

“**HOW CAN I
to see
HOW THIS
STOPPV
ends.**”

Megan Smith's dream went unfulfilled once. She's determined not to let it happen again.

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“Cherry Bomb,” by The Runaways, echoes off the pool’s chlorinated water.

It seems too early — 6:15 a.m. — for the rock classic, but the few swimmers heading to get workouts in before the sun rises don’t seem to mind.

Among the swimmers is Megan Smith. On this morning, like most mornings, Smith is led by her seeing-eye dog, Suri, from the locker room to the bleachers beside the University of Oregon’s pool. She’s with her coach, Taylor Cole. Guided by his hand, Smith sets down her water bottle, snorkel and kickboard at one end of the pool before entering the water from the poolside stairs.

Before her workout can begin, Smith swims to the opposite end of the pool and attaches a purple pool noodle to the lane line 3 feet from the wall. What some would consider a children’s toy, the noodle plays a vital role; it will warn Smith of the approaching cement wall.

“All right, my dude,” Cole, 33, says, giving the warm-up set. “The hard work doesn’t start until 30 minutes in.” Smith nods, pushing off the wall, hands in a tight streamline overhead like a torpedo slicing through the water.

Over the next hour, while Smith swims the equivalent of 30 football fields, 13-year-old Suri snoozes next to the bleachers. Smith’s jacket separates her from the cool tile.

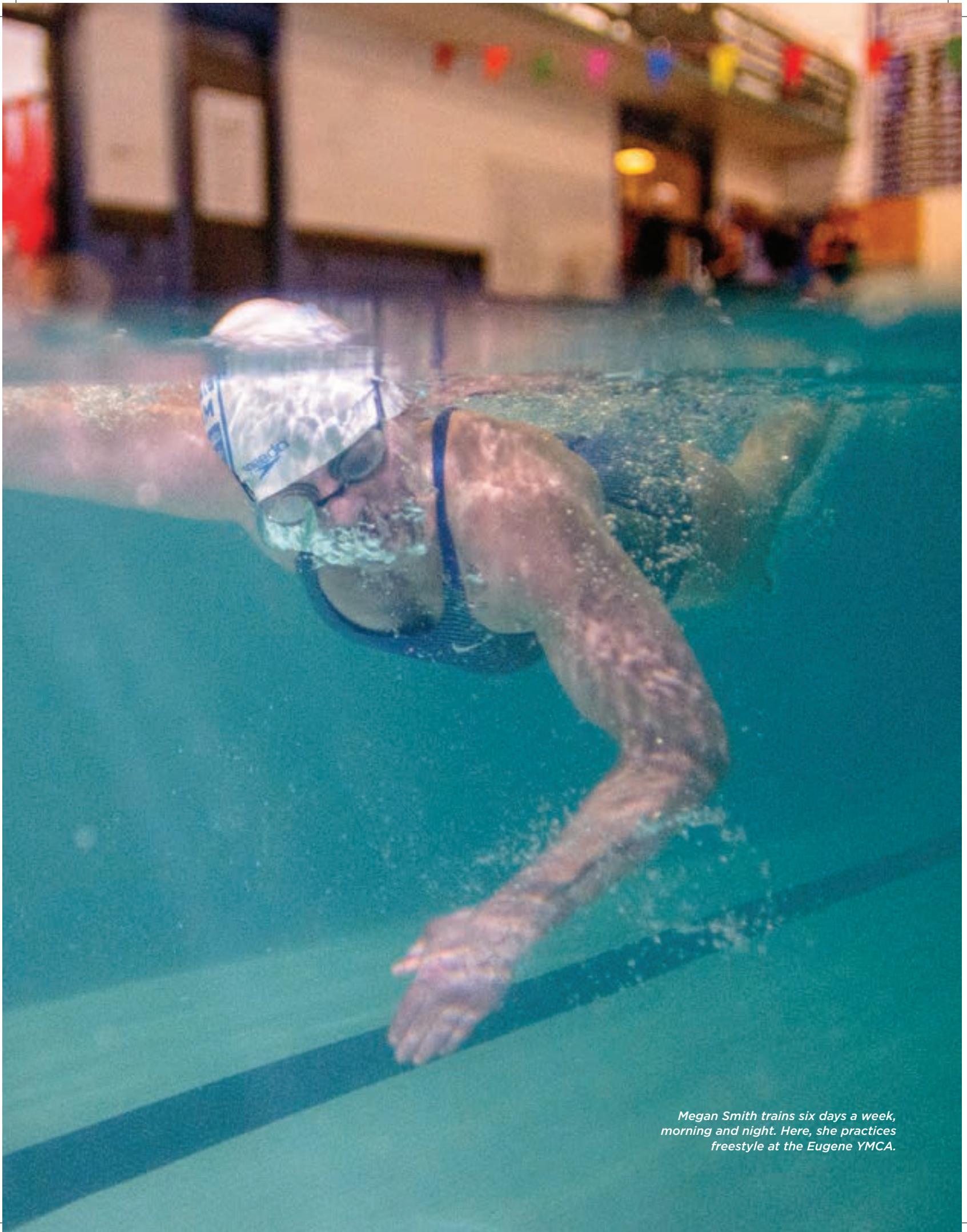
“Twenty-four six! Come on, kiddo!” Cole urges Smith, calling out splits to the tenth of a second during the final sets of hard backstroke sprints. “There’s another gear in there. Show me that 22.9. Prove me wrong! Three, two, one and go.”

