

RISE ABOVE

BY JOINING HIS HIGH SCHOOL SWIMMING TEAM, ANDREW LUK HAS OPENED THE EYES OF CLASSMATES WHILE OPENING DOORS FOR HIMSELF

WORDS BY MATT REMSBERG - PHOTO BY DUSTIN SNIPES

During Michael Phelps' historic run to eight Olympic golds this summer in Beijing, one race in particular stood out to Andrew Luk. It was Phelps' fourth championship race, the 200-meter butterfly — the event he swam blind.

Phelps' goggles filled with water during the race, leaving him unable to see the pool wall in

the wall. Two six-foot poles with tennis balls attached to the end were created so teammates could tap him when he was getting close to the wall and he would know when to make his turns.

He started off competing in the 500 freestyle as a way to help build stamina, but that also left him to swim the final few laps of each race by himself after his competitors finished. It was

year with a newfound connection to his classmates. Kids who didn't previously know how to approach him have a reason to start a conversation, which is leading to more meaningful relationships. And inspired by a UNICEF-sponsored trip to Spain over the summer, Andrew intends to further challenge himself by beginning to write for the school newspaper.

"I'D BE CRYING LIKE A BABY, YELLING, 'GO, ANDREW, GO.'"

front of him or the lane markers and competitors on his sides. Nevertheless, Phelps prevailed in world-record time to keep his march toward Olympic immortality alive.

In the aftermath, Phelps' determination and perseverance were praised by media members worldwide. But only a handful of people could truly appreciate what Phelps was up against. Andrew was one.

Since joining the Diamond Bar (Diamond Bar, Calif.) swimming team last year, Andrew has swum every race like Phelps swam the 200 fly — blind.

A tumor on Andrew's brain stem discovered when he was 5 left him completely blind in his right eye and with only the ability to detect light in his left eye, while also rendering him partially deaf. Two loving parents and three supportive siblings helped Andrew grow up living life to the fullest, and he blossomed into a model student while developing a love of reading (via Braille) and listening to the radio.

But upon entering high school, Andrew began feeling secluded.

"I needed to do something to get involved, something to make me feel like I fit in with people," says Andrew, a junior with a 3.9 GPA. "A school day was beginning to feel like something I just wanted to be over as quickly as possible."

In a moment of inspiration, he decided to try out for the swim team. The logistical obstacles were hurdled easily. He did not begin races by diving into the water, instead pushing off from

then, however, that the connection he was seeking with his peers began to take shape.

"Without fail, once it got down to the final few laps, all the members of our team, of our opponent's team, people in the stands, they would all start to cheer for

Andrew," says Michael Spence, who coached his final season at Diamond Bar last year. "I'd be crying like a baby, yelling, 'Go, Andrew, go.'"

Andrew's stamina and form improved rapidly, and he dropped his time by more than a minute in his first few races. He continued to practice in the off-season and entered his junior year well-versed in a wide variety of strokes.

More importantly, Andrew entered this school

"I've felt more of a camaraderie between lots of people who had known who I was before but hadn't gotten to know me," Andrew says. "Now they really talk to me and see me face-to-face as a high school kid just like they are." 

