

MARK SPITZ

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE
OF AN OLYMPIC CHAMPION

RICHARD J. FOSTER

FOREWORD BY MARK SPITZ

INTRODUCTION BY KEITH JACKSON



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CHAPTER 1



A FAVORITE COLOR EMERGES

Summer of 1959

A LANKY NINE-year-old boy, equipped with ocean trunks, a few weeks of simple workouts, and even fewer expectations, stepped on the starting blocks at a YMCA swim meet; it was his first experience with organized sports. He crossed the pool and touched the opposite wall first in his heat of the twenty-five-yard race.

As the youngster watched the remaining heats, his coach explained that there would be no final; the winners would be the boys who swam the six fastest times in the heats. During the awards ceremony, the young swimmer swelled with pride at the sound of his name and strode forward with great satisfaction to accept his purple ribbon, mistaken about what it signified. He hurried to show off the colorful cloth to his naturally pleased mother, who rewarded him further with a congratulatory hug and kiss on the forehead.

But the timed-heat contest had included almost forty other competitors. In the slow pace at which realization sometimes strikes youngsters, the boy became aware that the presentation had not ended. When three others stepped up on a tri-tiered podium and received white, red, and blue ribbons, he peered up at his mother with a growing sense of uneasiness.

“Why are their ribbons different colors?” he asked, his glee yielding to doubt.

“Well, those boys had the fastest times of everyone in the race,” she explained. “The one on the highest step swam the fastest, so he got a blue ribbon. The boy with the red ribbon was second, and the boy with the white ribbon was third.”

A scowl immediately appeared on her son’s face, and he threw his ribbon on the ground in disgust. “I hate purple, I hate red, and I hate white! From now on, I’m only winning blue ribbons.”



Within a year, Mark Spitz had set seventeen national age-group records, and his seven gold medals in seven world records thirteen years later at the 1972 Munich Olympics was the most impressive showing ever at an Olympic Games. The initial splash of his career as the world’s greatest swimmer was eclipsed in history by Alaska and Hawai’i joining the United States, Fidel Castro taking control of Cuba, and Charles Lincoln Van Doren admitting that his winnings on the popular TV quiz show *\$64,000 Question* were rigged. But his maiden competitive voyage, in which he shunned the new-fangled and scanty Speedo briefs—finding them goofy-looking at best and transparent from certain angles at worst—hardly inspired the likeness of a legend.

Eventually, though, Mark—with his unprecedented success in the pool, unfailing confidence, and movie-star looks—would shine as brightly as the countless flashbulbs that accompanied his athletic performances and public appearances.

That self-assurance in his abilities, his strong-headed personality, and the inevitable attention lavished on him as his confidence and conquests continued to feed off each other, though, came with a painful price. He was ostracized, ignored, and discriminated against by jealous, psyched-out, and con-

stantly defeated teammates and their parents. He butted heads with demanding coaches who attempted to exact their control over the sensation, wanting credit for his success. He floundered as an entertainer, fighting against unrealistic expectations for a swimmer whose audition for the part had been to swim eight to ten miles a day, win races, and sign autographs. But perhaps most hurtful and confusing were the observation, analysis, and subsequent disdain of his father's image in the press: aggressive, overbearing, and obsessed with his son's athletic prowess. But those who knew Arnold best told a different story, and it started years before his son's birth.



Mark's father, Arnold Spitz, was born in 1925 to Jewish chicken ranchers in the railroad town of Turlock, California. Nestled between the Diablo Range and lower Bay Area to the west and the Sierra Nevada and famed Yosemite National Park to the east, Turlock was at the heart of agricultural development in the San Joaquin Valley in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Both of his parents were first-generation Americans whose families emigrated from Hungary in the early 1900s to escape the region's unrest surrounding World War I.

Life on a chicken ranch offered little in the way of entertainment, but Arnold recognized in himself at a young age a knack for building things. His mechanical aptitude manifested in several forms in his early years, none more important than the makeshift bridge he built in a dusty field on the farm when he was seven. He labored over the construction site, wanting nothing more than to present the masterpiece to his father and bask in the inevitable praise from his hero.

