

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

As he swims for more Olympic gold, Dwyer remembers a doting grandpa

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When he swims the 200- and 400-meter freestyle and the 4 X 200 relay for the U.S. team at the Rio Olympics, Conor Dwyer will have everything in place except one key emotional motivator.

Winnetka native Dwyer, who won a gold medal in the 4 X 200 in London in 2012, possessed plenty of his own confidence knowing he's in his athletic prime at 27. He will also have Mr. Swimming, Michael Phelps, otherwise his frequent roomie, buddy and splash counselor, available for last-second and instant-replay counsel. And Conor will be rooted on by a big, supportive, swimming-conscious family, led by mom Jeanne Dwyer, who once knifed through the water competitively at Florida State University.

The missing-man formation will be the absence of grandpa Jim Dowdle. After boosting Dwyer through almost every youth athletic event on dry land or in water, he lived long enough to see him collect his gold in 2012. Dowdle died of congestive heart failure at 79 in 2014.

If that name rings a bell, well, it should. Dowdle proved to be one of the key executives in Chicago baseball history. And when he wasn't watching Dwyer in a swim meet or Little League game, he was taking his grandson to see, from the inside-out, a Cubs team Dowdle supervised from both Tribune Tower and among baseball people with whom he hobnobbed.

Much of Dwyer's competitiveness, love of sports and ability to perform under bright lights were passed along from Dowdle, a big, friendly salesman with a booming voice who drew people to him.



Conor Dwyer points to his family at the Olympic Trials in Omaha after swimming the 200-meter freestyle. That event will be one of three in which Dwyer will compete at the Rio Olympics.

“He was big as far as my driving force in athletics, not just swimming,” Dwyer said as he took a break from pre-Olympics training, watching Phelps’ new puppy at the latter’s Arizona home.

Jeanne Dwyer was thrilled her father was the top sports booster in the family.



Conor Dwyer's family gathers at Wrigley Field in 2012 when he was honored for winning his first Olympic swimming gold medal. From left: father Pat Dwyer, cousin Colin Dowdle, mother Jeanne Dwyer, grandmother Sally Dowdle, grandfather Jim Dowdle, Conor Dwyer, and brothers Brenden and P.J. Dwyer.

“My dad was the No. 1 cheerleader for all 16 grandchildren,” she said. “He was such an inspiration to all the grandchildren. His example of hard work and determination, they all tried to follow in his footsteps. We were so blessed that Mom and Dad were (in London), it meant so much to Conor. My mother (Sally) is planning on going to Rio.”

But the No. 1 fringe benefit of having Jim Dowdle as a grandfather was getting up close and personal with the Cubs when the kids weren’t out there playing.

Hanging around the Cubs

“I got to be around the Chicago Cubs and Wrigley Field 40 games a year, home and road,” Dwyer said. “And I don’t think he missed one of me and my brothers’ (Spencer, P.J. and Brenden) All-Star baseball games. He wouldn’t miss a baseball game, a country club swim meet, a basketball game. He somehow found a way to run the Cubs and be a huge impact in our lives, sports and academic-wise.”

The fringe benefit was rubbing shoulders with Cubs players and managers from 1994, when Tribune Co. executive vice president Dowdle assumed supervision of the team, until and beyond his retirement in 2000.

“We went to Denver and he brought us into the locker room where we tried on Scott Servais’ catching gear,” he said. “Jim Riggleman was always a good family friend.”

Riggleman can confirm such a relationship. Conversations with the Reds bench coach all the way back to his 1995-99 Cubs managerial days often mentioned convivial dinners with Dowdle presiding over baseball conversations with the team brass.

Dowdle proved to be the most impactful – in a positive way – Tribune Co. executive connected with the Cubs. And there was plenty of negative coming from neighboring upper-floor Tribune Tower offices.

After a long career flitting around stations all over the country, native South Sider Dowdle was called home to run the expanding Tribune Broadcasting Co. in 1981. One of his first moves was to recommend Tribune Co. purchase the Cubs to protect their valuable broadcast rights on WGN-TV and Radio. Only three years earlier, WGN had put the games up on satellite when it became a superstation.

Later in 1981, Dowdle went out on a career limb to hire Harry Caray away from the White Sox. Although Caray and partner Jimmy Piersall conducted a guerilla-theater-on-the-air for Bill Veeck at old Comiskey Park, he had to tone his style down a bit for the far-more conservative Tribune-run broadcast operation. Dowdle and new Cubs GM Dallas Green spoke to Caray, who complied and ended up far bigger than ever as the face of the Cubs.



