

This is a printer friendly version of an article from [www.heraldtribune.com](http://www.heraldtribune.com)  
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

Article published Jun 11, 2007

## He's ready and willing to serve -- as a SEAL

SARASOTA -- When Nick Perez was 5 years old, he often dressed up like Batman and valiantly protected the city from evil.

Fighting crime was dangerous work, however. Once, he climbed onto the family SUV and jumped off, supremely confident in his special flying powers.

But somehow they failed him that day, and the young superhero got lectured by his father in the driveway.

When he wasn't Batman, he was a soldier, fighting a war inside his living room; he would hide under a blanket and fire his toy gun at the enemy.

By 10, he wanted to join the military, like his father, the Marine, did.

His mother said he walked around for a year saying, "I'm going to be a Navy SEAL, I'm going to be a Navy SEAL."

But not long after, something new captured his attention.

He saw the 2000 Olympics on TV and was mesmerized by gold medal swimmer Ian Thorpe.

He joined the YMCA Sarasota Sharks swim program and fell in love with swimming. He became pretty good, too.

He swam six years with the Sharks and four years at Sarasota Christian School. He was twice selected to the Herald-Tribune's All-Area team.

He was good enough that Gardner-Webb University in North Carolina wanted him to swim on its team next fall and offered him a partial scholarship.

As his senior year at Sarasota Christian wound down, he was torn by a decision not many high school seniors confront.

Should he go to college and swim for a Division I-A program, or should he join the Navy SEALs and go through perhaps the toughest military training program in the world?

He agonized over the decision for months, and ultimately chose to serve his country.

Only now the war is not inside his living room.

"It takes me back to the generation of World War II, where people willingly signed up to serve their country," said Sarasota Christian coach Steve Brown. "For him at 18 to want to do that, not only for himself, but for our country ... it's reassuring there are people like that.

"When I was that age, I wanted to go to college, swim and meet girls. He's one of the few kids that age who



STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER

Sarasota Christian graduate Nick Perez is turning down an opportunity to swim in college and is joining the Navy SEALs instead.

genuinely cares about everyone he comes into contact with," Brown said.

### **Seeking something more**

Somehow, he just seemed different from the others.

"I've always felt kind of out of place," Perez said. "Like going to a football game and everyone getting excited for a field goal. It's like, it's great, but there's more.

"And swimming, as important as our coaches and we make it seem, it's going to be over. If I don't end now, it's going to be over in four more years.

"So sooner or later, swimming back and forth on a black line as fast as you can just doesn't really matter any more."

Here is what came to matter to him:

"When he hears on the news what's going on overseas, he'll say, 'Why should I get to stay at home when these guys are putting their lives on the line for me?'" said Jennifer Perez, his mother.

Though Nick Perez has always been intrigued by the military, the fallout from the 9/11 attacks also played a part in his decision.

"I was in seventh grade when 9/11 happened, and I was just getting so tired of hearing you can't do anything about it," Nick Perez said. "I can do something about it. I can help."

"Maybe there's a terrorist attack on a plane that my friends are going to be on. If I stop that terrorist, I've saved my friends."

### **An agonizing decision**

Sometimes, while sitting in class, Nick Perez would take out a piece of paper and write down the pros and cons of the decision he was faced with.

It was never far from his mind.

One night, after seeing a movie with his father, Evelio Perez, they sat in the parking lot and talked for hours.

His father, a former Marine who has spent the last 22 years in law enforcement, asked him: "Do you know what sacrifice you're making? Do you know you can be shipped off to war?"

His son replied, "I understand fully."

In March, Nick Perez took a test called the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, or ASVAB, and scored well enough to qualify for SEAL training.

That helped solidify his decision.

Still, he knew that a letter of intent from Gardner-Webb would be arriving in the mail for him to sign in April.

Even though he made a visit to the school and loved it, he called the coach and told him not to send the letter of intent.

On April 17, he signed up for the Navy.

He had made his decision.

"It's hard to explain how hard it was," he said.

So many factors were weighed.

How much would he see his friends if he joined the military?

What about missing the college experience?

What about the great sense of purpose he'd get in the military?

Which one would I regret not doing more? he wondered -- and it went on like that for months.

