

Swimming that day was magical. Despite the stress, we enjoyed every moment. When the music ended and the applause began, we looked up at Julie, and her expression told us what we already felt – we had given the performance of our lives!

Finally, we marched around the pool for the medal ceremony. As we stepped on the podium to receive our silver medals, our joy was doubled as we shared the moment together. We hugged each other, as if to say, "Thanks for your commitment, support and encouragement."

We'll remember forever the electric atmosphere as everyone swayed back and forth and joined in singing "Amigos Para Siempre," or "Friends for Life". That's when it began to sink in: after twenty-one years, our Olympic dream had come true!

As one of the many celebrations after we returned from Barcelona, all five Quebec medalists were invited to throw the opening pitch at the Montreal Expos' baseball game! Now a lot of things had changed since elementary school, but throwing a ball was not one of them. When we received the invitation, we immediately thought, "Oh no!" and for an instant we both felt like little kids again, as memories of "I don't want her on my team," came flooding back. On game day, we drove to the Stadium with a sinking feeling. We followed the organizer onto the field, along with the other Olympic medalists - Sylvie Fréchette,

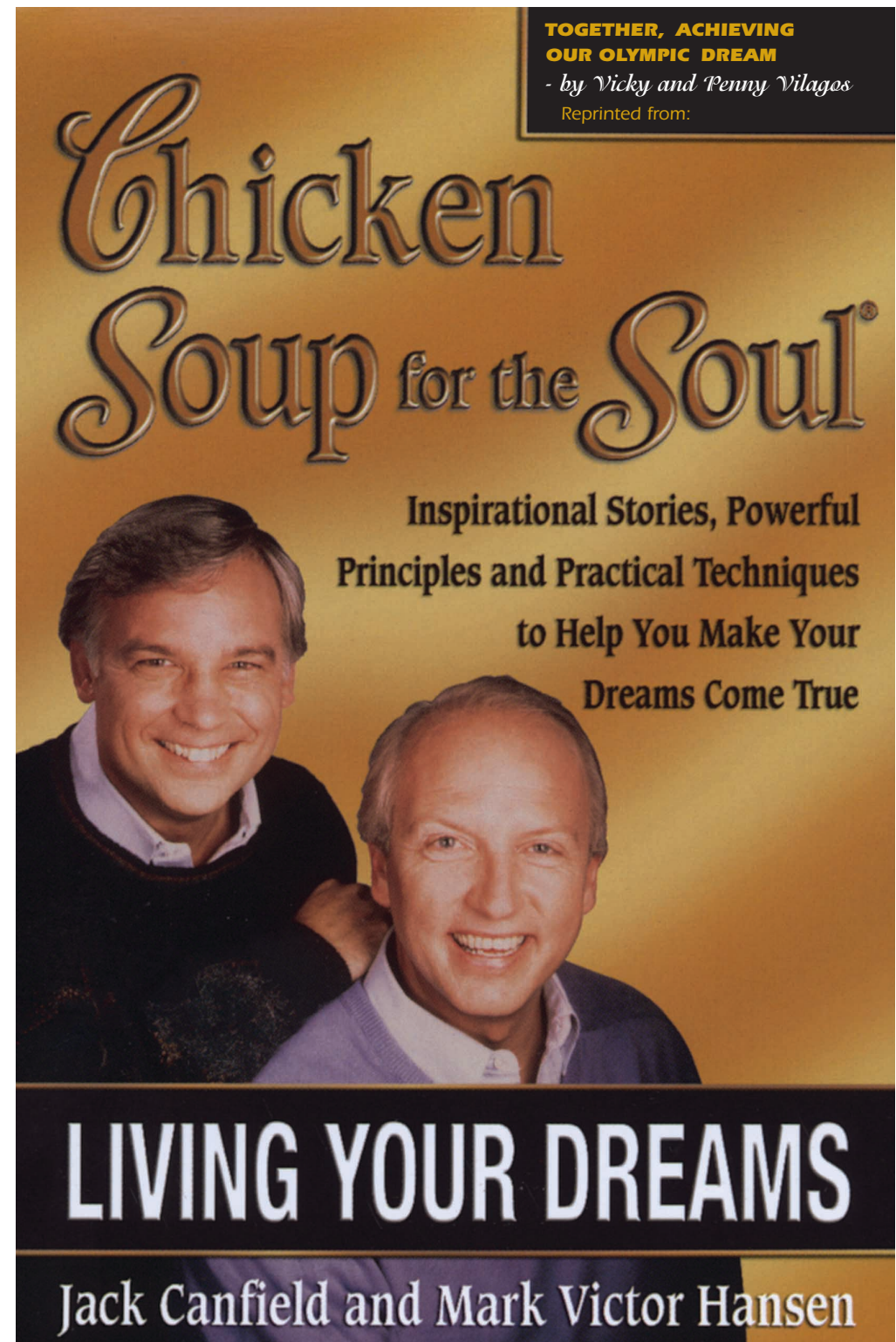
Guillaume Leblanc and Nicolas Gill. The baseballs felt unnatural in our hands; our single solace was knowing we would only have to throw them a short distance.

