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Eyes on world, Phelps is far from treading

World-record holder in 200 fly finishes up races at Meadowbrook Swimming

June 19, 2001 | By Ryan Clark | Ryan Clark,SUN STAFF

His shoulders are the most noticeable thing, those shoulders that seem as broad as a Buick. They melt into the water, his head bobbing up and down like a cork, as he pulls away from other competitors in the pool. As he leaves all the other swimmers in his wake, the crowd whispers.

"Is that him?" a little boy asks. "Is that Michael Phelps?"

"Yes," a woman replies, careful not to raise her voice. "Just watch."

They watch in silence as the 6-foot-4, 175-pound Phelps finishes the last leg of the 200-meter butterfly in a time of 1:57.43. The butterfly was one of four events in which Phelps competed at the North Baltimore Aquatic Club Long Course Invitational, held from Friday through today at the Meadowbrook Swim Club.

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The spectators know this is the same Michael Phelps who set the world record in this event in March with a time of 1:54.92. They know it's the same Phelps who broke more than 25 national age-group records in 2000. And they know it's the same Phelps who became the youngest male in 68 years to compete on the U.S. Olympic team, [earning](#) a fifth-place finish in the 200 butterfly in Sydney, Australia.

But before the swim, an announcer revealed this fact to the crowd: Because he's only 15 years old, Phelps can't even drive himself to swim practice. He doesn't turn 16 until June 30.

"I haven't had time to worry about driving," Phelps said yesterday, still shaking water from his ears. "It's just been hectic lately, but fun."

Phelps participated in the invitational as his training continues for the world championships next month in Fukuoka, Japan. Phelps easily won his four events - the 100 butterfly, the 200 individual medley, the 400 and the 200 butterfly - but said his sights are set on a world title in Japan.

On Sunday, after taking a 15-minute swim to cool down, Phelps relaxed in a white T-shirt, blue sweatpants and sandals. Yellow headphones dangled around his neck and connected to his CD player. Rappers Snoop Doggy Dogg, Dr. Dre and Wyclef Jean inspire him before and after races.

"The music just pumps me up, and puts me in my own little world," Phelps said.

But for now, Phelps' world consists of his mom, dad and coach, Bob Bowman, as they prepare for a world championship

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run and an appearance in the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece.

"We feel like he's right where he needs to be," Bowman said after Phelps' performance last night in the 200 butterfly. "This was definitely his best swim since he set the record last March. I guess this could send the message that he's ready to go."

Phelps was named The Sun's Male Athlete of the Year earlier this month, becoming the youngest to win the award. But even with all the attention, Debbie Phelps said her son has stayed grounded.

"This has all been such a whirlwind, and Michael's bringing so much excitement to Baltimore, but he's so relaxed about it all," Debbie said. "He's still as friendly to people and fans as the day he started swimming. He's just a normal All-American kid."

"He's still just my son," said Fred, Michael's father. "He's still just the same kid that goes fishing, plays video games and shoots hoops with his buddies. He's just a normal kid."

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Just a normal kid who happens to be the very best 200-meter butterfly swimmer in the world. But Phelps isn't satisfied with where he is. He's concentrating on where he's going.

"I've already accomplished a lot, but there's so much more I want to do," Phelps said. "There's a whole lot more going to happen down the road."

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