

Joanne Malar – Overcoming Obstacles

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Professional and Olympic athletes are often put in the spot-light for the entire world to see. They are people society looks up to and admires. Olympic athletes are role models to young inspiring athletes. These athletes are often criticized for their competitiveness and personality as an athlete as well. Joanne Malar is one of these Olympic athletes and a role model. She also knows about the criticism firsthand. She is a three-time Olympic competitor and has competed at numerous Pan American Games, Pan Pacific Games, and Commonwealth Games. During her career as a professional swimmer, Joanne Malar has accomplished a lot. She has been on top of the swimming world for a number of years and her accomplishments are proof of this. Despite all the accomplishments Joanne Malar has achieved, this road to success has not always been easy for her. Like most decorated athletes, Malar has gone through hardships in her career and has been criticized numerous times by the media. But she has always put on a brave face and these difficulties made Joanne Malar the swimmer she was.

Throughout her years as a professional swimmer, Joanne has accomplished a lot. She has been a national champion 27 times over (Team Canada, 2000). After her move to Calgary in 1998, Joanne saw a huge improvement in her career. Within months of each other, she won gold in the 200m IM and 400m IM at both the Pan American Games and the Pan Pacific Games. Furthermore, throughout the history of the Pan American Games, Joanne Malar has been the most decorated Canadian athlete. Moreover, in 2000, she smashed her own Canadian, Commonwealth, and Pan American Game record in the 400m IM before the Sydney Olympics (Richer, 2000). Throughout her career, Joanne has been on the podium many times. She said, "Watching the flag go up and hearing the national anthem is my favourite thing in the world other than touching the wall to win" (Jones, 1999). Joanne has accomplished much in her career but none of it happened without some adversity.

Despite Joanne's sensational experiences as a swimmer, she has gone through rough times as well. The 1996 Olympics were her worst days. According to the newspapers, she was Canada's best medal hopeful going into the Olympics, which added to the pressure. Unfortunately, she did not come home with a medal of any colour. She placed fourth in the 200m IM and the person who came first was caught taking drugs a year and a half later. When Michelle Smith was caught cheating, Joanne's reaction was, "I came fourth and I should have come third because the girl that won cheated. And that's awful. Being on the medal podium would have meant the world to me. I don't care about a material object. That means nothing. It's that moment. It's that time. Knowing that I really should have come third. It's just sickening. Everyone knew she was cheating, but you couldn't do anything about it" (Buffery, 1999). Joanne was dejected about the whole issue. She says of the 1996 Olympics, "There was so much hype around Atlanta and, with what happened; I was definitely a little heartbroken. But I don't think about it as much now. The only people who don't seem to let me forget are the media. It kind of hurts when people think or suggest that maybe I failed when I came fourth in the world and the person who came first cheated" (Richer, 2000). As she looks back on 1996, she calls it an "emotional rollercoaster" (Buffery, 1998). Joanne still feels emptiness whenever she thinks about the 1996 Olympics because that time should have been the best time in her life but it was her worst days. After these Olympics, Joanne contemplated quitting swimming because of what happened. In April 1998, she considered retirement but then she moved to Calgary instead. This move re-ignited her fire to compete again (Team Canada, 2000). She fell in love with the sport once more and she gained her confidence when she won gold at the Commonwealth Games in 1998 in the 400m IM.

Joanne has her own opinion about blood doping and drugs in swimming because of what happened in Atlanta. Going into the 2000 Olympics, Joanne was asked if Sydney was going to be any better. "I'd like to think so, but I don't know if it's going to play out that way," she said. "I hate to sound like a pessimist, but it's been a long time since there has been a clean Olympics, and I really doubt that this is going to be the one. But you hope. You have to" (Richer, 2000). Furthermore, whenever Joanne talks about drugs and doping there is a hint of pain and betrayal in her voice (Buffery, 1998). Joanne was been hurt by this situation and it is what drove her to almost quit swimming in 1998.

