

THE RETURN OF THE MISSILE

Following on from a tough year of setbacks, swimmer James 'The Missile' Magnussen is back in top form. **Paul Ewart** speaks to the freestyle champion about fame, fitness and his hopes for Olympic gold.

AT SIX FOOT two and weighing 200 lbs of solid muscle, James Magnussen cuts an imposing figure. Indeed, he looks every inch the swimming superstar. But while he may be one of the country's swimming greats now, his talents in the water were late blooming.

"I hadn't done anything spectacular as a teenager or as a young kid swimming, I just gradually improved. I was never super really talented," he pauses to reflect, "I didn't really stand out as a kid."

This admission is surprising; after all, Magnussen is the Aussie swimming world's wunderkind. Catapulted to international fame in 2011 Magnussen made history by becoming the first Australian man to be crowned the 100-metre freestyle world champion. Just one year later at the 50-metre and 100-metre freestyle Olympic selection trials, he won every heat, semi-final and final setting two new personal best times along the way. Indeed, his time in the 100-metre was the fourth fastest recorded in history and the fastest in a textile suit. Not bad for a teenager from Port Macquarie.

With such a meteoric rise to success, James – later dubbed 'The Missile' – seemed unstoppable. But his debut Olympic event did not go to plan with the swimmer finishing just fourth in the 100-metre freestyle – an event Australia was hotly tipped to win. But behind the scenes, the swimming prodigy was dealing with a back injury.

"I knew I wasn't swimming my fastest," he admits. "And other people could obviously see that, but I didn't want to go public and tell the competition that I had an injury and was beatable as a result. It was quite a mental struggle for me."

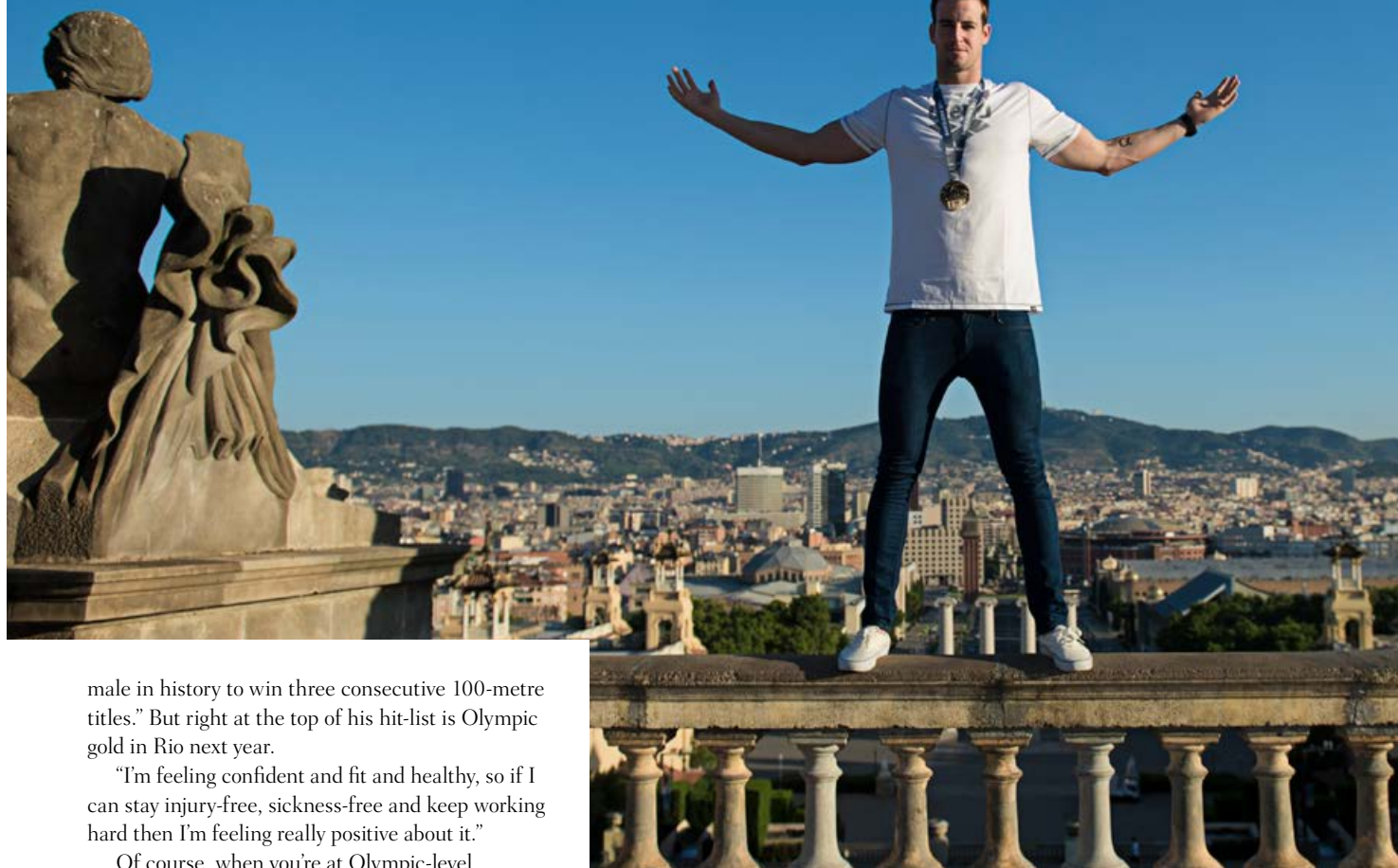
Thankfully the swimming superstar has taken matters into his own hands, making the bold move last September to leave his coach of five years and give his training regime an overhaul.

