



BORN TO 'FLY
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Meet swimmer MacKenzie Downing, Vikes female athlete of the year.

The two Downing children were with their father in the change room at the swimming pool. He got them dried and dressed and had just dropped his own Speedo trunks when his daughter bolted out the door.

Only 13 months old, she didn't so much run as totter towards the water. Her mother, working as a lifeguard, came running. Her father, his trunks pulled back up, scrambled onto the swimming deck.

Both were too slow and too late.

Little MacKenzie Downing jumped in. She splashed about before hauling herself out just as all the adults arrived.

Her overalls and sweater were soaking wet. She didn't care. The headstrong toddler hadn't been ready to call it quits on her daily swim, so she had returned to where she was happy. These days, at 21, the University of Victoria undergraduate student remains just as eager to enter the pool. A butterfly specialist, she puts in several hours in the water every day. Downing is broad in the shoulders, narrow at the waist. A lifetime in the water has given her the ability to cut through water with ease.

"I just love being underwater," she says. "It's a whole different world down there."

On land, her shoulders ache and her kneecaps have the discomfiting habit of popping out, a dislocation as painful as it sounds. In the water, those hurts disappear. It is where she is most

comfortable.

In the water, at least, no reporters come asking questions. She is a reluctant interview, shy by nature, and, like many her age, not much given to introspection, nor to having strangers poke around her life.

Her teammates call her Yukon, after the territory in which she was born. Back home, she was a Glacial Bear. The Whitehorse swimming club hosts an annual memorial swim meet named for Ryan Downing, the brother she lost one week after his 13th birthday and just before Christmas in 1996. Ryan liked to compete in the pool and was known to never miss a practice. He collapsed during gym class one day, the result of a congenital heart defect that had gone undiagnosed. Just like that, he was gone. MacKenzie was 10. In Whitehorse, Ryan is remembered at an event in which improving your personal record trumps even a first-place finish. His sister describes him as the most influential person in her life.

Their parents had met at Queen's University. A job offer from a mining company brought the couple north. David worked as a geologist, Jane as a lifeguard, an appropriate job for someone who had been on the university swim team. The pool became a part of the family's daily routine.

One day at poolside, a parent asked David Downing if he planned to bring the children to a weekend meet at Fort Nelson, BC, a 12-hour drive. "Oh sure," he replied sarcastically, "I'm going to take two days off work for a 30-second race." When he realized the other parents were doing just that, he loaded up the family for the first of uncountable marathon road trips.

Downing took a single Latin course this past term. Her days in this Olympic year were filled with intense training. She was in the pool each morning by 5:30, putting in 6,000 metres—that's just about the distance from campus to Saanich Commonwealth Place—before breakfast. She would do some cardio work, perhaps some weights, during the day. The pool beckons again each afternoon at 5:30, during which another six kilometres will be covered.

Last fall, at the Universiade Games at Bangkok, Downing had the race of her life, winning the 100-metre butterfly in 58.88 seconds. The time was a personal best, as well as a Canadian record.

In February, she claimed four medals, including two gold, at the Canadian Interuniversity Sports swimming championships.

The stunning performances contributed to her being named UVic's outstanding female athlete of the year. She also won the prestigious President's Cup, which recognizes the athletic and scholastic achievements of a student in fourth or fifth year. Downing had to skip the ceremony at the Fairmount Empress on March 31, as she was in Montreal for Canada's Olympic qualifying meet.

The next morning, she splashed into the pool as a favourite in the 100-metre butterfly. A minute later, she emerged in second place and just a shade over the Olympic cut-off. She had swum a full second slower than her national record. A second is an eternity at this level.

She had one last chance at redemption. Three days later, she raced in the 200-metre butterfly. She finished third.

It was a heartbreaking conclusion to a spectacular season. The next Olympics are scheduled for London in 2012, by which time she will be 25. Will she train and sacrifice for four more years, or pull the plug on a dream? That is one tough decision.