But Morris, not feeling well that afternoon, promised to see the bridge the next day. His condition worsened, though, and

later that night doctors discovered a brain tumor. The Spitzes were presented with a Hobson's choice. Morris would surely die without surgery. But the alternative wasn't much better. Brain surgery was far riskier in 1932 than it is now and presented a reasonable likelihood of fatality as well. The family made the only decision that offered hope, but Morris died shortly after the operation.

"My dad was so disappointed that his father never saw that bridge," Mark said, recalling the sadness in his father's voice. "He always said that was the darkest day of his life. Whenever he was too busy to pay attention to us or couldn't be there even for a minor event in our lives, that memory and his father's early death really haunted him."

That incident and the simple fact that Arnold was robbed of the benefit of a father for the rest of his life were more crushing and ultimately defining given his mother's instability and inadequacies. An eccentric artist, Alice felt bound by the traditional role of motherhood. She openly admitted—without remorse—that she did not love her two sons equally. In possibly her singular act of conformity, Alice overtly favored the oldest, Jim, as was customary in those days, especially in families of European heritage. It was to Arnold's credit that he did not condemn his elder of four years for her behavior, and it was to Jim's credit that he did not commend himself for it. The two shared a unique closeness that sometimes represents the only silver lining of such troubling times.

Alice constantly berated Arnold, not understanding why her rough-around-the-edges, opinionated son could not emulate his brother's tact and intellect. In an attempt to avoid one of her virulent shouting episodes, Arnold once climbed to the roof of their barn. Not only was he unsuccessful in evasion, but the move further fueled his mother's fire, who augmented her verbal attack by throwing rocks and a pitchfork at him.

Even Arnold's own children could not escape his mother's propensity for partiality, enduring her unabashed favoritism of

grandsons over granddaughters. On one visit, Alice spent five hours helping an artistically challenged Mark paint a mural while relegating his more talented sisters to painting alone on newsprint.

Alice remained eclectic and unable to relate personally until the end. Living in a senior care facility in 1975, she decided she'd had enough of life. Without warning or fanfare, she purposely stopped taking her medications one day and quickly passed away alone.

As many young patriotic men did in that era, Arnold transitioned into adulthood as an airman for the United States Air Force in World War II. Barely nineteen years old, he volunteered for the war effort three years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. As a gunner on a B-29, he flew reconnaissance missions out of Guam and Tinian Island, which quickly became the prime launch site for large raids against Japan after its U.S. capture that year. Two of the B-29s based on the island were the infamous *Enola Gay*, which dropped "Little Boy"—the code name for the first atomic bomb ever used in a war—on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and *Bockscar*, which three days later dropped "Fat Man" on Nagasaki.

"Whenever we'd complain that we were cold, Dad would launch into stories about how he'd spent hours shivering on a bomber, trying to prove that we had it good, like the 'I walked four miles uphill in the snow' stories," Mark laughed. "But looking back, Dad hated to be cold. Every one of our family vacations was spent somewhere warm, and I don't think that was a coincidence."

Three years after returning home from the war and working as an appliance salesman for the venerable Sears, Roebuck & Company, Arnold married Lenore Smith in 1947. The couple settled in Modesto, just fourteen miles from his hometown of Turlock.

Lenore was a second-generation American whose grandparents emigrated from Russia in the early 1900s. When they entered the United States, the Ellis Island clerk didn't care for the family name—Sklotkovick. Indifferent about how his alteration of their personal history might feel, he changed the name to

Smith on the immigration papers, largely because Lenore's grandfather listed his occupation as a blacksmith.

Lenore and Arnold easily embodied the maxim "opposites attract." Arnold bluntly spoke his mind; Lenore naturally practiced diplomacy. Arnold was passionate and at times fiery, Lenore even-tempered and nurturing. Arnold polarized; Lenore was personable and well-liked. Her characteristics came through when she described her late husband with a chuckle, "He was a no-BS kind of guy who was a great husband but a better father."

