

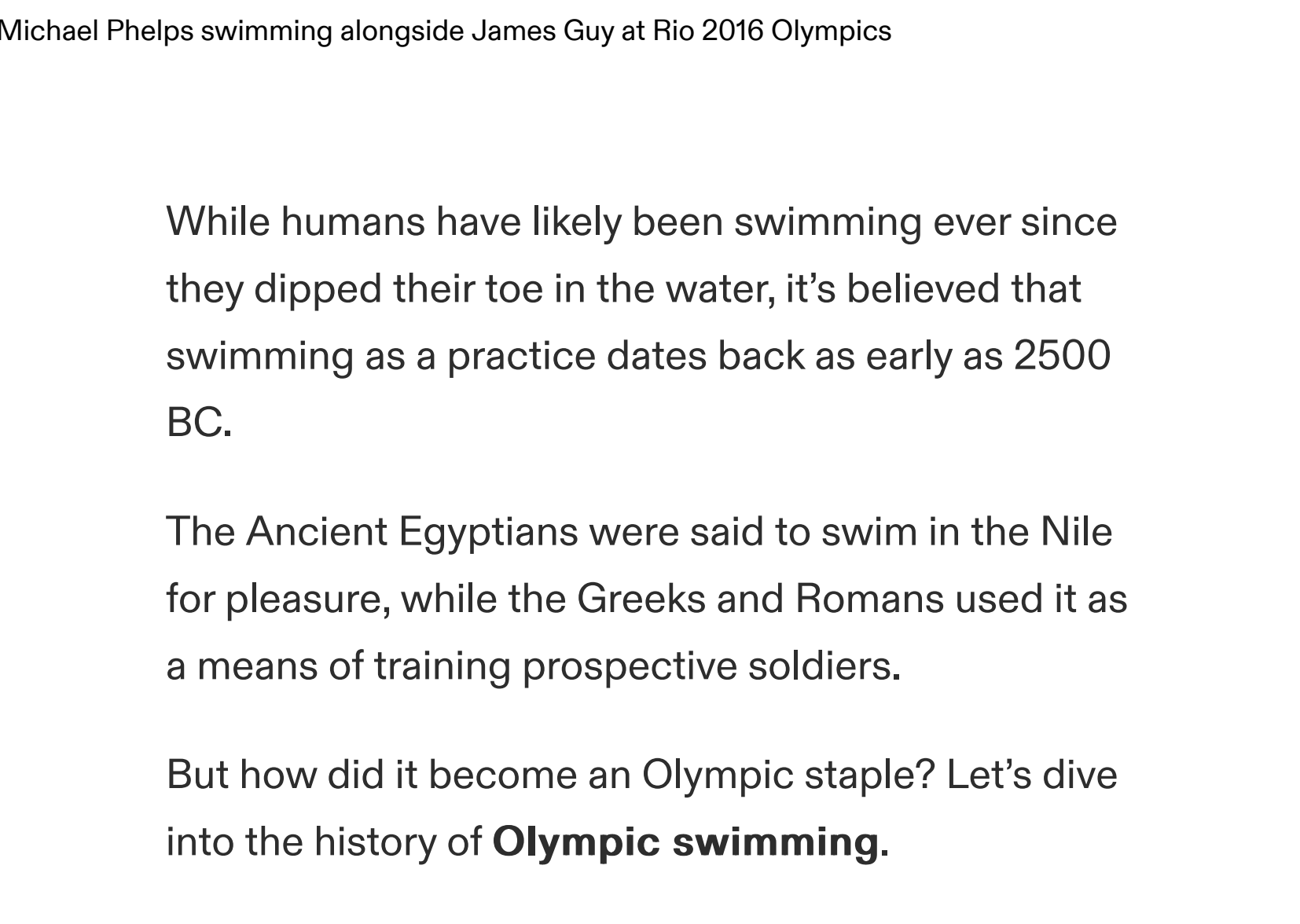
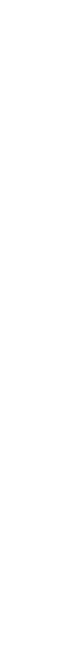
