



Not Shy, Just Focused

McDowell's unconventional upbringing, humility spark Purdue swimming

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In a dimly lit coffee shop, Nicholas McDowell quietly sips his hot beverage. Forks and knives clang against plates, and the clash of breaking glass from somewhere in the kitchen resonates out into the dining room. A hum of chatter fills the entire space around him, but McDowell offers all of his unspoken attention to his across-the-table companion.

The conversation is mostly one-way, with McDowell smiling softly and nodding here and there, but he doesn't mind. He much more enjoys listening anyway, on taking in the moment and focusing on what's in front of him. Today, that's a friend. Most other times, though, it's swimming.

Ironically, this soft spoken young man is one of the most talked about upcoming freestyle swimmers in the Big Ten. Perhaps even more paradoxical is the difference between Nick McDowell the person and the athlete. On paper for instance, the humble and reserved nature of McDowell is lost, overshadowed by the records and statistics of what many might describe as a sports jock.

Swimming for Durango High School in Las Vegas, McDowell capped off his pre-collegiate swimming career last spring with a state championship in the 200 and 500 freestyle competitions. Prior to that, he qualified to swim at the 2016 U.S. Olympic team trials in the 1500 freestyle, was selected to swim for the 2016 USA Swimming men's national team, and was named his team's MVP as early as his sophomore year.

Now a freshman swimming for Purdue University, McDowell has already solidified his place among the best freestyle swimmers in the NCAA, finishing second to Northwestern swimmer and FINA World Championships gold medalist Jordan Wilimovsky in January.

Yet, despite the impression Nick's remarkable accolades might suggest about his character and personality, the kid is never one to brag. In fact, he's barely one to talk.

After McDowell's runner-up finish to Wilimovsky, the same January meet where he finished with a new season-best time of 9:12.81 in the 1000 freestyle, head coach Dan Ross was asked about the freshman.

Is there a moment you and Nick have had that stands out to you?

What about a memorable conversation the two of you shared before one his outstanding performances?

His answer: "Not really. He's so quiet."

A Different Lane

To really know Nick McDowell the person, not just the name up on the scoreboard of the Purdue Aquatic Center, a closer look at his time at Durango High School - or lack thereof - might be a good place to start.

Everything surrounding McDowell's high school experience - an Olympic trial, Division I swimming prospect living in "The Fabulous" Las Vegas - suggests that Nick's life at the time must have been a breeze, both socially as well as athletically.

Both presumptions would be misguided.

Yes, McDowell swam for Durango High School. Every college scout who was eyeing him back in his late high school career knows that. What they might not know is that for the first time, McDowell is attending school in a classroom.

"I was actually home-schooled," said McDowell in a mellow hum between sips from his coffee mug. "All of my siblings were before me, and that's just what was normal for me."

As anyone might imagine, McDowell's jump from in-house studying to Division I swimming was a bit of a step to take. The mental and physical preparation any collegiate athletic prospect must undergo between high school and NCAA competition is taxing enough. Yet, here was McDowell, making the leap from a house that for the last 18 years had been both a family home and a classroom, to a 2,468 acre campus.

McDowell admits the transition hasn't always been easy, especially for a young man of such few words.

"I've always been pretty shy. I don't really say too much."

For McDowell, though, the quiet and studious demeanor that he credits his home-school upbringing with shaping isn't exactly a weakness. It's just a part of him, who he is, and if anything it's his biggest strength when it comes to the sport he loves.

Coach Ross may have put it best, saying that McDowell's outspoken character is what allows him to stay so mentally focused, and so committed to improving himself.

"He's a coach's dream," says Ross. "Very quick-witted. He does everything you ask, and works very hard."

That same quiet focus that caught the eye of Dan Ross is what makes McDowell such a likable teammate and friend - not only one share a coffee with once in a while, but someone whose mental toughness and concentration you hope might rub off on you before your next meet.

"I think it has a positive impact on his life," said McDowell's teammate, friend, and roommate Kristian Komlenic. "He jumps in the pool, gets his work done, eats and sleeps."

Next to all the hours of work McDowell puts in, though, Kristian says he's watched his friend slowly open up, and gradually relax into Purdue's social life. Still, Kristian admires McDowell's ability to retain and hone in on that iconic McDowell focus for the swimming pool.

"And I guess I don't mind how quiet he is when I'm trying to sleep," Komlenic added.

Between Moments

Even though McDowell himself is all right with it, and has even come to happily embrace the label, perhaps "reserved" or "shy" isn't exactly the most accurate description of his demeanor.

In the middle of swim meets McDowell can be spotted on the team bench, plugged into his headphones with his head tilted down toward the tile between events, focused. One of the trainers might tap him on the shoulder, updating him with new information about which lane he's

in next, or who he's competing against. A head nod and a few OK's later, and McDowell is back in the zone, the words of his favorite artist - Logic - buzzing through his ears:

"Even though there's been moments when everything fell through,
I kept it moving assuming even the greatest fail too."

Those lyrics aren't just part of McDowell's mental preparation, some random words from another radio hit that energize McDowell before he breaks the surface of the water. Those lines fuel his focus, only because they ring so close to home.

Despite all of his successes and accomplishments in his time at Durango High School - a four-year period of what the scouting paper trail might describe as complete dominance, made exponentially more admirable only by the star swimmer's honest humility - McDowell almost never won a state title. In fact, it wasn't until his last high school swim meet ever that he finally secured the trophy.

Still, coming home with that win, despite it standing as a moment he'll never forget, isn't what Nick is reminded of when he nods his head to those lyrics from Logic. It's the long, exhausting road that led up to that moment.

As a high school freshman, McDowell's personal best time in the 1000 freestyle was an unremarkable 9:57. To win state his senior year, McDowell would cut that time by forty seconds.

The outlandish task of slashing nearly three-quarters of a minute off of his time - an accomplishment many young athletes would shake their head at the prospect of completing - was daunting. Yet, Nick attributes his lofty four-year journey's final triumphant end to the thing his teammates and coaches have come to know and love about him: focus.

Take it one step, one day at a time, says McDowell. A stroke, a breath, then another stroke. Stay humble, it's not about the crowd or the accolades.

"I focus on what I can control. Keep getting better in practice. Keep getting better in the weight room. The rest will be history."

What a history he's had so far.

Yet, the question remains: can McDowell live up to the bar he has set for himself? To recreate here at Purdue the same gains he made in high school would be something for the storybooks, but the team has faith in their young freestyle swimmer.

"He's already had a huge impact as a freshman," says coach Ross. "I'd like to see him set our varsity record in the 1650, the oldest record at Purdue."

At the end of the day, though, McDowell is a normal guy. If he's not in the pool, he might be in his dorm room watching a movie from one of his favorite directors Quentin Tarantino, or sipping a hot cup of Joe at the coffee shop.

Whatever happens with Nick McDowell down the road, in swimming or in everyday life, is only for time to tell. In the meantime, just like he always has, McDowell will simply be quietly focused on the moment.