Although Arnold unquestionably wore the pants in the family, Lenore quietly commanded its full respect. If she grew tired of an argument between her husband and son that showed no signs of resolution, a simple, "That's enough," would stop both in their tracks. Bewildered, they'd look at each other for a moment and then move on.



By the time Mark Andrew Spitz was born on February 10, 1950, Arnold was clear about one thing: family was of the utmost importance to him, and he was committed to giving his children the presence, attention, love, protection, and opportunities that he desperately missed growing up. His experiences losing his father at a young age, being abused by his mother, and living through the atrocities of war had a significant effect on how he viewed his role as a father. While many would later view Arnold as overbearing and boorish, those that knew him best knew that his intentions were good.

But that cornerstone to his existence was in stark contrast to the public's perception that he lived vicariously through Mark's pursuits. That he pushed Mark into greatness, possibly against the boy's will. That he forced Mark to view winning as mandatory, as if he would not love a son who was anything less

than a perpetual victor. The truth to their complex relationship lies somewhere in between, and both men battled that complicated blend of uninformed assessment and twisted reality for much of their lives.

Much has been made about the pair's take-no-prisoners approach to Mark's swimming career. Many reports assert that the elder infused in the younger an unsavory attitude for competition, citing Arnold's infamous and frequent mantra: "Swimming isn't everything—winning is!" Arnold uprooted the family and moved a hundred miles away when it became clear Mark needed better coaching. One of Mark's teammates admitted in adulthood to using Arnold as a model of how *not* to act as an age-group father. Mark's cousin, Sherman, remembers the pair feeding off each other's audacity at swim meets, similar to the modern-day chest bumping that pervades team athletic accomplishments.

"Dad was criticized for trying to live life through Mark," Nancy, Mark's sister, said. "But he was just trying to be as supportive as he could because of what he missed out on as a child."

Clearly Mark thrived in that atmosphere.

But outside the aquatics arena, an uncommon intensity permeated their battles. The day of Mark's bar mitzvah, Arnold insisted Mark write his thank you notes immediately. Sherman watched as Mark, in his meticulous penmanship, composed the exact same message:

*Dear _____,
Thank you for my bar mitzvah present.
Mark Spitz*

"Arnold was not happy when he saw the notes. He said they were unacceptable and told Mark to write them over and personalize each one," Sherman remembered. "When he left, Mark said, 'I hope I get big and strong, because one day I want to pin down that SOB and never let him up.'"



Shortly after his wedding, Arnold took a job with Learner Company, a scrap iron and steel corporation owned by his uncle Paul Learner. Learner transferred Arnold to Hawai'i in 1952 to set up a new office, and it was in the warm Pacific Ocean where Mark first learned to swim. Arnold, a lifeguard in his youth, taught his son a basic stroke, and Lenore enjoyed watching her toddler rush to the water at Waikiki Beach almost every day, knowing full well a tantrum likely would follow when they had to leave the sandy playground. "You should have seen that little boy dash into the ocean," she recounted to a *TIME* reporter in 1968. "He'd run like he was trying to commit suicide."

When Lenore became pregnant again, she asked Mark if he wanted a brother or a sister. His response was immediate: he wanted a sister. Heidi's arrival in 1952 fulfilled that wish. Unlike many two-year-olds, Mark welcomed a sibling into the family wholeheartedly, climbing into her crib daily. Worried that his mannerisms were a bit rough for a newborn, Arnold added a clasp to the top of the crib gate, presumably out of Mark's reach. It wasn't. Mark quickly figured out that he could undo the clasp if he moved a small chair next to the crib, and Heidi survived her first years of life with her constant playmate. Two years later, Lenore again asked Mark if he wanted a brother or sister, and his answer was the same. Nancy arrived in 1954. Mark didn't pester her like he had Heidi, but the directness that some thought refreshing and others thought was arrogant debuted the day he told his parents, "She looks like a monkey."

