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Swimming helps his Down syndrome - Before he began swimming, Andy Miyares could not hold up his head. Today, he's competing around the world.

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Andy Miyares is a world-record swimmer who once swam with Olympian Michael Phelps, has socialized with President Bill Clinton, and has traveled the globe.

He was swimming before he could walk, but on the day he was born, his mother, Ana Maria Miyares, was handed a book listing the things he would not be able to do. Andy was born with Down syndrome, a condition arising from a chromosome defect. His mother, who had given birth to four previous children without issue, was 44 when Andy was born. Older mothers have a greater chance of having a child with Down syndrome.

"The pediatrician told me I had a big job ahead of me, but if I looked at it as a challenge for both him and me and the whole family, he was bound to succeed," she said. "People suggested sending him to a home. That thought never crossed my mind. When I read the book, I knew my son would not be like that."

When Andy was a baby, he lacked muscle tone. Intellectually, he was fine. When he was 9 months, his mother enrolled him in swimming lessons at Swim Gym in Coral Gables, founded by Robert Strauss, a former Olympic swimmer for the Mexican team who focuses on children's swimming lessons.

"His mom's influence was a key factor," Strauss says. "You ain't going to find another mom like Ana Maria."

Within three months of swimming for 45 minutes a day, Andy could hold his head up straight. From then, he swam every day.

"The doctors said he wouldn't be able to walk until about 4 years old, since his neck wasn't strong enough to hold his head up," his mother said. "Because of the strength he gained from swimming, he walked at 14 months."

At age 7, Andy joined the Special Olympics. At ages 8 and 17, he broke six records for swimmers with Down syndrome. His records include the 1,500-, the 800-, 400- and 200-meter freestyle races and 100- and 200-meter butterfly, with a time of 2:35 in the latter during a competition in Ireland.

Today, Andy, 28, holds 24 world records among swimmers with Down syndrome. He swims for a Special Olympics team called Baywatchers, and is part of the Down Syndrome International Swimming Organization. He also swims among able-bodied swimmers on the U.S. swimming team, and the Master's U.S. Swim Team.

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“His thousands of hours of dedication and hard work played into it. I always told him if you stick with it, you’re going to be the best. He’s a world champ and when you’re at the top of the totem pole, everyone is clawing at you. He’s the best, especially in his heart,” Strauss said.

He practices for two hours a day at Miami Dade College’s Kendall Campus for a team called the Flying Fish. He swims 5,000 to 7,000 meters a day. “This is my home team and I swim here every day,” Andy said. “I’ve had the same friends for a long time.”

Andy is part of the International Global Messengers for the Special Olympics. There are two in the United States and 12 in the world. They represent the Special Olympics at competitions, motivating others with their success in sports.

“Andy is my name, swimming is my game and Special Olympics is my life,” he begins. He has traveled to Greece, Morocco, and Shanghai and will compete in Panama and Italy. He also is training to compete in the 2015 World Games of Special Olympics in Los Angeles.

“He’s 28, but he thinks he’s physically 16 years old,” says his mother. “But he swims with high school swimmers and keeps up with them.”

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