

KIRSTY COVENTRY: AN UNLIKELY HERO

By Craig Lord

Kirsty Coventry was named Swimming World Magazine's female African Swimmer of the Year for her stellar swimming accomplishments in 2005. Check out the December issue of Swimming World Magazine for photos and to see what she did during the year.

Following is a story about Kirsty that offers some interesting perspective about Coventry after she did so well at the Olympics in 2004 and as she prepared for her swimming in 2005.

Of all those elevated to the status of national hero by their exploits and achievements at the Athens Olympic Games, there's one who should get the gold medal for being the most unlikely: Kirsty Coventry.

As David Marsh, head coach at Auburn University (where Coventry graduated last spring), puts it: "The truly exciting thing that's happened with Kirsty's experience is that it has completely transcended sports and the Olympics."

Within a week of her winning Olympic gold (200 back, 2:09.19), silver (100 back) and bronze (200 IM) and becoming Zimbabwe's first-ever swimming gold medalist, the 20-year-old white African's fame had spread well beyond the Athens pool and the Auburn, Ala. campus, where she majored in hotel and restaurant management and minored in business.

Her name was even being heralded in the maternity wards of far-flung hospitals across her native Zimbabwe, where the majority black population took her success not only to heart but to the registry of births.

Kirsty Coventry Mapurisa and Kirstee Coventree Kavamba were among the first two babies to have the honorable name bestowed on them, but their parents must surely have regretted their lack of originality in the days that followed. Try these out: Threemedals Chinotimba, Swimmingpool Nhanganga, Freestyle Zuze, Breaststroke Musendame, Butterfly Masocha, Backstroke Banda, Goldmedal Zulu, Goldwinner Mambo, Gold Silver Bronze Ndlovu and, last but not least, little Individual Medley Mbofana. The start list at swim meets in her African hometown of Harare come the year 2020 could be very confusing, indeed!

Greater the pity, then, that the national pool in that capital city--built in a high-density housing area for the 1995 All-Africa Games--is, as one Harare newspaper painted it, now merely "a green festering body of water."

Perhaps that is to be expected in a nation where unemployment runs at 70 percent, annual inflation at 300 percent (if you trust government figures) or 750 percent (if you don't), where the average wage is 19 cents an hour and life expectancy is, at 38, just about as low as it was when the pyramids were built.

It would be easy to blame such poverty--and certainly the dereliction of a pool--on the economic conditions that prevail in much of Africa--where water, if you can get it, is for drinking, not swimming.

But the truth lies elsewhere: Zimbabwe is a resource-rich nation torn apart by a racist, thuggish, corrupt leadership that has squandered its wealth, let crops rot in fields for the sake of perverse ideology and encouraged blacks to harass, torture, rape and even kill their white neighbors.

When Coventry's accomplishments sent the Zimbabwean colors up the flagpole three times in Athens--a feat not witnessed by Aeneas Chigwedere, Zimbabwe's Minister of Sport, who is banned from traveling in Europe as part of sanctions against the corrupt regime--Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's president, must surely have writhed as Hitler did when he watched the great Jesse Owens reign supreme over his superior race in Berlin in 1936.

Yet, propaganda being the peg on which all brutal despots hang their bloody robes, it came as no surprise to see Mugabe pin his colors to Coventry's mast. Her achievements, he said at her homecoming parade and State House reception, represented "efforts underlining some degree of discipline, efforts that produce some habits." If the words were rather underwhelming, Coventry's rewards were not: U.S. \$50,000 in "pocket-money" (his words) and a diplomatic passport for life.

A measure, perhaps, of how much he appreciated the contribution made to Zimbabwe by a minority population? Or maybe the brilliance of her shiny medals had blinded him to the fact that she was white? After all, this was the same president who, at the height of the white farm invasions, when violence against whites was rampant, urged black Zimbabweans to "instill fear into the hearts of all whites."

Perhaps he wrote a sub-clause to his creed: Kirsty Coventry, Zimbabwe's all-time greatest athlete and the best African individual female Olympian at a single Olympic Games ever, is to be exempt.

It is amidst this background that Coventry is an unlikely hero: "unlikely"--because of the circumstances; "hero"--not only for what she achieved in the water, but the gracious way in which she repaid the compliment bestowed on her by the many thousands of black Zimbabweans who turned out to welcome home their countrywoman.

"Zimbabwe Is My Home"

It would be easy to view Coventry, like so many Olympic swimmers, as a U.S. collegian with a tenuous ancestral tie to an obscure country that gets them a certain ticket to the biggest sporting show on earth once every four years. Coventry is not one of those. "Zimbabwe is my home," she says. "It's where I was born. It's my culture. I will always represent Zimbabwe. Color doesn't matter to me."

However, it has mattered a great deal to everyone else in Zimbabwe these past years. Formerly Rhodesia, Zimbabwe gained independence from white minority rule in 1980 and soon became known as the "breadbasket of Africa," a political and economic model of black majority rule.

Mugabe changed all of that in 2001 when he ordered white-owned farms to be "repatriated." Government-backed groups invaded the countryside and forcibly removed thousands of white farmers from their land without compensation and, sometimes, with loss of life.

The white population has since diminished from 300,000 to about 30,000 of a total of 12.6 million. Coventry's parents, who own a chemicals business in the Newlands suburb of Harare, were among those who remained. So, too, did some members of her extended family who worked on the land.