When Learner awarded employee bonuses, Arnold perceived his relatively small check as a slight from his uncle. Priding himself on a strong work ethic and dedication to the company, he believed that his performance on the job and his sacrifice in uprooting his family entitled him to a greater reward, but all he

felt was yet another insult to his worthiness carried over from childhood. Not willing to remain in the “family” business, Arnold went to work for a competitor, Schnitzer Steel, back in the Bay Area, where he stayed until his first retirement.



Arnold’s childhood and early professional life came during the height of anti-Semitism in America. Many universities either refused to admit or had quotas on the number of Jewish students whom they would admit. More than a few country clubs, resorts, and neighborhoods were altogether closed to Jews. Employment studies in Chicago and Los Angeles from the early 1950s revealed that twenty percent of job openings specified that non-Jews apply.

It was in that milieu that Arnold raised his family. He worked hard to shield his children from prejudice. But he also jumped to accusations of bigotry at the mere trace of a snub, keenly aware of the perceived, subtle, and overt discrimination against his people.

“Dad’s protective nature, especially when he felt one of us had been slighted, was misinterpreted as being overbearing,” Nancy explained. “I don’t remember any discrimination, per se, but it was well-known that there were only three Jews at Santa Clara High School: Mark, Heidi, and me.”

And so, given that culture and Arnold’s sensitivity toward it, it seemed unusual for the Spitzes to purchase a home constructed by Joseph Eichler, a well-known German builder. His “California Modern” design—featuring floor-to-ceiling glass walls and an open floor plan—in a middle-class neighborhood appealed to the Spitzes. Arnold gave no thought to the builder’s ethnicity. “The homes were gorgeous and affordable,” Lenore recalled of their house on South Land Park Drive. “We had

architects, engineers, and lawyers in our neighborhood, but we also had a lot of normal, middle-class families.”

Arnold’s brother, Jim, and Jim’s wife, Helen, however, refused to consider an Eichler home, equating the German name to Nazis with an attitude that broke from Jim’s customary placidity. But they misplaced their distaste for all things German with Eichler, a fellow Jew with an Austrian-Jewish immigrant father and a German-Jewish mother. He was one of the first mass home builders to establish a non-discrimination policy, selling to buyers of any race or religion. In fact, he punctuated that stance in 1958, resigning from the National Association of Home Builders when the organization refused to formally change its exclusionary ways.

Although seemingly adopting the other’s personality in their home-buying decisions, the episode touched on the brothers’ stark differences. Arnold’s build, almost six feet tall with a strong upper body, fit his personality as a forceful individual who was direct and to the point. He was adept mechanically, very good with his hands, and successful professionally despite having never attended college. Jim was far more of an intellect, earning his master’s degree and teaching high school English and drama. A tall, thin man, he made friends easily yet had no mechanical skills whatsoever. “My cousins used to joke that their dad had difficulty plugging in a toaster,” Mark said.

Their bond despite their differences and Arnold’s sense of family were unmistakable when Jim, a smoker, was dying of lung cancer in 1962. His hospitalization during the last month of his life took a toll on Jim’s family, especially his young son. With tears streaming down his face, Jim painfully shared with Arnold his only regret: that he would not be able to watch and help his children grow up. Arnold’s promise to take on that role began immediately, treating Sherman like his own son. Their trips to the barbershop and Little League baseball games were the more enjoyable duties. The toughest one was explaining the terrible disease of cancer and the finality of death with heartfelt

sadness, compassion, and honesty, better preparing the eight-year-old to handle his father's passing.

"My mom wasn't able to personalize things," Sherman recalled. "She was great at PTA and women's groups, but she couldn't articulate what Dad was going through. Arnold recognized that and explained how Dad's cancer had spread and was untreatable. I felt so much better just knowing what was going on, and I was able to help my younger sister understand."