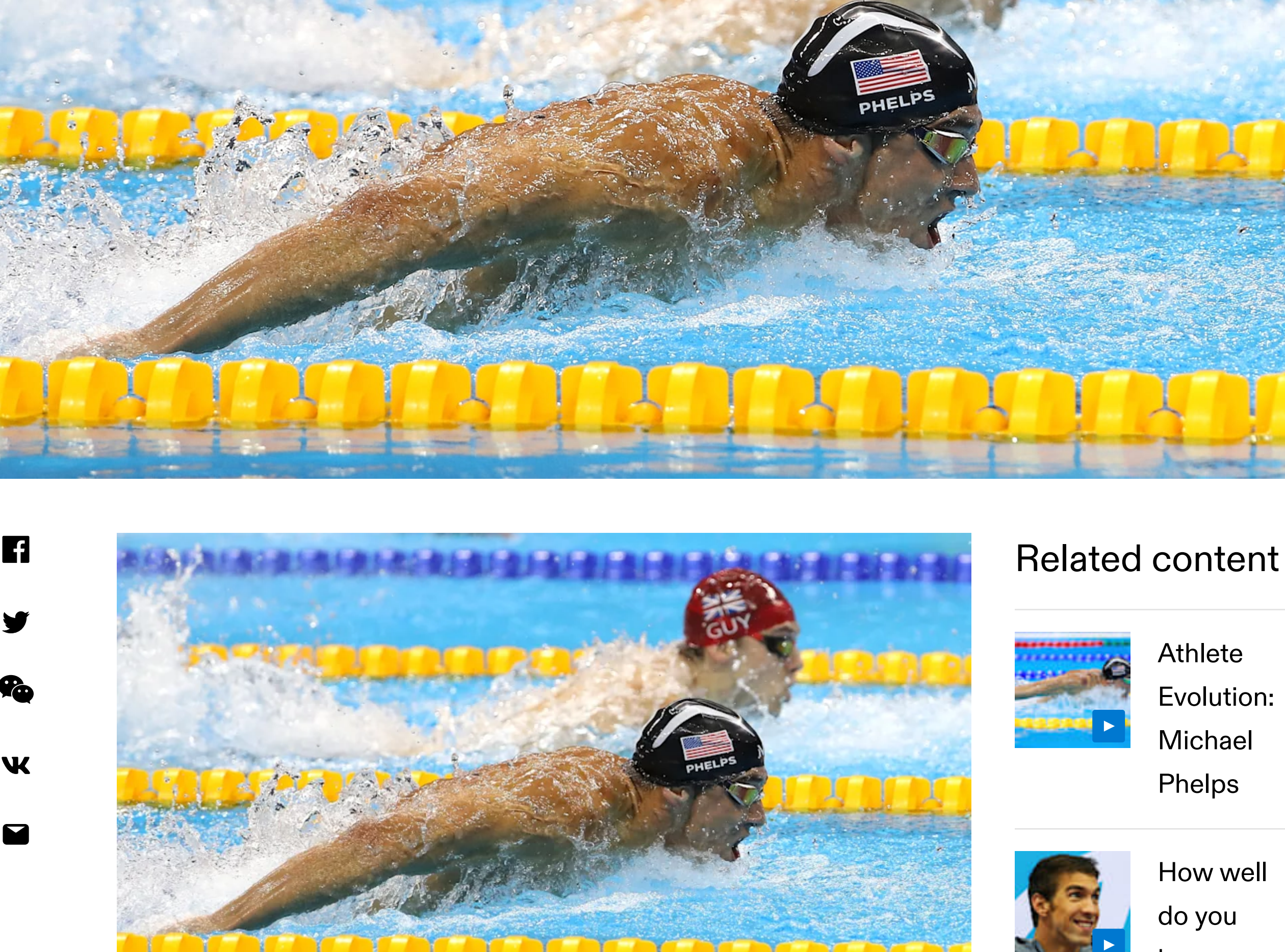
# The history of Olympic swimming

