The buzzer sounds, a shockingly glaring noise, and suddenly all the viewers at home can see is waves of white as the swimmers’ bodies hit the pool. Less than a mile away, a similar noise sounds, signifying the start of a grueling race in which swimming is only one component of. These were the starts of the life-changing races that some of the University of Michigan’s very own competed in.

Mokhtar Al-Yamani graduated from UM in 2019 with an undergraduate degree in international studies and with a masters degree in 2020, all while being a part of the UM Men’s Swimming and Diving Team. In the summer of 2021, he also represented Yemen in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics.

“It’s such a crazy feeling to be able to represent Michigan, not only at the collegiate level, but nationally and internationally,” Al-Yamani said. “Like you feel like you’re a part of a really big community of Michigan men that have come before you. And at the start of every year on the varsity team, we do a run through campus, we learn about the historical moments here at the university, and we learn about the history of our team. Knowing all of that, and how rich of a tradition and history and cultural excellence that we have, it’s really cool to feel like... in coming generations, you’re going to be a part of the old guards that came before you.”

Valerie Barthelmy, who also swam during her time at UM for the Women’s Swimming and Diving Team, graduated with an undergraduate degree from the College of Engineering in 2013 and with a master’s in 2014 from the same school. She represented Belgium in the summer olympics where she competed in the Elite Women’s triathlon. Barthelmy got tenth place with a time of 1:58:49 out of over 50 competitors.

“I grew up with this notion that I had to follow this specific trajectory, like, growing up here in Ann Arbor, really influenced by the University, siblings went here, [I followed] a pretty traditional path,” Barthelmy said.

“And funny enough, despite choosing engineering and Michigan as this traditional safe choice, ironically enough I had the freedom and confidence to do something pretty outside the box. I feel lucky that I had the chance to do it. Also proud that I was willing to take that risk. And grateful that I had all the support around me to catch me if anything went wrong.”

While both athletes were new to the Olympics, so the experience was already unlike any other, the delay of the games created even more unusual. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Tokyo 2020 games were moved to 2021. Athletes had to completely change their training schedules which, for some, included a rarely taken break.

“As someone who had been competing internationally every single summer, there were times when you couldn’t take a break,” Al-Yamani said.

“So I took a much needed break. And that was very unique, because I’ve never taken a break since I started. And so that was challenging, but to be able to come back, get a couple months of really good training in and then represent at the highest level was an incredible feeling.”

Barthelmy echoed her fellow swimmer’s thoughts when discussing the impact that the unexpected break had on her training and overall mentality.

“[Triathletes] were pretty lucky because since we weren’t in a stadium, our course was along the streets in Tokyo... so we actually still had quite a good crowd support,” Barthelmy said. “But it was hard not to be able to celebrate right there with family right after. That’s something that a lot of athletes experienced... but there was this feeling of just appreciation that the games were even happening and they still made it like this big thing... But I feel like I got everything out of it.”

Despite the complications that COVID-19 brought, from the delay to the lack of spectators to the secluded Olympic Village, the experience was truly once-in-a-lifetime.

“When you’re in the venue, you’re seeing other swimmers but it’s the moment that you’ve dreamed up your whole life,” Al Yamani said. “I grew up watching the Olympics for as long as I can remember, so to be there, seeing so many Olympic tattoos all around me and then knowing that at the end of the day one of the people that was swimming next to me in the warm up pool might be a gold medalist was indescribable.”

That indescribable feeling was one that Barthelmy experienced as well. She reflected on her journey that led her to that feeling.

“I didn’t expect that I would go to the Olympics,” Barthelmy said. “I didn’t expect sitting here 10 years ago that I would do that, and it’s been so cool and freeing to know that you can just do literally whatever you want to do. I really believe that about anyone. I hope other people can see that in my journey and that inspires them to make themselves happy.”
TRADITIONS
Setting up to dive into the pool, Olympic swimmer Mokhtar Al-Yamani flashes his Olympic rings tattoo, a tradition for many Olympic athletes. “I did end up getting the Olympic rings tattoo,” Al-Yamani said. “It’s something that I dreamed up. I’m really happy with how it looks. I ended up getting it in Costa Rica during a ten day vacation after the Olympics, because I wanted to celebrate them.”

WOLVERINE RESILIENCE
Triathlete Valerie Barthelemy leans against the wall in her team colors. “I’ve never had a harder four years than I did when I was studying and swimming here at Michigan,” Barthelemy said. “I think what was great about that is that it made me so strong and so tough and resilient, and really made it feel like I could do anything.”

PATRIOTIC
Showing off her country’s colors, UM Alumna and Olympian Valerie Barthelemy grins while wearing a Belgian Hammers jacket.
Competing in the Olympics can be considered a spectacular achievement even under ordinary circumstances. Doing so in the midst of a pandemic, however, is perhaps a different beast altogether.

Several Wolverines faced this formidable task head-on, including College of Engineering alumn Uche Eke and Ross alum Jamie Yeung, classes of 2019 and 2021, respectively. Uche, a Maryland native, competed for Nigeria as a gymnast, while Yeung swam for her home region of Hong Kong.