Harry Caray (left) owed his late-career superstardom to Jim Dowdle's (right) daring decision to hire him for WGN in 1981.

Thirteen years later, Dowdle cleaned up a corporate mess that had dragged down the Cubs. From the time Green was forced out in 1987 until 1994, Dowdle's fellow executives had meddled too much in the day-to-day baseball operations of the team. The likes of Stanton Cook, Donald Grenesko and John Madigan were totally unqualified.

Worst of their interference was the bungling of ace of aces Greg Maddux's long-term contract to which he agreed in the winter of 1991-92. Maddux's free-agent departure to the Braves was only a slightly bigger catastrophe than permitting the farm system built up by Green to wither and die on the vine.

Grandpa cut the cord of Trib control of Cubs

In 1999, with his retirement looming, a Dowdle welcoming a visitor to his 24th-floor Tribune Tower office revealed his goal five years earlier was to "cut the cord" of daily corporate control of the Cubs. His answer was to install whiz-kid baseball-man Andy MacPhail as Cubs president after he won two World Series with the Twins. The concept was sound. The one aspect Dowdle did not scout accurately about MacPhail was his innate fiscal conservatism.

Dowdle was so much unlike the typical Trib executive. He was a born salesman and comfortable carrying on the lively art of conversation. In contrast, the silver-haired Madigan fled from an interview request around the Wrigley Field batting cage in 1999, complaining to MacPhail and GM Ed Lynch that a reporter was trying to query him.

"I would always love talking shop at Sunday dinners," Dwyer recalled, "but I'm more proud how many people around Chicago who were well-known liked how (Dowdle) handled himself as an executive and how good of a person he was. I'm as proud of that as any of his business moves he made."

The young Dwyer got to know the biggest names on the Cubs thanks to his family entrée.

“I think it was awesome being around the pro players to see how they acted,” he said.

Sammy Sosa, though, taught him that outside appearances can be deceiving.

“He gave us bubble gum,” said Dwyer. “We asked him how he hit so many home runs. He said you just gotta believe. I guess we found out later on it wasn’t just about believing.”

Caray became Dwyer’s all-time Cubs favorite. “We were friends with the Caray family,” he said. “We all went to his funeral (in 1998). Grandpa gave the eulogy.”

Other favorites were Mark Grace, Kerry Wood and Mark Prior.

Meanwhile, through his storytelling talents, Dowdle counseled his grandchildren not to cut things close academically. He had literally scraped through Notre Dame.



Colin Dwyer (left) meets Cubs first baseman Anthony Rizzo at Wrigley Field in 2012.



Conor Dwyer tries out a bat as a raw rookie. He soon found a sport less stressful on the body and more to his liking as a competitor.

“He always brought up Notre Dame,” Dwyer said. “He somehow found a way to graduate. He was never the smartest guy. He got his accounting degree, but the dean of Note Dame’s accounting department promised to pass him and let him go through Notre Dame as long as he didn’t practice accounting in the real world.”

Phelps the swimming mentor

Dowdle’s advice helped get Dwyer this far. The old man would be proud he has become Robin to Phelps’ Batman. Training with Phelps rubbed off on Dwyer by osmosis, but the 18-time gold medal winner does more than just show the way by body English.

“At practice, he is an unbelievable mentor,” Dwyer said.

“He gives small advice to me before races. He’ll say, ‘Conor, I’ll see what you’ve done for the 200 and 400, no one should beat you this year. This is what I think you’ll got to do and practice.’”

“We roomed together at Olympic trials (in Omaha). We’re hanging out as big sports fans, big foodie guys. We go out to dinner, more low-key friends.”

The time to win multiple golds is as good as now.

“I worked a lot on my mental game,” Dwyer said. “I matured a lot as a swimmer the last two years. I followed guys a lot. I’m right around my prime at 27. I would say I’m still peaking. Until you stop going best times, that’s when your peaking stops.”

He is postponing a firm direction for a business career until after the Olympics, and likely after those times start inflating. One job he wouldn’t mind having decades from now is running WGN, like Dowdle once did.

“That would be awesome,” he said.

Yeah, Dwyer could not only hire Phelps, but also strike gold in another way with a baseball announcer hiring. It runs in the family.