

*Gwen Jorgensen · Elizabeth Jorgensen · Nancy Jorgensen*

Foreword by Rich Roll

*A story of risks  
and goals,  
disappointments,  
and rewards*

# Gwen Jorgensen

**USA's First Olympic Gold Medal Triathlete**

MEYER & MEYER SPORT

## Praise for *Gwen Jorgensen*

“Gwen’s story proves that any girl can have a gigantic dream. From everyday young athlete to aspiring Olympic champion, Gwen’s story rings true and emanates inspiration.”

—**Alexi Pappas, 2016 Olympian and author of *Bravey***

.....

“Sprinkled with advice from adult Gwen to her younger self, this inspirational story gives the reader an inside look at the journey from little swimmer earning a ribbon to a triathlete earning an Olympic gold medal.”

—**Barb Lindquist, 2004 Olympian, Triathlon**

.....

“I would have enjoyed reading this book as a young aspiring athlete. Gwen’s story is relatable to many in that she came from humble beginnings and slowly chipped away at her big goal. Her never give up attitude and dedication to reaching her goal to be an Olympian will be inspiring to all.”

—**Flora Duffy, 2020 Olympic gold medalist, Triathlon**

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“This may have been written for young adults, but anyone of any age will finish the book deeply inspired to pursue their goals—big or small—with passion and heart.”

—**Liza Wiemer, award-winning author of *The Assignment***

.....

“This book encapsulates Gwen’s remarkable journey to winning Olympic gold in triathlon. There are so many wonderful lessons and there is so much to be gleaned in *Gwen Jorgensen: USA’s First Olympic Gold Medal Triathlete*.”

—**Taylor Knibb, 2020 Olympic medalist, Triathlon**

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“It’s a special experience to be able to read in detail the background of an Olympic gold medalist, not just about her triumphs but also the challenges, setbacks, and uncertainties along the way.”

—**Katie Zaferes, 2016 Olympian and two-time 2020 Olympic medalist, Triathlon**

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Gwen Jorgensen | Elizabeth Jorgensen | Nancy Jorgensen

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# Foreword

This is the story of Gwen Jorgensen—an accountant turned “Queen of Triathlon”. Her rise to the top was swift. She won elite, professional races and qualified for the London Olympics within two years of taking up the sport. By 2015, she was a back-to-back world champion, and in 2016, in Rio de Janeiro, she became the first American to ever win Olympic Gold in a sport invented in California.

But don’t be confused. This is not a story of greatness simply bestowed at birth.

When seen through the lens of those six years, you might think that Gwen was a natural and that winning Olympic gold was her destiny. However, this family heirloom of a book, bursting with optimism and written with love by Gwen’s mother and sister, tells a deeper tale.

Sure, Gwen dreamed of the Olympics from the time she was a little girl, but she always considered herself a swimmer. The pool is where she found her strength and individuality, met her best friend, and fell in love with competing. She was good. Really good. She won races all over town and was one of the best on her high school swim team, but she wasn’t fast enough to earn a scholarship to a top swim program, and by the time she was 18, it was clear that making the Olympic swim team was never going to happen.

Fortunately, Gwen Jorgensen wasn’t just a good swimmer. She was a talented runner. Twice she was recruited by track coaches, once in high school and again in college. Although she didn’t love running as much as swimming, she took their advice and pivoted. She was so good on the collegiate track that by the time she graduated she had an opportunity to pursue a professional career. Instead, she played it safe and took a job with a big accounting firm. It was the sensible thing to do. Most professional runners don’t make a very good living. They do it for the love. At 22 years old, that wasn’t enough for Gwen, and it seemed that her Olympic dreams were dead.

When coaches with the US Triathlon team approached her about getting into their sport with an eye on the London Olympics, her competitive fire reignited like a torch, and her future began to crystalize. They came to her because of her strong swim and run background, but when it came to the bike, she couldn’t have been less experienced. She hardly even knew how to shift gears!





The point is, talent alone did not lift Gwen Jorgensen to the top of the triathlon universe, and that’s what makes her story and this book so potent. She succeeded by falling in love with the process of controlling the controllables—all the little details that make up an athlete’s life—and staying committed to getting a little bit better every single day.

But how do you do that when things seem to be going wrong? When injury, mishap, or malfunction surfaces and makes it impossible to achieve your immediate goals? How do you keep going when everything you see and hear makes you doubt yourself and question your future? Gwen did it by staying positive even in the face of negativity. “There is power in what you tell yourself,” the Jorgensens write. She trained herself to look forward, not back. She concentrated only on what was to come.

Gwen cultivated mental and physical toughness—it takes a lot of grit and pain tolerance to excel in endurance sports—and lived life with intention. She didn’t simply accept things as they were. She made her own way. She walked on to her college swim team. She sought out the coaching she needed to become a world champion, even when that meant moving to a different continent and far away from family and friends. She adopted dozens of small life hacks that helped her stay on course. You will find them within the main story, but also as additional tips slotted between chapters, alongside photographs, and the occasional recipe.