The coronavirus aside, another unique aspect of Eke’s Olympic journey was the fact that he was the first ever gymnast to represent Nigeria at the Games.

“It’s an amazing feeling to know I motivated a lot of people in both Nigeria and the US to pursue their dream,” Eke said, noting that going to the Olympics had been a dream of his since he was a young child.

Yeung shared this dream, and feared that COVID-19 would derail it. When the pandemic first swept through Michigan, her training schedule was hindered when pools closed for safety. She searched for new ways to stay in shape in the interim, surprisingly finding her solution in the Huron River.

“It was April,” Yeung said. “My friend and I put on wetsuits and started jumping in the river just to remember the feel of the water... The first time, it was so cold. We only stayed in for ten minutes, and there were just ducks next to us. They probably thought we were crazy... people go there to swim and sunbathe in the summer, and even then, the water isn’t that warm.”

In spite of the cold, the Huron became a part of her routine, along with working out in parks to stay fit. She kept it up until the summer, when she returned to Hong Kong in a locked-down training facility, where athletes both lived and trained in an effort to avoid COVID-19.

When Yeung did arrive in Tokyo months later, the competition itself was unlike any of its predecessors, with no live audience and other COVID-centric precautions. Within the Olympic Village, however, Yeung described a level of interaction uncharacteristic of the pandemic, noting the cross-country friendships that formed.

“One really memorable thing was watching one of our Hong Kong teammates fighting for gold in fencing,” Yeung said. “We couldn’t go to the venue (because of COVID-19), so we all gathered in the lobby of the Village to watch, and other countries came to watch with us. And the moment he won, everyone cheered, no matter if they were from Hong Kong or not. And that kind of thing happened every night... all those different kinds of people coming together. It was really cool.”

Eke had his own stories about the Village to share, though his centered around ping pong. He said he spent quite a bit of time challenging other athletes to a game.

“Before I went to the Olympics, I would have rated my ping pong skills at like... thirteen out of ten,” Eke said. “But playing world class athletes? I lost every game.” He added he even faced several Olympic ping pong players, by whom he was “destroyed,” though “that was to be expected,” Eke said.

Both athletes described these types of small interactions as some of the most meaningful, highlighting the sense of unity they felt in an otherwise isolating time. Eke reflected on a similar sentiment in describing his time at the University of Michigan.

“Football games are my favorite memory from there,” Eke said. “And I don’t really like football, honestly. But just to see all of Michigan together, all wearing maize and blue, the maize in the student section... and shouting out loud, and being around your teammates and friends... just being together, ultimately. That’s the best.”

Yeung also expressed the sense of togetherness that she felt at UM and the Olympics alike.

“I lived in South Quad my freshman year,” Yeung said. “I think four or five of us who lived there all went to the Olympics in the same year... In terms of the Michigan community, I’m always, always grateful for the support.”
VICTORS IN THE VILLAGE

Written by Sabrina Nash and Grace Watson
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VALERIE BARTHELEMY

“The most rewarding part of this experience has been seeing younger women follow in this path,” College of Engineering Alum and Olympic triathlete Valerie Barthelemy said. “Seeing a program that was struggling to do what they’ve done in recent years—to the top three, winning the NCAA and Big 10 championships—I wasn’t part of that. But I was part of an era before that. And it’s nice to see it going in that direction. And then personally achieving this goal of going to the Olympics that I’ve had since I was six and being 30 now, I think you can carry that for your whole life. It’s so cool to see that you can achieve this because it really does feel like I could do anything... Hopefully that also gets through to younger women like, yes, you can be an engineer and an athlete.”

MOHTAR AL-YAMANI

“On our team, at least, we very much see swimming as a stepping stone in life,” College of LSA Alum and Olympic swimmer Mohhtar Al-Yamani said. “We don’t want swimming to be your entire life. Our coach, Mike Bottom, really emphasizes taking the skills that you learned from swimming to propel yourself into a greater life of success professionally and otherwise. And so we really emphasize that. And so that allowed me to stay focused during school, during my time as a student athlete and making sure that I had fun with my friends.”

UCHE EKE

“At the Olympics, I was just thinking, I’m doing this for Nigeria, I’m doing this for Michigan, but at the end of the day, I’m doing it for myself,” College of Engineering Alum and Olympic gymnast Uche Eke said. “At first, I was going to just treat it like any competition. But then, going to the Opening Ceremony, I just imagined that there were millions of people there. There were millions of cameras, ginormous cameras... that was kind of scary. I was very excited and not focused at all, but at the end of the day, it was just like a regular competition. I was enjoying every moment.”

JAMIE YEUNG

“None of our friends or family could go and watch this year,” Ross School of business alum and Olympic swimmer Jamie Yeung said. “So, it was really up to you to bring back memories to them. We always went to the souvenir shop. They would put out something new every day, and all the athletes would just flock to it. The Village in general was actually really beautiful, and it was really cool because you’re surrounded by such a diverse group of people who are all there for the same goal.”