



# KIRSTY COVENTRY: *An Inspiration for a Nation*

By Wayne Goldsmith



[PHOTO BY PETER H. BICK]

*Kirsty Coventry, who competed in her first Olympics in 2000 at Sydney, will be representing Zimbabwe in Rio de Janeiro for her fifth straight Olympic Games. Now 32, Coventry recently reflected on her remarkable swimming journey that has resulted in her being tied with Hungary's Kristina Egerszegi for the most individual Olympic medals won by a female athlete.*

In the mid-1990s, my then fiancée (now wife), Helen Morris, and I were in Harare in Zimbabwe conducting a FINA coaching clinic. As part of the clinic, we had the opportunity to work with Zimbabwe-based swimmers and coaches in the classroom, on the deck and in the pool.

We met some wonderful people during that tour, but one person really stood out: a tall, skinny, blond-haired girl named Kirsty Coventry. Even as a young age grouper, she stood out—talented and tenacious in the water, a hard worker, but always

smiling, pleasant and respectful. She was already showing many of the characteristics that would take her to the top of world swimming.

Helen and I followed her career with great interest and always enjoyed seeing her race internationally, knowing what challenges and difficulties she had overcome along her swimming journey.

Recently, I had the pleasure of watching her compete at the Arena Pro Swim Series in Mesa, Ariz. Seeing her race again prompted me to contact her and ask her to share just some of her remarkable journey from that old

swimming pool in Harare to Olympic glory and beyond.

**Q. WAYNE GOLDSMITH:** *Kirsty, thank you for your time and energy. Tell me a little about your early life in Zimbabwe. How did you become interested in swimming, who were your coaching influences and what were your early memories of training and competing?*

**A. KIRSTY COVENTRY:** Growing up in Zimbabwe was amazing. Zimbabwean people are very warm, humble and accommodating.

There was an anthropologist doing a study somewhere in Africa, where he placed a bowl of fruit underneath a tree and told some children across the field that whoever got to the fruit first could have it all.

An amazing thing happened—they all held hands and ran to the fruit together!

When asked why they did that—i.e., when one of them could have enjoyed all the fruit—they responded, “Ubuntu. How can one of us truly enjoy the fruits if we cannot share it?”

This is what it was like growing up in Zimbabwe. We were very fortunate to have a pool at our house, and my parents often laugh about how I would instinctively head toward the pool from a young age—similar to a newly hatched turtle.

My mum taught me to swim. I was swimming from the age of 18 months... and that was it!

Other children were coerced into finishing their homework and chores with chocolate and TV. My parents used swimming!

I would caution any parent who doesn't allow his or her children to have fun in the pool because even when I joined my first swim club aged 6 years old, it wasn't about competition or being serious—it was about finding a group of kids that I could have fun with.

It was my natural competitiveness and the opportunity I had to swim that led me to club swimming.

This, in turn, taught me about winning and losing. I hated to lose, so this meant I had to train harder! I was never a bad loser, and I have my

parents to thank for this.

I remember one instance at a competition when I was up against a slightly older girl. I would win, and she would literally have a tantrum. She would win, then puff out her chest and parade around the pool.

My parents pulled me aside immediately after the meet and told me that if I ever behaved like that—and it didn't matter how old I was—they would not let me swim again! I felt like it was my fault she behaved like that, so I made sure not to hang around her again.

My parents were my greatest influencers and taught me to win with humility and to lose with grace. They taught me what was good and what was bad. Nothing was complicated—it was right or wrong...simple.

Being humble has always been my personality, and it is probably a combination of good parents and having to work hard for everything that I have managed to achieve so many of my goals. Nothing was ever given to me.

My coach, Charles Mathieson, wasn't any different to my parents. We were taught to behave properly because if we didn't, there would be consequences to our actions. This made us accountable to each other and to ourselves.

My parents were also very good at leaving the coaching to the coach, and if I needed parenting, my coach would send me to my parents. There was a distinct line between the two roles.

Talk about coaching discipline! My

swim coach growing up was a butcher. He would leave home at 4:30 a.m. to come and coach us, drive to work afterward and meet us back at the pool at 5 p.m.

He now lives in Phoenix, Ariz., looking after swimming pools, and he still leaves home at 4:30 in the morning.



**Pictured:** Kirsty Coventry has broken the world record in the women's 100 backstroke once in August 2008 (at the Beijing Olympics) and three times in the 200 back between February 2008 and August 2009. She was the first female swimmer to break 2:06 as well as 2:05.

