



Larsen Jensen

...at a glance

Career Highlights

2004 Olympic Silver Medalist, 1500m Free
2008 Olympic Bronze Medalist, 400m Free
6-time US National title holder
Current American Record holder in 400m and 1500m Freestyle



Swimming

Vital Statistics

Born: September 21, 1985
Hometown: Bakersfield, CA
Height: 6-0
Education: University of Southern California



getting to know... Larsen Jensen

Biography

Larsen Jensen has been a member of two of America's most selective organizations: the U.S. Olympic swim team and the Navy SEALs.

The process for joining both is at the same time highly selective and yet ruthlessly fair, with no one accorded special consideration. About 1,000 swimmers turn up every four years for Olympic Trials; a scant 52 go on to represent their country on the sport's biggest stage. Jensen made that cut twice. At the 2004 Athens Olympics, he won a silver medal and set an American record in the 1500. Four years later, he made the team for Beijing, this time nabbing a bronze and another American record in the 400.

The odds of making it through the SEALs' 6-month selection course aren't much better. About 1,000-1,200 show up in a given year; only 200-250 survive. Jensen graduated at the top of his class.

So, you could say the guy knows a thing or two about realizing elusive dreams.

The Bakersfield, Calif., native learned to swim in his backyard pool, where he was taught by his mom Barbara, a former distance freestyler who just missed making the Olympic team by one spot.

"It wasn't until I was 12 that I actually joined a summer league team," he recalls. "I made a lot of friends and really enjoyed it – well, except for wearing a Speedo. I still hadn't grown into my body at that point. But for the first time in my life in sports, I was able to see noticeable improvement. It felt good to work hard and see that work pay off."

He didn't take the next step on the swimming ladder – practicing year-round – until his freshman year of high school. Though that seemed late at the time, he now views it as a positive. "The risk of burnout is a serious issue," he explains. "Plus, I don't see the sense in specializing in anything when you're really young. You haven't explored all your options yet."

When Jensen was 14 and had a few years of steady progress under his belt, a coach began goading him to try distance events. "Back then, a 500 seemed like forever. But my coach said something to the effect of, 'All the toughest kids are the distance guys. Have some pride!'"

Jensen took him up on that dare. First, he did his research (as he would later do before choosing a college and joining the Navy). "I looked into the history of United States distance swimming. There was a lot of heritage and pride there and that really motivated me to challenge myself."

He was the type to set lofty goals, some of which were seen as overly ambitious by other swimmers and adults. "Coaches would tell me to set realistic goals and I didn't respond to that in the most mature way. I didn't care much about what anyone else thought. I thought that I would continue my track record of improvement if I kept working hard and going to practice and doing what my coach said. I didn't see it any other way. People that told me otherwise could keep their opinions to themselves. And that mindset really helped me."

First up on his to-do list of lofty goals as a distance swimmer? Making a national cut and being named 'Rookie of the Meet.' "All the great swimmers I ultimately ended up swimming against like Klete Keller were Rookie of the Meet," he explains. "If you want to be good, you've got to show and up and be good right off the bat."

Jensen checked off both those milestones at the 2002 winter nationals, where he finaled in the 800. (His mom still has a picture of him "looking goofy on the podium" with another other rookie named Ryan Lochte.)

That year's summer nationals served as the selection meet for the 2002 PanPacs and 2003 Worlds. At that meet, he hit the next goal on his list: qualifying for an international team. At PanPacs, he took silver in the 800 and bronze in the 1500.

When he returned to the U.S., he upped the ante on his training, moving south to train at the distance freestyle mecca of Mission Viejo. He lived with a host family for his senior year of high school and trained under legendary distance coach Bill Rose. The change paid off: at the Worlds the next summer, he took silver in the 800. "Everyone was like, 'Holy cow, who's this kid?'"

With the 2004 Olympics scheduled for the summer after his freshman year at the University of Southern California, he decided to sit out most of the 2003-2004 NCAA season and withdrew from classes for the spring semester so he could "train my butt off" in long course for Trials.

Jensen says that his announcement was labeled as immature at the time, but he got the last word by making the team in both the 400 and 1500, the latter in American-record time. Two weeks later, he won silver in Athens, shaving another 11 seconds off the record. That mark still stands 10 years later – and Jensen is not pleased.

