

## Even Olympians Aren't Perfect

When thinking about Olympic athletes, the dominant quality that comes to mind is perfection. Olympic athletes are the epitome of physical and mental perfection. Yes, mental. Let's not pretend that it doesn't take a substantial amount of mental fortitude to push to the limit as they do. These athletes are the pinnacle of their sports. And as viewers, that's how we see them. However, we don't think about the lives they have and the challenges they experience outside of athletics. For Kami Craig, the real-life challenges hit home in a deeply personal way. Far more than the physical challenges she experiences as an Olympic athlete.

Kami's mom wouldn't be the first to be frustrated with her kid's energy level. However, by the time Kami was four, her mom realized Kami needed help. Her parents, Dale and Steve, took her to a doctor who prescribed Ritalin. Dale filled the prescription, but it didn't last; she ended up pouring the drugs down the drain. Telling Kami, through tears, that she didn't want to change her personality or drug her out. Dale's position is understandable; this occurred during the early 90s when doctors began liberally medicating kids. However, unwilling to commit her child to a lifetime of drug dependence, Dale decided to find an alternative. The alternative ended up being in their neighbor's backyard. And Dale threw Kami in the pool.

Throwing her in the pool was arguably the best move in Kami's life. A couple of hours in it every day and she would come out exhausted. Seeing the effect the pool had, Dale took Kami to the YMCA. Kami ended up joining a children's swim team and spent the next few years there. The exercise and team comradery would help build Kami's confidence and sense of self. Both of which ended up helping when she was diagnosed with dyslexia and ADD in second grade.

For Kami, dyslexia means inverted or flipped letters, confusing homophones, and written words often appearing 3D. While not the news they wanted, the Craigs were able to begin to make sense of

the challenges Kami experienced so far. Due to her learning disability, the classroom wasn't where Kami received positive reinforcement; that came from sports. The need for positive reinforcement would lead to her driving to make grades when she was competing on school teams. Being able to compete was important. Not because it gave her something to do with all her excess energy, but because it gave a feeling of normalcy. On one hand, it's nice to have a name for the thing that caused her to struggle academically. On the other, a diagnosis is a marker that there is something wrong.

Dale and Steve worked hard to make sure that Kami was successful despite the diagnoses. Steve did his part by making sure they had a roof over their heads. Dale, by helping Kami with homework every day in addition to getting her to and from tutoring and practices.

Around junior high Kami transitioned from swimming to water polo. This shift meant a 45-minute drive from their home in Santa Ynez to the pool in Santa Barbara. But Dale drove Kami there, twice a week. The family would ultimately end up moving to Santa Barbara, and Kami would attend Santa Barbara High School (SBHS). SBHS did their part in helping Kami succeed as well. While attending, Kami was part of a program called Resource. Resource was the last period of the day, where teachers from all areas of study were present. So if Kami didn't quite grasp something covered in math, there would be someone there who was qualified to help. In addition to that support, Resource also meant that Kami got to take exams by herself with longer time limits. She had a reader who would read the exam to her, so her dyslexia didn't interfere with understanding the questions. For math tests, she was allowed to use calculators. Kami doesn't feel that this gave her an advantage so much as it leveled the playing field. Arguably the biggest thing that Resource did for Kami was to teach her to self-advocate. And the last two years of high school were spent emphasizing that. With Resource helping her make grades, Kami was able to kick-ass in the pool. It must have been a glorious ass-kicking because she was awarded a full-ride scholarship to the University of Southern California (USC).

As expected, college was a different experience than high school. Shocker right? But in high school, she had Resource and her mom to advocate for her. Now the only person who could be Kami's voice was Kami. Likely because of two years of learning to self-advocate this put Kami in a position for success. USC has excellent disability resources for its students, but the athletic department has even better resources. The difference is likely because the university views student-athletes as an investment. So it makes sense that the university would want to help them succeed as much as it is able.

Kami's hard work paid off again. In 2008, she took a year off of school to focus on training. Training that ended up taking her to Beijing, China to compete in the summer Olympics where her team would win a silver medal. After the Olympics, Kami returned to USC and finished her degree in Sociology with a minor in Occupational Therapy. After graduating, Kami devoted her time to training and returned to the Olympics in London, and again in Rio-which would be her last. Her team won gold in both.

What does a one-time silver, and two-time gold winning Olympic medalist do after retiring from professional athletics? Kami took her background to a company called Equilibria™, where the focus is on developing individuals and teams through a program that helps identify people's strengths and weaknesses. Knowing what it's like to have the deck stacked against her, Kami is trying to help others and pay it forward.