Until I started going on tours to South Africa and Europe, I had no idea how bad our swimming facilities in Zimbabwe were. Then, when I saw what "real" swimming pools looked like, I trained harder. Instead of whining about our facilities, I did what I could to earn the opportunity to swim in those amazing pools again—it was my reward for training harder.

I have learned to focus on solutions, not on problems, and that is not just from playing sport, but because of where I come from.

Many people may think of it as a negative, but it's only a negative if you don't succeed.

If you do make it through all these obstacles, you have the ability to be the best in the world because everything you have endured has made you so much stronger—not just physically, but mentally and spiritually.

There is something dreadful, but at the same time, thrilling, about jumping into a cold pool at 5 a.m. for morning training—we do not have heated or indoor facilities in Zimbabwe!

When it gets too cold (about four months of the year), swimming is over, and we go and play other sports. You don't whine about not being able to swim—you get on with it and do what you can.

Often we would have to check the pool for frogs and frog eggs because there is nothing worse than being in the middle of a stroke and feeling the slimy roughness of something gross!

**WG:** *Was there a time or a moment when you "fell in love" with swimming and decided to see how far you could go with it?*

**KC:** When I was about 8 or 9 years old, I told my parents I wanted to go to the Olympics and win gold.

Thinking about it now, I don't know if I even knew what the Olympics was about. My parents are huge sports fans, and my uncles swam and boxed for Rhodesia...so maybe I knew a little bit about it.

Was this the turning point in my career? I don't know. I have always been goal-oriented, even though I may not have known what a goal was when I was young.

My parents never put me in a swimming club—I wanted to join. I did when I was 6. **continued on 14**



# KIRSTY COVENTRY'S CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

## GLOBAL RANKINGS

*Tied (with Hungary's Kristina Egerszegi) for most individual Olympic medals won by a female (7)*

*Most Olympic medals won in African history—all sports (7)*

## WORLD RECORDS (Long Course)

100 meter backstroke (1):  
- 58.77 (Aug. 11, 2008 - July 27, 2009)  
200 meter backstroke (3):  
- 2:06.39 (Feb. 16, 2008 - July 5, 2008)  
- 2:05.24 (Aug. 16, 2008 - Aug. 1, 2009)  
- 2:04.81 (Aug. 1, 2009 - Aug. 3, 2012)

## WORLD RECORDS (Short Course)

200 meter backstroke (1):  
- 2:00.91 (Apr. 11, 2008 - Nov. 14, 2009)

## OLYMPIC GAMES

*Two gold medals (200 back, 2004/2008)  
Seven medals (2 gold, 4 silver, 1 bronze)  
Five-time Olympian (including this year at Rio de Janeiro)*

## WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS (LC)

*Three gold medals (100 back, 2005; 200 back, 2005/2009)  
Eight medals (3 gold, 5 silver)*

## WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS (SCM)

*Four gold medals (100 back, 200 back, 200 IM, 400 IM—2008)  
Five medals (4 gold, 1 bronze)*

## COMMONWEALTH GAMES

*One gold medal (200 IM, 2002)*

## ALL-AFRICA GAMES

*14 gold medals (7, 2007; 4, 2011; 3, 2015)  
22 medals (14 gold, 7 silver, 1 bronze)*

## NCAA CHAMPIONSHIPS

*Auburn University (2003-04-05)  
Seven-time champion:  
2003: 400 yard medley relay, 400 free relay, 800 free relay  
2004 (SCM): 200 meter back  
2005: 200 yard back, 200 IM, 400 IM ◀*

*continued from 13*

My parents never told me that I should think about the Olympics. I told them I wanted to go. I did when I was 16.

I would go fishing with my dad on Lake Kariba or the Zambezi River, watching elephants bathe while reading a book or while fishing; listening to the lions roar while cooking dinner; laughing at the baboons chasing each other; amazed because the giraffes were as tall as the trees!

I was always so excited to catch a fish, but I always knew I could catch a bigger one. It wasn't about being unhappy with the fish I had just caught—it was an inner feeling that I had to keep fishing and try to catch a bigger one.

I think that inner feeling was belief. I didn't need my dad to tell me that. I knew if I kept trying, I would get it.

I don't think there was a specific moment when I decided to see how far I could go. I think it was a progression of desire fueled by a combination of the influence of having good people around me, the opportunities I took, my own determination and self-belief.

