

Downing follows her heart, retires from swimming

MacKenzie Downing said it was time to listen to what her heart's been telling her for more than a year.

By [Marcel Vander Wier](#) on May 31, 2013 at 1:30 pm



Photo by Whitehorse Star

CALLS IT A CAREER – MacKenzie Downing, a butterfly specialist and former member of the national team, has announced her retirement.

MacKenzie Downing said it was time to listen to what her heart's been telling her for more than a year.

It's time to hang up her goggles.

The 26-year-old Whitehorse swimmer has called it quits on her competitive swimming career, only a month after finishing six seconds away from making the country's world championship team.

"It's a hard decision to make, obviously," Downing said. "But I just knew. I was just ready. I think I decided in my mind and in my heart a long time before I admitted it to myself."

The longtime butterfly specialist discussed her decision with the Star this morning.

Downing said her past year in the pool was a struggle, ever since she missed her chance at the 2012 London Summer Olympics by a mere tenth of a second last March.

"After Olympic trials, I pretty much felt like I was done, but it's so hard to call it quits, I kind of kept going for a while. (The Olympic team) was a big goal for me, but that's the way it goes. I didn't really feel like I could've done anything else. I feel like I did everything I could and put everything on the line. It just didn't pan out the way I wanted it to."

Her thoughts clouded, Downing took a shot at the world championship team last month, but finished more than six seconds back of the qualifying pace in the 200-metre butterfly.

"After that, I just didn't want to get back in the pool," she explained. "I think it gets to that point for a lot of people, where you've done it for so long. It's hard to say goodbye ... It's a very difficult transition, but it was just time. There wasn't really anything left that I wanted to accomplish in swimming."

Downing is a two-time Outstanding Athlete of the Year at UVic, a former member of the Canadian 4x100-metre medley relay team, and a gold medallist at the 2007 World University Games. She also owns 21 medals from the Canadian Interuniversity Swimming Championships and seven national titles.

Now 26, Downing said she feels her best years are behind her, and wasn't ready to commit to the intense training for another Olympic shot.

"You can do it, but it just gets harder," she said. "It's a lot of commitment. Your body just doesn't respond the way you're used to."

Age 18 and 19 are the best for swimmers, because "you still don't really feel pain."

Downing said she underwent weekly physiotherapy and massages during her training this past year.

After joining the Glacier Bears swim team at the age of five, she will now turn her focus toward other goals, such as a career or further education in her chosen field.

Downing graduated from the University of Victoria with an archeology degree last month, and has returned home to the Yukon capital for the summer, working for the Department of Education's First Nations Programs and Partnerships unit.

Downing admitted she has struggled with her emotions since making the decision to quit swimming.

"I was scared to commit to it," she said. "It's the end and it's so final. I actually haven't been to the pool at all since I retired. I just need some separation for a while. There's just so many memories – like even walking into a pool and smelling the chlorine ... it's very nostalgic."

However, Downing said it won't be long before she's helping with swim camps, and sharing her expertise with the local swim team.

While her career was chock full of highlights – including setting a national record in the 100-metre butterfly in 2007 – Downing said her accolades are not what made her so sad to leave the pool.

“Most of the things I've been thinking about are the experience and the friends you make,” she said. “I got to see places all over the world, and I miss those experiences and the people you meet more than the performance.”

As always, thoughts also turned to her late brother, Ryan, a swimming phenom who died long before his time at the age of 13.

“He's been a huge inspiration in my whole life,” Downing said. “I like to think that he's there with me in all my accomplishments and that he's experiencing life through me. I tried to live up to what a great person he was. He was such a good sportsman, and very supportive of other people. I've always tried to aspire to that in all my competitive pursuits.”

Downing also lauded her parents – David and Jane Downing – for their tireless support throughout her outstanding swim career.

“So many people had a huge impact on my career, but I really wouldn't have achieved the things I did without my parents. They've really been the most important people in allowing me to follow my dreams.”