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## Why we need this hero

By Martin S. Nocchi

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We are fascinated with the "underdog" story, enthralled whenever someone can rise above and overcome the challenges set before him.

Now, most people would never say that Michael Phelps was an underdog. He is a master at his game -- and now an icon for the entire sports world.

So if it isn't the idea of the underdog, what can it be -- beyond hometown pride -- that attracts us to his story? His experience doesn't resemble any of the underdog stories that have fascinated us for years, such as Rudy, Seabiscuit and Hoosiers.

Or does it?

Before and during the Beijing Olympic Games, we have all watched Mr. Phelps overcome deficits with grace, unite an American team, give praise to his coach and mentor, and express deep love for his family. But there is something else there. Behind any of us, including public figures and renowned athletes, there is still a child who wants to prove that "I can" and beat back the voices that tell us, or have told us, "You can't."

Often during the Games, we have heard Mr. Phelps give voice to that message. Time and again, there were people, including his peers, who told him he couldn't achieve his goals. Mr. Phelps was quoted as saying, "With so many people saying it couldn't be done, all it took was a little imagination."

In a way, Michael Phelps is not much different from you or me. No, I am by no means an athlete. I probably couldn't swim 50 meters in the time it takes him to swim 400, nor can many other people. But when we put swimming aside -- or baseball, football, horse racing, Hollywood, politics, etc., and the fame and fortune that come with them -- there is a human being, one with a story that goes beyond what the eye can see. And it is precisely what we can't see that intrigues us all the more.

Greatness doesn't come with simply hitting a ball, swimming laps, starring in an Oscar-winning film or sitting in the Oval Office or Congress; it comes when you can believe in something bigger than yourself and not become controlled by those who tell you, "You can't." We have all had people who have told us we wouldn't amount to much, or we can't do that, or why even bother?

Often, those voices remain in our heads for life, and we sometimes become jealous, envious or even resentful of those who have quieted those voices and who begin to say, "I can." We begin to compare

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ourselves with their success and see ourselves as something "less than" and "not as great as."

This is an unfortunate part of our broken humanity, because our belief in something bigger than ourselves is what can help us rise above the belittling voices and the naysayers and begin to see ourselves as being as great, in a way, as Michael Phelps. Not in a swimming pool, of course, but in having a shared ability to connect with him on this higher level that allows us to also strive for greatness.

A desire and a passion have been touched within many of us last week in witnessing greatness and a hero being born. We can't always put words to it, but we know it's there. We can sense it: a desire to do more and be more in our lives. Yet we are pulled back into the realities of life where so many things say to us, "You can't." We are divided from one another, terrorized by financial or political fears, suffering from terrible illnesses and broken families. So many things that we seemingly cannot overcome are right in front of our faces.

In a world that sometimes seems hopeless, we seek something more. That is why we need people like Michael Phelps -- because, if only for a moment, he can open our eyes and our hearts to something bigger than ourselves. The Michael Phelps we cheer and cherish is an ordinary guy who doesn't give up, chases dreams, believes, motivates, overcomes and in some ways always has that little boy within him telling him he can, even in the face of "I can't."

This generation has waited for someone to challenge us in this way, someone who understands the trials that young people face. What this young man offers us isn't an invitation to be Michael Phelps, but rather to be who we really are -- and to be something and someone better in the face of all adversity and naysayers we may encounter. The challenge for us is to accept it and own it as this hometown hero has done.

In the end, we are all "underdogs" to some degree; even Michael Phelps can attest to that. But he is giving us the chance to ride this wave with him and to each become great in our own way. It may take years for some to see it in their lives, but for today, greatness is undoubtedly in our midst.

Mr. Phelps is the one bringing eight gold medals home to Baltimore; that victory is his alone. But the thing that made it possible for him to do that belongs to all of us.

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