In 2000, Joanne competed in the Sydney Olympics. She was ranked fourth in the world going into the Games but she felt physically good enough to come home with a medal. Again, she came home with nothing. Despite this, she tried to console herself, "I'm not going to say I'm disappointed, no," said Malar, who finished ninth in the same event four years ago in Atlanta. "I'm not ecstatic. I made the final, seventh in the world, I'm not disappointed. Would I have liked to have been faster? Yes. I don't think I could ever be fully disappointed in myself with all the training and effort. Sometimes it's just not there at the time" (Sydney, 2000). She was not disappointed in her race, but she did admit it was not her race. She gave herself a lot of credit for all the training and effort she has put into the sport to make it to her third Olympics. In addition, Joanne said that going into these Olympics she was more confident in herself. "When Malar looks into a pool, she sees the reflection of a woman confident in her ability to win a medal in both the 200 and 400-metre individual medley, not the over-hyped, insecure swimmer who waded into the water at Atlanta four years ago" (Morris, 2000). She said, "I've grown up and changed a lot. As a person I know more who I am, what I want out of life" (Morris, 2000). She was a different person going into these Olympics who understood the pressure she was under.

She officially retired in 2000 after the Olympics, but then in 2003 she came back out of retirement. “I wanted to swim again. I knew that if my mind was committed I would be physically able to be on the national swim team again, and make it to my fourth Olympic Games. I know what it takes to be successful. It takes determination, commitment, vision, drive, passion, support and guts. I know that I have all of that and it is my mission to make it all happen again” (RoadtoAthens, 2004). Joanne really wanted to swim again and be the first Canadian to make it to four consecutive Olympic Games. Unfortunately, this dream was crushed when she just missed qualifying for the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens.

During her career, Joanne got a lot of sponsorships. Most of these came right before the 1996 Olympics. She became well-known which made her the medal hopeful in Atlanta. Unfortunately she performed poorly and came home with nothing. The pressure from the sponsorships might have contributed to her poor performance. She says, “I was doing commercials. That was a dream come true. But it was a lot for a 20 year old to deal with” (Jones, 1998). Everything that came along with the sponsorships was too much for her to handle at such a young age. She said, “The stress became overwhelming, even before the Games. There were days when I would just break down,” (Buffery, 1999). She was excited about the sponsorships because it gave her a lot of opportunities and financial stability but it was too much for her to handle at such a young age and her swimming career suffered.

Many different people have different opinions about Joanne Malar. By many, she has been accredited for her talent and hard work. Despite this, people have said she gave a subpar performance at the 1996 Games (Team Canada, 2000). Furthermore, she has been sometimes viewed unfairly, she thinks, as an athlete who was too soft and lacked mental strength (Stevenson, 2000). Moreover when Joanne retired it was written, “Malar is extinguishing her

fire and her critics will say it never burned brightly enough. That's the way she is and she is not making apologies" (Stevenson, 2000). People have viewed her in a bad light but she is not apologizing for the person she is. She is proud of who she has become.

Researching Joanne Malar has been an exciting experience. To learn firsthand someone's experiences as a professional athlete has been a joy. In order to find information for this paper I looked at the Toronto Star and looked for all the articles that talked about Joanne Malar around the dates of the Olympics and important meets she competed at. Fortunately, there were a lot of articles that aided to my research. I also had a phone interview with Joanne and got a lot of information from her personally. Furthermore, I looked at her official website as well as other news sites such as canoe and CBC. Moreover, from the canoe website I got a number of different articles with information from different times in her career. There really were no books on her so I did not use any books. I put limits on my research as well so I did not get an overwhelming amount of information to go through. I limited myself to the Toronto Star and only to the dates of the Olympics and important meets. I also limited myself to just the articles that talked about Joanne Malar specifically. Researching for this paper was not difficult as there was a lot of information on Joanne Malar.

Joanne Malar is a great athlete and much of my research alluded to this. She has been on the World Swimming stage for thirteen years. Furthermore, she was and still is one of Canada's all-time best swimmers. Her Canadian, Commonwealth, and Pan American record in the 400m IM is still undefeated. Moreover, she has hundreds of medals, seventy-one gold medals and first place standings, and thirty national titles (Malar). And every time she stands on the podium, she realizes how lucky she is to be involved in sports. She is honoured and glad to represent her country Canada (Malar).

