



SWIMMING WITH PRIDE

MOM SHARES INSIGHT ON LIFE WITH AN OLYMPIAN

WRITTEN BY *Damon Autry*

Gail Schmitt looks at a newspaper article about her daughter, Allison, a swimmer who competed in the Olympics in 2008 and 2012.

SPORTS HAVE BECOME AN INCREASINGLY BIGGER PART OF AMERICAN SOCIETY OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY.

Our social gatherings are often triggered by televised athletic contests, and there's practically nowhere we can go without seeing a fan sporting an athlete's jersey. We follow our sports heroes with great interest and passion, often knowing as much about the athletes' vital statistics — their height, weight, what college they attended — as our own. But with so much fan attention focused on athletes, we seldom give much thought to the

family support system that allowed them to achieve those lofty athletic heights in the first place.

Gail Schmitt is the essence of a family support system. The 12-year employee at Ford Credit in Dearborn and mother of five insisted her children take part in sports at an early age. Though it often meant shuttling children to and from practices and games after working a full day, she and her husband, Ralph, were determined to expose their kids to the world of athletic competition. While lacrosse, soccer, hockey, and basketball were options, the Schmitts

required that every one of the children participate in swimming.

A TALENT SURFACES

While all five displayed a talent for it, middle child Allison took hers to another level. Allison first began swim lessons while older sister Kirsten took part in the sport. At first, Allison cared little for swimming, preferring soccer at the time. While she participated in both sports initially, swimming emerged as the priority.

"Allison would compete in swim meets and win prizes — things like candy," Schmitt says. "She started winning more and

began liking it. Eventually she met friends (in swimming) and started getting really good."

Allison soon focused primarily on swimming and was later presented with the opportunity to train with famed swim coach Bob Bowman while still in high school. Bowman is best known for training swimmer Michael Phelps, winner of the most Olympic medals (22) in history. Bowman helped shape and mold Allison into a finely tuned and conditioned swimmer. She earned a spot on the U.S. Swim Team during the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, China, where

she took a bronze medal.

In spite of the excessive \$900 per night hotel rate, expensive airfare, and costly admission to attend the swimming events, both Gail and Ralph traveled to Beijing to watch their daughter swim against the world's best competition. Four years later, Gail, Ralph, and Allison's four siblings — Kirsten, brother Derek, and twin

"I feel like a lot of people put pressure on their kids. Allow them to show what they're most interested in and nurture that."

sisters Kari and Sara — made the trip to London to help cheer Allison on to five swimming medals during the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. The family began planning the trip two years in advance, which allowed them to find ways to contain costs.

"Our family has always been supportive of each other," Allison says. "It's who we are as a family, and they've helped me along the way in getting to be where I am in swimming."

Not only did Allison and the rest of her teammates make American swimming fans proud, they especially had an energetic fan base at Ford Credit. Many of Gail's coworkers caught the swimming competition from London on television, cheering Allison and her teammates on with excitement and pride.

Gail's coworkers felt a connection to Allison. As a show of just how proud they were, her office was

festooned with red, white, and blue streamers and decorative balloons upon her return from London.

NURTURING AN ATHLETE

Gail says she is often quizzed on what she and the family did to shape Allison into an Olympian. Her response is modest.

"Yeah, like it was something WE did," she says, downplaying her role in her daughter becoming a world-class athlete. "Allison had something internal. Sure, the family enhanced that, but she's always been a hard worker ... very determined. She has that internal drive."

For parents whose children possess extraordinary athletic skills, Gail offers some advice. At the top of the list? Let the child lead the way.

"I don't think you can make the child excel at what they're good at," she says. "That comes from the child."

The parents' role is to offer opportunities, support, and guidance, she adds.

"I feel like a lot of people put pressure on their kids," she says. "Allow them to show what they're most interested in and nurture that."

"People say, 'Your kids are so successful; what did you do?' Well, I supported them, I loved them, and I really hit home the rules in the family, which are God, family, school, and activities, in that order. That kept them all level-headed and on the path toward reaching their goals." ■

DAMON AUTRY IS A MICHIGAN-BASED FREELANCE WRITER.