

# Coach Hans' Blog

## Are Olympians Different *You Can Decide*

I have worked with several Olympians both as a coach who has placed the athletes directly on the team and as a coach who spent time developing these athletes. I have been asked "what sets them apart from those who do not" Great question, one that I have pondered many times myself. Are there controllable factors that make it easier for these athletes to succeed?

There are many factors or behaviours which are learned and practiced by those individuals. In other words, there are things in our actions which we can change that will give us a better chance for success. There are also, obviously many innate characteristics that allow for those people to thrive, many of them genetic, things like size or athletic ability, which are often inherited, but still need to be developed.

There is also opportunity and circumstance, and sometimes these are out of our control.

But what is it that sets these people apart as human beings, how do they make the most of their genetics or their opportunities to succeed? Are there specific behaviours that can be learned to optimize whatever abilities they have? These are some of the things that I have observed in those athletes and some anecdotes to back them up

It should be noted that all of these swimmers had siblings and in all but one case they all swam as well and none of them experienced the same level of success. I have noted at least one quality in each athlete that they did possess, but that quality was by no means the only thing that set them apart.

***Julie - always improving unflappable*** - One thing that Julie did as an age group swimmer was to constantly improve. She swam every race as if it were her last, heats, finals, it didn't matter. Once when she was 12 her best time for 100 fly was 1:13, in heats she did a 1:08, which left everyone pretty well speechless, then, that night in finals she went 1:05.81. She was also a literally hassle-free swimmer, which meant I never had to hassle her to do anything, once she knew what she had to do, she just did it. Now, I will explain the unflappable part. On the way to finals in Montreal we got caught in a snowstorm during rush hour, needless to say we arrived at the pool just minutes before her event, she had already changed in the van, hopped in the pool, did a 50 and got on the blocks. She broke the Canadian record for the 200 back with a 2:09.99. With all that she was always grateful and humble. She made the team in 1992 as a 15-year-old and followed that up in 1996.

***Scott - always wanted more, willingness to change, take chances, trust.*** When I first started coaching him, he was an excellent age group swimmer. His 200 breast time was one of the best in the country. In one of his first races that year he swam a good time, 2:35, I think, but was taking way too many strokes per length, probably 12-15 and considering his skill set and height was merely a waste of energy. I counseled him to change and instead of questioning it, (many athletes who are already good are resistant to change) he though made the change right away. In a couple of months, he was taking only 8 strokes per length and dropped 8 seconds off his time. He continued to improve and was always looking to get better and find a way to reach his dreams. He often complained that he wanted to do more work, never looking to ever find the easy way around. He participated in the 2004 and 2012 Games.

***Tanya - supportive family, perseverance*** Tanya was a great age group swimmer, who worked her butt off all the time, in workouts, races and even lifeguard practice. Her family, especially her dad, was extremely supportive and vocal, almost over the top. That sort of thing can be very worrisome. The interesting part about



her was that she made the Olympic team at the age of 28 She had to endure countless setbacks that would have stopped most mortal beings from succeeding, injuries, loss of scholarship ( which forced her to work full time, plus overtime at a very physical summer job ) and more than several disappointments along the way. She kept her dream alive and at one point even pursued successfully open water swimming but finally in 2008 made the team in the 400, 800 free as well as the 400 IM.

***Evan - adaptability*** - Evan started swimming late, probably around the age of 16, his older sister was a good swimmer and Evan was first and foremost a football player, at 6'8" tall and 240 pounds he fit the mold. Once in the water he started doing reasonably well. To say he was a little rough around the edges would have been an understatement. After turns he pushed off the wall on the surface without and kickout or even a reasonably discernible streamline. In the end, those were the skills that set him apart from most of his CIS and OUA competitors. In essence he took his main weakness and turned it into strength. In 2016 he earned a spot on the 4 x 100 free relay team.

***Andrew - great technician*** - made the team in 2012. I was asked to cover his workouts several times, one time, which I remember was when he had to do a set of 15 x 100 on 1:30 on which he averaged 59.5 or something. That was not the remarkable part though, he did a full kickout, 6 kicks off every wall for the entire set, no breathing in or out any of the turns, not faltering once. I was always amazed at how technically proficient he was in all his strokes. Andrew made the Olympic team for the London games of 2012 in the 200 IM.

***Alex - fearless and loyal*** Alex was a PARA athlete who out trained and out raced most able-bodied swimmers. He competed in several Grand Prix meets and earned final swims. The one story about him is that we were at a training camp in California. In the morning we did a really tough set for the middle-distance swimmers which he completed beating most everyone in the pool. When we returned in the evening the focus was a really tough set for the distance swimmers, the middle-distance swimmers were expected to do a less intense, recovery type of workout. Instead of going for that he asked, no, he begged me to do the distance set as well. He out trained that group as well. He made the PARA team in 2016 and followed that up again last year.

Conclusion They were all willing to work harder than anyone else, had supportive families, took direction well and were mentally strong. Another thing they all had in common was that they never missed any workouts even if they had reason to. Developing these characteristics by no means guarantees that you will be an Olympian, however, it will help you to get the most out of your natural abilities and life in general.

