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For Champion Olympic Swimmer, a Simpler Time

By **KAREN CROUSE**

TUCSON — It was a curly blue ribbon, much thinner than the ones [Amanda Beard](#) collected as a child for winning swim races. Holding none of her seven Olympic medals, it held no value except in the eyes of her playful 10-month-old son.

His delight in playing with such a simple object resonated with Beard, who in motherhood is infused with a joy that was missing when she was breaking world records and gracing Olympic podiums.

Before the birth last September of her first child, Blaise Ray Brown, Beard's life was a blur of swimming pools and airports, red carpets and splashy headlines. In and out of the water, her eye was always on the clock.

Now Beard is on her son's timetable. She trains for roughly half the hours she used to, then banishes swimming from her mind when she returns home.

"I go to swim practice in the morning and play with Blaise the rest of the day," Beard said. "It's just kind of amazing how he experiences pure joy in things that are so simple. It makes everything I used to think was a big deal not a big deal anymore."

Beard, 28, will venture out of her cocoon this week to race at the national championships, her first major competition since the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Frank Busch, who coached her at the [University of Arizona](#) and is steering her latest comeback, said her training had gone remarkably well and that he had never seen her happier.

“She’s definitely more comfortable in her own skin,” said Sacha Brown, a **professional photographer** whom Beard met in 2005 at a swimsuit catalog shoot and married last year. “It’s an amazing thing to see.”

Beard twice broke the world record in the 200-meter breaststroke and won that event at the 2004 Summer Games in Athens. She made **four Olympic teams** and the cover of Playboy.

Yet during that period, Beard said, “I was never really, really happy.”

Throughout her teens and well into her 20s, Beard presented an image to the world that was as airbrushed as her photographs in magazines. Her toothy smile and surfer girl insouciance hid deep emotional pain. In a series of interviews over the past year, she revealed for the first time her struggles with anger, depression and self-injury.

Beard said she had not engaged in self-destructive behavior in two years. Her road to contentment was paved by events at opposite ends of her broad emotional bandwidth: performing poorly at the 2008 Olympics and becoming a mother.

She failed to advance out of the preliminaries in Beijing, a devastating result that ultimately proved liberating because it helped her shed the wrinkle-free persona that had become such a constricting second skin. Beard has since settled into a new identity — wife and mother — that fits her much more comfortably.

“I’m in such a different state,” she said, adding, “It’s really hard to be sad and upset when I’m playing with Blaise and he’s laughing his butt off.”

Beard was a baby on the 1996 Olympic team in Atlanta, a 14-year-old who in less than two years had ascended from part-time swimmer to the top female breaststroker in the United States. After winning a gold medal and two silvers, she returned home to Irvine, Calif., as a celebrity.

Self-consciousness is the scourge of adolescence, and it was nearly paralyzing for Beard, whose insecurities became magnified under the public microscope.

“People wanted to be friends with me for not the right reasons,” she said of her days at Irvine High School. “They’d introduce me to somebody else as the Olympian or the swimmer. I didn’t

want to stand out. I wanted to blend in.”

Beard’s parents, Dan and Gayle, divorced in 1996, and Beard, the youngest of their three daughters, was distraught.

“I’d go to swim practice, put my face in the water, and I didn’t have to talk to anybody,” Beard said. “Swimming was like my escape, but it was also like this huge prison because I felt like I had to swim up to people’s standards.”

She said she hid her sadness and anger from everyone and overcompensated by trying to make everybody happy.

Her father, Dan, said, “She’s incredible at being able, no matter what kind of turmoil she’s having personally, to be outwardly very gregarious and endearing.”

Beard said she drank beer for the first time at 14, during the Atlanta Olympics. For the next decade, she said, she variously abused alcohol and recreational drugs and developed disordered eating as she struggled to reconcile her low self-image with her high profile.

“I just kind of put a smile on my face and just pretended a lot of the time,” Beard said, adding, “I always felt like I didn’t want to be a role model because if people knew the real me or the things I was doing or going through, there’s no way they’d want their kid to be like me.”

In college, Beard said, she began deliberately injuring herself, an unhealthy behavior meant not to commit suicide but to **manage negative emotions**.

Beard said a fight with her boyfriend or a pile of dirty dishes in the sink could cause her to cut her arms and ankles, which she described as a cathartic release. Although she felt alone in her pain, nonsuicidal self-injury is not rare.

Janis Whitlock, a research scientist at Cornell, **wrote in the May issue** of PLoS Medicine, a journal from the Public Library of Science, that studies in the United States have found the prevalence “ranges from 12 percent to 37.2 percent in secondary school populations and 12 percent to 20 percent in late adolescent and young adult populations.”

Beard said: "I'd go back to this whole self-hating thing, where I had this record player repeating to me, 'You're stupid, you're ugly, you're fat, you're nobody.' You're in so much emotional pain, and you don't know how to express it."

If somebody noticed her cuts and asked about them, Beard would say that she had scraped her arms against a tree branch or that her dog had scratched her ankles. During photo shoots, she would conceal the cuts or scars with makeup.

"Nobody ever questioned my explanations," she said. "If the cuts were really bad, I'd wear long-sleeve shirts to hide them."

Karen Conterio, an addictions counselor who co-founded an inpatient program for deliberate self-harm behavior in 1986, said it was not unusual for her patients to conceal their cuts in plain sight.

"People don't see what they're not looking for," Conterio, who did not treat Beard, said in a telephone interview.

Conterio, a co-founder of the Web site self-injury.com, redirects her patients' focus from the acts of self-injury and toward the root causes of their sadness or anger, or both. Depression, she said, "is usually a very powerful part of this behavior."

With Brown's encouragement, Beard started talk therapy in 2006, then told her parents about her self-destructive behaviors. Her father recalled being shocked and said, "I just wanted to make sure she knew that we were there for her."

Beard said that she stopped taking a prescribed antidepressant when she resumed training for the 2008 Olympics.

"We have to list what medications we take for drug testing," Beard said, "and I was kind of embarrassed because I knew they'd know what that's for."

Beard said she felt sluggish in the days leading to her first swim at the 2008 Olympics. She posted the 18th-fastest time in the preliminaries of the 200-meter breaststroke.

For someone who believed she had to succeed to feed her public persona, it was a crushing disappointment. “I felt like I let everybody down,” she said.

In the days afterward, her family and friends lifted her mood, and Beard had an epiphany: she did not have to win every race or come across as perfect to be loved.

“I don’t even know how to explain how much she’s changed and grown in a pretty short time,” Brown said. “It’s happened because she’s been able to let go of other people’s idea of her, let go of that persona she thinks she has to be, that person who feels like she has to be on all the time, and just be herself.”

The other day, Beard’s voice was buoyant as she mentioned over the phone that Blaise had just taken his first steps.

“It was the cutest thing in the world,” she said.

When Beard was winning championships and setting records, she felt hollow and unworthy of her success.

“Now,” she said, “I know that I do deserve good things.”