, and the great visual images of this and any Olympiad, there is an underpinning of personal best that while not quite good enough to rise to the Gold Standard, says loudly enough for any champion or

any spectator to hear: "I tried."

Michael McNamara is a retired Infantry colonel and teaches literature for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at George Mason University.