"I have had very close family members and friends on farms who have gone through very hard times," Coventry told the Western media, understandably refusing to be drawn into any statements that might put her relatives in danger. "We have a large extended family, and we all have been very supportive of each other." Her family was there to greet her on a national day of celebration when she made an unplanned four-day visit home on her way back to Auburn in late August.

Coventry, who had a tattoo of the Olympic rings placed on her right hip after making the semifinal of the 100 meter backstroke as a 16-year-old in Sydney 2000, comes from a family of swimmers. Her grandfather was a chairman of the swimming board, while her parents, Rob and Lynn, were also avid swimmers.

They were not alone as Coventry stepped off the plane. "Then it really hit me," she said, recalling the many thousands of Zimbabweans--black Zimbabweans--who came to cheer her. There were traditional dancers, tribal drummers, a presidential motorcade, banners welcoming "Our Princess of Sport" and cries in Shona (the country's primary indigenous language) that Coventry could not comprehend. When she asked one of the national team coaches to translate, he said, "Give her a farm." The irony would not have been lost on any of the 270,000 white Zimbabweans who no longer live at home.

Back at Auburn after Athens, she did not quite regain the anonymity she preferred, though she was fast to recognize the value of her Olympic medals. "It's really nice," Coventry told the campus newspaper. "There's been a couple of occasions where people have been like, 'Are you that swimmer?' Teachers have been bribing me, saying, 'The only way we'll let you out of work is if you show us your medals,' so I've been taking them along with me."

For all too obvious reasons, Coventry and her family will, perhaps, never talk freely about the situation in Zimbabwe and whether the swimmer feels like the political pawn Mugabe intends her to be.

No one who has ever had to live in a country where freedom of thought is punishable by the long hand of the law or by the sharp fist of the thug, would dream of criticizing diplomatic responses such as that graciously delivered by Coventry at her homecoming parade: "I think every country goes through bad years and good years. I hope this (her success) gives Zimbabwe hope, and that they can take something good out of it. All sportsmen and women can take inspiration from it and know that they, too, can follow their dreams."

A Light in the Darkness

For sentiments so often unspoken by the shrinking white minority, we must, then, turn to the media who have observed events at close quarters. Pius Wakatama, a reporter for All Africa, described Coventry as "a Light in the Darkness of a pariah among democratic and civilized countries of the world" in an article summing up the swimmer's splendid achievements in Athens.

Wakatama had been present when Coventry first became the toast of Zimbabwe back in 2002, when she won her country's only gold medal (200 IM) at the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester, England. At the time, pressed on the situation in Zimbabwe, she referred to her parents and sister who live in Harare and said that "the things they were going through were hard."

Wakatama wrote: "We all know what she was talking about. She was talking about the hell that her parents and most whites are going through today whether they are citizens or not. We all know that she was talking about the racial insults, threats, extortion, rape, torture and murders that the white Zimbabwean community and those blacks labeled 'British supporters' are going through at the hands of the government."

But a nation's true borders lie around the human heart, and Coventry is a patriotic Zimbabwean. "I am ecstatic," she said in Manchester in 2002, a message she repeated in Athens, adding, "Hearing the national anthem from the podium made me feel so proud to be a Zimbabwean."

Wakatama notes that not everyone feels the same: some of Zimbabwe's top sportsmen, such as Henry Olunga, Heath Streak and most top white cricketers have left their country in disgust. In addition, Edgar Rogers, former secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Olympic Committee and outgoing Commonwealth Games Federation vice president for Africa, renounced his Zimbabwean citizenship and announced his departure to South Africa.

Wakatama laments their decisions before concluding his article with some of the wisest words to have been written on the Zimbabwean crisis: "As I watched the enthusiasm with which Zimbabweans welcomed and congratulated Coventry and how they took her glory as their own, I again concluded that black Zimbabweans are not hate-filled racists at heart. If that

is the case, why is it that our government media propagate racial hatred and negatively stereotype whites as part of their political propaganda?

"Don't get me wrong. I am not and will never be an apologist for white racism. I am more aware now than I was during some of the evils of colonialism and the racial discrimination of the past. I was a victim of that myself. However, I am intelligent enough to realize that living in the past will not get us anywhere. I will not replace white racism with black racism. I believe that this is the attitude of the majority of black Zimbabweans.

"The hate-filled racist propaganda we are daily bombarded with through the media comes from idiotic politicians who are good for nothing. They blame the few whites left in the country for all evils besetting Zimbabwe today. History, therefore, becomes very convenient to them."

Coventry may one day feel free to express her own views on the subject. For now, she savors that special day when color faded into the background and a homecoming queen's parade was broadcast live on national television for two hours.

"It was very, very overwhelming," Coventry said. "I felt so much pride, seeing how much it meant to so many people. It really brought tears to my eyes. There were no political issues. There were no racial issues. Everything was put aside for a few days so people could celebrate. It was so nice to meet so many people all happy for the same reason. Hopefully, it will carry on like that."

In showing such spirit, said one African publication, Coventry had helped to soothe Zimbabwe's soul. For that reason, if no other, the swimming world should wish more success for Coventry as she pursues her next Olympic dream.

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KIRSTY COVENTRY AT A GLANCE:

Name: Kirsty Coventry

Date of Birth: Sept. 16, 1983

Birthplace: Harare, Zimbabwe, Africa

Height: 5-8

Weight: 132 pounds

Parents: Rob and Lynn

Favorite Music: "I enjoy all."

Favorite Food: Chocolate--"I have a really bad 'sweet tooth.'"

Favorite Book: "Drum Beat"

Secret Plan in Life: "I want to open my own restaurant."