"Some people are very protective of their records and hope they're never broken, but I take the exact opposite approach," Jensen says. "I wish they'd been broken years ago. To my reasoning, if they're not breaking my records, we're not as competitive as we should be on an international scale. I want USA Swimming to get out there and crush it, bringing back the heyday of U.S. distance swimming."

Jensen continued to do his part through the next quadrennial. He made the Worlds team again in 2005, taking silver in both the 800 and 1500. He also won three NCAA championships for USC in the 1650 (2005, 2007) and 500 (2007). During his college career, he witnessed the sea change in coaching philosophies, from the mega-yardage once prescribed by Rose and Mark Schubert to the quality-based race-pace approach pioneered by his final coach, Dave Salo.

"It took me a while to buy into it," he admits. "But it was awesome. I was even sorer but I swam faster in practice, which led to faster times overall" – and where it counted most: Olympic Trials.

In 2008, Jensen reversed his Olympic Trials finishes from four years earlier, winning the 400 in American-record time and taking second in the 1500. He would go on to finish out his Olympic career in Beijing with bronze and an American record in the 400. (That record hasn't been erased either.)

After returning from Beijing, it was time to move on and tackle his next lofty goal: becoming a SEAL.

"There are a number of reasons I chose to join the military," he explains. "The primary ones were the chance to give back to my country because it gave me so much and to be a part of an elite, special team. I chose to pursue a career in the SEALs because it is the toughest organization to join. I wanted to challenge myself to the maximum extent possible and work with others who shared that perspective."

Given that Olympic fitness and military fitness are two very different beasts, he ramped up the running, weightlifting and calisthenics to prepare his body for what was about to come.

He enrolled at Officer Candidate School in 2009, which led to him being commissioned an ensign in the Navy. "OCS was a pain in the butt," which he blames on lots of menial tasks, "but you can put up with a lot when you have a goal you're trying to reach."

By the time Jensen reached BUD/s (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL), the Navy instructors knew about his Olympic pedigree and decided to have fun with it and to see if they could get under his skin. He laughed it off. "On days where we were in the pool, the chief would hum the Olympic anthem when it was my turn to go," he remembers.

The first several weeks of SEAL training consisted of nonstop physical activity. He ran everywhere – to and from the beach, even to and from meals. And most of the time, he was cold, wet and sandy and often holding a log or raft over his head. "But it was a rewarding experience. After every day, I'd think to myself, 'I just got through this total torture session.' It was just like the feeling you get leaving the pool after a practice you thought was going to kill you." And as he watched others quit around him, he compared the attrition to dropping another swimmer coming off a turn, which gave him a new burst of energy.

A few SEAL colleagues confessed they were surprised the Olympian graduated. "I asked why and they said most successful athletes are too used to being pampered," he explains. "At the college level, you're an all-star. Then you get to BUD/s and not only are you just like everyone else, but you're a piece of (garbage) and they make sure you know that." So Jensen happily embraced the role of garbage and won the respect of his instructors and boat crew.

He ultimately trained for two years before he received his SEAL trident and officially joined a team based at Coronado, Calif., in 2011. Since then, he's served multiple tours in Afghanistan and other conflict zones.

Jensen decided to leave the Navy in 2014 after six years in uniform. He was approaching the part of his career where his job would entail less training and fighting and more administrative work. And after getting married in July 2013, he dislikes the thought of leaving his wife for months at a time to do paperwork.

As always, he mapped out the next step of his career well ahead of time. He's been accepted to Stanford Business School, where he plans to study entrepreneurship. And he's rejoining the swimming community. (He credits his wife, Emily, with thinking up both of those plans.)

As a Fitter & Faster clinician, he's a firm believer in mastering the fundamentals of body position, hip rotation and efficiency. And he's got a message for swimmers with a lazy kick: "The days of the two/four-beat kick are over! Six-beat kicks are not just for sprinters. Everyone can master the skill."

Jensen also mines his Olympic and military careers for ways to help athletes cope mentally in the face of hard workouts and slumps.

Ultimately, he wants to convey to kids and parents that life is more than just swimming. "But there are a lot of lessons you can take from swimming that will put you on the right trajectory to be accomplished in whatever you choose to do. How you decide to focus your energies and pursue your sport with passion is very similar to how you're going to pursue everything else in life."