Floodwaters took life of young champion swimmer

BY SCOTT WILLIAMS
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TROPHY CLUB — Few 13-year-old boys are buried with medals on their chests.

But few become state champion swimmers and muster the determination to strive toward the Olympics.

Paul Cooley, who drowned Sunday in a creek flooded by a torrential rainstorm, was such a boy.

"He was like a little Superman," his father, Claude Cooley, said yesterday. "When he got in that pool, no one could touch him. He thought he could swim against anything."

A seventh-grader in the Northwest school district, Paul was the defending two-time champion of the Texas Amateur Athletic Federation in the butterfly stroke.

The irony of his death — after he fell or jumped into 5 feet of water Sunday night on a golf course near his home — has made the loss all the more painful for his family.

Claude Cooley said he recently took his son to a collegiate swimming competition, and inspired by what he saw, the ambitious young athlete began intense training in hopes of qualifying for the 1996 Olympics.

"He was just a tremendous athlete," his father said. "That's what makes all this hurt so bad."

The Tarrant County Medical Examiner's Office has ruled the boy's death an accidental drowning.

Questions remain about whether Paul intended to enter the water. Police and fire officials yesterday said two witnesses — both 7-year-old boys — said he either slipped while trying to jump across the creek or plunged into the water in an attempt to conquer the rushing tide.

"He got into the water and that's the last they saw of him," said Susan Sandlin, spokeswoman for the Denton County Sheriff's Department.

Trophy Club Fire Chief Roger Unger said the flooding left behind by the downpour earlier Sunday probably created dangerous undercurrents in the creek, which is normally only about 6 inches deep.

Unger said the rushing current propelled Paul's body through an underground culvert that was filled with water.

The drowning occurred about 7:15 p.m. on the golf course at Trophy Club Country Club. Searchers found Paul's body about 8:45 p.m. about 300 yards from where he had disappeared.

Flown by helicopter ambulance to Harris Methodist Fort Worth, he was pronounced dead about 9:15 p.m.

Claude Cooley said that children

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