

An Unlikely Hero

by Sandy Struss

Ian Thorpe is one of Australia's most celebrated athletes, a swimmer with a long list of World and Olympic championship titles to his name. With the 2000 Sydney Olympics happening on his home turf, these were *his* games, with the crowds filled to capacity in anticipation of another World Record. There wasn't a free seat in the house.

Who would have ever imagined that some unknown 22-year-old from Equatorial Guinea could emerge to steal the spotlight from the World Record holder on the biggest stage in competitive sports? And here's the kicker: it wasn't for *winning*, but rather for logging the *slowest* recorded time in Olympic history for the men's 100m freestyle in an unforgettable race that was a true example of the Olympic spirit at its best.

Nobody who saw that race could be left untouched by the sheer determination and courage demonstrated by the young man named Eric Moussambani who swam the race of his life that day.

Eric learned to swim in a hotel swimming pool just 6 months before the Sydney Games. His small African nation had just established its first aquatics federation and he was invited to the Games as a "wild card" entry without having to reach the qualifying standard. Prior to arriving in Sydney, Eric had neither seen a 50m pool, nor actually swum the full distance of 100m before! He was simply grateful to have the opportunity to be there at all.

The stark contrast between the top swimmers and Eric in appearance alone was more than a little bit hilarious. All the "contenders" were decked out in their fancy Speedo "fast-skin" bodysuits and could be seen stretching and limbering up before the race, while Eric stood there looking terrified, fumbling awkwardly with his goggles and standing in his baggy blue trunks with the drawstring hanging out.

Eric was in the very first heat of swimmers, joined by a swimmer from Niger and one from Tajikistan, all three invited to Sydney under the friendship funding programme organized by FINA, swimming's global

authority. The starter called the swimmers to their marks, and while Eric held steady – the other two guys were disqualified for jumping the gun. So here was Eric, now *all alone*, under the microscope of the world, having to swim a race he had never swum before...

The gun went off and Eric dove into the water. His arms immediately started going like propellers, giving every bit of energy he had. He made it almost to the 50m mark when he looked up to see the wall and did a tumble-turn (which he had only learned 3 days before!), and then started on his way back. His stroke technique began to unravel quickly as you could tell his arms were feeling like cement blocks, and his legs sank from the surface of the water. You felt certain that there was no way he was going to finish the race. Lifeguards stood poised and ready, but Eric continued, gasping for air on every stroke, but still moving forward – ever so slowly.

By now, the crowd realized what they were witnessing, and everyone got on their feet to start cheering. The volume grew with every stroke Eric took, rising to an almost deafening crescendo as he reached for the



wall. It was pandemonium as the 18,000-plus crowd just about blew the roof off the place when Eric finished, and as he looked up after reaching the wall, he smiled broadly as he realized that the applause was for *him*. After all, he was the only one in the water!

Completely exhausted, he struggled to get out of the pool, but eventually stood and raised his arms in victory, for what he had done was *his personal best*.

“The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well.” - Pierre de Coubertin

Eric’s pure joy and enthusiasm were contagious, and we all felt the triumph of his achievement. The media were falling over themselves with cameras and microphones to find out about this little mystery man who stood only 5’7” but stole the hearts of the crowd.

Eric’s race caused such a sensation that it was broadcast internationally, and it was in that one moment on television when a young girl (and up-and-coming speaker!) halfway around the globe decided to become “*Champion-of-the-Underdog!*”

I believe that our greatest role models in life aren’t necessarily are the gold medal winners or the Olympians, but those ordinary folks among us who dare to be extraordinary. Those who throw caution to the wind and pursue whatever makes their heart sing with reckless abandon. Those who live their life with no regrets.

There was a tremendous lesson for all of us in Eric’s performance and spirit on that day. How many times have we held ourselves back from trying something because we were afraid we might fail? Because our friends or family might think it’s silly? Because of what the neighbors might say? Because we’d never be good enough to win?



The true underdog spirit is about doing something for the pure love of the game (sport, art, practice, whatever) and savoring the moments and the journey along the way.

PS. If any of you readers might have a connection to Eric through a few degrees of separation, please contact me directly as it is one of my biggest dreams to meet Eric in person and thank him for inspiring me to be all that I am today.



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