Discover the history of Olympic swimming, from its early days as a military training technique to a showpiece Olympic event.

5 min

17 December 2018 05:40 GMT-5

Swimming



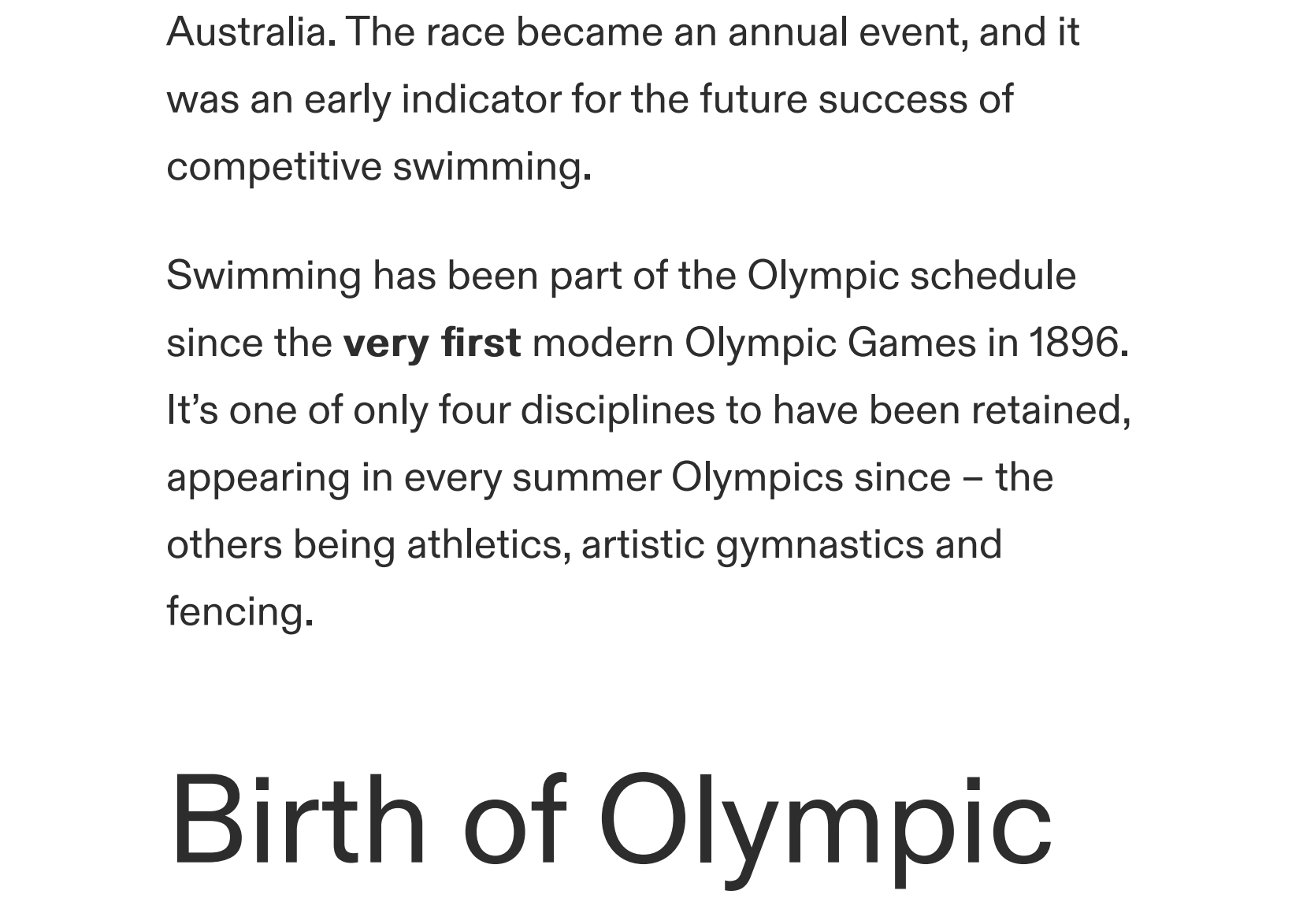
Michael Phelps swimming alongside James Guy at Rio 2016 Olympics

While humans have likely been swimming ever since they dipped their toe in the water, it's believed that swimming as a practice dates back as early as 2500 BC.