He would go to swim practice and think: "If I'm swimming now in January, but I'm not going to do it in college, then what's the point?"

"I tried to keep the mentality that I would be swimming in college just so I could finish with a good season," he said.

Brown, his swimming coach, was surprised by Perez's ultimate decision.

"My first reaction, like most people was, I was concerned," Brown said. "I don't want him to come home in a box."

The possibility of death had to be factored in.

"I'm not afraid of it," Nick Perez said. "There's no greater love than to sacrifice your own life for your friends or your family.

"I kind of have this peace inside. I know this is what I'm meant to do and I know where I am going if I was to die."

His parents are also at ease with the decision, and the potential danger that could lie ahead.

"A lot of people are like, 'Oh, the military, there's a war going on, aren't you afraid?'" said Jennifer Perez. "I'd be just as worried if he was going off to college.

"There's a joke that goes, 'At least in the military, someone's keeping an eye on him.'"

One of the toughest factors in his decision was his girlfriend, who did not take the news well at first.

"She says she supports me, but most people see the worst-case scenario, especially during wartime, that I might not be coming back, or they might not get to talk to me as much," said Nick Perez.

"We're trying to figure it out right now," he continued. "Are we going to try and stay together through this or are we just going to part ways and be friends?"

"She was one of the hardest parts to factor in because I knew the possibility of always being in contact with her might be gone."

Perez told her one night after dinner. She voiced her concerns and then asked him a question.

"What, exactly, are the Navy SEALs?"

### **The ultimate test**

Before Nick Perez eats a meal, any meal, he does 20 pushups. He is trying to prepare himself for what's ahead.

And what's ahead is as demanding physically and mentally as you could possibly imagine.

To reach just the minimum qualifications for becoming a SEAL, a candidate must be able to swim 500 yards using the breaststroke or sidestroke in 12 minutes and 30 seconds, do 42 push-ups in 2 minutes, 50 sit-ups in 2 minutes, six pull-ups, and run a mile and a half wearing boots and long pants in 11 minutes and 30 seconds.

However, prospective trainees are expected to blow those requirements away.

On Sept. 6, Perez will leave for Great Lakes, Ill., where he will undergo seven weeks of basic conditioning.

The fourth week is known as "Hell Week."

Trainees will participate in 5 1/2 days of continuous training. They will get a maximum of four hours of sleep per day for the week.

According to the official SEAL Web site, Hell Week "proves to those who make it that the human body can do 10 times the amount of work the average man thinks possible."

Then comes eight weeks of dive training, followed by nine weeks of land warfare, where the physical training becomes much more intense.

The final three weeks are for basic parachute training.

The training ends in San Diego, where the water never gets above 68 degrees in the summer and 58 degrees in the winter.

All told, Nick Perez will spend about six months feeling cold, wet and full of sand.

That's if he makes it that long.

The training is so demanding that between 70 and 80 percent of the trainees will drop out.

If a trainee wants to quit, at any time he can drop his helmet liner next to a pole with a brass ship's bell connected to it and ring the bell three times. If you drop out of SEAL training, you are still in the Navy and are made available for orders. You can reapply after completing a minimum activity tour of two years.

"It comes down to: How bad do you want it?" said Nick Perez. "It's going to hurt, it's going to be cold, and it's going to be miserable. How bad do you really want it?"

"I can feel myself deep inside, I really want it."

Jennifer Perez feels Nick's swimming background with the Sharks and Sarasota Christian will help him tremendously with the brutal training.

The discipline will come into play the most.

"There were days when the alarm went off at 4:30 and you're out there in 30-degree weather in January and the coach is telling you to jump in the water," Jennifer Perez said.

Nick Perez swam six different events with the Sharks and Blazers, and the 200 butterfly was his best stroke. His best time was 2:03:44.

"I tell him you have what it takes physically," said Evelio Perez. "The question mark is the mental side. You never know until you're in that situation.

"You're cold and wet all day and they keep dunking you in the ocean and it's 58 degrees ..."

After Nick Perez told his father of his agonizing decision to join the Navy SEALs, his father looked him in the eye, shook his hand and told him he was proud of him.

He knows how hard the decision was to make.

"I've always seen him as a son," he said. "Now I look at him as a man."

---