"I thought that a lot of decisions were being taken out my hands. I was doing what I was told and ended up with an injury and that did not sit well with me."

At the time of our interview, a buzzing James is gearing up to make history at the World Championships. "I'll be trying to be the first ◀



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male in history to win three consecutive 100-metre titles.” But right at the top of his hit-list is Olympic gold in Rio next year.

“I’m feeling confident and fit and healthy, so if I can stay injury-free, sickness-free and keep working hard then I’m feeling really positive about it.”

Of course, when you’re at Olympic-level, maintaining a diet to correspond with intense training can be tricky. Happily, James is able to utilise his role as ambassador for Body Science. “My dietary requirements – because of the amount of training and exercise that I do – aren’t met with a normal diet. You need to supplement, so that’s how Body Science helps me.” He explains, “I use their supplements like their proteins and amino acids before and after training so I can keep training, keep lifting weights and keep competing.”

The freestyler has also learnt to apply the same discipline to his relationship with the media; a lesson that he’s had to learn the hard way. “I think I was quite young and naïve,” he says. “It’s something I really struggled with because I grew up in a really small country town and it’s strange to be in the spotlight like that at 18 years of age.”

And while fame has certainly followed his career in the pool, the sporting star is quick to assert that celebrity acclaim is far from his primary motivation. “I certainly don’t swim for status, to be popular, or for fame. I swim because I enjoy it and I can do two laps of a pool faster than everyone else!” laughs Magnussen.

Of course, notoriety is a double-edged sword, which the swarthy sportsman has experienced both sides of. “A lot of it is positive,” he says. “People in the street wish me well for an upcoming meeting, or they might say that their son or

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daughter started swimming because of me. But then on the flipside, things like trying to go out and have a quiet drink with friends on a Saturday night has become almost impossible.”

As clearly as he sees the pros and cons of fame, the 23 year-old is equally realistic when it comes to the expiry date of his career. “I embrace it. I’m very focused and motivated to stay at the top of my sport for as long as I can and I’ll retire before I get forced to. But yes, swimming is pretty tough because you do have a pretty limited life span.”

Of course, unrelenting training takes its toll on the body, but knowing that your time to shine is short-lived and precious also has an impact on the mind too, as James readily admits: “It can be a really lonely place sometimes, but I’ve got goals and things I want to achieve before I retire,” he pauses and adds. “Once I’ve done everything I want to, I think I’ll be quite happy to call it a day.” 📍