

What does it mean to be an Olympian?

NOTE: Last week, Janet Evans was the keynote speaker at the opening of the U.S. Olympic Sportslink program. Staff member, Emily Silver (an Olympian, herself) to take notes on Janet's speech so that we could share her comments and message with you.

Evans graciously thanked the members of the crowd for attending and asking her to speak. She posed the question, "What does it mean to be an Olympian?" For an athlete, it is one of the greatest honors of all time and each person has their own story of how they got there. Evans chose to share her personal story to explain what being an Olympian means to her.

In 1984, the Olympic Games came to Los Angeles. Evans' parents decided to take her and her brother to the Opening Ceremonies. At 12 years old, she recalls sitting in the crowd watching the Opening Ceremonies unfold and thinking how incredible it would be to be a part of them. At that moment, the Olympics called to her: she wanted to be an Olympian. At 80 lbs. and with many years of hard work ahead, Evans decided then and there that she would do whatever it took to be an Olympian.

The next four years of her life, she dedicated every morning and afternoon to training. In that time she never once missed a practice. From 1984 to 1988, Evans rose to "swimming" fame and burst onto the international stage by making the 1988 Olympic Team in three events. She was an Olympian! Evans recalled the time between Trials and the Games and the ease she felt for making the team.

At 16 years old, she thoroughly enjoyed the training camp in Hawaii, sunbathing and relaxing because no one expected her to beat the East Germans so what was the point in continuing to train hard? One day as she was lounging by the pool she remembers a man walking up to her and asking, "What's it like to be an Olympian?". At that time, Evans did not know who it was and responded, "It's great! We get lots of free gear and we're in Hawaii!" The man looked at her and smiled, "Oh yeah I understand. I am Olympian too. I won seven events at the '72 Games; I have seven gold medals and seven World Records." The man was Mark Spitz. Feeling somewhat embarrassed Evans later found out that the coaches had put him up to it with the hopes that he could change her mindset before Seoul. Spitz told Evans to go back to her room, focus on her swims, believe in herself, and beat the East Germans for the USA. So she did. She decided to believe in herself and her ability. She decided to prove others wrong and win Gold for her country.

In the 1976 Olympics, the East German Women's team won 11 of 13 Gold Medals, the USA? One. Everyone told Evans that the East Germans were unbeatable, but with her new found determination she went out there to prove everyone wrong. And she did. At the 1988 Olympic Games, Evans beat the East Germans in all three races. She was an Olympic Champion and an immediate inspiration for our country.

The next eight years were very difficult for Evans. She experienced great pressure to stay on top and swimming became something she *had* to do, not something she *wanted* to do. During the time between '88 and '92 she traveled all over the country with Billy Payne, the president and chief officer of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, campaigning to bring the Olympics to Atlanta.

In 1992, Janet became the first woman to ever win back-to-back Olympic titles in the 800-meter freestyle, but her silver medal finish in the 400-meter free was enough to break Evans into thinking she wanted to retire. Silver wasn't good enough in her eyes and swimming felt like a chore. She decided to continue her education at Stanford, quit swimming, and become a lawyer. As she was packing up her apartment in Austin, Evans received a call from Mark Schubert. He told her he was

taking the head coaching job at USC and she needed to move there to train with him. When she resisted he told her that she needed to because she was not yet a champion. He told her the true value of being a champion is the life lessons you learn through your successes and failures and she had not learned those yet.

After some convincing Evans decided to move to Southern California and continue her training. Swimming became a part of, not all of her life; she started to love the sport again and was happy to be competing. In 1994, Evans made her third Olympics which were held in Atlanta, the city she campaigned for with Payne years earlier. About a month out from the Games Evans received a call from Payne asking her to carry the torch at the Opening Ceremonies. He didn't tell her who she would be receiving it from or giving it to, just that she would be the final woman and second to last person. She said no. Janet wanted to win and her best event was the day after the Opening Ceremonies, she didn't want any distractions. Payne promised her that if she carried torch it will be the greatest moment of her Olympic career. After some thought, Evans accepted the offer with much skepticism.

She recalls running with the torch and looking into the crowd of athletes. This was her third Olympics and she said it was the first time she really saw the other athletes. She realized that the Olympic Games were about the ATHLETES! The majority of athletes competing would not win a medal, but they were there to try their hardest and each one would give their best. Right then, Evans decided that as long as she gave her best, that's all anyone could ask for. It wasn't all about winning.

As she handed the torch to 1960 Olympic champion Muhammad Ali, he told her that was his greatest Olympic moment. As she left the stadium, she grabbed a stranger and cried into his arms for five minutes. She had never cried after winning an Olympic medal, but realizing what the Olympics really meant to her brought tears to her eyes. Evans placed sixth and eighth in her final Olympics, but walked away content knowing she had given her best and that's what the Games are all about.

To Janet Evans, that's what it means to be an Olympian.