She gulps air, launches backward and completes submerged dolphin kicks



“The tough love is to get younger athletes to commit. [Smith’s] been committed for 15 years. She always shows up. Now, we just have to put in the work.”

— Taylor Cole



Megan Smith trains six days a week, morning and night. Here, she practices freestyle at the Eugene YMCA.



Smith's morning workouts get her in shape while Suri gets some time to snooze.

before breaking the surface and attacking the water. She swims better pissed off, Cole will later say.

Megan Smith, 33, was born with bilateral microphthalmia, a birth defect in which both her eyes did not develop fully. She doesn't let being blind define her.

"It's not even the most interesting thing about me," she says. Being consistently underestimated made her extra competitive. "When people are impressed that you can go out and get yourself a cup of coffee, it's really a hit to your self-esteem."

What no one can doubt is Smith's prowess and her persistence in

the pool. The before-sunrise swims are nothing new to her. Many mornings as a teen she was working out while high school classmates were sleeping in. At 17 she left her family and her hometown of Eugene, Oregon, and moved 1,300 miles away to train with some of the nation's most elite swimmers. At one point she was ranked third in the world in multiple events. Her goal: to make the 2008 U.S. Paralympic team. But just when it looked like she would fulfill that dream, it came crashing down.

Now, over a decade since that unfulfilled quest, followed by a self-imposed sabbatical from the sport, Smith is back in the pool swimming twice a day, six days a week with a ticket to the 2024 Paralympics in Paris on her mind.

Smith may have taken time off from swimming but not from dreaming.

"The world's gotten a lot faster, significantly faster," Cole says on the evolution of swimming during the years when Smith was away from the sport. "Now, she's like third in the U.S. She's not in the top 20 in the world right now, but we're getting there."

Growing up in Eugene, Smith says she was never treated differently by her family. She had chores like her other siblings. "Blind infants tend to withdraw if you don't push them," Smith's mother, Beth Smith, says. "I just always thought that she's going to be like everyone else. She's just going to learn it in her own way." That included swimming.

Smith always enjoyed the water but never contemplated competing until 2004 when she was 15. She wanted to find a group of people to hang out with at Sheldon High School. A friend recommended she join the swim team. She admits to not being good at first.

"I had no idea how to do it efficiently," Smith says. "I was in the back of lane one for a long time. I loved the team aspect of it. I was challenged by swimming — I loved that about it."

Her mother remembers that with no visual cues, she would zig-zag down the 25-meter pool, bouncing from lane line to lane line. "It was like a contact sport when she first started," Beth says. "She went boink, boink, boink, boink, boink all the way down the lane until she figured out how to swim straight."

Smith says she initially wanted to be a sprinter because that's what everyone wants to do when they start. But she found a groove in the middle distances, and her times started dropping. She was featured in a newspaper article in which a coach from the Paralympics, a competition she never heard of, said she was slow now, but with hard work, she could possibly compete on the international stage. She committed to the dream and joined a local club team. In 2007, at 17, she was invited to train with Team USA at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

“It was definitely hard,” Beth says about having her daughter leave home for the first time. “I remember crying a lot when we dropped her off at the airport.”

From 15 to 18 years old, Smith went from novice to international competitor, moving up the world rankings to third in the 400-meter freestyle. But travel and competition began to take a toll. Prerace jitters would start a week out, she says. Constantly yawning, shaking and vomiting before races, she'd become sleepy and dissociate from reality. The nerves would burn her body's adrenaline before she even got on the diving blocks.

