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Lessons Learned in Pursuit of Olympic Dreams

A little more than four years ago, I stood on the deck of the Olympic pool in London. My whole life had come down to this moment as my teammates and I tried to qualify for the Olympics. I had taken a leave of absence from Stanford, missed what would have been my college graduation, moved away from home, and trained 10-12 hours a day, six days a week for the last year and half for this moment. My Olympic Dream was 16 years in the making, and finally this was my moment.

A few minutes later, that moment, and that dream, was over.

As a member of the 2012 Olympic Synchronized Swimming Training Squad, our Road to London ended with the Olympic Qualification tournament. We had failed to qualify for the Games. For the first time since its Olympic debut, the United States, the inventors of synchronized swimming, would not be sending a team to the Games.

Needless to say, that summer was very difficult. My family had to sell their tickets to Olympic sporting events because I could not emotionally handle being there for the Games while not competing. I had to be supportive of my two teammates who had qualified in the duet event, while the other eight members of our team mourned the loss of a lifelong dream. We had to fight the overwhelming feelings of letting down our country, our coach, our families, and ourselves. That summer, I watched the synchronized swimming events through tear-filled eyes and regular emotional breakdowns, knowing that our team was better than some of those competing.

Due to the regional qualification rules in synchronized swimming, five of the eight teams competing qualify based on regional events. One spot is reserved for each region, with three spots left for the world to fight over at the Olympic qualification event. Because Great Britain was hosting, they received an automatic bid and the European spot. China won the Asian spot, Canada the Pan American, Egypt the African, and Australia the Oceania spot. The last three spots were awarded to Russia, Spain, and Japan at the Olympic qualifying tournament in April.

The US finished in sixth, three spots out of the Olympic Games. Though they were already qualified, Great Britain competed in the qualification tournament, finishing eighth, and demonstrating what many of us already knew. The teams from Ukraine, Italy, and the United States, the next three in line at the Qualification tournament, would have placed better than Great Britain, Egypt, and Australia at the Olympic Games had we been given the chance.

Duet competition allows for 24 duets, giving highly ranked duets a chance to qualify with those guaranteed qualification through the regional system. The teams do not, and the Ukrainian and Italian athletes along with my teammates and I, had to watch the London Games knowing that under different rules, we would have been there instead.

The Olympics are supposed to be about the best in the world competing against each other. But there are rules in place to ensure that the best from all over the world are guaranteed a chance to compete. The United States would have finished eighth at the Olympic Games for synchronized swimming had the qualifications been done based on world rankings. Instead, I watched the Games from my living room in California.

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Pursuing Olympic Dreams, continued

It took a long time to accept that failure, the biggest failure of my life. And there are still times when it hurts. Every four years, there is a constant reminder of a life-long dream that I will never achieve.

Many people tell me that my experience makes me an Olympian, that being named to the US Olympic Squad is the same as making the Olympics. But I know, and my teammates know, that it is not the same. We will never walk in those opening ceremonies, never have the opportunity to represent our country on the world's biggest stage, never wear those five rings proudly.

As I watched my teammates compete in the duet event in London, knowing I would never again have the chance to be there, I realized that though my Olympic dream had ended, **I could have new dreams.** I was 22, I had plenty of life left to live and plenty more I could and wanted to accomplish.

I set a new goal of winning a national championship during my final season at Stanford. I focused on school and taking full advantage of all of the wonderful opportunities available to me there. One of my teammates who competed in London returned to Stanford with me, and though I saw her during practice every day, her Olympic rings tattoo serving as a constant reminder of her accomplishment and my failure, **I focused on my new goals, and what I needed to do to get there.**

When I left Stanford to train for London, I knew I would be sacrificing a lot, and I knew that I might not make it to the Olympics, but **I also knew the feelings of regret I would feel for never taking that chance.**

It still hurts to watch the Olympics, but four years later, it hurts less. Not making the Olympics was the biggest failure of my life, but I refuse to let that failure define me. There is more to me than my failures. I look back on my time on the US National Team with pride. We knew we were a long shot for the Games, **but I would rather look back now on an Olympic dream cut short, than one that was never even pursued.**

Written by Morgan Fuller

Morgan Fuller is PCA's Program Administrator. Following her retirement from competitive synchro (after winning that National Championship with her Stanford team), she worked with the Stanford University Athletic Department in a variety of capacities, served in South Korea as a member of the U.S. Delegation Staff at the 2015 World University Games, and now works for the San Jose Earthquakes MLS team in addition to coaching for the San Francisco Merionettes Synchronized Swimming Club.