The Ancient Egyptians were said to swim in the Nile for pleasure, while the Greeks and Romans used it as a means of training prospective soldiers.

But how did it become an Olympic staple? Let's dive into the history of **Olympic swimming**.

## Origins of the sport



A black and white photo of female athletes lining up on the starting blocks before an Olympic swimming race in 1948

Swimming started its sporting journey in the mid-19th century, when the world's first swimming organisation was formed in London in 1837.

Inevitably, things soon became competitive and, in 1846, the first swimming championship was held in Australia. The race became an annual event, and it was an early indicator for the future success of competitive swimming.

Swimming has been part of the Olympic schedule since the **very first** modern Olympic Games in 1896. It's one of only four disciplines to have been retained, appearing in every summer Olympics since – the others being athletics, artistic gymnastics and fencing.

## Birth of Olympic swimming

In the early years, Olympic swimming events were male-only. Women's events were introduced at the 1912 Games in Stockholm – although women initially only competed in two events, the 100m freestyle and 4×100m freestyle relay.

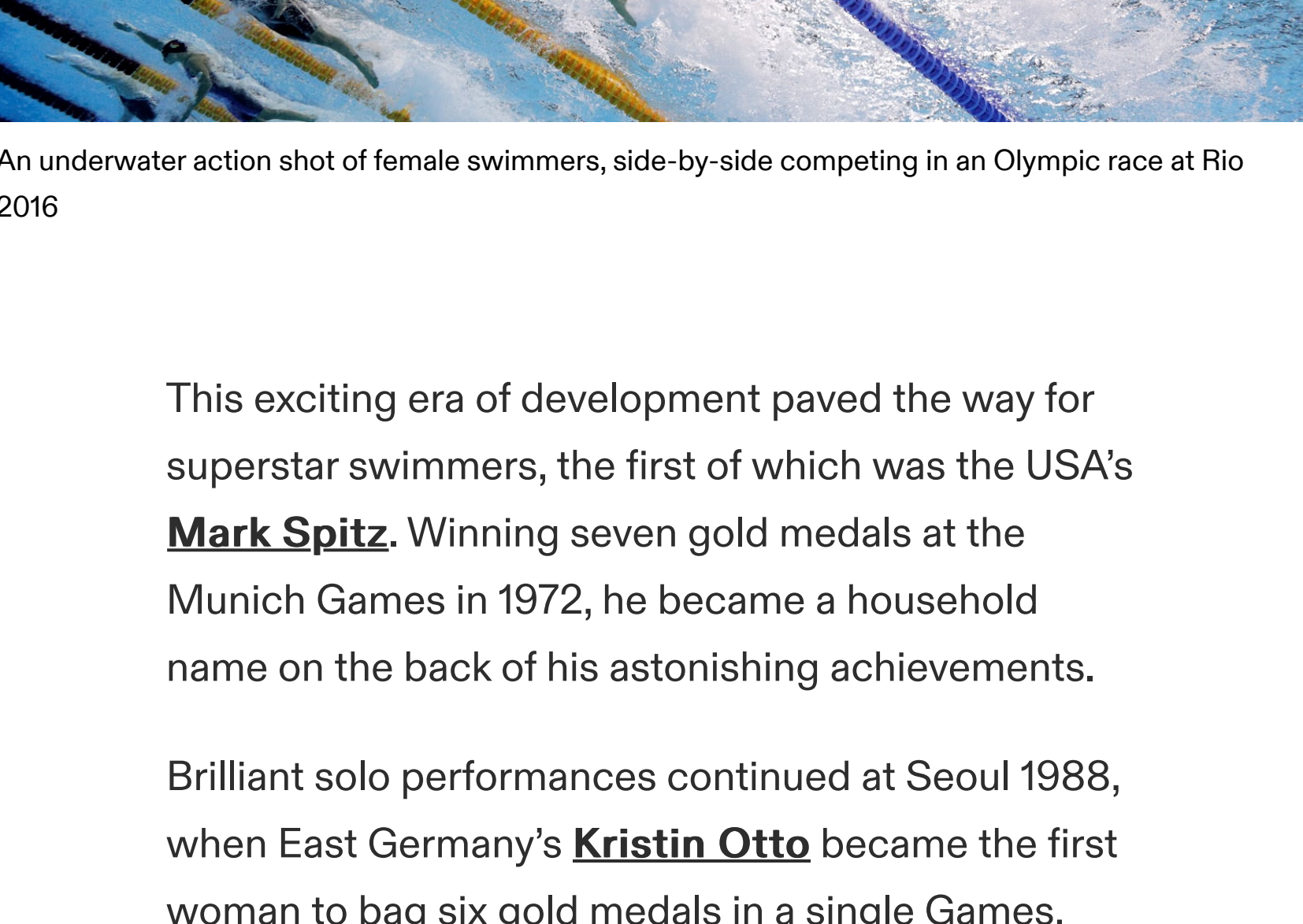
Experimental beginnings brought some rather unique events to those early Games. At the inaugural modern Olympics in Athens, swimming events included the **100m freestyle for sailors**, which only members of the Greek navy could compete in.