We watched uneasily as the organizer kept on walking... and walking... all the way to the pitcher's mound! Glancing sideways, we saw fear in each other's eyes... and tens of thousands of fans who were cheering loudly and doing the wave. Time for the opening pitch... five catchers lined up, ready to catch our five balls... On cue, we wound up and threw. Penny's catcher leaped forward – but neither fast enough, nor nearly far enough. Her ball, falling short, hit the dirt with an embarrassing thud.

For a split second we froze, reliving that awful, elementary school feeling. We prepared ourselves for the laughter, but this time everything was different. This time we heard the roar and the applause. The sinking feeling evaporated and we smiled – at the crowd, at each other, at the memories – and we waved back.

*Penny and Vicky Vilagos*

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## *Together, Achieving Our Olympic Dream*

It didn't start out as an Olympic dream. Back in elementary school, we were a pair of overweight, uncoordinated twins. When teams were chosen, it didn't matter if the game was baseball or dodge ball, we were always last to be picked.

It was so bad, our gym teacher said to us one day, "Penny and Vicky, you have been chosen, along with four other kids, to miss music class and go to remedial gym." This was because neither of us could catch or throw a ball. We were totally mortified.

Although this humiliation whittled away at our self-esteem, we continued to try other sports and activities outside of school. At age eight we discovered synchronized swimming. It was as if the sport had chosen us; we found we had a natural talent for it, and we loved it. It was an ideal sport for identical twins: the goal was to swim like mirror images with perfect synchronization. We had an advantage since we were equally strong, had identical arm and leg angles and the same sense of timing. We looked so identical that in one photograph even we couldn't tell who was who. At one competition, a little girl said, "Look Mommy, they're wearing the same face!"

As youngsters, we were inspired to follow in the footsteps of our role models, the

National Duet champions – also twins. We passionately loved working with other swimmers and our coaches and we worked incredibly hard. As twins we were on the same wavelength; we had shared values and implicit trust.

At our first Nationals, we placed 24<sup>th</sup> out of 28 competitors. There we saw how great the best swimmers were, so we set our sights higher and worked toward one common goal. We rose to 6<sup>th</sup> place the following year, and then to National Junior Champions the next. Subsequent victories allowed us to travel all over the world, and our dream to participate in the Olympics was born.

We achieved many of our goals, becoming seven-time Canadian Synchro-nized Swimming Duet Champions, world champions in team, and the first duet in the world to ever receive a perfect mark of "10".

But to our great disappointment, the 1980 Olympic Games eluded us when they were boycotted by many countries, including Canada. And then in 1984, we didn't make the team. After fourteen years of training and striving, we had to accept that our Olympic dream would remain out of reach. We retired from swimming to finish our degrees at McGill University.

Then one day five years later while watching a synchro competition, we both experienced an unexpected sensation. Penny leaned over and whispered: "What if we tried one more time? What do you think about shooting for '92?" My eyes opened wide as one eyebrow lifted

slightly. We suddenly realized our Olympic dream was still alive, and we could no longer ignore it. On April Fool's Day 1990 we decided to make an unprecedented comeback and shoot for the 1992 Olympics. We were afraid to announce our plans in case we didn't make it, but in the end, we were more afraid of not trying and having to live with the thought of What if?

Everyone said it would be impossible, but our intense desire provided the energy we needed to persevere. We had only two years to get back in shape, only two years to become among the best in the world. No swimmer had ever come back after a five-year absence, especially not at the age of twenty-seven!

We weren't eligible for any funding, so we both maintained full-time jobs and trained five hours every day after work. We still had to support ourselves and fund all our travel to international competitions. For two full years we maintained that grueling schedule without ever knowing whether we'd make it.

Thankfully, we had four dedicated coaches who poured their souls into helping us achieve our dream. Though pushed to our physical limits during training (we had to make up for the five years off), we still loved it. Sometimes we laughed so hard with our head coach Julie, we ran out of air and ended up sinking to the bottom of the pool. Julie helped us to continue believing in ourselves.

When the day of the Olympic trials finally came, we were confident but nervous. We could hardly breathe as we waited after the finals to

hear our marks. When they were announced, we jumped up and down, hugging each other: We had won by 0.04!

We could hardly contain our excitement as the 1992 Olympic Team gathered in Toronto, en route to Barcelona. During the Opening Ceremonies, we were thrilled to walk into the packed stadium to thunderous applause. Our spirits received another tremendous lift during those last few stressful days of training, thanks to the Olympic Mailbag Program. After practice each day, we would rush to dig through the giant pile of bright yellow postcards sent to the Canadian Team, and pick out those to us, many addressed simply to "Penny and Vicky Vilagos - Barcelona." The messages came from old childhood friends, complete strangers, and former athletes. Imagine how we felt when we read, *"Dear Penny and Vicky: You are swimming my dream. I used to be able to swim two lengths of the pool in a single breath. I am now disabled, and can no longer swim at all. I am sending you my strength – May the sun shine on you."* And the sun did shine on us in Barcelona.

When our big day finally came, and we stepped onto the pool deck and heard "Competitor #9...Canada," our considerable stress turned into a sunburst pride. As the crowd cheered and waved their maple leaf flags, we ignored the temptation of the moment to reflect on the 30,000 hours of training it had taken to get there, and looked at the water, in order to fully focus on the job at hand.