

STEWART CONFIDENT HE'S AMONG THE BEST

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BARCELONA – He was "Little Melvin" back then, a kid who was small for a 10-year-old and who swam in a ratty YMCA in a run-down part of Charlotte, N.C.

Little Melvin was a big talker, though. He would tell you he was going to the Olympics. "I'll be there," he said, "and I'll break a world record."

He already was breaking the age-group records of swimmers two years older.

Little Melvin grew up. He talks bigger. He swims faster.

Melvin Stewart, 23, has a world record in the 200-meter butterfly, a previous Olympic appearance and his eye set on three medals in Barcelona. Stewart is somebody who bears watching.

Today at the Picornell Pool, he starts his medal quest in the 100-meter butterfly – the event he says "every practice day for the past year has been for" – before Thursday's 200.

"I want to beat Anthony Nesty," he said. "He's been winning long enough. I see a window of opportunity. He has not improved since 1988. At the college championships last spring, he was almost beaten by the guy who got fifth place at our Olympic trials."

Nesty, who swims collegiately for Florida, won Suriname's only Olympic medal when he won the 100 butterfly four years ago in Seoul, South Korea. He's the favorite. Based on times, Stewart is only the No. 2 U.S. swimmer, behind Pablo Morales of Santa Clara.

Four years ago, Stewart's goal in Seoul was to beat West Germany's Michael Gross – "The Albatross" – then the world-record holder in the 200. Stewart finished fifth, more than two seconds behind.

"I've never felt quite that low," Stewart said.

"I sat by myself on the flight home from Seoul. There was no talking. I didn't talk to my parents. I felt like a loser, and I don't like that feeling." Stewart got his rematch, his revenge and the world record of 1 minute, 55.69 seconds a year ago at the world championships.

"I respected (Gross), but I hated him," Stewart said. "I wanted to talk to him, but I visualized killing him."

He calls such thoughts "mental felonies."

He sees no reason to offer evidence that he's not a little crazy. Or a lot funny. He was almost kicked out of Mercersburg Academy, the Pennsylvania prep school where he was sent to pull up his grades after he was caught in his girlfriend's dorm room.

"Someone said I was caught naked," he said. "I had boxers on."

Oh.

There in the middle of Amish country, he pursued his hobby of cow tipping.

"You run up and you hit them," he said. "Sometimes it takes two hits before they fall over."

Oh.

His mother, a fundamentalist Christian who once worked at Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's religious retreat near Charlotte, called him the other day when she read that Barcelona's beaches are topless.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm not looking."

Oh.

Before the week is over, Stewart may have three medals, two of them gold. He'll give one gold to the alumnus who paid his tuition to Mercersburg to recruit such a good swimmer.

Then he'd like to go out and meet Charles Barkley of the Dream Team – who might be Stewart's only competition as the most quotable American at the Games.

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