Shortly before the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Joanne had several different sponsors. She appeared on several different cereal boxes as well as on commercials. She was happy to be recognized as a role model and hard worker and it gave her the financial stability she needed (Malar). Joanne said the financial side of an athlete is a burden and that in getting sponsors she was one of the lucky ones (15 March 1995. E3). With the sponsors comes more pressure and Joanne experienced this first hand. She “became overwhelmed by the pressure, distracted by endorsement deals, and awed by the constant media attention” and “her swimming suffered and so did her self-confidence” (13, September 1998, E1). In some ways she set herself up for this because she “willingly indulged in extensive promotional campaigns that made her the nation’s best-known swimmer” (25 July 1996. D2). While the sponsorships gave Joanne the financial ability she needed, her swimming career suffered and this is prominent at the 1996 Olympics.

The 1996 Olympics were the second Games Joanne competed at. She was 20 and ranked number one in the world. She felt more pressure, more excitement, and more stress at these Games (Malar). The media said the first medal would come from Joanne Malar (22 July 1996. D11) but unfortunately she didn’t come home with a medal and she felt terrible (Malar). After these Olympics, she lost her love, enthusiasm, and innocence in the sport (Malar). It was the pressure put on her by the media and the citizens of Canada that undid Joanne (22 July 1996. D11). When Joanne did not come home with anything the media said, “Joanne Malar of Hamilton has been Canada’s disappointment sweetheart of the pool at the 1996 Games here” (25 July 1996. D2). Despite getting slammed by the media, Malar’s coach said “I don’t think Joanne disgraced herself. That was her best morning swim” (21 July 1996. D1). Later on he talked about how Joanne learned a painful lesson (21 July 1996. D1).

After the 1996 Olympics, Joanne seriously contemplated quitting the sport because of everything that happened. “The thrill was gone and she didn’t think it would ever come back” (13 September 1998 E1). Instead of quitting she moved to Calgary to train in 1998. This move was the biggest positive in her career and it helped her slip out of her comfort zone (Malar). She was not getting any better training in Hamilton and the coach in Calgary was a breast stroke specialist, which was her weakest stroke (Malar). “Under new coach Jan Bidrman at the University of Calgary’s Olympic training centre, swimming is becoming a finite science for Malar” (7 August 1999. E1). When Malar moved to Calgary she rediscovered her love for the sport and she really started to improve her swim.

Joanne has seen herself change a lot over the years as a professional swimmer. She qualified for the national team at the young age of fourteen. At this age, she was young at heart, innocent, and loved the sport (Malar). As she grew older the hardships she went through hardened her and she lost her love for the sport and the innocence that came along with it (Malar). At the end of her career, she once again experienced the innocence and love of the sport (Malar). Her coaches have also said she has grown a lot throughout her career. “It’s clear Malar’s a far different athlete and person than the young swimmer who was overwhelmed by the hype attention she received as a medal contender heading into Atlanta Olympics in 1996” (3 August 1999. C7) said one of her coaches. Furthermore, another coach, Dave Johnson, said, “Malar has matured since her disappointment at Atlanta...she has more experience, she’s way more comfortable with herself, she considers herself a world player in swimming” (3 August 1999. C7). Joanne has changed and matured a lot since she first appeared on the world swimming stage and this helped her to improve her swimming.

As an athlete, Joanne has a lot of opinions about herself and her swimming career. She said that as an athlete you have to love the sport (Malar). You have to love your coach and teammates because you spend a lot of time with them (Malar). Furthermore, she said that you have to be able to endure the exhaustion from the training (Malar). Joanne not only has opinions about the characteristics an athlete in general has to have but she has said a lot about herself as an athlete. After the 1996 Olympics she said, “I don’t think I believed in myself totally. I think everybody else believed in me more than I did in myself. It was not until I came fourth in the Olympics that I realized I really did belong on the podium, that I believed I should be with the best in the world. Since then, I’ve got my head on straight” (13 September 1998. E1). She has admitted that, “the biggest thing for me is going to be self-confidence” (25 July 1996. D2). She is not afraid to acknowledge her weak points. On the other hand she is not afraid to say she was proud of how she was swimming. For example, “At 23 to be able to drop your best time like that is really motivational for me” (3 August 1999. C7). Even though Joanne, at the 2000 Olympics, did not win a medal she said, “There’s nothing to be sad about. Except that I didn’t get on that podium. Competitive sport is all about life, the ups and downs, having some obstacle and overcoming that. A lot of great athletes never make it to the Olympics; they never make it to the finals of a race. To be fifth and seventh I’m really proud of myself” (20 September 2000. D2). Joanne is not afraid to give her opinion of herself and is ready to acknowledge her weaknesses as an athlete.

