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REACHING NEW HEIGHTS



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GOING IN FIRST



Jim Gamble (front row, second from left) and the 1981-82 Pitt men's swim team

In 1967, Newark, New Jersey, erupted in flames. Riots that summer engulfed the city—and 158 other cities across the country—in protests against repeated violence and racism toward Black Americans. That same year, four miles away, a Black child learned to swim. Jim Gamble was 5 years old when his father started taking him to the East Orange YMCA to teach him lifesaving skills: If you fall in, remain calm. Get to the wall and call for help.

Written by Liberty Ferda

The Y pool, unlike most others, was integrated and thus safer than other community pools, and Gamble loved to splash around with his father. One day, a swimming coach saw Gamble swim the entire length of the pool in one go and asked his father if he would let Gamble join the Y's competitive team. Gamble's father agreed to pay for additional lessons and let Gamble try out, and at age 7, he became the very first Black swimmer on the team.

Gamble excelled in the pool. When he was 13, his family moved to Livingston, New Jersey, where he joined the middle school team and later the high school team—again as the only Black

swimmer. He began practicing twice a day and competing most weekends. His Livingston YMCA team was one of the best in the state (teammate Chris Jacobs would later earn two gold medals and a silver medal in the 1988 Olympics), and Gamble thrived amid the increasing competition.

But being a rising star didn't save him from the sting of racism. Gamble's mother would drive him to out-of-state meets, knowing it might not be safe for a Black young man to venture alone through places like rural Pennsylvania or New York. At meets, kids as well as adults would call him names, threaten him and say that Black people didn't belong in the sport. Gamble's parents encouraged him to channel the negativity in a positive way, and

swimming morphed into more than just a competitive thrill.

"The water was my punching bag. I could say anything I wanted, I could make faces, and no one could see or hear," Gamble recalls. "That's how I kept going." That, and the fact that he won most of his races. The guys who sneered at him poolside might always win out in the world, but in the water, Gamble could beat them.

Swimming also was a source of camaraderie. Teammates became friends as they spent hours together every day pursuing the same passion. Locker room talk turned toward graduation and future possibilities for swimming, and Gamble, like the others, wrote inquiry letters to a few university swimming programs.

Then a coach from the University of Pittsburgh called and offered him a full scholarship to join the swim team.

That coach, Fred Lewis, would shrug if you tried to call him a visionary for recruiting Pitt's first Black swimmer in 1980; he simply knew talent when he saw it. If you were good and worked hard, he took you in. Gamble signed on right away, knowing that he was making history as the first Black swimmer at Pitt and the first in his family to attend college.

Life for Gamble opened up at Pitt, in the pool and beyond. He made friends easily, and they went everywhere together, studying, talking about girls, sharing meals.

One day during his first year, Gamble and some of his new teammates gathered to play flag football on the Cathedral of Learning lawn. Gamble scored and started showing off, sauntering back and forth mockingly. The guys tackled him, ripped his corduroys and ran away. Gamble walked back to Litchfield Tower B holding the shreds of his pants together, laughing the whole way. He got the message: They would not be extra gentle or tiptoe around "the Black guy"—the guys did what they'd do to anyone who got mouthy. It was right then, with his tattered pants in his hands, that Gamble knew he really belonged.

Meanwhile, in the pool, Lewis demanded a lot, and he was especially hard on the young athletes he knew could rise to the challenge. His voice echoed off the walls in Trees Hall as he shouted critiques (and occasional praise).

Soon enough, Gamble warmed to Lewis' tough love approach and found himself improving. Although freestyle had been his favorite race in high school, he focused on honing his other strokes and swam in the 100- and 200-meter breaststroke and the 200-meter individual medley (butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle).

"Coach really made me swim better," Gamble says. There was less rage and more joy, too; he never felt he was treated differently because of race.

Lewis remembers him as a positive, smiling kid who worked hard.

"Jimmy was just part of the team," Lewis says, "part of the family."

That family won big time. The Pitt swim team came out on top all four years Gamble competed, as Eastern Atlantic Conference champions in 1981 and 1982 and Big East champs in 1983 and 1984. Gamble's dad proudly joked that he regularly drove six hours from New Jersey to watch his son swim for one minute.

Gamble stayed on at Pitt for a fifth year to finish course work in liberal arts and chemistry while serving as the swim team's assistant coach. He advised his former teammates on technique, using a softer approach that complemented Lewis' vigorous training.

Then Gamble moved out to California, where he started a career in the telephone business and had his son in the pool's deep end as a baby. Today, Gamble swims recreationally three or four times a week, and he silently celebrates when he sees another person of color at the pool. Minorities are still woefully underrepresented in the sport. And, of course, racism is alive and there

are demonstrations over racial injustice in the streets, just like there were in 1967. But Gamble sees hope in more efforts for inclusion, like USA Swimming's annual National Diversity Select Camp, which funds a week of training and education for minority athletes. He cheers when big names like Simone Manuel, Jack LeVant and Maritza McClendon are on top of leaderboards and world record lists.

One day, Gamble met fellow New Jerseyan Cullen Jones, the first African American swimmer to win Olympic gold and silver medals (2012) for the United States. The two bantered about how rare they were in the water growing up, and Jones said he was grateful to Gamble for helping to pioneer the way for people who look like him.

Thanks for going in first. 🗣️