Until the London 1908 Games, Olympic swimming events took place in open water. This left the swimmers at the mercy of the elements, contending with the weather and waves.

After being exposed to temperatures of 13°C in the Mediterranean (a modern Olympic pool is around 25-28°C) during the 1,200m freestyle race – in which he won gold – Alfréd Hajós said: "My will to live completely overcame my desire to win", illustrating the precarious nature of the early swimming events.

Showing just how varied the Games have been throughout history, Hajós would later compete at the 1924 Paris Olympics in the art competition, when he and fellow countryman Dezső Lauber won silver in the sporting architecture category.

## The modern era and rise of superstar athletes



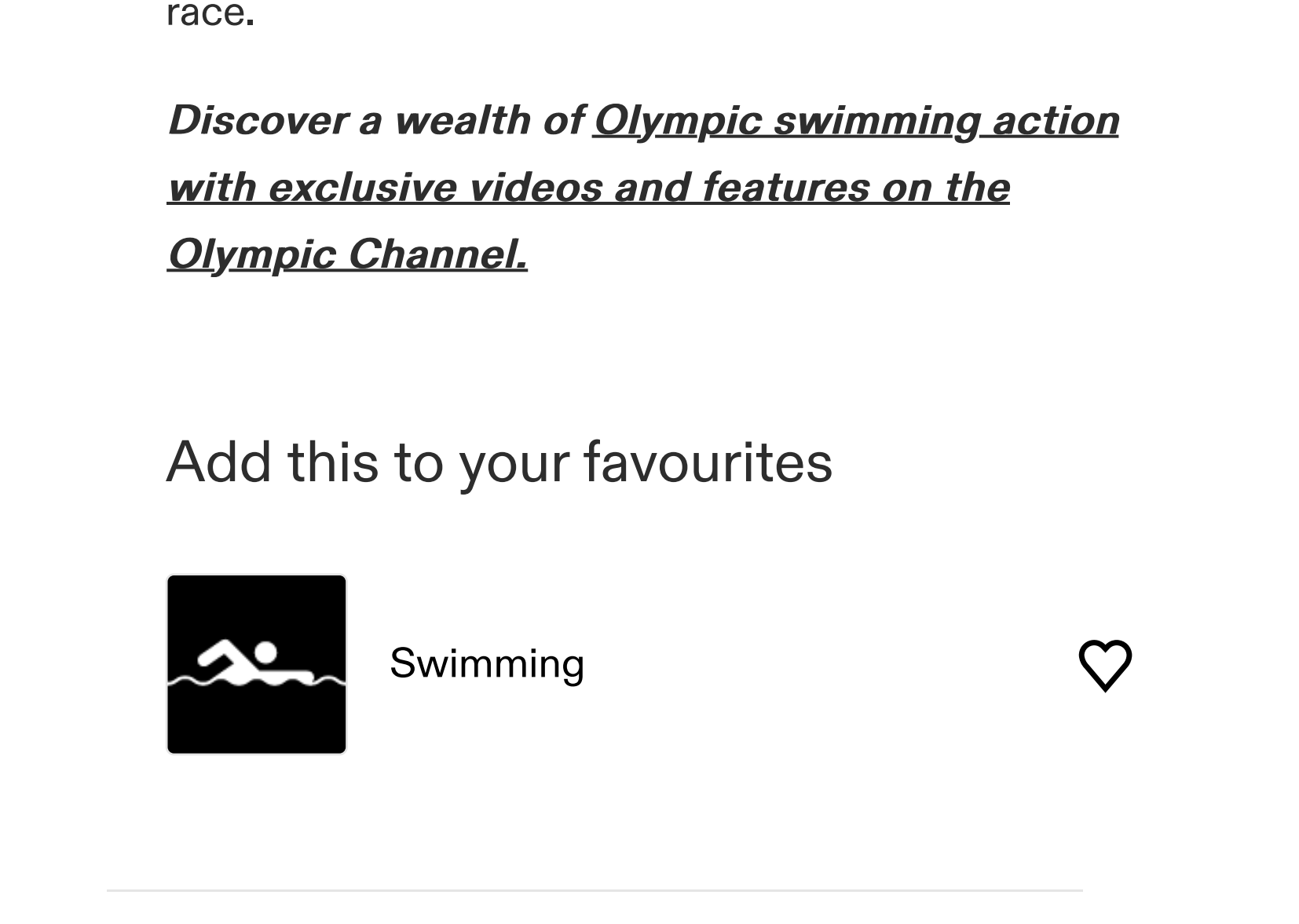
Male swimmers dive off the starting blocks to compete in an Olympic race in Athens 2004.

