

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

After overcoming fears, Missouri sophomore competes in Olympic Swimming Trials

By [Sarah Bricker](#)

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Connor Nolan has one goal for the 2012 U.S. Olympic Swimming Trials.

“I’m not so much worried about making the team. I just want to get through this meet and get back on track,” Nolan said.

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Nolan, a sophomore on the Missouri swimming team, qualified for both the 200 and 400 individual medley events at this year's trials. He swam the 400 Monday morning, but his time of 4:37:59 put him out of the running for the finals that night. He will swim the 200 on Friday.

“The race wasn’t great. I added (seconds), but now I’ve gotten some of the nervousness out of the way and am amped up for my favorite, the 200 IM,” Nolan said about his performance in a interview on Skype.

But, while other athletes might be discouraged, Nolan said he is just happy he finished.

“Unfortunately,” Nolan said, “it has been a real struggle this year.”

Nolan, who has never had problems at swim meets, spent this year battling mental obstacles that almost prevented him from qualifying for the Olympic Trials. It started his freshman season last fall, and it got to the point where he couldn’t compete.

“It feels kind of like there are walls around me closing in, and I’m physically exhausting myself so if it does come to a live or die

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situation, I won't have enough energy to fight it off. It feels like I'm going to die from the race by letting everyone else down, myself down and by not doing as well as others see that I can be, or how I think I should be. The fear is intense enough to nearly stop me from racing and make the only thought in my mind 'Get out of the water and stop because something is going to happen to you.'"

Nolan said the sensation happened throughout the season, and while he tried to deal with it on his own, it became too much to handle at a meet in North Carolina.

"It just shut me down completely and got into my head," he said. "After North Carolina, when I couldn't even finish a race, I just felt so frustrated and didn't see it getting any better. I didn't want to have to deal with it anymore. I couldn't even be in the building. I just needed to take my mind away from things."

Nolan considered taking a break from swimming and going home to Southlake, Texas. Instead, Nolan met with Rick McGuire, the director of Sports Psychology at MU.

McGuire, who has coached numerous athletes who have made it to Olympic trials and on an Olympic team, worked with Nolan to help him understand where the fear was coming from.

"He had lost confidence in himself and didn't trust in his capabilities to compete at that level. The frustration just overwhelmed him," McGuire said.

McGuire and Nolan created strategies that allowed Nolan to get past the fear and the frustration, but McGuire said the key to Nolan's recovery was Nolan himself.

"He did it. I didn't do it. Nobody else did it. He did it," McGuire said. "The key thing is he learned he could demand of himself his very best. It isn't easy, but it's simple."

Nolan said it was hard to figure out where it was coming from, but eventually it seemed that he had become a victim of himself. He put too much pressure on himself before, during and after each race.

"I was seeing things as outcome based," Nolan said. "If I didn't do this race. If I didn't get the time I wanted or the place I wanted ... I got caught up in winning and thinking I should do more and more and get better and better."

"It just takes a toll on you, always wanting to do better. And, my game face, I got too into the mode hours before a race would start, and you aren't doing yourself a favor by over preparing and over

thinking it because when it comes time you are mentally overcooked.”

Nolan said he found that no matter how physically ready you are to swim, if you aren't mentally ready, it's not going to happen.

But now, Nolan is making his way back.

“I feel like I kind of figured out when you don't really understand why you do something, then it isn't worth it,” Nolan said. “If you have no passion for it you can't be motivated.”

Nolan's new approach is to just enjoy the moment.

“I make small mental adjustments just before the race, get words of praise from coaches, just minor things like that to keep it positive,” he said of his new pre-race routine.

McGuire said Nolan's new approach is “perfect for him,” and his new mindset for the trials is ideal for both this meet and for his future as a swimmer.

“The goal for Nolan should be to recognize that he belongs there, and when he realizes that, he can learn what he needs to do and how he needs to be to get up on that medal stand,” McGuire said.

Nolan said he is looking forward to the race Friday morning, and feels confident after finishing the longer preliminary race on Monday.

“It feels like I've just jumped over a huge hurdle, and I'm back in the sport. I've put a lot of hard work into it, so I'd be really upset if I don't finish it,” Nolan said.

And famous competition doesn't seem to be psyching him out either. Up against Olympic swimmers such as Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte, Nolan has challenging opponents. Yet Nolan doesn't seem to be nervous.

“You eventually get to know that you swim in the same pool as them, and you just got to race against them,” he said.

“Besides, part of the cool thing about being here is every night watching the finals because it's basically watching history be made. You're getting to watch the U.S. team that is going to go compete in London.”

If he doesn't place Friday, Nolan isn't concerned. He already has other plans.

“The U.S. Open is coming up at the end of this summer, and that is one of the biggest meets we have as a swimmer,” Nolan said. “I may hit the weight room and get a little bigger too.”

Supervising editor is [Grant Hodder](#)