

MacKenzie Downing: the race of her career and lessons learned

On March 27, MacKenzie Downing took her place at the end of lane five at Piscine Parc Olympique, Montreal's Olympic pool.

By [Sam Riches](#) on May 11, 2012 at 2:32 pm

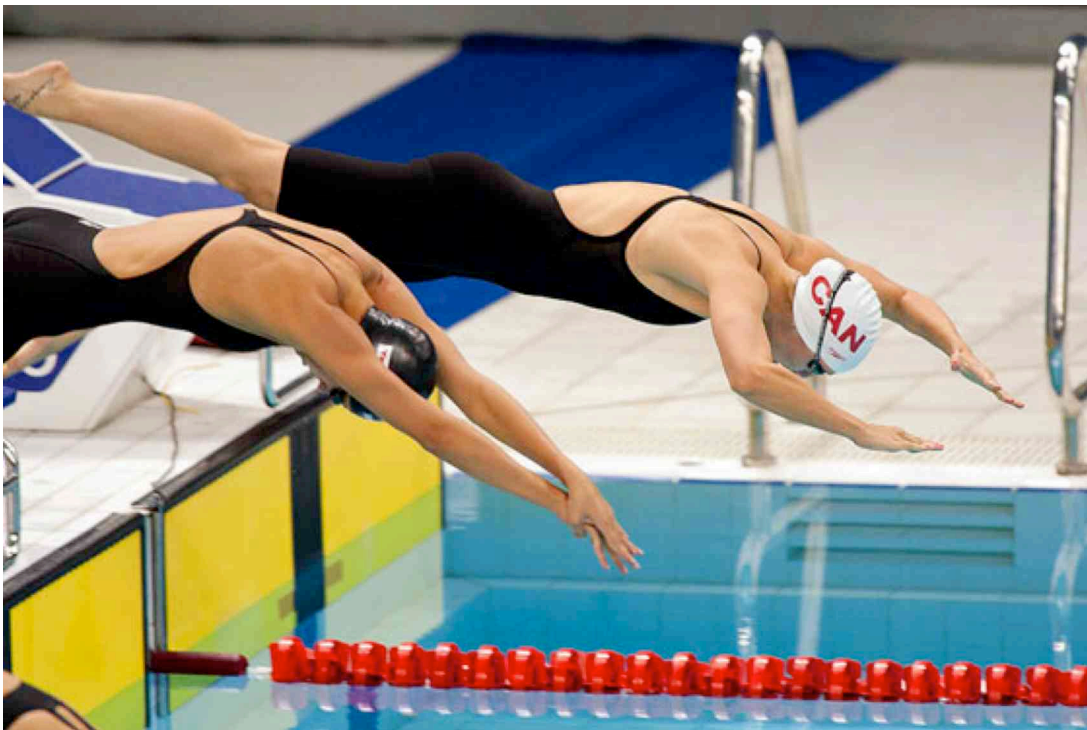


Photo submitted

DIVING IN – MacKenzie Downing (Canada swim cap), leaps into the pool at the 2011 FISU Games in Shenzhen, China. Downing recently competed at Olympic qualifiers in Montreal, where she won a silver and bronze medal. Photo courtesy of DAVID DOWNING

On March 27, MacKenzie Downing took her place at the end of lane five at Piscine Parc Olympique, Montreal's Olympic pool.

In the next lane stood Katerine Savard, the Canadian record holder in the 100-metre fly event.

Downing and Savard were joined by the best swimmers in the nation, each vying for a spot at the 2012 London Summer Olympics.

The stadium was lined with fans, anticipating the women's 100-m fly final, a headline event in the five-day meet.

One of the faces in the crowd belonged to David Downing, MacKenzie's father.

When the swimmers broke through the water, they moved in harmony, matching each other stroke for stroke until two emerged from the pack: Downing and Savard.

The 18-year-old Savard pulled ahead on the final lap and for Downing it became a race against the clock.

Savard was the first to touch the wall with a time of 58.45 seconds.

Downing followed closely with a time of 58.86.

It was a personal record for Downing, a silver medal performance and the culmination of a year's worth of dedication and training.

It was also one-tenth of a second short of meeting the Canadian Olympic qualifying standard.

"I was just staring at the clock blankly. I was in shock," said Downing. "It was hard to process. I read it a couple of times to make sure."

With the crowd cheering in support of Savard, a Quebec City native, Downing reached across the lane and congratulated the young swimmer on her Olympic berth.