**WG:** *It can be tough being a swimmer in many parts of Africa—lots of challenges with facilities, access to world-class competition and many other tough struggles with adversity. How did you overcome these challenges and remain focused on becoming one of the best female swimmers in the world of all time?*

**KC:** I at least had the opportunity to learn to swim. Many people in Africa didn't, and still don't. I think I was able to see this every day, and I've always appreciated how



**Pictured:** *Kirsty Coventry, shown here as an age grouper and with her parents as a young child, learned to swim at the age of 18 months and joined her first swim club when she was 6 years old. Says Kirsty, "It wasn't about competition or being serious—it was about finding a group of kids that I could have fun with.... My parents were my greatest influencers and taught me to win with humility and to lose with grace."*

fortunate I was.

For a long time, in a way, I could have been seen as the "privileged white kid" because swimming was seen as a white person's sport. Compared to the majority of the people in the country, I guess we were privileged, but we certainly were not driving flashy cars or flying off on holidays anywhere.

From an early age, I knew how lucky I was. It was only until recently when I truly appreciated just what my parents had done for me.

We never had enough money for tours (e.g., traveling from Zimbabwe to South Africa for competition), so my parents would sell hamburgers and hot dogs at the swimming meets and outside the supermarkets. My memories of these times are running around, chasing my sister with an ice cream in our hands, and wearing the biggest smiles and sharing the deepest laughter. We were such happy children because my parents never made their problems our problems. Similar to the wildebeest on the African plains, only the fittest survive. If we constantly had to worry about problems, we would never do anything. We were forced

to be innovative, make a plan, come up with solutions and get on with it—that's what makes you a survivor.

Despite all the challenges you face—and I'm talking about real-life difficulties—if you can maintain your path and reach your goals, you will be more than successful.

I believe it's important to strive to be more than just successful in athletic terms—it's about accomplishing your own goals with humility while helping others to reach their goals.

**WG:**  
*You've had the experience of working with some outstanding athletes and coaches...and now, you're training with Coach Dave Marsh at SwimMAC in North Carolina. What qualities, values and character traits do you feel are essential for swimming success?*

**KC:** While it's not the most obvious character trait to have, one of the most important in my view is the capacity to be self-aware.

Swimming is a lonely sport. You have a great team around you, but when you are doing the volume and the hard sets, you have to realize that your team is only there to push you and support you. You have to do the work, and you can be stuck in your thoughts.

My husband, Tyrone, knows not to argue with me before a swim practice or to try and discuss anything too serious just before training. He will have forgotten about it by the time I get out, but I would get out seething or overthinking—not what a swimmer needs!

Self-awareness is about knowing who you are as an individual, separate from your environment and other individuals. If you are self-aware, you can be honest with yourself. If you are honest with yourself, then you can start being honest with your teammates, your coach and your support network—e.g., parents, friends, spouses.



**Pictured:** Kirsty Coventry, shown here with young age groupers from Zimbabwe, tells children around the world who wish to pursue their Olympic dreams—as she has done: “If you can hold on and stay determined—if you never give up—you will always have the possibility of success.”

This helps you with your goal-setting because it makes you accountable to yourself. This, in turn, creates an easier job for your coach because now, he or she can focus on coaching you and not having to “mommy” you.

To be successful in anything, you have to be passionate, purpose-driven and disciplined.

Passion is your desire to do something, but passion is the easy part.

Without a clear purpose, you will find it difficult to stick to the program, and it makes being disciplined much harder.

Discipline is about making sacrifices to ensure you reach your goals. Your goals might change, so you have to be able to adapt.

Purpose is deeper than your goal. As a younger athlete, I only had goals, but now as a mature athlete—and by

“mature,” I mean mature in emotional intelligence and spiritual growth—I have a greater purpose than just winning gold medals and breaking records.

As important as it is for swimmers to have these characteristics and traits, it is vital that coaches also share some common values with their athletes.

The bond between coach and athlete can then, in turn, become greater, and this will develop more accountability, respect and trust.

I have been fortunate to have coaches such as Kim Brackin, David Marsh and Bob Groseth, whose own values reflect many of my own—and we've all worked together well as a result.

**WG:** *You're an inspiration to many young athletes in Zimbabwe, throughout Africa*

*and in many other parts of the world.*

*If you had one piece of advice for a young kid—swimming in a pool in Africa and with a dream of following you on the path to Olympic glory—what would it be?*

**KC:** We cannot predict when an opportunity will present itself, but we can strive for those opportunities, so that when they do come, we must be ready.

If you choose to give up because of the things that are outside of your control, then you will have definite failure. However, if you can hold on and stay determined—if you never give up—you will always have the possibility of success.

This is stronger than hope—this is your will, and no one can take that away from you! <