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"Athletes - More than Just Medals"

by Dr. Brian S. Seaman, DC, FCCSS(C), FICC

Sports role models inspire young Canadians to reach their potential



For CJ Seaman (right), it doesn't get much better than kayaking with Olympian and world champion Karen Furneaux (left) on Lake Banook in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

Bronze, silver, gold!

There is no doubt that we all get excited when Canadian athletes succeed at international competitions, world championships, and especially the Olympics.

For an athlete, there is no greater honour than representing their country. Succeeding in competition and reaching the podium, in particular after giving a gold medal performance, is the ultimate achievement. However, getting to the podium takes years of hard training, dedication, focus, adequate funding, and mental preparation, along with top-level coaching and equipment. A support system of family and friends, and a network of expert health-care professionals (including a rising number of sports

chiropractors) are also very important to every athlete.

On the world stage, the top athletes are very close in terms of their performance. At the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics, for example, the average difference (i.e., weight lifted, race time, height jumped, etc.) between the gold medalists and those who just missed the podium (4th place) was only one per cent. That's not much, is it?

At that level of competition, physical training is obviously important but mental preparation and focus represents the split between medalling and going home empty-handed.

But there is another side to the story. Athletes are more than just the medals they win. I have had the privilege of representing not only Canada but also the chiropractic profession at a number of national and international events including the Pan American Games and the Olympics. As a result, I have seen first-hand that all of our athletes are great ambassadors for Canada. They are outstanding individuals, personable and accommodating, who make excellent role models for our young people.

These people are modest about their athletic achievements as well as about the work that they do, largely behind the scenes and without expectation of acknowledgement.

THE ESTEEM TEAM

The Esteem Team Association (ETA) offers a national program through which athlete role models annually deliver more 1,000 presentations across the country. It all started as a dream of Olympic wrestler Chris Wilson in 1994, when he began inspiring students in British Columbia schools with his experiences in high-performance sport. The program was further expanded in 2001 with the support of Sport Canada.

Research has demonstrated that, when asked to name role models, young people will most often choose athletes. A variety of positive values such as sportsmanship and fair play, integrity and respect, courage and composure, character development and maturity are instilled by sports.

The stated goal of the Esteem Team is to motivate younger generations of Canadians to reach their full potential. The ETA's mission is "youth development through sport and education." Team members speak about setting and achieving goals, overcoming challenges, dealing with disappointment, and making the right decisions in life.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Two-time Olympian and world champion kayaker Karen Furneaux trains at Cheema Aquatic Club in Waverly, Nova Scotia. A member of the Esteem Team, she frequently touches the lives of young people by meeting with groups of students in Nova Scotia.

Before leaving for last year's summer Olympics, Karen promised a young kayaker that after getting back from Athens she would take her out in a K2. Despite her busy schedule, Karen was true to her word, and showed up at Banook Canoe Club in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia to surprise my daughter, who was just finishing up her own workout. In CJ's words, paddling with Karen was "way cooler" than anything else she could have thought of that day. More importantly, it also provided memories that she will cherish forever.

Karen is not the only Olympian who adds the personal touch to the communities and the children who look up to them. Adam Van Koeverden (Olympic champion and 2004 Canadian Athlete of the Year), who trains at the Burloak Canoe Club, surprised a youngster in Ontario last fall. The young fellow had decided, after much thought, to go out on Halloween dressed as Adam, complete with a papier mâché kayak. After being shown a photograph of the boy, Adam phoned him for a friendly chat (Source: Glen Benison, Paddles Up, January 2005). Sometimes the little things make such a difference - especially to impressionable young people.

So, the next time you see our athletes competing on the international stage, be sure to cheer them on! Not only do they represent our nation but they are an integral part of our communities from coast to coast. In other words, they are far more than just medals.

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