This book is packed with powerful life lessons whether or not you are an athlete. We all have dreams and will encounter obstacles as we learn and grow, but if you are a young woman who loves to compete in athletics, it will read like a road map. It will encourage you to never give up on your dream, teach you to accept intelligent guidance, embrace gratitude, and show you the power that comes from focusing on each day, each race or game, as another opportunity to be better.

The potential to do great things—whatever those things may be—resides deep within all of us. It lies dormant, beckoning to be harnessed. May this book help unlock your version of Gwen—and set you on a path to achieve your most outlandish dreams.

–Rich Roll, author of *Finding Ultra*





## A Letter from Gwen

**Dear Reader,**

In elementary school, I wanted to be an Olympic swimmer. I imagined wearing the USA red, white and blue, my name first on the scoreboard. I dreamed of hearing the “Star-Spangled Banner” while I stood at the top of the awards podium.

Swimming dominated my life, from practices and competition to nutrition and recovery. Some of my races scored wins, but many did not. I believed if I worked harder and spent more time in the pool, I would get to the Olympics.

While my friends’ times qualified them for regional meets, girls from other cities beat me at State and I never qualified for Junior Nationals or the Olympic trials. I felt like I did something wrong. That I should have been better.

So, you might be surprised to know that I am a two-time World Champion and at age 30, I became an Olympic champion. You might be more surprised to know that I’m the first USA athlete, man or woman, to win an Olympic gold medal in triathlon!

This is my story. After you read it, I hope you work to make your dream come true. Whether that is to be a famous artist or to revolutionize the gaming industry or cure a disease or even to be an Olympian, I hope you are inspired to try, to fail, to thank those who help you, and to find success.


Tell me about your goals. Post them on my social media pages, and I’ll do my best to give you encouragement, a “like” or a thumbs up.

**Love,  
Gwen**




## CHAPTER 1

# Rio 2016: Seven Days Before the Olympic Triathlon



"There is just so much to being the best that you can be."  
—Gwen Jorgensen



Gwen Jorgensen planned to win the 2016 Olympic triathlon. She said it in interviews, she posted it on Instagram, she wrote it in her journal. In seven days, she would have her opportunity.

Gwen had been training in Spain where the sun was always hot. On this day, a fan whirred, blowing an arid breeze through her window. Sweat poured down her back. In 24 hours, she and her husband Patrick would be on a plane to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she would face the ultimate test in strength, endurance and training.

There was so much to remember, yet Gwen felt calm. Five suitcases gaped open, waiting to be packed. She added wetsuits, goggles and swim caps. Sports

bras, running shorts, training shoes. One bag held her bike with two sets of wheels, a tire pump, inner tubes and helmets. When filled, each would weigh 50 pounds.

“Patrick,” she said, “do we have everything for the bikes?” Patrick had been a professional cyclist and now helped maintain her equipment. He loaded a spoked wheel into the largest bag, wrestling it next to a bike frame. “And did you remember the toolkit?”

“I’m working from our list,” he said as he added a bike pump and extra tire. “I think we have it all. I’ve got both bikes and your training wheels packed. I don’t see your helmet, though.”

Gwen looked over his shoulder at the list and pointed. “You’re good. I checked it off already. Did you reserve the team van for tomorrow morning?”

“Yup. One of the coaches will drive us.”

In her six years as a professional athlete, racing in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia, Gwen learned to make lists. It helped her control what she could, and it gave her peace of mind. Plus, it was the only way she remembered everything. She felt confident about her packing for Brazil and her race at the Olympics.

The next day, she would travel in the van 90 minutes north to the Bilbao, Spain, airport. Her final destination: the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. At stake was her Olympic dream and the first USA Olympic gold medal in triathlon.

## Gwen’s Packing Tips

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- Make a list. Use an app or phone notes and reuse lists, adding or subtracting items as needed.
- Be specific. For example: 4 tights, 3 shorts, 3 shirts.
- Remember things that cannot be purchased—cash, credit cards, passport.
- For big trips, allow extra time to pack.
- While packing, evaluate belongings to donate or give away.



## CHAPTER 2

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# 1994 Third Grade



At Heyer Elementary School in Waukesha, Wisconsin, Gwen's teacher handed out a flyer. Sending papers down the rows, she said, "For all you swimmers, there is a special event next weekend. It's free and very popular. Our local Optimist Club runs a one-day swim meet. It's a day of learning. If you're interested, show your parents and have them read the directions for how to register."

The rest of the day, Gwen couldn't get swimming out of her head. She thought about summer days with her cousins at Grandma's pool. She imagined playing Marco Polo. She remembered how it felt to jump from a scorching diving board into cool water. She recalled racing her



dad and her sister, arms and feet splashing, and wondered if she could win a real race.

After school that day, she ran in the door, shouting, “Mom, Mom,” the swim meet permission slip in hand. “You have to sign this! Please! I need to swim in this meet.”

“Hmm,” her mom said, looking at the form. “I think the neighbors did this last year.”

“Please, Mom?”

“Dad and I can talk about it.”

“Dad will say yes. Please!” Gwen needed to do this. On television, she saw swimmers sail from regulation diving blocks into an Olympic-sized pool with colored lane markers. She knew she could do it, too.

