



First Person is a monthly Q&A that features compelling people who excel in their chosen endeavors. Ideas for future Q&As? Email edit@thriveswla.com.

first person

with **Cullen Jones**

by Kaite Harrington
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Today, Cullen Jones is the first African-American swimmer to break the long-course world record. The four-time Olympic medalist holds the American record in the 50m freestyle. Swimming didn't always come easy for this decorated Olympian. When he was five, he nearly drowned at a New Jersey waterpark he was visiting with his family. His mother enrolled him in swimming lessons after that experience.

Jones is quick to point out that why he has seen a lot of success

After reading about your near-drowning experience at the age of 5, it's easy to understand why you are an advocate of teaching children how to swim. What is the key message you hope to get across?
The major thing that I want to get across to parents and children is how important it is to learn to swim. Drowning is a silent killer; in which many times children and adults are not even able to call out for help. This is absolutely preventable and the first step is learning to swim.

You are only the second African-American to win an Olympic Gold medal in swimming and were the first African-American swimmer to break a long-course world record. What types of challenges have you had to overcome to be successful in a typically Caucasian sport?
It goes without saying that the road was long, filled with trials and tribulations, and unfortunately, I have had to deal with racism and stereotypes. I know it was not an easy conversation for my parents to have with me explaining why someone was angry because of what I looked like. My father simply put it one way. He said, 'the reason that they are mad is because you are beating their sons.' I took that as motivation.

You've said that swimming doesn't come easy for you—that you didn't start winning until you were 15. What motivated you to keep going?
My coach told me that there are two major reasons that children swim: friends and fun. And it's true; these two things drive me to the pool every day.

Your training regimen consists of swimming six days a week. You've also logged more than 50,000 air miles since the London games, promoting swim education and other causes. How do you balance all of these commitments?
I sleep a lot! My schedule is very hectic and my stress level is through the roof. But I honestly wouldn't have it any other way. I work hard knowing that someday it will all pay off. Whether it's going for gold on the Rio games or just trying to make my next connecting flight.

You hold a degree in English with a minor in psychology and have said in the past that you aspire to write for a men's fashion magazine, like GQ, one day. Tell us a little more about this dream.
My dream has evolved over the years. I would love to write for GQ, but I've started to think

swimming, it didn't come naturally. But with perseverance and hard work he stuck with it and eventually earned a scholarship to North Carolina where he was a four-time ACC champion as well as an NCAA winner in 2006.

Thrive had the opportunity to speak to Jones about the importance of swim lessons, what motivates him to keep going and more when he visited the area late last year.

about starting my own apparel line. I've been told there is nothing better than having an idea and seeing it come to fruition, so I am definitely leaving my options open.

What advice would you give to young athletes in any sport who have aspirations to be an Olympic athlete? What does it take?
I would tell young athletes in all sports, be willing to learn. I've been swimming for over 20 years and am still learning. It is a demanding sport no matter what level you are at. Enjoy the journey.

What's next for you? What can we look forward to in Brazil in 2016?
Continuing my work with Make a Splash, getting children water safe is not only my job but my passion. I always wish I could devote more time to this goal, but I'm also training for Rio.