The post-World War II era brought better technology, facilities and improved training techniques, resulting in significantly quicker times compared to the early, wave-fighting competitions.

Originally, female and male swimmers wore body suits, which increased resistance and slowed them down. As the sport progressed, swimwear became more hydrodynamic. Suits began to be made from materials such as Lycra, which reduced drag and, as a result, reduced lap times.

Competitive pools also saw great change during this period, which led to the move from outdoor to indoor tournaments. The introduction of drainage in Olympic swimming pools, marked lanes in 1924, and guidelines for pool depths all contributed to a better overall standard of competition in the years that followed.

## The rise of the superstar athlete



An underwater action shot of female swimmers, side-by-side competing in an Olympic race at Rio 2016

This exciting era of development paved the way for superstar swimmers, the first of which was the USA's **Mark Spitz**. Winning seven gold medals at the Munich Games in 1972, he became a household name on the back of his astonishing achievements.

Brilliant solo performances continued at Seoul 1988, when East Germany's **Kristin Otto** became the first woman to bag six gold medals in a single Games, setting a new standard for aspiring Olympic swimmers.

These accomplishments have been bettered only by one man, **Michael Phelps**. Vowing to break his countryman Spitz's record, he eclipsed it by one in Beijing 2008. Phelps claimed a grand total of eight golds – 36 years after Spitz's era-defining performances in Munich – and later became the most decorated Olympian of all time with a total of 28 medals over four Games.

## Sights on Tokyo and beyond

As time has progressed, more events – and swimming techniques – have been added to the Olympic swimming programme. At the 1956 Melbourne Games, the butterfly stroke made its debut. In 1968 in Mexico City, there was an almighty leap – the biggest jump in new events between Games – when the number of swimming events grew from eight to 14 for women, and 10 to 15 for men.

Tokyo 2020 will mark the start of a new era for the Games. For the first time, **men's and women's events will be identical** in number, distance and discipline. At Rio 2016, there were 32 events – in Tokyo, this will grow to 35, with 18 events for both men and women. The 35th event, though, is revolutionary.

Tokyo 2020 will include the mixed 4×100m medley relay. In this new gender-mixed race, both men and women will compete together in the same teams. And in Tokyo in particular, we'll see them fighting to become the inaugural winners of this new race.

***Discover a wealth of Olympic swimming action with exclusive videos and features on the Olympic Channel.***

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