In the stands, David looked on, helplessly.

"It's really difficult being a parent and watching this stuff," he said. "As a parent, you always want to do more for your kids, you want to help out more, but you can't. You're just a spectator at that point in time."

"I was disappointed in the moment," said MacKenzie. "It was overwhelming and upsetting, but by the time I went over to see my coach and cool down, I

just thought about how it was the best time I've posted in about four years and you have to be happy with that. When you work so hard all year and see that you're improving, that's really important," she said.

"At the end of the day, a tenth of a second is nothing. I don't think I could have done anything differently or better, that's just the way it happens sometimes."

After the race, MacKenzie and David waited to board the subway. They took the Metro to and from each event over the course of the meet.

For David, the time on the Metro was anthropological, a chance to see how a top tier athlete prepares and recovers.

"Even though she's my daughter, to get to go to and from a big event like that with an athlete is pretty neat," said David. "You get to see who they say 'hi' to and what they are thinking of.

"All the swim fans are there, you see the coaches, you see the swimmers with their big backpacks and you see a whole range of people, you see world championship athletes, and they're just on there along with everybody else and you see the young kids, who are going to their first trials."

The subway car was empty as they boarded the train, with many of the athletes remaining in the stadium to finish their respective events. The ride home was quiet.

"We didn't talk much," said MacKenzie.

"He just gave me a big hug."

"It was somber," said David. "We've had wins and losses before and we don't talk a lot about it. Not until later. It was really hard to take but we rode the Metro, had a hug and said good-bye."

"To have him there was really great and important to me," said MacKenzie.

"Both my parents have been there the whole time through everything, all the ups and all the downs. They're invested in it too and I know both of them must have been so devastated as well, so just to have him there and know that my parents will love me anyway, that unconditional support just makes other things seem less important."

At the end of the meet, MacKenzie packed up her things and headed to Victoria, where she's swimming and attending school at UVic, while David continued on to Whitehorse.

Now, almost six weeks later, MacKenzie views that day with a refreshed perspective.

"It's still pretty disappointing and it's going to take some time but I've had a really successful career and I've gotten a lot out of swimming," she said.

"I'm just trying to really enjoy swimming, that's why I've done it for so long and put my heart into it because I've always loved it. I've just been trying to focus on that and think of all the great things swimming has done for me."

When David speaks of MacKenzie's season, his voice swells with pride.

"She faced really tough challenges and competition and she approached it like a pro," he said. "It can be very tough on athletes because they put so much into it and there isn't much of a fallback position. There's no second chance. She went to win, that's what she went to do.

"There's a certain feeling among athletes that if you don't win it then the rest of event has been wasted but it hasn't. It's the journey more than the destination. It's what you get the most from as an individual. That's kind of hard to come around to and I think she's starting to do that."

MacKenzie's training was slowed over the past year as she battled tonsillitis, ultimately having surgery in September.

"It doesn't sound bad but it really comprised her previous season," said David.

"She faced all sorts of adversity and just kept at it. She was determined, she looked at what had to be done to get there and just worked at it.

"She gave a world quality performance and that's what she had been working towards. You can never control what someone else is going to do."

The women's fly is one of Canada's strongest swimming events, with three women in the top-25 in the world.

As a way of separating the talent, Canada holds a different time standard than the International Olympic Committee.

"She swam Olympic qualifying time, there's others going into the Olympics that didn't do that," said David.

"She was well above the 'B' qualifying standard, as far as the International Olympic Committee is concerned that's what we are."

Mackenzie will be back in the pool in less than two weeks for the Canada Cup, which will be held in Vancouver from May 25 to 27.

This time, an Olympic berth won't be on the line.

"You've got to move on to the next one, it's hard to do but it's very much the routine," said David.

For Mackenzie, she views the opportunity to get back into the pool as cathartic.

"I'm still swimming full-time and I'm considering swimming through to world championship trials next year and seeing how that goes," she said.

"All the skills swimming has given me and all the places I've been able to travel, that's all sort of coming up now."

David laughs when asked about the experience of watching Mackenzie compete at countless meets over the year, growing as a swimmer and as a person.

"You never forget a thing," he said.

"You remember stuff from when they're little, like the way they look in the water.

"The first time she went to Canadian Junior National Championships, she won a silver medal unexpectedly and just about won the race.

"The coach came running up to my wife and I after and he said 'You must be so proud' and I said 'I was always proud.'

"It's not about the racing, it's about what the kids do and what they learn."