



## Top stories

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### U.S. women doing swimmingly Down Under

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Michael Phelps is tearing up the pool at the world swimming championships. The U.S. women aren't doing too badly, either, with five gold medals and four world records.

Phelps' 4-for-4 performance, including three world records, has got everyone buzzing about whether he's the greatest swimmer ever.

While that debate rages, the American women are stealing the thunder Down Under from their Aussie counterparts. The U.S. has won nine medals to the Aussies' six, and the Americans own a leading five golds to three through five days of swimming.

Not to be lost in all of this was the performance of Canada's Brent Hayden and Italy's Filippo Magnini. The two snatched a piece of history today, tying for the gold medal in the 100 free, a first in a World Championship event.

Both were timed in 48.43 seconds.

The effect of Phelps' success has spread to the women's team.

"It's contagious," women's co-captain Tara Kirk said. "It makes you want to swim faster and perform better."

The Americans pulled off perhaps their most impressive performance Thursday night, taking back the world record in the 800-meter freestyle relay with a 3.73-second victory over Germany.

And they did it from lane eight after barely edging into the final.

"Hopefully, we won't do that again," said Natalie Coughlin, who set an American record of 1 minute, 56.43 seconds in the 200 free as the relay leadoff. She broke Katie Hoff's record from a night earlier.

A poor morning swim relegated the Americans to the worst position in the temporary pool. Lacey Nymeyer was the only one held over for the evening final, when the U.S. was bolstered by the additions of Coughlin, Dana Vollmer and anchor Katie Hoff.

They won in 7:50.09 to set the 10th world record of the meet, going 0.73 seconds under the old mark of 7:50.82.

Coughlin and Vollmer were part of the team that established the standard at the 2004 Athens Olympics, only to have Germany break it at last year's European championships.

The United States won its fourth consecutive world title in the relay.

"I couldn't see anybody, so I couldn't tell if I was going fast or not," said Coughlin, who has earned four medals so far. "I was so nervous coming into this race. Having not swum the 200 free at this meet, I really didn't know what to expect."

Coughlin, a 24-year-old, five-time Olympic medalist in Athens, needed reassurance from, of all people, Hoff — a 17-year-old who was undone three years ago by the magnitude of her first Olympics.

"I had to remind her that she's in the best shape of her entire life," Hoff said.

Coughlin was 2.71 seconds under the world record when she turned it over to Vollmer, who raced against German star Britta Steffen.

Vollmer went even lower, dipping 3.49 seconds under before Nymeyer dove in. She had the Americans 2.07 seconds under after 600 meters.

Hoff swam the anchor leg against French star Laure Manaudou, who moved her team from fourth to second on the first of her four laps.

Undaunted, Hoff opened a bigger lead while churning away near the pool's edge as a tight race for second developed between France, Germany, Britain and Australia.

Hoff's 200 split was actually slower than German anchor Annika Lurz, but the Germans weren't able to dent the lead.

Germany took the silver in 7:53.82. France finished third.

A couple of little-known American women also shone well..

Kimberly Vandenberg, a 23-year-old former UCLA swimmer, won a surprise silver medal in the 200 butterfly behind Australian Jess Schipper.

Vandenberg defeated Otylia Jędrzejczak of Poland, the two-time world champion who settled for the bronze.

Vandenberg nearly quit swimming a year ago to get a real-world job, but, convinced by family and friends, decided to stay in the pool.

"I just took it a lot more seriously, put in a lot more time doing more training overall and just changed a lot of my lifestyle habits," she said.

"This is the biggest competition I've ever had in my life. This moment tonight was what pushed me. It makes me want to train even harder and get faster."

Like Vandenberg, Leila Vaziri is a rookie at these world championships.

The 21-year-old Indiana University student equaled her world record in winning the 50 backstroke, a non-Olympic event.

Vaziri first set the mark of 28.16 seconds in Wednesday's semifinals after swimming a meet record time in the preliminaries.

She earned a dream trip to Melbourne by winning the 100 backstroke at last summer's U.S. nationals — her first national title.

"The whole year I tried to get used to the idea I qualified for world championships," she said. "The energy is so incredible with the team on the pool deck."

Vaziri's e-mail account is so overloaded with good wishes, it's stopped accepting incoming messages.

"Everyone is keeping up with it," she said. "It's incredible because it's 2 o'clock in the morning in Florida at home. Everyone heard how fast the whole meet is."

Bummed about not qualifying for the 100 backstroke final, Vaziri took out her disappointment in the 50.

"This race was for confidence and experience," she said.

And a gold medal.



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