At the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Joanne was 24 years old and more confident in herself. She was ranked fourth in the world but she felt she could win a medal and Canada was hoping this too. Despite the wonderful experience of the Olympics, she found it very difficult to come home with nothing. There is always pressure to win when you appear at the Olympics as a

medal hopeful. Going into the 2000 Olympics Joanne said, “You’ll always feel pressure but I feel more that Canada wants me to swim well. That’s a different kind of pressure, a good pressure” (15 September 2000. D3). Joanne did not come home with a medal but these Olympics were a much better experience for her and she felt more confident in herself.

Throughout her career, many different people have had different opinions of Joanne. The media has said a lot of different things about her. They were always out to make a story and many times she had been slammed by the media (Malar). After the 1996 Olympics, she dreaded coming back to Hamilton and McMaster. People did not know how to react around her. Should they ask if she’s okay or should they not mention it at all (Malar)? In 2000, “Joanne says she no longer frets about what the big, bad, expectant media thinks of her” (20 September 2000. D2). This is a good thing because it has been said of her in the newspaper, “whether that’s a character deficiency, I couldn’t say. But such laissez-faire is not an attribute in an elite athlete” (20 September 2000. D2). Furthermore, “It could be that Malar...is simply not good enough to challenge for the podium with the other women in the pool” (20 September 2000. D2). As well as, “But there is suspicion, that the talent exists. It’s the competitive ferocity that is lacking” (20 September 2000. D2). Besides all the harsh comments the newspaper has printed about Joanne, it has admitted that, “Four years ago, in Atlanta, the build-up to Malar’s races, was probably unfair” (20 September 2000 D2). Furthermore, an anonymous person replied to the newspaper in response to a harsh comment said about Malar. She said in response, “Malar is a true athlete and role model for young Canadians. I am extremely proud to have her represent our nation and even more in awe of the effort and sacrifices she has made to do so” (30 September 2000. H7).

The information in the review of literature and my findings were in agreement with each other. Both alluded to the 1996 being a rough year for Malar with the pressure she was under

and with what happened with Michelle Smith and drugs. Furthermore, the review of literature and my findings were in agreement that Joanne moved to Calgary to train and her swimming career improved greatly when she moved there. In addition, both have proved that many people have criticized Malar for the athlete she was but in both research Malar was making no apologies for which she has become and she no longer cares what people say. Lastly, both the review of literature and my findings said that Malar came out of retirement in 2003 in order to try to make it to her fourth Olympics in Athens. This dream of hers was crushed when she just missed qualifying for the Olympics.

Joanne Malar has had an amazing experience as a professional swimmer. She has had the opportunity to compete in three different Olympic Games. Joanne has hundreds of medals to her name with seventy-one of those being first place finishes. She has also won thirty national titles. Joanne has gone through the ups and downs every athlete goes through but she stood strong and excelled. Joanne Malar is a phenomenal athlete and should be respected and looked up to as a role model and not belittled. Joanne Malar should be given the credit that she deserves for her hard work and talent as a professional swimmer.

Appendix

- 3-Time Olympian (Barcelona 1992, Atlanta 1996, Sydney 2000)
- 5-Time Olympic Finalist
- 30-Time National Champion
- Won over 70 International Medals
- World Champion 1995
- Gold Medallist:
 - Pan American Games 1995, 1999, 2003
 - Pan Pacific Games 1999
 - Commonwealth Games 1998
 - World Cup Circuit 1997-1999
- Her Canadian, Commonwealth and Pan American Record in the 400m IM remains undefeated
- Most decorated Canadian Athlete in the history of the Pan American Games
- Ranked Number One in the World (1995-1996 & 1999-2000)
- National Team Member 1990-2000 & 2003-2004

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