Nerves aside, Smith enjoyed success. She won a bronze medal at the 2007 Pan American Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which boosted her confidence heading into 2008 when the next Paralympic Games would be held. But six months before the trials in Minneapolis, the event she was ranked third in the world in, the 400-meter freestyle, was cut from the program. The 50- and 100-meter freestyle were still options for her, but they were distances she had not spent the last two years training for. She tried to adapt by scrambling to put on muscle and learning to sprint properly.

“I did pretty well,” Smith says. “It just wasn't enough time for me to make the team that year. You make it or you don't. It's not an excuse.”

Smith moved back in with her parents in Eugene. Her family was supportive, but the transition to normal life was difficult.



Even though Smith is blind, she still uses swim goggles. She dangles a pair and shows off her tattoo, which reads Morningstar, her middle name, in Braille.

“It's hard to convey that disappointment to someone who hasn't done anything like that,” Smith says. She was burnt out. Her times weren't improving enough to justify spending all those hours in the pool or paying for four more years of club swimming and the constant travel.

Around the time her swim career was ending, Smith got approved for a seeing-eye dog. She had to attend a two-week course to train Suri and herself.

“We went up for graduation,” Beth recalls. “It's a real tearjerker, of course, because the puppy raisers hand over the dog to the person. There's all these beautiful labs. They're calm and just great. Then up comes Suri and Megan. People are applauding and Suri thinks it's all for her. She's bouncing around and we were like, ‘We got the one guide dog that's crazy.’ They're a good match, honestly.”

Suri's always been there for Smith. She filled the void left by swimming — and at times stopped Smith from walking into traffic. “She's saved my

“I was in the back of lane one for a long time. I loved the team aspect of it. I was challenged by swimming and I loved that about it.”

— Megan Smith



In order to compete in the 2024 Paralympics, Smith must compete in the trials next summer. She says she is most confident in the 400-meter freestyle.

life physically and mentally,” Smith says.

Smith also learned what it was like to be a typical 20-year-old whose life didn’t revolve around a pool.

She got her own apartment, went out with friends, and got a job as an accessibility analyst for a tech company. She also pursued her other passion: music. In 2021, Smith recorded a nine-song album, *Sight*. She grew up singing with her family while her father played the piano. She still performs at any opportunity, including karaoke at a local bar in Springfield, Oregon.

“She was fearless,” Beth recalls about times when her daughter first performed as a child. “She’d just get up on these stages and not be afraid. It’s amazing because she couldn’t see anybody. She thought she was as big as everyone else.”

Normal life was fine for a decade, but Smith started feeling the competitive itch again in 2020. As if by kismet, she ran into a high school friend who at the time was dating Cole. Smith mentioned wanting to swim again, got Cole’s number, and restarted the journey.

Practices were casual at first, Cole says. Smith had spent much of the past six years working from a chair at a tech company. Still, her intent was clear: to qualify for the 2024 Paralympics in Paris.

Although he’s been coaching for 15 years, Cole didn’t comprehend how much work it would take: picking Smith up for morning practice, spending extra time in the weight room with her, and balancing her coaching needs with those of the swimmers in his master’s swim program. It took six months to bust the rust formed from the 12-year layoff.



"I'm not a shoo-in," Smith said, "but I have to see how this story ends."

Smith is committed, coachable and a little stubborn, Cole says. She doesn't need much besides tweaking her technique. "The tough love is to get younger athletes to commit," he says. "She's been committed for 15 years. She always shows up. Now, we just have to put in the work."

Cole has learned how to teach proper technique to his visually impaired swimmer. Sometimes, he'll simply explain to her from the pool deck the way to position her arm for an efficient

breaststroke; Smith usually picks up on the correction. Other times, she'll get out of the pool and Cole will physically move her arms to show the correct form.

The morning workout is almost over. Smith has gone up and back the 25-yard pool more than 100 times. "She's tired today," Cole says as Smith touches the wall one last time. He checks his stopwatch. She did that last 25-yards in just over 23 seconds. "We started to really kick her ass in the gym on Monday."

Smith hangs on the wall for a few

seconds and drinks from her bottle. "You look tired," he tells her. "It's good."

"Thanks, I guess," Smith says before starting another lung-scorching sprint.

Cole speedwalks down the pool deck, keeping up with his athlete. As she touches the far wall, he checks his stopwatch and raises his arms in victory. "22.7! 'Bout time, dammit. It's always been in there. We just had to find it." ☆