“I’ll check the schedule,” her mom said. “As long as we’re free, I don’t see why not.”

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At the one-day event, Gwen heard about starting blocks, race officials, heats and scoreboards. For a warm-up lap, she used the freestyle stroke taught in swim lessons. She breathed side to side. She kicked and pulled. Then, she lined up on the pool deck for her first race.

Standing on top of the starting block, she felt nervous about diving headfirst, but girls on her left and right didn’t look scared. They look determined. Gwen mimicked their actions, adjusting her goggles, and then focused on the official.

At the signal, Gwen crouched and grabbed the edge of the block. When the gun sounded, she dove in, came up for air and stroked arm over arm. She loved the sensation of moving fast, air rushing through her lips, bubbling up in her lane.

She reached the end of the pool, gulping oxygen as her chest rose and fell. Chlorine stung her nose, all the way to her throat. She spat water and looked around. A few had finished, but others were still swimming. Her body tingled with the rush of being one of the fastest.

Gwen hoisted herself to the deck and a woman gave her a ribbon. Gwen tucked it in her towel and pressed it close. As she waited for her next race, she



uncovered her prize. She was proud of her first ribbon and wondered how much faster she could go.

In the car on the way home, Gwen said, “Can I join the swim team?” She wanted to practice. She wanted a coach to teach her. She wanted to swim faster.

Her parents exchanged a look, and then Dad said, “We know you’re excited, but Mom and I need to look at the cost and see if we can make the schedule work.”

“Please?”

“Dad and I have heard good things about Waukesha Express, but are you sure you want to swim twice a week? If we sign you up, you can’t quit.”

Gwen wouldn’t quit. She wanted to swim every day. She hoped there would be meets every weekend, too. “I know, Mom. I’m positive. Can I?”

Swimming would be her activity, a sport no one else in the family did. Not Mom, not Dad and not her sister Elizabeth. Not even her cousins. It would be hers alone, a place to practice and excel.

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Gwen’s parents agreed to one 12-week session, so every Tuesday and Thursday, her dad drove her to Waukesha South High School. Coach Blaine Carlson showed Gwen the proper way to grip a paddle board for kick sets and how to use a buoy on pull sets. Each week, she swam laps, practiced dives and prepared for competition.

She made friends with Allison, Tristine and Katie Mae. They created games to keep track of laps. They talked between sets and shared secrets in the locker room. The four girls planned to swim in high school and college and vowed to work hard and improve their speed. They agreed to eat healthy foods, filling their plates with broccoli, carrots and apples. A few times, they ate ice cream and then Gwen said, “It’s made from milk, so it has a lot of calcium.”

At practice, Gwen and her friends learned the competitive strokes: freestyle, butterfly, backstroke and breaststroke. Each one found her own



strongest strokes: Gwen freestyle; Allison butterfly; Tristine butterfly and breaststroke; Katie Mae butterfly and backstroke.

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On the day of her first Waukesha Express swim meet, Gwen's dad dropped her off at the pool. The moon shone full, the morning sky still dark. When she stepped into the entryway, her footsteps echoed in the empty space. Was she the first swimmer to arrive? In the locker room, she changed into her swimsuit and shivered from the cold air and freezing floor. But on the pool deck, steam rose. Gwen breathed the chlorine scent. She loved it. It reminded her of her friends and the smooth, clean feel of the water

Coach Blaine put Gwen, Allison, Tristine and Katie Mae in a relay. At their turn, they huddled behind the starting block. Katie Mae hopped in the water for backstroke. The whistle blew and she pushed off. Gwen, Allison and Tristine cheered even though so many kids were shouting, Katie Mae probably couldn't hear them. Tristine climbed up the starting block, bent forward, and when Katie Mae tagged the wall, Tristine launched into the water. Gwen yelled as loud as she could for Tristine and then for Allison. Nerves prickled under Gwen's skin because she was the anchor. It was up to her to win.

Gwen dove in with a tiny lead over the other teams. She plunged her head under the water and breathed only when necessary. A girl in the next lane caught up and that's when Gwen kick, kick, kicked! She moved ahead an inch and hoped to hold her off. Gwen stretched her arms and after one last stroke,



*Grandma and Grandpa's pool*





glided to the pool edge and slapped the gutter. When she looked up, Allison, Tristine and Katie Mae were jumping and cheering. They pointed to the scoreboard. Gwen turned to look. Her team held the number one spot with the fastest time. They won!

In the car on the way home, Dad said, “Good job on your personal best.”

Gwen looked up at him. “I always swim faster in relays.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I can’t let my friends down. I have to be fast so they can win.”



*Allison, Katie Mae, Gwen*

## How Gwen Learned to Use a Starting Block

A starting block is a raised platform at one end of a pool lane. It is usually within 29 ½ inches from the water. For safety, the pool must be deep enough to prevent injury when a person dives. USA Swimming recommends a pool has “a minimum pool-depth of four feet at the shallow end and seven feet at the starting block end.”

At practices, Gwen and her friends lined up behind the starting block. At their turn, they mounted the block, waited for the coach’s whistle and dove in. When they climbed out of the pool, they listened to feedback from the coach and got back in line again.