That backdrop was more than an adornment to Mark's life, more than a series of bedtime stories about a childhood, a war, a career, and a family. More than either of them were aware at the time, Arnold's upbringing provided the foundation for how he parented. It also established the example from which Mark imprinted life lessons: tact is overrated, fortitude will save you, backing down from other people is not an option, and nothing is stronger than the familial bond.

But Mark's visceral reaction to the meaning of a purple ribbon in his inaugural race demonstrated that he did not get his drive to win from his father. Nor did he learn it from his primary coaches. No doubt all these men impacted Mark's mental approach to swimming, but up until that point he was relatively free from outside psychological influences.

Craig Townsend, a clinical hypnotherapist and director of a mental training company for swimmers in Australia, has devoted his life to helping athletes develop winning attitudes. He believes early events such as Mark's encounter with the purple ribbon can become burned onto a youth's psyche.

"That incident spurred him into action to ensure he would experience the positive emotions of being a winner rather than the negative emotions attached to the feeling that he wasn't the best," Townsend explained. "It's an inner belief, a mindset, an expectation of success which continues to build over time and eventually leads to athletes attaining an absolute superhuman impression of themselves and their ability. This, in turn, propels

their performances to greater heights. Once an athlete attains this level of belief, they become an *ominous adversary*; one who will never quit until they find a way to win.”

Mark’s intense statement, coming from a neophyte in the competitive realm, provides a glimpse into the innate mentality that propelled him to Olympic glory and to forever find the colors red and white offensive. “They still represent failure to me,” Mark explained.



But Mark was not yet an Olympian. He was merely a boy who was bored one summer. His foray into organized swimming began at the Sacramento YMCA in 1959, which won out over Little League simply because no local baseball teams existed. Initially, he filled his days at the Y with arts and crafts, gymnastics, basketball and playing in the pool. Then Paul Heron, who recently had swum the English Channel and was developing the organization’s swim program, noticed Mark’s ease in the water and invited him to join the team. With no information or knowledge about what that meant, and no visible desire to find out, Mark happily accepted and went home to announce proudly that he was now a swimmer.

Heron took a low-key approach with his team. Workouts lasted about forty-five minutes, which Mark attended two or three times a week. There was little in the way of stroke instruction; the only technique Mark learned was a flip turn and diving off the starting blocks.

Shortly after that purple-ribbon race, Mark entered a novice meet in Walnut Creek, California, held by the American Amateur Union (AAU), the governing body for all amateur sports in America at the time. Seriousness and intensity layered the event in a way the Spitzes had not experienced at the YMCA, and they found the accompanying scene at the outdoor pool quite odd.

Despite the warmth of the day, swimmers lay in sleeping bags on the deck. Arnold, embarrassed that Mark did not have one, rushed to a nearby sporting goods store. He wanted Mark to fit in, and he wanted to provide Mark whatever advantage the unusual behavior afforded the competition. Mark didn't readily conform. It was beautiful outside, he wanted to improve his tan, and he just didn't care. But Arnold insisted, conjecturing that the sun would drain the energy out of Mark, who reluctantly complied.

Still, Arnold felt like an outsider, and his lack of familiarity with the meet format and officials only increased his anxiety. Mark was relatively unfazed, taking in the scene in his still-innocent manner and almost missing his first race because they didn't know the check-in procedures. Arnold's tension lessened when Mark won. In his more relaxed state, he began to think, as so many parents of young athletes do, that his son was destined to be a champion.

From Mark's perspective, he had made good on his promise to win only blue ribbons, even at larger meets. Never mind the token competition. Mark had never stopped to consider that another level even existed. His ego, as well as his father's, began to swell.

Mark continued to swim on the AAU novice circuit, winning with much greater frequency than not, even with his minimal workouts. His passion for being the best overrode his lack of training and technical skills. In his limited world, he was becoming invincible. Likewise, with every win, Arnold became prouder.

In the fall of 1959, Mark set a regional YMCA age-group record in the 25-yard butterfly at a novice meet in Watsonville, California. The Spitz family was ecstatic, but the record didn't create much of a stir, and few other people noticed.

One person who did notice, however, was Sherm Chavor.